Not long ago, the number of Internet users on the planet surpassed 2.4 billion, the global average time spent in front of computer or smartphone screens reached sixteen hours per week, and Facebook, Inc., completed the integration of its database of birthdays -- a billion and counting -- with its firehose of other relational data in order to provide birthday gift recommendations optimized according to users’ expressed preferences as observed through online activities of ‘friend’ networks, corporate ‘likes,’ and various keyword mentions in postings and status updates. With 1.11 billion monthly active users spending an average of 31 minutes on the site per day, Facebook alone is a fast-evolving informational ecosystem of 34.1 billion minutes of human communication every day -- translating to a daily magnitude of 64,878 years of human
expression that can be measured, monitored, mobilized, and (Facebook’s stockholders hope) monetized. All of these trends have coincided with the long-anticipated arrival of a truly global urbanism: sometime in 2007, the world crossed the fifty-percent threshold, and now for the first time in history a majority of the world’s population lives in urban areas.

How are these trends related? Does the meaning of urbanism change when a third of humanity is on the Internet, a seventh is on Facebook, and hundreds of millions more are on other social networking sites around the world? What are the implications when the world’s most highly urbanized societies are now described by marketing firms as the places with the highest rates of Facebook “population penetration” (Figure 1)?

Figure 1. Facebook World City. For the urban sociologist Louis Wirth (1938, p. 2), the city 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, peoples, and activities into a cosmos.” 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 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.
COURSE OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this course is to explore the relations among urbanization, social media, and socio-political change. The organizing theoretical framework is “social physics,” an obscure but persistent concept that was first proposed by the Belgian astronomer/statistician Adolphe Quetelet in 1835. Quetelet’s argument for physique sociale was bold and simple: the methods that had achieved such remarkable success in the natural sciences should be applied to the “political and moral sciences” as well, to understand the choices and behaviors of individuals, groups, and indeed entire national populations. Social physics was subsequently theorized in great detail as part of Auguste Comte’s philosophy of positivism between the 1830s and the 1850s, and eventually found its way into urban studies, economics, planning, geography, and sociology in the 1940s -- with the widespread adoption of Newtonian physics metaphors to guide the quantitative measurement of social and political trends. The approach has always been controversial, given the unsettling presumption that human choices, motivations, and meanings can be likened to the motions of stars and planets. Yet the framework has consistently delivered the kinds of quantitative measurements demanded by certain types of explanations and planning purposes. Hence the approach is widely used, while the unpopular connotations of the phrase “social physics” are avoided by speaking instead of the scientific method, ‘evidence-based policy-making,’ or just plain common sense.

In recent years, the most dramatic resurgence of social physics modes of thought and analysis comes from the new possibilities of widespread Internet connectivity and the expansion of social media. Wildly popular, best-selling books speak of a global “cognitive surplus,” and of mobile social networking as an entirely new “social operating system” for human relations -- replacing or restructuring every major social institution, of family, nation, city, neighborhood, social or cultural identity, corporation ... Everything, it seems, is going online, and changing in the process. Manuel Castells describes socially networked crowds like those seen in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements of 2011 and 2012 becoming “a conscious collective actor,” while a physicist historian reminds us that, since the breakthrough of computational sciences involved in the creation of the atomic bomb in the 1940s, we have been living in a “universe of self-replicating machines.” Meanwhile, there are heavy media advertisements for Lumosity, a website “based on the science of neuroplasticity” that will help you train your brain; a software program used to detect plagiarism is based on a neuroscience doctoral student figuring out how to apply brainwave-analysis software to textual databases; and a Wall Street trading firm promises to execute equities trades “at the speed of thought.” This all seems to resemble a resurgence of a lot of the ideas of social physics. A strange, utopian concept born in the eighteenth century quickly slipped into obscurity, reappearing from time to time in various theories of science and society, suddenly flourished at the birth of the Atomic Age -- only to be relegated once again to a distant memory. Now, in the age of planetary urbanization and worldwide social networking, social physics arrives once again -- as something each of us helps to build each time we go on the Web, each time we pull out the smartphone or flash a QR code.
TEXTS

Required


David Harvey (2012). Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press.


Recommended


EVALUATION

Course marks are based on seminar participation (30 percent) paper-in-progress writing submissions (30 percent), and a final paper (40 percent).

Participation includes three expectations: regular attendance and contributions to seminar discussions, delivering a ten-minute oral presentation and co-leading a seminar discussion, and submitting brief (one-page) reflection papers each week.

Paper-in-Progress Writing Submissions are due January 19, February 23, and March 23. [When you submit a Paper-in-Progress Writing Submission, you are not required to submit a one-page-reflection.] The first submission should be a one-page statement of your research question or thesis; the second submission should be five pages either in the form of i) a detailed outline, ii) an annotated bibliography, or iii) a draft of a major section of the paper. The third submission should be a draft version of the full final paper.
Final Papers are due no later than 5:00 PM Friday, April 24, 2015. Papers should be approximately 3,500 words, not counting references; include an abstract of no more than 150 words. Papers must conform to general guidelines at http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~ewyly/guidelines.html

All submissions should be on paper, printed on one side only of standard, 8.5 x 11.0 inch paper.

For examples of papers written by students who have taken this course in previous years, see:


An archive of seminar materials from previous years is available at http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~ewyly/u400.html

These resources may be updated from time to time. All other necessary details and recommendations will be provided in class. Please join us. A good seminar is a bit like a city; let’s build one together!

**SCHEDULE AND READINGS**

Required readings are indicated by an asterisk*; other entries are recommendations.

**January 5. Introductions.**

“Kresge was the sixth college established at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Founded in 1971, it was designed with the concept of participatory democracy as a means of encouraging a strong sense of community. The vision was for the college to be a place where students enjoyed a sense of creativity, community, and individuality.” (Kresge College website, 2013).


**DISCUSSION led by:** ______________________________________

________________________________

________________________________


**DISCUSSION led by:**

--------------------------------------------------

--------------------------------------------------

--------------------------------------------------


February 2. A New Social Operating System?

**DISCUSSION led by:**

--------------------------------------------------

--------------------------------------------------

--------------------------------------------------


**February 9. University Closed, BC Family Day Statutory Holiday.**

**Assignment:** Read (consider the recommended readings, as well as items cited in the required readings), and work on your paper. An additional recommendation:


**February 16-20. No Class, UBC Reading Break.**

**Assignment:** Read (consider the recommended readings, as well as items cited in the required readings), and work on your paper. An additional recommendation:


**February 23. Networked Neuroplasticity. Outline / Annotated Bibliography / Section Draft Due.**

**DISCUSSION led by:** ________________________________

________________________________

________________________________


March 2. Networks of Outrage and Hope.

DISCUSSION led by: ________________________________

________________________________

________________________________


DISCUSSION led by: ________________________________

________________________________

________________________________


March 16. Theorizing the Right to the City.

DISCUSSION led by: ________________________________________

________________________________

________________________________


March 23. Presentation and Discussion of Draft Papers.

March 30. An “Unprecedented Cosmic Singularity.”

DISCUSSION led by: ________________________________________

________________________________

________________________________


**Last day of Term 2 classes:** Friday, April 10. **Exams begin Tuesday, April 14, 2015, end Wednesday, April 29.**