Mapping civil society with Social Network Analysis

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Abstract:

The network concept is in widespread use in human geography and yet methodological implications regarding the formal study of network relations remains largely unexplored. Working within the tension between more formal sociological/analytical approaches on one hand, and more relational/ethnographic modes of network analysis on the other, this paper explores the possibility of using social network analysis and visualization as a tool for qualitative research in human geography. The approach put forward in this paper combines formal network analysis with ethnographic research methods, and takes a relational view of the network as a metaphor that at once describes and works to shape social relations. Taking networks of civil society organisations as our example, this paper highlights the debates over what social network analysis allows and omits, focusing in particular on issues related to flows, power, boundary demarcation and abstraction. It seems clear that, from a methodological perspective, much can be lost when the conceptual and theoretical arguments about networks are applied to the material and embodied practices that constitute network relations. Nevertheless, the formal analysis of such networks can provide a representation of relationships at a moment in time that can help to both express those relationships and to open new questions that can be explored using other methods. Just as abstraction is used in an iterative process to move between empirical evidence and conceptual and theoretical arguments, the representation of networks using various analytical techniques can be part of a methodological approach that moves between the representation of relationships and the ways that various agents express, experience, and remake those relationships. Using the example of research on NGOs and civil society organisations promoting citizenship for young people in divided societies, we explore the utility - and limitations - of working in the liminal space of formal network analysis and more relational, ethnographic approaches.

Keywords: Civil society; social network analysis; actor-network theory; diagramming; abstraction; hybrid methods

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1. Introduction

The term ‘network’ has become a pervasive spatial and organisational metaphor for describing sets of complex interactions. However, the pervasiveness of the term masks the different “analytical [and normative] commitments” that underpin divergent conceptual and methodological approaches to the study of networks (Johnston, 2000). Within sociology, the formal analysis of networks is a well-established subfield. In this area of research, Social Network Analysis (SNA) is used to uncover structural patterns that enable or prevent social interaction and flow. Formal approaches to network analysis have lately been taken up by geographers, mainly within economic geography (Broekel and Boschma, 2012; Gluckler, 2007; Ter Wal and Boschma, 2009; Yeung, 1994). In addition to mapping distribution networks, supply chains, and transnational financial streams, SNA has also been used to analyse diffusion of industrial innovation, (Breschi and Lissoni, 2009; Howells, 2012; Howells and Bessant, 2012; Huggins and Thompson, 2013), and other forms of informational flows such as ‘buzz’ (Mould and Joel, 2010) and corporate knowledge transfer (O'Hagan and Green, 2004). In other areas of geography, formal approaches have been applied to mapping knowledge networks within the discipline itself (Socio, 2010) - a popular use of SNA across disciplines - while others have recognized the potential in combining SNA with GIS (Luke, 2005; Radil et al., 2010).

Critics of social network analysis argue that this formal approach to the study of complex relationships risks confusing cause with effect. That is, the focus on the structure of networks themselves tends to offer deterministic explanations of social phenomena, without providing any contextual insight into the social processes by which network relations form, or the meanings and norms that govern their functioning (Fuhse and Mutzel, 2011). Bucking against this tendency are more relational and reflexive approaches to network analysis, such as that offered by relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997; White, 1992, 2008) and Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law and Hassard, 1999). It has been largely through the latter vein that political and cultural geographers have engaged in the conversation on network ontologies. The network metaphor has been particularly useful to geographers in theorizing relational approaches to space and scale (Amin, 2002; Bulkeley, 2005; Dicken et al., 2001; Jones, 2009; Sheppard, 2002). As Latour (1999) explains, network ontology does not try to solve or overcome the micro/macro dilemma, but rather sidesteps the problem altogether through a focus on movement and mobility. However, Marston et al. (2005, 423), warn against fetishizing network fluidity and ignoring the “large variety of blockages, coagulations and assemblages (everything from material objects to doings and sayings) that congeal in space and social life.” Using more ethnographic approaches researchers have begun interrogating the various social and material blockages that constrain and enable network mobility by attending to the embodied practices that are produced by and produce network imaginaries (Larner and Laurie, 2010; Routledge, 2008; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009).

Thus, despite the ubiquity of the term network, an often unacknowledged and unresolved tension exists between these different analytical, conceptual, and methodological approaches to researching different kinds of networks. Working within this tension between more formal, analytical approaches on the one hand, and more relational, ethnographic modes of network analysis on the other, this paper explores the possibility of using social network analysis and visualization as a tool for qualitative research in human geography. The approach put forward in this paper combines formal network analysis with ethnographic research methods, and takes a relational view of the
network as a metaphor that at once describes and works to shape social relations. Taking networks of civil society organisations as our example, this paper highlights the debates over what social network analysis allows and omits, focusing in particular on issues related to flows, power, boundary demarcation and abstraction. It seems clear that, from a methodological perspective, much can be lost when the conceptual and theoretical arguments about networks are applied to the material and embodied practices that constitute network relations. Nevertheless, the formal analysis of such networks can provide a representation of relationships at a moment in time that can help to both express those relationships and to open new questions that can be explored using other methods. Just as abstraction is used in an iterative process to move between empirical evidence and conceptual and theoretical arguments, the representation of networks using various analytical techniques can be part of a methodological approach that moves between the representation of relationships and the ways that various agents express, experience, and remake those relationships. Using the example of research on NGOs and civil society organisations promoting citizenship for young people in divided societies, we explore the utility – and limitations – of working in the liminal space of formal network analysis and more relational, ethnographic approaches.

