Transcending Boundaries through Networks – Locally, Globally[1]

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Both in Germany and around the world, more and more people are of the impression that social cohesion is at risk and that society and, in a broader sense, the world as a whole are increasingly falling apart (cf. Zick et al. 2011). Even though the term 'social cohesion' usually has positive connotations, it is important to keep in mind that increasing group cohesion bears the risk of closing oneself off to the outside: The conformation of norms, values, and models of work and life that is typical of cohesion also requires that a distinction be drawn with regard to others. Taken to an extreme, this can lead to exclusive and xenophobic movements. Cohesion and distinction are therefore two sides of the same coin.

In the Bertelsmann study *Sozialer Zusammenhalt in Deutschland 2017* (Social Cohesion in Germany 2017), in addition to national solidarity and a focus on the common good, social relationships are also named as constitutive dimensions of a cohesive society (cf. Zick et al. 2011: 25). The sociologist Georg Simmel, a pioneer in network analysis, pointed out in 1890 that the close connection between the forms of communal life and the individuality of people can be represented as a relationship structure: "[...] as a regulative world principle, we have to assume that everything is in some kind of interactive relationship with everything else, that there are forces and reciprocal relationships between every point in the world and every other" (Simmel 1890: 13, translated from the German[2]). In his analyses of "social circles", Simmel clearly described how networks develop in a multi-grade manner. In other words, network relationships develop on very different levels. Simmel differentiated "organic" from "rational circles" here. The individual is born into organic circles, which include the family and neighbourhoods. Rational circles, on the other hand, are selected and formed by the individual. Quilling et al. (2013: 14) further develop Simmel's distinction by differentiating between primary, secondary, and tertiary networks. Primary networks refer to personal relationship structures in the circle of the family, the circle

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[1] Translated from the German by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

[2] „[...] als regulatives Weltprinzip müssen wir annehmen, dass Alles mit Allem in irgend einer Wechselwirkung steht, dass zwischen jedem Punkte der Welt und jedem andern Kräfte und hin- und hergehende Beziehungen bestehen".

of friends, or the circle of colleagues. Secondary networks such as neighbourhood networks or interest groups are already somewhat organised, but remain largely informal in nature. Finally, tertiary networks are professional relationships between different organisations. They are highly organised and can pertain to social, political, legal, cultural, or economic domains, for example.

Both cultural and educational policy work necessitate exchanges with a large number of stakeholders or actors. The key to this increasingly lies in the establishment of networks, which is to be understood as the third form of organisation between 'hierarchy' (e.g. ministries or associations) and 'market' (e.g. companies) (see Fig. 1). All of these developments have been greatly multiplied by digitisation in both the local and global context.

Markets – price
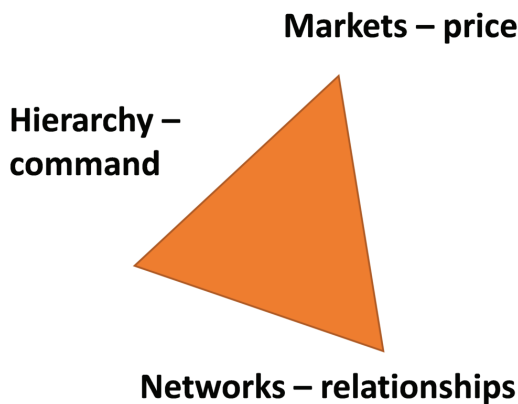
Hierarchy – command

Networks – relationships

Fig. 1: Networks as a Third Form of Organisation; source: http://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/cross-sector-collaboration-and-working-how-much-time-do-we-have-to-do-things-right/3/4/2018 [01.12.2020].

The Valorisation of Networks

The importance of networks has increased significantly in recent years – both regionally and internationally. On the international level, there are a large number of networks that target sustainability or corporate social responsibility, for example (see United Nations Global Compact & Bertelsmann Stiftung 2012).

As the complexity and dynamics of markets increase, traditional political arenas and places of decision-making are being partially overridden. It is clear that the boundaries between different organisations are gradually shifting or even dissolving. An essential feature of these new forms of organisation is that it is no longer possible to distinguish their inside from their outside. Traditional policy approaches are not yet prepared for these developments.

