Public 2.0. Social Networking, Nonprofits, and the Rhetorical Work of Public Making

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Much of the scholarship that explores the democratizing potential of the Internet begins with an assumption that ideal public discourse will appear as on-line deliberation; it seeks out discussion forums on issues-based and community-oriented websites to examine whether strangers come together in these spaces to deliberate about public concerns. This article questions the focus on deliberation by looking at the social networking practices of a local non-profit. Miriam's Kitchen, which serves meals to homeless individuals in Washington DC, actively engages many followers and fans through their Twitter and Facebook feeds, but their social networking does not set out to encourage deliberation among homeless and housed people. Nevertheless, the essay argues, their on-line rhetorical work should be understood as the work of public-formation. The essay analyzes the local contexts and participants—including, in this case, the constantly public lives of chronically homeless individuals—and considers how social networking offers people a new tool in public formation: the power of circulation.

Yes, it's another story about Twitter. But this one is not about narcissistic celebs tweeting their daily dross. This is a story about how a local charity that feeds the hungry is capitalizing on social media better than many private companies.

—*Ncyz-Conner*

In July 2009, *The Washington Business Journal* told a story that many area nonprofits already knew: Miriam's Kitchen is on the leading edge of a trend to use social networking. Because my first-year writing service-learning classes partner with Miriam's Kitchen, I have followed their transformation. I watched as Miriam's Kitchen created their first Facebook page in 2008 and then, in March 2009, with a flurry of online activity, revamped their Facebook page and launched a Twitter account. By July 2010, they had 2775 Twitter followers; 497 people "liked" them on Facebook. And the result—celebrated frequently in updates on both sites—has been a steady stream of much-needed material donations: tea bags from Boston, socks from California, lotions, soaps and much more.

In this article, I'd like to investigate what social networking at places like Miriam's Kitchen might suggest about the potential for the internet to serve as a "public sphere." From the perspective of many who study public space and public spheres on and off the internet, Miriam's Kitchen's social networking seems to fall short because it is directed primarily to one group—donors. Political scientist Iris Young argues that "In open and accessible public spaces and forums, one should expect to encounter and hear from those who are different, whose social perspectives, experiences, and affiliations are different" (Young, cited in Mitchell 116). Geographer Don Mitchell says that urban planners should maintain public spaces "marked by free interaction and the absence of coercion by powerful institutions. . . . [P]ublic space [is] an unconstrained space within which political movements can organize and expand into wider arenas" (115). In such spaces—virtual or actual—homeless people should be able to assert themselves as part of "the public"—part of the "legitimate" group of people who make up our democracy (Mitchell 115). In a truly public space, everyone has a voice.

Consider that multi-vocal ideal alongside a passage from the *Washington Business Journal* article. Jennifer Roccanti, mentioned in the passage, is Miriam's Kitchen's Development Associate; she manages their social networking.

Miriam's case workers used to say that for their guests, success was coming in for a cup of coffee. With "social media, success is now a box of tea," Roccanti says. "We got a box of tea because of Twitter, and that is successful because we have just built a relationship. It's really about building new, stronger relationships." (Ncyz-Conner).

Whereas the caseworker focused on the Kitchen's relationship with a homeless person, Roccanti focuses on the Kitchen's relationship with donors. Neither the Kitchen itself, nor the Twitter and Facebook interactions seem to bring the middle class public and the homeless public together to learn from and with each other. We therefore might dismiss what's going on as reinforcing a patronizing ideal of public relationships, where middle class citizens give to the poor, where "the poor" are imagined as dependent upon benefactors rather than as people who can represent themselves and speak back to social and economic inequalities. This was my first reaction: I worried that the regular updates and exchanges that Roccanti had with donors, volunteers, and other friends and followers on Twitter and Facebook reinforced an unequal, patronizing kind of charity.

