Review of “The Network Community: An Introduction” by Barry Wellman

The book reviews ego-centered social networks or as stated in the book personal communities in different parts of the world. The author tries to prove that the initial belief of loss of communities in modern world is not valid since communities still exists through personal network, ties and relations binding people together. The author describes his approach of study as studying people’s sociable and supportive community ties with friends and relatives without considering their physical locations and distance between them. Author’s interest in studying communities is based on what he calls the community question which can be summarized in two different smaller parts: How does the structure of large-scale social systems affect the interpersonal ties within them and reversely how the internal ties affect the social system. He then continues by presenting different concerns of previous analysis regarding the community question and states that their main problem was to continue looking for community ties in local areas, reflecting community sociology’s origins in studying neighborhoods.

It was interesting to me when the author mentions that the Internet will ultimately either create wonderful new forms of community or will destroy community altogether. I personally think not only it won’t destroy the community but also it would provide an infrastructure for newer forms of relationships between individuals. We all have met some friends online and there are lots of people get to know each other through cyberspace. I think the cyberspace gives us the ability to meet new peoples and socialize without being limited to our current physical location. As supported by the paper, public socializing in a large group of related individuals in pubs has reduced in recent years and people tend to form smaller groups and be together in private places such as their houses rather than going to public places to meet new unknown people. I think internet has provided new tools to encourage people to go to new places in order to meet unknown people. Through internet you can easily go to different chat-rooms, groups and discussion boards to discuss your favorite topic, express yourself or even simply chat with some unknown person. Also modern socializing websites such as Facebook, Orkut ... provided people with excellent tools to expand their current known social network to all the people they might have met in the past. It has happened to me several times that someone added me in Facebook and sent me a message about being classmates in 2nd year of high school. I might not recognize him at the beginning but by searching through my high school friend’s friend, I was able to remember him. I strongly believe that without these modern tools it was impossible to form a social network of several hundred people, keep in touch with them and follow their social life.

Besides, since you don’t have to remember someone just at the moment you meet him, you won’t give him negative feeling of not recognizing him at the moment. You can spend some time trying to remember him through your friends’ friend. This existing optional log between the time someone sends you a friend request and the time you have to respond is an excellent tool which would have never been possible in face-to-face communication. You would definitely make some negative impact in case you can’t remember somebody who argues to be your classmate in high school. This negative impact would direct the other person that he was not important to you and would lead to the fact that he would continue his way after several minutes without even exchanging contact number with you. Also I think tools as mentioned above are the best solutions in visualizing and understanding your current social networks. Without such a visualization people would be confused about the relations between two individuals they know. This is also supported by the author when he mentions that his study showed that the least reliable and valid survey data are the respondent’s reports about the nature of the relationships among the members of their personal communities. Many people just do not know how Cousin Betty relates to Uncle Henry.
Also regarding the typical personal network of an east Yorker figure provided by Barry Wellman, I think the categorizing lacks from the fact that it is not able to find an appropriate place if someone belongs to more than one category. You are not able to place your friend who is your coworker in both friends and coworkers categories. It would be worst if your friend is also one of your neighbors.

Review of “The Strength of Weak Ties” by Mark S. Granovetter

The paper reviews the social networks and is based on the fact that the overlap of individuals’ social network varies directly with the strength of their ties to one another. It categorizes the relations between individuals into strong, weak and absent. The absent category is the most interesting one, in my opinion. It is defined as those low level ties, such as knowing the name of the grocery store salesman whom you usually bought your stuff from. This tie would be useless in normal life but in special situation such as disasters, this tie would significantly be distinguished from the absence of one. As mentioned by the paper situation could affect the ties. I believe that it is not the situation but the type and content of the message communicated between individuals that can change the types of ties. It does not define the ties by itself but can slightly change some ties from one category into another.

