See you in the Funny Papers: Cartoons and Social Networks

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From time to time a branch of science captures the imagination of the public; it gets "hot." When that happens, references to the "hot" item appear in newspapers, in novels, in movies -- even in cartoons. Forty odd years ago, for example, Ray Birdwhistell (1952) first introduced kinesics, the field concerned with the importance of non-verbal gestures in human communication. Very soon, Al Capp introduced a new character in his comic strip, *Li'l Abner*. Capp began a series of based on the activities of a "Professor Fleasong," a specialist in the study of "toe gestures."

The field of social network analysis seems to be in that kind of center-stage position today. The fact that social networks is "hot" is indicated by its increasingly frequent appearance in the popular media, particularly in the comics. And, interestingly enough, many of those treatments are quite sophisti-cated. They refer, not just to the network idea, but they often reflect some of the more subtle and sophisticated ideas from our field -- and they do it with wit.

In the present note, I will review some of the cartoons published in the last few years that focus on social net-works. One aim is to entertain. But, at the same time, I will show cartoons that reveal the core ideas behind a wide range of important structural research. Cartoons of this sort might be used to provide the uninitiated with a painless introduction to some key network concepts and research findings.
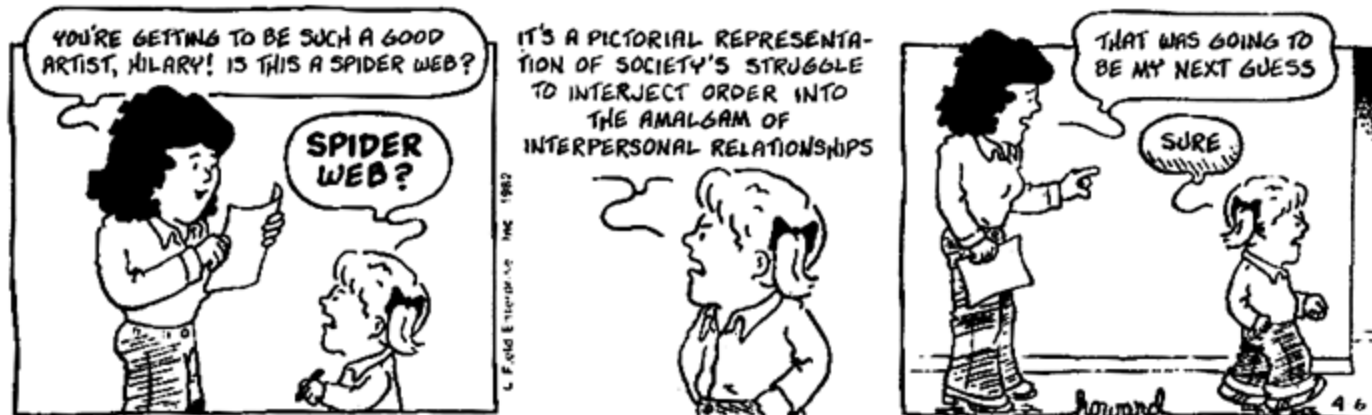
Sally Forth — By Greg Howard

Figure 1.

I'll begin with three illustrations that capture the general concept of social network. Figure 1 shows an image from Greg Howard's comic strip, *Sally Forth*. It provides a very general definition of social networks and calls attention to the structural similarity between patterning of social relations and the notion of a web. Figure 2 is from the comic strip *Cathy* by Cathy Guisewite. Like Figure 1, it defines the general idea of social networks and it proposes two more structural analogies.
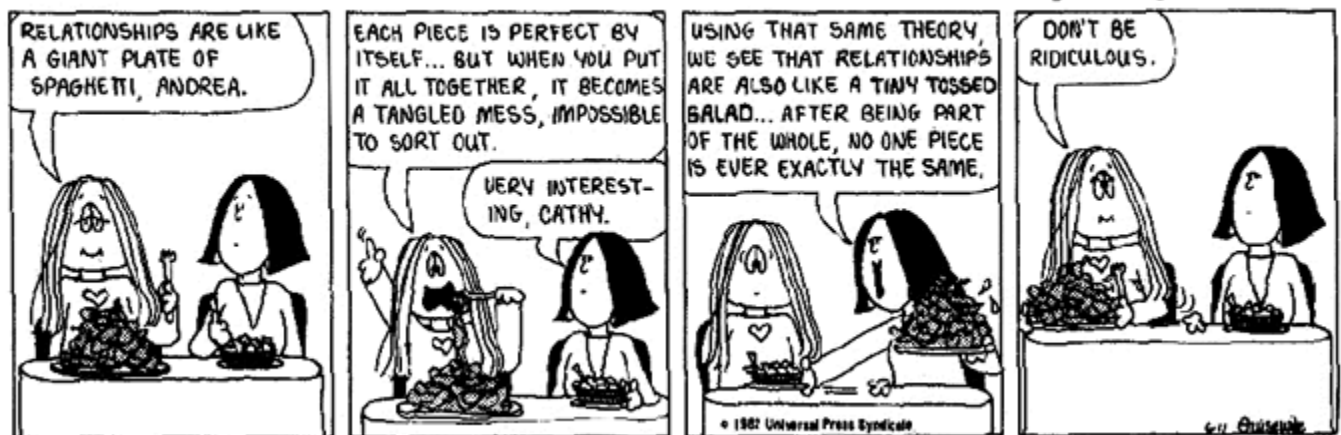

