

In the Age of Facebook, What Does it Mean to be an Urbanite?  
Louis Wirth's view of Facebook in relation to "Urbanism as a way of Life"

Larissa Zip

Nov. 13, 2011

The arguments laid out in Louis Wirth's 1938 article, "Urbanism as a Way of Life" need to be adjusted to account for the ubiquity of social media technology in the modern age. His argument that the process of urbanization perpetuates the consequences of modernization on the social life can be applied to the Facebook phenomena to extend his argument into the present day. In his article, Wirth describes how the effects of urbanization change the nature of the modern social life. He argues that because of the scale of modern cities, the individual must assimilate into social roles dictated by societal norms. He believes "that large numbers [of people] account for individual variability, the relative absence of intimate personal acquaintanceship [and] the segmentalization of human relations which are largely anonymous, superficial, and transitory"<sup>1</sup> in large cities. The use of social media, and in particular Facebook, has changed the nature of human interaction in a similar way. In the seven years since the site was launched in 2004, 750 million active users have joined the massive global networking site<sup>2</sup>. Facebook's enormous popularity has created a controversial shift away from face-to-face social interaction. It has been cited with decreasing the quality of interpersonal relationship, increasing loneliness and creating more segmented relationships. On the other hand, it has been praised for its ability to aid in maintaining dispersed international relationships, signaling in a new age of transparency and linking together long lost family members, old loves and acquaintances<sup>3</sup>. Wirth's classic article was written in 1938, long before the current era of exploding social media use where 60% of Canadians regularly visit social media sites<sup>4</sup>. A reconciliation of the effects of Facebook must take place with the argument laid out in his article to account for the massive shift Facebook has caused in how interpersonal relationships are maintained in the current age. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to integrate the effects of Facebook on social interaction in the city with Wirth's ideas of what it is that is unique to the urbanite's mode of socialization.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 1. Print.

<sup>2</sup> "Timeline." *Facebook*. Facebook, 2011. Web. 7 Nov 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Kirkpatrick, D. (2011). *The Facebook Effect*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>4</sup> Hermida, Alfred. "Social media transforming how Canadians get the news, study finds." *UBC Public Affairs*. 24 April 2011: n. page. Web. 12 Nov. 2011.

Through a closer investigation of the use of Facebook in the rural setting as a means of massive urbanization as well as the decline in the importance of the city as a disseminator of ideas, I will present how these factors have affected modern social interaction in both urban and rural settings in relation to Wirth's article.

Wirth's argument that "what is distinctively modern in our civilization is best signaled by the growth of great cities"<sup>5</sup> transcends the physically geographical sense of the word "cities". He speaks of "the distinctive feature of the mode of living of man in the modern age is his concentration into gigantic aggregations around which cluster lesser centers and from which radiate the ideas and practices that we call civilization"<sup>6</sup>, a definition that is inclusive of "cyberspace". He then goes on to state that "rural life will bear the imprint of urbanism in the measure that through contact and communication it comes under the influence of cities."<sup>7</sup> When Wirth speaks of the "city" in this essay he is very ambiguous in defining the city and goes out of his way to avoid any factors which might too narrowly direct the classification of "urban" areas based on numbers, area or other hypothetical data. He seems to find his most concrete definition of what it means to be an urbanite in the description of the city as: "not only in ever larger degrees the dwelling-place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, people, and activities into a cosmos."<sup>8</sup> Finally he seems to settle on the definition that "a city may be defined as a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals."<sup>9</sup> Thus, the city is not so much a geographical region but can be also interpreted as any form of space that connects people in a way that encourages the exchange of ideas in an actively social manner. It is due to this overwhelming amount of people that the urbanite encounters in

---

<sup>5</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 1. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 2. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 7. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 2. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 8. Print.

their everyday life that causes “the blasé outlook which urbanites manifest in their relationships.”<sup>10</sup> Wirth adamantly argues this shift in mentality changes the fundamental social attitude of the urbanite.

However, there no longer has to exist in the fashion that Wirth previously associated with the city and thus urbanite such a sharp contrast between urban and rural mentalities and their chosen methods of social interaction. The massive integration of social media and in particular Facebook has exponentially intensified the effects of urbanization Wirth describes in his article. The large-scale of information found on people’s Facebook “pages” again can be tied back to the way in which “urbanites meet one another in highly segmental roles,”<sup>11</sup> with less focus on the “whole” person. The ability of the individual user on Facebook to monitor their persona and regulate their privacy settings allows a greater degree of control by the individual to manipulate their public presence, in order to represent themselves in ways carefully constructed to portray a calculated image. In the same way Wirth’s article identifies the lack of natural overlap between social circles in the modern world, it has become increasingly easier to present fragments of oneself to select groups through one’s online presence. Facebook has rapidly increased the rate at which urbanization is able to happen because of its unprecedented accessibility for those with access to an Internet connection. Across cultures, it has been adapted without hesitation leading to a scale of systematic information exchange never seen before in history.