2. Networks as conceptual and analytical devices
Within the social sciences, network analysis is best defined as “the disciplined inquiry into the patterning of relationships among actors” (Breiger, 2004, 505). However, there is no singular methodological approach to the study of networks. What unifies various approaches is a focus on relationships between actors. Network analysis is by definition relational. However, approaches to the study of networks vary in their reflexive recognition of this relationality. Formal approaches to network analysis take the network as a model for social interactions, while more recent ethnographic research on organizational networks has highlighted how the network ideal not only describes webs of social relations, but also instructs the formation of those relations. We make the argument that these tensions can be productively mediated, if not resolved, through a combined approach which sees network visualizations as conceptual diagrams which produce a space for research. Formal network analysis and visualization can serve a function within an iterative, grounded approach to ethnographic research that positions itself within, and seeks to study, social networks. This section will tease out the tensions between the different approaches to network analysis, ranging from more reflexive, ethnographic, and qualitative approaches on one side, to formal, data-analytical, quantitative approaches on the other.

Early ethnographic work on social networks emerged out of the British urban social anthropology tradition and the Manchester school in particular (Barnes, 1954; Mitchell, 1969). As early as 1940, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown was using the term ‘social structure’ to refer specifically to the “complex network of social relations” that connected people and groups to one another (Beiger 2004, 506). In this way, the network structure serves as a metaphor, or diagram for thinking about social relationships, as well as a mode of analysing those relationships. Around the same time, Norbert Elias’s figurational sociology examined the complexity of interdependent social relations between actors, taking those relations rather than the actors themselves (or their aggregate characteristics) as the foundational unit of analysis, a key distinction in network analysis (Elias, 1969; Fuhse and Mutzel, 2011; Hughes, 2012). Contemporaneously, early contributions to the study of small-scale social networks were being made in the US as part of research on group dynamics in social psychology (Bavelas, 1948; Cartwright, 1959; Moreno, 1934). These ethnographic and qualitative approaches used the network as a metaphor for understanding complex interwoven social relations.
The shift in thinking about the network as metaphor for understanding both large and small scale social relationships, to a formal methodological technique for analysing and visualizing those relationships was largely the result of advances in digital data analytics that developed in the late 1970s and 1980s (Breiger, 2004; Galaskiewicz and Wasserman, 1993). By the 1990s formal network analysis had come of age as a subgenre of sociological research, as sociologists began making regular use of computer-aided network analysis (Galaskiewicz and Wasserman 1993). The move toward formal network analysis was not solely the outcome of technological advances, but also part of an effort to understand the new social condition that such advances in computing technology signalled. Network analysis was a response to the perceived expansion in the scale, complexity, and rapidity of social organization that characterized the post-Fordist era. Likewise, the sheer amount of data that became available in this time, along with new techniques for processing it, presented new challenges and opportunities for sociological inquiry. Researchers began to move beyond the individual/society and agency/structure dualisms of the era of mass society, focusing instead on the complex social relations within and between groups of actors that characterized a globalized, networked society (Castells 1996). In this way, formal approaches to network analysis maintain a focus on relationality between actors. However the shift in attention toward uncovering and analysing network structures and what such structures enable or inhibit differs from that of ethnographic approaches which attempt to understand the social process of network formation, maintenance, and failure.

This focus on the relationships between actors -- be they individuals, groups, institutions, or non-human entities -- makes it difficult to categorize formal social network analysis as a strictly quantitative tool. Social relations between groups and people, as the basic unit of network analysis, can often only be assessed qualitatively, even if those relations are analysed using quantitative techniques. While networks are often seen as analytical constructs of quantitative, algorithmic outputs, the qualitative nature of most social relations makes SNA essentially a hybrid method (Breiger 2004; Fuse and Muhtzel 2011). Seeing qualitative methods and data as “inextricably intertwined” with the formal analysis of social networks, Fuse and Muhtzel (2011) argue that statistical analysis of network characteristics alone cannot capture the way individual actors within a network create and make sense of their connections to one another, and the cultural meanings which constrain and enable such connections. Instead, the authors see potential in combining qualitative and formal analytical approaches to the study of social networks (see also Mohr and Duquenne 1997). While formal network analysis within sociology remains tied to more quantitative approaches, the cultural turn in Anglophone social sciences has seen a growing recognition for the need to attend to the cultural norms and meanings that produce, infuse, and hold together networks (Breiger, 2004; Dimaggio, 1997; Fuhse, 2009; Mützel, 2009; Pachucki and Breiger, 2010; White, 1992, 2008).

