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# **Social Networks and Professional Communities: A Fair Governance?**

*Christophe Assens and Jean-Pierre Bouchez*

## **Introduction**

This research focuses on social relationship management within networks and workplace communities in which the softening of institutional boundaries and the development of a digital and collaborative economy becomes as important as financial resources and skills management. Yet relationship management is certainly the most problematic task as it is difficult to foresee and control another person's response. To minimize uncertainty, businesses tend to organize relationships among colleagues in a social network or a professional community in which the principles of trust and reciprocity prevail.

## **An Issue of Governance**

One of the major topics of this research is the governance of a network or professional community, namely, how decision-making power and tasks are shared. In other words, what is the best way to manage the collective interest without threatening independence, individual responsibility, and equality among members? This is not an easy problem to resolve because traditional governance theory, such as Board of Directors' control of private companies or state supervision of public bodies, cannot be applied to the network; the parameters of a network's territorial, legal, or capital limits are not always clear. On the one hand, no clear legal, territorial, or capital boundaries have yet been established. On the other hand, the network may evolve into a hybrid public/private entity. Further, the network is not always represented by a collective agent with the legitimacy to discipline its members. Finally, the network does not always have a predetermined objective for its existence (Kilduff and Tsai 2003).

In order to explore this issue of network and community governance, we shall base our analysis on the work of Provan and Kenis (2007) by successively examining three forms: the participant-governed network, the lead organization-governed network, and the network administrative organization. This classification will enable us to determine, in the chapter's conclusion, whether governance is socially responsible based on certain criteria that could limit its implementation: transparency of information that is able to give legitimacy to a decision; equal treatment of members with equitable power sharing, which acts as a gauge of efficiency for democratic government; and equity in the distribution of tasks and payment, which effectively empowers each member.

### **Networks, Communities, and the Governance Model**

In order to fully understand the challenges of our subject, it is important to establish the difference between the networks and communities that exist, particularly within organizations in the form of social networks (SNs) and communities of practice (CoP).<sup>1</sup>

A social network is defined by Powell (1990) and Williamson (1991) as a collaborative organization of institutions or actors whose rules of exchange depend neither on market nor on hierarchy. The network is formed of fiscally and legally independent associates who self-govern and rely on one another for the achievement of a common goal.

Much like an ecosystem, as described by Moore (1996), the network thrives on an exchange with its environment, which urges it to further extend its sphere of influence and constantly challenge its own limits. However, the more the

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that these concepts of community and network, which have come back into vogue over the last years, are probably as old as the history of mankind itself.... So that one could ask oneself whether digital communities are based on an intermediate form between traditional, human-sized communities and wide social networks.

network expands, the more difficult it is to regulate, as the number of interacting components increases. Conversely, when the network stops growing, it loses flexibility and modularity, giving way to rigidity between its connecting parts, thus causing an imbalance of power between its members.

Furthermore, by continuing to rely on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), and Cohendet et al. (2008), we will consider that a CoP is characterized by the voluntary and regular involvement of its members. They take part in the sharing and exchange of knowledge and practices, based on a shared interest in a given field. This in turn leads to the development of a shared identity while complying with the group's social norms. Also, a distinction between the two emerges through the deployment of a key variable based on the intensity of ties (Bouchez 2015, 2016), by referencing the work of Granovetter (1973) on “the strength of weak ties.” Taking this perspective, SNs inherently rely on the logic of “weak ties.” The internal rules of engagement and operation are—a priori—much looser and more relaxed, and concern peripheral relationships that fall outside the primary circle, such as neighbors, work colleagues, business associates (or sports buddies), friends of friends, and so on.

