

## Closing the door on influencers:

### Membership closure in social media

Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com>) is a social media app and website that was deployed in 2010. Only two years later the company was bought by Facebook for one billion dollars (Medium. How Instagram Started). The application is an image sharing application, that lets the user interact with other users by sharing images, liking- and commenting- content. People realized that this was something one could make money on, and *Influencers* (Utdanning. Yrker) quickly established themselves on the network. Celebrities like Cristiano Ronaldo and Selena Gomez has close to 200 million unique followers (Brandwatch. Top most Instagram followers) and advertising firms are willing to pay a lot to be featured in one of their posts (US Magazine. Celebrity news). Also Norwegian influencers, like Jørgine Vasstrand, are making money from advertisement on Instagram (Instagram. Funkygine).

There are several features on the Instagram application that lets people interact with one another. The main feature for interaction, in my opinion, is the possibility to like each others images. This is a way for the user to separate the popular content from the less popular content, but also a way of showing approval of the image that is posted. One feature that is closely related to *likes*, is the *Following Activity* feature. This lets you see what content, or which users, the people you are following has liked or followed.

In 2019 Instagram decided to remove the *Following Activity* feature (Businessinsider. Instagram following activity), and has later announced, and initialized, a trial project where they remove the possibility to see likes (Businessinsider. Instagram removing likes). Removing these features can create implications for influencers who earn money on exposure in social media. In this blog entry, I will explain one of the possible implications of removing the *following activity* feature, using graph theory.

*A graph is a way of specifying relationships among a collection of items* (Easley et al. 2010, 21).

This relationship is specified using *nodes* and *edges*, where the *nodes* are items, and an *edge*

between two nodes represents a relationship between them. A graph can both be *directed* and *undirected*. A directed graph represent a symmetric relationship between the nodes, for instance a friendship on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com>). If node A wants to be friends with node B, then node B has to be friends with node A as well (illustration 1). An undirected graph represents an asymmetric relationship between the nodes, for instance a *follow* on Instagram. Node A can follow node B without node B having to follow node A (illustration 2).

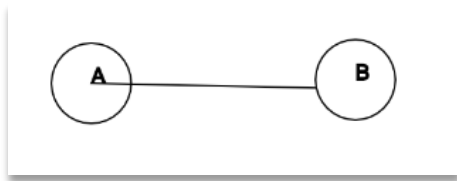


Illustration 1: A undirected graph, representing a symmetric relationship between the nodes. Illustration drawn with a beta-version of a network illustration tool, created by the author.

<https://dikult105.k.uib.no/2019H/students/pko005/privateProjects/networkIllustrator/vol4/>

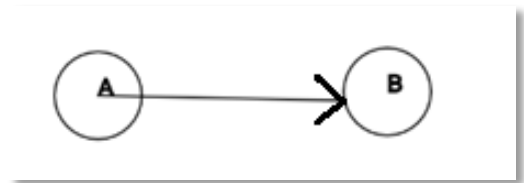


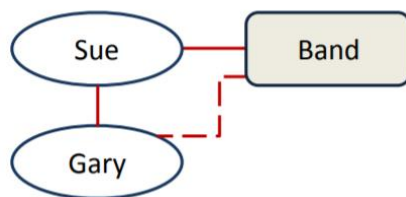
Illustration 2: An directed graph, representing an asymmetric relationship between the nodes.

The relationship between two nodes can either be *strong* or *weak* (Easley et al. 2010. 48). This is an important aspect when discussing how new relationships are formed, either if we are talking about real life friendship, but it can also be applied to social media. The definition of a *strong* and a *weak* tie can vary. When talking about social media, especially Instagram, we can say that a weak tie is established when someone follows someone, and that this tie is *strong* if either:

- The person follows back, or
- You have a lot of interactions with that person (likes, comments etc.)

If I (node A) have a friend (node B) (*Strong tie* between node A and B) who follows someone (Node C) on Instagram and regularly *like* many of their post (*strong tie*), then it is an increased likelihood that I (node A) will start to follow node C in the future (Easley et al. 2010. 44). This assumption is called *the strong triadic closure*. There are several forms of *closure* in a network, including:

- *Strong triadic closure*
- *Focal closure*
- *Membership closure* (illustration 3)



**Membership closure:**  
closure due to social  
influence

*Illustration 3: Membership closure*

When talking about influencers on Social Media, I find it more fitting to talk about *membership closure* (Illustration 3). If node A has a strong tie to node B, and Node B has a strong tie to node C, then there is an increased likelihood that there will be an edge between node A and node C as well. In real life scenarios this is intuitive, for instance if node C is a football team, it is more likely that node A joins that football team if Node B goes there often. However, it is not as intuitive in social media. If node B follows node C (e.g. Cristiano Ronaldo), why should node A follow him? If node A constantly gets notifications in his/her feed about node B *liking* and *commenting* on node C's images (the *Following activity* feature), it is more likely that node A will gain an interest in node C, following *membership closure*.

In this case, when Instagram removed the possibility to see what other people are liking, they also removed the ability for other to look at the *strength* of two users tie. It is still possible to like other people's post, so they have not removed the strong ties. This could reduce the amount of followers influencers will gain in the future, since users will not be informed of other users activity.

By removing the possibility to follow what your friends are doing on Instagram, what they are liking, commenting and who they are following, Instagram also reduces the exposure influencers get in Social Media. Since influencers earn money by exposure, this could impact the influencer business model and make it less attractive to be a influencer in the future.

## Resources

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