



© 2010, Erin Anderson.

Global Street Papers and Homeless [Counter] publics: Rethinking the Technologies of Community Publishing

Erin Anderson, University of Pittsburgh

This article argues that community publishing initiatives might extend the scope and impact of their work by critically examining the ways in which technology influences the production and circulation of their [counter]public discourse. Building upon the work of Paula Mathieu, the author analyzes the material and discursive complexities of the “street paper” movement as a site of community-based publishing, finding both limitations and potential in the survival-driven, print-based, and hyperlocal character of street paper media. Discussing an emerging digital platform for participatory blogging among homeless and low-income street paper vendors, the author suggests how a model of Web-based, multimodal, and interactive communication might work to extend the community literacy practices of the street paper movement.

Over the past decade, the field of communication studies has demonstrated increasing interest in a previously neglected movement of independent newspapers and magazines called “street papers,” examining the role that these publications play in providing a platform for self-representation and rhetorical action by marginalized people. Sold on public street corners by homeless and low-income “vendors,” street papers exist to provide these individuals with not only a source of dignified, low-threshold employment, but also an independent voice that speaks to issues that affect their lives and the lives of people like them around the world. While there has been



considerable disagreement as to how well individual projects fulfill this latter aim in practice, street papers in general have garnered substantial attention for their potential to contribute to “small acts of participation” (Novak and Harter 406), “communicative democracy” (Howley 274), and “counterpublic” discourse (Parlette 96) in the public sphere.

As a longtime advocate of this work, Paula Mathieu has proposed street papers as a site of interest for scholars in the field of composition, particularly those concerned with emerging theories of community literacy and public rhetorics. Noting the dozens of homeless and low-income writing groups operated by street papers in cities around the world, Mathieu conceives of these projects as localized seedbeds for “community publishing” (7) and exemplary sites of what Anne Ruggles Gere calls “composition’s extracurriculum.” While these groups sometimes address their discourse to autonomous forums, for the most part, they are invested in producing writing, ranging from poetry and personal essays to opinion pieces and advocacy journalism, for publication in their local street paper. Furthermore, among those street papers that do not have the resources or inclination to produce ongoing community literacy programs, most welcome independent submissions for publication by homeless and low-income people, particularly those employed as vendors, and there is no question that such “extracurricular” literacy practices serve as a vital anchor and a guiding metaphor for street papers’ philosophy and praxis.

More recently, in an article with Diana George, Mathieu expands the scope of her previous analysis to examine street papers as a vibrant “network of communication” among alternative social press (131), emphasizing the global collaboration represented by the International Network of Street Papers (INSP), a membership-based organization that currently unites 107 publications in thirty-five countries worldwide (“About INSP”). Highlighting a 2005 anti-violence campaign orchestrated by the group, she explains how INSP rallied its members to speak out against a wave of deadly attacks against homeless people in São Paulo, Brazil. Through



this campaign, INSP members distributed multilingual editorial content reporting on the events from the perspective of the local street paper while employing Web-based communication platforms to connect local readers across the world to collective advocacy efforts. Certainly, this initiative provides a compelling lens through which to examine what John Trimbur argues is a highly neglected area of rhetoric and composition—that of delivery, of inquiry into the complex ways in which discourse is not only produced but also *circulated* through public forums and civic life. Furthermore, it draws attention to the ways in which street papers, as inherently local press organizations, have begun to harness the potential for organized rhetorical action on a *translocal* scale—“translocal” in the sense of their “potential to constitute communicative relations” across and between distinct localities (Hepp 330).

Missing from this conversation, however, is a focused interrogation into the *technologies* at play in both of these settings—the street-paper-as-localized-community-publishing-enterprise on one hand and the street-paper-movement-as-translocal-media-network on the other. While emergent digital technologies are clearly implicated in the latter, the fact that street papers’ work in community-based publishing *also* inflects technology—specifically print technology—is less overtly evident, perhaps in light of its sheer naturalization. As a result, we have seen little investigation into the role that technology might play in shaping the form and circulation of the counterpublic discourse produced by marginalized people for publication in street papers. Perhaps, then, the question we should be asking is not only how technologies are being employed to serve the goals of these enterprises, but also, more crucially, what is the relationship between these technologies and the kinds of rhetorical spaces they open up—and for whom.

If we follow this line of inquiry further to examine the relationship *between* these two modes of rhetorical practice, a troubling disjuncture emerges. Despite the promise represented by street papers’ innovations in digital translocal delivery, such networked communication flows are not



yet functioning in a manner that directly engages the voices of homeless and low-income people. In the case of the Brazilian anti-violence campaign, it is important to note that the discourse circulated among INSP publications was not produced by homeless people themselves and neither, to my knowledge, were homeless people widely enlisted to participate in Web-based campaigning activities aimed at middle-class readers. While street papers' community publishing efforts have made great strides toward providing a public forum for traditionally silenced voices, it is significant that, with few exceptions, these voices remain projected primarily toward the hyperlocalized, print-based audiences of people who purchase and read street papers. Situated neither as globally resonant rhetors nor as intrinsically interested audience members for movement discourse, homeless and economically marginalized people, particularly those participating most intimately and actively as street paper vendors, have not yet been widely mobilized to participate in such innovative spaces and flows of translocal rhetorical action.

