

**Zsuzsanna SZVETELSZKY**

## ***Images of Networks – Reflected by Collective Consciousness***

Graphic descriptions of multi-element entities, such as websites, author lists etc. constitute an important segment of contemporary network research. The mass media ever more frequently feature products such as graphs, diagrams etc. Human thinking is essentially visual: pictures affect our emotions more powerfully and directly than texts and the communication they enable is more direct, the identification more profound than in the case of textual information.

The significance of pictorial representations has by now been well researched, substantiated and presented to the public. Thus it is highly likely that the pictorial element of various networks will powerfully influence collective consciousness, as a result of the perceptual quality of network representations and because they offer a suitable basis for abstract argumentation, the resulting narrative constituting a complex mental model.

Speech, writing and pictorial representation generate widely different attitudes and behaviours. The ‘net-scapes’ discussed in the present paper are a product of the school of thought associated with the name of Albert-László Barabási. Experts who analysed networks of relationships can in one sense be seen as forerunners to web-analysts. However, the latter group, most of them coming from the area of statistical physics, made a huge advance by virtue of the fact that computerisation enables them to examine such a vast number of elements as would have been unimaginable before. This fact alone enriches collective awareness with new images and a new degree of reliability.

An exciting aspect of the research into social networks is the unexpectedly high degree of interest shown by the general public, the media and various groups of users within the community (iwiw, Wikipedia etc.). These networks are gaining rapidly in popularity as the means of info-communication become ever more widespread. We might say that people are rapidly becoming more and more *network-conscious*.

Network-consciousness is not a new phenomenon. *Guanxi*, a determining feature of Chinese civilisation, is based on a similar type of group level self-reflection. This traditional phrase refers to a complex system which connects smaller or larger networks of individuals in economic, political and social nexus with each other. Even in antiquity there existed a remarkable mass of documented interconnections, but accessing these required an incomparably greater effort than it does today. It was only by direct presence that the individual could gain any information concerning the current state of society. Access to information was limited by confinement to a single time and a single location, whereas today rapid access to information also allows for rapid correction, opening hitherto unknown channels for feedback.

The process we are talking about is by nature emergent. From a mass of digital interactions previous unknown traits of the system emerge through algorithms which are able to detect the community around them. Today, in the age when data are available in far higher orders than before and networks are electronically documented, we must face the fact that some of our networks are ‘spread out’, i.e. can be accessed, observed and analysed from anywhere around the world. In return for this, however, the system also reveals itself to us.

‘Networkification’, similarly to material organisation, is always and everywhere an upward moving process. The media become fragmented and, at the same time, users become individualised, more active, better informed and better connected. Various characteristics of social networks are depicted together. The picture which emerges I consider as a special type of knowledge and, beyond that, a collective and contemporaneous form of representation. It

is highly likely that the representation of this network will overwrite the evaluation of certain acts of communication that had previously provoked moral censure.

Thus, for example, gossip may be revealed by a visual representation of networks to be a characteristic network feature and this may lead to the rehabilitation of gossip. The fact that it is a mass-scale and universal phenomenon may validate it as a vital condition for the existence of a community.

The emergence of network-consciousness and the spreading of resulting network patterns retro-actively affects the community itself. When scanning the whole, which is more than the sum total of its parts, the community is seeking to find itself. While details are revealed about the individual and his or her relationships, the individual gains knowledge about the entire system through the network operations he or she performs. By doing this, they simultaneously contribute to generating a topology.

All of this leads one to consider: is there such a thing as collective perception, decision and action going beyond individual perception, decision and action, i.e. any that is describable by exact scholarly means; as opposed to anthropomorphic metaphors characterising the general individual? (One such metaphor is ‘gaining social consciousness.’) If so, has there been any collective reflection on these of scholarly intent? If so: who is the subject of this reflection? Can collective reflection rationalise social action?

The basic constituents figuring in these questions are summarised in the following two tables:

Communal perception:	iwiv	
Communal knowledge:	Wikipedia	
Individual perception	Collective perception	Collective reflection
Individual decision	Collective action	Collective reflection
Individual remembrance	Collective remembrance	Collective reflection
Individual knowledge	Collective knowledge	Collective reflection

Representations of the individual	For the individual	By the individual	Private: children’s drawings
Representations of the individual	For the multitude	By the individual	Public: portraits of monarchs
Representations of the multitude	For the multitude	By the individual	Public: Riefenstahl
Representations of the multitude	For the multitude	By the multitude	Public: iwiv
<i>Representation of the multitude</i>	<i>For the individual</i>	<i>By the individual</i>	<i>Political advisor</i>

Of the above variations only the fourth, i.e. representations of the multitude aimed at the multitude and created by the multitude (iwiv, Wikipedia) constitute a form of representation which is not intentional.

As long as we lack a holistic scholarly paradigm, we lack a theoretical answer to the above questions. However, we know rather a lot about various organisational forms, since some processes of the communal perceptions, decisions and actions that emerge through the use of info-communicational devices have been well documented and archived.

Systemic characteristics presented by modern network research have been declared significant (by science, economy, business life, politics etc.); and they have to some extent found their place in relation to other areas of research. Net-scapes are the result of social constructions, where a picture is a cognitive tool with its own laws and characteristics. They represent a pictorial narrative which is paradoxical in that it is a cognitive mode of operation with a social relevance and at the same time a form of knowledge sustained and authenticated by this mode of operation.

No one can help getting excited when presented with a panoramic view of his or her contacts. Net-scapes are sure to influence the collective mind in such a way as to result in a communal use of images – however, we know fairly little at this moment of the kind of actions and reactions through which this will manifest.

**Zsuzsanna SZVETELSZKY** is a PhD student of the Social Psychology Programme of the University of Pécs, Hungary. Research interests: network communication, triangulization in networks, contemporary gossip research, network awareness, self-organizing infocommunication. Some main publications: "A társas mezőktől a hálózattudatig" [From Social Domain to Network Awareness], *Magyar Tudomány*, vol. 167, no. 11 (2006); "The Emergence of Gossip: Effects of Networked Communication Technologies on the Evolution of Self-Organizing Social Beliefs", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005; *Mindenki harmadik* [The Third One], Budapest: Alibi, 2004; "Ways and Transformations of Gossip", *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology* (Budapest), vol. 1, no. 2 (2003); *A pletyka* [Gossip], Budapest: Gondolat, 2002. E-mail: szvetelszky@gmail.com.