As Granovetter consistently illustrates, the strength of these ties is that they lead to a breakdown of boundaries, thanks to the potential for joining new circles and new communities, for example. This perspective also increases individuals' potential for accessing information that is quantitatively, and often qualitatively, superior to that offered by close relationships alone. In this way, these weak ties are “bridges” that provide members gateways to the members of other networks or social groups, thus building a greater social capital than that open to individuals with only strong ties. Similarly, we shall argue that CoPs more typically rely on “strong ties” in that they rely on a very close primary and direct network in the familial, intellectual, and cultural

spheres, that is, those found in affective relationships. The strength of these ties in fact correlates with their closeness and the trust they generate. But very intense links can also contribute to the creation of relationships that isolate the members of a group, as shown below. Further, we will outline how Bogenrieder and Nooteboom (2004) present four criteria with which to assess the strength of ties. The first refers to their “intensity,” explicitly their “strength,” considering the amount of effort each party puts into the relationship. The second relates to the “frequency” of interactions. The third relates to the “degree of openness” of communication, and the fourth to the relationship’s “longevity.” These criteria highlight that the weak/strong ties polarity is graded. In this way, some digital CoPs within large firms bring together many thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of members (as with IBM). In this instance, the CoPs in reality resemble an SN.

It is however important to note from the outset, the network and the community frequently appear together within organizations. In this way, the largest digital network corporations, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, encourage their millions of members to organize themselves into “groups” that resemble communities of interest with minimal organizational effort. Equally, in large organizations that now have digitalized social networks, CoPs attach themselves to SNs, particularly as groups that share a professional interest.

With regard to the governance model, taking the work of Moreau Defarges (2003), we will examine three dimensions in order to understand the mechanics of governance. In other words, one has to address three dimensions that explain the power struggle between networks or communities of participants and the distribution of their bargaining power:

- **The founding principle:** the network is viewed as a regulated collaborative space based implicitly or explicitly on a founding principle of solidarity. In other words, it is

necessary to understand the common denominator of its members and the sense of affiliation that unites them. This will help us to understand the strategic issues of governance.

- **The network architecture:** the issue is to examine how network boundaries change as members join and leave, whether by co-option or by “decree.” This may prove useful for understanding network properties.
- **The rules of relational games:** this leads us to examine the informal or formal code that governs relationships within the network, guides collective action, and arbitrates conflicts between its members. This will help us understand how decision-making power is distributed and how the benefits of the common relational capital are shared.

Based on these dimensions, Provan and Kenis (2007) recommend distinguishing three types of network, each with specific governance mechanisms that apply to communities: the participant-governed network, the lead organization-governed network, and the network administrative organization. We undertake to present these in the three sections that follow.

### **The Participant-Governed Network: Self-Governance**

Within this form, as with the lead organization-governed network that follows, we will sequentially present the network (RS) and community approach (CoPs), always bearing in mind that the third form, the network administrative organization, is more dependent on network than on community.

#### **Network Perspective**

This is based on a dense network, with members who occupy symmetrical and interchangeable positions. This means that no single member exercises control over another. In other words, no member is able to fill the network’s structural

gap by becoming an intermediary or pivotal connection. In this type of network, collective power is equally shared between all individuals.

Within the participant-governed network, governance has certain specific features. In so far as no member occupies a central position, governance is a self-regulatory process (Accard and Assens 2010). The self-governance process is a social structure based on exchange conventions. Through their interactions, the members together establish conventions that will either empower or restrict their subsequent interactions. These conventions also provide interactions with a spatial and temporal framework. In other words, the network develops a “structure” (Giddens 1984).

This type of self-governance exists mainly in networks with a founding principle based on corporatism, local rooting with a strong sense of belonging to a common territory, and shared working practices. Participant-governed networks correspond, for instance, to a “community of practice” as defined by Wenger et al. (2002). Specifically, this means that the network operates in a community-like way, regulated by peers who transmit the codes and adopt unwritten conventions (Gomez 1994). These conventions give meaning to collective action by ensuring legitimacy of action and equitable sharing of resources. Thus, deviant or over-opportunistic behavior is proscribed by peer pressure.

### **Community Perspective**

Taken from a community perspective and its focus on self-government, we will look at the case of Communities of Practice (CoPs), known as autonomous communities. The first CoPs, whose characteristics we highlighted above appeared progressively; thus, in some corporations from the 1990s on, they took on a spontaneous form. Table 12.1 describes an example of a community of maintenance technicians at Xerox who were initially autonomous but then developed into a neo-hierarchical group (see part 2 of the

text).