Taking this challenge as a point of departure, in this essay, I discuss an emerging community literacy initiative that I am working to develop in collaboration with INSP—a global platform for participatory blogging by street paper vendors. Drawing upon interdisciplinary theories of the public sphere, alongside insights gained through my own ongoing participation in the street paper movement,¹ I explore the ways in which this project seeks to engage networked digital media technologies in order to re-imagine the possibilities for translocal, counterpublic participation by homeless and low-income people. I begin by grounding my discussion in an analysis of the material and discursive realities that lie at the heart of the street paper model, considering how they might simultaneously support and complicate the project of community publishing among homeless and low-income people. Turning to a discussion of the

1 I became involved in the street paper movement in 2001 as a volunteer for Seattle's *Real Change News*. Since that time, I have worked on the ground with local street papers in the U.S., South Africa, Colombia, and Norway, as well as serving as the Network Development Officer for the International Network of Street Papers from 2007 to 2008.



emerging blogging initiative, I situate this project in relation to other promising innovations in street paper discourse and technology, ultimately proposing a model of Web-based, multimodal, and interactive communication, which, I argue, works to both address the limitations and build upon the strengths of street papers' current community publishing practice. Finally, I conclude by placing this inquiry into conversation with broader questions of community-based literacy, asking what we might gain from expanding our conception of "extracurricular" composing practices to account for such digital and translocal possibilities.

The Street Paper in Context

At its most basic level, the street paper is comprised of three core elements: a homeless or economically marginalized vendor, an independently produced and printed periodical, and a willing customer with an expendable income and a consistent presence in public space. These three elements are designed to work together in a mutually reinforcing way to contribute to a combined purpose of immediate social assistance and long-term social change. The vendor buys a copy of the periodical for a percentage of the cover price; he or she sells it on the street to the customer, earning the direct profits from the sale and encouraging an interaction across social boundaries; and, ideally,² the customer reads the periodical, gaining new information or a fresh perspective on critical social issues and his or her potential role in addressing them. Thus, beyond their surface-level communicative function as progressive media outlets, street papers are embedded in a complex network of relations—material, social, and technological—that necessarily contextualize and complicate their rhetorical practice. Turning to examine these relations, I consider the ways in which they influence the ability of street papers to serve as platforms for counterpublic participation through community publishing initiatives.

2 The uncertainty as to whether street paper buyers actually become street paper *readers* is a common strain of critique in street paper scholarship (for examples, see Lindemann, Novak and Harter, Parlette, Torck).



Delivery

At the core of the street paper model lies the age-old dilemma of “money versus mission” (Harter et al. 420), or, more specifically, “organizing for survival” versus “organizing for social change” (421). In one sense, the challenge of “survival” is fundamentally an issue of the financial sustainability of the street paper itself. While most street papers—save a handful of the more virulent social businesses like the UK’s *Big Issue*—finance their operation largely through grants and private donations, direct paper sales and advertising often constitute a significant percentage of their organizational revenue (Howley 281). Thus, like most independent media that do not have the luxury to choose alternatives to capitalist configurations, street papers must to some extent balance their attention to mission with their struggle for existence.

On the surface, this dilemma appears unextraordinary. For Kevin Howley, it is the same one that has long faced the alternative press in general, coming down to the question: “Is it possible...to publish a dissident newspaper—that is, a publication committed to progressive social change—and still attract a wide audience?” (283). Vanessa Parlette tackles this question in her case study of a street paper in Toronto, examining the publication’s ability to facilitate “public participation and empowerment through self-representation” by homeless people within the material constraints of its structure and sales directive (99). Finding a paucity of content “specifically by or for the homeless,” at least with relation to the organization’s idealistic mission statement, Parlette attributes this lack to economic factors—quite simply, the fact that the “continuance of the paper is dependent on an affluent market of buyers” (101). While there is a problematic assumption implicit in this statement as to the interests of “affluent” or middle-class readers, as well as to the quality of writing by marginalized people, it is fair to assume that most street papers have struggled with this same contradiction.

In briefly tracing the trajectory of the movement from its initial growth in the early 1990s, Danièle Torck notes a “successful period” in street



papers' public reception early on. "Partly for their novelty," he argues, "they were welcomed with a certain enthusiasm" (373). Many street papers in the first wave of the movement, and more so those in North America, were explicitly framed as "voice of the poor" publications written and produced entirely by or in close collaboration with homeless and low-income people. However, as Howley explains, street papers have, over time, been forced to confront the dilemma of "compassion fatigue" among readers (282). When the "novelty" wears off, new editorial strategies are on the table. And while some street papers still follow a mandate of pure participatory communication, many more have professionalized their editorial models, employing trained journalists and editors to produce a range of content, from activist journalism to more "general interest" social and cultural reporting.

This question of street papers' salability has long been at the center of internal deliberation within the international movement, contributing to the development of what Howley calls two "competing visions" of global street papers: "On one side of the debate are activists who use the paper to address issues related to social and economic injustice; on the other are business-oriented publishers providing entrepreneurial opportunities to the homeless" (283). While slightly oversimplified,³ this dualistic classification brings up a significantly more complex flip-side of the "survival" mandate: Crucially, street papers are unique in "their formation of entrepreneurial opportunities for homeless and economically marginalized individuals to sell the papers for income" (Parlette 96). And, furthermore, perhaps more so than for the average "entrepreneur," the earning abilities of many street paper vendors can be quite literally a question of survival.

