

From Know-how to Know-who: Reflexive Management of Interpersonal Knowledge Networks on Social Network Sites

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Although economic geography has shown increasing interest in interpersonal knowledge networks as vehicles for innovation and learning, the role of the Internet as a tool for establishing and maintaining relations has hardly been appreciated in a systematic fashion. Up until now, the impacts of internet-based communication on the practices and geographies of personal networking are largely unexplored. First, in mere quantitative terms, the increasing role of the Internet in establishing and maintaining interpersonal networks thus remains neglected. Second, the qualitative transformation of interpersonal networks into explicit “know who” has not yet been acknowledged. Most notably, Social Networking Sites (SNS) turn the private sphere of networks inside-out: SNS evolve into public displays of connections and visible expressions of reputation. In addition, Social Networking Metrics (SNM) and Social Networking Guidelines (SNG) advocate more reflexive perceptions of and more strategic approaches to networking. Social networking, then, is no longer a by-product of everyday business activities but becomes a business practice in its own right - aimed at building, maintaining, and harnessing social capital.

This research project seeks to appreciate this internet-induced transformation and attempts to explore its consequences for practices of networking as well as the structure and geography of interpersonal knowledge networks. In doing so, the project aims to theoretically clarify and empirically substantiate how technology, social practice and geography co-evolve. The project starts from the assumption that the Internet turns interpersonal networking into a *performative* activity: Social practice is increasingly aligned with theories and models of social network analysis and thereby gives rise to a new quality of networking practices. Networking - enhanced by internet-based algorithms - increasingly turns into an arena of competition for business contacts, resources and information.

Empirically, the research project focuses on the company founder milieus of two clusters of the Internet-Industry: Silicon Valley and Berlin. This setting not only allows to compare the emergence of distinct social practices in two different locations; it also enables us to conceive of the processes of diffusion and adaptation between the global center of the Internet-Industry and a rapidly emerging European cluster. Methodologically, the research project comprises three modules: (1) a document analysis is designed to systematically identify the affordances of SNS, SNM and SNG; (2) an online-survey and explorative two-stage interview-series with company founders will elucidate changing practices of networking behaviour, and (3) quantitative methods of social network analysis are applied to reveal the impact of these practices on the structure and geography of interpersonal knowledge networks.

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