Effective networks are no magic formula, however; rather, structuring and maintaining them is very demanding. Network cohesion is largely based on dialogue, voluntariness, and consensus. Classic concepts of politics and leadership run up against their limits here. Strategic, regional, and global networks as well as project networks bring their own unpredictable forms of momentum with them. The impression is often given that the formation of cooperative strategic networks per se is a silver bullet that instantly leads to innovations. Here, too little attention is being paid to the amount of personal and organisational expense required to build and continuously maintain network relationships.

Weak Ties and Social Cohesion

Mark Granovetter's study *The Strength of Weak Ties* (1973) focused on the special quality of weak relationships. His classification of relationships as "strong" or "weak" is central to a better understanding of networks and the role of the actors therein. *Strong ties* are characterised by close connections, the similarity of the actors involved, and by strengthening through cohesion and identity. *Weak ties*, on the other hand, are based on weak connections, the dissimilarity of the actors involved, and easier access to external resources (see Fig. 2). Weak ties allow you to leave social circles at least temporarily in order to explore new strategies. The disintegration of social distances is often based on weak ties that allow new social relationships to emerge and that reduce prejudices. Gordon W. Allport (1954) described this phenomenon with the hypothesis of intergroup contact. Strong relationships, on the other hand, favour dependencies and can prevent circumscribed neighbourhoods from being abandoned and one's own living environment from being expanded. Despite all the vagueness, the distinction between the two terms – strong vs. weak relationships – provides important insights into social cohesion: Strong relationships support the formation

of communities, while weak relationships enable the cohesion of the overall network. The removal of weak relationships leads to a gradual disintegration of overall social systems, while the reduction of strong relationships only results in a decrease in the size of the network, but not in its breakdown (cf. Avenarius 2010: 107).
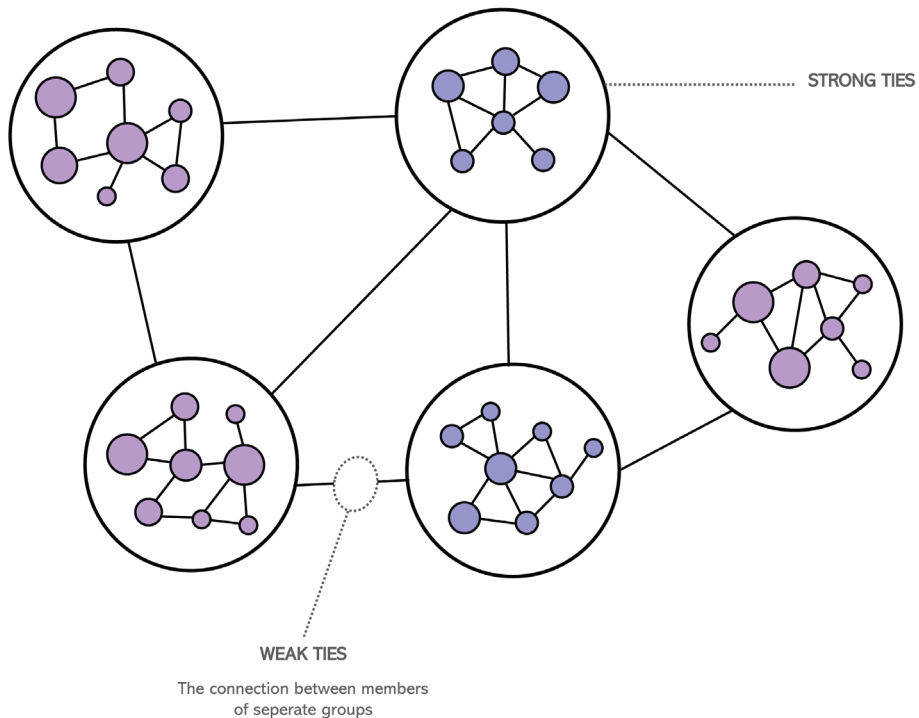

STRONG TIES

WEAK TIES
The connection between members
of seperate groups

Fig. 2: Strong Ties vs. Weak Ties; source: https://www.headresourcing.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Weak-ties-visual.png [14.05.2020].

