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Paper no. 2013/11

Why space matters in technological innovation systems – the global knowledge dynamics of membrane bioreactor technology

Christian Binz (christian.binz@eawag.ch)
Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology, Dübendorf, Switzerland

Bernhard Truffer (bernhard.truffer@eawag.ch)
Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology, Dübendorf, Switzerland

Lars Coenen (lars.coenen@circle.lu.se)
CIRCLE, Lund University, Sweden & NIFU, Oslo, Norway

This is a pre-print version of a paper that has been submitted for publication to a journal

This version: March 2013

Centre for Innovation, Research and Competence in the Learning Economy (CIRCLE)
Lund University
P.O. Box 117, Sölvegatan 16, S-221 00 Lund, SWEDEN
http://www.circle.lu.se/publications

WP 2013/11

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ABSTRACT

Studies on technological innovation systems (TIS) often set spatial boundaries at the national level and treat supranational levels as a geographically undifferentiated and freely accessible global technological opportunity set. This article criticizes this conceptualization and proposes instead to analyze relevant actors, networks and processes in TIS from a relational perspective on space. It develops an analytical framework which allows investigating innovation processes (or 'functions') of a TIS at and across different spatial scales. Based on social network analysis of a co-publication dataset from membrane bioreactor technology, we illustrate how the spatial characteristics of collaborations in knowledge creation vary greatly over relatively short periods of time. This finding suggests that TIS studies should be more reflexive on system boundary setting both regarding the identification and analysis of core processes as well as in the formulation of policy advice.

JEL Code: O31, F60, Q55

Keywords: technological innovation system, relational space, system functions, knowledge creation, social network analysis, membrane bioreactor technology

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Christian Binz[a], Bernhard Truffer[b] and Lars Coenen[c]

[a] Corresponding author. Eawag, Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology, Überlandstrasse 133, 8600 Dübendorf, Switzerland. christian.binz@eawag.ch. Tel: +41 (0)58 765 5674, Fax: +41 (0)58 765 5028

[b] Eawag, Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology, Überlandstrasse 133, 8600 Dübendorf, Switzerland. benrhard.truffer@eawag.ch

[c] Circle, Lund University, Sweden. lars.coenen@circle.lu.se

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Abstract

Studies on technological innovation systems (TIS) often set spatial boundaries at the national level and treat supranational levels as a geographically undifferentiated and freely accessible global technological opportunity set. This article criticizes this conceptualization and proposes instead to analyze relevant actors, networks and processes in TIS from a relational perspective on space. It develops an analytical framework which allows investigating innovation processes (or ‘functions’) of a TIS at and across different spatial scales. Based on social network analysis of a co-publication dataset from membrane bioreactor technology, we illustrate how the spatial characteristics of collaborations in knowledge creation vary greatly over relatively short periods of time. This finding suggests that TIS studies should be more reflexive on system boundary setting both regarding the identification and analysis of core processes as well as in the formulation of policy advice.

1. Introduction

Technological innovation systems (TIS) have become a popular and resourceful approach for the analysis of innovation processes and early industry emergence, especially in the context of recently developing clean-tech sectors (Markard et al., 2012). However, its narrow geographical focus on industrialized countries and the overriding emphasis on processes at the national scale are increasingly criticized (Berkhout et al., 2009; Coenen et al., 2012). Continuing globalization and the fast rise of new industries in emerging economies add considerable complexity to the spatial extent of innovation processes. It is for instance argued that newly industrializing countries could leapfrog onto new technological trajectories and directly become key actors in the development and diffusion of new cutting-edge technologies (Angel and Rock, 2009; Berkhout et al., 2009; Binz et al., 2012). It thus becomes increasingly important for innovation scholars and policy makers to understand how innovative activity is organized globally and how innovation processes work at and between increasingly interrelated spatial scales.

The technological innovation system (TIS) concept allows in principle for such an international analysis. Conceptualizing innovation systems without setting *a priori* territorial boundaries can be seen as a distinctive feature of the TIS concept. In contrast to other innovation system approaches that have pre-defined the territorial delineation, e.g. at the national (Lundvall, 1992) or regional (Cooke et al., 1997) scale, TIS proponents argue that by taking technology as a starting point, the approach cuts across spatial boundaries (Hekkert et al., 2007). Counter to this original vantage point, most of contemporary TIS literature delineates empirical studies ex-ante on the basis of territorial (often national) boundaries (Coenen et al., 2012; Markard et al., 2012). The broader (global) context of the system under study is often conceptualized as representing a ubiquitous 'global technological opportunity set' (Carlsson, 1997a), to which all actors have indiscriminate access.

Mindful of the uneven geographical distribution of innovative activity (Asheim and Gertler, 2005), Coenen et al. (2012) propose a more careful treatment of space in TIS studies which is pronouncedly relational and multi-scalar, avoiding a priori scalar boundaries and hierarchies. Also other TIS proponents have started to acknowledge the need to better understand the relationships between technological and other types of innovation systems (regional, national) to avoid a reified, decontextualized treatment of technological innovation systems and to improve policy advice based on the TIS approach (Jacobsson and Bergek, 2011).

Therefore, in applying a relational conceptualization of space, the objective of this paper is to develop an analytical framework for TIS that is explicitly spatial but at the same time avoids a fixation on specific territorial units or singular scales. This suggests to start from a network perspective and ‘follow the network wherever it leads’ throughout its development over time (Coenen et al., 2012). This means using the relational properties of the actors to identify relevant geographical locations and spatial levels of a TIS, *a posteriori*. In developing this analytical framework, the paper elaborates on how to specify whether, why and how space matters in studies of technological innovation systems, what errors might be incorporated in nationally delimited case studies and how policy advice could accordingly be improved.

The specific approach presented in this paper aims at explicating the spatial reach of core processes driving TIS dynamics, the so called TIS functions (Hekkert et al. 2007). By tracking the activities of core actors over time, processes like knowledge creation, entrepreneurial experimentation or market formation can be related to specific spatial setups. A relational view emphasizes that actors contribute to these processes by drawing on resources that they can access through specific networks. These networks may be confined to specific regions (e.g. as in the case of industry clusters) but they can as well span over several continents. An explicit analysis of the geography of these functions thus scrutinizes the differential access of TIS actors to resources and institutional contexts that are unevenly distributed across space. The notion of a global opportunity set is therefore replaced by a concept of differential access to unevenly distributed resources in the spaces of a “global TIS”.

While the conceptual argument is explicated for all TIS functions, we are restricting the empirical illustration to one core function that often plays a dominant role in early formation processes (Bergek et al., 2008a): knowledge creation. We will measure the spatial structure of actors and their collaborations by analyzing co-authored ISI publications in the field of membrane bioreactor (MBR) technology.

In the next section, the problems of limiting TIS studies to a national level will be discussed and the potential benefits of a relational geographic perspective for assessing the spatial reach of core functions will be elaborated in more detail. Section 3 introduces social network analysis as a tool for spatial analysis of TIS functions and develops and operationalizes a set of respective indicators. Section 4 discusses the selected co-publication dataset and applies the framework to knowledge creation in the TIS of MBR technology. The results suggest that knowledge creation in this field evolved from a nurturing phase dominated by globally spanning networks to a Europe-based expansion phase and finally to a multi-scalar, Europe- and Asia centred consolidation phase. We conclude by discussing the implications of the observed spatial-temporal dynamics in innovation activities for future TIS studies, as well as for policy making.

2. Conceptualizing space in TIS

The TIS concept emerged in the early nineties from a quickly expanding innovation system literature, which is rooted in evolutionary economics and industrial dynamics (Freeman, 1987; Lundvall, 1992; Nelson, 1993). TIS are defined as a “network of agents interacting in a specific economic/industrial area under a particular institutional infrastructure or set of infrastructures and involved in the generation, diffusion, and utilization of technology” (Carlsson and Stankiewicz, 1991, p.111). Innovation is conceptualized as an interactive, recursive process, embedded in a set of co-evolving actors, networks and institutions. TIS literature thus pronouncedly rejects the idea of linear innovation paths and emphasizes instead the importance of systemic interplay of complementary actors, interactive and recursive improvement processes and the institutional embeddedness of innovation (Bergek et al., 2008a; Carlsson and Stankiewicz, 1991). One does typically divide between TIS structure and processes (or ‘functions’). Structure is defined as the actors, networks and institutions that conjointly support the generation, diffusion and utilization of a new technology (Bergek et al., 2008a). A structural analysis is complemented with a dynamic view on innovation system build-up, by focusing on a set of functions, as defined in two programmatic papers by Bergek et al. (2008a) and Hekkert et al. (2007). These authors sustain that TIS actors in order to create, diffuse and utilize new technologies should be active in six key system-building processes, namely knowledge creation, entrepreneurial experimentation, market formation, influence on the direction of the search, resource mobilization and creation of legitimacy[1].

[1] We synthesized the two lists of functions slightly: Creation of external economies, which is only mentioned by Bergek et al. (2008) was not considered here, whereas ‘knowledge development’ (Bergek et al., 2008; Hekkert et al., 2007) and ‘knowledge diffusion through networks’ (Hekkert et al., 2007) are summarized in the shorter term ‘knowledge creation’.

2.1 The need for a notion of space in TIS

As described in the introduction, the conceptualization of space in TIS studies is rather simplistic and ignores that system build-up is an inherently spatial process which might transcend territorial boundaries and spatial scales. So far, TIS studies have essentially employed spatial boundaries (i.e. national borders) as scalar envelopes (Cooke, 2005) that contain the relevant processes of an innovation system. Especially the interaction of various TIS elements with the ‘global technological opportunity set’ (Carlsson, 1997a) has not been further specified. When outlining the original framework Carlsson (1997b) assumed that “the technological opportunities facing any economic agent are virtually unlimited; the pool of global possibilities has practically no boundaries” (p. 776). Coenen et al. (2012) challenge this view by sustaining that the global opportunity set is conditioned by differential absorptive capacities at the level of individual organizations and systems to tap into this knowledge and make use of it for innovative activities. This explains why, despite the potential existence of such a ubiquitous global opportunity set, innovation activities are not uniformly or randomly distributed across the global landscape. Moreover, tacit dimensions of knowledge may be sticky, which means it does not travel easily beyond the context in which it was generated (Gertler, 2003). This results in dual knowledge flows for innovation activities that consist not only of localized learning embedded in local nodes (Maskell and Malmberg, 1999) but also global knowledge networks in the form of international epistemic communities (Amin and Roberts, 2008), corporate networks of transnational companies (Chaminade and Vang, 2008) or temporary proximity and face-to-face interaction at international trade fairs and conferences (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008). Scrutinizing these complex relational dynamics has been ignored so far by TIS research, but become one of the hallmarks in the so-called relational turn in economic geography (Bathelt and Gluckler, 2003; Boggs and Rantisi, 2003).

