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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

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The Metropolis and Digital Life

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Abstract:

In his landmark essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life,* Georg Simmel drew the distinction between two "different, yet corresponding" aspects of modernity, which become embodied in the metropolis "as one of those great historical formations in which opposing streams which enclose life unfold, as well as join one another with equal right." Raymond Williams termed these *individuality*, which "stresses both a unique person and his (indivisible) membership of a group," and *individualism*, "a theory not only of abstract individuals but of the primacy of individual states and interests," the former being something that diminishes in the metropolis, while the latter is intensified. With the emergence of "digital life," including new spheres of virtual interaction, these forces take on new forms and characteristics which need to be articulated and understood more widely if plans for the 'digital city' and 'urban transformation' are to be open, accessible, and generally beneficial. In what follows Simmel's insights are developed with consideration of work by Williams, Zygmunt Bauman, Erving Goffman, and Richard Sennett, leading to an outline of the paradoxical, ambivalent, and complex nature of the digital metropolis.

Keywords: Zygmunt Bauman, Erving Goffman, Richard Sennett, Georg Simmel, Raymond Williams, digital city, The Metropolis, urban transformation

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I. INTRODUCTION

> "Imagine seven million people all wanting to live together. NY must be the friendliest place on earth …" (*Crocodile Dundee).*

Mick Dundee's "observation" about New York was, of course, resonant with naïve irony and paradox. When the film *Crocodile Dundee* came out in 1986, New York was far from friendly; on the contrary it was notorious for its extreme unfriendliness. Mugging was commonplace, there was an annual murder rate of over 2000, or one every four hours, and people lived behind double or triple locked doors and barred windows. A flavor of the city at the time is best evoked by Saul Bellow's *Mr Sammler's Planet* [Bellow, 1970] and films such as *Taxi Driver, Mean Streets,* and *The Warriors*.[1]

In the interim the city has changed out of all recognition. People today strolling around Central Park or sampling the delights of the many and varied—and for the most part safe and welcoming—neighbourhoods might not understand the massive transformation that distances New York City (particularly Manhattan) of the current decade from that of thirty or even only twenty years earlier. In that time seven million has grown to over eight million—making it even friendlier in Crocodile Dundee's terms. Moreover the world has developed along similar lines with the rise of mega-cities with populations over 10 million such as Sao Paolo, Mumbai, Karachi, Delhi, Istanbul, Seoul, and Shanghai.

Yet to a large extent, despite these radical transformations, the reason we laughed at Crocodile Dundee's innocence in the 1980s is no different from the reasons we would laugh at it now: Cities are vast agglomerations of people living close together for all manner of reasons, the least of which being that they have actually chosen to do so in order to be close to all their "mates." In the past a city was the primary site of power and exchange, and it also offered a place of refuge and protection when such exigencies arose. Partly in response to trends such as increased violence and property crime in the inner cities in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a flight from the metropolis to the suburbs, and some cities, particularly in the developed economies, have decreased in size; something which has been completely reversed in recent years. Yet the general long-term trend is not only for ever larger and more expansive cities, but for a larger proportion of the world's population to live in cities of one sort or another—albeit many live in slum-like enclaves rather than in metropolitan centers. Depending on which measure is taken, at some point around 2005 or 2006 more people were living in cities than not; a trend that is likely to continue in the foreseeable future. This comes at a time when the wonders of information and communications technology—the Internet and mobile telephony in particular—appear to offer the possibilities of overcoming time and place as social, economic, and geographical constraints.

One explanation for this is that the world of the twenty-first century is increasingly organized as a network. The term *network society* is a far more apposite and evocative term than *knowledge society* or *information society,* since these latter terms imply that what preceded them were societies based on ignorance or lack of awareness. Manuel Castells has been key in developing and explaining this term. He defines network society as one "where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks. So it's not just about networks or social networks, because social networks have been very old forms of social organization. It's about social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies" [Castells, 2001].

