

Facebook as a Way of Life: Louis Wirth in the Social Network¹

[anonymized for peer review]

Abstract: When he opens *Rebel Cities* with a quote from Robert Park on humanity remaking itself by remaking cities, David Harvey (2012) demonstrates the latent critical potential that lurks even within the most conventional, conservative streams of urban theory. In this paper, we consider the analytical possibilities in the work of another prominent figure of the Chicago School of sociology: Louis Wirth. Given his concerns about the cold, calculating instrumentalism and the “segmented selves” of urbanites in the industrial metropolis, what would Louis Wirth make of a world in which Facebook is redefining urbanism as a way of life?

¹ We are grateful to Samuel Johns for discussions and literature references that helped shape our perspective on the cognitive implications of social networks. We also thank Manu Kabahizi, whose dispatches have taught us about the segmented social-media selves involved in the transnational dynamics of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to Prepare a Globally Legally-Binding Instrument on Mercury. All deficiencies are the responsibility of the second author.

Louis Wirth's (1938) sociological masterpiece -- "Urbanism as a Way of Life" -- offers a key to understanding the ubiquity of social media in today's networked world. Wirth argued that urbanization reflects modernization, even while transforming and magnifying its consequences. The same now applies to Facebook -- and the many other social-media phenomena around the world. For Wirth (Figure 1), urbanization came to define the very nature of modern social life. Today, a case can be made that it is the "[l]arge numbers" not just in the metropolis but on social networks, that "account for individual variability, the relative absence of intimate personal acquaintanceship," and "the segmentalization of human relationships which are largely anonymous, superficial, and transitory" (Wirth, 1938, p. 1).

Social media are changing the nature of human interaction, redefining the meaning of urbanism as a way of life. Facebook's rise -- the current estimates are about a billion active users -- took place just as the world's population became majority urban for the first time in human history. The transition Wirth described from Chicago in a United States that became majority urban between 1910 and 1920 (Bogue, 1959, p. 30) is now happening worldwide. Increasingly, we're all living in cities. And many of us are also living in the City of Facebook.

The enormous popularity of social media has involved a dramatic (yet still partial and selective) shift away from face-to-face social interaction. Social media are blamed for weakening interpersonal relationships, exacerbating loneliness, and creating more segmented social lives (Carr, 2011; Marchie, 2012; Rosen, 2012). On the other hand, social media are praised for allowing millions of people to maintain relationships across distance in a world of expansive migration and mobility. A new age of instantaneous connection allows people to live parts of their lives *today* on the network, even while permitting the restoration of connections to

the *past* -- long-lost family members, old loves, and happenstance acquaintances who might otherwise be lost forever (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

The dramatic transformations wrought by social media can be understood from a variety of contemporary perspectives of theory, technology, and policy. We suggest, however, that Louis Wirth's (1938) classic offers fresh and unique insights into how social relations are maintained in the current age. In this article, we theorize the effect of social networking -- focusing particularly on Facebook -- using Wirth's (1938) conceptualization of the distinctive social meanings and practices of urbanites. A careful consideration of the social implications of Facebook and of the decline in the [physical] city's monopoly on the dissemination of ideas provides new understandings of binary oppositions between urban/rural as well as local/global.

When We Are All Urbanites, What Will Urbanism Mean?

When Wirth (1938, p. 1) boldly declares that "what is instinctively modern in our civilization is best signalized by the growth of great cities," he refuses to be fenced in by the boring technical details of specifying criteria for distinguishing "city" from "not city." "As long as we identify urbanism with the physical entity of the city," he warns (p. 4), we will make the mistake of ignoring urban phenomena that lie "beyond an arbitrary boundary line," and thus "we are not likely to arrive at any adequate conception of urbanism as a mode of life." What really matters for Wirth is "the distinctive feature of the mode of living in the modern age" (p. 2). True, this mode of living does indeed seem to involve "concentration into gigantic aggregations around which cluster lesser centers." But the essence of those centers is their function as nodes "from which radiate the ideas and practices that we call civilization." This definition is entirely compatible with the optimistic, technological-utopian views of global social networks of our

present age -- what has been described variously as cyberspace, virtual reality, the social web, Web 2.0, or the social network (Carr, 2011; Lanier, 2010). This is the new civilization, and just as Wirth (1983, p. 7) watched “rural life” bearing “the imprint of urbanization” through “contact and communication” and the “influence of cities,” today it is the social web that has become “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.” (p. 2).