CATHY — by Cathy Guisewite

Figure 2.

In contrast, Figure 3 (*Quality Time* by Gail Machlis) embodies the idea of ego networks. At the same time, it calls attention to the issue raised in Ron

Burt's (2000) recent work on the importance of considering the decay of relations over time.

Figure 3.

The next ten cartoons (Figures 4 through 12) all share a concern with the structural properties of social networks. Figures 4, 5 and 6 are all focused on tie strength.
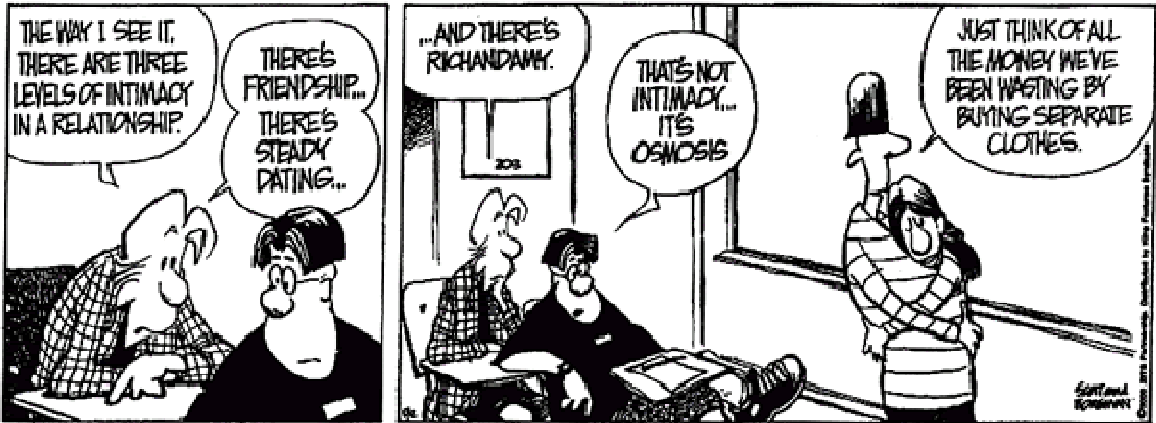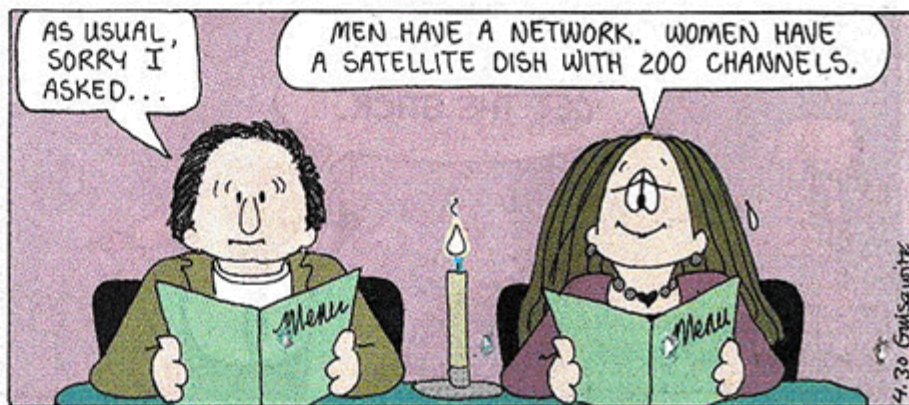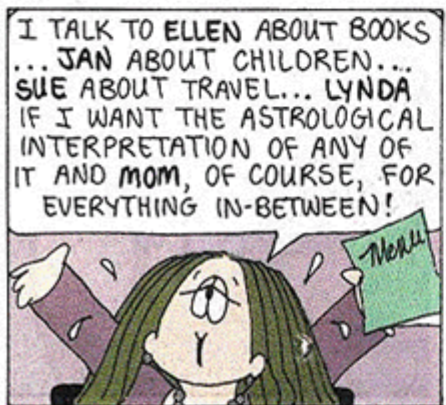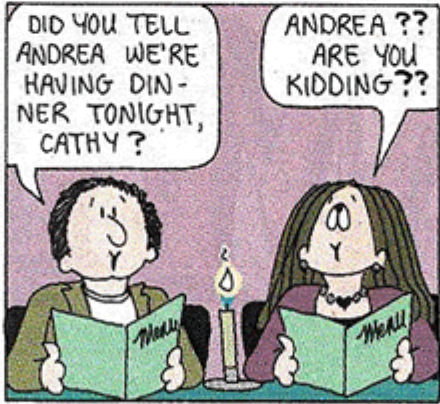
Figure 4.

