

# CS 6474/CS4803

## Social Computing: Sociological Foundations I

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What attracts people most, it would  
appear, is other people.

— William Whyte

# The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

- Whyte led the Street Life project in the 1970s, and began investigating the various dynamics of urban spaces.
- He focused on the city, and studied New York City's parks, plazas, and various informal recreational areas like city blocks -- a total of 16 plazas, 3 small parks.
- Goal: 1) *why do some city spaces work for people while others don't*, and 2) *what the practical implications might be about living better, more joyful lives in our urban environment*.

# The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces

An aerial photograph of a small urban space, likely a park or sports field, surrounded by buildings and a street. The field is green and rectangular, with a few trees and structures visible. The surrounding area includes a street with parked cars and some buildings. The overall scene is captured from a high angle, providing a clear view of the layout of the space.

**THE SOCIAL  
LIFE OF THE  
STREET**

# Discussion Point 1

How is an understanding of street behavior relevant to the study of behaviors on social computing systems?

# Discussion Point 2

What are your key observations (find two) and how do they relate to social computing systems?

Observation 1: People gathered and conversed in the most unexpected (crowded) places

Observation 2: People love to gossip and talk about mundane topics; they gathered in specific places and had conversations that were fairly brief or fairly long



Observation 3: Conversations had silence and people used reciprocal gestures and movement; streets were a congenial place for expression of these activities

Observation 4: Cities across the world are distinct, but on the streets people acted more or less the same despite underlying contrasts in cultures and practices

Observation 6: Large cities vs. small cities – differences exist in terms of density, pace, nature and types of social activities. But similarities outweigh differences.

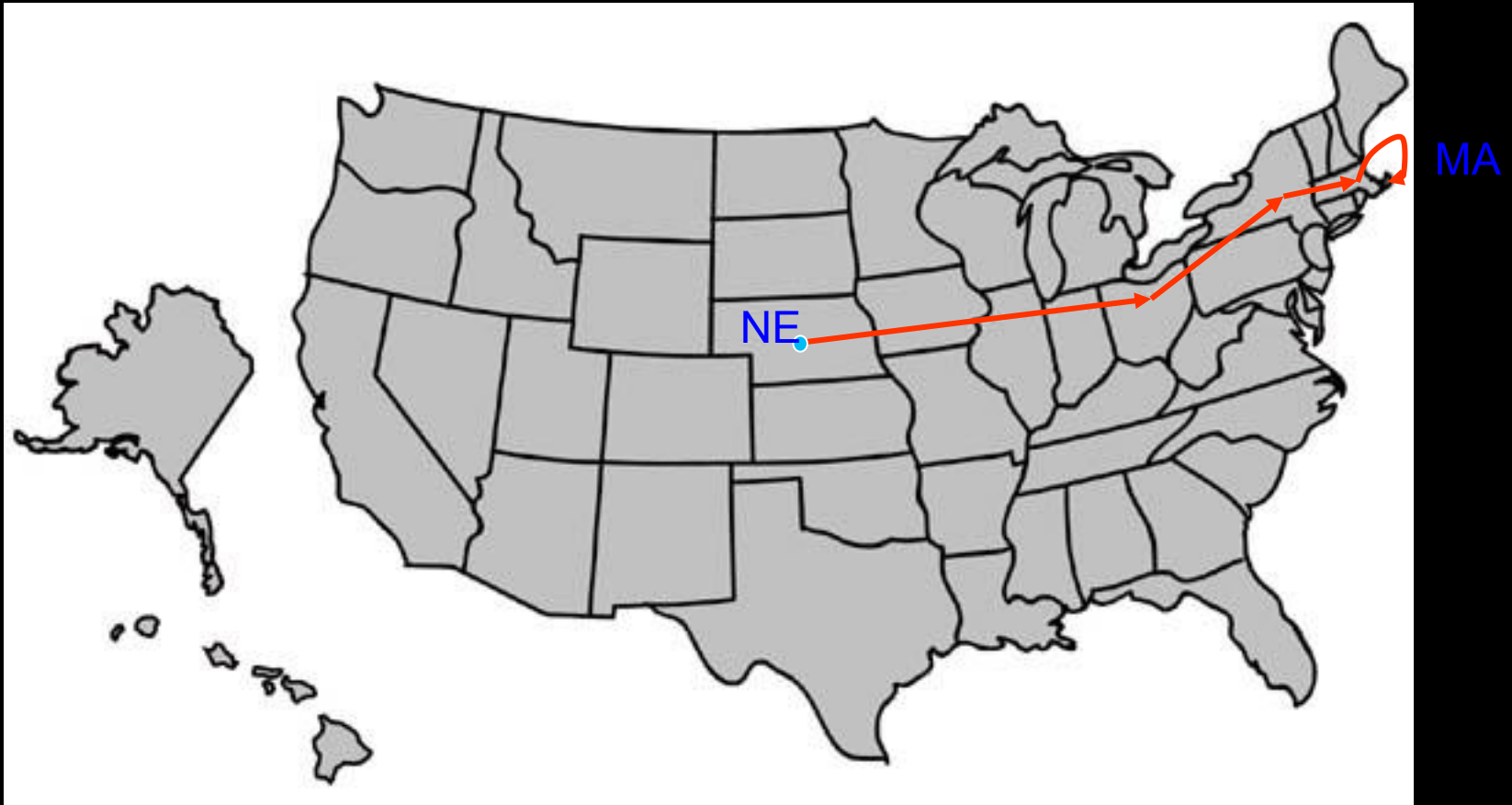
*Summary:* Urban design needs to account for creating physical places that facilitate civic engagement and community interaction