In an urbanizing world, the new “cosmos” of the social web erodes the idea of a city as any precisely-delineated geographical region or location. “The city” is instead any form of spatial arrangement of society that fosters communication, competition, and cooperation amidst intensified diversity and heterogeneity -- a crucible for all those “ideas and practices that we call civilization.” All the ideas and practices, of course, can be overwhelming: so much heterogeneity, so much disagreement, so much competition -- this is why Wirth (1938, p. 12), like Simmel and Durkheim before him, was so deeply concerned about “the blasé outlook which urbanites manifest in their relationships.” What matters now is that the urban/rural dichotomy that shaped the emergence of sociology in the early twentieth century is now dissolving into a geographically and spatially elusive, fluid form. The fundamental social attitude of the urbanite is no longer limited to urbanites (if we restrict ourselves to traditional definitions of ‘urbanite’). The massive expansion of social networking has spread Wirth’s “urbanism as a way of life” everywhere -- even while redefining the meaning of “where” as people live some parts of their lives on the social network, some parts in the ‘real’ world, and still other parts in a real/virtual hybrid that defies easy categorization. The vast troves of information that people post on

Facebook and other social networks now condition how “urbanites meet one another in highly segmented roles,” (Wirth, 1938, p. 11) redefining our understanding of the “whole” person.

Individual users on Facebook and other social networking sites are able to construct a customized persona, and monitor it carefully -- organizing social ties, curating the digital content of representations of their experiences, managing their privacy settings in order to shape *who* sees *what* about *whom* as part of *what* social circle. On the social network, individuals are able to develop sophisticated, multiple-faceted images, and to present multiple persona in dynamic, contingent ways depending upon the contextual circumstances of online and offline social relations. As more and more social life takes place on the network, the fact that individuals *are able* to construct multiple versions of Wirth’s “segmented selves” inevitably means they *have to*: for example, employers now routinely scan through social networking sites when considering job applicants.

Just as Wirth identifies how the industrialized urbanism of twentieth-century modernism eroded the old, settled, and seemingly natural overlaps amongst preindustrial social circles, we are now seeing a strange new kind of urbanism. In this new urbanism, people present fragments of selves -- their own and their ‘friends’ -- in the collective creation of online presence and identity. With the accelerating ease of access and corporate push to drive consumers into the new frontiers of digital-social modes of production -- what Allen Scott (2011) calls “cognitive-cultural capitalism” -- we are seeing a quick adoption of social networking across longstanding divides of nation, language, and culture (Figure 2). The world is now urbanized, and Wirth’s urbanite is shaped by a scale of systematic information exchange never before seen in human history.

This new global urban system is unprecedented. While there is nothing new about migration, mobility, and the global circulation of information and images, we must remember that space and time are *co-constitutive*. What matters here (and now) is the convergence of the time horizon of global information circulation with the rhythms of daily human life, along with a radical pluralization in who produces, consumes, and distributes information. Most of the history of urbanization is a story of centralization and what Harold Innis called “the monopolization of knowledge.” This history stretches from Egyptian priests’ command of sacred language, to Ptolemy’s Alexandria library, to King Philip II’s use of Vitruvius’s Ten Books of Architecture to guide the Renaissance construction of a Roman urban system in the ‘New World,’ to the establishment of a quaintly-named Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in the word city of high colonialism, to the rise of the Associated Press in the metal networks of rails and telegraph wires that built the continental urban hierarchy of nineteenth-century America (Vance, 1990, p. 212; Blondheim, 1994; Heyer, 2003; Branch, 1978). But now we are seeing something very different indeed. Facebook’s personalized news feeds and wall posts represent the leading edge of a decentralized -- and yet still urban (Figure 2) -- system of information production, consumption, and circulation. In the information society, of course, some information achieves the status of “official” news for a broad audience, and hence gets distributed through transnational media corporations. Other information, by contrast, remains deeply personal, relevant only to social networks whose limit is defined by members’ perception of the meaning and significance of the information. But now these distinctions are being remade: personal information becomes big business, for example, if your YouTube video “goes viral.” Information is also circulating much faster: the global messages of handwritten letters sent on ships that took weeks or months now appear as the stream of likes and status updates that

accumulate as fast as our social networks decide, available for us *anytime* and *anywhere* we decide to go on Facebook. The rhythms of daily human life for a growing share of the world's urbanites are now deeply enmeshed in "a mediascape with its own capacity to sustain and reproduce distinctive social realities." (Ley, 2010, p. 24).