Figure 5.

Figure 4 is *Single Slices* by Peter Kohlsaat. Figure 5 is *Zits* by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman. Figure 6 is *Blondie* by Dean Young and Denis Lebrun. And Figures 4 and 5, in particular, are concerned with the important problem of how we label a tie in order to reflect how closely the individuals are linked.

Figure 6.

Cathy
by Cathy Guisewite

WHAT WILL SHE SAY ABOUT ME?

PATTY WILL STILL TALK ABOUT YOU, EXCEPT THEN I HAVE TO HEAR HER WEEP ABOUT **FRED**... **JOAN** IS WHO I CALL FOR THE GOOD OLD-FASHIONED, "ALL MEN ARE PIGS" PERSPECTIVE...

BRENDA WON'T DISCUSS LOVE LIVES, BUT LOVES TO TALK ABOUT OUR **DOGS**... **KIM** HAS NO INTEREST IN DOGS, BUT LOVES TO TALK ABOUT **CLOTHES**...

I TALK TO **KAREN** WHEN I'VE BLOWN A DIET...**CAROL** WHEN I'M STICKING TO A DIET... **TERRY** WHEN I'M RE-CREATING MYSELF AS A VEGETARIAN...

TO WHOM WILL I SAY IT?

DID YOU TELL ANDREA WE'RE HAVING DINNER TONIGHT, CATHY?

ANDREA ?? ARE YOU KIDDING ??

I ONLY TALK TO ANDREA ABOUT **WORK**, NOT MEN... I TALK TO **CHARLENE** ABOUT MEN, BUT ONLY **NEW** MEN. SHE'S SICK OF DISCUSSING YOU.

I TALK TO **ELLEN** ABOUT BOOKS ... **JAN** ABOUT CHILDREN... **SUE** ABOUT TRAVEL... **LYNDA** IF I WANT THE ASTROLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF ANY OF IT AND **MOM**, OF COURSE, FOR EVERYTHING IN-BETWEEN!

AS USUAL, SORRY I ASKED...

MEN HAVE A NETWORK. WOMEN HAVE A SATELLITE DISH WITH 200 CHANNELS.

Figure 7.

Cathy Guisewite takes up the problem of specifying kinds of social relationships in the episode of *Cathy* shown in Figure 7. This treatment calls attention to what is probably the greatest weakness in the General Social Survey item on social networks. The item asks about discussions of "important issues" but it neglects to find out what issues were discussed with whom.
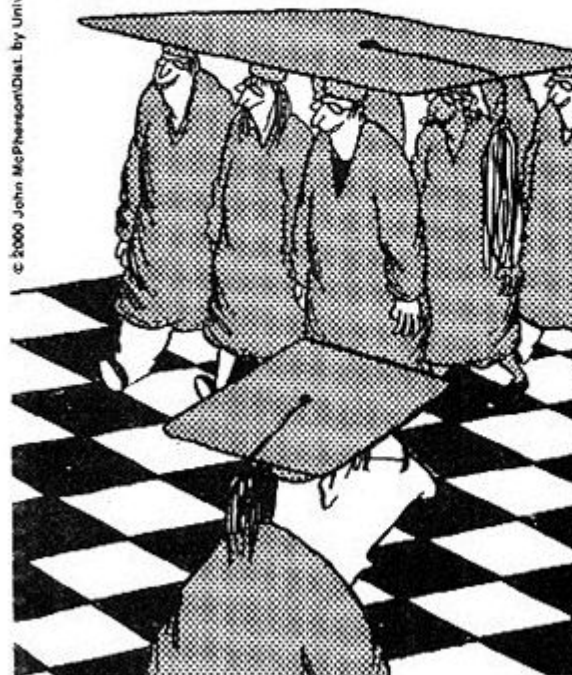
CLOSE TO HOME By John McPher:

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"So far I'm doing all right. I went over to t people, but nine people have come over to t

Figure 8.