Castells' metaphor of a network implies that society can be seen in terms of nodes interlinked by lines of communication or flows of information; hence his concept of "the space of flows" which is "the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows." Moreover, the form these networks take is quite specific and exhibits what have been termed "scale-free characteristics" [Barábassi and Bonabeau, 2003]. A scale-free network is essentially one where a small number of nodes—called hubs—exhibit a very large number of links to other nodes; often several orders of magnitude greater than most others, some of which may have just a handful of links. Analysis of networks as diverse as international transport, the Internet, brain neurons, and ecologies demonstrates that this scale-free form of organization is common to many complex networks. The existence of these hubs affords such networks a high degree of robustness and efficiency, but also increased vulnerability to attacks or viral-type degradations. So knocking out several nodes at random may not have any serious effect on the network

[1] See links to IMDB for all films listed.

as a whole; but singling out a small number of hubs may cause significant or even fatal damage. Barábasi and Bonabeau argue that scale-free characteristics are demonstrated particularly in cases where the network grows, so that new nodes link to existing ones. This contrasts with classic random-network theory, which is based on the assumption that the full inventory of nodes is in place prior to the establishment of linkages between them [see Barábasi and Bonabeau, 2003]. Moreover, as new nodes come to join the network, there is a clear attraction to link to those with the highest number of existing links; this then becomes self-perpetuating, producing a small number of highly-linked hubs, which can even result in a winner-takes-all situation of a single hub at the center of a star network. This goes some way to developing an understanding of the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of the growth of megacities, accompanied by generally increased urbanization, in a world where technology appears to undermine the importance of place and space. Megacities and other urban concentrations act as hubs within scale-free networks, affording all manner of opportunities and advantages at the economic, social and political levels [see Sassen, 2001].

The idea of a scale-free network also helps us understand Zygmunt Bauman's [2005] argument that the planet is full, not in the sense that there is no more room, but rather that all parts of the world are inter-connected, mapped into a sociopolitical system that no longer encompasses any areas of *terra incognita* or undiscovered lands: Here be *hubs*, rather than dragons. Some parts of the network may be less connected than others; but there are no unconnected outposts remaining. This was graphically illustrated by Anthony Giddens in his Reith lectures some ten years ago:

> A friend of mine studies village life in central Africa. A few years ago, she paid her first visit to a remote area where she was to carry out her fieldwork. The evening she got there, she was invited to a local home for an evening's entertainment. She expected to find out about the traditional pastimes of this isolated community. Instead, the evening turned out to be a viewing of *Basic Instinct* on video. The film at that point hadn't even reached the cinemas in London [Giddens, 1999].

This has come about not as a result of some grand design, but on the contrary, like Topsy it "just growed." As a consequence such network complexity defies all attempts at direction and sovereignty: Strategies and plans are for the most part ineffectual, and efforts to exert control will all too often lead to unwanted, unplanned, and contrary outcomes. (Similar characteristics apply to the Internet; hence the difficulty of applying models of control and governance.)

So too with cities: They grow or decline in organic fashion, often despite rather than because of enactment of particular policies or edicts. Cities certainly do not develop because people want to be friendly and live together, but a key characteristic of cities is that they do offer constant opportunities for social interaction. To some extent this is one of their attractions, but on the other hand it is also a basis for all manner of avoidance behaviors and strategies: The classic twentieth century example is the way in which commuters in many cities, particularly in the UK, sought to hide behind newspapers in crowded trains and buses. As megacities develop, the possibilities for engaging in a wide range of interactions and avoidance strategies are actually enhanced in the networked metropolis of the twenty-first century. People do not need newspapers to hide behind when they can use *ipods*, laptops, PDAs, mobile phones, and even portable electronic reading devices such as *Kindles* and *iPads*; moreover, they can simultaneously cut themselves off from their immediate surroundings and stay in touch with their network of friends—real or virtual.

"The Metropolis and Mental Life"

This dual reality of evasion and connection resonates with some of the key themes developed by Georg Simmel in his essay on *The Metropolis and Mental Life*—originally published in 1903. Simmel argued that there were two factors of social evolution that give rise to and develop with the city; the two being "different, yet corresponding." The first factor is that as social groups grow spatially and numerically their demarcations and specificities from other groups diminish. In other words, differences weaken outside small, tightly-knit groups. As these groups grow in number and degree of dispersion, usually geographical, they are less capable of maintaining cohesion, and sustaining their distinctiveness from others. Second, and as a result of this first factor, individuals gain more freedom and so begin to express their distinctiveness and idiosyncrasies. This itself is initially propelled by forces that free the individual from the grip of powerful social bonds, and eventually these liberated individuals seek their own, specific forms of identity. Raymond Williams plots precisely this trajectory in *Keywords* [1976], where he notes that the term *individual* initially meant something indivisible, in the sense that an individual was part of an indivisible group. In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the word itself developed associations with the two "different, yet corresponding" aspects indicated by Simmel. Williams argues that the first refers to *individuality*, which "stresses both a unique person and his (indivisible) membership of a group;" while the second refers to *individualism*, "a theory not only of abstract individuals but of the primacy of individual states and interests." So while there is a diminuition of *individuality* with the onset of modernity, there is an intensification of *individualism*.