These new social realities defy the easy binaries of good or bad: this is a paradigmatic case of "not only ... but also" (Barnes, 2009). Social networks have become the central mode of communication in the strategic maneuvers of long-established movements, and in the emergence of new ones -- from the Arab Spring, to rolling waves of anti-austerity protests across Europe, to Occupy in hundreds of cities around the world. "Facebook has ... become a vehicle for broad-based activism," the *New York Times* reported in 2009, "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 Colombia) rebels in Colombia" (Stone, 2009, p. BU1). For one Facebook user, torn apart from her family during the Holocaust, the social network is fundamental in "sustain[ing] and reproduc[ing] distinctive social realities" (Ley, 2010, p. 24): "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." (quoted in Stone, 2009, p. BU1). As it transcends, subverts, and dissolves (some) borders and boundaries with a few keystrokes or taps on the touch-screen, the social network "has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit, and woven diverse areas, people, and activities into a cosmos." (Wirth, 1938, p. 2).

Let Us Find a City

“As Carl Sandburg once said:

Put the city up; tear the city down

put it up again; let us find a city

Yet Chicago would never be ‘found.’ For it was not only a place, but a process.”

--Mayer and Kohn (1969, p. 464).

A massive social system is emerging above/beyond/through the boundaries of our “real” geographical entities. If urbanism as a way of life is spreading everywhere, then what does the city mean? If cities are civilization (Hall, 1998), then what kind of civilization is this new socially networked urbanism? Reading Wirth’s (1938) article today provides a shock if you simply replace every mention of “city” or “urbanism” with Facebook. The social web bundles the social life of cities together into uniform, user-friendly systems that engage billions of users - should we call them citizens? -- in building something. The unique, place-bound cultures of individual cities -- with their distinctive economic and social histories, their current political dynamics, their unique residential landscapes and districts of bars, restaurants, galleries, and shops -- give way to Facebook Cities. These cities are unique, too, in their own strange ways. Paradoxically, everyone can agree that “real” cities are unique: no one questions the assertion that London is different from Tokyo, or that both are different from New York, Toronto, and Vancouver. Yet we are just now learning how to live with the unique cities each citizen builds on Facebook: people have not yet realized how quickly the dichotomy between metaphysical realism and social constructivism has been dissolved by citizens who have established 125

billion friend connections, uploading an average of 300 million photographs per day (Facebook, 2012).

The vast power of the “urban” empire built by citizens on the social web reflects the increasing variety of recordable, observable social interactions -- and the underlying architecture of social personalization of information and communication amongst citizens. More and more of city life is lived on the You Wide Web (Figure 3). Increasingly, understanding human behavior in the city requires a closely-coordinated understanding of human behavior in online communities. Maintaining an online presence -- having one or more “digital individuals” (Curry, 1997) or avatars -- has become a prerequisite for the cosmopolitan life that once meant “urban.” Connections, competition, and collaboration that once took place *in place* are now (selectively) moving to a new urban world in which every city is unique -- uniquely constructed by the hybrid real and social-network social lives of people as they encounter the “numerous opportunities or choice points for someone to sketch out how they want the world to see them. What profile picture do you choose? Does it just show you, or you interacting with others? Who are your ‘Friends’ and how do others see them? What is your ‘Philosophy’ and what ‘Activities and Interests’ do you feature?” (Rosen, 2012, p. 19).

These and thousands of other questions and possibilities are asked and answered by more people, more frequently, as a new urban system emerges. Since this new urban system is defined in large part by the individual cities built by socially-networked citizens, it is extremely difficult to understand. The esteemed scientific tradition of using rational abstraction and careful measurement to classify cities and develop generalized theories of urban system growth and

change continues (Berry, 1972; Liu and Taylor, 2011); but this kind of work is now becoming vastly more complicated and difficult. There are thousands of “real” cities, but the number of “Facebook cities” is unknown and unknowable (to individual humans), and even here the boundaries are shifting again. With the current spatial transformation of the social media world through locational apps -- FourSquare, or the Nextdoor virtual neighborhood (Chapman, 2011) -- we are quickly approaching the ubiquity of what it means to *think* like an urbanite while using the latest smartphone to navigate through the streets and alleys of the real, physical urb. We are all living Wirth’s urbanism as a way of life. We post, we share, we update. Put the [Facebook] city up, tear the [real] city down. Stay offline -- for a few moments, a few hours, a few days: put the [real] city up, tear the [Facebook] city down.

