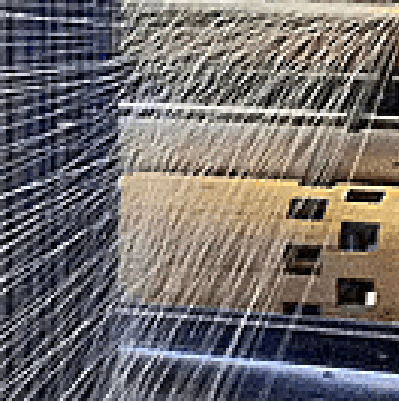




Network notion

Description

It seems that societies organise themselves as networks, an idea brought into sharp relief with the development of online social networks. People with online profiles are the nodes, hubs or cells, and there are linkages with other people through their personal directories of friends and followers, who are similarly linked.



It's easy enough to trace through the linkages from your own friends or associates to friends of friends and their friends, *ad infinitum*. Social networks are vast, highly interconnected, and extremely difficult to draw as a diagram. They are also the subject of suspicion. Think of the "old boy/girl network," and terror networks, and the project to break up the latter, to isolate nodes (terror cells) and sever links.

A network is a collection of interconnected entities. This simple definition belies an array of associations, passions, and ideologies that accords the network much of its authority. The architectural theorist Mark Wigley provides one of the few critical accounts of the network in modernist discourse, as exemplified in the enthusiasms of Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller. Wigley argues that the

network is an outdated notion whose perennial revival comes about through a historically ignorant enthusiasm for new technologies.

The idea of the network is not easily dismissed. It has influence in contemporary thinking about complexity, design, the computer, digital media, and the prevailing techno-social condition.

In their influential book, *The Network Nation*, Hiltz and Turoff point to the extension of digital networks, satellite communications, and video transmission as a means of forming the world into a "total communicative structure," drawing on McLuhan's concepts of the "global village." Writing at the end of the 1970s they identified this totalising network with a new opportunity to revive democracy, to enable people to communicate in a way that is open, free and that bypasses the problems of class and ethnicity.

They also align the network to human thought processes. Electronic networks extend the mind, and engender opportunities for communication at the level of highly informed, uninhibited reason.

More recent commentary introduces dynamism into the network theme. From a critical, social science perspective, Manuel Castells identifies the distinctive feature of the network society as "its ability to reconfigure, a decisive feature in a society characterized by constant change and organizational fluidity" (p.62).

The network is evident in design research, including applications of systems theory, cybernetics and autopoiesis that resort to networks of interconnected processes, the interdependence between design disciplines, accounts of publishing non-linear texts, and urban topologies. Of course, the network notion is not entirely new.

Design theorists often contrast loosely-formed, egalitarian and liberal network structures with less desirable, autocratic, linear, sequential and ordered organisation. For some commentators, an appeal to the network society, or network processes, is ostensibly an appeal against logic. The socio-technical digital network is a complex, relational, trans-logical, cultural and social phenomenon, in which we participate in ways that are liberating, consensual, and unconstrained by the strictures of formal organisation and logic. Society is formed as a complex series of conversations. Society and design are dialectical, as if constituted by a vast combination of conversational pairings in which truths and opinions are negotiated and propagated, as in a network.

Plato had something to say about networks, through the metaphor of weaving, though here there is also an appeal to bureaucratic order and control. We might think of a fabric as a network of loops and knots, overlays and connections. But here weaving subjects an understanding of the social condition (of the *polis*) to a formal frame, an intertwining of warp and woof (*Statesman*, 283a-b) measuring and dividing, marrying together dissimilar natures: the courageous and the temperate, the bold and the gentle, which are the warp and the woof of society.

There is the firm texture of the warp and the looser texture of the woof. Plato says that the beneficent ruler brings their life together in agreement and friendship and makes it common between them, "completing the most magnificent and best of all fabrics and covering with it all the other inhabitants of cities, both slave and free" (311c).

The brave, loose, slightly rhizomic woof, becomes subjugated by the constraints of the warp. The Platonic network is not a loosely-woven anarchic structure, but a gridded fabric with its logic of binding, constraint, covering, hierarchy, striation and order.

To use another weaving metaphor, this doctrine hints of a *tension* evident in all networks, between order and disorder, what is in the network and what is outside it, what gets trapped in the net and the stuff that falls through, the taut and well-connected threads contrasted with the loose ends â?? all endemic to the network notion.

Also see

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rcoyne99

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