The result is an uncomfortable ambivalence since city dwellers are caught between two divergent orientations. One seems to make social existence far richer and more satisfying, offering or even inundating individuals with a vast array of "stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness;" while on the other hand these impersonal elements and diversions assume such high levels of significance in people's lives that they displace "genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities."

If the first trend carries a person along "as if in a stream," the second threatens to submerge them entirely or cast them aside from the flow. Simmel suggests the result is that people find ways to accentuate their uniqueness, Williams' *individualism*, seeking to combat the 'atrophy of individual culture' and the simultaneous and related "hypertrophy of objective culture." The two trends are associated with developments emanating from two contrasting forms of individualism. One, originating in the eighteenth century, is the generic form which proclaims the general freedom and autonomy of the individual. The other, dating from the nineteenth century, seeks in some regards to counter the universality of the former, aiming to replace or complement the freedom of the 'general human being' with the assertion of each individual's uniqueness.

Simmel concludes that the metropolis offers itself "as one of those great historical formations in which opposing streams which enclose life unfold, as well as join one another with equal right." His concern is with the ways in which metropolitan existence causes people to interact and react in ways which are furthest removed from themselves. This occurs particularly at the level of mental activity, resulting in an "intellectuality" that is a protective response leading to remoteness and reduced sensitivity. Simmel uses the term *intellectuality* in something of a pejorative sense, seeing it as a metropolitan form of indifference or remoteness, as people become increasingly blasé in their orientation to their surroundings. But cultivation of this orientation is an understandable response to "preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life."

From Mental Life to Digital Life

In the twenty-first century we can extend and develop Simmel's analysis in the context of the development of "Digital Life," and the ways in which people now interact in what might best be termed "spheres of *virtual* activity" or "*virtual* spheres of activity." The term *virtual* is itself ambivalent since in some senses it can evoke ideas about being realistic, or encompassing the essential properties of something; on the other hand it is also used to define something that is unreal or nonexistent. The two aspects combine in the concept of virtual memory in a computer, whereby something is made to appear to exist, but is in fact a device emanating from the operation of the software. This incongruity is encapsulated in the idea of *virtual reality*, virtual in both senses, and also characterizes contemporary digital life in ways that parallel and complement Simmel's characterization of metropolitan mental life; encompassing factors that are "different, yet corresponding;" in this case being both real and unreal—actual and imaginary—simultaneously.

In the context of "Digital Life," Simmel's two forces, both generic and specific forms of individualism, can be seen in contemporary phenomena such as TV "Reality" (sic) Shows, where contestants and viewers alike are encouraged to develop rapidly intensifying relationships that are equally swiftly terminated as part of a competitive contest; speed dating is another example. Social networking sites such as *Facebook*, MySpace, and *Twitter*, can be seen simultaneously as ways in which people can reignite or initiate relationships and participate in interactions that can be both intense and transitory.

The trends that Simmel characterized might then appear to be the early stages of an evolutionary continuum, with pre-metropolitan life being characterized by repeated but limited interactions; identity emanating from the collective group and the immediate locale. Metropolitan life undermines and displaces this, releasing or exacerbating this double-edged individualism that both results in and feeds on the metropolis. The avoidance of deep interactions and the cultivation of a blasé attitude allow individuals to develop in their own ways, but they can also undermine or even threaten to destroy established forms of communalism or collective solidarity. All interactions become the subject of objectification, commodification, and rational (i.e. monetary) calculation. The appearance of ICT and Digital Technology both intensifies these trends and offers opportunities for their resolution or correction. A key concern is the extent to which these opportunities can be seized and used to outweigh the less constructive and potentially debilitating forces; harnessing newly released potentialities to positive effect. Hence the value of gatherings such as that held at Temple University in November 2007.

The workshop itself was entitled "Design Research Workshop on Digital Transformation of Urban Experiences." One of the strengths and benefits of the workshop was the way in which it brought together a wide range of people with specialisms drawn from numerous disciplines and orientations. The discussions within this multidisciplinary group focused on issues around technology, design, and infrastructure, associated with various ideas about the city; for instance, seeing it as a complex system, an evolutionary infrastructure, an architecture, even a *cyborg* [Haraway, 1991]. In order to develop from these promising beginnings, however, two related issues need to be stressed. The

first is that, as has already been hinted at above, cities are not readily amenable to design if this is understood in the sense of practices and strategies that aim to be mechanistic, rationalized, and ordered. Bauman makes this point in his book on *Globalization* [1998] in which he highlights the ways the idea of a perfect city, as espoused most blatantly by Le Corbusier, amounted to an erasure of existing cities and the imposition of "Le Plan dictateur." This principle was taken up by Oscar Niemeyer in the design and construction of Brasilia, envisaged to be the perfectly structured urban space: Needless to say the utopian dream turned out to be a far from perfect reality, resulting for some of its early inhabitants in a medical condition termed *brasilitis*; the result of living in a socially sterile environment.[2] For Bauman cities are best seen as "palimpsest-like … built of the layers of successive accidents of history."