"They always were a tight little

Figure 9.

Several graph theoretic concepts come up in the funny papers. In Figure 8, for example, W. S. F . . ., in *Human Behavior Magazine*, illustrates the social importance of indegree and outdegree. John McPherson's *Close to Home* in Figure 9 defined a clique. And, as Figures 10 and 11 show, Mel Lazarus regularly draws on graph theory when it comes to drawing *Momma*.

Figure 10.

In Figure 10, he stresses the critical role of a cut edge. In Figure 11 he questions the notion of balance. And finally in Figure 12, a *Dilbert* cartoon, Scott Adams provides insight into what betweenness is all about (Freeman, 1977).
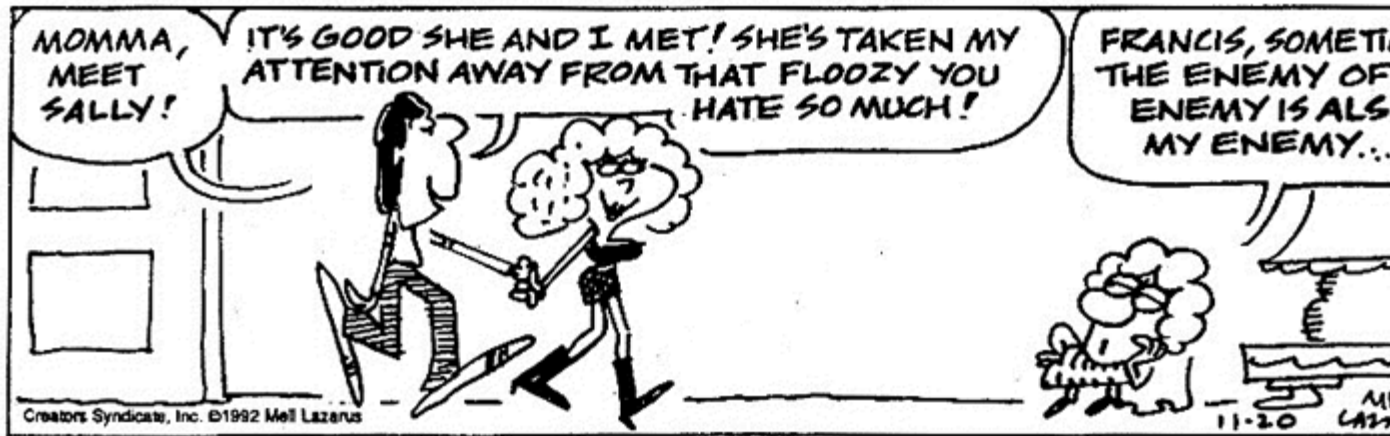
MOMMA By Mell Lazarus

Figure 11.

DILBERT By Scott Adams

Figure 12.

Algebraic ideas are unexpectedly popular with cartoonists. Figure 13 is the cartoon *Boffo*, by Joe Martin. Figure 14 is the comic strip, *Dennis the Menace* by Hank Ketcham.

MISTER BOFFO By Joe Martin

I'M A FRIEND OF A FRIE
OF A FRIEND OF A FRIE
OF A FRIEND OF A FR
OF A FRIEND OF A FI
OF A FRIEND OF A
FRIEND OF
HIS.

JOE
MARTIN
4-22-99

ANOTHER WAY TO TELL WHE
DEALING WITH A MORTAL EN

Dennis The Menace By Ha

"Margaret told Gina that you told her
you not to tell her! So don't you dare t
told you she told me what I told you not

Figure 14.

Figure 13.

And Figure 15 is *Peanuts* by Charles M. Schultz. Like Lorrain and White (1971), these three cartoonists are concerned with the importance and the difficulty of concatenating relationships.

Figure 15.

The remaining figures all deal with applications of various sorts. Figures 16, 17 and 18 deal with the issue of searching through a network. Figure 16 is yet another *Sally Forth* strip by Greg Howard. It is concerned with the use of social networks to find a job (Granovetter, 1974).

