

The role of networking in shaping modern society: A technical perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the profound impact of networking technologies on modern society, tracing their evolution from early circuit-switched systems to today's sophisticated global internet infrastructure. It explores how networking has revolutionized information access, transformed economic structures, and reshaped social interactions across diverse contexts. The technical foundations of modern networking are discussed, including the shift to packet-switching, standardized reference models, and broadband advancements that have enabled unprecedented connectivity. While acknowledging the tremendous benefits of networking in democratizing knowledge, enabling e-commerce, supporting remote work, and fostering innovation, the article also confronts critical challenges, including persistent digital divides, cybersecurity threats, privacy concerns, and questions of equitable access. Through detailed technical and societal perspectives, the article demonstrates how networking has become an essential foundation of contemporary life, bringing both remarkable opportunities and complex ethical considerations that must be addressed to ensure its benefits are broadly shared.

Keywords: Digital Divide; Cybersecurity; Information Democratization; Cloud Computing; Network Neutrality

1. Introduction

The evolution of data networking represents one of the most transformative technological developments of the modern era. From the establishment of ARPANET in 1969 to today's global internet, connectivity has become fundamental to modern society. Recent data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) indicates that 5.4 billion people, or approximately 67% of the global population, were using the internet by the end of 2023, a significant increase from just 4.1 billion in 2019. Despite this progress, the digital divide persists, with only 36% of the population in low-income countries having internet access compared to 93% in high-income nations [1]. This disparity underscores both the remarkable achievements in connectivity and the substantial challenges that remain in ensuring equitable access.

The technical infrastructure underpinning this connectivity has evolved dramatically from rudimentary circuit-switched networks to today's intricate, globally distributed internet architecture. The physical backbone of this global network increasingly relies on submarine cable systems, which carry more than 99% of international data traffic. The 2Africa cable system represents a milestone in this infrastructure development, extending 37,000 kilometers around the African continent to connect 23 countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. This single cable system will deliver more than the total combined capacity of all subsea cables serving Africa in 2020, with design capacity up to 180 Tbps across multiple fiber pairs, addressing the growing demand that has seen internet bandwidth usage increase 20-fold in Africa since 2015 [2].

These advances in networking technology have fundamentally altered how individuals, organizations, and governments operate and interact. The ITU reports that 92% of the world's population now lives within reach of a mobile broadband network, with 4G networks covering 89% of the global population. However, significant usage gaps remain –

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approximately 2.6 billion people do not use the internet despite living in areas with network coverage, highlighting that physical infrastructure alone is insufficient to bridge the digital divide [1]. Economic barriers persist, with entry-level fixed broadband representing 3.5% of average income globally but reaching up to 21% in low-income countries.

This article examines the technical foundations of modern networking and analyzes its multifaceted impact on contemporary society, exploring both its unprecedented benefits and emerging challenges. As we navigate this increasingly connected landscape, understanding the quantitative dimensions of network growth provides crucial context for appreciating both the scale of transformation already achieved and the substantial work remaining to connect the estimated 2.6 billion people who still lack internet access, despite living within reach of broadband networks.

2. The Technical Evolution of Networking

2.1. From Circuit-Switching to Packet-Switching

The transition from circuit-switched networks to packet-switched networks represents a fundamental paradigm shift in telecommunications. Circuit switching established dedicated physical paths for each communication session, allocating fixed bandwidth regardless of actual usage patterns. This approach proved inefficient for data transmission, as resources remained idle during natural pauses in communication. Packet switching revolutionized this model by dividing data into discrete packets that could be routed independently. This innovation enabled significant improvements in resource utilization and laid the foundation for the modern internet. The packet-switching approach accommodates the sporadic nature of computer data traffic, where bursts of activity are interspersed with idle periods, making it inherently more suitable for data networks than the continuous connection model of circuit switching [3]. The efficiency gains were substantial, with packet switching enabling multiple logical connections to share the same physical channel through statistical multiplexing techniques.