2.2 Applying a relational perspective on TIS space

In a relational perspective, spaces and places are shaped not only by processes and interactions happening within a specific territory but also by the impact of wider sets of structures and processes (Bathelt and Gluckler, 2003; Yeung, 2005), that are fluent and constantly reorganizing at all scales (Amin, 2002). Actors thus have significant relationships (through which they seek to access resources to achieve their individual goals) at different spatial levels that simultaneously influence their behaviour (Amin, 2002; Bunnell and Coe, 2001; Coe and Bunnell, 2003; Coenen et al., 2012). Relational economic geography has therefore put a premium on networks as a conceptual and methodological underpinning to analyze (uneven) spatial development (Glückler, 2007; Ter Wal and Boschma, 2009). Networks span space by establishing transversal and topological interlinkages among geographically dispersed locations or organizational units (Brenner et al., 2011). This does however not mean that a networked perspective by default presupposes distanced, global relations. Network spaces may as well be concentrated in a particular locality. Economic geographers have shown that often a combination of dense local ties and extended extra-regional connections creates successful long-term innovativeness of actors, places or innovation systems (Bathelt et al., 2004). We would thus expect that such local ties and extra-regional connections are equally relevant for the core innovation processes in a TIS. How this combination plays out empirically is however contingent on a number of factors such as the type of industry and its knowledge base (Asheim and Coenen, 2006) or the institutional conditions of a region (Tödtling and Trippl, 2005). A relational perspective on space thus suggests that relying only on interaction at one scale (e.g. the regional scale in regional innovation systems or, the national scale in technological innovation systems) curtails the significance of relevant factors at other scales or treats these as merely exogenous factors. This reveals a key challenge for TIS research. While indeed the development of a technology or technological fields does not stop short of territorial borders, its spatial set-up is neither randomly spread across the geographical landscape, but contingent on the specific technology in focus and the resources and relationships of actors involved in driving the relevant innovation processes.

Analyzing networks therefore potentially enables to scrutinize the spatial extent and structure of core TIS processes. Networks have held a core position in the TIS approach since the earliest writings. The actual use of the term has, however, been restricted to a mostly qualitative and metaphorical level (Coenen and Díaz López, 2010; Kastelle and Steen, 2010). This is not very surprising as getting a grasp of the plentiful and very diverse types of networks that define a TIS is a very delicate task: they can be formal, informal, short-run, long-lasting, trans-disciplinary, exclusive, open or strategic and spanning between diverse actor types (Musiolik and Markard, 2011). Nevertheless, they are of key importance for explaining how innovation and a supportive institutional context are created by TIS actors. Formal networks as a recent example have been shown to create system resources that are crucial for maturation and diffusion of new technologies (Musiolik et al., 2012). The spatiality of these actor networks which enact key system build-up processes (and ultimately structural change) has however not yet been further specified.

Thus, also when speaking about networks, TIS research so far mostly restricted their analysis to ties within or related to national territories. It would therefore be adequate to explicitly label these studies as ‘national TIS’ snapshots of a wider ‘global TIS’. Shifting to a relational perspective on space thus means explicitly analyzing TIS structure and processes from a global, relational perspective. Whether or not sufficiently coherent sub-systems may be identified in specific countries, regions or continents can then be treated as an empirical question.

2.3 A networked perspective on TIS functions

This implies a fundamentally new inroad to the way TIS analysis is approached. Instead of delimiting system boundaries ex ante we propose to start with a technological boundary and to then empirically reconstruct whether sufficiently coherent sub-systems overlap with specific regional or national boundaries. Existing schemes of analysis (Bergek et al., 2008a; Hekkert et al., 2007) would accordingly have to be adapted since the relationship between structures and functions has not yet been elaborated systematically in the literature (Markard and Truffer, 2008). A relational spatial perspective demands an explicit consideration of spatially extensive networks for driving core processes of TIS development. It thus becomes crucial to discuss where spatially extensive actor networks become important elements of TIS functions and where, as a consequence, a myopic focus on nationally bound networks is likely to miss out on important causal factors. [2]

Knowledge creation, for instance, is usually defined without reference to the actors or networks involved in the process, but with a focus on the way it is generated; e.g. Hekkert et al. (2007) distinguish between knowledge that has been produced through “learning by searching” or “learning by doing”. In our view, a distinction between codified and tacit knowledge is a constructive way forward here. Codified (or ‘explicit’) knowledge can be easily transferred between creator and recipient; respective knowledge bases of technologies

[2] Note that at this point it will not be possible to expound an exhaustive ‘theory’ on the relationship between different TIS structures and functions.

are thus – at least partly – public goods e.g. created in the science system and “originating from various geographical areas all over the world” (Bergek et al., 2008a, p.414). Tacit knowledge is in contrast hardly accessible in conscious thought, only producible in practice and strongly context-dependent (Gertler, 2003). It is thus evolving in much more complex settings: its creation and dissemination is in many cases still restricted to strongly localized interaction in densely co-located actor networks (Gertler, 2003; Maskell and Malmberg, 1999), yet also increasingly mobilized and effectively shared in international networks and communities (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008; Crevoisier and Jeannerat, 2009; Wenger, 1998). As tacit and codified knowledge co-evolve, one can assume to find considerably complex geographic network structures underlying knowledge creation: Subnational clusters of dense interaction, combined with increasing distant connections between actors in international networks and communities. A respective analytical framework for this function will be proposed in this paper.

Entrepreneurial experimentation depends on new companies entering a field, and especially the networks forming between them and supportive partners in an experimentation process, typically in protected market niches (Bergek et al., 2008a, p. 416). This process is inherently spatial as there are proximity advantages for new firm start-ups: “The social ties of the potential entrepreneurs are likely to be localized, and induce entrepreneurs to start their firm in close proximity to their homes and to their current employers” (Stam, 2010: p. 142). At first sight, one could thus expect entrepreneurial activities to build up mainly in localized settings. Yet, also entrepreneurial networks can be shaped by more international interrelations. Transnational entrepreneurship literature shows how e.g. returnee entrepreneurs can induce entrepreneurial experimentation as “new argonauts” (Saxenian, 2007) in places that were before unconnected to an emerging localized TIS and thereby span relevant networks between at first sight unrelated national subsystems (for a more extensive overview of this argument see Drori et al., 2009). This function could accordingly be analyzed by reconstructing the social networks of entrepreneurs and their dynamics over time, e.g. based on primary survey data, industry association’s member lists, data on actors in R&D projects or patent data.

Market formation usually develops in different stages with distinctive features of the relevant user-producer networks (Bergek et al., 2008a). Especially in very early nursing markets, collocation between users and producers may form important ‘learning spaces’ (Kemp et al., 1998), which facilitate repeated and trustful feedback loops between companies (or entrepreneurs) and their customers (Lundvall, 1992). Early markets for wind power and photovoltaics as an example were strongly shaped by such interactive learning at a local to regional level (Dewald and Truffer, 2012; Garud and Karnoe, 2003). Yet, especially in later bridging and mass market phases, producers and users do not necessarily have to be co-located to form and supply markets: Actors in regions without markets could also sell their products in other subsystems of the same TIS, e.g. by compensating missing spatial proximity to foreign market places with other forms of (organizational, institutional, cultural or cognitive) proximity (Lagendijk and Lorentzen, 2007), or in extended user-producer relations in global production networks or multinational companies (Coe et al., 2004). Chinese PV manufacturers as a case in point developed into a market leading position by strongly exploiting spatially distant foreign markets in Europe and the US (de la Tour et al., 2011). Empirically, networks of market formation could be mapped based on surveys on relevant user-producer interactions, market reports, or - in later development phases - trade statistics.

'Influence on the direction of search' describes the selection process dealing with variety emerging from "knowledge creation" (Hekkert et al., 2007). It works through a combination of regulations or long term policy goals set by governments and the creation of vision and collective expectations on a new technology among different TIS actors (Bergek et al., 2008a; Hekkert et al., 2007). In this context it is often assumed (but seldom verified) that national institutions constitute the most relevant context for effective policy intervention. However, supranational political institutions and treaties like the EU, UN, WTO or the clean development mechanism of the Kyoto protocol can have increasingly strong influence on innovation processes, especially in clean-tech sectors (Binz et al., 2012; Gosens et al., submitted). A similar argument holds for the second main dimension of that function, the shaping of expectations. Bergek et al. (2008a) explicitly argue that expectations might be influenced by growth occurring in TISs in other countries or by changes in the socio-technical landscape, which lies outside the influence sphere even of specific national agents (Geels, 2002). E.g. direction of the search in the German wind TIS was reportedly strongly influenced by developments in California and Denmark (Bergek and Jacobsson, 2003). Also the spatiality of this function is therefore far from restricted to a specific spatial scale. Similar arguments hold for another closely related function, creation of legitimacy. This complex process of expectation shaping and institutional change is created through e.g. lobbying in political networks, the global climate change debate or experiences from 'sister' TIS (Bergek et al., 2008b). The performance of both functions is thus closely related to the emergence of supportive advocacy coalitions, interest groups, networks and intermediaries which jointly opt for coordinated technological and institutional change (Bergek et al., 2008a), much in the sense of the work of Musiolik et al. (2012). Also here, whereas some relevant actor networks might be restricted in their spatial reach, others might consciously aim at creating guidance and legitimacy at a more international scale (as in the case of membrane technology policies in the Netherlands and Japan (van Lente and Rip, 1998). Empirical analysis of these functions should thus focus on the perception of key actors on the potential of new technologies and the formation of advocacy coalitions. Perception of key actors about the legitimacy of a technology can be scrutinized by classical discourse analysis methods (in the context of TIS studies see for instance (Konrad et al., 2012) or some newer forms of discourse network analysis, as it is done in political sciences (see e.g. Fisher et al., 2012). Sources of relevant data can be newspaper articles or protocols of parliamentary discussions. Formation of advocacy coalitions and intermediaries could be analyzed based on affiliation data from the core industry associations or interest networks in a field or again by conducting surveys.