Against the background of the development of these more relational approaches to network sociology, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) emerged from the work of French sociologists Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, as well as British Sociologist John Law, working in the area of Science and Technology Studies. Drawing upon the relational philosophy of Michel Serres, French post-structuralist theorists such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, and Donna Haraway’s feminist critique of science (Johnston, 2000), ANT offers a semiotic-materialist account of the way that assemblages of human and non-human entities within a network “hang together” enacting a kind of conceptual and material coherence (Mol and Law, 1994). According to ANT, networks form as actants are enrolled into them through a process of “translation” where the qualities and interests of the actants coalesce and are mobilized to create coalitions (Callon, 1986).
this way, ANT takes relational approaches to network analysis to the furthest extent by blurring any distinctions between actor and network, or agency and structure, as agency merely represents the extent to which actants become successfully enrolled within, and mutually indistinguishable from, their network. However, many critics have taken issue with this radically democratic symmetry which assigns equal agency to both human and non-human actors. Doing so risks obscuring the ways in which humans inevitably speak for non-humans in analysing these assemblages, while hindering an understanding of how networks come to have conceptual coherence to their human participants (Collins and Yearly, 1992; Czarniawska, 1997; Weick, 1995; Whittle and Spicer, 2008). This critique is part of a wider challenge to ANT’s flat ontological commitments, namely that ANT’s focus on situated, contingent and micro-level processes fail to take into account enduring forms of structural inequalities that form part of the social context in which networks form, operate, and break-down (Reed, 1997). Despite its emphasis on the contingent nature of social assemblages, ANT’s commitment to detailed empirical description above all (Latour, 2005) risks evacuating its critical potential – taking things as they are rather than as how they could be or could have been, thus reinforcing the status quo (Amsterdamska, 1990; Lee and Brown, 1994; Leigh-Star, 1991; Whittle and Spicer, 2008).

In this way, despite the great methodological and conceptual divergences between them, critiques of ANT are strikingly similar to those of formal social network analysis. That is, they both offer presentist accounts of assemblages without attention to their historical development within a wider field of power relations. Indeed, this has been a general critique of network ontologies, that they idealize a smooth plain through which relations flow unobstructed, failing to theorize the already existing social context in which networks form. As we have seen in this section, ethnographic approaches to network analysis have attempted to correct this blind-spot through a focus on how network relations actually form and operate. However, the danger here is that these situated interventions are unable to conceptualize the broader, more complex web of connections that individual relations take place within. Nevertheless, as this section has also shown, attempts have been made to approach formal network analysis with greater relational reflexivity by understanding social networks as forming within and being mediated by abstract network ideals. As networks form in relation to the image of themselves, a method for understanding networks should likewise move between representations of network relations, and grounded, ethnographic work investigating those relations.

3. Civil society networks

Civil society presents an interesting case for attempting such an iterative, relational approach combining formal and ethnographic network analysis techniques. The network is a salient metaphor that researchers and practitioners alike have used to describe civil society. Civil society organizations have networking strategies and participate in conferences in order to create networks of organizations active on a particular issue. Likewise, as we will see in this section, researchers have produced models of civil society networks, and engaged in ethnographic explorations of civil society networks. However, few approaches seek to combine these efforts, attempting a systematic analysis of the diverse array of connections that constitute civil society, along with ethnographic research with civil society actors investigating how they participate and work within this field of relations, and how knowledge, information, people, money, and ideas moves between and gets blocked at different points. This section will explore the use of the network metaphor within research on civil society, and the different approaches taken to researching civil society networks.
Networks, as both conceptual metaphors and analytical models have been used to give shape to the ‘fuzzy and contested’ concept of civil society (Anheier et al., 2001, 11) - the contours and edges of which are not easily defined. Like the network, civil society serves as both a normative concept and a descriptive term. That is, civil society is both an ideal to be achieved as well as an empirical category describing the actual work of various NGOs, intergovernmental agencies, and other organizations. This tension between normative ideal and practical reality is politically productive, but also analytically challenging. The transnational networks that constitute civil society are difficult to untangle both analytically and conceptually due to the impenetrably high degree of interconnection (Roberts et al., 2005). While normative ideals of non-hierarchical networking prevail in civil society organizing, numerous forms of networks emerge in practice, including not only horizontal solidarities between grassroots organizations, but also vertical integration of local organizations within larger international NGOs in ways that closely resemble the organizing principles of multi-national corporations. Network understandings of civil society highlight not only the multiple organizational forms that take shape between actors within this field, but also the multiple kinds of actors that connect in different ways to civil society, including private sector businesses and state institutions at all levels of governance, from municipalities to ministries. Our interest in applying social network analysis to civil society networks is to begin to understand the diverse sets of actors that cooperate around a particular issue, the forms of connections they make, and the circulation of knowledge, money, people, and “buzz” through these circuitous connections. Visualized networks can serve as entry points for embodied ethnographic research which can begin to analyse how these connections are negotiated, and how information and resources are used and understood in different ways.