In addition, the paper states that people rarely acts on mass-media information unless it is transmitted through personal ties. I think this relies on the content of the message itself. We usually encounter too many advertisements each day. This excessive number of similar messages would reduce the importance of such message to us and we won’t take it seriously. However, we are not that often recommended by someone we know, to use a special product. The effect would even be enhanced, if instead of recommending us to use some product, the other person expresses his own experience with using the product. This is some occasional situation and would not happen that often. In fact the aspect that it just happens occasionally is what makes us remember it and to try the product. It doesn’t have much to do with the type of ties. One can easily hear two people talking about their pleasant experience with a specific product when he is sitting in a bus. He might not know any of those persons and won’t even have to see their faces. So there exist no ties between them and the person, even the absent tie. It is just the type of the message and the way you receive it that makes it unique for you. This could also be true regarding the previously mentioned issue of shifting ties from one category into another based on the content of the message. I think one of the factors that have prevented the West End from defending against the renewal plan of the Boston city was the fact that they didn’t care enough about the neighborhood. Of course, ties were an important factor but the importance of the message and the content of the issue itself is also a critical item.

Paper concludes with the fact that weak ties are more likely to link members of different small groups than are strong ones, which tend to be concentrated within particular groups. In other words weak ties enable reaching new people that are not accessible through strong ties. I think this has significantly been expanded by the internet where one can easily expand his weak ties and there exists lots of absent ties around each individual. I believe this has been seen best by the advertising companies when they target weblogs for putting advertisements. Weblogs, in my idea, are good example of people having weak or absent ties. Most of the people referring to a specific weblogs form one of the above mentioned types of ties with the author over time since they all know that that blog is a private cyberspace of the owner. Putting intelligent advertisement based on the author’s preferences would exactly act as introducing products through weak or absent ties among peoples, such as the case of the bus mentioned earlier.
Review of “Visualizing Social Networks” by Linton C. Freeman

The paper emphasizes on the history of visualization and starts by mentioning that visualization is the only other main factor of development of all modern sciences beyond measurement. It cleverly categorizes the visualization into using points-lines and matrices. The paper reviews the visualization of social networks in 5 different eras: graphic images drawn by hand, use of early computers to draw graphs, automatic draw of images by computers, images that could be displayed on screens and finally images capable of being displayed all over the world based on web technologies. It is interesting to see how current visualization has been developed from simple graphs and how these simple graphs transformed into directed graphs and then became more advanced when combined with locations and shapes of the nodes. I liked the graph 4, which is a multigraph drawn in 1934 which shows the positive and negative choices between a football team members. The highlight of this image is the fact that nodes are located approximately at their actual location relative to each others in a real football court. Also good color coding has been used to distinguish between positive and negative choices. However, the problem with such categorizing is finding proper metrics for distinguishing between different categories. It looks easy at first glance to distinguish between positive and negative choices but I think in practice it would be very hard to distinguish them. It would become harder considering the fact that many of the choices could be neutral. It seems that in the presented graphs either these neutral choices have been neglected or the graph is drawn for a very limited time period. Otherwise, one expects to see much more connection lines between different players since the game is played for a long period of time. Besides this, I think this graph was a great improvement in traditional social network visualization. It used traditional directed graphs in combination with color coding, shape using for presentation of nodes with different characteristics and spatial using of node’s locations to present actual relative location of players.

In addition paper reviews Northway visualization of a target sociogram. What is interesting about this graph is that each circle contains points that are equal in terms of how frequently they were chosen. Points in the central circle are those which have been chosen more. Also the lines connecting circles represents the primary links between pairs and all the points are placed in a way to minimize the lines connecting them. I think this concept is interesting and can be used by those groups visualizing emails with circles in which the person was the center circle and his contacts were circles located at distance from him calculated based on the number of emails they’ve sent to each other. As I remember, they have used distance to represent the closeness between different contacts but they placed circles in random locations on the screen. Considering different possible weaker relationships between these contacts, which can be extracted through CC or multiple To in the case of emails, can be used to place them on the screen in a way that related contact circles stays closer to each other and the length of the lines connecting them become minimized.

The other interesting social network visualization is the one generated by Richards and Seary called MultyiNet. It is special since it combines two and three dimensional images to give additional information which could help understanding the visualization. It allows users to customize the visualization by rotating the image and coloring the points. Also it allows the use of red/green anaglyph to produce real three dimensional graphs. However, I think this would limit the use of graphs only by those who have access to red/green filters and those who are not color-blinded. I think this visualization could be enhanced if additional objects have been added to the environment to increase the feeling of perspective view. An example of such additional objects could be adding a ground surface consisting of tiles where the size of the tiles decreases with the relative distance of tiles from the screen in order to give the feeling of perspective to the viewer.