The second issue, following from appreciation of the first one, is that cities need to be understood as inherently chaotic and indeterminate, demanding specific and appropriate social skills and forms of interaction. Bauman contends that the modern city has been seen as an "artificially conceived environment, calculated to secure anonymity and functional specialization of space," depriving city dwellers of "the opportunity for meaning-negotiating and thus of the know-how needed to come to grips with [the problem of identity] and how to resolve it."

This implies that at least one aspect of achieving an understanding of the digital transformation of urban living will involve addressing the insights of those who have sought to understand the city in terms such as Bauman's characterization; then adapting them and seeing if they can prove useful as a basis for understanding "digital living:" Hence the importance of introducing Simmel's work as part of a consideration of the new context for studying issues around identity, experience, and interaction. In what follows, rather than seeking to offer a major study of specific cities and digital experiences and experiments, I will try to indicate the ways in which the ambivalences and paradoxes identified by Simmel, Williams, and Bauman can be understood in more concrete terms by drawing on some aspects of key works from pre-digital times. In particular I wish to introduce readers to some of the ideas developed in the work of Erving Goffman and Richard Sennett, each of whom in contrasting ways seeks to come to terms with the impact of the unleashing of modernity on the individual—although in a pre-digital context. This will then afford a basis for some concluding remarks that may be of assistance in consideration of the Digital Metropolis.

Goffman and Sennett

Goffman's most famous work is probably *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, originally written in the 1950s. The argument he presents is that social life can be understood by using an extended theatrical metaphor encompassing concepts such as *performance*, *dramaturgy*, and *impression management*. Sennett's work develops from a more historical frame of reference, particularly in *The Fall of Public Man* [1977] where he notes that developments around public life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have led to a paradox of simultaneous visibility and isolation, with a concomitant and enforced intimacy, and erosion of civility. Together they offer a way of lending substance to the transitions underlying Simmel's and Williams' work—i.e., the breakdown of pre-modern forms of community, the renegotiation or diminution of the distinction between the public and the private, the promise and the threat of individual freedom and autonomy: Also to draw attention to the ways in which what currently seems "natural" and timeless is in fact contingent and provisional.

Goffman's book appeared in 1959, the same year as Anselm Strauss published *Mirrors and Masks* which covers very similar ground. Goffman's key concept was *impression management*, understood against the view that although "All the world is not, of course, a stage, [but] the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify." He focuses on social interaction, specifically where people are "in one another's continuous presence;" analyzing the processes involved using dramaturgical concepts. Thus he explains the ways in which social actors perform and interact with one another. Initially in any social encounter each participant or actor will generate expressions, both intentional and inadvertent, simultaneously evoking responses and inferences from other participants. Gradually people will seek to control such interactions; the form, type, and degree of such control being dependent on the specific context. For instance, in a job interview, candidates will usually ensure that they dress appropriately and address the interviewers formally and correctly, but the successful candidate is unlikely to act in the same fashion later on when celebrating with friends. If the interview was for a job as part of a medical team, then the person appointed will have to learn to cooperate with colleagues to ensure a smooth and effective performance, taking into account not only those colleagues, but also other co-participants such as patients, and possibly including any audience or other observers.

For Goffman, social interactions are performances which succeed when everyone plays their part in establishing and sustaining an appropriate definition of the situation, but this involves issues of control, power, expectations, roles, rights, and duties. As such, the dramaturgical analogy embraces ethical aspects since "any projected definition of

[2] It is noteworthy that the successful bid for the 2016 Olympics was won by Rio de Janeiro; the Brazilians did not propose hosting the games in Brasilia.

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the situation also has a distinctive moral character." Goffman's analysis extends to cover features such as virtuoso performance, teams, frontstage and backstage regions, and acting out of character. Taken as a whole, his book can be seen as a handbook for people to use in perfecting the art of impression management and, therefore, a tool for the often cynical and manipulative manifestations of this art, particularly as practiced by certain PR specialists, image-consultants, and the like. This ignores the moral aspects that Goffman raises, but is in part due to the effective manner in which he explains the mechanisms behind impression management, thus effacing the moral issues. Furthermore, he offers little if any indication of the points at which the theatrical analogy breaks down or fails to apply, and so it is necessary to turn to Sennett to enhance the overall picture.