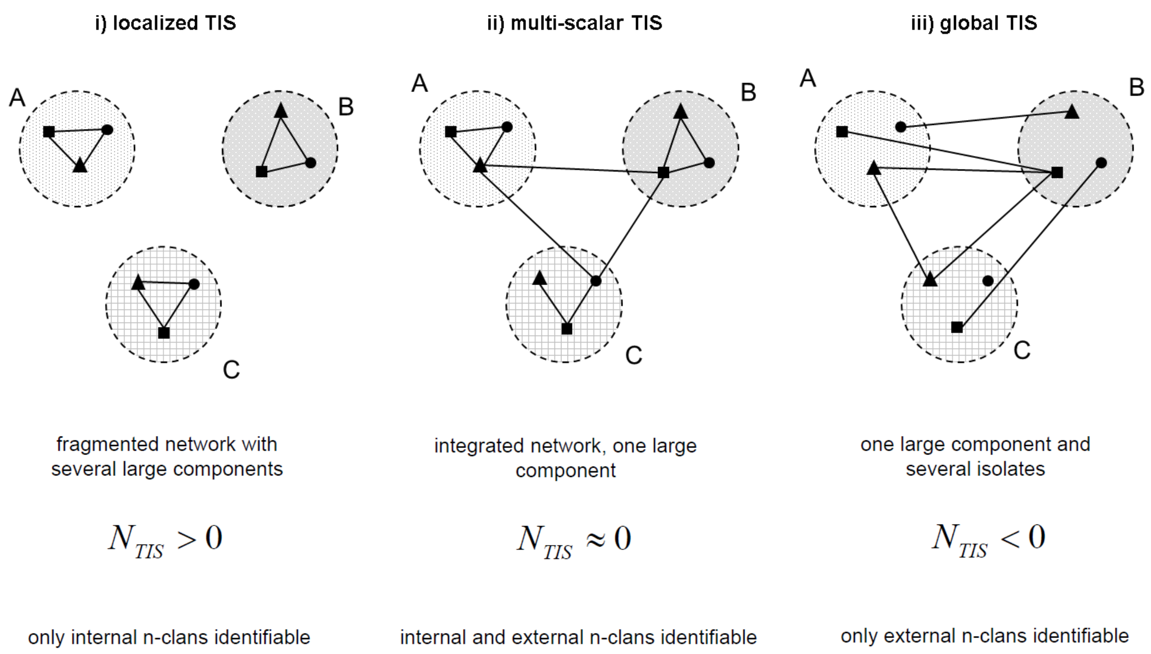
Resource mobilization, finally, involves the deployment of financial and human capital (Hekkert et al., 2007). Mobilization of financial capital essentially depends on the investment decisions of private or public investors. Whereas some of these investments are likely coming from local sources, venture capital might as likely be mobilized through the global financial system (Avdeitchikova, 2012). Similarly, human capital could be mobilized in local specialized labor markets, national education institutes or increasingly also through attracting foreign talent in the form of entrepreneurs, specialized professionals or academicians (Saxenian, 2007). Actor networks underlying financial resource mobilization could thus relatively easily be reconstructed through data on the investment shares of financial institutes or other investors in key companies of a field. Scrutinizing the mobilization of human capital could in turn be followed by e.g. mapping the social networks of key actors in a field or through graduation records of specialized engineers.

In summary, specifying how actor networks at different spatial scales influence functional dynamics is an important analytical problem that remains to be addressed in TIS research. The short discussion above reveals that further work is needed in particular to better theorize and empirically analyze the networked spatialities of TIS functions. Rather than trying to assign functions to their appropriate spatial level, we suggest to scrutinize in more detail how processes in networks at different spatial levels interact and thereby shape key processes and ultimately innovative outcomes of both specific national subsystems and the global TIS as whole. Unpacking these high spatial complexities in TIS was however avoided for a long time due to problems of data availability in particular if the focus is extended beyond the borders of small European countries. In addition to the conceptual challenges, new methodologies and indicators are needed to enable the proposed relational perspective. The following section will therefore propose a first step in this direction by developing a set of indicators based on social network analysis that allow for a spatial analysis of the actor networks underlying TIS functions. To reduce complexity and enable an in-depth study of spatial dynamics, the analysis will be limited to one function, knowledge creation, whereas the framework's potential applicability to the other key processes will be discussed in the concluding sections.

3 Measuring international network topologies of TIS functions

Based on the discussion above, we can distinguish between three ideal-type network patterns that might characterize the spatial setup of innovative interaction in a specific function or – if the assessment of different functions are combined – a TIS as a whole (Figure 1). First - as assumed in existing TIS research - relevant networks might form exclusively in localized setups, at regional to national scales (Figure 1 i). They would thus create innovation based on processes emerging in largely unrelated subsystems, e.g. in different countries. On the other extreme, networks might be exclusively global (Figure 1 iii), spanning between actors in distant places, as e.g. in an innovation network of multinational companies or the networks of open source programming. In this case, relevant TIS space would hardly be assignable to any fixed place or country, but rather be completely embedded in internationalized networks. Third and in between these extreme cases, relevant actor networks might be mutli-scalar, incorporating a set of both spatially proximate and distant ties as discussed in section 2.2 (Figure 1, ii). This setup essentially represents a small-world network, which efficiently connects tight clusters of local interaction with occasional nonlocal links to other clusters (Watts and Strogatz, 1998). Small-world networks are assumed to increase creative output as they combine spatially dense and trustful collaborative innovation processes with ties to more distant, complementary ideas (Fleming et al., 2006). Consequently, if actor networks underlying TIS processes do show small world properties, then this has strong implications on TIS research, as it implies that scrutinizing interrelations between different territorial subsystems gets crucial to understanding the structural and functional properties of its innovation processes.

Figure 1: Typology of spatial TIS setups



A, B and C denote borders of the spatial level in focus, in this case countries

A methodological approach is thus needed that enables us to scrutinize what setup applies in a function at a given point in time. Here social network analysis (SNA) enters the stage as a tool which comprises heuristic routines for scrutinizing actor network evolution in global space (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). A respective analytical framework will be operationalized based on three types of indicators: First of all, general properties of network structure and core actors can be characterized with descriptive SNA indicators, like degree centrality, mean distance, network diameter or centralization index.[3] Secondly, a "nationalization index" is developed, which gives a direct measure for how much of the cooperation in a given function is actually confined to national borders. Thirdly, areas of dense collaboration in the overall network are analyzed as 'coherent subsystems'. Such subsystems are here defined as groups of complementary actors (companies, academia, government, intermediaries) which show particularly tight interaction. As TIS research assumes such interaction to be crucial for the

[3] As these are standard measures in SNA methodology, they will be introduced directly in the results section, detailed descriptions can be found in Appendix A.

innovation process, coherent subsystems can indicate the core of innovative activity in a given function. Obviously, such subsystems may be strongly localized, but they may as well develop in regional agglomeration, form between actors at a national or international level or even across different scales.

3.1 Measuring the relative relevance of national networks

The nationalization index is defined as the average ratio of links among actors inside one country versus the links with actors outside a country. Its definition is based on the E-I index by Krackhardt and Stern (1988), but combined with the spatial attributes ‘national’ and ‘international’. This index gives a direct measure for the average importance of nationally delimited interaction in the actor networks underlying a function. It thus designates how much information on external linkages is lost in nationally delimited case studies and allows assessing the bias of these analyses. The following formulae capture the essence of this relationship:

1) $$N_c = \frac{\sum L_i - \sum L_e}{\sum L_i + \sum L_e}$$

N_c := ‘nationalization index’ of all actors in a specific country in the TIS, L_i:= internal link, L_e:= external link of actors in a specific country c

2) $$N_{gTIS} = \frac{\sum N_c}{c}$$

N_{gTIS} := nationalization index of the TIS as a whole, c:= number of countries

Equation 1) assesses the nationalization of activity in a specific country in the TIS, whereas equation 2) calculates the average of all nationalization indexes $N_{c.}$ It thus provides a cumulated measure for the importance of nationally bound cooperation in the whole TIS. If most actors are cooperating in national or subnational contexts, these ratios will show values above 0 and tend towards 1. If internal and external links are equally important, the value will be close to zero. Consequently, if international interaction is dominant, it will take on negative values and tend towards -1.[4]

3.2 Identifying coherent subsystems

Coherent subsystems will be assessed by identifying and characterizing network components and cohesive subgroups. Components depict isolated fractions of a network, whereas cohesive subgroups are defined as a subset of a network that displays stronger interaction within a group of actors than with actors outside the group. Subgroup identification will here be based on n-clan analysis. N-clans are defined as subgraphs in which the largest (geodesic[5]) distance between any two nodes is not greater than n and the diameter does not exceed the set n-value (Wasserman and Faust, 1994: 258-261). As such, n-clans identify cohesive subgroups based on reachability. This helps to understand processes that work through an intermediary, like e.g. the diffusion of knowledge among different actors in a TIS. In addition, it allows specifying some of the properties of the cohesive subgroups in focus. In the following analysis, an n-value of 2 was chosen, meaning that every actor in each 2-Clan is divided from all other actors by no more than one intermediary. In addition, n-clans allow for the definition of a minimum value of participants, which was set at 9 actors.[6]

Summarizing, analyzing the spatial setup of actor networks underlying a given function can be operationalized based on scrutinizing the overall network structure, the degree of nationalization and the geographic reach of its 2-Clans. In the localized setup in Figure 1, the actor network is divided into isolated components and internal 2-Clans at a (sub-) national level. In a multi-scalar setup, both intra- and extra-national 2-Clans are identifiable in a small-world like giant network component, whereas the global setup is dominated by international coherent subsystems that form around actors from distant geographic locations.

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[4] Note that this index is partly dependent on the size of countries. Large countries will always have more national cooperation, simply because there are more potential cooperation partners inside their boundaries. For regression studies this point should be controlled for, in this contribution it suffices to keep this caveat in mind.

[5] The shortest possible path between two connected actors in a network.

[6] This value was chosen based on the properties of our co-publication data. One publication in the dataset contains 8 authors, four of them 6 actors. The threshold level was therefore set at nine actors in order to avoid single publications from forming one distinct n-clan and therefore biasing the used n-clan measure. If more multi-author publications appear in a dataset, n-clan measures should be normalized with the number of publications per n-clan.

Correspondingly, the nationalization index is positive in the localized, close to zero in the multi-scalar, and negative in the global TIS setup. Combining these measures thus defines a selective spatial characterization of actor networks.