3 This dichotomy has historical roots in the temporally parallel but ideologically divergent development of the street paper movement in North America and Western Europe, respectively, in the early 1990s. However, as the movement has spread and the model has been adapted to the needs and realities of increasingly diverse global regions, I would argue that the lines between these two strains of practice have become considerably less distinct.



Clearly, then, street papers are at their core positioned in a highly contradictory relationship to capitalism, simultaneously fighting against the inequities it produces while also depending upon it as a strategy for “survival,” in both senses of the term. Drawing upon Negt and Kluge’s work in *The Public Sphere and Experience*, we can see how this internal contradiction—without which the street paper could not exist—might necessarily influence the extent to which these publications actively work to open up rhetorical spaces for socially and economically marginalized people. In their call for a “proletarian public sphere,” Negt and Kluge emphasize the need for this sphere to exist in an “autonomous” space that cannot be so easily co-opted by the dominant public sphere of bourgeois capitalism (28). In the case of street papers, the urgent and immediate needs of their vendors—many of whom depend on paper sales for their basic survival—are and *should be* difficult to ignore. As a result, the need to produce a product with sufficient exchange value to support the fulfillment of these needs must always be weighed against more radical concerns for long-term social transformation.

Regardless of the authenticity of their commitment to such aims, the fight to strike a balance between these two directives is, and will continue to be, an inescapable contradiction at the heart of street papers’ work. However, rather than viewing this fact as a liability, Harter et al. suggest that we frame it as an opportunity, indeed a key source of the “emancipatory potential” in street paper publication (422). Working against “our society’s tendency to talk and think in terms of binary opposites rather than from ‘both/and’ standpoints,” they argue, such moments of discord open up a challenging rhetorical space through which we might critically engage with the ugly but inevitable “tensions between ideals and practicalities” (421). Thus, while easy to criticize from a position of privileged academic detachment, the contradictions inherent in the street paper’s delivery model are not as straightforward as they first appear, serving quite obviously to restrict, but also, conceivably, to *enable* the potential for counterpublic discourse in the movement’s community publishing efforts.



Techné

Emerging out of these challenges of material circulation is a closely related issue of *techné*—namely the fundamental allegiance of the street paper to the medium of print publication. In the present economic and technological context, as we sit back and watch the printed press—as both a business and a social institution—gradually fade into oblivion, street papers remain ardently and inextricably tied to their material form as a function of their existence. Rooted as it is in the practical, material concerns of creating income opportunities for economically marginalized people, a street paper, by definition, cannot call itself a street paper without vendors, and a vendor cannot vend without a newspaper or magazine in hand—or at least that has been the prevailing conviction in the movement up to the present. However, in spite of their valiant efforts to make a space for traditionally silenced voices in the public sphere, there are ways in which street papers’ reliance on print technology in their community publishing practices might ultimately discourage participation by marginalized people lacking the basic literacies and discursive privilege required to enter the conversation.

On a technical level, the formal constraints of ink and paper place clear limitations on both the production and the reception of public discourse. First, by channeling participation through printed discourse, street papers are placing formal alphabetic literacy as a fundamental prerequisite for rhetorical action by homeless and low-income people. This is clearly a problematic expectation, considering the all-too-common correlation between poverty and educational inopportunity, and one that becomes increasingly exclusionary as we consider the movement on a global scale. Secondly, looking to the work of feminist scholar Joan Landes, we might further consider how street papers, as fundamentally print-based media, might be unequipped to support alternative modes of representation through which diverse counterpublics construct and communicate meaning (155). While advances in digital technologies have opened up new modes of expression through audio-visual



composing, the formal identity of street papers has made it difficult for them to put these tools to work in a systematic manner. Finally, drawing upon John Dewey's critique, we must also ask how the "soliloquy" of print publication alone may not, in fact, promote the kinds of interaction between author and audience necessary for dynamic public debate (218). For those individuals whose communicative practices are embedded in more dialogical contexts of oral exchange, it is easy to imagine how the vacuum of social interaction afforded by the printed page might dramatically inhibit rhetorical engagement.

Looking deeper, however, this problem is significantly more complex than one of "mere" technology. Rather, it further relates to the ways in which print technology is embedded in what Michael Warner considers to be the taken-for-granted socially, politically, and historically situated meanings of "publication" (5). In many ways, street papers' unshakeable devotion to the power of the printed press, alongside their celebration of and address to an exclusively "reading public," tends to locate these organizations in a paradoxical relationship to an idealized Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, with its basis in the coffee houses and salons of eighteenth century Europe. While "in principle inclusive" (Habermas 37), such a model brings with it implicit assumptions as to who belongs in the public and what counts as participation, defined in terms of a privileged framework of "critical discussion" (171) and "rational public debate" (169). Despite their deliberate subscription to the progressive values of the alternative press, then, perhaps there are some exclusionary discursive conventions inherent in "publication" itself, which street papers are unable to entirely escape or remake.

