Science, networks and all that: story of a summer school

by Federico Botta, 1st year PhD student

While on the train to Annecy, France, and my first “summer” school (which, funnily enough, was not in summer) as a PhD student, I somehow felt like the first day of primary school: nervous and excited. But then I got there and found a lovely town, with an amazing lake and surrounded by the Alps, which provided the perfect venue for the school.
EINS (Network of Excellence in Internet Science) had chosen the perfect location and provided a great organisation for the whole week.

So, let me first spend few lines to explain what EINS is. The Network of Excellence in Internet Science is funded under the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme: Information and Communication Technologies and its main goal is to provide an interdisciplinary understanding of Internet networks and their various aspects which range from social to scientific, from political to economical and humanitarian. Several institutions across Europe are involved in EINS and they provide experts in various fields such as computer science, psychology, complexity science, mathematics, physics, economics, sociology, political sciences, laws and many others.

This school was the second one organised by EINS, the first one being held in Oxford in August 2012, and the focus this year was on two different aspects of Internet science: 'Behaviour analysis: from human psychology to data mining' and 'Emergence of Networks: from an economical approach to statistical physics'.

The excitement of the first moments in Annecy grew even more when the school started: a very relaxed and friendly atmosphere led to very interesting discussions with the various speakers that were present. PhD students from all over the world (ranging from all across Europe to South Korea and Australia) were asking challenging and provocative questions that were then discussed by all the participants. Given the broad background of the students present, going from computer science to psychology, from economics to physics, from architecture to law, every discussion was extremely interdisciplinary, thus providing a global and detailed perspective of the topic under consideration. Talks ranged from topics in socio-physics, stochastic models, game theory and statistical physics of networks to opinion mining, sentiment analysis and machine learning. There were also some more sociological talks, going from online privacy issues to behavioural analysis and content production on the Internet. As a closing session, we had a brilliant overview on philosophical problems raised by so-called “Big Data” and some other epistemological questions that every interdisciplinary scientist should be aware of.

But this is not everything!

Participants in the school were separated into groups and during the week each group had to come up with an idea for a possible project to be developed by EINS and turn it into a research proposal. At the end of the school, each group gave a 15 minutes presentation of their ideas and methods they would use to approach their problem. Proposals ranged from quantification of risky behaviours of people exploiting data from online games to sybil detection in social networks and the spreading of riots that can be studied using tweets.

All this scientific excitement was perfectly mixed with a great selection of French food, such as a visit to a cheese-producing farm in the Alps where one of the dinners took place. To discover various beautiful places in Annecy, a treasure hunt across the town forced everybody to run around the town centre and the lake.

As you might imagine, the feelings on the way back on the train were opposite to the one I had just a week before. I knew I had learnt many useful things and had met lots of other PhD students that share similar interests with me.

A mixture of an exciting week, a brilliant organisation, challenging talks and great people. This was EINS 2013 Summer School in Annecy.