# Sociological Foundations I

- Frigyes Karinthy in 1929 published a volume of short stories called “Everything is Different”
- He was the first proponent of the six degrees of separation concept, in his 1929 short story, Chains (Láncszemek)
- In his book the characters created a game out of the notion that “the world is shrinking”:

A fascinating game grew out of this discussion. One of us suggested performing the following experiment to prove that the population of the Earth is closer together now than they have ever been before. We should select any person from the 1.5 billion inhabitants of the Earth – anyone, anywhere at all. He bet us that, using no more than *five* individuals, one of whom is a personal acquaintance, he could contact the selected individual using nothing except the network of personal acquaintances

# An Experimental Study of the Small World Problem



# Summary

- First sociological study of the “six degrees of separation”
- Empirically determine the maximum number of intermediaries it would require to reach anybody in the US
- Experiment conducted through forwarding of a set of snail mail letters, all targeted to a target in Massachusetts
- $N=296$  for two groups in Nebraska and Boston
- Main strategies involved in selecting the next point of forwarding: geographic and business



# Summary

- How many of the starters would be able to establish contact with the target?
- Well, that depends: the overall mean 5.2 links
  - Through hometown: 6.1 links
  - Through business: 4.6 links
  - Boston group faster than Nebraska groups
  - Nebraska stakeholders not faster than Nebraska random

# Summary

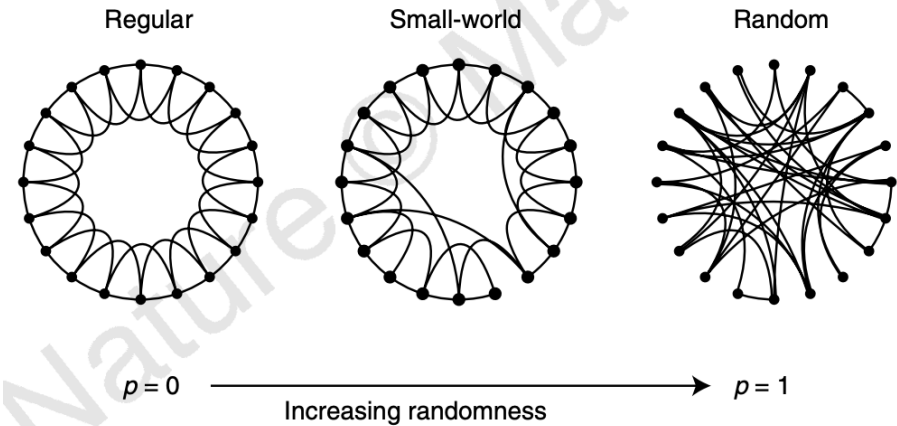
- Results:
  - 64 chains reached target
- At least two facts about this study are somewhat remarkable:
  - First, that short paths appear to be abundant in the network
  - Second, that people are capable of discovering them in a “decentralized” fashion, i.e., they are somehow good at “guessing” which links will be closer to the target
- What really stood out:
  - Funneling - Presence of a set of “hubs”/sociometric stars, through which most letters went through near the final target

# Collective dynamics of 'small-world' networks

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Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853, USA