According to Negt and Kluge, *language* stands as one of the most powerful instruments of exclusion in the bourgeois public sphere, wherein a set of rigid discursive norms enable the dominant public to govern "[w]hat one is allowed to feel, express, [and] communicate as a realistic person" (31). If we follow this line of thinking, the question becomes not merely whether homeless and economically marginalized



people have the technical or “linguistic” abilities to contribute to public discourse in street papers but also whether they have the “mimetic” abilities to shape their discourse in the image of acceptable participation (45). By imagining participation solely through the printed press, street papers may run the risk of replicating the bourgeois tradition of privileged discourse—a tradition that values “logic” over “emotion” and call for a fundamentally “abstract” rather than “tactile” relationship to language (48)—and, crucially, of alienating marginalized counterpublics from the means of expressing their own experience.

In what on the surface appears to be a direct challenge to this critique, a number of scholars have noted a presence of, and even a preference for emotive, personal, and ultimately *experiential* discourse by homeless and marginalized writers contributing to community-based publishing in street papers. Notably, in their analysis of Chicago’s *StreetWise*, Harter et al. find such discourse to be inherently progressive, arguing that it works to privilege subjective experience as a legitimate way of understanding the world and transmitting knowledge. Through contact with the printed life narratives of marginalized people, they contend, “readers have an opportunity to recognize the standpoints of others, deconstruct implicit stereotypes about these groups and their struggles, and identify possibilities for social change” (416). Such stories promote “identification” and “empathy” (415) and work to disrupt often one-dimensional or abstract representations of “social problems” such as homelessness. Perhaps, then, by taking up the historical excess of meanings surrounding print publication, and by simultaneously working to carve out a place for the personal and the emotional within them, street papers may in fact be working to remake those meanings in the image of a more open and equitable public discourse.

In his “cross-cultural” analysis of street paper discourse, Torck also notes a preponderance of “personal narratives and expression of feelings” in writing by homeless people (385). However, dampening the optimism of Harter et al. regarding the progressive function of experiential



discourse, he offers a starkly divergent reading. While granting that *any* mediated self-representation by homeless people—a group long ignored or mistreated by mainstream media—might be viewed as a progressive development, Torck ultimately condemns such “personal genres,” arguing that they can be viewed as legitimate forms of public discourse *only* if they represent a first step in a larger progression toward “rational and argumentative discourse” (387). Clearly, Torck is betraying a deeply problematic, Habermasian assumption as to the acceptable conventions of public participation. However, what is critical here is the *basis* for this assumption, which, I would argue, is closely tied to the social institution of print publication. As overtly personal, emotional, and therefore “unprofessional,” such writing does not conform to the historically dominant standards of “the press,” and thus may risk being read as different, exceptional, and ultimately marginal discourse.⁴ Thus, while street papers’ efforts to make rhetorical space for counterpublic experience may be one of their greatest discursive strengths, it is important to consider the limitations placed on such efforts by the mechanisms and the meanings of their technology.

Audience

Before moving on, I would like to pick up on one of the more nuanced elements of Torck’s analysis, which I believe warrants further examination. While his disavowal of the worth of experiential discourse is undoubtedly problematic and could even be seen as anti-feminist, it is important to note that Torck makes this judgment, in part, due to a concern that such personal framing tends to “pen [homeless people] into a specific kind of discourse, dominated by pathos” (374). Finding various cases of homeless self-representation characterized by victimhood or Otherness in the pages of the street papers he examines, Torck argues that such personal discourse ultimately serves to “reinforc[e] the distance that can be observed in social life between the

4 It is notable that the writing Torck examines, and much of the writing by marginalized people printed in street papers, is often set apart from the rest of the content in special sections and thus quite literally marked as different.



haves and the have-nots, between the people who fit into society and the ones we decide do not, people who control discourse tools and rational thinking and people who do not” (386). In an interesting parallel, Kurt Lindemann draws a similar conclusion in his ethnographic study of the practice of street paper vending in San Francisco. Lindemann finds that some vendors strategically “perform homelessness” in ways that seek to meet the dominant public’s expectations for an “authentic” but deserving marginalized identity (42). He argues that they are, in some ways, working to maintain the very boundaries that exclude them, albeit in the interest of survival. The explicit reference made by these two studies to relationships of social distance raises a new set of questions as to the relationship between the rhetorical practice of homeless and low-income people—in vending and community publishing contexts, alike—and the distinct character of the street paper *audience*.

Here, it is important to emphasize that, because of their investment in creating work opportunities for economically marginalized people, street papers necessarily address themselves to an audience of primarily middle-class, liberal-minded readers—people who have both the expendable income and the social inclination to purchase a newspaper or magazine from a local vendor. While, at its root, the street paper philosophy is predicated on breaking down the social and economic distance between people at the center of society and those at its margins, paradoxically, both the practical economics of their vending model and the identity politics of their advocacy framework depend upon this very distance in order to function. Thus, homeless and low-income people, whether participating in the embodied rhetoric of street paper vending or the discursive practice of community-based publishing, may be doing so with the conscious understanding not only that their practice is primarily directed at the center, but also, more crucially, that they themselves, as rhetorical agents, are at the margins. Certainly, this distinctive relationship of writer to audience, balanced as it is on basic inequality, must necessarily provide homeless and low-income people with limited and limiting possibilities for self-representation.



