

information and communication technology, these coordinates of existence can be transcended to create virtual times and places and to simultaneously act, perceive and think in global and local terms.

The social units of the network society are fragmented and dispersed. This means that the density of contacts and ties *within* these units is relatively low as compared to traditional families, neighbourhoods, communities and organizations in the mass society. Instead, the elements of these units, the individuals, select their own contacts and ties *beyond* these units. Using all kinds of telecommunication they develop an extremely high level of connectivity between themselves as individuals and accordingly between the units of the network society of which they are a part.

Networks are relatively flat and horizontal, so-called heterarchical social structures. However, this does not mean that they do not have centres. Think about the spider in the web. Networks usually do not have a single centre – they are polycentric, as some nodes are (much) more important than others. For this reason, the network society is less centralized in the sense of having single centres in the economy, politics, government, culture and community life. They are replaced by a multitude of centres cooperating and competing with each other.

The network society is less inclusive than the mass society. You may be a member of some part of the mass society by birth or ascription. In the individualized network society you have to fight for a particular place. You have to show your value for every network, otherwise you will be isolated within it, or even excluded from it. In the network society, you have to stand firm as an individual. You are not that easily taken along in solidarity by proximate people.

In the network society, face-to-face communication remains the most important kind of communication in many ways. However, gradually it is also partly replaced and supplemented by mediated communication. A multitude of interpersonal and mass communication media are used for this purpose. Broadcast mass media reaching everyone are accompanied by, and partly replaced by, narrowcast interactive media reaching selected audiences. They lead to all kinds of new communication forms and groupings between interpersonal and mass communications, such as chat and instant messaging groups, virtual teams at work and virtual communities of interest. Virtual communities add to the thinned out physical communities of the network society with their small and diversely composed households. Figure 2.4 represents the complicated social and communicative structure of the network society.

The advent of another structure of a society implies that the relations between its parts are changing. In the network society, both abstract relations and concrete ties between individuals, groups and organizations are transformed. Often these changes run against popular views about social and media networks. For instance, one popular view is that networks are not a hierarchic but are a 'flat' mode of organization. Most often, horizontal and flexible networks are opposed to vertical and ponderous columns of organizations. Some people even suggest that networks are democratic by nature. Or they suppose that they are more transparent than the institutions they partly replace. Another popular view is that networks are open and accessible to all, contrary to fixed and closed organizations with their memberships. A less positive

popular connotation is that networks are breaking the social cohesion of modern societies. They cut right through existing institutions and everyone appears to communicate alongside each other in their own subcultural network. A final popular view is that computer networks are no longer tied to place, time and physical conditions and that they are offering us more freedom in this way. In this book, it is argued that all these popular views are one-sided, to say the least. Networks are not necessarily more 'flat', democratic, open, free, accessible, physically unconditional or less socially coherent than other modes of organization and communication.

