

**SISN**

**Systems and the Information Society  
Network<sup>1</sup>**

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## A Metaview of the Network's Activities

This CD-ROM offers an account of the *Systems and the Information Society Network* activities from November 2000 to October 2002. The network's origin was an EPSRC/BT sponsored workshop on "Speculative Approaches for Systems Research" at Slaley Hall in February 1999. One of the outcomes of this workshop was an EPSRC call for proposals to constitute System Networks. SISN was one of the successful proposals.

A question posed to participants to the workshop was: "In your area of interest, where are the current limits of what can be made systematic, and what are the limiting factors and challenges to expanding those limits? My interpretation of this question at the time was that something that cannot be made *systematic* was beyond design, and therefore if I wanted to increase the scope for design reflecting upon limiting factors in order to remove them was necessary. This view perhaps appropriate for engineering issues is inadequate when our concerns are social problems and organisational design. For social problems the issue is not producing systematic but systemic knowledge, and in practice this means that the focus of the inquiry is on processes and not on procedures. The complexity of social issues is too large to lend itself to procedural analysis. Self-organisation, and not design, appears by far the most significant explanation for the social systems we experience in daily life. However, the challenge is improving these self-organising processes, in order to make institutions more respectful of human values and also more coherent to their ecologies. It would appear that the scope for design in this case is in *understanding self-organising processes and producing the necessary knowledge to steer them in desirable directions*. This is knowledge to intervene in social processes, to make them better. This knowledge is not about procedures but about the very relations that we create and produce as we do whatever we do. The problem for us, generically, is learning to observe these relations *as we relate to others* and to use these observations to produce desirable social properties within a framework of social guardianship, capable of checking our meanings. *In this context the hypothesis of this research is that, current ICTs are increasing significantly our capacity to produce desirable systemicity in today's society.*

This was the problematique that brought together the Systems and Information Society Network. Its 28 participants, or *infoset* as we called them, came from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, and the challenge was to enable their contributions. Team Syntegrity (Beer, 1994) was used for this purpose (see "Methodology" in this CD-ROM). I had already used this approach in 1996 to produce a Festschrift in honour of Stafford Beer (Espejo and Schwaninger 1997). This work took place at a time when the diffusion of communication technologies was still incipient. SISN was an opportunity to try again this platform for interactions in a much more mature technological environment. Moreover, SISN members decided to observe the network in action as one of their topics of debate. Chris Atkinson led this work using Actor Network Theory –ANT– (Latour, 2001) (see Gold Group in this CD-ROM).

SISN activities were driven by the implementation of an open and effective *interaction space* to get the best out of its participants. The Syntegration protocol is a three-day meeting that enables the democratic discussions of twelve self-generated discussion topics (often identified by colours). In SISN this protocol was extended by the use of a

website and a set of seminars. Alfonso Reyes, the network's brilliant and energetic coordinator, coordinated the overall process. Ian Perry, a member of the network, contributed with the website implementation. The website, and other ICTs, supported communications and virtual interactions for most of the running of the project. Additionally SISN run 12 seminars, one for each of the Syntegration topics, during the first semester of 2002. These seminars, coordinated by one member of each topic (see table below), gave participants the opportunity to discuss topics in depth.

## **SISN Spring Seminar Series 2002**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Co-ordinator</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Colour</b>
February 15 <sup>th</sup>	Loet Leydesdorff	University of Amsterdam	Understanding Society	Light Blue
February 20 <sup>th</sup>	Patrick Humphreys	London School of Economics	New Organisational Forms	White
February 27 <sup>th</sup>	Clive Holtham	City University	Co-evolution Between ICT and Society	Red
March 6 <sup>th</sup>	Gerard de Zeeuw / Roger Harnden	University of Lincoln / Emergent Forms	New Technologies Re-construct the Natural World	Brown
March 13 <sup>th</sup>	German Bula /	Colombian Embassy in Venezuela	ICT and Social Exclusion	Silver
March 20 <sup>th</sup>	John Mingers	Warwick University	ICTs, Context and Face-to-Face Communication	Black
March 27 <sup>th</sup>	Roberto Zarama	Universidad de los Andes, Colombia	Ethics and ICT.	Green
April 10 <sup>th</sup>	Pete Barnsley	British Telecom	ICT, Desirability and Values	Dark Blue
April 24 <sup>th</sup>	Neil Stewart	Imago Management & Manchester Business School	ICT, Politics and Social Control	Yellow
May 1 <sup>st</sup>	Eve Mitleton-Kelly	London School of Economics	ICT and the Nature and Relevance of Work	Orange
May 8 <sup>th</sup>	Alfonso Reyes	University of Lincoln	ICT May Enrich the Modeling Process by Expanding the Boundaries of Agreement	Purple
May 22 <sup>nd</sup>	Chris Atkinson	Brunel University	ICT and Human-Machine Networks	Gold