The network concept is useful to research on civil society not only because the network metaphor provides a tool for conceptualizing how connections between diverse actors create a sphere of interaction greater than the sum total of these relations, but also because practitioners in this field often see their work as being situated within a broader network of relations. To understand how the network imaginary informs the construction and maintenance of civil society networks requires methods open to critical reflexivity and embodied proximity. Following the flows of funding, knowledges, practices and people through these networks, as they are understood by the actors within them, has been one such method. For example, Riles (2001) takes the network as both the object of study and her method of research in her examination of civil society networks produced through UN world conferences. This networked ethnographic approach to civil society works to both ground and complicate the idealized and normative model of the network as a smooth plane through which knowledge freely circulates. As Thörn (2011) observes in his similar research on AIDS activism and global governance, normative understandings of networks often neglect the “structural context of a network and the fact that actors enter into networks with different material power resources acquired outside of the network (such as money, technology and other material resources)” (Thörn, 2011, 437). It is the disparity in resources that has led many to raise doubts about the ability of local NGOs to set their own agendas and pursue their own interests in the face of international donor dominance. However, despite the uneven distribution of connections throughout a network, Roberts et al. (2005) find that the network metaphor is still analytically useful in disrupting hierarchical models of relations that imagine a unidirectional ‘top down’ flow of information, funding, and influence. Through meetings, trainings, conferences, and reports, knowledge has the potential to travel from project-oriented NGOs to international NGOs and donors, shifting their priorities and procedures. From this perspective, civil society actors are not ‘endpoints,’
but nodes situated a network with relative degrees of influence, connectedness, and autonomy (Roberts et al 2005, 1848).

Formal network analysis can illustrate the ways in which some local organizations are more successful at attracting donors, and positioning themselves as key intermediaries between international funding and local partners. However, ethnographic research is needed to understand the nature of these relationships, including the ways in which local organizations may subvert a donor’s agenda through tactically translating their own priorities and activities into donor jargon. Likewise, network analysis can illustrate uneven funding landscapes within civil society, while ethnographic methods help to illustrate how the ability (or inability) to adopt the professional standards of donors may determine access to those resources. This type of information requires embodied, ethnographic research into how network interactions are formed and negotiated, and how the knowledge that flows through them are blocked or translated by different actors to suit their own interests. Routledge (2008) provides an example of this in his research on grassroots peasant activist networks. This research illustrates how issues of race and inequality do not cease to be problematic in networks that attempt to organize along non-hierarchical and egalitarian principles. Such inequalities are not merely an internal relational effect within the network, but are the result of wider social inequalities. As Routledge (2008) observes, “the distribution of power within an actor network has been considered only as a relational effect; the causes of, and accountability for, differential power relations has been precluded, as have the productive dimensions of that power” (214). In order to better appreciate social inequality in non-hierarchical network organizing, Routledge advocates critical and self-reflexive embedded-ness within such networks. The researcher must be aware of how he or she “becomes an actor in the practice of network constitution” through the very practice of researching the network (Routledge 2008, 204). This is what Riles (2001, 4) alludes to when she observes that researchers create networks by “studying, analysing, or communicating about them,” and that in this way the knowledge practices of the networks we study easily “fade into our own.”

An ethnographic approach to networks, then, involves researchers embedding themselves within the inner workings of a network, while also maintaining a critical awareness of the researcher’s own role within the often uneven practices of network imagining and formation. Riles (2001) and Routledge (2008) take the network imaginary itself, as well as the situated practices and materials that produce and reflect upon these networks, as their objects of study. However, in both cases, the networks they study are more-or-less coherent and self-articulated, albeit geographically dispersed, in which all the actors within it could be said to be fully enrolled within, aware of, or in some way invested in it as a concept. A single normative model of a non-hierarchical network is taken as given, and the ethnographic focus is instead on the spaces and practices through which this network model is produced, however imperfectly, and on the inequalities of access, resources, and mobility of the actors within it. While the network metaphor continues to have significance amongst civil society organizations, there is no single civil society network into which participants can opt in or out. Instead, there is an amalgamation of different sets of network relations, variously and unevenly connected, that in the aggregate might be said to make up part of a broader civil society network. While the normative ideal of a network is one in which every node is equally connected to all others in perfectly non-hierarchical fashion, in practice there are many different kinds of network patterns that emerge and overlap in civil society organizing. This is due to the different strategies actors take in forming relationships with one another, and the specific historical and political contexts within which these network practices take place.
As we have argued, what is needed is an approach that combines formal analysis of these network structures in order to map the different kinds of relationship that form among the many actors in civil society, as well as the embodied and discursive practices that create and sustain these relationships within specific contexts. The following sections will sketch out our application of this approach.

4. Grounding Social Network Analysis
Having provided background on the development of different approaches to network analysis, as well as having outlined the uses of the network concept in civil society research and practice, this section will provided an account of our own approach to exploring civil society networks in our three case study countries. As part of a broader study on the promotion of youth citizenship and civic participation as a mode of conflict resolution in so-called divided societies, this research examines the connections between various international donors, civil society groups, and community organizations coalescing around issues of youth and citizenship. To do so we use SNA as a grounded, iterative methodological tool in conjunction with key informant interviews of NGO practitioners, institutional ethnographies with civil society organizations, and participatory research with youth. Diagramming civil society networks in our three case-study countries of Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and South Africa, helps us to situate our ethnographic research in these three countries. We have found that network diagrams can highlight potentially influential actors within a network (whether a donor or NGO) that might otherwise have escaped notice. Likewise, these diagrams reveal interesting sets of thematic connections between different types of organizations, for example, the connections between environmental NGOs and organizations promoting youth citizenship. Finally, these networks also point to the many gaps in the network, the unconnected clusters and organizations that, perhaps strategically, have chosen not to connect up with larger donors or more visible civil society actors. In this way, initial research findings can be sketched out diagrammatically to guide further grounded research and ethnographic investigation into the questions that these diagrams raise.