**Table 12.1** An illustrative example: the originally “self-organizing” CoP of maintenance technicians at Xerox

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In the above contribution, the American anthropologist Julian E. Orr (1996) presents the community of maintenance technicians at Xerox, after having observed them closely in situ. These technicians, who worked on site at Xerox clients’ premises, had the habit of meeting informally before and after work, as well as during their lunch break, to exchange information and share “war stories,” which created a real narrative, generally around the subject of machinery malfunctions that “strangely” weren’t covered by the company’s very extensive documentation ... These informal, professional exchanges gave technicians the opportunity to share their collective knowledge and practices in order to resolve problems created, in particular, by unforeseeable or unusual malfunctions.

In this way, the group effectively becomes a “self-organized” or “autonomous” CoP: one that is based on an area of common and shared interest as well as mutual, voluntary, “free” and virtually invisible interaction. Over time, it develops a collective memory based in particular on the sharing of an operational repertory of contextualized practices (under the form of a shared passion), thus effectively replacing the official manual.

Management’s attitude was initially hostile, but evolved; particularly after finding that when the informal meetings were suspended, practices were no longer shared and client calls increased significantly, especially with regard to unforeseeable malfunctions ... In order to overcome this problem, the firm launched a project called Eureka, designed to provide structure and supervise the diffusion of tacit practices relating to these technical repairs, and finally recognize the CoP by creating a database able to store and preserve useful ideas, making them accessible to all. After the Eureka project had been running for a few years, Xerox estimated that it had saved the company close to 100 million dollars.

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### **Too Much Solidarity Kills Solidarity**

The self-governed CoP provides the first real-life experience of a participant-governed network thanks to its two-core governance-related characteristics: first, the equal treatment of members regardless of their social status, their size, or skills, and second, the limiting of individual opportunism through peer pressure.

More precisely, a lack of anonymity leads to a form of self-discipline for all the links in a chain of solidarity. In other words, in a participant-governed network, trust cannot be



broken without negative consequences to the originator. By leaving the group, he loses access to the network resources on which he depends. Indeed, if one party tries to mislead another, the offending party is punished by all members of the network, not only by the victim or a transaction partner. Therefore, the transaction becomes equitable not because of the balance in interactions between parties, but rather the reciprocity, with its shared vision of solidarity.

However, this sense of solidarity is weakened when the network expands haphazardly and allows access to trespassers. Indeed, like any shared property that is used individually and paid for by the community, solidarity is beneficial for everyone and no one in particular (Hardin 1968). Yet, the management of a common asset is a sensitive issue, because its use cannot be refused to any member within the network, including those who exhibit trespassing behavior, thus depriving other users of the shared benefit of its use. This is why it is sometimes necessary to introduce a more formalized mode of governance to avoid deviant behavior among peers that may transform the network into a lead organization-governed network or a network administrative organization.

## **The Lead Organization-Governed Network: Hierarchical Governance**

### **Network Perspective**

The characteristic feature of a lead organization-governed network is a hierarchy that exists between a member who is at the pivot of exchanges and the group's peripheral members. The central member acts like a pilot regulating the behavior of other members (Assens 2003). Specifically, the network pilot has three particular competencies: a strategic vision of the network's future through a set of specifications and contracts with various members of the network; the ability to create and consolidate an atmosphere of trust and reciprocity (McEvily and Zaheer 2004); and lastly, the means

to canvass and select new associates. In this capacity, he defines the network's boundaries and pools its resources like a master architect. He secures solidarity within the network because, as project manager, his objective is to constantly consolidate relationships between entities. To do this, he monitors and contributes to the development of relationships in many ways: he shares information, educates newcomers, and disciplines members who fail to comply with the rules he introduces.

Thus, the unity of a lead organization-governed network relies on the intangible assets belonging to the pilot (Assens and Bouteiller 2006): brand image, relational capital, access to market players, and technological knowhow. They give meaning to the founding principle and explain the solidarity between partner manufacturers within the network. Ultimately these assets unite network members around a pilot situated at the core of all exchanges.

### **Community Perspective**

Since the 2000s, there has been a progressive shift from “self-organizing” to “sponsored” communities. The main reason behind this is the common need of large, enlightened organizations to develop an original, hybrid form of governance that is advantageous for all participants. The sponsored communities of practice (SCoPs), via their less-remote leaders, gain official recognition from their sponsor leaders, as well as a certain amount of resources (time, meeting areas, financing), once their projects and work appear relevant.