Sennett's position is far more critical of the way in which social interaction needs to be understood, particularly the changes in public interaction that have developed under the forces of capitalism and secularism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whereas we now take it for granted that someone's public persona is an indication of their private one—and in general of their personality—this was not always the case. Sennett's argument is that broad social forces result in public life being taken seriously; what he terms "society on its way to becoming intimate." At the individual level, this is experienced in the form of "four psychological conditions … involuntary disclosure of character, superimposition of public and private imagery, defense through withdrawal, and silence." Taken together this yields "the paradox of visibility and isolation."

In referring to Goffman's work, Sennett points out that all Goffman's examples are static and devoid of history; "there are scenes but no plot." "In Goffman's world, people behave but they have do not have experience." Writings such as Goffman's are symptomatic of the modern malaise, but they do not present any explanation for contemporary society. Sennett contrasts late twentieth century ideas about the public realm with those prevalent in the eighteen century. He notes that the late eighteenth century witnessed a new form of *theatrum mundi*, whereby what was believable on the stage was intermixed and confused with what was believable on the street.[3] In general people's appearance on the streets was an indication of social standing, their *individuality* in the sense of their membership of a particular group or class; whereas now it would be far more to do with someone's effort to express their *individualism*. Crucially for Sennett, the older form of *theatrum mundi* allowed people to find ways of "being sociable, on impersonal grounds."

Sennett contrasts this with what he terms "intimate society," where such devices are no longer in place, and—echoing Simmel—so people find themselves caught in the paradox of visibility and isolation. Public space fails to afford a specifically and distinctive public life; instead it can only offer a context where private strangers coexist. Moreover the distinction between the private and the public has all but disappeared. People can no longer be sociable in any way that does not involve their specific private persona—hence the title of Sennett's book. Impersonal sociability is not possible, and, as a consequence, impersonal experience becomes meaningless; what replaces it is an overwhelming concern centered on the self and individual experiences. "In an intimate society, all social phenomena, no matter how impersonal in structure, are converted into matters of personality in order to have meaning."

For Sennett this new, intimate society is organized around two principles—narcissism and destructive *gemeinschaft*. He argues that narcissism is not simply self-centeredness, rather it is a search for self-gratification which is inherently self-defeating. Nothing can actually satisfy the desire since there is nothing that can actually satisfy the need. For Sennett cultures that encourage narcissism actually divert people from considering their own self-interest, since this requires a more far-reaching and long-term perspective; narcissism is based on the experience of each moment as absolute.

The more pertinent principle, however, is the new form of *gemeinschaft*; a destructive one. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Ferdinand Tönnies introduced the contrast between *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society), locating the former in contexts where there are "full and open relations with others;" as opposed to the latter, where people interact on the more impersonal basis of division of labor and social roles [Tönnies, 2003]. *Gemeinschaft* existed in pre-modern, pre-urbanized, hierarchical societies. *Gesellschaft* became the dominant mode in modern, industrialized societies, since they were based around the intensification of individualism, hence a more impersonal form of interaction. Stated in this fashion, Tönnies' distinction is somewhat unrefined, the contrast it raises can be seen in the constant efforts of people to sustain or develop the idea of *community* against the trend of what is often seen as the impersonal and overly-rationalized progress of modernity—particularly in ever-expanding cities. It might then be reasoned that Sennett would welcome this, as a way of resisting "the fall of public man," but, in fact, he offers exactly the opposite view arguing that only social romantics could ever assume that a re-

[3] A tendency that has clearly developed even further as is evidenced by the way in which fictional stories from the "soaps," then become news stories in themselves; also the way in which the stars of these dramas are confused with the characters they play.

emergence of *gemeinschaft*-like conditions in modern, urbanized contexts might be possible. Pre-modern forms of *gemeinschaft* were centered around traditional roles and relationships, impersonal devices for sociability that allowed some degree of private-public distinction through disguises and masks. This is no longer possible under conditions of modern intimacy, where communities now are based around "full disclosure"—i.e. membership is not simply on the basis of a role or an interest, but necessarily involves the whole person.[4] Sennett concludes in a somewhat somber tone that these "communities of collective personality" center on "collective *being* rather than collective *action"* (stress added).