But the more I looked at what Roccanti has been doing, and the more I have considered the context in which Miriam's Kitchen carries out their work, the more I've come to see that the lens I had been using— seeking out spaces for deliberative exchanges across diverse groups of people—may not be the best way to understand all that's happening. For one thing, over sixty percent of the guests at Miriam's Kitchen are chronically homeless. The life conditions of homeless people upset one of the foundations of this deliberative model of public-formation: the separation of public and private. Our evaluation of Miriam's Kitchen's social networking as a public space, I argue, cannot only be based on who *enters* public space but also who can choose to leave it. Second, the theory of the public sphere that Young and Mitchell draw on relies on a belief that deliberation is the central mechanism of public formation. Within a theory of deliberative democracy, people come together as

"publics"—as people who recognize their interdependence and joint capacity—when they jointly analyze, debate, arrive at new insights about public issues. But after looking more carefully at how Miriam's Kitchen uses social networking, I am less convinced that *deliberation* is the key component of public formation. The non-deliberative exchanges on Twitter and Facebook create a sense of capacity and joint mission by relying on another element of public formation: circulation.

I'll begin with a review of how Miriam's Kitchen uses Facebook and Twitter. Then I'll explore in more how the conditions of chronic homelessness challenge the foundations of the ideals of multi-vocal and deliberative democracy. Finally, I'll explain how Miriam's Kitchen's approach offers an alternative theory of public formation.

Social Networking at Miriam's Kitchen

Miriam's Kitchen made a big push to expand their online presence in March 2009, when First Lady Michelle Obama came to serve breakfast. With a few days' notice, Development Associate Jennifer Roccanti revamped their Facebook page and started a Twitter account. As Roccanti and Development Director Sara Gibson explained, Twitter was a way to let their supporters know about Mrs. Obama visit in real time. The social networking was also a way to capitalize on what they knew would be a tremendous amount of media coverage. The Twitter feed that day gave access to reporters who could not be on-site. Over the course of a week from March 5, 2009 (when Mrs. Obama came to the kitchen) to March 12, the story was picked up in eight local (Washington DC) publications, one hundred eighty-two national publications and thirty-five international publications. Many of those reporters remained as Miriam's Kitchen Twitter "followers" after the event. A Lexis Nexis search reveals that the media coverage shot up from fifteen stories in 2008 to one hundred nine in 2009.

The press's coverage of Miriam's Kitchen spawned social network connections among other people within DC and beyond. According

to Roccanti, most of her 2,775 Twitter followers have not been to the Kitchen before. They started following because of relationships through the media or other tweets. Her nearly 500 Facebook fans[1], she says, are more likely to have a direct relationship with the organization, such as volunteers or donors—at least in the first year. Her Twitter followers interact more than Facebook fans.

Roccanti and Gibson reinforce two main messages about their use of social networking. First, their goal is to deepen relationships with people. Second, these relationships have landed Miriam's Kitchen donations from all over the country. Roccanti regularly repeats a story about their first success—this story shows up, for example, in the *Washington Business Journal* article (2009), in an interview with *Washington Business Tonight* (2009), and is one she repeated to me in an interview February 2010. A California business woman, Kyle Smitley had first heard about Miriam's Kitchen when she interned with First Lady Laura Bush at the Whitehouse. She began following Miriam's Kitchen on Twitter, and soon received one of Roccanti's "On our wish list today" tweets. Smitley forwarded the wish list to her business email network; later Miriam's Kitchen mysteriously received boxes of socks from California, and tea from Boston. The donations came from people who had had no previous connections with the nonprofit. Roccanti emphasizes that Smitley is still very involved with Miriam's Kitchen. In March 2010, she donated $1 to the Kitchen for every comment on her company blog and, as Roccanti announced in a Miriam's Kitchen Facebook update, Smitley's early 2010 clothing catalog nods to Miriam's Kitchen when one image of a young boy is captioned: "Luke wasn't afraid of anything hiding under his bed. What bothered him was that tonight, some people didn't have one" (Barley & Birch). Twitter and Facebook, says Roccanti, are about building relationships that allow people to have a direct effect, and to "build relationships on *their* timeline": she allows people to "choose when and how to engage."

