Choice Cuts

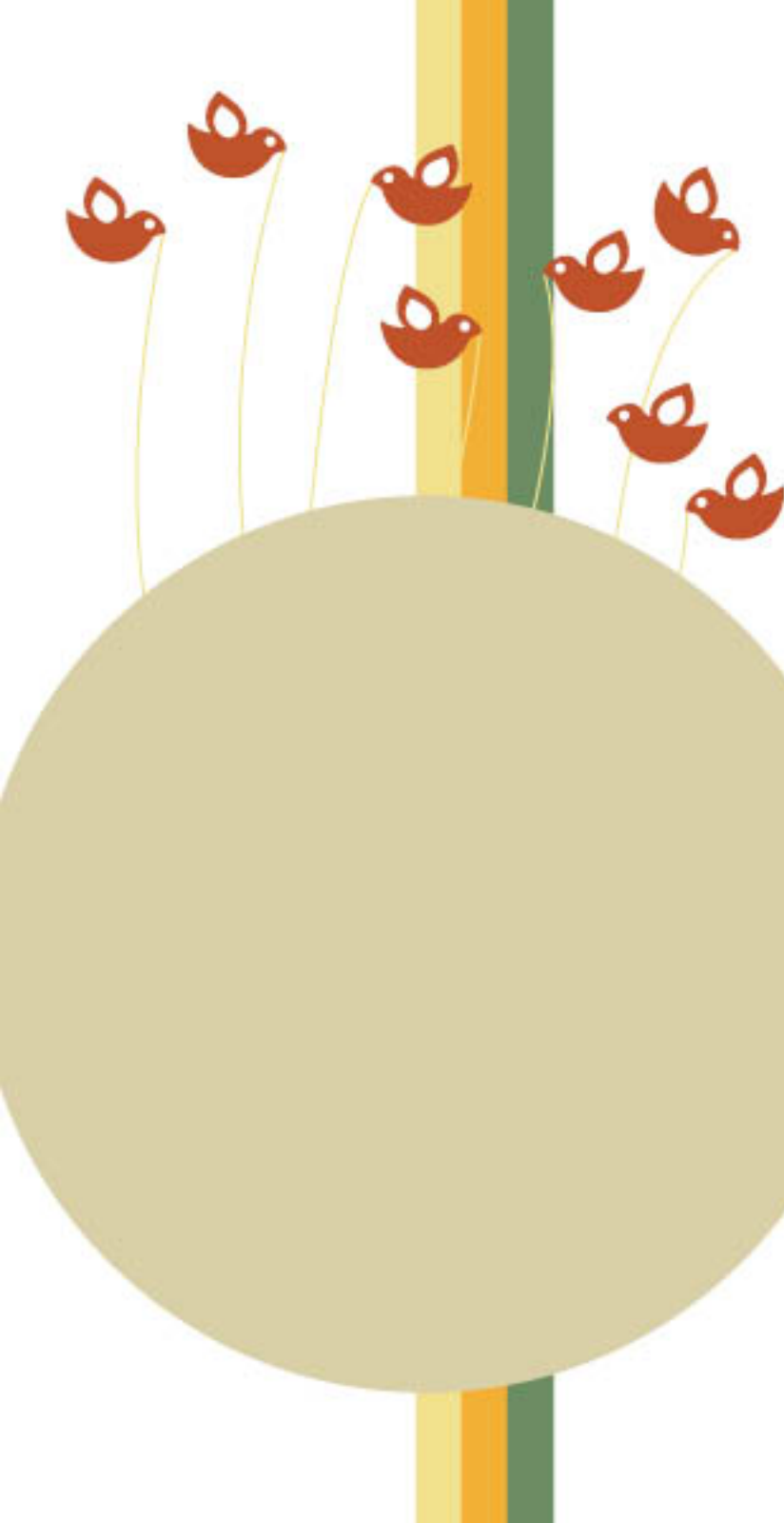# #ATL Fail: Twitter-friendly Atlanta is not fully wired yet.