In sum, what we can glean from these specific aspects of the work of Goffman and Sennett is that the transition to modernity and metropolitan living places people in ambiguous and paradoxical conditions; they no longer have a private realm into which they can withdraw, and there is no repertoire of established roles to take up and deploy. The move from pre-modernity to modernity, although seemingly offering a breaking of shackles and constraints, is far more double-edged. Freedom may not actually be "another word for nothing left to lose," as Janis Joplin intoned, but it may well be a miasma and a mirage. It is no accident that Simmel uses the imagery of being "cast adrift"; Bauman has given us the term *liquid modernity*.

Liquid Modernity

The term *liquid modernity* has now entered the conceptual lexicon of many disciplines [see Bauman, 2000; also Bryant, 2007, for further background]. Wikipedia, itself a paradigm example of liquid modernity, offers the definition of the term as "a kind of chaotic continuation of modernity." Bauman sums it up succinctly; in liquid modernity "[T]ime flows; but it no longer marches on to any destination." He takes his starting point from the imagery of liquidity and flux evoked by a famous—albeit scientifically inaccurate—section from *The Communist Manifesto:*

> All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.
>
> The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere (chapter 1).[5]

But it is the sentence immediately preceding this one that provides the core of Bauman's recent work—"All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify." Bauman's concern is to stress that, in our current phase of modernity, the key characteristic is not merely a one-off stage of sweeping things away, but rather an obsessively continuous and all-encompassing process of jettisoning; the innovations of today become the detritus of tomorrow. It is no coincidence that one of Bauman's bleakest books bears the title *Wasted Lives* [2003].

Yet this constant flow is paradoxical—it is seemingly endless and yet without direction. Bauman quotes Emerson's dictum that when skating over thin ice, speed is the only form of safety, thereby stressing that the liquid modern imperative is ceaseless movement, without direction. The manifest implication is that in liquid modernity there is no sanctuary. Our predicament is akin to those cartoon characters who continue running over the cliff's edge, only to plummet to earth once they look down and realize that they are in mid-air. The movement is itself the objective, yet it necessarily prompts us to ask: "Movement towards what?" Bauman contends that such queries cannot be answered and perhaps should not even be posed.

In liquid modernity, the tendencies characterized by Simmel reach new levels of intensity. The ceaseless striving for change and movement necessitates that individuals constantly have to respond to pressures to *re*-create themselves. The move from the pre-modern to the modern results in a Sisyphean task centered on this intensification of individualism. Evoking precisely Williams' and Simmel's ideas of individualism and modernity, Bauman states that "[C]asting members as individuals is the trademark of modern society. That casting, however, was not a one off act. *It is an activity re-enacted daily"* (stress added). So it is no coincidence that in his book on *Identity* [2004] Bauman warns against seeking solutions to our identity problems in the work of the founding fathers of sociology, since these current identity problems relate not to the solid forms of togetherness of yore, but rather to the frail "virtual totalities" that are electronically mediated. The only exception singled out is Simmel, who "could glimpse and taste the existential condition which was to become everybody's fate." Goffman and Sennett sit somewhere bestriding the transition from solid to liquid modernity, but, if we revise and restate their key concerns, they can shed further light on the issue of digital life and liquid modernity.

[4] Confirmation hearings for public appointments are evidence of this; usually involving all manner of enquiries into aspects of a person's background that go well beyond their capacity to fulfill the actual role itself.

[5] Text available at http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html.

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For Bauman one key distinction is that "Simmel's urban strollers, and the later Baudelaire/Foucault *flâneurs* and Goffman's practitioners of the art of civil inattention, did not walk the city streets in search of a community with which they could identify"; whereas today we seek and construct identities constantly while on the move. Thus Goffman could offer advice on how to fine tune social interactions into virtuoso performances, because it was taken for granted that other, more sustaining interactions were available to people elsewhere. Sennett, on the other hand, already hints at the fallacy in this assumption when describing how the new form of *theatrum mundi* involves an imbrication of both the theatrical and the urban realities; hence, in part, his dissatisfaction with Goffman's work. Under conditions of liquid modernity this coalescence has gone still further; people now seek affirmation of identity "constantly while on the move," in the sense that this is a project that requires constant attention, and that people's identities are themselves transient.