Nevertheless, as this section will also demonstrate, our use of formal SNA for analysing civil society networks is confronted by methodological challenges which make it an insufficient tool for use on its own. These challenges include the demarcation of the relational, temporal and spatial boundaries of a network. Neat visualizations of static, coherent networks obscure the ambiguity surrounding who is in the network, when, and where. Another related challenge is the problem of self-reported information. The civil society networks graphs below are constructed using self-reported information gathered from public-facing websites and reports. What is depicted as a single network then, is in fact a series of ego-centric dyads, each captured at a different point in time, and pieced together to form a representation of an overall network. Still, it would be wrong to treat these sets of relationships, and the greater field of relations they comprise, as complete artifice. The funding and partnership connections that make up individual networks overlap and are maintained through embodied and material practices which have tangible, cumulative effects. Likewise, as many NGO websites attest to, such practices are often undertaken as part of an explicit network strategy. Indeed, many of the NGO professionals we interviewed as part of this research referred to their work as being situated within a broader network of actors working toward similar goals, even drawing diagrams of nodes and webs of relations to illustrate their point. As McCormack (2005) observes, “although it is abstract, the diagram can nevertheless be apprehended as a real organisation of forces through the way it gives the relations between these forces a kind of spatiotemporal consistency.” In this research, we use network diagrams to piece together these rough sketches of ego-centric networks in order to form a broader
understanding of the overall field that these individual networks produce and the practices and information that flow through them.

The first challenge when seeking to examine networks of civil society organizations is determining where to draw the boundaries of a given network, including questions about which actors to include. Although perhaps especially challenging given its contested nature, these questions are not unique to analysing civil society networks. As Knoke (1993) advises, when undertaking network analysis, researchers must first specify the network they are researching by delineating the boundaries and identifying key actors in the network. As our research is specifically concerned with youth citizenship and civic participation, we initially compiled a list of organizations in each of our three case study countries dealing with these issues, using information collected from internet and database searches. Our criteria for selecting an organization for the network analysis was that it 1) included youth either as a specific target population, a significant portion of participants in their activities, or as a significant portion of their organizational leadership; and 2) specifically promoted and sought to enhance youth citizenship, civic engagement, and participation (broadly conceived), or had the effect of enhancing youth participation through their activities and organizing around other related issues. Once an organization was selected for inclusion, we compiled a list of that organization’s donors and partners. A particular donor or partner may not be, and likely is not, a specifically youth-focused organization, but by virtue of supporting an organization that is, it gets included in the network. While partners and donors of a given youth organization are included, partners of partners are not. For example, the International Youth Foundation may donate to an organization in Lebanon, but we do not include IYF’s corporate sponsors in the network as they do not appear to have any direct contact with the actors in Lebanon. This is a limitation, but a necessary one, as for a network to be comprehensible, it cannot map every conceivable connection.

Beyond the challenge of drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion around the network to be analysed and visualized (and thus constructing the network itself), another, related challenge is information availability. Using a small sample of organizations, it may be possible to achieve something like a full accounting of funding and partnership connections. Our main interest, however, was in gaining the broadest possible perspective in order to gain an appreciation of the number, variety, and geographic reach of youth citizenship promotion efforts. As such, our construction of the networks relies initially upon publically accessible data. This data is based on self-reported information provided by organizations on their public facing websites and other public documents (such as annual reports). Most of the organizations we identified provide a list of their donors, with some providing detailed annual reports, including budgets indicating how much funding they received in a given year and from whom. However, many organizations do not provide any information about their sponsors or partners, either because they do not have any or they wish to keep them private. Likewise, some

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1 Given our starting point, NGOs registered or active within one of our case studies, these networks are in a way nationally bound to our case study country. However, the presence of foreign donors, international donors, and intergovernmental agencies all point to the way that civil society actors are connected to other actors, activities, and processes which transcend national boundaries.

2 Similarly, while doing this research we began to appreciate the extent to which individuals, and not just organizations, play a crucial role in creating and sustaining these networks. These individuals rarely represent their organization alone, but often support an array of personal and political causes and commitments or move from job to job within the NGO sector. These multiple subject positions, the sheer number of personal, informal relations an individual has, and issues of confidentiality, all restrict our ability to include individuals in our network analysis at this point.
organizations may exaggerate the number of partners and donors they have in order to emphasize their organizational success and influence. Thus, some organizations might underreport their donors and partners while others may overstate their network connections.

In addition to issues of accuracy and consistence of self-reported information, there is also another related issue of the inconsistent timing of this information. Our data was based on information provided on websites, but it is not always clear when the websites had last been updated and if the information was still up-to-date. As Fuhse and Mutzel (2011, 1078) remind us, networks, as sets of social relations, are constantly in flux, “continuously created, reproduce, and modified in the social process.” Every representation of a network is thus already problematic because it presents as fixed and stable something that is inherently fluid and changing. This is doubly problematic in the case presented here, as the networks we sought to construct were not just single snapshots captured at one point in time, but a series of snapshots pieced together as a single, coherent image.

