

Global communications and the mesh of civilizations

February 18 2014, by H. Roger Segelken

It has been 20 years since political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published his influential "Clash of Civilizations" prediction that cultural differences and "fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future."

Now a team of social and information scientists has revisited Huntington's controversial prediction by tracing hundreds of millions of interpersonal emails and tweets around the globe. Their paper, "The Mesh of Civilizations in the Global Network of Interpersonal Communication," was presented Feb. 17 at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Chicago by Michael Macy, director of the Cornell Social Dynamics Laboratory. The paper is co-authored with Bogdan State of Stanford University, Ingmar Weber and Yelena Nejova of the Qatar Computing Research Institute, and Patrick Park, also of Cornell.

The anonymized email data were collected by State while interning at Yahoo in 2012, assisted by Weber and Nejova who worked for Yahoo Inc. when the research project began, geo-locating and pairing Yahoo email logs (without seeing the email text) and Twitter tweets among hundreds of millions of users worldwide. The researchers used the density of message traffic to measure the "density of [social ties](#)" among users in different countries. That's how they were able to discern the digital-age "fault lines of civilization" – using the number of anonymous individuals in each country exchanging emails and Twitter messages with one another.

The researchers claim to have assembled one of the most complete global networks of social ties derived from the interpersonal flows of Internet communication.

Their AAAS presentation includes a network diagram of 90 countries, each colored according to membership in one of Huntington's eight "[civilizations](#)," termed Sinic, Hindu, Islamic, Latin American, Western, Orthodox, African and Buddhist. The researchers say the diagram "reveals visually striking evidence that online social ties are much stronger within civilizations than between." Although Huntington questioned the possibility for a "universal civilization," Macy notes that "The Clash of Civilizations" was written "before our species gravitated to the borderless web of the cyber world where citizens regularly defy the parochial efforts of nation states. Nevertheless," he laments, "we found little evidence that online communication is bridging the [fault lines](#) of civilization."

More information: The abstract is available here:
[aas.confex.com/aaas/2014/webp...gram/Paper11531.html](https://www.aas.confex.com/aaas/2014/webp...gram/Paper11531.html)

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