1.   In 2010, a Facebook redesign removed the option to "fan" an organization; instead, people can indicate that they "like" an organization, celebrity or another person.

My own experience with the power of such social networking happened during the historic winter storms that struck DC in February 2010. In an area where average snowfall measures a few inches a year, we had two major snow storms within a week. Snow began falling Friday night Feb 5th, and by Sunday morning, I measured twenty-six and a half inches on my porch. We had barely dug out when the snow began again Tuesday. While that storm didn't bring as much snow (total of about 8 inches), Wednesday's blizzard was one of the worst I have ever experienced. The white-outs were so severe I could not see the street a few yards from my house and I worried all day that the hovering tree branches would tear off and jam into our roof. The storm raged at this intensity all day long on Wednesday.

What can one do in a storm like that? I checked my email constantly, and I logged onto Facebook as often as I could. On Tuesday morning, between the two storms, I received an email from Miriam's Kitchen. Titled "We're There When You Need Us," the email comforted its readers: "We know many of you are concerned about the homeless men and women you see sleeping outside or standing on street corners hungry for food and warmth. And so we hope this email will help put to rest some of those concerns and assure you that Miriam's Kitchen is there when those homeless men and women need us." The email updated readers about how Miriam's Kitchen staff and volunteers made it through the snow (the chef "hosted a sleepover" for the volunteers), assured us that they had a steady stream of "emergency volunteers" and reiterated what we could do for homeless men and women, even if we could not make it to Miriam's Kitchen. We could shovel our sidewalks, call the hypothermia line if we saw people sleeping in the cold, and so on.

The day of the blizzard, Miriam's Kitchen posted this status update on Facebook around noon. "Miriam's Kitchen: Of the 62 guests we served this morning, most of them slept on the streets last night." I read this while the snow blew sideways past my window. Then a half hour later: "Miriam's Kitchen: ON OUR WISH LIST TODAY: Warm

men's clothing. Our guests are coming in soaking wet from the snow & we don't have enough clothing to keep them warm. If you live near us, please help**.**" The wind outside was fierce, the snow stung and bit.

I replied that I'd spread the word at George Washington University, where I work. I live miles away, but students on campus are only a few blocks from Miriam's Kitchen. I emailed the two Facebook updates to current and previous students. I emailed them to my colleagues in the writing program. I emailed the head of residential life.

On Thursday morning, the status update read: "Miriam's Kitchen: UPDATE: Thanks to all of your help, we received a LOT of warm clothing last night! We still need blankets, socks, gloves and hats though."

On Friday, Miriam's Kitchen replied to the post where I had said that I would spread the word to the GW network: "Miriam's Kitchen**:** Phyllis—I think your network has had an impact!" And included a link to a GW radio spot in which the GW student author shared how he discovered Miriam's Kitchen through an email from a professor and met up with other students who were also on their way to deliver clothes. The GW student newspaper, the *Hatchet*, ran a similar story. GW students, teachers, and friends had rallied to the cause during the blizzard. It seems hyperbolic to say it, but those dry clothes probably saved some lives during the storm.

Both of these stories—Smitley's and mine—highlight a particular kind of capacity that Miriam's Kitchen reinforces through their social networking: the capacity of people to mobilize their networks so that others can make a material donation to the Kitchen. And material donations matter to an organization that provides breakfast, dinner, case management and a suite of community-building and therapeutic studio classes to over 4,000 homeless people, with a budget of $1.7 million. A staff member told me recently that because of in-kind donations from area food stores, Miriam's Kitchen is able to prepare a full mean for each guest for $1.

Fig. 1. Blizzard Updates. Miriam's Kitchen, "Miriam's Kitchen." July 30, 2010 Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/miriamskitchen>.

