

**Social Networks and Cooperation
in Electronic Communities.**

**A theoretical-empirical Analysis of Academic
Communication and Internet Discussion Groups**

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**Social Networks and Cooperation
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**A theoretical-empirical Analysis of Academic
Communication and Internet Discussion Groups**

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van het doctoraat in de
Psychologische, Pedagogische en Sociologische Wetenschappen
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door

Uwe Matzat

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Promotor: Prof. Dr. T.A.B.Snijders
Co-Promotor: Dr. H. de Vos

Beoordelingscommissie: Prof. Dr. B. Wellman (University of Toronto)
Prof. Dr. J.J. Siegers (University of Utrecht)
Prof. Dr. R.P.M. Wittek (University of Groningen)

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For Andrea

Preface

After about five years of intensive work on this research project (and two smaller projects) I am very happy to be able to publish this book. The last few years have been extraordinary for me in many senses. While becoming acquainted with the research system I have been traveling back and forth between the Netherlands and Germany, constantly trying to live in both worlds. I agreed with those who have regretted the disadvantages that the situation has had and I am afraid that Andrea has sometimes felt uncomfortable with it. At the same time there have been many occasions where I have really enjoyed experiencing an intellectual world that is so far removed from my personal background.

When I came to the ICS in 1996 I was very enthusiastic about performing research in an integrated graduate school that emphasized the development of theory in sociology. During the first months there, however, my enthusiasm diminished. The following years were constantly a mixture of 'ups' and 'downs'. Happily, there were many colleagues and friends both inside and outside the ICS who helped me in getting along. Since I have once again come into contact with the German university system during the latter phase of my project, the feeling has come to me that the peculiarities of the ICS system with its combination of 'community' and competition between members are even more remarkable. It has offered me the opportunity of actively participating in an exciting international academic discussion, not without the burden of much work to be done. The discussions with colleagues at the ICS about sociological questions (not necessarily only related to my research topic), or often just being able to listen actively to the ideas expressed by others, have strongly influenced my own thinking and reading.

Many people have helped me in finding my way during this time. Tom Snijders' support, his many-faceted help, and his encouragement to carry out research on a topic that five years ago appeared to be "unusual" and of no interest to theoretical sociology were extremely valuable for me. I am still wondering how somebody who is so busy with serious research can be contacted so easily and informally. I hope that his future additional obligations will not impair this asset. The discussions with Henk de Vos and our work together (both inside and outside my Ph.D. project) were not only very helpful for me, but often gave me a comfortable feeling and energy to carry on. Moreover, I was able to escape from the somewhat isolated way of doing research during the first half of my time at the ICS.

I am very thankful to Barry Wellman and Bonnie Erickson who made my research visit to the Center for Urban and Community Studies (University of Toronto) a

pleasant and useful one. Frans Stokman gave me the opportunity to perform additional research for KPN Research and ICT-Noord-Nederland, which clarified for me various practical implications of my work.

Many other people have helped me, some without necessarily being aware of it. I have shared thoughts with Marcel van Assen, Karoly Takacs, Rafael Wittek, Tamas Bartus, Rita Smaniotto (thank you very much for immediately correcting the Dutch summary!), Christian Steglich, Andreas Flache, and some members of the DATE group, such as Wijbrandt van Schuur, Carlijne Philips, Corinne Hoeben, and Justine Horgan. When I look back it seems that whenever I needed help there was always someone there.

I would like to mention Evelien Zeggelink, who was part of my supervision team during the first half of my project and who unfortunately had to withdraw from this role. I hope that she's doing well now. Moreover, I would like to thank Prof. H. J. Hummell (Gerhard Mercator University of Duisburg) who taught me sociology and brought me into contact with the ICS as an undergraduate student. While working in Groningen I realized that he and also Prof. U. Engel (now University of Bremen) have had a large influence on the way I now do research. Neither were involved in my project, but I hope that they do not dislike too much what has resulted from it.

I am thankful to others who are friends, who have provided companionship, or with whom I have very much enjoyed the opportunity of socializing. I hope that those who I especially appreciate will realize that I refer to them. I wish that I could, or will, give back to them what they have given to me. I would like to mention Marcel van Assen, Jeanette Koenders, Marieke van Onna, Karoly Takacs, my former room-mate Jan Kratzer, Martin van der Gaag, Philipp Woitschek, Tamas Bartus, Rita Smaniotto, and Liesbeth Haken. I remember with so much pleasure the evenings of playing games, cycling around Groningen, going to the cinema, or just drinking a beer and talking, talking, talking. Without them, life would have been less valuable to me.

Most of all, there is Andrea. I would simply like to thank her for always being there and taking care.

Groningen and Düsseldorf, October 2001

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