As a final note on the topic, however, it is worth examining the ways in which the social practice of vending may actually work to promote positive forms of human connection across these binary inequalities. As Novak and Harter argue, “The commercial exchange that constitutes vending offers opportunities for sellers and buyers to connect, and in doing so flips the scripts of separation and isolation typically experienced by those without homes” (407). While, in keeping with Lindemann’s critique, they recognize that this exchange has potential to both “undermine” and “reinforce” the divisions between disparate publics (404), Novak and Harter suggest that there is at least some intrinsic value in this simple act of connection. Parlette reinforces this belief, recognizing that such relationships, whether built through long-term vending or fleeting moments of recognition at the instant of the purchase, might provide “a vital link” between members of marginalized and “mainstream” groups, which could prove to be valuable for both (102). Qualifying this claim, however, Parlette also notes the fundamentally “individualist” nature of the vending model in its entrepreneurial approach to survival (103). Thus, while these street-level interactions may help build connections between mainstream and marginalized publics, they may ultimately do little to forge dialogue between vendors themselves. Despite this limitation, however, there is no question that the street paper’s potential for localized, face-to-face relationship-building represents an indispensable source of its “social change” potential.

Situating the global vendor blog project

As a long-time supporter of and participant in the international street paper movement, I offer the preceding analysis not in the spirit of critique but rather that of invention. In locating points of both tension and possibility in the complex formations of delivery, techne, and audience that characterize street papers’ current practice, I have sought to build a foundation upon which to extend the movement’s contributions to “extracurricular” literacy and community-based publishing among



homeless and low-income people. In this vein, I now turn to discuss a collaborative initiative that I am currently working to develop in partnership with INSP, which aims to create a global platform for participatory blogging by street paper vendors.

Project overview

The idea for the global vendor blog project first emerged in 2007, growing out of a collaboration between about ten street paper editors participating in an international “working group” that I facilitated in my capacity as INSP’s Network Development Officer. Over the past year, I have continued working with INSP on a volunteer basis to further develop the concept and create a plan for its implementation. As things currently stand, this initiative is still very much in the early stages of its development: I have designed a preliminary technical platform for the blog network, begun to create a toolkit of training resources and best practices for blog-based community literacy programs, and facilitated a series of pilot blogging workshops with a small group of vendors at a street paper in Seattle, Washington.⁵ As such, at the present moment, I can speak only to the project as a concept—its preliminary structure and design, its precedents in other promising innovations in street paper discourses and technologies, and the value of the intervention it aspires to make in the movement’s community publishing practices.

The global vendor blog project utilizes a multisite blog network⁶ as a central structure through which to draw together and circulate the discursive practices of individual vendors participating in the initiative through local street papers around the world. The model functions as

5 As I write this, I am also preparing to lead a workshop for delegates at a regional conference of North American street papers to explain the project and build further participation among local street papers.

6 I have designed the preliminary technical structure for the blog network using the multisite capabilities of Wordpress 3.0. As the project continues to grow, we may research funding opportunities for the development of a more sophisticated and customizable platform, depending on the needs that arise.



follows: Each INSP street paper registers its participating vendors as individual contributors on a collaborative blog, which it designs and manages locally, based on a template provided by INSP. Vendor-bloggers have access to log-in and post content to the blog of their own street paper, as well as to communicate with vendors at other street papers by posting comments on and links to other blogs in the network. All of these local street paper blogs are interconnected through a central global portal administered by INSP, which includes a public interface allowing visitors to navigate between and among the individual street paper blogs on the network.

The project is working to build momentum by connecting with the existing infrastructure represented by the many vendor art and writing groups currently operating at local street papers around the world, while at the same time developing new spaces of “extracurricular” composing practice across INSP’s global membership. Street papers are invited to consider the blog platform as an alternative outlet for existing community publishing initiatives, as well as to take up new practices of digital literacy and multimodal composing through workshops tailored specifically to the blogging initiative. With the aide of automated online translation software, participating vendors are encouraged to situate their blogging practice as part of an ongoing global conversation, creating posts that draw from and speak back to the diverse experiences and perspectives of fellow vendor-bloggers around the world. Furthermore, at a level of community literacy pedagogy, facilitators of local blogging workshops are connected through an internal metablogging forum, through which they might reflect upon their pedagogical practice, exchange ideas and resources, and develop structures for more deliberate cross-boundary collaboration.

Challenges

Before moving on to discuss what I believe to be the value of this digital intervention, let me first explain what the global vendor blog project



cannot do. First, and most importantly, the project cannot claim to offer an alternative to the street paper's ongoing and vital work of "survival." As I have noted, this collaborative initiative is intended only to *extend*, not to replace the current material and discursive practices of local street papers. As the project develops, papers will continue printing; vendors will continue vending—they may just also begin blogging on the side. Basically, participation by vendors in the global blogging forum will take place on a purely voluntary basis, and vendor-bloggers will not receive monetary remuneration for their contributions. Inevitably, and regrettably, this fact will no doubt constrain the participation of some of the most severely marginalized vendors, for whom personal time away from street paper sales is an impossible luxury. However, based on the experience of decades of street paper writing groups and community publishing workshops—many of which offer no financial incentives for participation—it is safe to assume that the opportunity to learn new skills, build relationships with peers, and express themselves to a public audience will be enough to motivate those vendors who are inclined to find time to participate.

