

# Chapter 4

## NetLab

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses NetLab -- an interdisciplinary scholarly network studying the intersection of social networks, communication networks, and computer networks. Although centered at the University of Toronto, NetLab members come from across Canada and the United States as well as from Chile, Hungary, Israel, Japan, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. NetLab has developed since 2000 from an informal network of collaborators into a far-flung virtual laboratory. Its research focuses on the interplay between social and technological links, including the understanding of social capital in job searches and business settings, new media and community, Internet and personal relations, social media, households, networked organizations, and knowledge transfer in research networks.*

### INTRODUCTION

NetLab is an interdisciplinary scholarly network studying the intersection of social networks, communication networks, information networks, and computer networks. The interplay between social and technological links its research to broad trends of social and technological transformation (Wellman, 1988; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

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. NetLab members share a 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.

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 is broadly inclusive in academic status,

including faculty, graduate, undergraduate, and high school students. Although centered at the University of Toronto's Department of Sociology, NetLab members stretch across Canada from Halifax on the Atlantic to Vancouver on the Pacific; across the United States, from New Jersey to Los Angeles; globally, NetLabbers are in Chile, Hungary, Israel, Japan, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom.

NetLab is an informal network of collaborators - faculty and students - who work together on research projects, brainstorm, bounce ideas and help each other in their work. It is a "community of practice" – a self-selected, self-organizing, informal group of collaborators who solve problems together and learn from each other (Wenger, 2000). Common intellectual perspectives, frequent communication, and a culture of inclusiveness and mutual supportiveness connect NetLabbers. All members sit in on meetings; students and faculty help, train, and recruit each other; many routinely take initiatives on matters of common interests.

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 important trends in research. For instance, studies of science and technology show that research is becoming more collaborative; that the complex issues of society require the contribution of several disciplines; and that the need of specialized expertise brings remote collaborators together (Olson, Zimmerman & Bos, 2008).

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

In addition to its style of working, NetLab research is informed by a set of guiding principles, derived from more than 40 years of research and theorizing (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

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 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 relationships: it's sociology, not psychology. Ties are usually asymmetrically reciprocal, differing in content and intensity.
4. Ties link network members indirectly as well as directly. They form in clusters, with boundaries and cross-linkages.
5. Asymmetric ties and complex networks differentially distribute scarce resources.
6. Networks structure collaborative and competitive activities to secure scarce resources.
7. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are usually extensions and enhancers of ongoing relationships; few people have most of their ties in segregated virtual worlds.
8. Households have become more networked, with ICTs keeping mobile spouses and their children in contact.
9. At work, less-formal, fluctuating and specialized peer relationships are more easily sustained now compared with the past, and the benefits of boss/subordinate hierarchical relationships are less obvious. The organization of work has become more spatially distributed, with ICTs and communication connecting people, and appreciable numbers working at home full or part-time.
10. As the dividing line between work and home has weakened, so has the more general boundary between the private and public

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