

Editor's Introduction

Contacts and Influence

This article, written with the mathematician Manfred Kochen, is one of Ithiel Pool's most farsighted and original contributions. It begins to develop a set of analytical tools to study the rise of contact networks, which establish new avenues for political influence and social change.

Earlier in the twentieth century, it was more accurate to analyze politics as the study of groups. Social classes were more easily distinguished and there were moderate or strong correlations between social class and a wide range of attitudes and behavior. American politics typically involved the interaction of different organized groups: labor, business, political parties.

But today (the emphasis of humanists on social entrapment notwithstanding) the correlation of social class with other variables has diminished steadily in advanced industrial nations, and traditional political loyalties also have loosened. At least in these countries, more people have wider choices about their lives, are more widely traveled, relate more as individuals, have a wider circle of acquaintances, and the verb "to network" has become commonplace.

Pool began to study contact networks by asking the probability that any two individuals, selected at random, would know each other; or, if not, would be able to contact one another through one step (a mutual friend); or through two steps; etc. Another way to pose the question is how many steps it would take, by personal acquaintance networks, to send a message to the President of the United States, or to any other selected target person in the world? Pool's line of inquiry often gave unexpected results, and it has become known as the "small world" phenomenon. A book and play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, were inspired by the ideas.¹

Also (at the time of the publication of this volume in the late 1990s) the development of contact networks (supported and strengthened by the Internet) is becoming recognized as a powerful force in global humanitarian politics. It would be impossible to conceive of the global environmental movement, or the new world landmine treaty in the late 1990s, without recognizing the causal force of individuals and their network of relationships in producing results that earlier might have required support from the American government. The explicit measurement of these changes, an assessment of the depth of penetration, and of the new potential for political influence by well-connected individuals using new telecommunications technology are among the lines of research that can build upon this foundation.

Note

1. See Manfred Kochen (ed.), *The small world: A volume of recent research advance commemorating Ithiel de Sola Pool, Stanley Milgram, Theodore Newcomb.* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1989).