With this massive social system existing outside the confines of any geographical area, it raises the objection to Wirth’s article that perhaps with the advancement of technology there has necessarily been a decline in the importance of the city as an epicenter of culture. The effect of the personalized “news feed”, “wall” posts and platform abilities of Facebook has drastically affected the way news is spread. As can be demonstrated by the organization of several of the past year’s large-scale rebellions, ranging from the Occupy movement to the liberation of Libya, Facebook is taking over as a means to communication and the spreading of important ideas. It is used not only as an

---

<sup>10</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 12. Print.

<sup>11</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 12. Print.

important social tool but also as the primary means of unifying massive amounts of people. The New York Times argues that “Facebook has also become a vehicle for broad-based activism — like the people who organized on the site last year and mobilized 12 million people to march in protests around the globe against practices of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) rebels in Colombia.”<sup>12</sup> Its ability to transcend international borders and link displaced people through a single search has highlighted its importance and relevance in the modern age. One user, torn apart from her family during the Holocaust states that: “I have this tool that helps me find the descendants of people that my grandparents knew, people who share the same truth I do. I’m using Facebook and trying to unite this family.”<sup>13</sup>

Through my first read of Wirth’s article I found it shocking the amount of times I felt I could easily replace the words “cities” with “Facebook”. Facebook’s unique ability to bundle together in a uniform and easy to navigate, user-friendly application all that which cities help to create is what makes Facebook so readily accepted and loved by those who use it so frequently. The unique culture of a city which is found in the wonderful variety of bars, restaurants, cafes, galleries and shops, and blended together by the social lives of it’s inhabitants is recreated in the two dimensional online world we call Facebook. Wirth’s belief that “never before have such large masses of people of diverse traits as we find in our cities been thrown together into such close physical contact as in the great cities of America,”<sup>14</sup> may have been true in 1938, but holds nothing close to the sheer size and vast power of the “urban” empire Facebook has created. The variety of content and degree of social personalization Facebook allows their user has far eclipsed that of the city so much that it has become the modern city. The importance of physicality has been replaced by accessibility in the modern online age to the degree that in studying “cities” by Wirth’s above description, online communities more relevant to studying human behavior in the “city”. The modern city is different from that of Wirth’s

---

<sup>12</sup> Stone, Brad. "Is Facebook Growing Up Too Fast?." *New York Times* [New York] 28 March 2009, BU1. Print.

<sup>13</sup> Stone, Brad. "Is Facebook Growing Up Too Fast?." *New York Times* [New York] 28 March 2009, BU1. Print.

<sup>14</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 20. Print.

description in 1938 as the importance of maintaining an online presence increases. And with the infiltration of the social media market with such applications as Nextdoor,<sup>15</sup> a platform similar to Facebook that virtualizes neighborhoods, we are quickly approaching a complete ubiquitouness of what it means to be an urbanite. Due to the massive amount of social contacts made easily available through applications like Facebook, we have all become urbanites according to Wirth's description. Thus, the claim that there is even such thing anymore as urbanism as a way of life comes into question.

For Wirth, the value of the individual in the collective settlement of a city lies in the unique traits they bring to the conglomeration of perspectives that make up the urban psyche. Through my personal experience with Facebook and watching its rise, I can say with confidence that this is not an area that seems to be fading into obscurity, at least anytime soon. One of the fascinating and engaging features of Facebook is its ability to connect people quickly and effectively in an age defined by busyness. Perhaps what Facebook is providing is a stepping-stone into the future of communication and socialization. In the same way urbanism was a radical change with consequences similar to what we are experiencing in the age of social media, Facebook has altered the social norms of our generation. Wirth's observation that "the personal mutual acquaintanceship between inhabitants which ordinarily inheres in a neighborhood is lacking,"<sup>16</sup> can be just as easily be applied to the consequences of Facebook as the growing trends in urbanism when he wrote this article. Where the process of urbanization created the polarizations of a *Gemeinschaft* (characterized by it's inorganic feel towards interpersonal relationships) and a *Geselleschaft* (characterized by it's sense of genuine community) in the mind of Tonnies<sup>17</sup> Facebook only takes the *Gemeinschaft* further away from the socially fulfilling *Geselleschaft*. Although people's lives may become more familiar as users are bombarded with more information about those close to them, in the same way a city presents this information, it is edited towards a narrow scope so one never feels

---

<sup>15</sup> Chapman , Glen. "Nextdoor network links neighbours, virtually." *Globe and Mail* 27 10 2011. n. pag. Print.

