The NetLab Network

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INTRODUCTION

The NetLab Network ("NetLab") is an interdisciplinary scholarly network studying the intersection of social networks, communication networks, information networks, and computer networks. NetLab gets its identity and zeitgeist from its distinctive subject matter, multi-disciplinary nature, and the way in which it functions as a social network.

As a network in its own right, NetLab comprises shifting teams, spatially dispersed relationships, and permeable boundaries. Its members have come from many disciplines: Communication Science, Computer Science, Geography, Information Science, Management Science, and Sociology. NetLab has been inclusive in academic status, including faculty, graduate, undergraduate, and high school students. Although centered at Toronto, Canada, NetLabbers are elsewhere in Canada, as well as Australia, Chile, China, England, Israel, Italy, Japan, Norway, Singapore, and the United States. Connecting them is a shared sensibility of interpreting behavior from a social network perspective rather than seeing the world as composed of bounded groups, tree-like hierarchies, or aggregates of disconnected individuals.

Not only ideas connect the network. NetLab is an informal network of collaborators - faculty and students - that function as a community of practice: a self-selected, self-organizing, informal group of collaborators who solve problems together and learn from each other. In addition to congruent intellectual perspectives, frequent communication and a culture of inclusiveness and mutual supportiveness also connect NetLabbers. With its paramount interest in social networks, as well as its collaborative focus, interdisciplinary nature, remote team members, and partnerships with government and industry, NetLab exemplifies key trends in research (Wellman, et al, 2016). It is important not only for what it does but for also how it achieves it.

This chapter summarizes and updates an earlier description published in the *Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior*. As the space allotted for this chapter is less than half of the original chapter, we emphasize recent research and refer readers to the earlier version for fuller discussions, citations and references (Dimitrova & Wellman, 2012).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

NetLab research has been informed by a set of guiding principles:

1. *The world is composed of networks, not groups.* People function more as individuals connected via partial memberships in multiple networks and less as people embedded in tightly-bounded, densely-knit, settled groups.
2. Many people meet their social, emotional, and economic needs by tapping into multiple, loosely knit networks of diverse associates rather than relying on tight connections to a relatively small number of core associates.
3. The social structures people are in largely determine the operation of two-person re-

lationships: it is sociology, not psychology. Ties are usually asymmetrically reciprocal, differing in content and intensity.

4. Ties link network members indirectly as well as directly.

5. Asymmetric ties and complex networks differentially distribute scarce resources.

6. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are usually extensions and enhancers of ongoing relationships. Few people have most of their ties in segregated virtual worlds.

7. Households have become more networked, with ICTs keeping mobile spouses and their children in contact.

8. At work, less-formal, fluctuating and specialized peer relationships are common, and the benefits of boss/subordinate hierarchical relationships are less obvious. The organization of work has become more spatially distributed, with ICTs connecting people, and appreciable numbers working at home full or part-time.

9. As the dividing line between work and home has weakened, so has the more general boundary between the private and public spheres of life. In the less hierarchical and less bounded networked environment where expertise is more in dispute than in the past and where relationships are more tenuous, there is more uncertainty about whom and what information sources to trust.

10. Social movements arise out of both existing social networks and more organized groups; they rarely are disconnected bunches of alienated individuals.

BACKGROUND

Although social networking services such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter have highlighted the connection between social networks and technology, NetLabbers have looked at social networks – spatially distributed and sparsely knit – for decades. The International Network for Social Network Analysis was founded at the University of Toronto in 1977, and many local scholars have used a common network analytic approach in a variety of substantive areas and topics. Some focused on large-scale structures and their implications while others focused on interpersonal relations.

In the early 2000s, a cohesive set of scholars started examining how the internet fits into community and family life, friendships, civic involvement, and health practices. The network jelled, linked not only by overlapping research interests but also by a propensity to collaborate and help each other. They had an understanding of their overlapping intellectual pursuits and the connections among them, but they lacked a name and a distinct identity. Creating NetLab formalized existing practices of collaboration and gave an identity to an already well-functioning network of faculty and students.

The creation of NetLab – as a brand independent of any scholarly discipline – also facilitated the involvement of scholars from a variety of disciplines. Then and now, the boundaries of the network have been flexible: Faculty members are engaged to a different degree depending on the mix of projects they have at a particular moment in time. Students come in and out, graduate from university, or finish internships. Members move away or change interests. Yet the network remains: Former students come back for a visit or engage as collaborators; network members collaborate and ask for help with relevant references, a survey protocol, or an ethics submission.

Branding the network as "NetLab" provided a useful identity. It gave visibility to the University of Toronto among the global network of social network scholars; it provided an easy way for other scholars to connect with network analysts. It provided a quasi-formal identity to scholars, the general public, the media, and government bodies, NGOs, and corporations interested in the

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