The Bridging of Network Holes

Actors who enter into relationships with people who are not connected to each other have great importance here. Bridge builders, information brokers, etc. bridge so-called 'structural holes', which Ronald S. Burt (1992) has pointed out (see Fig. 3). Although structural holes are beyond direct measurability, they point to the special possibilities that emerge for those people who bridge them. For actors who are able to connect different social clusters, there are information gains, control benefits,

as well as alternative perspectives and courses of action. At the interorganisational level, the bridging of structural holes also has effective impacts in terms of learning, innovation, and creativity (cf. Scheidegger 2010: 146 ff.). Structural holes can be bridged through strong as well as weak relationships. It is not the degree of relationship strength that is decisive here, but rather the relationship's uniqueness or lack of redundancy. However, maintaining structural holes can also be beneficial for those people who would like to maintain dependencies.
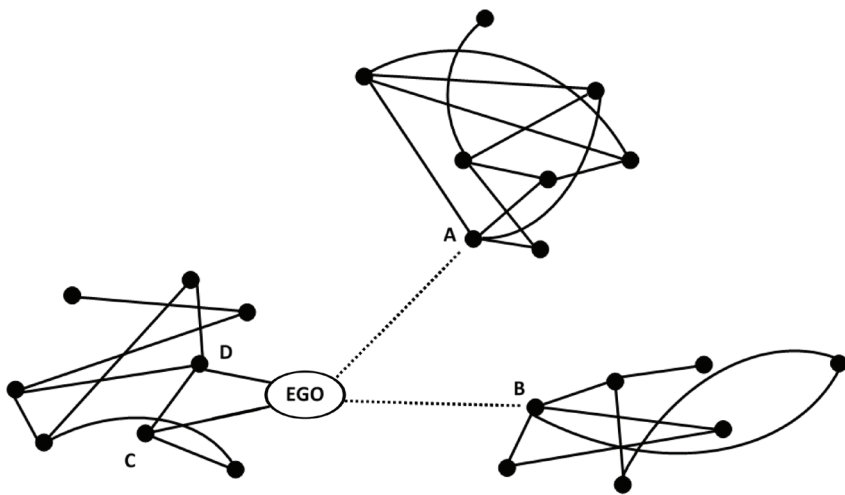

Fig. 3: Structural Holes; source: Burt 1992: 27.

Digitisation and Social Cohesion

As early as 1993, before the extensive changes that took place over the course of digitisation, Robert Putnam spoke of the media as the culprit responsible for the loss of public spirit. But the relationship between digitisation and social cohesion is not that easy to grasp. Digital networking via social media has *increased* the number of social relationships for many people. "This connectivity, the number of followers and Facebook friends, is the new currency in which the popularity of the individual is measured" (Baringhorst 2017: 5, translated from the German). News, including fake news,

is spread quickly through real people and so-called 'social bots'. Digital networks, in addition to enabling an increase in the possibilities of surveillance and social control, have also allowed solidarity and protest movements to proliferate. New platforms for exchange and networking have emerged on the Internet, some of which also encourage civil society engagement. Internet-mediated communication is often accompanied by a withdrawal from analogue communication. New links between one's real-world social life and one's digital existence are emerging. All of this is likely having an effect on social cohesion processes. For example, Wallace et al. (2017) examined how information and communication technologies are changing social cohesion in rural communities in Northern Scotland. They demonstrated that the effects of digitisation are very different for different social and cultural groups. At the same time, they presented the great extent to which digitisation has become an integral part of the social relationships of the villages under examination. Alam and Imran (2015) were able to establish that refugee migrants in Australia were better able to integrate into society if they had access to digital media. Conversely, a "digital divide" served to increase social inequality.

Successful Components of Network Building

Qualitative structured interviews were conducted with successful networkers from the world of business. These interviews focused on which subjectively relevant criteria of network building and the development of cooperation play a central role for the interviewees. The group of experts consisted of 20 representatives from small, medium-sized, and large companies. The interview partners were or are all active as networkers both in the field of corporate cooperation and in the social-political arena. In the following, the key findings are summarised as seven successful components (see Endres 2012). To a large extent, the results correspond to the conditions that Hanleybrown et al. (2012), in their concept of *Collective Impact*, consider prerequisites for the interaction of different organisations.

a) Common Goals and Visions

The interview partners see the development of common goals and visions as a central prerequisite for the establishment of networks. The reason for this is that the respective cooperation partners first have to be clear about their own goals. This initially requires considerable internal coordination within their own organisations.

Furthermore, forums that facilitate identifying similarities in the respective goal orientations are necessary. The similarities can also lie in relating complementary knowledge bases or resources to one another.

