▼ Introduction to Social Networks and Collaboration Minitrack

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Social network analysis and understanding of social networks is a rapidly growing field within computer science and information systems. Recent Web developments, in particular the development of Web 2.0 and paradigms of real time experimentation provide an opportunity to examine "on-line social networks" and use that information for better software and better organizations. Social networks provide an abstraction that can represent almost any type of human interaction. There are over 40 years of empirical results that have helped to better understand and manage regions, organizations and individuals. Computer technology has aided this effort by providing the ability to visualize, analyze and simulate social networks. In addition, collaborative software broadened the possibilities of interaction. The Social Networks and Collaboration Minitrack tackles social networks as it relates to information systems which may include business processes, network analysis of collaborative software, simulation of social links by analogy and other methods on the Web, semantic networks, algorithms, visualization, persuasion, and knowledge networks.

The fundamental idea behind systems is that they have interactions with other systems. In a similar manner networks talk about multiple elements interacting. Networks go even further in that relations take primacy over individual elements. They can provide a measurable way of investigating the different behaviors observed in different patterns of relations. This has lead to generalizations about network configurations that apply to all networks. Some have even come to call the work "the new science of networks." This includes new ways to look at the innovation processes, spread of disease, self-organizing networks like the Web, new ways of thinking about organizations and strategy, and much more. It may be described as a revolution not just in how we think about these issues, but a revolution in the tools and methods to analyze them.

Something of interest to software developers is the creation of new relationships on line. Some argue that "social networks" like MySpace and FaceBook differ from communities that are created by phone calls or even email. At the very least they aggregate users around a common platform so business can be made on advertising and sales to the community members, at best they might give us cues about the way social networks are organized in the broader world. This information can potentially tell us more about the operation of complex systems like organizations or trade.

New tools and new ways of looking at things can provide us with new answers to old questions, but they also bring up many new questions. The Social networks and Collaboration Minitrack provides an opportunity for researchers to share their findings in this new area. It also provides an opportunity for people who are not familiar with the work being done in network research to come and learn from the researchers.

The number of people in this field is growing rapidly. It is exciting to inaugurate this area as part of the HICSS conference series with the following papers. Keith, Demirkan and Goul look at the organizational level through investigating the influence of collaborative group technology on social structure, wheras Buckner and Cruickshank focus at the regional level through European innovation networks. Yoo, Lyytinen and Boland propose a taxonomy of networks and suggest that these differences have an effect on innovation. Rosen uses the idea of networks as self organizing systems and suggests strategic choices for organizations. Bastani and Fazel-Zarandi investigate the Internet's influence on social connections through studying twelve major cities in Iran. In overall, these papers provide an exciting glimpse into what kind of research is starting to be done by using the social network model.