

The Performativity of Networks

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Abstract

The “performativity thesis” is the claim that parts of contemporary economics and finance, when carried out into the world by professionals and popularizers, reformat and reorganize the phenomena they purport to describe, in ways that bring the world into line with theory. Practical technologies, calculative devices and portable algorithms give actors tools to implement particular models of action. I argue that social network analysis is performative in the same sense as the cases studied in this literature. Social network analysis and finance theory are similar in key aspects of their development and effects. For the case of economics, evidence for weaker versions of the performativity thesis is quite good, and the strong formulation is circumstantially supported. Network theory easily meets the evidential threshold for the weaker versions; I offer empirical examples that support the strong (or “Barnesian”) formulation. Whether these parallels are a mark in favor of the thesis or a strike against it is an open question. I argue that the social network technologies and models now being “performed” build out systems of generalized reciprocity, connectivity, and commons-based production. This is in contrast both to an earlier network imagery that emphasized self-interest and entrepreneurial exploitation of structural opportunities, and to the model of action typically considered to be performed by economic technologies.