The experts' analysis demonstrates that the formulation of common goal perspectives often requires support through third parties. One interview partner expressed it as follows: "Info-marketplaces are needed where you can learn something about the goals and competencies of others" (cited in: Endres 2012: 50). The respondents see the most far-reaching and most fundamental form of cooperation in the formulation of common future images of cooperation. However, a prerequisite for the joint development of visions is a high degree of strategic capability on the part of one's respective cooperation partner.

b) Willingness and Ability to Change Perspectives

For the experts who were interviewed, another key prerequisite for cooperation is the ability and willingness to take on the perspective of their cooperation partners: "The better you can adapt to others, the easier and more successful the cooperation becomes" (see ibid.). Short distances to and a strong presence with the cooperation partner play an important role here.

Perhaps the most important effect of a temporary change of perspective can be seen in becoming aware of the cultural pattern in which both one's own and other people's actions and knowledge are embedded. In order to recognise the systematic framework conditions and sociocultural peculiarities through which knowledge bases take on a high degree of significance with regard to action, it is necessary not to individualise difficulties and misunderstandings, but to try to classify and understand them from the perspective of one's cooperation partner. This can, for example, relate to the question of which internal organisational problems and which strategic goal conflicts the cooperation partner has.

c) Engaging in Something New

The outcomes and benefits of networks cannot be predicted and planned in detail. Yet this salient risk also harbours opportunities. Indeed, innovation potential in particular can be activated when actors who are, to some extent, from very different worlds cooperate with each other. Cooperation therefore requires the courage and

the openness to engage in developments that are not fully defined. However, one should not ignore the danger that the resulting changes will not actually be desirable and therefore that new knowledge will come to be seen as a threat. An important personal cooperation factor comes to light when decisions are made that are intuitive and often not justifiable in rational terms; these decisions therefore go beyond the limits of the known. One interview partner gets to the heart of this matter: "Risk tolerance and a bit of craziness are part of it" (quoted in: ibid.: 51). This willingness to take risks presupposes the ability to courageously engage in something new and to take action even if the consequences are not entirely foreseeable. The ability to react quickly in order to adapt to the changed situation and to benefit from the expanded possibilities the situation offers is also needed here. Several examples from the discussions with the experts made it clear that structural changes often go hand in hand with the establishment of new networks.

d) Mutual Trust

Successful cooperations are characterised by relationships of mutual trust, in the sense of mutual predictability: "You have to build trust with the other person to establish that you are the right partner" (cited in: ibid.). In order for the respective cooperation partners to be able to recognise each other's resources as well as each other's goals, critical areas have to be identified and sensitive doors opened, at least in part. There is definitely a risk here that doors that have been opened will be misused. The fears that come with this are some of the most significant obstacles in otherwise promising networks. A sensitive and careful approach by all parties involved is therefore an absolute prerequisite. A relationship of trust is not only necessary at the level of the cooperation partners involved, but also at the respective management level. Trust means less the establishment of an intensive personal relationship, and more that everyone can be sure that their own preliminary work will not be exploited by the other side.

e) There Can Only Be Winners

If one of the cooperation partners has the impression that their counterpart is primarily concerned with their own gain, that cooperation partner will withdraw, as the respondents reported. However, a mere win-win situation is not enough; it is also absolutely necessary for the gains or profits of the respective cooperation partners to be close to the same amount. The question of what gains are and how they should

be valued primarily follows subjective and culturally influenced criteria ("culturally" includes organisational culture here). Recognising the respective understandings of the cooperation partners involved requires an intensive search process.

A culture of an exchange economy with transparent mutual benefits is necessary: "A business is only good if it is good for everyone" (cited in: ibid.: 52). This is not just about monetary gains; indeed, monetary gains could stand in the way of establishing long-term relationships. Gains can also include access to networks or an improved public image.

f) Reciprocal Communication

Cooperation requires a common language and direct channels of communication. This already identifies an important internal requirement: "Different languages are already spoken within the organisations" (cited in: ibid.). The success of network building is thus not least linked to whether it is possible to establish a process of reciprocal communication and understanding. That this is by no means self-evident is shown, among other things, by the fact that even the same terms could have subjectively different meanings. Deviations in meaning can therefore quickly lead to misunderstandings.