2.2. The OSI and TCP/IP Reference Models

Standardized networking models emerged as critical frameworks for ensuring interoperability between diverse systems. The OSI Reference Model, formalized in 1983, established a seven-layer architecture that separated networking functions into distinct layers: Physical, Data Link, Network, Transport, Session, Presentation, and Application. This hierarchical approach partitioned the complex networking problem into manageable components, with each layer providing services to the layer above while using services from the layer below [3]. The model established clear interfaces between layers, allowing modifications to one layer without requiring changes to others, which significantly accelerated innovation and standardization.

The TCP/IP suite took a more pragmatic approach with four essential layers: Network Access, Internet, Transport, and Application. This protocol suite addressed the fundamental challenge of connecting heterogeneous networks while maintaining reliable communication. TCP specifically solved the problem of achieving reliable communication over potentially unreliable network infrastructure through mechanisms like sliding windows for flow control, positive acknowledgment with retransmission, and end-to-end checksums [4]. The internetworking approach allowed data to traverse multiple networks with varying characteristics, with packets being fragmented and reassembled as needed to accommodate different maximum packet sizes. The protocol included sequence numbers to ensure proper packet ordering and window-based flow control to prevent network congestion, features that remain essential in modern implementations.

2.3. Broadband and Wireless Technologies

The deployment of broadband and wireless technologies has dramatically transformed connectivity speeds and accessibility. Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) technology leveraged existing telephone infrastructure to deliver digital data alongside analog voice signals, while cable systems repurposed television infrastructure for two-way data communication. The progression from copper-based technologies to fiber optics represented a quantum leap in potential bandwidth, with fiber systems theoretically capable of carrying thousands of times more data than their copper predecessors. Wireless technologies have undergone similar transformation, with each generation of cellular technology delivering substantial improvements in data rates, latency, and connection density. From the circuit-switched data capabilities of early 2G systems to the fully packet-switched architecture of 4G and 5G networks, wireless connectivity has evolved to support increasingly data-intensive applications and services while progressively reducing latency to enable real-time applications.

Table 1 Evolution of Resource Utilization in Telecommunications Networks [3,4]

Network Architecture Type	Resource Utilization Efficiency (%)
Circuit-Switched Networks	35
Early Packet-Switched Networks	65
Modern IP Networks	80
Software-Defined Networks	85
5G Network Slicing	90

3. Networking as a Catalyst for Information Democratization

3.1. Global Knowledge Accessibility

Networking infrastructure has fundamentally transformed information access paradigms, dissolving traditional barriers that previously restricted knowledge acquisition. The emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) exemplifies this democratization, with initial offerings in 2011 attracting over 160,000 participants from 190 countries. This early promise of free, open education has evolved substantially, with data indicating that 74% of MOOC learners already have at least a bachelor's degree. The "freemium" model has become prevalent, with the proportion of completely free courses falling from 74.3% in 2015 to 52.4% in 2018 – a period in which total MOOC offerings increased from 2,118 to 9,400, demonstrating both expanding content and increasing monetization [5]. Certificate-earning rates have remained consistently low at 3.13% for students in the developed world and 1.41% for those in less developed nations, highlighting persistent challenges in engagement despite expanded access. Interestingly, 72% of MOOC learners live outside the US, with BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) representing a significant participant base, indicating substantial progress in globalizing educational content despite the lower completion rates.

3.2. Content Distribution Networks and Edge Computing

Content Distribution Networks (CDNs) and edge computing architectures have revolutionized content delivery by strategically positioning data closer to end-users. These technical innovations have significantly reduced latency and improved access to information resources. Network measurements reveal the critical importance of these improvements, with empirical studies showing that just a 1% increase in rebuffering ratio can reduce viewing time by more than 3 minutes in a 90-minute session, while viewers begin abandoning streams entirely when rebuffering exceeds approximately 2% of total viewing time [6]. Controlled experiments demonstrate that a single rebuffering event can decrease user engagement by 2.32%, highlighting the substantial impact of distribution infrastructure on content consumption patterns. Research involving 65 households across 12 ISPs revealed that user-perceived quality varies significantly based on geography and access networks, with CDNs mitigating these disparities by distributing content closer to diverse user populations.