<sup>16</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 11. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Tonnies, Ferdinand. *Community and Society*. Dover. East Lansing: Harper & Row Publishing, 2001. eBook.

connected to the entirety of another person. It was found in a study done by the Government of Canada “that 38.5% of those who used the Internet for more than one hour a day described their sense of belonging to their community as “somewhat” or “very” weak, compared to 35.2% of those who used the Internet for one hour or less, and 31.6% of non- users.”<sup>18</sup> I remember last week boarding the night bus home from downtown and being shocked and appalled when I realized everyone was taking part in their own personal world provided by their mobile device, probably half of them on Facebook, as opposed to carrying on a face-to-face relationship of any sort with their fellow human beings. “Within the span of a single generation.... [There will always be a shift which] has been accompanied by profound changes in virtually every phase of social life.”<sup>19</sup> For the current generation illustrated in the night bus example, Facebook is this shift. Wirth’s interpretation of urbanization as a profound catalyst in changing the nature of social interaction is not incorrect; it is just applied too specifically to one form of change in the nature of society. His predictions and remarks on the effects of urbanization are inherent in any form of change of settlement patterns in the grand sense of where humans exchange ideas, his initial definition of urban life. Facebook raises the new question I would love to read Wirth’s response to of “what is it that is unique to urban life in the age of the online community”?

What is immediate to notice as an active participant in this massive shift towards more of an “online” form of urbanism is the lack of appreciation for those factors that make a city urban. With the ability to access information and to communicate with people online there is less motivation for people to reclaim their space and occupy their city. The livelihood and prosperity of culture in the city rests in the hands of those who do not forfeit their city for the convenience of the online community. For Wirth, his framework of what a city is and what it provides for human beings could easily be transposed over the networks that make up Facebook, however, I don’t think he would be

---

<sup>18</sup> Veenhof, B, B Wellman, C Quell, and B Hogan. Government of Canada. Statistics Canada. *How Canadians' Use of the Internet Affects Social Life and Civic Participation*. Ottawa: SIEED, 2008. Web.

<sup>19</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 2. Print

entirely at ease with this move. He actively argues that to be an urbanite one must feel the weight of the city on one's shoulders as they walk down the dim and moist alleys in search of a favorite bar or towards a meeting with a group of like minds. Illustrated through his statement that the city "refers also to that cumulative of accentuation of the characteristics distinctive of the mode of life which is associated with the growth of cities, and finally to the changes in the direction of modes of life recognized as urban which are apparent among people, wherever they may be, who have come under the spell of the influences which the city exerts by virtue of the power of its institutions and personalities operating through the means of communication and transportation."<sup>20</sup> He would not be satisfied in saying that Facebook is able to recreate this or even come close to igniting something so simple as the thrill of the downtown lights on a midnight stroll. Which is demonstrated in talking to friends who live in rural areas and crave the excitement of the city, seeing it as the provider of opportunity for "bigger and better things". Although the city is losing its uniqueness as a disseminator of ideas and is finding its way into the rural setting through social media, the essence of what it means to be an urbanite will never be recreated through Facebook or similar applications. These mediums, as much as they recreate the ideals of what it is to be urban, will always remain an imitation of the genuine physical exchanges naturally inherent in active city life. His argument finds its footing in the ungraspable details that are illuminated only through one's interaction with the city as an entity in itself; and from that, the social interactions, which take place in the city, find their context.

---

<sup>20</sup> Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): 5. Print

## Works Cited

Chapman, Glen. "Nextdoor network links neighbours, virtually." *Globe and Mail* 27 10 2011. n. pag. Print.

Hermida, Alfred. "Social media transforming how Canadians get the news, study finds." *UBC Public Affairs*. 24 April 2011: n. page. Web. 12 Nov. 2011.

Stone, Brad. "Is Facebook Growing Up Too Fast?." *New York Times* [New York] 28 March 2009, BU1. Print.

"Timeline." *Facebook*. Facebook, 2011. Web. 7 Nov 2011.

Tonnies, Ferdinand. *Community and Society*. Dover. East Lansing: Harper & Row Publishing, 2001. eBook.

Veenhof, B, B Wellman, C Quell, and B Hogan. *Government of Canada. Statistics Canada. How Canadians' Use of the Internet Affects Social Life and Civic Participation*. Ottawa: SIEED, 2008. Web.

Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology*. XLIV.1 (1938): Print