Networks of coupled dynamical systems have been used to model biological oscillators<sup>1–4</sup>, Josephson junction arrays<sup>5,6</sup>, excitable media<sup>7</sup>, neural networks<sup>8–10</sup>, spatial games<sup>11</sup>, genetic control networks<sup>12</sup> and many other self-organizing systems. Ordinarily, the connection topology is assumed to be either completely regular or completely random. But many biological, technological and social networks lie somewhere between these two extremes. Here we explore simple models of networks that can be tuned through this middle ground: regular networks 'rewired' to introduce increasing amounts of disorder. We find that these systems can be highly clustered, like regular lattices, yet have small characteristic path lengths, like random graphs. We call them 'small-world' networks, by analogy with the small-world phenomenon<sup>13,14</sup> (popularly known as six degrees of separation<sup>15</sup>). The neural network of the worm *Caenorhabditis elegans*, the power grid of the western United States, and the collaboration graph of film actors are shown to be small-world networks. Models of dynamical systems with small-world coupling display enhanced signal-propagation speed, computational power, and synchronizability. In particular, infectious diseases spread more easily in small-world networks than in regular lattices.



**Figure 1** Random rewiring procedure for interpolating between a regular ring lattice and a random network, without altering the number of vertices or edges in the graph. We start with a ring of  $n$  vertices, each connected to its  $k$  nearest neighbours by undirected edges. (For clarity,  $n = 20$  and  $k = 4$  in the schematic examples shown here, but much larger  $n$  and  $k$  are used in the rest of this Letter.) We choose a vertex and the edge that connects it to its nearest neighbour in a clockwise sense. With probability  $p$ , we reconnect this edge to a vertex chosen uniformly at random over the entire ring, with duplicate edges forbidden; otherwise we leave the edge in place. We repeat this process by moving clockwise around the ring, considering each vertex in turn until one lap is completed. Next, we consider the edges that connect vertices to their second-nearest neighbours clockwise. As before, we randomly rewire each of these edges with probability  $p$ , and continue this process, circulating around the ring and proceeding outward to more distant neighbours after each lap, until each edge in the original lattice has been considered once. (As there are  $nk/2$  edges in the entire graph, the rewiring process stops after  $k/2$  laps.) Three realizations of this process are shown, for different values of  $p$ . For  $p = 0$ , the original ring is unchanged; as  $p$  increases, the graph becomes increasingly disordered until for  $p = 1$ , all edges are rewired randomly. One of our main results is that for intermediate values of  $p$ , the graph is a small-world network: highly clustered like a regular graph, yet with small characteristic path length, like a random graph. (See Fig. 2.)

Such small-world phenomena turn out to be abundant in a variety of network settings

## The Erdős Number

Who was Erdős? <http://www.oakland.edu/enp/>

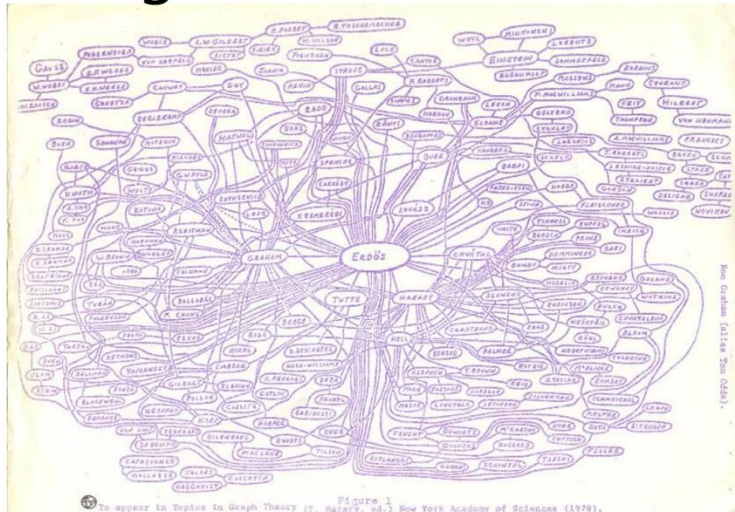
A famous Hungarian Mathematician, 1913-1996

Erdős posed and solved problems in number theory and other areas and founded the field of discrete mathematics.