Secondly, and on a related note, the global vendor blog project cannot and would in no way aspire to do away with the longstanding practice of traditional, print-based community publishing among local street papers. As I have argued, under the present conditions, print technology remains a foundational and nonnegotiable fact at the center of the street paper model. Despite the technical and discursive complexities that I have located in the mechanism and meanings of print publication, I firmly believe in the intrinsic value of this practice. Without it, the street paper would lose an invaluable ingredient of the "social change" potential that makes it unique as both a source of social opportunity and a progressive media outlet. Furthermore, international street papers collectively reach an estimated annual readership of over 100 million people worldwide ("About INSP"), and to ignore such potential would be a serious error. Thus, rather than to displace or overshadow existing activities,



this project aims to work together with them, sharing experiences and inspiring innovative approaches that might help to invigorate community literacy and “extracurricular” composing practices, in general, across the movement.

Finally, despite its best intentions and highest ambitions, the global vendor blog project cannot work miracles. The staggering inequities of the so-called “digital divide”—a phenomenon that has been decades, perhaps even centuries in the making and that becomes increasingly disheartening the more global one’s gaze—will not be easily or quickly overcome. The technical capacities of INSP street papers are highly disparate, often reflecting the vast inequalities in resource distribution between the Global North and South more generally. Thus, participation in the project must necessarily start out small, connecting first with those street papers already equipped to support local blogging workshops, and build slowly over time as INSP works to assess and build the capacity of its broader membership. Moreover, further complicating this issue are questions of digital literacy. As Jeffery Grabill argues, “literacy as an access principle deals with knowing how to use computer technologies as well as how to write effectively with such technologies” (70). Thus, in the spirit of starting where participants are—and assuming that few will have had substantial previous experience writing in digital environments—holistic digital literacies must necessarily be a core component of these community pedagogies, in many cases requiring an additional investment in “training the trainer” activities in order to build the pedagogical capacity of local staff and volunteers. While clearly an obstacle, this reality also represents a powerful opportunity to expand the ways in which marginalized people might participate and communicate in the world, on a personal, professional, and civic scale.

A digital intervention in community publishing

The global vendor blog project seeks to respond to the complexities inherent in the street paper model, as a fundamentally survival-driven,



print-based, and hyper-localized communication platform, while at the same time building upon core values of participation, experiential discourse, and relationship-building that are at the heart of the movement's philosophy. As a digital intervention in community publishing, the project draws upon precedents set by promising innovations in street paper discourse and technologies, which have emerged out of the global movement in recent years, to propose a model characterized by three core principles: *Web-based networks*, *multimodal composing*, and *[counter] public interactivity*. Together, these principles work to carve out a new rhetorical space for translocal, counterpublic discursive practice among homeless and economically marginalized people around the world.

Web-based networks

Most notably, as an online platform for networked communication, the global vendor blog project builds upon the innovation represented by INSP's Web-based alternative news agency, the "Street News Service" (SNS - www.streetnewsservice.org). Established in 2002,⁷ the SNS serves as a forum for multilingual content exchange and republication among INSP's membership, as well as a publicly accessible platform for delivering independent local news and perspectives to a global audience. Standing out as one of the most compelling examples of the increasing drive toward creative, cross-boundary collaboration among global street papers, this project harnesses the potential of networked digital media technologies to re-imagine the geographic, linguistic, and socio-cultural boundaries of street papers' discursive practice.

As James Bohman argues, the rise of the Internet has opened up new possibilities for, if not "transform[ing]" at least "*extend[ing]* the public sphere of civil society" beyond its previously bounded spatial and temporal horizons (144). Like the SNS, the global vendor blog project embraces this potential, taking steps to broaden the reach of rhetorical

7 The SNS began as a regional initiative of the North American Street Newspaper Association in 2002, and was taken over as a global platform by INSP in 2005.



practice by homeless and low-income people beyond the hyper-localized constraints of street papers' print-based delivery. In doing so, the blog project notably acts to preserve the core value of *experience* that characterizes street papers' community publishing work. Rather than sacrifice the local to be swallowed up in the nebulous expanse of globalism, the project works to embed nodes of local community literacy practice in a fundamentally *translocal* environment. While channeling the experiential discourse of vendor bloggers through networked flows of communication, the project also remains deeply "rooted in the localities of everyday life" (Hepp 327)—particularly everyday life at the margins.

Furthermore, setting itself apart from previous innovations in networked street paper discourse, the blog project begins to move away not only from the mechanisms of print publication, but also from their meanings. While the SNS provides a valuable global forum for the translocal circulation of "alternative voices"⁸ on the Web, it does so in a way that essentially replicates the discursive conventions of the printed press. Because discourse circulated through the site is drawn, almost exclusively, from content originally published in print-based editions of local street papers, the relatively few voices of homeless and low-income people that are taken up by the SNS are ultimately subject to the same editorial gatekeepers, and the same discursive constraints, as their printed counterparts. Thus, while the SNS is effectively a translocal network of street paper "publication," the global vendor blog project works to extend this translocality to a level of participatory communication. By connecting them with a fundamentally networked platform for Web-based *self*-publishing, the blog project provides homeless and low-income people with the direct means to address themselves to a global public.

8 It is important to note that the content on the Street News Service reflects the diversity of street paper content in general, ranging from grassroots, activist campaign journalism to celebrity interviews, and the proportion of articles written by vendors and other homeless and low-income writers is relatively small.