3.3 Analyzing knowledge creation in the MBR TIS

For illustrating the benefits of this framework, it will be applied to an illustrative case of knowledge creation in membrane bioreactor technology. MBR technology represents a case in point for a recently emerging environmental technology which strongly depends on systemic innovation processes (Truffer et al., 2012). MBR plants are based on conventional biological wastewater treatment, combined with a micro-porous membrane. It relies on integrating knowledge bases from areas as diverse as process engineering, biology and advanced materials sciences. MBR plants produce a directly reusable, reliably clean effluent and thereby promise to significantly improve the efficiency of industrial, municipal and particularly on-site wastewater treatment processes (Fane and Fane, 2005). The basic process was invented in 1966 in a lab of Dorr-Oliver Inc. in the USA (Wang et al., 2008), but innovation in this field remained rather dormant in the following 20 years. Activities gained considerable momentum only after a decisive innovation by a Japanese professor in 1989 and especially in the past ten years (Judd and Judd, 2006; Lesjean and Huisjes, 2008). The MBR TIS is thus still in a late formative phase. Commercial applications are booming recently (Lesjean and Huisjes, 2008; Zheng et al., 2010), but the technology is still subject to major uncertainties, not yet fully standardized and developed by a dynamic set of small start-ups, large transnational companies and various research institutes and universities worldwide (Binz et al., 2012).

3.4 Data sampling

Knowledge creation in the MBR field is strongly engineering-driven and tightly intertwined with scientific research and government agencies (or utilities) that foster pilot plant applications. Dense interaction between academia, companies, utilities and government agencies is thus crucial for the development and diffusion of the technology. The results of experimentation are widely published in international academic journals or presented at relevant conferences. Relatively abundant data about relevant cooperation is thus included in the MBR publication record, which was chosen as a source of network data. In the specific case of MBR technology, publication data could not be complemented with patent data. A respective search in the global database of the European patent office retrieved 575 patents, among which more than 87% originated from small Chinese companies and were of questionable quality, whereas most major commercial players did not file one single patent[7]. Contextual knowledge of the sector confirms that most MBR companies prefer non-disclosure of their production processes over patenting as a strategy to protect their intellectual property. This notwithstanding, the co-publication dataset includes a balanced set of actor types (only 53% of actors originate from universities, the rest includes companies, research institutes, government agencies and associations, see Table 1). We thus maintain that - despite well documented limitations of publication data (Katz and Martin, 1997) - a sufficiently indicative part of the innovation network structure underlying knowledge creation is covered with this dataset in the specific case of MBR technology.

Data collection was based on a query in the publication database of Thomson Reuters web of knowledge.[8] A dataset of 1,068 publications covering a timeframe from 1992-2009 was obtained by searching for TS=('membrane bioreactor' AND water) and filtering for research areas that contribute to knowledge generation in MBR technology.[9] A broad spectrum of topic areas was included in the initial search string (relevant contributions range from fields as diverse as process engineering, material sciences or microbiology). Thematically unrelated entries were later manually eliminated from the dataset. Publications after 2009 were excluded, as the records did not yet appear to be complete at the time of data sampling. In the end, 911 publications covering a time frame from 1992-2009 were left for a co-authorship analysis. Even though co-publications are the source of relational data, actors in this study are defined not at the level of single authors, but at the level of organizations such as companies,

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[7] Search string: "membrane bioreactor" AND "water" in title or abstract. Search performed on October 2, 2012 on the website of the European Patent Office, http://worldwide.espacenet.com/advancedSearch?locale=en_EP.

[8] Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge, http://apps.isiknowledge.com/

[9] Search string: TS=("membrane bioreactor" AND water) AND SU=(water resources OR engineering, chemical OR environmental sciences OR engineering, environmental OR biotechnology & applied microbiology OR polymer science OR chemistry, multidisciplinary OR biochemistry & molecular biology OR engineering, civil OR energy & fuels OR agricultural engineering OR food science & technology OR microbiology OR chemistry, analytical OR chemistry, applied OR materials science, textiles OR multidisciplinary sciences OR ecology OR engineering, aerospace OR engineering, biomedical OR engineering, electrical & electronic OR engineering, multidisciplinary OR environmental studies) Databases=SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH Timespan=1960-01-01 - 2010-01-01 Lemmatization=On

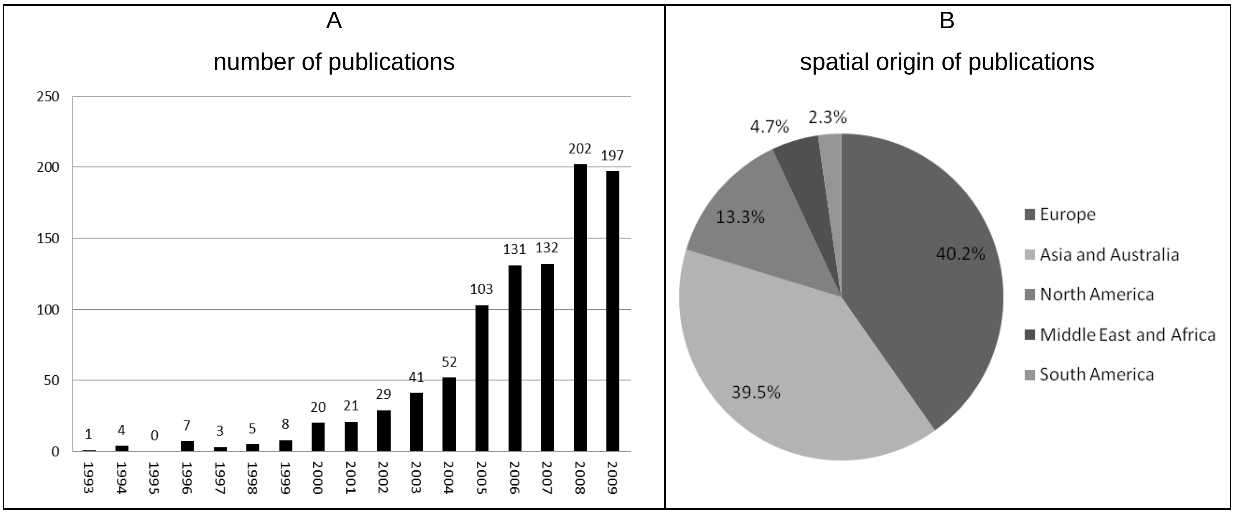
universities, research institutes or government agencies.[10] Network nodes are thus organizations and ties between organizations represent their cooperation in the co-publication process. Nodes that are linked to themselves indicate cooperation between different departments of the same organization (e.g. different faculties of the same university). The dataset was evaluated and visualized using Net Miner 3 software.

4 The spatial evolution of knowledge creation in the MBR TIS

4.1 General characteristics of the dataset

MBR technology is in a booming period: Publications grew exponentially over the last ten years (see Figure 2A), in parallel with rapid market growth and increased commercial dissemination of MBR systems (Lesjean and Huisjes, 2008; Wang et al., 2008).

Figure 2: Publications on MBR technology, 1993-2009



Source: Own design, based on data from web of knowledge

Error! Reference source not found. further reveals that the publication record of MBR technology contains a mixed set of academic, commercial and public actors and abundant data on cooperation between them. Actors from 46 countries are involved in the network. Seen

[10] Interpretation of the 2-mode data is simplified by operationalizing links between organizations as co-publications and analyzing them as a one-mode network (organizations interacting in a network with other organizations). We maintain that this simplification is legitimate as co-authorship in MBR technology often involves lab-scale experimentation and prototyping which includes extended cooperation among broader parts of the participating organizations.

from this aggregated perspective, knowledge creation is thus forming around three key blocks of innovative activity in Europe, Asia and – to a lesser extent – North America (Figure 2B).

Table 1: Actors and form of cooperation in publications on MBR technology

Actor type	Number	%
University	273	53.2
Company	109	21.2
Research Institute	84	16.4
Government Agency	39	7.6
Research Institute of Company	5	1.0
Association	2	0.4
Government Research Institute	1	0.2
Total	**513**	**100**

Actors per publication			
1	44.8%	3	15.4%
2	35.8%	≥4	4%

Form of cooperation	
international cooperation	22.1%
national cooperation	24.1%
internal cooperation	9.0%
single authored publication	44.8%

To be able to discuss temporal dynamics, the evolution of the MBR TIS will be divided into distinct development phases, based on the dynamics observable in the evolution of the co-publication network. As publications are relatively sparse in the first ten years of development, the aggregated network data between 1993 and 2001 is taken as a starting point for a more detailed analysis between 2001 and 2009. Appendix D and network measures in Table 2 show how co-variation of key network measures allows distinguishing three stylized development phases. Between 2001 and 2003, relatively short paths span between most actors in a dense network. After 2003, the network expands quickly; new actors enter the field and mean distance between actors grows longer. This trend reverses only after 2007, when average connecting paths get shorter again. In parallel, the network oscillates from a centralized to a more equally connected and back to a more centralized setup (see Appendix D).

Table 2: Three phases of network evolution (non-cumulative except for 'number of actors')

	Number of actors	Number of Links	Mean Distance	Network diameter	Centralization index	Components > 9 actors
93-03	104	201	2.597	7	19.174	2
03-07	291	553	5.540	15	4.456	6
07-09	513	945	4.963	13	6.953	1

Explanations of the indicators used in this table are summarized in Appendix A, a threshold value of 9 actors was chosen for the component analysis to avoid publications with many co-authors from being interpreted as a distinct component.