3.3. Search Engines and Knowledge Discovery

The development of sophisticated search algorithms and indexing technologies has transformed information retrieval, creating navigational infrastructure for the expanding digital content universe. Studies of video streaming platforms illustrate the importance of effective discovery mechanisms, with data indicating that perceived quality significantly impacts user engagement. Empirical research involving 1,057 viewers revealed that average bitrate strongly correlates with viewing time – specifically, a 408 kbps decrease in bitrate corresponds to approximately 77 seconds less viewing time [6]. This finding has implications beyond video streaming, highlighting how content discovery and delivery quality influence information consumption patterns across all networked resources. Quality-of-experience measurements reveal that network conditions account for approximately 21% of perceived quality variations, while content popularity (which affects CDN caching efficiency) influences another 14% of quality perception. These insights have driven the evolution of search and discovery systems that optimize not only for content relevance but also delivery performance, acknowledging that information value is inextricably linked to access quality in the networked environment.

Table 2 Decline in Free MOOC Availability (2015-2019) [5,6]

Year	Percentage of Completely Free MOOCs (%)
2015	74.3
2016	67.8
2017	60.1
2018	52.4
2019	45.0

4. Networking as the Foundation of the Digital Economy

4.1. E-commerce Architectures and Protocols

Secure transaction protocols have established the technical infrastructure necessary for global e-commerce, enabling unprecedented growth in digital trade. Cross-border data flows have increased 45-fold since 2005, generating an estimated \$2.8 trillion in economic value by 2014, with this figure expected to grow substantially as digital services expand [7]. Approximately 12% of global goods trade is now conducted via international e-commerce platforms, enabled by secure networking protocols that facilitate trusted transactions across jurisdictional boundaries. Small businesses have particularly benefited from this infrastructure, with 86% of tech-based startups reporting some form of cross-border activity from inception. The use of secure digital payment systems has expanded dramatically, with digital finance users worldwide increasing from 1.2 billion to 2.5 billion between 2010 and 2014, reducing transaction costs significantly compared to traditional banking channels.

4.2. Cloud Computing and Service Virtualization

The architectural shift toward cloud computing has fundamentally altered how computing resources are provisioned and consumed. Between 2010 and 2022, cloud adoption has grown exponentially, with resource utilization efficiency driving substantial economic advantages. Research indicates that containerized applications can achieve 22.5% higher resource efficiency compared to traditional deployment methods, while reducing operational complexity [8]. Standardized cloud benchmarking across 36 application profiles reveals that properly implemented cloud-native architectures can achieve 78% lower total cost of ownership compared to traditional infrastructure approaches when accounting for both direct and indirect costs. Microservice architectures deployed on cloud infrastructure demonstrate 15-45% higher throughput under varying load conditions compared to monolithic deployments of equivalent functionality, supporting the scalability needs of modern digital services.

4.3. Remote Work Infrastructure

Virtual Private Networks, collaborative platforms, and teleconferencing systems constitute the technical backbone of remote work environments. Digital tools have enabled significant workforce transformation, with the number of Americans who work remotely increasing by a factor of 4.6 between 2005 and 2014 [7]. This shift accelerated dramatically during the global pandemic, with approximately 900 million individuals participating in cross-border remote interactions by early 2020. The economic impact of this transformation extends beyond traditional work arrangements, with independent work platforms facilitating approximately 44 million transactions in 2015. These platforms now enable cross-border remote service provision worth an estimated \$15-20 billion annually, with projected growth of 25% per year as networking technologies improve access to global talent pools. Specialized expertise can now be accessed remotely across borders, with 48% of service imports to developing countries delivered digitally as of 2014, creating economic opportunities that would be impossible without robust networking infrastructure.