Multimodal Composing

Secondly, by disrupting the inevitability of textual discourse through audio-visual media, the global vendor blog project builds upon a growing interest in multimodality that has recently emerged at the margins of the movement's practice. A notable example is the "Mag DVD" project, established in 2005 by *L'Itineraire* street paper in Montreal, Canada, which engages homeless youth in collaborative and participatory videography to conceive of and produce a "magazine" in audio-visual form—or a "Mag DVD." With content ranging from personal testimonies of mental illness, to features on underground artists, to music videos dramatizing the lives of homeless "squeegee kids," the project was conceived as a means to reach out to a particularly marginalized segment of the city's homeless population—young people, ages 18 to 30, who tend to associate street papers with the people Lee Stringer perhaps not very delicately refers to as "street geezers" (63). Grounded in a fundamental understanding of and respect for the variant ways in which diverse groups of people understand and communicate meaning, the Mag DVD project stands out as an exemplary case of a local street paper thinking beyond the formal constraints of print publication to re-imagine the technologies of community publishing.

Building on this localized momentum, the global vendor blog project promotes multimodal composing as a valid and accessible form of community literacy throughout the broader movement, while at the same time distancing itself from exclusionary discourses of professionalism associated with the "magazine" form. By mobilizing diverse practices of photo-, audio-, and video-blogging alongside more traditional textual discourse, the project carries forward a feminist call to embrace "the culturally variant ways that humans produce and make use of multiple representations" (Landes 155). Ultimately, it aims to create a more inclusive space for communicative agency wherein marginalized people can build critical digital literacies to support the unique ways in which they understand and transmit knowledge in the world.



[Counter]public interactivity

Finally, as an online space of interactive communication, the global vendor blog project builds upon the unique spirit of “public interaction and dialogue” represented by the “Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour,” an experiment in performative community literacy facilitated by Paula Mathieu in her work with homeless and low-income writers at Chicago’s *StreetWise* street paper (Mathieu 39). This initiative worked to engage writers in a collaboration to create a “theatrical bus tour of Chicago,” in which they told stories of their lives in the city to a live (and mobile) audience. Crucially, this initiative arose in response to the group’s frustration with the lack of feedback its published writing afforded (38). Thus, the bus tour concept, as an embodied and physically present alternative to print publication, expands on street papers’ innate potential to promote cross-boundary dialogue, in this case, through a collaborative discourse that moves beyond the entrepreneurial frame of vending. By implicating the public in a fundamentally interactive “composing” experience, this project takes steps to challenge traditional relations of author and audience, moving away from the “soliloquy” of mere publication and offering new opportunities for “dialogue” (Dewey 218).

The global vendor blog project, like the “Not Your Mama’s Bus Tour,” seeks to promote more dynamic forms of reciprocal communication in street papers’ community literacy practice. By harnessing the interactive possibilities of Web-based digital media technologies, and by extending them through the distinctive networked relations of a deliberate blogging community, the project encourages a sustained flow of commentary and dialogue between, on one hand, vendor-bloggers and outside readers and, on the other, vendor-bloggers themselves. In the first case, the platform promotes the same kind of cross-boundary social interactions that are central to a street paper model, carrying forward Danielle Allen’s prescription for a citizenship of “talking to strangers,” wherein, by engaging in conversation across lines of difference, “one gets not only an extra pair of eyes but also an ability to see and understand parts



of the world that are invisible to oneself” (167). While such mediated digital interaction can in no way replace the visceral human contact of the vending transaction—as Dewey argues, “There is no substitute for the vitality and depth of close and direct intercourse and attachment” (213)—what it can do is expand the scope of this contact beyond the idealistic hyper-locality of face-to-face community.

Taking this one step further, though, it is through the second form of interactivity—the internal, translocal dialogue among vendor-bloggers themselves—wherein the global vendor blog project makes its most compelling intervention in community literacy practice. Most notably, by providing a space for homeless and low-income vendors to follow, respond to, and allow their own rhetorical practice to be informed by the experiential discourse of other marginalized people worldwide, the project works to disrupt the inevitability of the street paper’s exclusively middle-class and potentially Othering configuration of audience. In doing so, the project aims to construct what Nancy Fraser calls a “parallel discursive arena,” wherein the diverse but overlapping counterpublics represented by global street paper vendors might “invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (14) in a safe space of collective self-making and exchange. Furthermore, by connecting with and feeding into the organized networks of communication constructed by the global movement, the project provides the potential impetus for “agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (Fraser 14), ultimately enabling new forms of integrated and inclusive “convergences in translocal social action” (Appadurai 8).

Rethinking the technologies of community publishing

In this essay, I have drawn upon interdisciplinary theories of the public sphere, as well as my own engagement with global street papers, to consider the ways in which a digital intervention in the technologies of community publishing might extend the scope, impact, and participatory potential of rhetorical practice by marginalized people. Offering my ongoing work to



develop a platform for participatory blogging by street paper vendors as a foundation, I have set forth a model of Web-based networks, multimodal composing, and [counter]public interaction, arguing for its potential to open up new rhetorical spaces for translocal community-building among homeless and low-income people worldwide. Because the project I have proposed is still at an early stage in its development, I position this essay as a conceptual starting point, hoping that it will serve to inform my own thinking as the project continues to evolve, as well as to inspire wider engagement with questions of circulation and technology in community literacy settings. As a follow-up, I will revisit the framework that I have laid out in this essay and explore the ways in which the global vendor blog project has been taken up, appropriated, and carried forward in new directions through the actual rhetorical practice of local street paper vendors.

