SLIS Events News

The Social Dynamics of Online Networks: January 28, 2008

Time: 6:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Location: SLIS, Wells Library, Room 001

Cornell University faculty member Michael Macy will give the first Networks and Complex Systems Series talk of the spring semester, "The Social Dynamics of Online Networks," on January 28, 2008. SLIS faculty member Katy Börner is the series organizer. The talk series is "open to all Indiana University faculty and students interested in network analysis, modeling, visualization, and complex systems research."

Macy currently serves as the Goldwin-Smith Professor of Sociology and a professor in the Computing and Information Science program at Cornell.

Abstract for "The Social Dynamics of Online Networks" Talk

Social scientists routinely collect stores of individual-level data, using surveys and records kept by governments and employers. These data are then aggregated across groups of varying size, from households to nation states. In comparison, we have very limited data about the interactions between people. Social interactions are fleeting and mostly private, making them hard to capture and arduous to hand-code and record. These problems are compounded by the need for repeated observations and by the exponential increase in the number of relations as group size increases. As a result, social dynamics are not systematically documented at the relational level, except in observational and ethnographic studies of small groups. All this is rapidly changing as human interactions move increasingly online, leaving digital records that allow automatic data collection on an unprecedented scale. However, social scientists have been reluctant to embrace the study of what is often characterized as the "virtual world," as if human interaction somehow becomes metaphysical the moment it is mediated by information technologies. While great care must be exercised in generalizing to the offline world, the digital traces of computer-mediated interactions open a window on aspects of social life that have been previously hidden from view.
The detailed records of interaction in online communities are unique in human history, providing an exceptional opportunity for research on the formation of communities, a broad topic that includes research questions ranging from recruitment of new members to the emergence, spread, and enforcement of norms. Are new members influenced to join primarily through commitment to shared goals or do they tend to be pulled in by friends who have already joined? Are people influenced more by strong ties to close friends who also know one another, as in a tightly clustered network, or are they influenced more by weak ties to acquaintances who do not know one another and thus are more likely to have access to non-redundant information? Are people and organizations attracted to similar others, or does similarity lead to competition and rivalry? Does the dynamic of influence and attraction lead to cultural convergence or differentiation? These are some of the questions for which we are beginning to get answers from data collected from online networks.

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