- 511 co-authors (Erdős number 1)
- ~ 1500 Publications

# Such small-world phenomena turn out to be abundant in a variety of network settings

e.g. Erdos numbers:



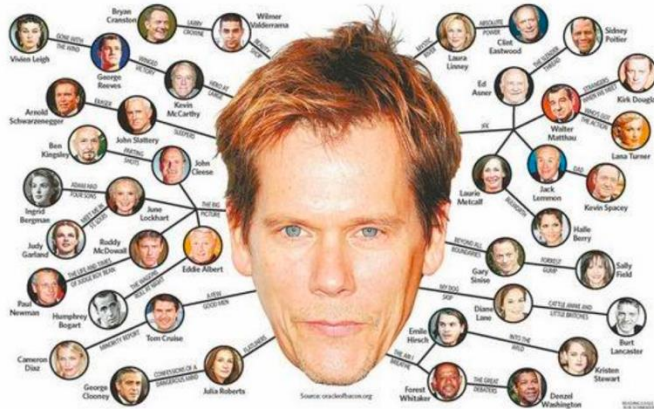
Erdős # 0	-	1 person
Erdős # 1	-	504 people
Erdős # 2	-	6593 people
Erdős # 3	-	33605 people
Erdős # 4	-	83642 people
Erdős # 5	-	87760 people
Erdős # 6	-	40014 people
Erdős # 7	-	11591 people
Erdős # 8	-	3146 people
Erdős # 9	-	819 people
Erdős #10	-	244 people
Erdős #11	-	68 people
Erdős #12	-	23 people
Erdős #13	-	5 people



<http://www.oakland.edu/enp/trivia/>

# Such small-world phenomena turn out to be abundant in a variety of network settings

e.g. Bacon numbers:

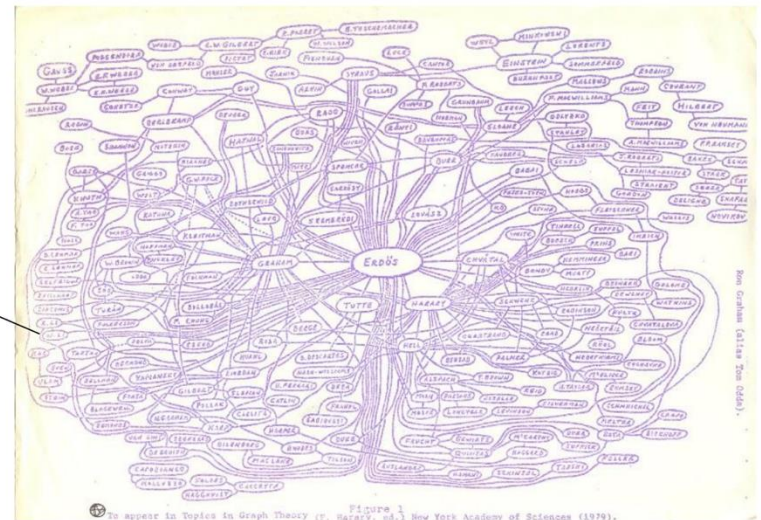
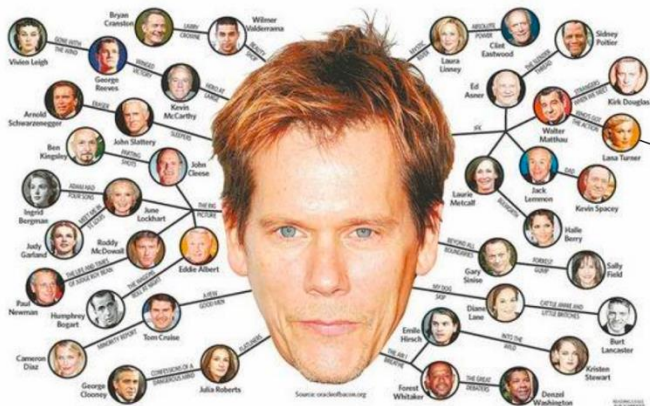


[linkedscience.org](http://linkedscience.org) & [readingeagle.com](http://readingeagle.com)



# Such small-world phenomena turn out to be abundant in a variety of network settings

Bacon/Erdos numbers:



Kevin Bacon→Sarah Michelle Gellar→**Natalie Portman**→Abigail Baird→Michael Gazzaniga→J. Victor→Joseph Gillis→Paul Erdos

What are some of the biggest assumptions/constraints in the study that may have affected the outcomes?



What are some of the biggest limitations of the study? What could have been alternatives to address them?

What are some of the biggest surprises from the study?

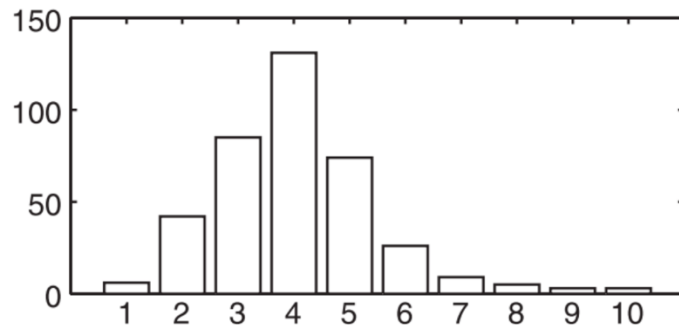
A. There was a constant drop off rate as the letters traveled forward. What could be potential reasons behind this phenomenon?