Figure 16.

The dual of that issue, finding a person to fill a position, is covered in Figure 17, a Gary Trudeau *Doonesbury* strip.
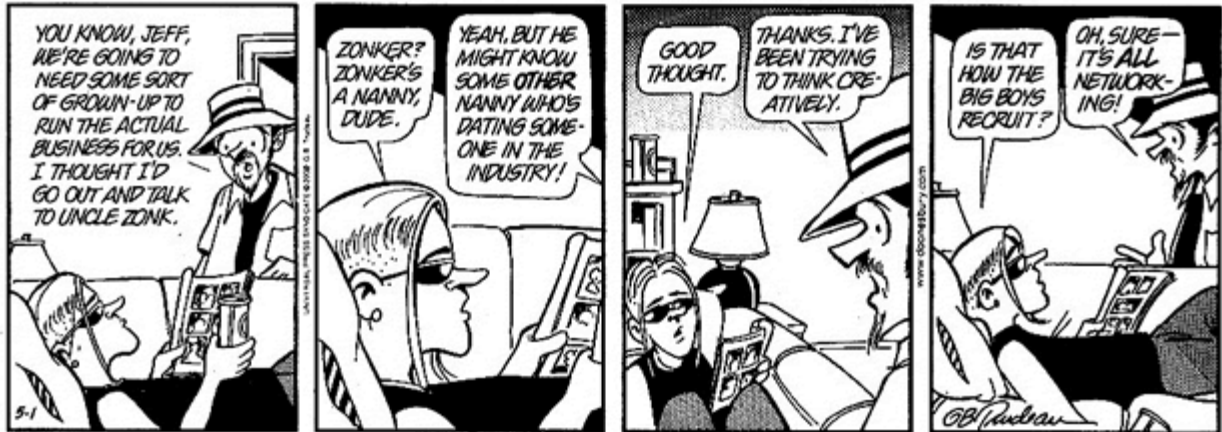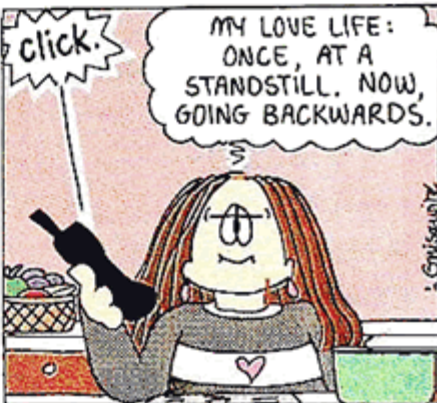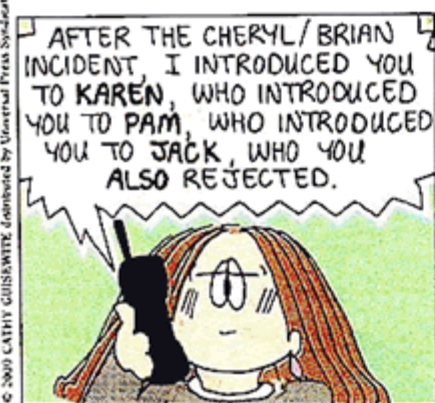
Figure 17.

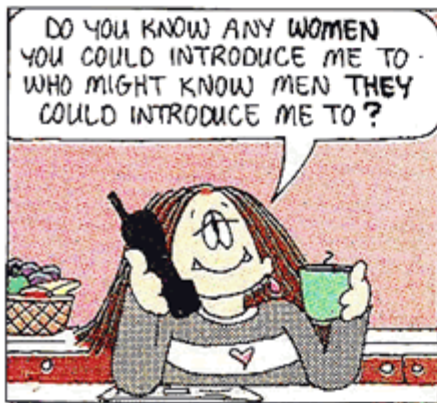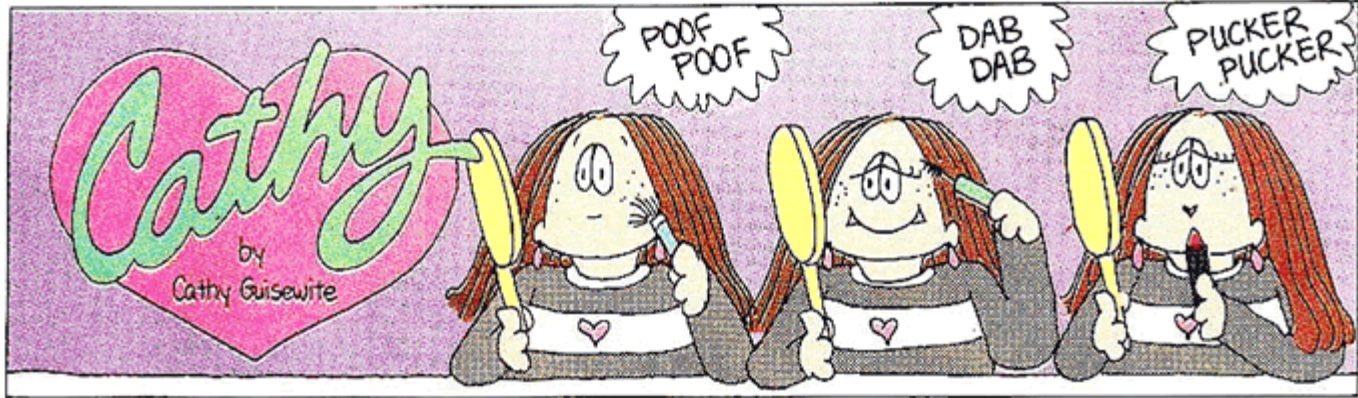And another *Cathy* by Cathy Guisewite illustrates the search for a mate.