While, in many ways, the motivations behind this essay spring from what is ultimately a narrow personal, intellectual, and political pursuit, I believe my work here has wider implications for the field of composition and the study of community literacy, more specifically. First, I offer my engagement with street papers as a rich example of one of the many potential sites within which compositionists might employ our skills to support purposeful and public discourse beyond the walls of our classrooms. Second, I situate this project as part of a broader, ongoing effort to take up Nancy Welch's call for the discipline to "make rhetorical space" (486) for [counter]public discourse when we find existing public spaces to be inadequate. And, finally, I position my argument as an invitation to community literacy practitioners to ask ourselves whether localized frameworks of print-based technology may indeed lie unquestioned at the core of the practice and meaning of "community publishing" itself, and, if so, to consider what might be gained from challenging their privilege and inevitability.

I am a firm believer that the value of community publishing goes well beyond the "empowering" experience of creative expression itself.



Producing writing and seeing it laid out and bound in “published” form is indeed a powerful experience for any writer, not least of which for those whose voices so often go otherwise unheard. However, as Dewey argues, “Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth” (219). Thus, alongside our concern with promise and pedagogies of community-based literacies, we must also continue examining the technologies and networks of their discursive circulation. What is at stake, I believe, is not simply the warm feeling of participation by silenced voices in “Public Discourse,” but rather the enormous potential such voices have when invited to participate fully as discursive publics. As Danielle Allen so eloquently puts it, “[t]he invisible can exercise their own political agency precisely by converting the wisdom derived from their experience into the material from which to refashion the meaning of citizenship for everyone” (116).



Acknowledgments

Thank you to Jess Enoch for her enthusiasm and encouragement in the development of this article, as well as to Pamela VanHaitsma, Dahliani Reynolds, and Jean Bessette for their invaluable editorial support. Thank you to Jamie “Skye” Bianco for her steadfast guidance with all things digital and also to my mom, Pat Anderson, for her proofreading expertise. And a special thank you goes out to Reggie, Kat, and everyone at *Real Change* who helped to make the pilot blogging workshops a success. It was an absolute joy to work with you (and I’ll keep my eye out for your latest posts!)

Works Cited

- “About INSP.” *The International Network of Street Papers*. The International Network of Street Papers, n.d. Web. 30 April 2010.
- Allen, Danielle. *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004. Print.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996. Print.
- Bohman, James. “Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy.” *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*. Ed. Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. 131-155. Print.
- Dewey, John. *The Public and its Problems*. Athens: Ohio University, 1954. Print.
- Fraser, Nancy. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” Ed. Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993. 1-32. Print



- Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition." *College Composition and Communication*. 45.1 (1994), 75-92. Print.
- Grabill, Jeffery T. *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change*. Albany: State University of New York, 2001. Print.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT, 1989. Print.
- Harter, Lynn M., Edwards, Autumn, McClanahan, Andrea, Hopson, Mark C. and Evelyn Carson-Stern. "Organizing for Survival and Social Change: The Case of StreetWise." *Communication Studies*. 55.2 (2004): 407-424. Print.
- Hepp, Andreas. "Localities of Diasporic Communicative Spaces: Material Aspects of Translocal Mediated Networking." *Communication Review*. 12.4 (2009), 327-348. Print.
- Howley, Kevin. "A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy." *Journalism*. 4.3 (2003): 273-292. Print.
- Landes, Joan B. "The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration." *Feminism, the Public, and the Private*. Ed. Joan B. Landes. New York: Oxford University, 1998. 135-157. Print.
- Lindemann, Kurt. "A Tough Sell: Stigma as Souvenir in the Contested Performances of San Francisco's Homeless *Street Sheet* Vendors." *Text and Performance Quarterly*. 27.1 (2007): 41-57. Print.
- Mathieu, Paula, and Diana George. "Not Going It Alone: Public Writing, Independent Media, and the Circulation of Homeless Advocacy." *College Composition and Communication* 61.1 (2009): 130-150. Print.
- . *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Portsmouth: Boyton/Cook, 2005. Print.
- Negt, Oskar and Alexander Kluge. *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993. Print.



- Novak, David R. and Lynn M. Harter. "'Flipping the Scripts' of Poverty and Panhandling: Organizing Democracy by Creating Connections." *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. 36.4 (2008): 391-414. Print.
- Parlette, Vanessa. "*Toronto Street News* as a Counter Public Sphere." *Understanding Community Media*, Ed. Kevin Howley. Washington: Sage, 2010. 96-105. Print.
- Stringer, Lee. *Grand Central Winter: Stories from the Street*. New York: Seven Stories, 1997. Print.
- Torck, Danièle. "Voices of Homeless People in Street Newspapers: A Cross-Cultural Exploration." *Discourse and Society*. 12.3 (2001): 371-392. Print.
- Trimbur, John. "Composition and the Circulation of Writing." *College Composition and Communication*. 52.2 (2000): 188-219. Print.
- Warner, Michael. *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1990. Print.
- Welch, Nancy. "Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Post-Publicity Era." *College Composition and Communication*. 56.3 (2005): 470-492. Print.