These methodological shortcomings underscore the extent to which the networks analysed and visualized by researchers are artefacts constructed through the research itself more than they are representations of actually existing network structures. What we treat as a stable, coherent network is in fact a series of dyadic relationships taking place at different points of time. Here, the diagrams of the network are but abstract representations of relationships. Yet, the network model helps give conceptual consistency to these relations, which are reproduced through temporal, tangible, and embodied practices, such as the production of monthly newsletters, annual reports, and regular meetings, gatherings and conferences. Moreover, these diagrammatic representations open up various questions regarding how and why certain organizations connect with each other, why some organizations seem barely visible within a particular network, and what kinds of work these connections (and disconnections) perform. Using these diagrams, we can map out our ethnographic explorations of the embodied, material and discursive practices that reproduce these networks, in seeking out answers to these questions. The following section will explore some of the questions and issues these diagrams raise.

5. Diagramming civil society networks
As discussed above, our research on civil society organizations active in the field of youth citizenship promotion revealed sets of relationships between these actors based on funding and other forms of cooperation which might not otherwise have been readily apparent. Focusing on these relationships provide an entryway into exploring the connections that constitute a given network. To visualize these connections two sets of network graphs were produced for each of our three case study countries, one illustrating funding relationships between donors and recipients, and the other showing both funding and partnership connections. Funding relationships potentially serve as the most straightforward way of determining whether a connection between two organizations exists. But organizations are connected in more ways than funding, such as

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3 Network graphs were constructed using Gephi, an open source social network analysis program. On both sets of graphs, we used Gephi’s Force Atlas 2 algorithm which, through measures of gravity and repulsion, provides a layout structure for the arrangement of nodes, situating nodes in proximity to other nodes to which they are connected (Bastian and Heymann, 2009).
through partnerships to carry out projects, events, campaigns, and activities. So, to gain a
fuller appreciation of the different types of connections that produce civil society
networks, we created graphs illustrating not only the connections between donors and
recipients, but also the mutual connections between partner organizations. In both cases,
as noted above, we relied on self-reported information from the civil society
organizations in questions. This section will illustrate the kinds of questions that arise
when illustrating these funding and partnership connections between civil society actors.
Again, we emphasize how these diagrams are used to open up spaces, questions, and
opportunities for further research, sketching out potential ethnographic pathways for
more grounded inquiry.

The initial donor-funding graphs reveal some interesting features of the civil society
landscapes in each of our three case study countries [Figures 1-3], while also raising some
important questions. First, the graphs highlight the most active donors in post-conflict
youth citizenship promotion in the three countries. These include US government-
funded organizations like USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy, as well
as international civil society organizations like the Open Society Foundation. However,
other donors were also found to be highly active across the case study countries include
philanthropies such as the CS Mott Foundation, and German political party foundations
like Konrad Adeneur Stiftung and Heinrich Böll Stiftung. Beyond highlighting the key
donors operating in each country, however, the donor graphs also point to important
differences between these civil society landscapes. For example, in Bosnia-Herzegovina
and Lebanon, [Figures 1 and 2], the donor landscape primarily consists of funding from
international civil society foundations, bilateral funds from international donor
governments, and intergovernmental funding from UN agencies and, in the case of
Bosnia-Herzegovina, the European Union. In contrast, South Africa [Figure 3], depicted
by donors as a development ‘success story’, has a donor landscape consisting of national
grant-making agencies as well as private and corporate foundations. The latter may be
the result of the country’s strenuous social-responsibility laws that mandate corporate
giving, and longstanding relationships between private foundations and South African
NGOs. This difference in the types of donors active in civil society, and the different
types of institutional relations that exist between donors and recipients, informed our
line of inquiry when conducting interviews with international donors and NGOs. Indeed,
these differences raise key questions about how a country’s political history, legal
framework, and institutional governance structures work to shape civil society organizing
within the country. Institutional ethnographies and analysis of legal and governance
frameworks are needed to shed more light on how different civil society landscapes form
the way they do.

While helpful as a tool for interrogating the flows of funding which infuse civil society,
social network graphs can also help illustrate other forms of cooperation and influence,
as can be seen in the donor partner graphs [Figures 4-6]. By widening the scope of the
network to include partnership relations, we get a better idea of the different ways that
civil society organizations partner with one another beyond funding. Analysing both
donor and partner connections helps illustrate which organizations may be influential in
mediating relationships between international donors and other local organizations, as

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4 An interactive version of each of the networks presented in this paper can be found at
well as linking together various clusters of actors. However, it is crucial to note, we are just as interested in the nodes and clusters that are seemingly isolated as we are in the larger, more central actors. We are aware that some of the organizations that appear insignificant and disconnected from wider donor/partner connections, may in fact be extensive networks within themselves, perhaps connected to influential parties, personalities, and families. Their relative autonomy from wider donor networks may be an indication of their success and their ability to create robust internal networks. Does the disconnectedness of some nodes suggest a failure to attract donors and partners or is it the result of an intentional strategy? Or perhaps it is an artefact of incomplete information, as these graphs only represent formal partnership and funding relations, not other more casual forms of cooperation and connection? This raises important questions about regimes of visibility and practices of translation whereby civil society actors frame their activities in a specific ways in order to be visible (or invisible) to donors or state regulators. These connections and disconnections are best explored through ethnographic research, but these networks provide a route in, and a frame for analysis.