g) Regular Maintenance of Contacts

According to the interviewees, in successful networks existing contacts are continuously maintained beyond everyday issues. The fact that communication also exists outside of everyday work is essential for longer-term cooperation: Criticism is more likely to be accepted when it is removed from the everyday pressure to take action; this lower-pressure context also makes it easier to discover scope for possible changes. Another function of maintaining personal contacts lies in the collection, selection, and conveyance of relevant information. In contrast to public information sources or the Internet, networks offer pre-filtered information, which is therefore highly relevant to action, and which in turn saves times and increases efficiency in the utilisation of that information. Close contact with the operational level of one's respective network partners is also perceived as being particularly important: "You have to know both the clerk and the boss at the top" (cited in: ibid.). The importance of maintaining personal contacts is signalled as being particularly important in the initial phase of a cooperation; in the later phase, cooperation can also be guaranteed

by telephone. Nonetheless, the need to continuously maintain contact remains: "After three to five months, you often have to refresh the contact, otherwise communication problems will gradually emerge" (quoted in: ibid.).

The Need for Boundary-Transcending Competencies

It is obvious that the boundaries between the various social institutions are becoming more permeable or are gradually shifting. Charles Sabel already spoke, in this context, of a new form of meta-organisation in 1991, which he vividly described as the "Moebius Strip Organization" (cf. Sabel 1991). In this context, a new type of management or action has been emerging in various social areas for some time, which can be described as boundary-transcending (see Endres 2014). Boundary transcenders (Grenzgänger) continuously operate within and between different organisations and social networks and work in a process-oriented manner. This means that their tasks are initially defined primarily through *critical events*, for example in the form of concrete challenges (e.g. integrating refugee migrants into the job market). As a result, boundary transcenders cannot choose which problems are to be solved, but *can* choose the strategies and methods to deal with them, which are in turn always linked to specific cooperation or network partners. The opportunities available to boundary transcenders lie precisely in the fact that – in situations originating with a critical event – they seek out those actors who are most likely to support the finding of solutions. In this way, it is also possible to successfully cope with demanding situations for which there are as yet no formal structures of action in place.

Boundary transcenders can be empirically proven as a phenomenon in very different networks. Placke distinguishes between institutional and individual boundary transcenders and also points out that the competencies of boundary transcenders largely correspond to the concept of "leading beyond authority", as formulated by Julia Middleton, the founder of Common Purpose. It is a matter of establishing action and taking responsibility "beyond the boundaries of formal authority" (Placke 2012: 216, translated from the German). It thus becomes clear that, at the level of the individual, boundary transcenders in particular have acquired the skills needed to shape relationships and change perspectives.

Conclusion

1. Successful network work goes hand in hand with the 'management of tensions'. This includes both interpersonal and interorganisational skills. In the domains of culture and education, it is always a matter of local and global communication processes and the development of common objectives. Networks are not silver bullets, but they offer considerable opportunities that are still far from exhausted in the landscape of cultural and educational policy.

2. The digital transformation is reaching cultural neighbourhoods at high speeds. Neighbourhood platforms such as www.nextdoor.com from San Francisco or www.betreut.de (an offshoot of the Google subsidiary www.care.com) are catching on quite strongly. The path from digital platforms to the utilisation of algorithms is only a very short one. Algorithms know no feelings and cannot become tired. That is both their advantage and their disadvantage.

3. Foreign cultural and educational policy is very networked. In light of the digital transformation, these networks, which have had a positive impact for many years, are running up against their limits. The existing networks need to form new strategic alliances. This could be achieved through cooperation with actors from other domains (e.g. start-ups). One starting point could also be the launching of innovation forums in which promoters of power, promoters of professions, and promotors of process all take part. A more far-reaching measure would be the establishment of intercultural entrepreneur networks that could try to tap innovation potential by bridging network holes.

4. Foreign cultural and educational policy unites a large pool of potential from various institutions and actors. This considerable potential should be harnessed so as not to leave digital transformation in the hands of Amazon, Google, and others.

5. The extensive experience and knowledge potential of intermediary institutions are great treasures that need to be brought together in line with a guarantee of quality. Although – unlike in business – there are no budgets for research and development, the digital transformation should be designed in accordance with an orientation toward the common good. This requires great efforts and strategic alliances on a hitherto unseen scale.

6. To once again get to the heart of the matter: Foreign cultural and educational policy is facing one of its greatest challenges. This requires not an increase in the number of networks, but rather targeted strategic networking and courage among those responsible, especially in politics.

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