Atlanta is supposed to be one of America's most wired cities. #Truth?

By Thomas Wheatley

For the last few years, Atlanta's consistently landed on a series of lists proclaiming it one of America's five most wired cities. Add to this a handful of lists placing our bustling little town to have one of the most engaged populations on such social media services as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Tumblr.

To which we say: Are you sure? We're not as dense as Chicago, nor as populous as New York, and not nearly as tech-obsessed as San Francisco. Last time we checked there wasn't free, public Wi-Fi. And the city's website has a certain 2002 quality to it. But there we are, year after year, supposedly a hotbed of techno know-how and connectivity.

There is a nugget of truth to the claim. Since 2008, social media services such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and others have changed the way Atlanta businesses promote deals and handle complaints, allowed local politicians to bypass the news media to deliver messages, and helped protest movements rally supporters when under threat of arrest.

Millions of residents are tapping their thumbs on screens, clicking icons, and speaking their minds, sometimes without talking to anyone at all. We flood the microblogging service Sunday, organize at least three Facebook groups to protest a toll lane along I-85, and tune in by the hundreds via livestream to watch Occupy Atlanta tempt arrest. Some of Twitter's most followed users, including CNN, Soulja Boy, and Justin Bieber — and the occasional self-promoter — boast Atlanta addresses. Atlanta-based corporations such as Turner, Coca-Cola, and Home Depot have strong social media presences. Without social media, local popsicle hawkers and food trucks would be much harder to locate, and artists would never have convinced Atlantans to comb the city looking for

cat-shaped cutouts. But none of that necessarily makes us "a wired city." It just means that we're embracing the technology of our time, as are most other urban centers. To understand why Atlanta's landed on so many lists of "wired" cities, it helps to understand that the city is, literally, very wired. Atlanta was one of the early "nodes" of the Internet and sits on top of much of the wiring that keeps the Internet a-humming. Prior to the 1996 Summer Olympics, millions of dollars were invested in laying fiber optic cables underneath our feet, particularly in downtown Atlanta.

"If you were to go on one of those horse carriage tours around downtown, they should be pointing out that this random building was the first place where data access was available," says Peter Fasano, a senior digital marketer. "Down on Marietta Street and DeKalb Avenue there are many buildings that are still there that are dedicated server ports. That enabled companies like MindSpring or EarthLink to thrive back in the day. This was the place you needed to be." That continues to this day. Less than one mile from downtown Atlanta, guarded by a fence and

Jeff Smith

a security guard, hundreds of servers hum in a nondescript, 990,000-square-foot warehouse — the world's second-largest data center, trailing only a behemoth in Chicago — which handles Twitter's micro-sized messages from the East Coast and Europe.

The city isn't without more socially relevant bragging points (which is completely different than a #humblebrag). It's true that, according to some social media gurus, Atlantans are quick to jump on new technologies and experiment. Students from the historically black colleges on the Atlanta University Center which include Morehouse, Spelman, and Clark Atlanta, pounced on Twitter, says Brandon Sheats, a local web developer, because they could post quick, concise messages using the service's technology that allows tweeting by text. (Peruse Twitter's trending topics after the sun sets each night and you find young black people riffing on memes — "WhatILearnedFromMyHBCU," for a recent example — well into the next day.) Atlanta's Brazilian population is loyal to Orkut, a network service owned by Google that's wildly popular and commonly referred to as the South American country's Facebook. When Foursquare, which allows you to compete with your friends and tap deals by checking-in to locations and events, began beta testing, Atlanta was one of the first cities to be selected. Not only does the city boast lots of actual locations, giving fodder to Foursquare, but it had a strong following on Dodgeball, the service's precursor.

Why we embrace these services might be because we're so spread out. Stephen Fleming, vice president of Georgia Tech's Enterprise Innovation Institute, says without Twitter, he and his peers, some of whom are as far off as Duluth, wouldn't be able to share ideas or communicate in real time. No longer do people have to carve out 30 minutes to meet when they can just pitch concepts via direct message.

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