Figure 18.

Figures 19 and 20 explore the network based diffusion process. Figure 19 is a *Mother Goose and Grimm* strip by Mike Peters. It shows how an individual can benefit by the spread of information.
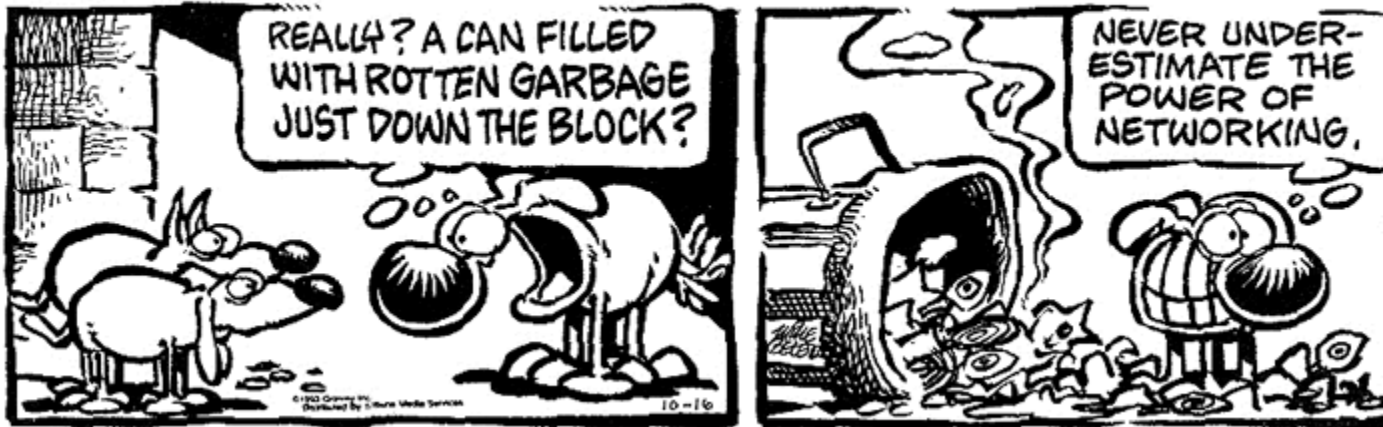

Figure 19.

Figure 20 is a linked pair of Greg Howard's *Sally Forth* strips. They introduce the idea of the speed of a diffusion process in a small organization.

Figure 20.

There are four cartoons that are concerned with organizations. Figures 21, 22 and 23 are all focused on the importance of the "old boy" networks. Figures 21 and 22 are both by Dana Fradon from *The New Yorker*, and Figure 23 is a *Good News - Bad News* cartoon by Henry Martin. Together, the three associate "old boys" with organization, power and privilege.

Figure 21.

"Tell him the old-boy network is here to

Figure 22.

Figure 23.

Finally, Figure 24 is from Lynn Johnson's *For Better or For Worse* strip. It shows dramatically the implications of Bott's (1957) tight-knit networks. They provide social support but they also mobilize social control.

Figure 24.

That, then, is a quick review of some recent cartoons that deal with issues in terms of social networks. They are fun and, hopefully, they can be used to initiate newcomers to the study of social structure. Personally, I hope that

the networks field continues to catch the eye of the community of cartoonists.

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