Along with the different patterns of relations that make up civil society networks, the donor-partner graphs also help visualize the diverse sets of actors that participate in these networks. Rather than seeing civil society as distinct from other spheres, these graphs give an indication of the messy and leaky materiality of civil society networking. In this way, we have sought to iteratively mediate between idealized representations of civil society and a grounded perspective. Like the model put forward by Roberts et al. (2005), the donor/partner graphs below illustrate the inter-sectorial relations that exist between NGOs, state agencies, intergovernmental organizations, and private sector capital, including banks, large corporate foundations, and multinational companies, thus complicating the view of civil society as a space distinct from market or state forces. Here too, however, the differences between the three countries are telling. Again, in South Africa [Figure 4], with a legal environment conducive to corporate giving, we see a larger presence of state institutions and private businesses and foundations operating in the field of youth citizenship promotion. Foreign donors and international NGOs are relatively rare. This is in stark contrast to Bosnia-Herzegovina [Figure 5], where the field is made up almost entirely of international NGOs, international foundations, donor countries, and intergovernmental agencies (UN and EU). There is only a single private sector node here, a radio and TV broadcaster, a private company broadcasting over public airways. This raises questions about how the complex federal system in BiH, as well as its history of international intervention, both restricts and enables different forms of civil society organizing. Similarly, in Lebanon, we see very few governmental agencies involved in civil society [Figure 6], apart from relevant government ministries, and local municipal cooperation. However, the field in Lebanon is highly varied, including a balance of international NGOs and foundations, donor governments, UN agencies, and private businesses. Many of these business and foundations may have their own links to prominent local politicians. Indeed, it is important to remember that each of these organizations in the network has its own strategy and agenda for building donors and partner relationship, meaning that there are not only general differences between the donor/partnership relationships across the three country networks, but within them as well. It is through later follow-up interviews and ethnographic research that these different network strategies can be examined.

Here influence is visualized as a measure of centrality. These graphs use Eigenvector centrality, which calculates influence based on the number of connections to other well-connected nodes (Carrington et al., 2005; Ruhnau, 2000).
Indeed, the different patterns of relations between actors suggest not only different institutional contexts and histories but also different organizing strategies. In the South Africa graph, we see different clusters of nodes each in their self-contained donor-partnership relationships, many unconnected to a larger network. This seems to correspond with what our respondents later observed in interviews about a fractured civil society, where organizations that were not directly in partnership with the government were often left working toward their own ends with their own sets of donors and clients. Somewhat surprisingly, the BiH graph suggests a fair amount of cohesion, despite the highly fracture nature of political governance in the country. The graph depicts a single, small-world network, in which every node is connected to every other. How are these connections established and maintained? Again, the graph suggests a hierarchical relationship in which a handful of organizations based in Sarajevo and operating on a national scale mediate between an array of international donors and multiple local community organizations. International donors demand a high degree of accountability of their partners, measured quantifiably in external monitoring and evaluation, so highly professionalized intermediary organizations often fill a niche role connecting donors with local partners who carry out the projects (Roberts et al., 2005; Thörn, 2011). But is this the case here? Organizations such as Youth Communication Centre (YCC), Youth Information Agency (YIA), Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), and the Nansen Dialogue Centers have clearly been successful in implementing projects with several local/municipal partners, while connecting with international donors and regional partners. But how are these relationships negotiated by these various actors, and what does this tell us about the way knowledge and practices flow through and become shaped by civil society networks? How might some organizations and some practitioners serve as “translators”, translating the activities and priorities of their local partnerships into the language of donors, and vice versa? Or alternatively, how do the activities of various local partner organizations become enrolled within a broader funding network through making their activities legible to techniques of accountability, and how might this influence their activities, or not? Again, interviews and ethnographic research are needed to gain a more nuanced understanding of the directionality of these relationships and how they are formed.

Despite its internal divisions, civil society organizing in BiH, at least as represented in the graphs here, appears cohesive in comparison with that of South Africa and Lebanon. In the case of Lebanon, the divisions in the network are only partially accounted for by sectarian divisions in the country, and again point to different kinds of alliances being formed. In the Lebanon graph [Figure 6] we can see that issue-based local NGOs establish multiple funding relationships from a range of donors. Likewise, many institutional donors, often foreign government aid agencies or international NGOs, distribute funds to multiple local partners. This seems to create a fairly coherent network of actors often clustering around significant themes. For example, the graph depicts a

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6 This is what Galaskiewicz and Wasserman (1993, 15) refer to as “integrative centrality.”