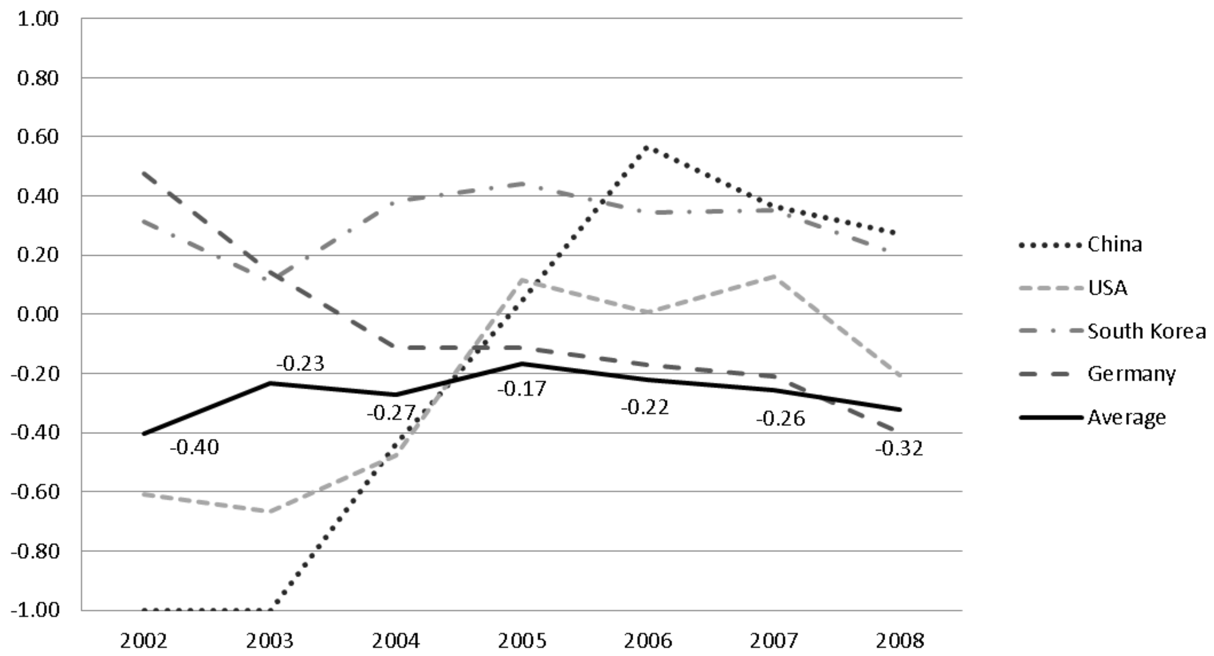
These three phases can thus be characterized as follows: First a nurturing phase between 1993 and 2003 in which activity is growing and first cooperative ties form around a few central actors in a dense and centralized network. Subsequently a rapid expansion phase (2003-2007) in which knowledge creation grows exponentially and many new actors enter the TIS in an increasingly broad and decentralized network. Third and finally a consolidation phase (2007-2009) in which growth slows down and knowledge creation gets intensified among existing actors.

A comparison with secondary sources on the MBR sector shows that the first 20 years of TIS development with very low innovative activity are not covered by our dataset. The publication record only starts after a decisive invention at the end of the 80ies. Our dataset thus misses the very early technology development (or invention) phase between 1960 and 1990, but covers the later nurturing phase in the TIS between 1990 and early 2000 when activities start growing and first commercial MBR plants emerge (Lesjean and Huisjes, 2008; Wang et al., 2008). The subsequent phase matches the expansion phase in the TIS when commercial applications start booming and many new actors enter the field in different parts of the world (Judd and Judd, 2006). The last phase finally corresponds with a consolidation in the MBR industry where dominant designs emerge and some companies leave the field or are bought by large transnational companies (Binz et al., 2012; De Wilde et al., 2008). The spatial evolution of knowledge creation can thus now be analyzed according to the identified three development phases and the indicators outlined in section 3.

Nationalization index

Error! Reference source not found. 3 depicts the temporal development of the nationalization index both for knowledge creation in the TIS as a whole and for actors located in the four largest national subsystems.

Figure 3: Nationalization index of knowledge creation in the whole TIS and 4 national subsystems



Source: Own design, based on data from ISI web of knowledge. Values depict shifting (3 years) averages.

Knowledge creation in the MBR TIS is most internationalized at the beginning of the nurturing phase. In the consecutive expansion phase the trend is reversing and cooperation at a national level gets slightly more important, whereas the third phase is characterized by another dip towards internationalized values. This pattern interestingly suggests that knowledge creation in the MBR TIS started in a rather globalized network structure and turned into more differentiated multi-scalar spatial setups only in the later expansion and consolidation phases.

The dominant form of interaction in specific countries shows strong temporal variation, too. E.g. Chinese actors' nationalization index values are exclusively international in the first two years and then increasingly switch to nationalized index values until 2006. This shift happens at a time when many new Chinese actors enter the TIS and MBR technology gets increasingly integrated into strategic national R&D programs (Wang et al., 2008; Zheng et al., 2010). This pattern thus reveals a catching-up process in which the Chinese actors first tapped into global knowledge sources before domestic research capabilities and policy incentives were built up. South Korean actors, in contrast exemplify a geographically stable cooperation strategy which was in all periods mainly confined to a national level.

Coherent subsystems

The results of the 2-Clan analysis in **Error! Reference source not found.** further differentiate the precedent insights. In the nurturing phase, all three identified 2-Clans are of global outreach. The second phase is dominated by six 2-Clans at a continental level (mainly in the EU). Coherent subsystems get spatially more differentiated only in the consolidation phase when continental 2-clans are the dominant level of interaction, but global and national 2-clans emerge, too. 2-clans are non-exclusive and therefore needing careful interpretation. The next section will thus discuss the spatial setup of coherent knowledge creating subsystems in the MBR TIS in more detail and with contextual information.

Table 3: Spatial reach of 2-clans in knowledge creation

Type of 2-clan	Nurturing 1993-2003	Expansion 2003-2007	Consolidation 2007-2009
National 2-clan	0	0	9
Continental 2-clan	0	6	45
Global 2-clan	3	0	3

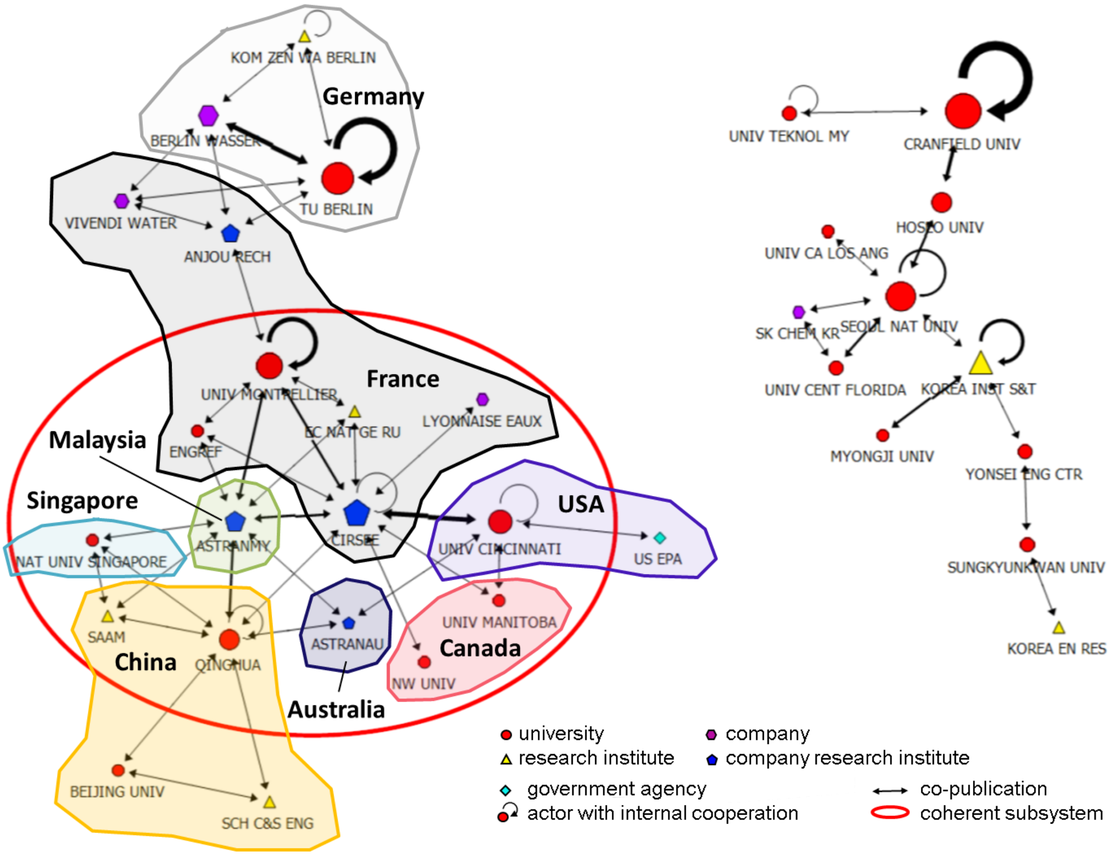
Source: own design. National 2-clans: 2-clans with more than ½ of the actors from one specific country; Continental: 2-clans with more than ½ of the actors from different countries of the same continent; Global: 2-clans containing actors from at least three different continents, without a dominant region

4.2 1993-2003: Globalized, company-based knowledge creation

Figure 4 illustrates that in the nurturing phase, knowledge creation is split into two main components and three strongly overlapping 2-clans, containing actors from eight countries. The core coherent subsystem is centered on CIRSEE (Centre International de Recherche Sur l'Eau et l'Environnement), a French company owned research institute, and its subsidiaries in Malaysia (ASTRAN Malaysia) and Australia (ASTRAN Sydney). Another subsystem is forming around an isolated network component comprising Cranfield University, the National University of Seoul and other institutes in South Korea, the USA and Malaysia. However, cooperation in this component is less tight than in the main component around CIRSEE and no n-clans can be identified in this part of the network.

Network measures in table 2, the nationalization index and coherent subsystem analysis thus assert that international interaction is most relevant in the nurturing phase (also see network visualization in Appendix B). These results thus suggest that knowledge in the TIS of MBR technology originated from an international coherent subsystem initiated by French water companies. As public funding for research and development on MBR technology was very limited at this early point of development (Lesjean and Huisjes, 2008), first innovative activities were pushed by private actors that mobilized financial resources and their extended international innovation network to developed the first commercial applications of the technology.

Figure 4: Core coherent subsystem in MBR knowledge creation, 1993-2003



Source: Data from web of knowledge, visualized with NetMiner 3 software. Node size depends on sum of publications. Actors in the red circle belong to at least one of three strongly overlapping 2-clans.

