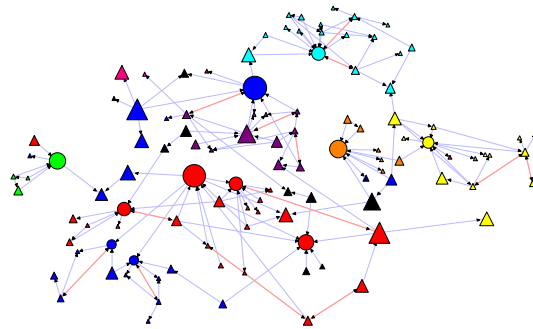


3 Big Problems for Social Network Analysis

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Social Network Analysis is experiencing a surge in popularity. As a result many organisations are likely to invest significant time, effort and money only to shelve yet another consultant's report. We suggest that Social Network Analysis needs to move beyond mere analysis and overcome 3 big problems: *engendering trust*, *dispelling the illusion of accuracy*, and *taming the expert mindset*. A sensemaking approach might just be the answer.



Problem 1: Trust

Social Network Analysis is powerful and dangerous

Social network data is extremely sensitive. Network maps illustrating people's names and relationships conjure powerful emotions, especially when discussed in a group setting to affect organisational change. There is a real chance for conflict and managing this conflict requires skill.

Social Network Analysis depends on people disclosing their relationships

Disclosure typically occurs in the form of completing a survey. Unlike many forms of survey which use anonymity as a protective mechanism for participants, the very power of social network analysis depends on people explicitly disclosing their relationships with others.

What are *they* up to?

With people being asked to disclose personal and sometimes intimate relationships it is natural for them to wonder what this survey is really about and how management will use the results. The need for trust is then compounded during the process of interpreting the results. Explicit effort in building trust or avoiding distrust is required in combination with a strong set of ethical principles to ensure SNA results are not misused.

Problem 2: The Illusion of Accuracy

Missing data

Social network analysis uses a host of metrics and measures. Commonly used are centrality measures such as in-degree, betweenness and close-ness. The robust use of these measures assumes the underlying data sets are accurate. Such accuracy is in fact rare and missing data is more commonplace. Often missing

data arises through participants not responding to survey questions or the entire survey.

On the flip side, with many organisations moving more and more towards informal networks and communities of practice, missing data can also arise through the question of boundaries and how one chooses participants for inclusion in the survey. For example, we have seen a survey to a network of 229 people result in the formation of a network of over 700 people!

The map is *not* the territory

With the final output of the social network analysis being alluring pictures, maps, charts and graphs it is easy for those involved in the viewing to believe they are witnessing reality: ‘this is it’, ‘this is how we are’. Just as in the story of the blind men and the elephant, where each blind man had a different interpretation of the elephant—a wall, a snake, a rope—it is common for people to ‘see’ different things in social network maps. Jumping to conclusions is a real danger.

Problem 3: “The expert” mindset

There is no doubt that the research interest in social network analysis has exploded since the 1970’s (see Figure 1).

In the last 5 years we have seen SNA move from a research tool to a management technique.

The current trend within social network analysis has seen the role of the researcher / consultant being that of an expert. An expert helping to guide the organization through the dense jungle of problems such as survey design,

robustness of measures and metrics, the missing data problem and the final analysis, interpretation and possible intervention design outcomes. Of course, management ultimately decides what they will *do*. The expert role creates an expectation and a dependency—‘tell us what to do, you’re the expert’.

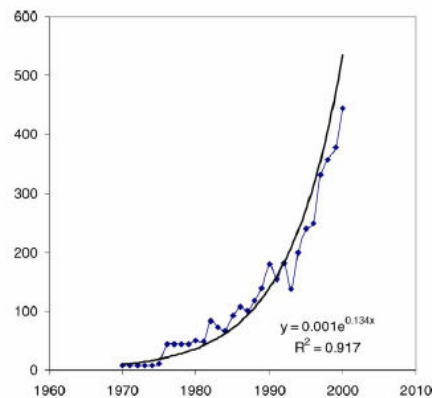


Figure 1: The exponential increase in number of publications with ‘social network’ in the title (extracted from Borgatti and Foster 2003)

Moving forward

For social network analysis to move to the next level, moving beyond merely analysis, there is a need to move the role of researcher / consultant from ‘expert’ towards ‘facilitator.’ This move will open up new perspectives for social network analysis, perspectives focused more on sensemaking approaches within organizations of people. And as Karl Weick has said “sensemaking is unrelentingly social”.

About Anecdote

Anecdote is an Australian consulting firm that specialises in helping organisations to tackle complex problems like organisational change, learning and project evaluation. We help to create the conditions for insight and empowerment.