

Chapter 38

Social Networks and Computer Mediated Communication: The Emerging of a Social Structure in a Portuguese Bank

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines social networks in the Portuguese society, and the impact of these social networks on organizations regarding Computer-Mediated Communication. The results describe a Portuguese case study and attempt to answer the following question: How does Computer-Mediated Communication contribute to social networking in organizations? This chapter examines the emails and phone calls exchanged during the year 2008 by employees working for a Portuguese bank in order to identify nodes, roles, positions, types of relations, types of networks and centrality measures. Overall there were 93.654 internal calls and 542.674 emails exchanged between the actors. The findings suggest that emailing is the preferred means of communication, although frequency increases with hierarchy communication. Collaborative work between departments functions as the emergence of a network. The results confirm the relevance of computer networks to support social networks in organizations, and its potential concerning data analysis outside the traditional surveys, and the possibility of introducing Internet sources.

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INTRODUCTION

Social Network Analysis (SNA) emerged from different lineages traditions (Scott 2000) including: the sociology founding fathers, such as Simmel; sociometric analysts and the Moreno work; Manchester tradition in the 1950s; Harvard researchers of the 1930s and in the 1960s Harvard's breakthrough (Scott 2000) with the forerunning research and mentorship of Harrison C. White.

SNA was rooted in sociology and grounded in the observation that people are interdependent and the links among them have important consequences. Links permit the actors to access power, information, influence or social support (Freeman 2000). During the 1960s and the 1970s this seminal traditions developed through different researchers, universities and events. Between 1990 and 2005 papers on SNA field overcome three thousand and this was due to the interdisciplinary perspective and different applications inside and outside social sciences, such as management, physics, organizations and computer science.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is frequently associated with positive change in organizations due to rapid diffusion, diminishing costs and ease of use. New forms of work are possible because CMC overcomes limitations of space and time, and provides the opportunity for people with common interests to connect in a network society (Castells 1996). As a consequence of the transformation of the bureaucratic organization to a networked organization, new organizational structures were designed. Before the Internet, telephone networked people (Fischer 1992) affected the special and social structure of communities (Wellman 2001). In this chapter we consider the telephone as belonging to CMC as there are no social differences between a phone call using the traditional (analog) technology and modern VoIP calls over Internet.

After the Internet, the structure of organizations and the communication structures have both changed. CMC supports networked individualism:

connected, shifting interactions in sparsely-knit, loosely-bounded social networks rather than focused interactions in densely-knit, tightly-bounded groups (Wellman 2002). Analysts have suggested that these trends result in networked organizations: communication structures based on electronic networks where information flows with flexibility.

The theoretical and empirical importance of Social Network Analysis (SNA) and the significance of social networks in Portugal contrast with the almost inexistence of research in the field. This chapter is a contribution to analyze employees and organizations in Portugal, especially in the context of their social structure as supported by CMC. We examine the situation of social networks in Portugal according to the Eurobarometer (2005) considering these networks: friends and job, types, frequency and sources of support and voluntary work.

Social networks depend on trust: the higher it is, the easier it is to network. Trust varies across European countries; Denmark, where most people can be trusted in the opinion of 76%, has the highest rate. Trust remains high in three other Northern countries: Finland, Sweden and Netherlands. In Portugal, only 24% of the respondents answered that most people can be trusted while the EU average is 30%. People who trust other people are somewhat more satisfied with their life in general, so it comes as no surprise that satisfaction with life in Portugal is also 24%.

How Portuguese are networked with family, friends and colleagues? An overwhelming majority of Portuguese people declares that family (83%) and friends (67%) are very important. More than 60% of the Europeans meet socially with friends once a week or more, but that percentage is higher than 70% amongst Greeks, Portuguese, Cypriots and Swedes.

Socialization is extremely widespread and frequent in Southern European countries with work colleagues, especially in Portugal: at least 50% of Portuguese meet work colleagues on a

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