"EPINETS: THE EPISTEMIC STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS"

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ABSTRACT

The explanatory success of network theories of interpersonal and inter-organizational phenomena depends on researchers’ assumptions about what actors know, what they know about what other actors know, and the extent to which they trust what they and others know. We aim to develop a precise way of representing the epistemic states of actors in a social network that permits development of new theory about their relevance and importance to the structure and dynamics of social networks, as well as measurement instruments and techniques for testing and validating the theory. Getting precise about knowledge requires more than simply mapping bits of knowledge to individual network actors: the ways in which they know what they know are also relevant. Higher-level epistemic states such as awareness, ignorance, and oblivion are as...
important as lower-level qualifiers such as risk and uncertainty. Interactive epistemic states such as trust, trustworthiness, trusting-ness, and credibility are equally important to our understanding of network phenomena. For these reasons, we believe the study of network epistemics – the individual, collective, and interactive epistemic states of network actors – should be central to network theorizing, and that the foundation for such a study is a precise description language with which the epistemic states of network actors can be specified, and a theory that specifies the logical relations among the epistemic interactions that can take place within a network. We sketch an epistemic description language (EDL), introduce the epistemic network, or epinet, and illustrate how an EDL and epinets can help deepen and sharpen our understanding of familiar network phenomena including co-mobilization, coordination, cohesion, trust, and status.