Valuable as it is, though, collecting donations is simply the most tangible outcome of Miriam's Kitchen's social networking. The exchanges that lead to those donations are full of specific, rhetorical work that brings fans, followers and their networks together as a public, one that adopts a particular attitude towards the conditions of homelessness, a particular understanding of their capacity to address those conditions, and a particular mode of interacting around those concerns. Recognizing that this public formation is happening among journalists, activists, online followers, and Miriam's kitchen's staff, volunteers and donors—but without the voices of homeless men and women, a point I'll examine in more detail later—I want to use this example to unpack some of the rhetorical strategies of public formation.

Rhetorics of Public Formation: Exigency, Capacity, Circulation and Stranger Relations

Lloyd Bitzer says that what turns any situation into a *rhetorical* situation is *rhetorical exigency*: it must be a situation that "is capable of positive modification," something that we believe can be changed, and one where the rhetor and audience alike believe that change "requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse" (Bitzer 6). To extend his argument, in a *public* rhetorical situation, the rhetor posits that the situation that can be changed requires people to work together to make that "positive modification"; moreover, the rhetor has some way to reach those change-agents. Part of the rhetorical task, then, is to make the audience believe that, by coming together, they are *capable* of making change. The sense of agency invoked in public texts insists on the *interdependence* of the audience members, who orient toward each other to gain this agency. The public comes to feel their collective power not only among those who are immediately present or known, but also from strangers lurking at the edges of the space, who are believed to share this approach and whose affirmative presence is regularly signaled in the discourse. Finally, publics coalesce through the circulation of discourse: a public solidifies as a social entity when people see the discourse in multiple places, among multiple speakers, over the course of time (Warner 90-97).

What kinds of rhetorical moves does Roccanti use here to establish public exigency, capacity, and interdependence among strangers? How does she keep the discourse circulating?

As Development Associate at Miriam's Kitchen, Roccanti describes her work as "building relationships" with people and "to deepen those relationships so we can meet our budget for our guests." And she quickly names what's at stake: "Our goal . . .is to raise more money so we can continue to keep our programs strong and our guests alive." As the story of the blizzard makes clear, her words are not an exaggeration: coming in out of the weather can be a matter of life and death. Moreover, as Roccanti explains, the people who come to Miriam's Kitchen are a

particular subset of the broader homeless population in DC: "We have a unique community. We cater to chronically homeless people." Homeless organizations throughout DC draw different constituents: Bread for the City, for example, attracts people with very low-paying jobs whose focus is on affordable housing. DC Central Kitchen works with homeless people who seek a particular set of job skills: they employ and train homeless men and women to work in their kitchen and as part of their catering program.[2] But Miriam's Kitchen works with chronically homeless people, many of whom "may never want to be inside," Roccanti explains. "Just coming into Miriam's Kitchen is a success for those who will stay outside." When chronically homeless people feel enough trust to come in out of the street for a small while, the choice is hardly trivial, especially during storms like the blizzard or heat waves that blast the homeless with one-hundred degree days for weeks at a stretch.

To consider the question of social networking's public exigency, then, we have to look at two different situations. First, what exigency brings together an online community of Miriam's Kitchen followers and "fans," a group that includes many people who have never been to the Kitchen or may never have talked to a homeless person, people who may not appreciate the unique challenges living on the streets, yet nevertheless sign up to receive updates about what Miriam's Kitchen is doing. Second, how does Miriam's Kitchen use the social networking platforms to convince followers that their participation in this medium and with Miriam's Kitchen in general will effect change? And third—a point I'll take up later—what is the exigency for Miriam's Kitchen itself, and how does its vision of "positive modification" in the lives of chronically homeless people inform the interactions in the online community?

