Tools for social network analysis

What is a Social Network?

A social network can be made up of individuals or organisations. Though we tend to think of ‘social networks’ as online entities such as Facebook or Twitter, the theoretical concept of Social Network Analysis predates the world of online social networking (though it can be applied to online social networks just as well as to offline ones).

It is suggested that people can only maintain a certain number of stable social relationships. This is something called Dunbar’s Number after the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar who suggested humans can only comfortably maintain 150 stable relationships. There is much debate about the nature of online ‘relationships’ and whether Dunbar’s Number can be applied in an online context, but it is unarguable that monitoring and analysing your online social networks can help you to manage and benefit from these relationships, however many of them you have.

There are many tools available that can help you measure your social influence and networks. Some people see influence and reach as levels of a game, the more followers you gain the better you are in comparison to others. Tools such as Klout give you a score based on your Social Media influence, whilst others help you manage your networks to prevent them from spiralling out of control. There are too many tools to mention here, but below are some of the more notable ones.

Key Tools for Social Network Analysis

**Klout** - Klout is a website and mobile app that ranks its users based on their social influence and in turn gives them a score between 1 and 100. The tool measures the size of a user’s social network and the content they create to measure how others interact with that content. This measurement is created by looking at activities on Social Media platforms including Google+, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and FourSquare in addition to others. By achieving certain goals and points users receive perks such as free experiences or products, thus reinforcing the idea of gamification of Social Media and networks.  

**ManageFlitter** - ManageFlitter is a very useful tool for anyone who uses Twitter a lot or has more than one account. The tool analyses your Twitter account to highlight useful information such as who does not follow you back, who is not Tweeting, who Tweets in a foreign language amongst other things. This allows users to unfollow large groups of people on mass, which is useful if your social network is getting too big - which takes us back to Dunbar’s Number again.  

**Newsle** - One of the biggest problems for anyone building their social network is that it can get spread too big over too many platforms and as a result you can often miss certain messages or stories. Newsle connects with your Facebook and LinkedIn contacts along with other people you are interested in and notifies you via an email when any of them are mentioned in the news or in...
Magic Recs - This is a very simple tool for Twitter users in that it looks for patterns of your followers and who they start following and who may be a useful addition to your own social network. To use Magic Recs you simply follow @magicrecs on Twitter and it will provide personalised recommendations via a direct message for you to follow based on what your social networks are following. https://twitter.com/MagicRecs

Case Studies

1. Ben Goldacre/ Twitter

Staff at ScHARR, University of Sheffield, used Twitter to promote an upcoming Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). The eminent Doctor and Journalist Ben Goldacre, who has a highly popular twitter account (followers) noticed our tweets and tweeted himself to draw attention to our course. The resulting tweet got multiple retweets and favourites, further spreading the word about our course, with Ben’s positive comments. This had an immediate impact on sign-ups to the course, and our highest number of sign-ups in a single day.

2. Using other peoples networks- Social Media blog post LSE

Andy Tattersall, an Information Specialist at ScHARR, University of Sheffield, recently wrote an article on social media within HE, which he submitted for publication to the London School of Economics (LSE)’s ‘Impact Blog’. It was accepted and has since been tweeted over 240 times in less than 3 weeks. Choosing to publish to a high-impact blog, rather than (or in addition to) your own can help you to reach a wider audience, and drive viewers back to your own site or blog. Many blogs publish work under Creative Commons licences, meaning authors still own their own work and can publish it elsewhere.
Restricting the size of your networks.

One of the issues mentioned earlier that your social networks can grow quickly and become unwieldy and hard to manage, in somuch that you can no longer filter out the quality messages from the noise. If you are worried that this could be a potential problem for you there are a few tools you can employ to make life easier.

**Path** - Path is a limited social network tool that only allows users to have a maximum 150 contacts in their social network. Until a few years ago 150 friends was the average for Facebook but in recent years it has grown with over half of all Facebook users now having in excess of 200 friends, with the average number now being 338 according to the Pew Research Centre. [https://path.com/](https://path.com/)

**Twitter Lists** - Perhaps the most under-used and appreciated of Twitter’s tools. Lists allows you create lists of Twitter users based on topics or social networks, such as work colleagues, friends, celebrities etc so that you can filter the Tweets in your timeline based on these criteria. You do not need to follow users to add them to lists, so it is a good way of following personal interests whilst using your public facing account to follow just people in your professional networks.

Links to academic content, intros on social network analysis

