Assignment I – CS 6474/CS 4803 Social Computing

Grade	Max 100 points; 10% of overall grade (late policy applies)
Due	Sep 18, 2017, 11:59pm Eastern Time
What to submit	A report (as a PDF file) with answers to the questions; reports should be no longer than 4 pages
Where to submit	T-Square

In 1970, legendary urbanist and professional people-watcher William "Holly" Whyte formed a small, revolutionary research group called The Street Life Project and began investigating the curious dynamics of urban spaces. At the time, such anthropological observation had been applied to the study of indigenous cultures in far-off exotic locales, but not to our most immediate, most immersive environment: the city. Whyte specifically focused on New York City's parks, plazas, and various informal recreational areas like city blocks – a total of 16 plazas, 3 small parks. His research served two goals: why do some city spaces work for people while others don't, and what the practical implications might be about living better, more joyful lives in our urban environment.

To answer the questions in this assignment, please first watch the video documentary of Whyte's Street Life Project here: https://archive.org/details/SmallUrbanSpaces

Whyte's findings, though from the 1970s, are valid even today. In particular, they bear striking resemblance to observations of online behaviors of people, and how design impacts online platform use. The questions in this assignment focus on these connections, specifically around appropriating Whyte's observations to social computing sites. All questions are compulsory.

- **Q1 [25 points].** Whyte's basic premise for this research study was that, until that point, direct observations have rarely been used to study people in urban settings. Most times research was done somewhere else (e.g., an experimental setting in a lab) or some other context (e.g., animals), removed from where the phenomenon under study supposedly occurred. Do you see any analogies between Whyte's approach and studies of people based on observations of what they do and share on social computing platforms? Justify your rationale behind your answer. Also illustrate your answer with a concrete example, e.g., a specific problem/context/situation where such observations gleaned from social computing platforms are invaluable, and arguably more insightful than experimental or laboratory based studies.
- **Q2 [30 points].** Whyte noted that plazas were growing and many buildings were built with plazas in front of them. However, although they were not built to be "people's plazas", they attracted a lot of people. A variety of people adorned these spaces, and specific plazas were more popular among specific sets of people (e.g. the swingers plaza). However most plazas were underused, although designers built them with good features like ample sunlight. Consider early social computing platforms, MySpace and Facebook. While the latter continues to be successful even

today, the latter died in just a few years. Speaking strictly in terms of features, both were similar in many aspects. Drawing from Whyte's observations of more and less successful plazas, discuss two potential hypotheses behind the differential success of MySpace and Facebook.

- **Q3 [15 points].** Whyte's study also found that "Musicians and entertainers draw people together [but] it is not the excellence of the act that is important. It is the fact that it is there that bonds people, and sometimes a really bad act will work even better than a good one." Similarly, in the context of social computing platforms, a variety of external or orthogonal aspects or agencies draw people together. Taking the specific example of Twitter, describe one such aspect or agency where you have observed otherwise socially unconnected people to bond together, not necessarily due to the quality of the concerned aspect or agency.
- **Q4 [30 points].** Whyte considers the problem of urban "undesirables" — drunks, drug dealers, and other uncomfortable reminders of how our own lives might turn out "but for the grace of events." His findings debunk conventional wisdom with an invaluable, counterintuitive insight: rather than fencing places off and flooding them with surveillance cameras, we should aim to make them as welcoming as possible: "The best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make a place attractive to everyone else". Social undesirables exist in social computing platforms too; for instance, those who engage in bullying and harassment on social computing platforms under the cloak of anonymity. Per Whyte's findings, it would be less effective to outright ban them, restrict them to specific online communities, or continuously monitor their activities for violations. Describe an approach that social computing platforms could adopt, that, per Whyte's recommendation, would "make a place attractive to everyone else" and thus "handle the problem of undesirables". Frame your answer based on any social platform of your choice.