Symposium—Network Theory in the Twenty-First Century: New Direction or Dead-End for Public Administration?

Introduction

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Since at least 1994, public administration scholars have attempted to apply network theory to improve the operation of public organizations and public programs (Mandell, 1994). Networks now constitute perhaps the central focus of mainstream scholarship and administrative practice (e.g., Agranoff, 2007; Keast & Brown, 2002; O”Toole, 1997; Provan & Milward, 2001). Administrative Theory & Praxis (ATP) has shown a similarly long-standing interest in network theory. Also in 1994, Korac-Boisvert and Kouzmin studied the “dark side” of “Info-Age Social Networks in Public Organizations,” and Deleon reviewed the implications of network organizations and interorganizational networks for public organizations and public administration. Later, Sørensen (2002) questioned the extent to which network governance challenges traditional forms and images of democracy; Dixon and Dogan (2002) focused on the “flawed” underlying epistemological and ontological premises of hierarchy, interactive (network), and market modes of governance; Triantafillou (2004) outlined a framework for network governance based on governmentality and normalization; and Sørensen and Torfing (2005) proposed governance networks as fundamental to complex, fragmented, and multilayered societies and that required a postliberal theory of meta-democracy to overcome the tendency toward hegemonic activities and discourses. So prevalent have networks become in public administration that Hummel (2007) commented recently that there may be a problematic convergence of thought around networks.

In the 15 years since ATP and public administration first examined network theory, neoliberal and other advocates, such as Altman (2007), Barnatt (1995), Crumlish (2004), Florida (2003), Friedman (1999, 2005), and Ohmae (1991, 2005), increasingly claimed there has been an exponential growth of “globalized,” “networked,” “flexible,” or “virtual” organizations based on information and communications technology (ICT). These new organizational
forms, putatively, have replaced Weber’s “iron cage” of inflexible, bureaucratic administration and radically diminished, if not outmoded, the regulatory role of the state and public administration. As Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) influentially proclaimed, the ICT revolution transformed capitalism. The “network society” was now dominant. The exploitative regimes of industrial capitalism were supposedly gone and social, political, and economic life now revolved around the constantly changing, technology-mediated politics of collective and individual identity. Given the presumed post–cold war death of Marxism and socialism, political economy no longer seemed capable of establishing a plausible response to global capitalism. It also did not seem capable of grasping the emerging possibilities for human transcendence in any way comparable to global, ICT-driven networks and flexible social compacts, where cyberspace was the replacement for physical civil space.

Given the extent of these transformational claims, Deleon’s (1994) challenge to carefully and critically examine network theory and practice and, especially, its impact on public administration resonates today in the strongest terms. This symposium contains three papers that critically examine the “light” and the “dark” sides of network theory and its application to public administration, governance, and political economy. These papers also take up the challenge networks pose to intellectual effort, as McSwite exhorts and exemplifies, “to be genuinely radical in our thinking, to go to the root of what we are directly experiencing, and not to be afraid to face the implications of what this present experience might be telling us” (McSwite, in this issue).

THIS SYMPOSIUM

Morçöl and Wachhaus, in their paper “Network and Complexity Theories: A Comparison and Prospects for a Synthesis,” demonstrate the potential rewards of moving beyond definitional, terminological, and other intellectual barriers to interdisciplinary and intertheoretical analysis. Relying on a fascinating extension of Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory, the authors undertake the difficult task of locating conceptual differences and commonalities between network theory and complexity theory. This effort to bring together network theory and complexity theory and to identify the interplay between these theories is a most commendable move toward some eventual “synthesis” between network theory and complexity theory. However, it must be acknowledged that the nature of any commonalities between network theory and complexity theory is controversial, and proponents of each theoretical framework may question the extent to which a balanced “synthesis” of the interplay between network theory and complexity theory is presented in this paper. For example, does complexity theory bring network theory to life, or does network theory bring complexity theory to life?
Yet, despite these concerns, Morçöl and Wachhaus clearly favor the potential contribution of complexity theory to network theory. The authors emphasize the view that studies of networks have been more concerned with the static rather than the dynamic nature of networks and that complexity theory has been more concerned with the dynamics of adaption and change. Complexity theory is considered not only to bring a dynamic and evolutionary dimension to the study of networks via concepts such as nonlinearity and dissipative structures but to provide methodological tools such as agent-based simulations that are most useful to enriching the limited number of studies into structure–process transformations within networks. Network theory researchers may find most engaging or provocative the proposal that Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory may resolve the methodological individualism that has plagued the study of network dynamics.