In addition to the factors to which Bauman draws our attention, it is critical to understand that under conditions of digital life all *performances* now leave virtually (!) indelible traces. For Goffman each performance was live and fleeting; furthermore, adopting one role in one context was not a constraint on adopting other roles in other contexts, or even altering one's role in subsequent encounters of a similar nature. Under conditions of digital life, however, the skills of impression management do not relate merely to individual performances, not even to maintaining an impression across performances to the same participants for the sake of coherence and consistency. We now inhabit a world, a networked society, where all of our performances—or many of them—are potentially accessible and retrievable by anyone and everyone. A person's homepage, *YouTube* clip, *Facebook* entry or other such digital trace can be found and becomes part of others' knowledge of that person—for good or ill. This both develops from and exacerbates Sennett's point about the move away from impersonal ways of being sociable, resulting in the reign of intimacy and destructive *gemeinschaft*. When Goffman wrote about the performances he witnessed, they may have had no history, and any traces they left might have been only brief and impressionistic. But now similar accomplishments have a traceability from which people can construct histories, drawing conclusions about the actor's personality, reliability, and employability. As a result, we are now victims and targets of what Bauman calls "Goffman's ... the art of civil inattention," leaving traces of our past performances in the digital network; also implicating ourselves and others as we take our cues from the ways in which others have done likewise.

This development then makes Goffman's ideas more pertinent to digital living than they were in the 1950s; also adding to their admonitory and cautionary weight. People need to develop their skills in impression management from an early age and on a daily basis, which is precisely what Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim mean by their term *individualization*, which Bauman defines as "transforming human identity from a *given* to a *task*," a ceaseless performance for which each individual social actor is responsible [see his introduction to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001]. Goffman himself claimed that his work applied to social interaction, specifically where people are "in one another's continuous presence." But this is something that takes on new resonance in an age of digital living, with people being almost constantly online in some manner or another. People feel the need to connect, reconnect, and disconnect with all manner of networks and all manner of technologies; not simply with people in the flesh. They want to be able to text their *contacts* at all times and be contactable by those same people—hence the frenzied activity of passengers disembarking from aircraft. Their *Facebook* pages need to be current and vital, linked to appropriate "friends"—as many of these as possible, perhaps making sure not to retain links to anyone who has become a liability or has fallen out of favor.[6] In Sennett's terms, being sociable now seems to preclude being impersonal; some level and form of intimacy is almost mandatory.

Goffman distinguished between backstage and frontstage aspects of performances. Backstage still involved a performance, but participants felt themselves removed from the main action, and adopted levels of familiarity and informality not allowed or tolerated when up-front. Examples might include the school staff-room, or the kitchen in a restaurant. Goffman noted that control of the backroom might not always be possible, but on the other hand if everyone adopted backstage manners then any region might become a backstage. What seems to have happened in the interim, as a key feature of digital living, is that the backstage and the frontstage have become entangled and confused; people often adopt backstage informalities in contexts where such behavior would previously have been seen as inappropriate. On the other hand, the boundary between the two no longer holds, and it might be best to assume that everything is open to audience scrutiny regardless.[7]

Sennett locates the source of this development within the modern city, where the lack of a strong, impersonal culture arouses "a passion for fantasized intimate disclosure between people." Any possibility of developing and pursuing common interests is "destroyed in the search for common identity." People may well be able to interact to a greater

[6] Although de-linking can itself be far from easy.
[7] Issues such as "climategate" indicate the problems that arise when backstage behavior comes to the fore, becoming front page news.

degree in the city, but these forms of interaction need limits or constraints. “Active expression requires human effort, and this effort can succeed only to the extent that people limit what they express to one another.” If there are no limits to physical motion, the result is a “disastrous deadening of the city as an organism.” So in a digital age, where there are few if any limits to interaction—real or virtual—this deadening effect can be magnified.

Sennett identifies a further effect of this limitless interaction; the erosion of “civility.” Since people feel the need constantly to be familiar—with others and with all and every context—civility and formality are undermined and lose all value. For Sennett, “wearing a mask is the essence of civility.” It is a crucial component of urban living, based on the capacity to develop one’s creative powers, particularly the power to play, “but which require a milieu at a distance from the self for their realization.”

Lessons for the Digital Metropolis

Well, what can we learn from all this? How does it help in our understanding of the digital transformation of urban experiences? Simmel alerts us to the ambivalence of urban existence *per se*, encapsulated in Williams’ formulation of individual*ity* as opposed to individual*ism*. Bauman takes this still further with his concept of liquid modernity—developing the metaphor of flow, flux, disorder, and unpredictability. Taken together with Goffman’s dramaturgical mode of explanation and Sennett’s admonitions, it might seem that the digital metropolis is as unwelcoming, risk-laden, and dangerous as the streets of Manhattan were in the 1970s. So perhaps advocates of the view that the Internet is the basis for an enhanced repertoire of enriched social experience and interaction, new forms of community, and interpersonal relationships are as misguided as Crocodile Dundee?