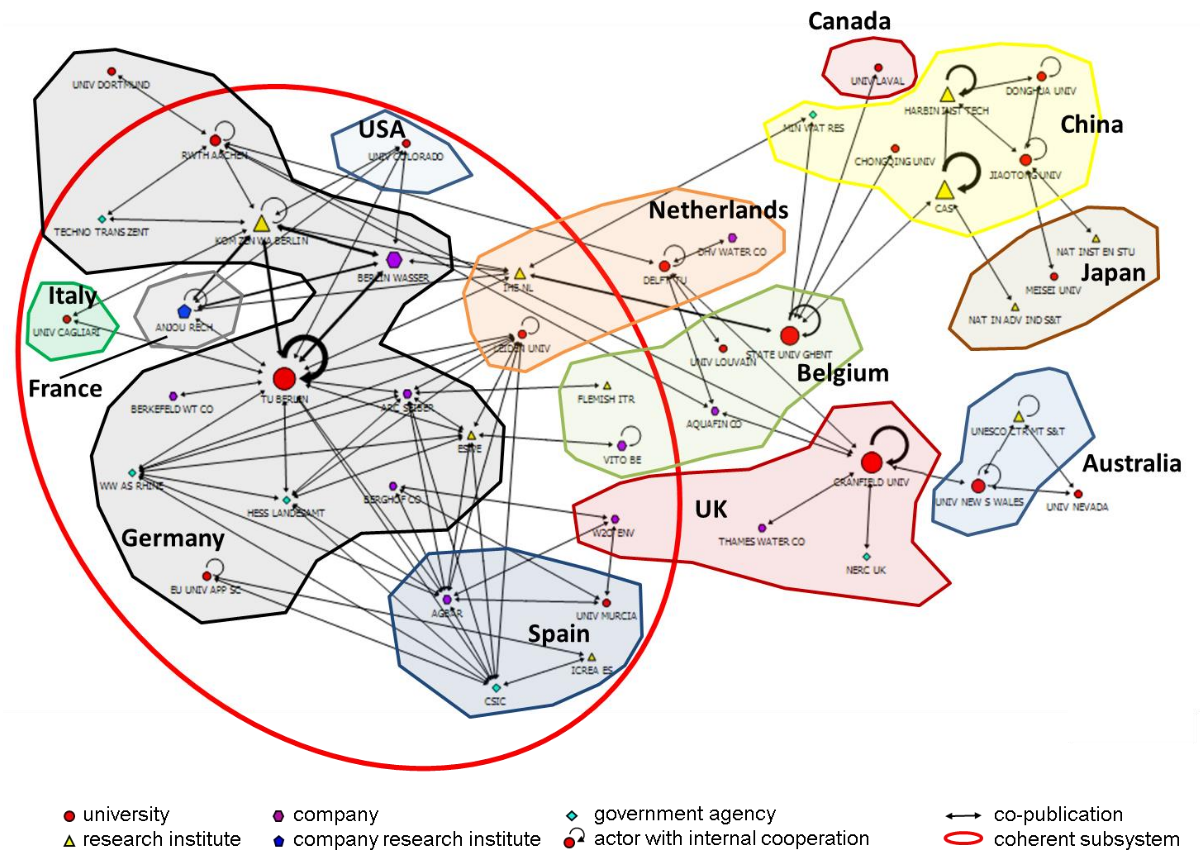
4.3 2003-2007: Multi-scalar, Europe-centered knowledge creation

The subsequent expansion phase was so far characterized as a multi-scalar setup with six 2-clans at a continental level and a sharp increase of involved actors. Also in this second period, most identified 2-clans are strongly overlapping. Figure 5 identifies a core coherent subsystem spanning between actors in the European Union, connected by the Technical University of Berlin. Dense cooperation in the networks of French water companies is still relevant in that subsystem (Anjou Recherche and Berlin Competence Centre for Water are closely related to

Veolia, a large French water corporation), but the network around CIRSEE has lost its central position.

Dense interaction now gets dominant especially inside the European Union, whereas the USA and Canada become the most disconnected region with a high number of single authored papers and correspondingly isolated actors (Appendix C). The actor bas in Asia in contrast is expanding quickly and dense internal cooperation forms especially among and between South Korean, Chinese and Japanese actors. In addition, many small components now appear, mainly connecting European and/or Asian actors. Knowledge creation as a whole is thus fragmenting into a main coherent subsystem and several isolated components in different regions of the world.

Figure 5: Core coherent subsystem in MBR knowledge creation, 2003-2007



Source: data from ISI web of knowledge, visualized with NetMiner 3 software. Node size depends on the number of publications. Line thickness indicates the number of (co-)publications between actors. Actors in the red circle belong to at least one of six strongly overlapping 2-clans.

Comparing the results of the nurturing and the expansion phase reveals that the overall spatial setup and the composition of the most central actors in knowledge creation have switched considerably over a short period of time. Actors from Germany as an example occupy a rather peripheral position in the network until 2003 but quickly move to a central position between 2003 and 2007. The core coherent subsystem furthermore changes qualitatively from a company-dominated mode to a more trans-disciplinary mode, now connecting seven universities, five companies, five research institutes, three government organizations and one company research institute.

This major spatial shift very likely reflects activities induced by MBR research programs of the European Union (Lesjean and Huisjes, 2008). Because European actors were increasingly lagging behind in the dynamically evolving MBR field, a new relevant level of interaction was constructed in four large research initiatives of the 6th European framework program. These comprehensive projects were not only aimed at creating scientific knowledge, but also inducing entrepreneurial experimentation, guidance on the search and connecting different actors in a series of international conferences. The relative decline of the activities of transnational companies in knowledge creation might accordingly be explainable with the fact that they increasingly focused on internal optimization of their MBR technology and left more basic R&D activities to smaller actors in an increasingly vibrant surrounding technological innovation system in that second phase.

4.4 2007-2009: Multi-scalar knowledge creation between Europe and Asia

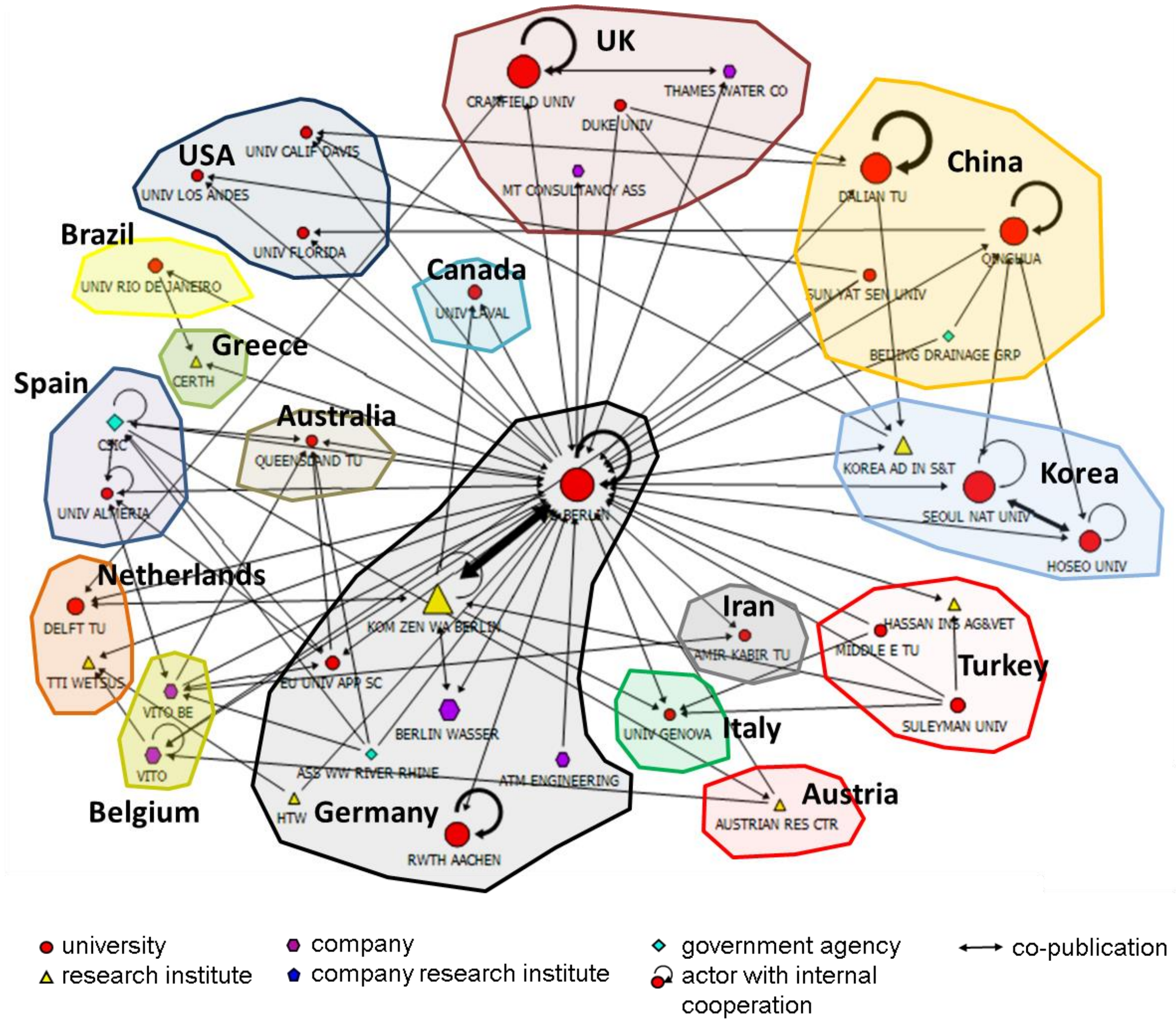
In the last phase of development, cooperation intensifies in an increasingly consolidating environment. Even though the number of very small network components still increases, most actors are now included in a small-world-like giant network component, connecting 340 nodes. Section 4.1 described this phase as a multi-scalar setup with 57 2-clans. The high number of (frequently overlapping) 2-clans in **Error! Reference source not found.** makes interpretation of the data and the identification of core coherent subsystems more challenging.

Table 4: Spatial setup of 2-clans, 2007-2009

number of 2-clans	dominant region
35	European Union
7	Asia
4	Germany
4	South Korea
3	EU and Asia
2	Global
1	China
1	Middle East

35 overlapping 2-clans which are dominated by European actors appear to form the core coherent subsystem in this phase. Figure 6 visualizes the largest of these 2-clans containing 38 actors, which are also present in many other overlapping clans.

Figure 6: Core coherent subsystem in MBR technology knowledge creation, 2007-2009



Source: data from ISI web of knowledge, visualized with NetMiner 3 software. The most central actor in the core of the 2-clan is the Technical University Berlin.

This coherent subsystem nicely illustrates a multi-scalar setup as introduced in Figure 1: On the one hand, the cooperation clearly has a global dimension, connecting actors from 16 countries and 5 continents. On the other hand, cooperation inside the European Union is the core level of activity (more than half of the actors are located in EU member states). Finally, cooperation among 8 actors at a national level in Germany (and dominantly in Berlin) is present in the structure, too. Innovative activity of German actors like the TU Berlin can accordingly not be solely attributed to the specific context constituted at a national scale. It rather has to be interpreted as the outcome of multiple relations established concomitantly at different scales and in a wide trans-disciplinary network.