SCoPs have in fact multiplied, sometimes bringing together many thousands of members through the use of digital supports. In his annotated review, Bootz (2013) states that Siemens, British Petroleum, IBM, the Council of Europe, GDF-Suez (now Engie), Hydro-Quebec, the World Bank, HewlettPackard, EDF, Clarica, and Schlumberger have all undertaken a knowledge management initiative centered

around sponsored communities of practice (SCoPs). For their part, Cohendet et al. (2011) confirm this trend by classifying the different types of sponsored communities: “apprenticeship groups” (Hewlett-Packard), “family groups” (Xerox), “peer groups” (British Petroleum), “knowledge networks” (IBM Global Services), “knowledge sharing groups” (Siemens), and “internal knowledge management group” (EDF GDF—former name). The objective remains the same: these companies recognize that communities are capable of making a big contribution to performance.

### **Too Much Monitoring Kills Practice Sharing**

The sponsored communities referred to as “institutionalized,” that is, those that form part of and are integrated into an organization, can be likened to a type of deviation. We have observed two approaches that must be differentiated from this point of view: “project communities” and “hierarchical communities.”

The first case refers to a return to classic and formal functioning, particularly in the guise of qualified, collaborative “project” communities that in reality operate in a way that is analogous to traditional collaborative project groups. They function by mobilizing digital tools and constrained processes to the point of losing any identity and specificity. Managerial governance and procedural devices therefore strip them of all “community spirit” in a type of “recycling,” hijack, or deviation. However, we have observed an increase in the existence of project manager communities. The second case can be seen in the deployment of what are referred to as “hierarchical” communities; inevitably closed, they extend a service or department’s reach. But this fusion of a hierarchical team and a community (the team leader is also the community group leader), even when it includes exchanges that are both extraprofessional (sharing of holiday videos and curiosities, etc.) and professional (calendars, document libraries, information on current activities, capitalizing exchanges and document monitoring, etc.) carries a real risk

of clouding boundaries and heightening embarrassment.

### **The Network Administrative Organization: “Democratic Governance”**

By its very nature and extent, the administered form creates more of a network than a community, although this does not stop communities from forming or attaching themselves to these vast networks.

The network administrative organization has specific characteristics. Collaboration among members falls under the jurisdiction of institutional rules, that is, the charter of rights and duties required for network membership. The governance structure, led by elected members, is responsible for changing these rules and ensuring their implementation with compliant members.

This governance structure embodies the legal nature of the network. It engages the network’s legal responsibility and has the legitimacy needed to resolve bottlenecks, mediate conflicts, and define the axes of expansion. Consequently, the network administrative organization is a real joint venture based on *affectio societatis*, that is, on the intention of its members to be considered equal within the governance structure (Hatchuel and Segrestin 2007). This model is dominant in the social and solidarity economies, associations, NGOs (non-governmental organizations); in the mutual banking sector, the social capital of which is distributed among member customers; in mutual health organizations where solidarity becomes apparent in the distribution of contributions made by the sick and the healthy; in the private sector with its economic interest groups; in the public sector through the example of public interest groups (PIG) which have a limited life span and a legal entity aimed at implementing a public interest project by pooling member resources.

We can complete this assessment by citing the cooperative entity, which appears in many production sectors such as

banking, crafts, trade, industry, and services. It is likewise prevalent in the agricultural sector, which has a total turnover of 4 billion euros and employs 42,000 employees who are affected by this status.

One of the specific features of the network administrative organization, the examples of which we mentioned above, is the fair distribution of property rights, and, therefore, the democratic distribution of decision-making power within the governance structure. According to Parrat (2003), the relational capital within the network is distributed in a “democratic” manner. The right of ownership over the governance structure is assigned solely to network members. Thus, no individual owner may appropriate the benefit of relational capital, which is a membership benefit, at the expense of other partners. The right to use social capital or a network membership benefit, in order to gain from it or transfer its ownership, therefore belongs to the network as a whole. Despite these theoretical arguments, the “democratic” dimension of a network’s governance is often challenged in practice.