The next paper, “Networks in Contemporary Public Administration: A Discourse Analysis,” is a feat of considerable academic diligence that could become a standard reference on how networks are (or are not) conceptualized in U.S. public administration journals. This paper is an exemplary addition to the typologies of networks developed by Jordan and Schubert (1992), Mingus (2001), Rhodes (1997), and Wilks and Wright (1987). Of course, it is possible to suggest that the methodology followed in this paper may have excluded some relevant publications, especially books. Many of us may be bewildered at the exclusion of Administrative Theory & Praxis from the “top” journals investigated for this paper! I also expect that Wachhaus’ attributes list may not please every researcher working in network theory. It is also possible to question the usefulness of presuming or demanding definitional uniformity across differing paradigmatic research traditions. Despite these concerns, the research focus is clear and compelling.

The findings concerning the problematic nature of conceptualization within network theory (and by implication within wider aspects of the social sciences) are well drawn and should caution all theorists and researchers about taking definitions or attributes for granted. Wachhaus’s findings also suggest that the treatment of network theory and networks in U.S. public administration journals is somewhat disconnected and fragmented, if not precursory and underdeveloped. Overall, this paper reinforces the need for public administration to take network theory and networks seriously and, as O’Toole and Meier (2004) suggest, to place them within broader political and organizational contexts.

“The Challenge of Social Networks,” an invited contribution from McSwite, is hopefully another in an ATP series of papers where distinguished public administration theory “elders” reflect on their previous work or, as in this case, make connections with specific symposiums. This paper is expansive, highly speculative, yet intensely practical and has far-reaching implications not only for network theory but also for the fields of public administration and social
study. The emergent post-postmodern world obsessed with written language and the search for individual truth is presented as involving “an actual anomaly [which] disconfirms and delegitimizes standing theory per force.” According to McSwite, this requires “a new fundamental frame for understanding,” and the author laments that the requisite reformulation is not yet apparent. The author envisions contemporary networks as presenting a new era in the ongoing evolution of human consciousness reflective of our day-to-day experience of our human condition. McSwite embarks on a sweeping, daring, feminized (?), anti-rationalist, grand narrative (?), teleological (?) history of human consciousness that draws us back into the “primeval ooze” and rejects the type of theorizing about networks that is despoiled by ahistoric, male (?), rational, technocratic “dream[s] of progress.”

The author favors a pro-Lacanian, pro-desire, pro-Darwinian, pro-adaption, anti-literate, decision-making, public administration based on “properly” organized, “real,” open collective processes (much more oral than written), not as individual experts or “improperly” organized, “unreal,” closed, decision-making, public administration where individual desire dominated collective processes. The related discussion of the preexisting yet contemporary bicameral mind is redolent of Farmer’s interest in preexisting and shifting dispositions in human consciousness (see Farmer, 2005) and directly connected to his exploration of neurobiology published in a previous volume of this journal (Farmer, 2008). McSwite concludes that although the “discourse of rational knowledge [surrounding social and other networks] has become problematic” (pace Sørensen, 2002), there is an emergent “new discourse” “based on [individuals] finding personal validation in whatever transactions they can negotiate with other people.”

Yet McSwite’s epochal “‘world’ of revitalized social networks, a Web 2.0/ Facebook world where judgements are based on inventories of “pure information pooling” and without any reflective or considered recourse to moral or empirical truths may be a “nightmare” for those less convinced about the evolutionary worth of the technologically enabled search for personal validation in the hyperindividualized social networks envisioned by McSwite (see Thorne & Kouzmin, 2008). Do we really want social interaction and compacts where attention is divorced from judgment? Will a new post-postmodern symbolic order emerge from the networked pursuit of what is cool? Are we adapting to a “real” or an “ontology”? Perhaps McSwite should be even more concerned about the nonphysical, electronically mediated nature of post-postmodern social networking and explore further the conjecture that the physically proximate sharing of “chemicals” and other aspects of our biology are fundamental to ensuring affective interpersonal bonds.

I thank the authors of these most thoughtful papers for their contributions to this symposium. I hope that individually and collectively these papers extend our understanding of network theory. I also thank the three reviewers for their
extensive and constructive advice to both myself and the contributors to this symposium. It has been a most enjoyable experience working with the editor of ATP Tom Catlaw in his inaugural year at the helm. I am grateful for his unstinting intellectual and administrative support.

REFERENCES