B. Why were there so few completed chains?

In Milgram's chain letter experiment, men were 10 times more likely to forward the letters than women. Why do you think it was the case?

# Dodds, Muhamed, & Watts repeated Milgram's experiments using e-mail

- 18 "targets" in 13 countries
- 60,000+ participants across 24,163 chains
- Only 384 (!) reached their targets



Histogram of (completed)  
chain lengths – average is  
just **4.01!**

L	N	Location	Travel	Family	Work	Education	Friends	Cooperative	Other
1	19,718	33	16	11	16	3	9	9	3
2	7,414	40	11	11	19	4	6	7	2
3	2,834	37	8	10	26	6	6	4	3
4	1,014	33	6	7	31	8	5	5	5
5	349	27	3	6	38	12	6	3	5
6	117	21	3	5	42	15	4	5	5
7	37	16	3	3	46	19	8	5	0

**Reasons** for choosing the next  
recipient at each point in the chain

from <http://www.cis.upenn.edu/~mkearns/teaching/NetworkedLife/columbia.pdf>

# Four Degrees of Separation

Lars Backstrom\* Paolo Boldi† Marco Rosa† Johan Ugander\* Sebastiano Vigna†

January 6, 2012

## Abstract

Frigyes Karinthy, in his 1929 short story “Láncszemek” (“Chains”) suggested that any two persons are distanced by at most six friendship links.<sup>1</sup> Stanley Milgram in his famous experiment [20, 23] challenged people to route postcards to a fixed recipient by passing them only through direct acquaintances. The average number of intermediaries on the path of the postcards lay between 4.4 and 5.7, depending on the sample of people chosen.

We report the results of the first world-scale social-network graph-distance computations, using the entire Facebook network of active users ( $\approx 721$  million users,  $\approx 69$  billion friendship links). The average distance we observe is 4.74, corresponding to 3.74 intermediaries or “degrees of separation”, showing that the world is even smaller than we expected, and prompting the title of this paper. More generally, we study the distance distribution of Facebook and of some interesting geographic subgraphs, looking also at their evolution over time.

The networks we are able to explore are almost two orders of magnitude larger than those analysed in the previous literature. We report detailed statistical metadata showing that our measurements (which rely on probabilistic algorithms) are very accurate.

## 1 Introduction

At the 20th World-Wide Web Conference, in Hyderabad, India, one of the authors (Sebastiano) presented a new tool for

studying the distance distribution of very large graphs: HyperANF [3]. Building on previous graph compression [4] work and on the idea of diffusive computation pioneered in [21], the new tool made it possible to accurately study the distance distribution of graphs orders of magnitude larger than it was previously possible.

One of the goals in studying the distance distribution is the identification of interesting statistical parameters that can be used to tell proper social networks from other complex networks, such as web graphs. More generally, the distance distribution is one interesting *global* feature that makes it possible to reject probabilistic models even when they match local features such as the in-degree distribution.

In particular, earlier work had shown that the *spid*<sup>2</sup>, which measures the *dispersion* of the distance distribution, appeared to be smaller than 1 (underdispersion) for social networks, but larger than one (overdispersion) for web graphs [3]. Hence, during the talk, one of the main open questions was “What is the spid of Facebook?”.

Lars Backstrom happened to listen to the talk, and suggested a collaboration studying the Facebook graph. This was of course an extremely intriguing possibility: beside testing the “spid hypothesis”, computing the distance distribution of the Facebook graph would have been the largest Milgram-like [20] experiment ever performed, orders of magnitudes larger than previous attempts (during our experiments Facebook has  $\approx 721$  million active users and  $\approx 69$  billion friendship links).

This paper reports our findings in studying the distance distribution of the largest electronic social network ever created. That world is smaller than we thought: the average distance of the current Facebook graph is 4.74. Moreover, the spid of the graph is just 0.09, corroborating the conjecture [3]

\*Facebook.

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So is the world really shrinking?

In Milgram's chain letter experiment, letter forwarding may imply a different notion of a "friend" compared to what we imply today in online settings. Can these differences affect the number of hops (i.e., people are separated by about 6 acquaintances)?



Milgram did not after all investigate whether tie strength might play a role. How do you think tie strength would impact the so called “small world phenomenon”?