

Networks and the Internet

The term “social network” is used in everyday speech to mean your social circle, the people you know and interact with. When you “network”, this usually means you’re talking to people and making connections with them for a specific purpose, like becoming more well-known or having a better chance at getting a job. The term “social network” in the analytical, academic sense means a social system that is person-dependent, usually one specific person. That means that it is a set of relationships that are all linked to someone, which would not exist if that person did not exist and maintain those relationships. Because they are dependent on one person, social networks are fragile and don’t last very long.

Think about all the different people you consider part of your social network, everyone you are friends—or family—with. Many of those people might know others in your network, but it is unlikely that everyone you are friends with are friends with each other. There will be people in your network whose only connection with one another is their mutual friend, you. If you were to suddenly disappear, or stop being friends with one of them, they would lose that connection with each other.

Another common thing about social networks is that they don’t really have boundaries. If you think about your social network, everyone you know, from your grandparents, to your neighbor, to that friend you have at school who you’ve talked with a few times, they are all part of your social network. But you probably don’t think of them as one single group, because your relationship with them—and how you know them, whether it be through family, location, or school—is different. Not only that, but each time you’re introduced to someone new, no matter how, that person is added to your social network. At the same time, if you don’t maintain a relationship with someone, they may no longer be in your social network. People are added and removed from a social network quickly and easily, and it is difficult to know, sometimes, whether that childhood friend who you no longer talk to is still part of your social network or not.

The concept of a social network is usually only used to talk about smaller sub-communities or to describe one specific social system, with actual concrete people, instead of an entire social field, because it is so fragile, changes a lot, and is often specific to the context. For more large-scale studies, things like social structures or other social systems are used instead. However, with newer technologies like the Internet, anthropologists have begun to use social networks to describe groups of larger and larger scale.

On the Internet, communities are created, grow, and shrink in ways that don’t follow typical “rules” anthropologists use to observe societies. The most major one is the idea that a community is bound by its physical territory, a specific place the community is rooted in. On the Internet, you can make connections and communicate with people who you might never meet physically, who all have roots in various places across the world.



Online, the relationships you can have are almost limitless, except perhaps to those who don't have access to the Internet. This means you can be part of a community that constantly adds (and loses) members. That is why these online communities are best described as social networks, because they are fragile, boundless, and are dependent on one person.

For example, Facebook is a social network that most people are part of. On Facebook, there are no boundaries for who you friend, or who you unfriend. You don't have to know someone personally to friend them, message them, or to be in the same Facebook group as them. You can comment on a stranger's post or have an online debate with someone you've never met, whether they are friends or not. But if you delete your account, your social network no longer exists. People won't have you as a mutual friend, and no one else will have the same exact friends as you have.

Even though you can be Facebook friends with people you have never met and may never meet, Facebook is usually used to maintain connections with people you already have a relationship with offline. After meeting someone for the first time, people often friend each other on Facebook, so that they can stay in contact. You can use people's Facebook statuses to see what your friends are up to, even if you never see them or talk to them. That way, they stay within your social network—both the online one and the physical one. Therefore, the Internet doesn't only create its own communities, it also helps maintain existing physical communities and relationships.

The Internet is still very new, and studying it and its communities is also new. The Internet is so different from typical communities, because it includes the whole world and is not physically there. So many old theories in anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology are being changed to fit the online world we live in now. For example, the pandemic has caused many things to go online, from work to social or religious gatherings. This has changed the way we connect and interact with one another, and has changed how our society functions. This change is happening right now, and many people are studying it for the first time. You could even study it yourself by looking at who you talk to every day, or checking out your Facebook friends list! What observations can you make about your social network?

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