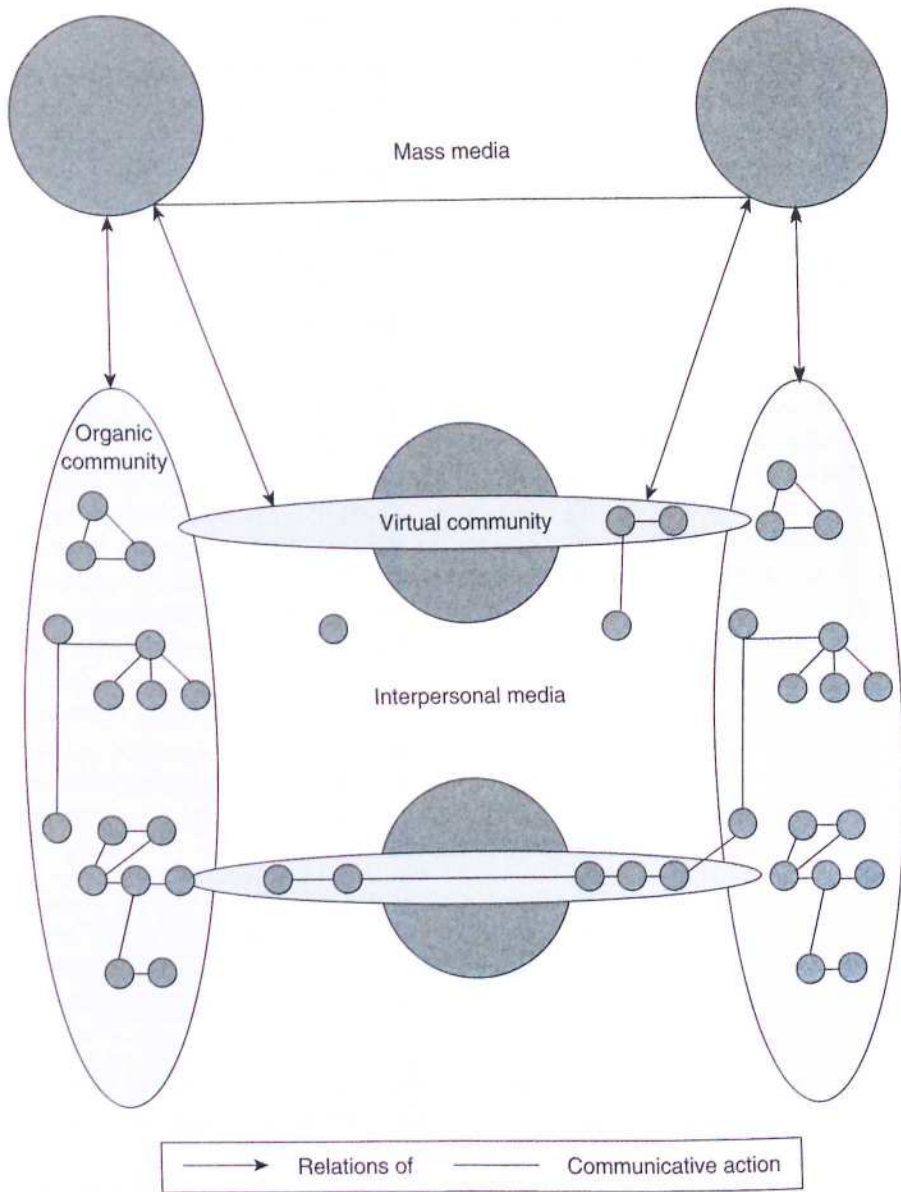


FIGURE 2.4 The structure of network society

## CONCLUSIONS

- The network society should be defined as a modern type of society with an infrastructure of social and media networks that characterizes its *mode of organization* at every level: individual, group/organizational and societal. This can be compared to an information society that is marked by a particular *substance*: a high information intensity of all activities in society. It can also be contrasted with the mass society: a previous type of modern society with an infrastructure of groups, organizations and communities (called 'masses').
- Social networks are as old as human kind. First trade networks were added and subsequently transportation and production networks. In the course of the 20th century, information and communication became so important that it has now become possible to speak of a network society.
- Currently, networks serve at every level of society and they connect these levels. The Internet, for example, simultaneously serves individuals, organizations, communities and societies. We have never had such a medium in history before.
- The growing importance of networks can be explained by historical and social causes and by systems causes. Historically, it can be shown that individuals, organizations and societies needed them to realize their social, cultural and economic objectives. Systems theory adds deeper causes defining networks as relatively open systems linking closed systems of individuals and organizations. In the biological inspiration of evolution theory, networks are seen as structures that help social units to better adapt to their environment. In a mathematical and physicist inspiration, networks are a way to create order out of chaos. They consist of long-distance links connecting a large number of local individual units ordered in all kinds of clusters (groups, communities, organizations). In this way, a 'small world' is created with a decreasing number of degrees of separation and a growing number of degrees of influence via higher connectivity.
- Following these deeper causes, network theory has formulated seven 'laws' of the Web. These laws are no natural necessities as they are continually changed by human beings. Nevertheless, they exert pressures that are able to explain many trends of the network society in the following chapters.
- With the distinctions and theories formulated in the first part of this chapter a systematic and recognizable comparison can be made between the network and mass society.