In addition to this central hub, 2-clan analysis now also reveals an extensive set of 2-clans at other spatial scales (see table 4). These 2-clans show some internal cohesion, but also all contain actors from the central coherent subsystem around the Technical University Berlin. 45 out of the 57 2-clans furthermore contain ties at a continental level, connecting actors from closely neighboring countries. Most of them form in the European Union, but also increasingly in Asia or the Middle East. Two 2-clans are still fully globalized, whereas at the same time nine 2-clans are now identifiable at a national scale.

This last switch in the spatial setup of knowledge creation likely reflects the increasing maturation of the TIS and the formation of an increasingly well-structured research and development community around MBR technology, which turns the underlying knowledge networks more and more into a small world setup. Still, spatial imbalances in the global distribution of activity are much accentuated: Concentrated R&D efforts of Asian actors, especially in South Korea and China (Zheng et al., 2010), increasingly establish relevant coherent subsystems also in this part of the world. North American actors, in contrast, are still underrepresented in the most vibrant part of knowledge creation. This finding corresponds with empirical studies which claim that North American actors are partly decoupled from mainstream research activities and following a distinct technology development path focussing on side-stream MBR systems (Wang et al., 2008). Summarizing, in the consolidation phase, international, continental and national scales all contain relevant coherent subsystems, with the core of activity still staying in Europe, but increasingly shifting towards Asia. The actor network of knowledge creation in the MBR TIS thus gets increasingly interconnected, with national subsystems being only one relevant scale of interaction which is strongly connected to other vibrant levels of activity.

4.5 Discussion

The results presented above have to be put into perspective now. In our view, two main findings stand out from the observed strong spatial dynamics in knowledge creation of MBR technology. First, our case study indicates that TIS function’s underlying actor networks can shift considerably in space and that innovation processes in national (sub-)systems might be more strongly interconnected and influenced by a ‘global TIS’ level than could be assumed from existing studies. We thus support arguments from economic geographers and innovation system scholars that innovation (system) research should explore multi-scalar processes and especially the global scale in much more detail (Bunnell and Coe, 2001; Carlsson, 2006).

Secondly, we could illustrate how assessing the spatial setup of functions can improve our understanding of innovation processes in a TIS. Knowledge created in networks spanning transnational companies and their research partners (as in the nursing phase of MBR technology) is clearly of a different quality than knowledge created in small world networks connecting different trans-disciplinary subsystems in a multi-scalar setup (as in the consolidation phase of MBR technology). Also the dominant level of the core coherent subsystems may shift in space. Policy interventions to sustain system buildup in specific countries should thus be responsive to (and try to anticipate) the shifts in the spatial configuration of core subsystems of a TIS.

A further direct added value of this framework is that it allows identifying spatial errors that might be incorporated in nationally delimited TIS studies (see Binz and Truffer, 2012). Firstly, in a TIS dominated by localized interaction (setup i in Figure 1), ‘isolation errors’ might occur: A study in a single country would only inform about innovation in one specific subsystem of the overall TIS. Decisive technological advances might however develop independently in another subsystem without the TIS analyst taking note. In the case of MBR technology, focusing on the US and South Korea would likely have produced such isolation errors: US and South Korean actors were in most phases of TIS evolution relatively decoupled from a dynamic knowledge network and the central knowledge subsystem spanning between other European and Asian actors. Focussing only on innovative activities inside their borders and deriving related policy advice would accordingly not have touched on the most dynamic area of activity in the TIS as a whole. Secondly, in a multi-scalar setup of most TIS functions, errors of ‘omitted context’ might be conducted; a national case study would likely overestimate the importance of processes working at national to subnational scales. Developments stemming from outside could falsely be attributed to developments inside the focal sub-system and thereby again lead to inefficient policy advice. A dominantly globalized TIS setup, finally, could induce ‘system misinterpretation errors’. Here, innovation predominantly stems from activities embedded in international networks. National delimitations would accordingly lead to a complete misinterpretation of the most relevant level of innovative activity. In the case of MBR technology, doing nationally delimited TIS studies in the nurturing phase would arguably have produced this type of errors: As the central knowledge creating subsystem was dominated by globally operating companies at that time, nationally delimited studies would arguably not have identified the core actors and spatial level of this technology’s development.

Two shortcomings of this paper also have to be mentioned here: First, we could only scrutinize one function in more detail and, secondly, left institutional contexts rather underexplored. To address the first issue, one should now analyze the other functions of the MBR TIS with the same framework (following the suggestions of section 2.3) and try to identify overlaps between the core coherent subsystems in different functions. Identifying such overlaps would allow to infer where the innovative core of a TIS is located at a given point in time and to develop theories on how and why it moves in space. If only few overlaps between different functions of the same TIS exist, then this would imply that the TIS in focus has to be understood as a conglomerate of spatially very diverse networks, a finding that would strongly contradict the approach of existing TIS studies. Finally, as system functions are inherently interrelated, identifying the core actors and coherent subsystems of one function could be used for predicting the probability of activities in other functions emerging in the same place. Knowledge spillover theory of entrepreneurship as an example would suggest that entrepreneurial activities emerge in close spatial proximity to the core knowledge creating subsystem of a TIS (Audretsch and Lehmann, 2005).

Considering the second issue, empirically identifying innovative cores of a TIS would also allow to reconstruct to some degree which institutional settings in which places have been key to system development at specific points in time. In the case of MBR technology, institutional contexts of the EU were identified as being of key importance to foster knowledge creation also in other parts of the global TIS. However, the fundamental question on whether actor networks shape institutional contexts or vice versa could not be addressed here and clearly needs further elaboration in future work.

Finally, our approach is also depending on further methodological innovation and the exploitation of new data sources. Our case study might be subject to biases originating from the used dataset and methodology. The observed high importance of international linkage in all development phases of knowledge creation in MBR technology might be partially attributable to the bias of publications from ISI web of knowledge towards research in international projects and published in international journals (Nelson, 2009). For a more balanced view one would have to integrate other data types like patents or licenses, publications from non-ISI journals or other relational data from industry associations or conferences. Yet, even in the light of these data limitations, in the presented case, co-publication data is still an indicative proxy measure for knowledge creation as many key actors (also companies and government agencies) of the MBR TIS have been very active in scientific publication. This might be different in other technology fields, so the data sources would have to be adapted accordingly.

5 Conclusions

This paper aimed at discussing the implications of the spatially implicit practice in identifying system boundaries in current TIS studies and at illustrating how a spatialized TIS framework could contribute to empirically identifying meaningful system boundaries and analyzing linkages and relationships between its (territorial) subsystems. As showed in the literature review, adding relational space to TIS and functional TIS analysis is a promising way forward for improving conceptual rigor, empirical applications and the policy advice derived from this conceptual approach. Mapping the global (yet uneven) TIS helps clarifying how national sub-TIS are related to each other and how specific spaces in the TIS might generate comparative advantage. The empirical case study indicates that knowledge creation in MBR technology happened in a global company-based, a science-driven Europe-centred, as well as in a multi-scalar Europe- and Asia based spatial setup. As national subsystems are embedded differently in each of these setups, nationally delimited studies would have to be adapted accordingly. TIS space is thus fluent and innovation processes can change quickly both in spatial reach and nature.

Apart from showing where and when specific innovations develop and diffuse, a more explicit spatial perspective also sheds light on interrelated processes at places which seem to be unrelated at first sight. Our results showed that processes transcending national borders might be more relevant for innovation processes in TIS than has been acknowledged in previous studies. The ‘global technological opportunity set’ should accordingly not be understood as a ubiquitous resource for TIS actors. It rather has to be characterized as an uneven and dynamically evolving network structure to which actors with different relational positions and capabilities have differential access at different points in time. We thus argue in line with Carlsson (2006) that this scale needs more attention in future conceptual, empirical and especially methodological work.

The presented results also imply a central lesson for policy making: Innovation or industrial policy, for instance in the form of subsidies for specific technologies, have to consider the global spatial setup of a technological field (see Truffer, 2012). National support of specific technologies may otherwise lead to supporting industry growth in other countries as exemplified by the impact of feed-in tariffs for photovoltaics in Germany, which strongly supported the growth of Chinese at the expense of German companies. Also in the specific case of knowledge creation, policy interventions are often predominantly targeting processes at a national level even though knowledge production increasingly takes place in complex international networks. Couplings between national actors and their international TIS environment has thus been underrated as a policy option, so far (Binz et al., 2012).

Future TIS research could be inspired by this contribution in two ways: Firstly, our framework could be used for spatially sensitive studies of other TIS functions, which could in turn improve the generalizability and explanatory power of the approach. Secondly, respective studies could feed into a spatialized TIS lifecycle theory. Understanding which spatial scales are relevant in what fields of technology and at what phase of system development could generate important input for improving TIS-based theory development and policy advice. Finally, our study just covers one illustrative case in water recycling technology. Similar studies in other technological fields are needed to further test and improve the proposed framework.