The New City

“Within the span of a single generation,” Wirth wrote in the 1930s, the “shift from a rural to a predominantly urban society ... has been accompanied by profound changes in virtually every phase of social life” (Wirth, 1938, p. 2). Seven decades later, Larissa boarded the express Night Bus from downtown Vancouver out to the UBC campus, and was appalled to see a new kind of profound change in social life: *everyone* was immersed in their own personal world, each devoutly focused on their mobile device. *Noone* was reading a (physical) book, and *noone* engaged in any face-to-face communication with the people surrounding them: books and faces had been *completely* replaced by ebooks, Facebook, and the rest of a social web that is evolving at an accelerating pace. In an age of intensified competition -- when everyone seems busier than ever -- the social network provides a stepping-stone into an uncertain future of communication

and urban socialization. Just as the rise of the twentieth-century metropolis undermined “the personal mutual acquaintanceship between inhabitants which ordinarily inheres in a neighborhood” (Wirth, 1938, p. 11), the social web is now radically redefining the experience of urban social life. The social web stretches the continuum between community and society -- Tönnies’s distinction between the tightly-bound locality of *gemeinschaft* and the impersonal, instrumental dynamics of *gesellschaft* -- into a complex new transnational spatiality (see Phillips, 2009, pp. 173-174). In Wirth’s day, urban sociology was just coming to terms with the full scale of the transformation of local village life in *gemeinschaft* to the multifaceted, segmented selves of *gesellschaft* in the industrial metropolis. Now the city is remade again through the choices and constraints of people who live parts of their lives on the social web. The city once served as editor: the neighborhood and city where one lived made it clear what information mattered most in daily life, and what information could safely be ignored. Spatial proximity was never *perfectly* correlated with information utility, but space did matter (Abler, Adams, and Gould, 1971). Web urbanism as a way of life, however, can make each reader into editor, author, and publisher -- either through active consumer choice (the friend requests they accept, the twitter feeds they chose to follow) or through subcontracted, automated choices (Google news alerts, apps that automatically troll online content according to parameters specified by users). This provides an historically unprecedented informational freedom in the development of the urban personality.

But the new urbanite’s freedom comes at a cost. Wirth’s (1938, p. 12) concerns about “the ‘schizoid’ character of urban personality” is reflected today in Carr’s (2011) manifesto on what the internet is doing to our brains. It is echoed in front-page magazine articles asking, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” (Marchie, 2012). It informs the research documenting the

negative correlation between heavy internet usage and community attachment and participation (Veenhof et al., 2008). In an eerie parallel, Wirth's (1938, p. 14) attempt to explain the diversifying effects of density with references to Durkheim and Darwin now appears in mainstream press reports about the evolutionary capacity of social-web citizens paralyzed by information overload in Simmel's "unthinkable mental condition." "We're studying the plasticity of the brain," one neuroscientist tells a reporter for the *New York Times*, describing the frontier of research on how humans cope with the flow of infinite interruption and constant information. The sense of vertigo you get from a close read of any of the foundations of urban sociology and political economy -- Tönnies, Simmel, Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Wirth -- now appears in the continuous news feed of stories about everything, including the impacts of the continuous news feed: "Email, social media, and the 24-hour news cycle are information amphetamines," Frank Partnoy (2012) warns us on the *New York Times* website, "a cocktail of pills that we pop at an increasingly fast pace -- and that lead us to make mistaken split-second decisions." Pills = profit, however, and so one of the evolutionary consequences of pharmaceutical capitalist innovation involves neurochemical interventions in human cognition: overstressed students are using ADHD drugs to help maintain focus and concentration to survive the high-stakes testing that has become endemic in a short-attention-span world (Schwarz, 2012).

