

Towards a theory of book-trade networks

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This is the second of three workshops funded by the British Academy. My aim in this session is to outline where my research is ‘coming from’ as well as where it’s going. It began, in a sense, with my PhD [Loughborough University, 2002] research on the history of the book trade in Leicester. I identified many connections between book-trade people in Leicester and elsewhere: quite a surprising number, especially at regional level, with a definite leaning towards the East Midlands and East Anglia; other important connections were with book-trade practitioners in London. My postdoctoral research – working at the University of Birmingham with Dr Maureen Bell to develop the [British Book Trade Index](#) (BBTI) into a web-based resource and to test it as a research tool, especially the BBTI urban book trade research project¹ – sustained my interest in book-trade networks and ‘communities’.

I had already floated some thoughts about radical communities of print in a conference paper at the University of Edinburgh in April 2002: [Radical Communities of Print in England? A theory with some examples from 1790 to 1850](#). In addition, I had presented a paper the Printing Historical Society’s conference at the University of Reading in January 2002: *Local and regional Studies of Printing History: Context and Content*, which was subsequently published in the society’s Journal.²

When the AHRC-funded BBTI project at Birmingham ended, on 31 March 2005, I began my current research, here at Leicester, funded by the British Academy. The original aim of this research was ‘to explore the extent and nature of communities in the book trade from the lapse of the Printing (Licensing) Act in 1695 (which removed restrictions on provincial printing) to 1850, with a particular focus on towns in the English Midlands and East Anglia’.

[\[More detail here.\]](#)

¹ John Hinks and Maureen Bell, ‘The Book Trade in English Provincial Towns, 1700-1850: an evaluation of evidence from the British Book Trade Index’, *Publishing History*, 57 (2005), pp. 53-112; Maureen Bell and John Hinks, ‘The English Provincial Book Trade: Evidence from the British Book Trade Index’, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol. V, ed. M Suarez and M Turner (CUP, forthcoming)

² *Journal of the Printing Historical Society*, new series, 5, 2003, pp. 3-15.

The original plan was to study three types of community:

- within the book trade
- between the book trade and authors
- between the book trade and readers

The first of these, in particular, was to be studied on a regional basis (the Midlands and East Anglia).

Perhaps I should have realised at the outset that the scope of this research was much too broad. What I had planned to do was simply not achievable within the two years allocated to the project. In addition my research has been delayed several times by persistent minor health problems and the British Academy has agreed to extend the period of research to 31 March 2009.

NOTE: the remainder of this session was an informal discussion of a number of issues based the following [series of slides](#).

Lack of clear, agreed definitions has hampered research [into the history of industrialization].

Suggested usage:

- DISTRICT = a concentration of firms in an industry, either in a single town or in a zone of a city
- CLUSTER = a wider agglomeration of industries that may be connected by common products, technologies, markets (of supply or demand) or institutional frameworks
- REGION = a geographical system of differently-sized urban conurbations [sic] with interlinking interdependent industrial and commercial profiles

John Wilson & Andrew Popp, 'Districts, networks and clusters in England: an introduction', in *Industrial Clusters and Regional Business Networks in England, 1750-1970*, ed. by J. Wilson & A. Popp (2003)

Clusters and Districts:

- How did clusters and districts emerge?
- How did they evolve in the long term?
- How did they adapt in the face of foreign competition and fresh market-cum-technological challenges?

John Wilson & Andrew Popp, 'Districts, networks and clusters in England: an introduction', in *Industrial Clusters and Regional Business Networks in England, 1750-1970*, ed. by J. Wilson & A. Popp (2003)

An economic approach:

- Formal and informal organization of districts and clusters ('governance systems')
- Evidence of 'social embeddedness' and 'co-operative competition'
- Evidence of entrepreneurial responses to new challenges?

M. C. Casson, 'An economic approach to regional business networks' in *Industrial Clusters and Regional Business Networks in England, 1750-1970*, ed. by J. Wilson & A. Popp (2003)

- A 'high-trust' culture enabled entrepreneurs to utilise 'extensive local networks for the mobilisation of finance, talent or information'...
- Networks can function as vehicles for collusion and exclusion, but are most likely to do so in conditions of decline and stagnation.

John Wilson & Andrew Popp, 'Business networking in the Industrial Revolution: some comments', *Economic History Review*, 57 (2003), pp. 355-361.

M. Storper (discussing the seminal work of Piore & Sabel):

'appropriately institutionalised networks are essential to successful ongoing adaptation of a regional economy in the face of uncertainty.'

Piore & Sabel suggest that there has been a strong tendency to idealise both the form and function of networks. Definitions of regional networks often stress such aspects as their role in transmitting information or in reducing transaction costs, or highlighting attributes such as a basis in trust.

Thus, 'network' is at once crucial and contentious!

M. Storper, *The Regional World: territorial development in a global economy*. (1997)

Peter Burke identifies five features distinguishing historical anthropology [HA] from mainstream social history [SH]:

- SH is often quantitative – HA is ‘deliberately qualitative’ and concentrates on specific cases
 - SH often describes the lives of millions – HA focuses on smaller communities ‘to achieve greater depth, as well as more colour and life’
 - SH tries to explain long-term trends (but not in contemporary terms) – HA uses ‘thick description’ (C. Geertz) to interpret social interaction in terms of the society’s own norms and values
 - SH tends to ignore symbolism in everyday life but it’s a central concern of HA (routines and rituals, clothes, food, manners, gestures, speech, etc)
 - SH is generally informed by Marx and Weber – HA follows Durkheim and (more recently) Geertz, Bourdieu et al.
- ‘Historical analysis would benefit if it drew more heavily on this tradition.’

Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (1987), pp. 3-4

We suggest that network analysis is neither a method nor a metaphor, but a fundamental intellectual tool for the study of social structures. In our view an important key to understanding structural analysis is recognizing that social structures can be represented as **networks** – as sets of **nodes** (or social system members) and sets of **ties** depicting their interconnections. This is a marvellously liberating idea.

Barry Wellman & S. D. Berkowitz (eds.), *Social Structures: a Network Approach* (1988), p. 4

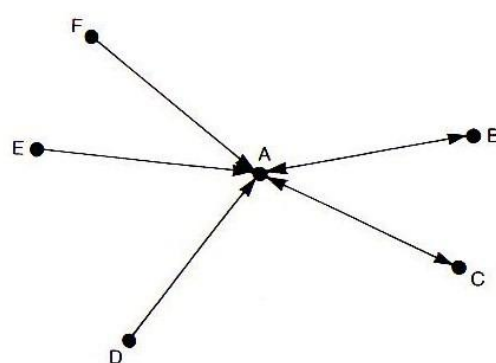


Figure 2.2 A sociogram: the sociometric star

John Scott, *Social Network Analysis: a handbook* (2nd edn, 2000), p. 10