These seminars, well supported by the Internet, had the important effect of providing a rich interaction space for regular participants; they helped to consolidate the Lincoln Network. However, in the language of ANT, they may have betrayed the consolidation of the 12 micro-networks created during the Syntegration. This was a topic of discussion in the last seminar. My view at the time, and still today, was that expecting the emergence of 12 micro-networks from a workshop was too optimistic. What follows is a quote of a document I contributed to that last seminar (cf. Gold folder):

“The main aim of the syntegration was to structure 12 topics starting from the opening question. For this aim the diversity of the participants was a clear plus. Their variety of backgrounds and concerns could only enrich discussions during the meeting. In fact most participants experienced powerful interactions and produced rich meanings for their topics. In most cases groups also succeeded articulating follow-up activities.

As expected, the experience of most participants was that their ‘groups’ ceased to be such after the syntegration. However, a significant number of them were willing to contribute to the Spring Seminar Series and to a number of other activities. This made apparent that at an individual level people were still committed to SISN. This commitment has been instrumental in its consolidation.

Over a period of four months the syntegration’s 12 topics have been the foci for the activities of a local network in Lincoln (the mother network in Chris’s terms; the Lincoln Network in my own terms), with the contribution of the Lincoln based members of SISN, two SISN members from elsewhere and a group of doctoral students. Additionally, eleven other members of SISN have contributed with seminars, research work, preparation of papers, website development and the writing of research proposals to the development of the Lincoln Network. Altogether 18 out of the initial 28 members have contributed to this process.

Perhaps the question for me is whether this network will remain as a creative and stable entity beyond its formal period of existence. Those of us who have attended all the seminars in Lincoln are starting to recognise a connecting thread in the discussions. However, will this emergent thread be enough to maintain the network?”

And, Chris Atkinson’s final reflections on this issue were (cf. Gold folder):

“In the post-syntegration environment the majority of the micro groups birthed by the Lincoln ‘mother’ network did not fully mature and thrive ... This was often due to the participant actor’s commitments to other networks, such as family and work or educational institutions and programmes. All of whose Intéressement were far more powerful than that of the micro groups and the Lincoln mother network itself... To be fair to Raul Espejo, the nominated Focal Actor, he reported that had never anticipated that they all would. One or two did, such as the one producing this analysis – Gold group. In addition representatives of the vast majority of the groups, (though those groups had in Latour’s words ‘betrayed’ them by not consolidating and functioning), often the nominated co-ordinator with perhaps another member, did make presentations in a series of workshops put on by the mother Lincoln Network. These were relevant to the themes of the ‘outcome resolves’ by the micro groups emanating from the Team Syntegration exercise and cogent to the overall project. In addition some other micro group networks spontaneously emerged out of the interactions from amongst the project’s participant actors and others outside... A final event, at which many of the participant actors attended, produced reflections and learning on the overall outcomes and themes of the ‘Systems and the Information Society Network’ providing a final punctuation to its existence, but not necessarily its prodigy findings and insights. The SISN network is dead, long live the SISN network.”

Team Syntegrity, extended by the Internet and the Spring Seminar Series, provided the methodology for interactions in this project. It is in the hands of the user of this CD-ROM to assess whether this methodology produced an effective interaction space to make progress in the discussion of the network’s research hypothesis. The *Project Final Outcomes* offer, from different perspectives, integrated views of the networks’ outcomes.

Thanks to all participants and long live the SISN Network.

## **References**

Beer, S. (1994). "Beyond Dispute: The Invention of Team Syntegrity". Chichester: Wiley

Espejo and Schwaninger (facilitators), 1997, *To be and not to be, that is the system*, Carl Auer Verlag

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