

Book Review: The Network Society

by Blog Admin

September 14, 2012

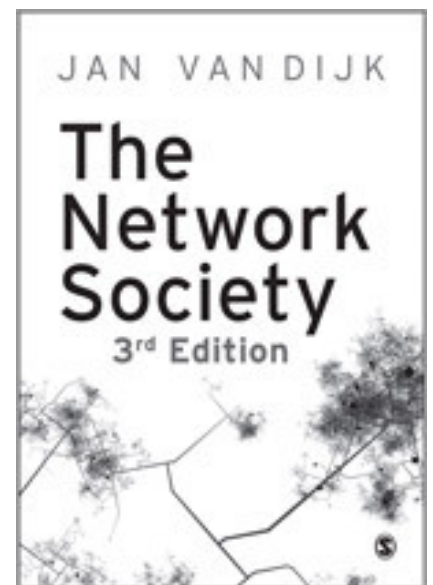
The Network Society sits on the bookshelves of many as an essential guide to the past, consequences and future of digital communication. Fully revised, this **Third Edition** covers crucial new issues and updates, including digital youth culture as a foreshadow of future new media use and the contribution of media networks to the current financial crisis. **James Cuffe** feels that it may appeal to communications theorists who fail to endorse Castells or Luhmann and are looking for a moderate approach.



The Network Society (3rd Edition). Jan Van Dijk. Sage. April 2012.

Jan Van Dijk ([University of Twente](#)) is one of the foremost scholars developing the Network Society approach, a framework that places networks as the marker for understanding richly integrated societies. The Network Society concept is increasingly popular for understanding current societal changes and this 3rd edition strives for a more encompassing framework to account for recent technological developments and their pervasiveness in everyday life.

The Network Society, as Van Dijk sees it, can explain a new type of society where social relations are organised within mediative technologies that form a communication network rather than networks typified by face-to-face social relations. This different organisational logic gives rise to different capacities for social units that previous societies (hunter-gatherer/mass society) could not strive for. He differentiates the network society from the information society by highlighting what they focus on, the information society concept concentrates on the changing substance of social processes while the network society concept examines the organisational forms of social processes.



Van Dijk's analysis laudably avoids the overly deterministic tones of Castells and he identifies these differences in approach where necessary. Van Dijk's moderate approach sees networks as organised according to levels from the chemical, biological to the societal but with each level dynamically interrelated in what he calls a *heterarchical* mode of organisation. Neither higher nor lower levels are in control but are co-determinate. Van Dijk argues against complete determination by the necessity of an operating system's engagement with its environment in order to reproduce itself. Once a network, which is a collection of relatively closed systems engages with other systems the possibility for chance and random events are opened up.

In contrast to Castells he is in favour of retaining social units (individual/ family/ organisation) for analysis. One of the interesting arguments developed by Van Dijk is his explanation for apparent increasing individualisation evident in modern high-tech societies. In this context he sees the rise of individualism as the counterpoint to the increasing pervasiveness of the network i.e. the levelling of accessibility for each individual connected in a network. The potential uniformity leads to a social demand for the individual to differentiate, we are all on facebook but each page is unique- "generalization and standardization of the social environment meet the opposing trends of particularity and cultural differentiation". (p. 175).

Overall, this book is clearly laid out with each chapter focusing on distinct themes and problems such as Technology and the Network, Economy and the Network, Law and the Network. However in social network

theory the human is reduced almost to the point of being a relay node, the sum of its own relations that are brought to bear on it by an overarching network. Van Dijk criticises the extremism of such a prioritising of form over substance but given the way he foregrounds the network over society it is not easy to see the family as the unit of analysis rather than the heterarchical organisation of appropriate network systems.

Van Dijk's stance on the relation of networks to societies – i.e. that networks are maintained by the actions that give rise to them – does not come across in the main text of the book as much as it should. There is a lack of the human touch in favour of the high tech. It left me wondering just how deterministic his concept of the network society is and whether he sees smaller networks subsumed by larger networks as something justifiable due to Darwinian evolutionary principles. His identification of the rise of the network in other disciplines (such as neurology) leads the reader to think that the network is the basic unit or foundational category for study, however he clearly states in places that this *is not* his intention creating an unsatisfying tension between what he means and what he says when reading:

“...networks are not supposed to be the basic units of contemporary society as they are in the view of Manuel Castells... these basic units are held to be individuals, households, groups and organizations ... the combination of social and media networks produced by both organizational and technological innovation forms the all-embracing network structure of modern societies. This combination justifies that use of the strong metaphor of networks shaping the nervous system of advanced high-tech societies.”

[p. 33]

The huge scope and descriptive nature lack the strong theoretical foundation I would have needed to be persuaded by his conception of the Network Society. The book comes across as a second-order systems theory framework (interested in networks as an organising principle, privileging relationships over the connecting nodes and network systems over ecological environment) even though Van Dijk appears to be theoretically operating as a first-order systems theorist (family, individual, social units). He is not as radically deterministic as Castells nor anti-humanist like Luhmann and for me these are both positives, though Luhmann offers a more profound understanding of communication in society in his *Die Gesellschaft* *Der Gesellschaft* [The Society of Society] or Norbert Elias' figurational approach may provide greater explanatory power in understanding the increasingly interconnected society.

This book may appeal to communications theorists who fail to endorse Castells or Luhmann and are looking for a moderate approach. I am not sure how well the title travels across the traditional academic boundaries, something Van Dijk acknowledges could be the case; For example I think it is problematic for mainstream anthropology in part due to semantics but also conceptually. If the reader fails to be convinced or persuaded by the Network Society argument (which I was not) then all that follows are merely increasingly complex descriptions of smaller and smaller units that do not contribute to any greater understanding. Its utility, as a concept, may lie in being a method for organising the vast amount of empirical data that is becoming available on our high-tech societies.

James Cuffe is an Anthropologist at [University College Cork](#). He teaches on China Studies and Social Theory at University College Cork, National University of Ireland: Maynooth, and University College Dublin. He is interested in Chinese Anthropology, Chinese systems of thought and cross-cultural comparisons of notions of time and space. His publications include a number of review articles within China Studies and articles and chapters in Chinese and English on Sino-Irish economic and cultural relations. He maintains a profile page at www.jamescuffe.com. [Read reviews by James.](#)

Related posts:

1. [Book Review: The Sociology of Theodor Adorno by Matthias Benzer \(8.5\)](#)
2. [Book Review: British Social Attitudes 28: 2011-2012 Edition \(8.4\)](#)
3. [Book Review: Youth Policy, Civil Society and the Modern Irish state by Fred Powell et al. \(6.4\)](#)
4. [Book Review: Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers by Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone \(6.3\)](#)
5. [Book Review: Intellectuals and Society by Thomas Sowell \(6.2\)](#)