7 In the Lebanese graph we do see an example of “sectoral differentiation” where “different outlying regions of the network” are populated by organizations with common interests or target populations (Galaskiewicz and Wasserman 1993, 15). For example, we see Assumoud and Tomorrow’s Youth Organization at the bottom of the graph only tenuously connected to the rest of the network (and in the case of the donor graph, Assumoud is entirely cut off, dependent on its own set of international solidarity donors.) Both organizations serve Palestinian communities. However, potential sectarian divisions between organizations along religious lines is not readily apparent in these graphs, in part owing to our reliance on public facing information in constructing them. For a discussion on sectarianism and group clientelism see Cammert M, Issar S, 2010, “Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon” World Politics 62 381-421.
network of donors and organizations clustered around the theme of ecological protection and environmental awareness. Foreign donors such as USAID, Swiss Agency for Development, the Italian Development Cooperation, and UNDP, all donate to multiple environmental NGOs, including the as-Shouf Cedar Society, Green Hand, the Association for Forest Development and Conservation (AFDC), and the Development for People and Nature Association (DPNA). Likewise, these environmental NGOs are successful at seeking funds from a variety of donors, from foreign development agencies, to international environmental NGOs and corporations. What can account for this clustering of actors? Is it that the environment is a relatively ‘safe’ topic for donors to support in an otherwise politically risky region? Or, similarly, perhaps the umbrella theme of nature enables organizations to safely branch off into other issues, situating the environment within a broader social-ecological frame. The Shouf Cedar Society for example connects biological diversity and cultural heritage in its environmental awareness activities with youth; the AFDC promotes youth public engagement in environmental policy promotion and governance; Green Hand supports youth engagement with local municipalities around the theme of governance and transparency; while DPNA engages in a wide range of issues relating the environment to social justice, human rights, and youth citizenship. This raises the question, then, about what kind of alliances, activities, and indeed politics the discourse of environmentalism both enables and potentially delimits; these questions – which might otherwise not have been raised – can then be explored in ethnographic analysis.

It is worth remembering that these networks are only a reflection of the information publicly available to us at the time. It is likely that, in actual practice, many more partnerships and informal relations exist connecting these organizations to one another. Likewise, it is just as likely that there are other organizations working on issues of youth citizenship outside this network entirely, organizing instead through other kinds of social networks, not easily detected by search methods mainly focused on certain kinds of visibility. This is why this research method serves as the first step in a research process that involves further grounded, ethnographic research tracing the connections between the well-connected nodes, as well as those groups and organizations outside the network or not visible in these particular representations of civil society.

6. Conclusion: The network as diagram
As geographers more aligned with qualitative, critical, and feminist inflected methods, there is something both discomforting and yet oddly satisfying about the network diagrams presented here. They are satisfying because the complexity of civil society is transformed into clearly legible lines and nodes that provide some substance to the fuzzy concept, and an entryway or a set of paths through which to research it. However, they are also discomforting because we know that satisfaction derives from the seduction of the Cartesian God trick in which the world is flattened and presents itself readily to a disembodied observer. The network representations provide order and straight lines to a world of messy relations, neatly cropped here to form self-contained, national civil society spheres. We know that as representations of infinitely more complex, subtle, and fluid relations, these network graphs are but an abstract simplification. And yet, the research process as such continuously moves between conceptual abstraction and empirical analysis, whether this is always explicitly acknowledged or not. These diagrams provide a useful visual way of formally expressing these abstractions, not as a final, definitive representation of an actually existing civil society, but as a starting point for further research to complicate this view. Using ethnographic methods we can trace the flow of bodies, money, knowledge and practices through these diagrammed lines, but
also, crucially, we must seek out the kinds of relations and processes hidden by and in these networks.

In this way, we share McCormack’s (2012, 2005) affirmation of abstraction as a necessary method of making sense of the world, and the use of diagramming specifically as a research tool or methodological device. As McCormack (2012, 717) argues, abstraction, including networks, “participates both in the worlds we inhabit and in our efforts to make sense of them.” As Actor-Network Theory likewise contends, this abstraction performs constitutive and generative work, holding things together coherently, and providing spatial and temporal consistency (McCormack 727). Abstractions render complexity accessible, or more precisely in our case, the network metaphor allows us to “render the familiar accessible” (Riles 201, 6). As such, networks participate in this research both as familiar conceptual devices that give consistency to the work of NGOs (and globally mobile researchers), as well as abstract diagrams to make sense of this work. This is what we refer to when describing our use of network analysis as an iterative process. We begin with an idealized, simplified model of a civil society network. Through the process of gathering data on organizations represented in the network, and the relationship between them, we provide more substance, complexity and detail to the original diagram. This complexity itself then requires abstraction and visualization in order to comprehend, hence the network analysis and visualization. Yet the graphs we produce are still abstractions, diagrams of relational processes constantly in flux. To better understand these ongoing relationships and processes requires embodied, ethnographic research, which itself will necessarily involve a process of abstracting our data into generalizable findings, in an open-ended dialectic. This is what McCormack (2012) means when he refers to abstraction as a process that is “provisional and prospective, intended to open up potential space-times rather than close them down.” With these graphs we seek to create a provisional and prospective opening to our ethnographic research, which in turn will open new worlds very different from the ones created and represented by these diagrams. However, it is important to realize that, as part of this process, abstraction may open certain avenues of investigation, but it necessarily closes others. Our network abstractions, to be coherent and legible, place necessary limits around the organizations and relations represented therein. This renders invisible the types of organizations that do not conform to a particular, recognizable form as a civil society actor. These include more informal and loosely affiliated social movements, social media tag-clouds, and activist milieus. While researching the organizations in our network, we would catch glimpses of these other groupings, aware of their non-presence in the network, curious about what this means, and determined in our grounded, ethnographic research to find out why. In this way, these diagrams draw a line, producing a space to be researched, while also inevitably producing an outside where more questions are raised and more research is needed.
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**Figures:**

![Bosnia Donor Graph](image)

*Figure 1 Bosnia Donor Graph*
Figure 3 South Africa Donor Graph
Figure 4 Bosnia Donor-Partner Graph
Figure 5 Lebanon Donor Partner Graph
Figure 6 South Africa Donor Partner Graph