The reality of the digital age is actually far more complex and ambivalent, as the preceding discussion has sought to explain. Sennett may well be correct in his diagnosis of narcissism and destructive *gemeinschaft* as trends inherent in modernity, but, on the other hand, one could point to contradictory trends where people have used social networking facilities such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* to positive effect—impacting political processes, disaster relief, and other socially beneficial actions.[8]

The concept of the digital divide alerted people to the fact that access to the wonders of the digital age are not available to all; an awareness of the paradoxes of the digital metropolis can build on this, indicating that policies to promote accessibility, equality, and fairness are not simply a case of more, faster, and cheaper.[9] Sennett’s paradox of visibility and isolation rests on four psychological conditions, “involuntary disclosure of character, superimposition of public and private imagery, defense through withdrawal, and silence” (p. 27). These can be seen as stratagems for individuals in dealing with the problems of modernity as diagnosed by Sennett himself. In the Digital Metropolis, the last two are available but highly problematic and often associated with great social costs. This is particularly true for the young and the variously disenfranchised and disempowered. They may not have ready access to the Internet, but it is highly probable that they will own or have access to a mobile phone. Not being contactable is socially disabling. Moreover there is an increasing extent to which government and third sector agencies present themselves, their activities, and their opportunities first-and-foremost through the Internet.

On the other hand, simply expanding availability and affordability of digital communications is no solution, since the other two psychological conditions come into play: “involuntary disclosure of character, superimposition of public and private imagery.” Sennett argues that urban experience can only prove fruitful and satisfying if it is based on a revitalizing of public space that engenders encounters with the unknown; “people grow only by processes of encountering the unknown.” This involves learning to live with others rather than a compulsion to get close to them. In the Digital Metropolis, people can be simultaneously intimate and withdrawn, plugged in to their virtual social networks while being impervious and indifferent to their immediate physical surroundings. Urban strollers and *flâneurs* of today are all too often completely unaware of their immediate physical surroundings—intently texting while listening to their *iPods*—hence failing to take advantage of the heterogeneity of the city.

In the pre-digital city, Sennett warned that one response to the trends he identified was that people’s locality became “morally sacred,” leading to “the celebration of the ghetto;” an admonition that was taken up by Robert Putnam in the 1990s in his article “Bowling Alone” [1995].[10] In the digital age there are similar trends, with people connected to social networks that are virtually (!) digital ghettoes, consisting of interconnected groups of likeminded people largely closed-off from wider networks. In terms of social capital, this is a situation in which *bonding* capital becomes more concentrated, greatly exceeding *bridging* capital. Mark Granovetter provided an earlier understanding of this in his

[8] Examples that spring to mind are the uses of texting and Twitter in countries such as Iran and the Philippines; also in the wake of the Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina.

[9] The debates around the “one laptop per child” policy indicate the complex aspects of these sorts of initiative—see for instance http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Laptop_per_Child#Criticism (current Apr. 17, 2010).

[10] The Amazon page for Tönnies book lists Putnam’s book as an item that is often bought in tandem.

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landmark paper on "The Strength of Weak Ties" [1973], which can be seen, in part, as a precursor of Sennett's position that it is important for ways to be found that allow and encourage people to be "sociable on impersonal grounds."

Granovetter's main concern was to highlight the importance of this aspect of social interaction, rather than to diagnose its current state. Sennett's work can be seen as a diagnosis, together with a prescription calling for people to find new ways of being "sociable on impersonal grounds" through redeveloping or rediscovering the capacity for play and ritual, which in itself can be taken as an invitation to review Goffman's work and others of similar mien, transcribing and revising the core ideas for digital living. So it can be inferred from this that Digital Metropolitans need access to impersonal places in which to play, where strangers can be encountered and where stranger-hood is taken as a mutual basis for interaction. Sennett claims that "people can be sociable only when they have some protection from each other; without barriers, boundaries, without the mutual distance which is the essence of impersonality, people are destructive." To an extent it might be contended that such opportunities already exist in the form of online role-playing games such as *Second Life*, and other MMORPGs.[11]

The outcome of all of this is that the developing digital metropolis has to be grasped as something paradoxical, ambivalent, and complex; potentially, but not inherently, offering ways for digital citizens to break out from the paradox of isolation and visibility. Sennett's accusation of narcissism encompasses the notion that self-absorption prevents self-knowledge, with people being caught up with the absolute experience of the moment, acting against the development of self-interest. The critiques and insights of Simmel, Sennett, Goffman, and Bauman afford a basis for a view of digital urbanism seen in terms of impersonal sociability, encouragement of play and interaction, mutuality, and responsibility, rather than enforced intimacy, isolation, economic productivity, and patterns of consumption. In which case, Crocodile Dundee was onto something after all!

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