All that is solid melts into tweets. In some quarters, the global information society is being diagnosed as an "iDisorder" (Rosen, 2012). Wirth (1938, p. 16) was anxious about the "nervous tensions which derive from" the "personal frustrations" of segmented, partial social relations, "accentuated by the rapid tempo and the complicated technology under which life in dense areas must be lived." Today, the anomie diagnosed from the mid-continental industrial metropolis is

now transnational, fluid, and increasingly automated. Jaron Lanier (2010, p. ix), the Silicon Valley visionary most responsible for the developments now described as ‘virtual reality,’ begins his book (!) *You are Not a Gadget* with a rhetorical sledgehammer, struggling to break through “the blasé outlook” of readers in a socially-networked world that is increasingly automated and commodified:

“It’s early in the twenty-first century, and that means that these words will be mostly read by nonpersons -- automatons or numb mobs composed of people who are no longer acting as individuals. The words will be minced into atomized search-engine keywords within industrial cloud computing facilities They will be copied millions of times by algorithms designed to send an advertisement to some person somewhere who happens to resonate with some fragment of what I say. They will be scanned, rehashed, and misrepresented by crowds of quick and sloppy readers into wikis and automatically aggregated wireless text message streams. Reactions will repeatedly degenerate into mindless chains of anonymous insults and inarticulate controversies. Algorithms will find correlations between those who read my words and their purchases, their romantic adventures, their debts, and soon, their genes. Ultimately these words will contribute to the fortunes of those few who have been able to position themselves as lords of the computing clouds.”

What Is To Be Done?

The radical pluralist individualism enabled and required by life on the social network has obscured the fundamental essence of urbanism: cities are collective human achievements. You can't have a city by yourself. Wirth hints at a contemporary answer to our social-technological dilemmas when he clarifies this point. In social terms, the city is built from the "cumulative accentuation" of distinctively urban practices by unique individuals struggling to find their way in the overwhelming metropolis. The "segmental character" and "utilitarian accent of interpersonal relations" of the city destroy individual morale "and the sense of participation that comes with living in an integrated society" (Wirth, 1938, p. 13). But the *individual's loss* is the *city's gain*:

"Being reduced to a stage of virtual impotence as an individual, the urbanite is bound to exert himself by joining with others of similar interest into organized groups to obtain his ends. This results in the enormous multiplication of voluntary organizations directed toward as great a variety of objectives as there are human needs and interests." (Wirth, 1938, p. 22).

Wirth foresaw a key point of the Right to the City movement theorized by Henri Lefebvre (see Harvey, 2008, 2012; Soja, 2010): the right to the city is a cry and a demand, but *we best cry out together*. Urbanism is a collective, community right -- not just another batch of individualized consumer-citizen claims of the kind that are all too easily hijacked to divide us from one another in unhealthy ways. Collective, community-based interests matter, and with the emergent digital wave of global urbanism, we should all remember: everyday digital decisions are tearing some

cities down, putting other cities up. Think carefully about the segmented self, and the dangers of the “utilitarian accent” of life in the age of digital, automated cognitive-cultural capitalism: one of the primary advantages of capitalist corporate law is “the fact that the corporation has no soul” (Wirth, 1938, p. 13). Corporate commodification of the social web is quickly approaching the latest limits to capital (Harvey, 1982), with the barrage of lawsuits following the botched Facebook IPO perhaps hinting at a new era in which capitalists themselves cannot abide the legal contradictions involved in suppressing the labor theory of value in a digital age. The global supply of the human attention span is vast but not infinite: the velocity of machine/code innovation outpaces the information absorption capacity of human brains. And so we echo Jaron Lanier: “it is you, the person, the rarity among [our] readers,” that we hope to reach. The words in this article are “written for people, not computers. ... You have to be somebody before you can share yourself.” (Lanier, 2010, p. ix). Claim the right to the city: online or off, put the city up, tear it down. Put it up again, and let us find a city of equity and social justice.

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Figure 1. Louis Wirth, top row, second from left, on the wall of former Chairs of the Department of Sociology, University of Chicago. Photograph by the authors.

parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos” (Wirth, 1938, p. 2). Replace “city” with “Facebook” (980 million estimated users), “Qzone” or “Sina Weibo” (480m and 300m, respectively, mostly in mainland China), “Vkontakte” (112m, Russia and former Soviet Republics), or any of dozens of other growing online communities. An urbanizing world is a socially-networked world. Urbanization rates account for 39 percent of the cross-national variance in Facebook’s market penetration. Circle areas are proportional to the number of active Facebook users. *Data Sources:* site registered user estimates from various sources compiled and distributed via [cringe] Wikipedia; Facebook country figures from publicly distributed estimates of users over previous three months as of July 1, 2012, from Social Bakers (2012); urbanization rates from World Bank (2011). Note: not all countries are labeled, and 32 countries or territories are omitted due to missing information either on Facebook users or urbanization rates.



Figure 3. The You Wide Web, Hong Kong. Photograph by the authors.