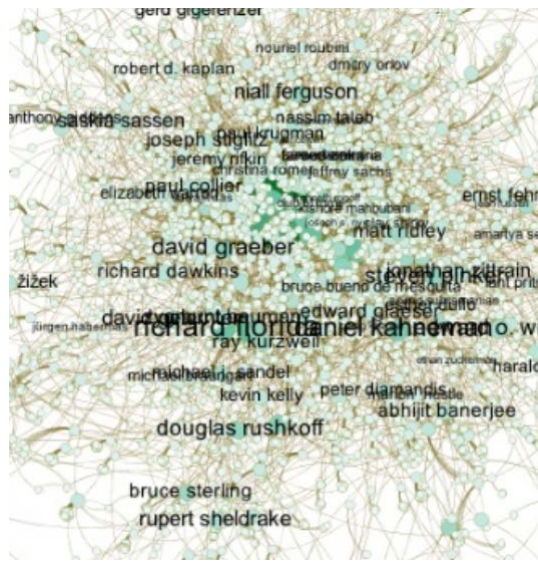**MIT Technology Review**

World's Most Influential Thinkers Revealed

Want to become a leading thinker? A new network analysis reveals the thinkers who most influence the rest of us and suggests ways to join this elite list

Who are the most influential thinkers on the planet? That's a question that you might imagine ought to be straightforward to determine, given the recent advances in the study of social networks and how information flows around the globe.

And yet, while this network approach has been widely used to rank websites, successful sports stars, business leaders and so on, there has been little work on influential thinkers. "The most important thought leaders and trends shaping our society have not been subjected so far to any truly systematic analysis," say Karin Frick at the GDI Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute in Switzerland and a couple of pals.

So these guys have set out to change this by putting together the first ever ranking of leading thinkers. And their analysis of this list leads to some interesting tips for thinkers hoping to break into the rankings in future.

First, a little about their method which is similar to the page-rank algorithm that Google uses to rank websites. The basic idea is that a thinker is important if he or she is influences the most important sources of discussion.

The difficulty is in measuring this influence. Frick and co do this by starting with a hand-picked list of 100 thinkers in the fields of philosophy, sociology, economics and the hard sciences. Frick and co cross-check this list by asking 50 thought leaders to name their most important influences, a process that throws up essentially the same people.

Next, Frick and co then assume that a person is influential if their ideas are discussed on important blogs. So they put each thinker's name into a search engine and collect a list of all the most influential blogs mentioning that person.

The final step is to plug the URL of each of these blogs into the search engine to find other blogs that link back.

The most influential thinkers are those that are linked back to by other influential blogs. In other words this is a pagerank-type listing in which a thinker is deemed influential if he or she influences other influential thinkers.

In this way, Frick and co develop a ranking that lists thought leaders according to their influence.

Indeed, Frick and co have a tool for analysing social networks called Condor that does all this for them and then visualises the result in the figure above. In this picture, two thinkers are close together if they are more likely to be mentioned on the same blog.

The list is surprising in one interesting way. Frick and co say there are no thinkers that stand head and shoulders above the others in terms of their influence. "The era of the great authorities seems to be over," they say.

Instead, the list is filled with specialist thinkers who focus on niche topics and whose work is generally unknown outside their field.

The full list is given in the paper referenced below but the top ten thinkers are as follows:

1. Richard Florida – urban studies theorist and author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*
2. Thilo Sarrazin – German politician and author of *Europe Doesn't Need the Euro*
3. Daniel Kahneman – Nobel prize-winning psychologist and author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*
4. David Graeber – anthropologist and author of *The Democracy Project*
5. Steven Pinker – experimental psychologist and author of *The Language Instinct*
6. Douglas Rushkoff – media theorist and author of *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*
7. Niall Ferguson – British historian and author of *Civilization: The West and the Rest*
8. David Gelernter – computer scientist and author of *America-Lite: How Imperial Academia Dismantled Our Culture (and Ushered in the Obamacrats)*
9. Frank Schirrmacher – German journalist and author of *Minimum*
10. Franz Josef Radermacher - German mathematician and co-founder of the *Global Marshall Plan* initiative

If you suspect that this list is a rather biased towards the west, you'd probably be right. Frick and co say the list is highly sensitive depends to how you measure it and admit that all of their influential blogs were in English.

Indeed, they compare their ranking to various other methods such as the Google's citation H-index and the number of Google hits and show that the list order changes considerably. And they say that repeating this process at different times should separate the one-thought wonders from the genuinely creative thinkers who are influential over long periods of time.

Frick and co also have a couple of tips for aspiring thought leaders. First, become an economist. Twenty-four of the leading thinkers are economists compared to the next most common discipline, political theory, which had only eight. There are only five biologists, three physicists and two chemists on the list.

Second, write a book. They point out that every thought leader on their list, bar two, is the author of a book about their ideas. "Writing a book is key," they conclude.

So now you know-get writing!

Ref: arxiv.org/abs/1308.1160: Coolhunting For The World's Thought Leaders