



## WHP 1200 Networks Frame Introduction | World History Project

In the last 800 years, humans have lived in incredibly diverse communities. There is much that distinguishes us from each other. But we also share ideas, goods, people, and diseases across communities. The systems through which this sharing happens are called networks. Networks are ways in which interaction is organized, but they are not unchanging. In general, humans have built larger and larger networks over time, leading up to the global exchange of ideas that has emerged in the period covered in this course. But very small networks, often within this bigger pattern, are still important today.

**0:14**

*Animation of a city expanding out to the globe.*

*Networks frame graphic.*

Humans are social animals. We need contact with other humans to live and thrive. Over time our species has developed patterns of connections between and among people and their communities.

We call these our networks of interaction. Networks link populations of people, allowing those living in different communities to move and share ideas, material goods, and crops, and animals, and pathogens, and even people.

We communicate across and through our networks.

*Illustration of an exchange.*

Sometimes what moves through and across networks are physical items, like clothing or food. But sometimes they are concepts, like mathematics or religious beliefs.

*Illustrations of conflict and war.*

At times, networks encourage and enable people to cooperate with each other and they proved to be mutually beneficial. But at other times, networks caused competition and violence. And they allow for the spread of disease and decay.

**1:12**

But for good or bad, progress or decline, human's networks of interaction have been among the most enduring and significant features of our lives. And thus, they're a central factor in understanding historical change and how the present came to be.

So developing a brief but big picture of major changes in human networks over our long history might help us as we study the human past, connect the past to the present, and face the future.

How might we frame this story?

*Illustrations of a world map with trade routes highlighted.*

Well, we might begin by pointing to the diverse world you'll encounter in Unit 2. In the year 1200 CE, most people lived local lives, and other societies were often distant and different. But long-distance and regional networks did expand during this period. The great Mongol Empire grew in the thirteenth century, enabling an intensification of long-distance trade along the silk roads in Afro-Eurasia. Trade across the expanses of the Indian and Pacific Oceans began to link far flung peoples together in networks of exchange.

**2:14**

*Illustration of goods distribution.*

And in the Americas, overlapping regional trade networks moved luxury goods across vast distances.

*World map with international trade routes highlighted.*

These larger "Old World networks" across Afro-Eurasia and the Americas meant that fewer and fewer people lived in isolation. And although these networks sometimes collapsed, people subsequently rebuilt and restructured them.

*Image of merchants traveling.*

These trade networks made possible the exchange of new ideas.

*Images and illustrations of transportation technologies.*

Technologies like the magnetic compass, lateen sail, and gunpowder traveled west from China and the Islamic world along trade routes.



*Illustration of a colony.*

European navigators and rulers made use of these technologies to establish the first transoceanic connections in Unit 3, connecting these two separate intercontinental networks. Humans brought them together to form the first truly global networks of interaction.

*Video clip of a large ship.*

Now this happened slowly at first, as the regions and communities of the world developed loose connections. Ideas, material goods, and people could now move around the globe, but they did so quite slowly.

**3:16**

*Video clip and illustration of transportation methods.*

However, in the past 200 years—as you’ll see in Unit 5—new technologies such as newspapers, telegraphs, and then telephones, helped spread ideas rapidly. Steamships and trains moved people and goods faster and further than ever before. These innovations tightened up loose global networks, connecting more and more people, and more and more communities, and allowing us to share more and more ideas.

*Illustration of the French Revolution.*

Some of these ideas have sparked revolutions that spanned borders and continents.

*Video clip of military tanks.*

Others have driven the nations of the world into colonial competition and global conflict.

*Illustrations of the Bubonic Plague.*

Now it might seem from this narrative that networks have expanded in a smooth, straight line across the history of the last 800 years. But they didn’t. Growing interconnection came with unexpected consequences. For example, the growth of long-distance trade networks in the Mongol Empire helped spread the bubonic plague.

**4:14**

*Illustration of smallpox.*

The thirteenth-century Black Death pandemic killed up to 200 million people and temporarily shrank Afro-Eurasian networks. In the Americas, the arrival of European conquerors also brought new diseases, like smallpox, that killed up to 25 million Indigenous Americans, shattering the regional trade networks that had once linked these societies.

*Animation showing wifi networks.*

But despite these upheavals, the growth of networks has continued into the present. Today, the new global internet helps us share ideas, plans, and news with millions of people almost instantaneously.

*Video clip of a city intersection.*

New innovations in transportation move people and goods anywhere in the world within days if not hours.

It appears as if we are living in one vast global network of interconnection today—an issue that you’ll consider in Unit 9. For the first time, historians speak of humans living in a network—singular—rather than networks—plural.

**5:12**

*Networks frame graphic.*

In this course, we have created a “tool” that we call the Networks Frame to help you remember and use this big story. Use this frame to help you think about changes in the human past and to situate events in the present.

Use it to think about how or if these increasingly rapid and complex networks changed who we are.

Does our global network give us meaning? Does being connected elevate us? Has it allowed us to create a shared sense of who we are? Or are we, in some ways, adrift in the vastness of our worldwide web?

Answering these questions requires us to understand how networks have shaped—and been shaped by—people, across the global past. Understanding the history of networks, in turn, can help us to make sense of the world we live in today.



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