Acknowledgements

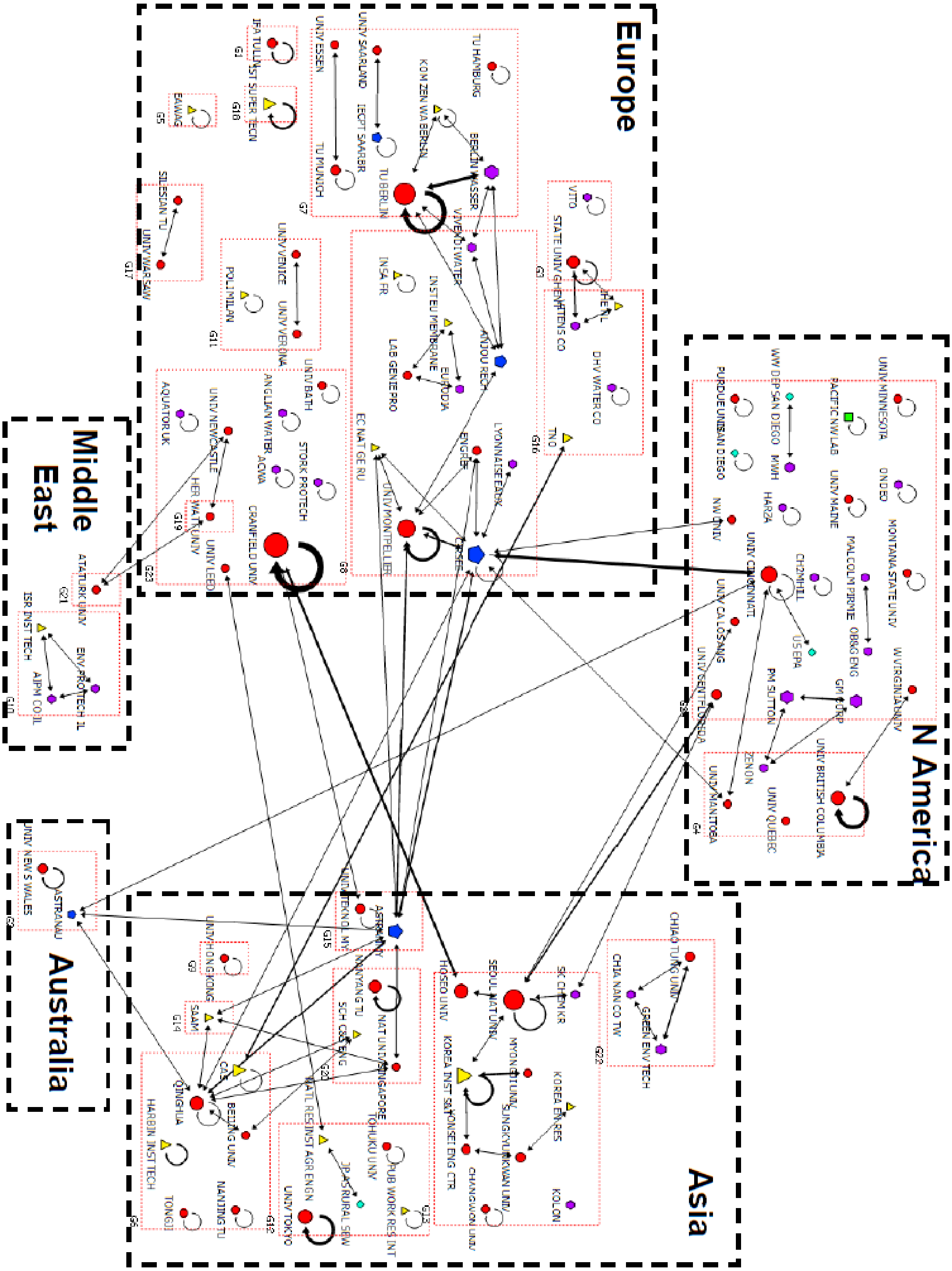
The authors would like to thank the Sino-Swiss Science and Technology Cooperation (SSSTC) for the funding of this project. Part of the work was conducted while one of the authors (B. Truffer) was a fellow in the sustainability Science Program at Harvard University. This paper profited from constructive input at the AAG annual meeting 2010, a DIME workshop 2010, the GLOBELICS conference 2010 and a TIS summer school in 2011. We would especially like to thank Karin Ingold, Frans Berkhout, Staffan Jacobsson and Koen Frenken for very helpful inputs on earlier drafts.

Appendix

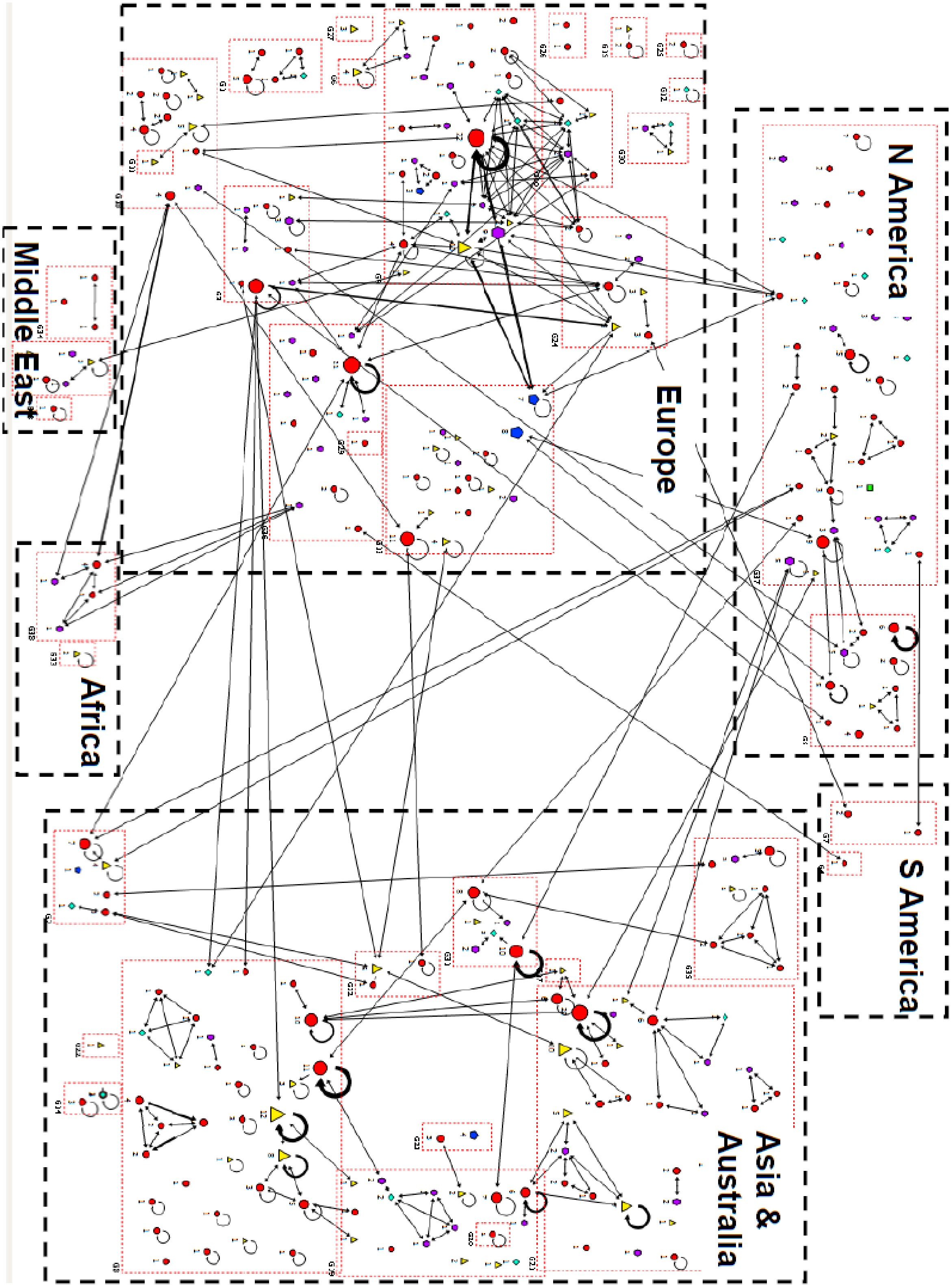
Appendix A: SNA indicators for network characterization

Indicator	**Definition**
Mean distance	Mean distance measures the average geodesic distance (shortest paths) between any pair of nodes in a network
Network diameter	Diameter describes the largest geodesic distance between any pair of nodes in a network. This indicator thus measures how many intermediaries a piece of information has to pass in order to travel on the shortest possible path between the two most distant actors in the network.
Centralization index	Index of variability of individual centrality scores. The most centralized network is a star network, where one actor has direct access to every other actor, the least centralized a circle network, where every actor has only access to two neighbors and thus all actors possess identical centrality
Number of components	Components are isolated fractions of a network. The smallest form of a component is an isolated actor. A network with many components thus indicates a fragmented innovation system with either many isolated actors or several co-existing, mutually exclusive networks

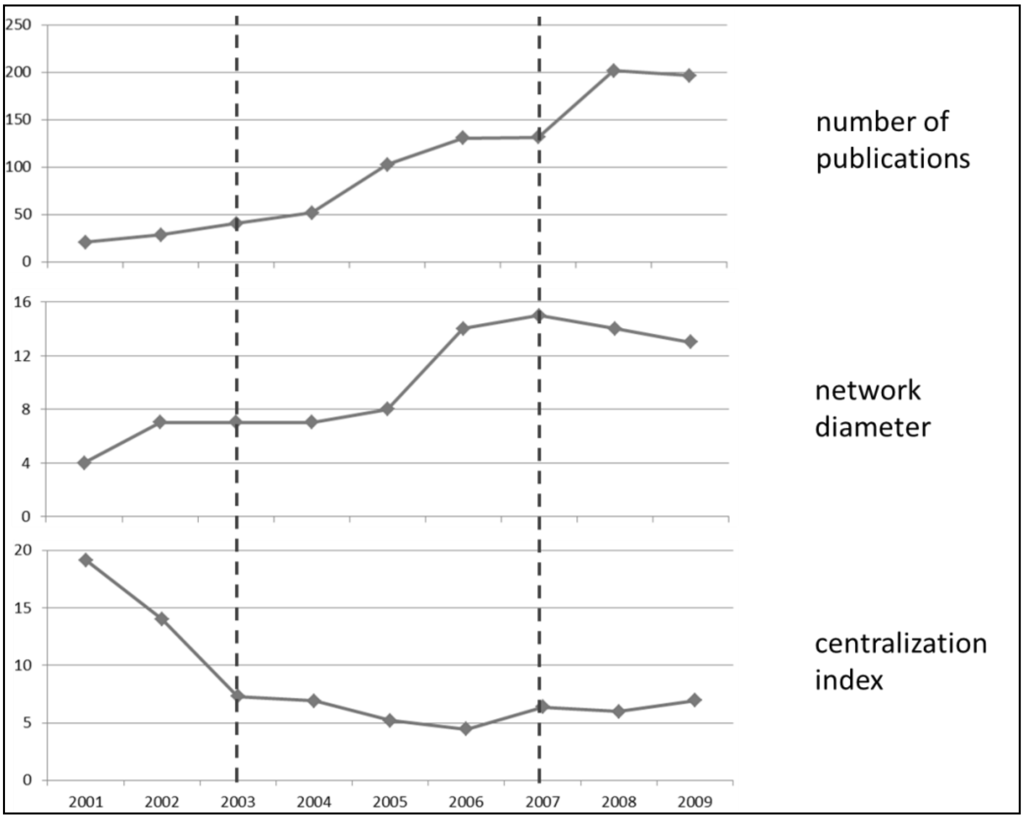
Appendix B: Knowledge creation of MBR technology 1993-2003



Appendix C: Knowledge creation of MBR technology 2003-2007



Appendix D: Identifying three phases of network evolution



Note that the data point in 2001 comprises the cumulated network data from 1993-2001

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