### **Too Much Democracy Kills Democracy**

In associations or cooperatives, all members are entitled to an equal share of property rights in order to better apply the principles of solidarity and reciprocity. In theory, this rule is intended to reinforce the network’s democratic nature, with the election of representatives to the Board of Directors being part of the governance structure. In practice, in the case of very large cooperatives or associations with several tens of thousands of voting members, the power of representation becomes so diluted and remote from its original purpose that elected representatives of the Board lose the legitimacy of their authority. This loss of legitimacy occurs most often in a technostructure in the case of the managing director, who enjoys the status of employee but not of elected member. In fact, in the end, the managing director, who remains untouched by the outcome of a vote, has the real power

within a network, without ever being subject to the political alternation of elected representatives. In these circumstances, members of a network administrative organization may gradually lose “democratic power” in favor of a technostucture.

## Conclusion

In theory, both networks and communities operate according to democratic standards, with a transparency and collegiality in decision-making that is in line with the universal principles of good governance (Graham et al. 2003) as defined in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). On the one hand, it concerns the legitimacy that gives any actor a voice in decisionmaking in order to achieve consensus despite divergent interests, the orientation that it benefits all and not just some. On the other hand, it concerns the efficiency that results from a rational use of resources to produce the best possible result; the accountability practices that apply to members in charge of transparency of information; and the equity of coming together around the principles of equality and impartiality.

According to our framework of interpretation based on three forms of governance—participative, lead, and administrative—the network and community are not always untarnished examples of good governance that are unwaveringly respectful of democratic principles. We will review these principles to discuss the limits of their practical application within the network.

The *legitimacy* of network members to participate in collective decisions is at question, particularly in the lead organization-governed network where only the pilot has the legitimacy to make decisions on behalf of everyone, with the inherent risk that he will exploit the organization for his own interests. As for the legitimacy of a community of practice, and in particular that of its leader, the institutional integration into a classic organization amounts to a deviation that has the effect outlined above, specifically, a distortion of the “community spirit.”

In practice, the *orientation* of a network, and of a community, is not always beneficial to the majority of network members. In the network administrative organization, the founding members retain the prerogative to steer the network’s development and prioritize their own specific interests before considering the stakes of new members.

*Efficiency* is not always guaranteed either within the network or the community. Peer control as in a participant-governed network can cause adverse effects because of the crossbreeding of members acting as judge and judged, especially when network membership operates by the “reproductive cloning” of its existing members. This can lead to inertia or the desire for a soft consensus on collective decisions, thereby resulting in a loss of individual accountability and the paralysis of the network as a whole.

*Accountability* practices are not always established. In a participant-governed network, for example, operating without a pilot or compliance with a charter of best practices, self-governance can lead to the appearance of “trespassers” who do not wish to get involved in the community but enjoy the benefits that it provides. Responsibility is no longer fairly distributed but is based on a compromise between active and inactive members. If there are no regulatory mechanisms to correct the perverse effects of this self-governance, the network may become discriminatory and rapidly lose efficiency.

*Equity* is another principle of good governance that can be jeopardized under certain circumstances. In a network administrative organization, the more one advocates equity with a fair distribution of decision-making power between all members of the network, the higher the risk of diluting this collegial power until it finally becomes a technostructure (too much democracy kills democracy). In the lead organization-governed network, particularly in the network form, the peripheral members’ proximity to the pilot is more likely to sharpen relational asymmetry than reduce an imbalance of power (too much proximity kills proximity). Finally, in a participant-governed network, solidarity that is based on goodwill has its limitations because of the existence of active members and those who benefit from the structure without getting involved (too much solidarity kills solidarity).

Further, network governance does not depend on the nature of geographical boundaries. In network administrative organizations, local roots can be a good indicator of solidarity only if physical proximity is important for cognitive proximity—for the ability to exchange information and remain supportive. In lead organization-governed networks or participant-governed networks, territorial boundaries are not enough to understand the true limits of solidarity within a network. This solidarity can be extended by means of telecommunication tools, due to the geographical migration of agents (diasporas), without raising issues of sharing and pooling. Therefore, the true limits of a network or a community are often intangible; they are based on a sense of belonging to a club, with specific rules of co-optation and control. Governance issues are thus dependent on the rules of exchange that are established through conventions and based on a balance of bargaining power, for which a member’s location is less important than his or her position within the network. This reflects his influence over others as an intermediate or a pilot, even if this influence is exercised remotely.



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