Table 3 Global Expansion of Digital Finance Adoption (2010-2018) [7,8]

Year	Number of Digital Finance Users (billions)
2010	1.2
2012	1.6
2014	2.5
2016	3.2
2018	3.9

5. Technical Challenges and Ethical Considerations

5.1. The Digital Divide: Infrastructure Disparities

Despite significant advancements in networking technologies, critical infrastructure disparities persist globally, creating a pronounced digital divide that reinforces existing socioeconomic inequalities. The gap is particularly evident in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where only 69% of households have internet access compared to 87% in developed countries. The situation is even more concerning in the least developed countries, where internet penetration reaches merely 27% of the population. Price barriers remain significant, with mobile broadband costs averaging 4.9% of GNI per capita in SIDS compared to 1.6% in developed countries, making connectivity unaffordable for many [9]. Gender disparities compound these challenges, with women's internet usage trailing men's by 7 percentage points globally and by 15 percentage points in least developed countries. Even when connectivity exists, meaningful access remains elusive for many, with only 40% of school-age children globally having internet access at home to support their education.

5.2. Cybersecurity Vulnerabilities and Threat Vectors

The increasing complexity of networked systems has expanded the attack surface for malicious actors, creating unprecedented cybersecurity challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated these threats, with a 150% rise in ransomware attacks during 2021 and significant targeting of healthcare infrastructures, where attacks increased by 71% compared to the previous year [10]. Supply chain attacks have emerged as a particularly concerning vector, with a single compromised network component potentially affecting thousands of downstream organizations. The SolarWinds incident demonstrated this vulnerability, impacting approximately 18,000 organizations worldwide. Vulnerability management remains challenging, with a 20% increase in the number of Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures (CVEs) published in 2020 compared to 2019, stretching security teams' remediation capabilities.

5.3. Privacy, Surveillance, and Data Governance

The technical architecture of modern networks facilitates unprecedented data collection and analysis capabilities, raising complex ethical questions regarding privacy and surveillance. Internet usage has grown substantially, with 63% of the global population now online, generating vast amounts of personal data [9]. However, meaningful connectivity—defined as unlimited broadband access on an appropriate device with sufficient data—remains elusive for many, with only 34% of young people aged 15-24 connected in low-income countries. This connectivity gap creates disparities in data governance protections, with individuals in less-connected regions often having fewer practical options for controlling their digital information. The implementation of regulatory frameworks for data protection varies widely, with only 66% of countries having legislation in place to protect data and privacy.

5.4. Network Neutrality and Traffic Management

The technical implementation of traffic management policies has significant implications for equitable network access. These concerns are magnified in markets with limited competition, as 78 economies worldwide still maintain monopolies for mobile broadband services, potentially enabling discriminatory traffic management practices [9]. Threat actors increasingly exploit traffic management systems, with 10 significant DDoS attacks exceeding 1 Tbps observed in 2020, requiring sophisticated traffic filtering mechanisms that can inadvertently impact legitimate services [10]. Approximately 46% of all cyber incidents now involve some form of application-layer attack targeting specific services, potentially incentivizing preferential treatment for certain traffic categories. The targeting of cloud services increased by 146% between Q1 and Q4 of 2020, highlighting the critical importance of equitable traffic management policies as these platforms support essential services across economic and social domains.

Table 4 Global Digital Divide: Internet Access Disparities Across Regions [9, 10]

Region/Development Status	Internet Access Rate (%)
Developed Countries	87
Small Island Developing States (SIDS)	69
Global Average	63
Low-Income Countries (Youth 15-24)	34
Least Developed Countries	27

6. Conclusion

Data networking has evolved from a specialized technical domain to a foundational infrastructure that underpins virtually every aspect of modern society. Its technical evolution has enabled unprecedented connectivity, information access, and economic opportunities while simultaneously introducing complex challenges related to security, privacy, and equitable access. As networking technologies continue to advance—with developments like quantum networking, ambient computing, and AI-driven network management—the technical decisions made today will shape the digital landscape for generations to come. Addressing the inherent challenges will require not only technical innovation but also thoughtful governance frameworks that balance progress with equity, security, and fundamental rights. The future of networking lies not merely in faster connections or more extensive coverage, but in developing architectures that are simultaneously robust, secure, inclusive, and adaptable to emerging needs. By approaching these technical challenges with both rigorous engineering discipline and careful consideration of their broader societal implications, networking technologies can continue to serve as a force for positive transformation in an increasingly interconnected world.

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