

Social Network Analysis And The Ecology Of Ideas

Rick Davies, Wednesday, 30 July 2003¹

Ecology is defined by The Oxford Modern English Dictionary as "the branch of biology dealing with the relationship of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings"

An ecology of ideas could similarly be defined as the relationship of ideas to one another and to their physical surroundings (especially the people that have them)

In July 2002 I undertook a survey of 71 members of the REMAPP network² to identify what interests they had in common. The aim was to try to facilitate exchanges of information between people with common interests, by making those common interests more evident.

A list of 12 potential topics of common interest was generated in a REMAPP meeting in London, in early July. This list was then sent to all REMAPP members by email, along with a request that they examined the list then replied to me with ratings of how interested they were in each topic. The rating scale had four points:

0 = not of interest

1 = of some interest

2 = fairly interested

3 = the topic I am most interested in at present

One incidental part of the analysis of the results involved using UCINET³ software to convert the data into what is called an "affiliation" matrix, that showed which topics were linked to which. Topics were effectively linked by being jointly selected as very important (rated 3) by the same respondent. That matrix was then converted into a network diagram, again via NetDraw a sub-package within UCINET. The results are shown below (on the next page). Thick lines show strong relationships, where the linked ideas were both rated of high interest by three respondents, medium lines show them present in two respondents and thin lines in one respondent⁴.

The central idea in this complex of topics was clearly *Organisational Learning and Knowledge Management*. This topic scored highly on commonly three network measures of centrality:

- Degree centrality: It has connections to every other topic surveyed, in like some others which are only connected a few
- Closeness: It has the shortest total number of links to all other topics, compared to all other topics

The most marginal topics were clearly *Assessing / evaluating country-level programmes* and *M&E of development awareness*. Since the latter was one of the author's own highly rated interest this was not good news!

A related investigation into the ecology of ideas has been done by Valdis Krebs, and can be found on his website at <http://www.orgnet.com/leftright.html>⁵

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² See <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/REMAPP/>

³ http://www.analytictech.com/ucinet_5_description.htm

⁴ If the interest rating threshold used in this analysis had been lower (i.e. 2) then the thickest lines would represent a large number of people judging two ideas (or more) to be important

⁵ See also the larger article at <http://www.orgnet.com/booknet.html>