Roccanti imagines the online community as people who are concerned about homelessness. She invokes her audience as people who already care and want to know what to do. Her task is to help them imagine steps

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2   DC Central Kitchen's philosophy is laid out in Robert Egger and Howard Yoon's book, *Begging for Change.*

they can take, but to do so in a way that reinforces one of the unique aspects she sees at Miriam's Kitchen, the positive, uplifting atmosphere in which such work is done.[3] To create effective updates, Roccanti has to identify opportunities provided by current events inside and outside of the Kitchen that allow her to highlight this component of Miriam's Kitchen's work.

Roccanti cycles through five main types of status updates on both Twitter and Facebook. (See Figure 2).   These are often tied to current events in DC or at Miriam's Kitchen. The five categories are

1. "**One thing you can do to help,**" posted every Friday;
2. **Links about issues** relating to homelessness and hunger;
3. **"Our wish list**" and thank-yous;
4. **"On the menu,**" posted twice a day; and
5. **Updates about events** and media coverage relating to Miriam's Kitchen.

The blizzard story and the often-told story of the organization's initial forays into social networking illustrate the power of the use of the first two categories.   Roccanti sends out "one thing you can do to help" every Friday, and—as with the blizzard email—the advice is simple and targeted to help people identify small changes in their everyday lives and interactions that can affect homeless people. The advice might be anything from "donate water bottles to your nearest homeless services nonprofit" (posted on a particularly steamy day in July) to "say hello to someone on the street."

Roccanti educates people about homelessness through "links about issues," such as news articles about homeless shelters, videos about related health-issues, or the like. She also regularly engages the Twitter followers in general questions, tied to some recent holiday or event,

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3   In both 2009 and 2010, Miriam's Kitchen was rated one of the best places to work by the *Washington Business Journal*; in 2009, the *Washington City Paper* rated it one of the best places to volunteer.

Fig. 2. Five Types of Status Updates. Miriam's Kitchen, "miriamskitchen." July 30, 2010 Twitter <http://twitter.com/miriam's kitchen>. Miriam's Kitchen, "Miriam's Kitchen." July 30, 2010 Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/miriamskitchen>.

1) "One thing you can do to help."

ONE THING YOU CAN DO TODAY TO HELP: Collect your plastic grocery bags & send them to MK! Our guests use them to carry their belongings.
11:00 AM Mar 5th via Social Media Exchange

ONE THING YOU CAN DO TODAY TO HELP: Do one nice thing for someone. As I heard on the vm of a donor, 'make today great for someone else'.
10:17 AM Feb 26th via web

2) links about issues

Startling revelations about DC's shelter for homeless families: http://bit.ly/aeGlnp
12:06 PM Mar 11th via web

The link opesn this page:

3) On our wish list and thank-you

Miriam's Kitchen ON OUR WISH LIST TODAY: Small, unopened bottles of hand lotion. Dry skin is common among our guests, especially in the winter.
March 4 at 9:00am via SMX · Comment · Like

👍 Anna and Frank like this.

Miriam's Kitchen Thanks Mary Roccanti Meckling for sending us a huge box of toiletries for our guests. It's chock full of Burt's Bees lotions and fun international hotel goods. Almost like opening birthday presents!
March 8 at 8:45am · Comment · Like

👍 Andrea likes this.

4) "On the menu"

Miriam's Kitchen ON THE MENU THIS MORNING: Buttermilk pancakes, scrambled eggs with sausage & cheddar cheese, warm biscuits, and fresh fruit.
Fri at 6:23am · Comment · Like

Miriam's Kitchen ON THE MENU TONIGHT: Beef & barley soup, oregano mashed potatoes, tomato & cucumber salad drizzled with red wine vinagrette, and fruit.
March 11 at 1:15pm · Comment · Like

5) Updates about events and media coverage

Miriam's Kitchen We're presenting at the Split This Rock Poetry Festival today in DC on the benefits of poetry in community building. If you'll be there, stop by our session at 11:30!
Fri at 7:39am · Comment · Like

👍 SJ and Frank like this.

Miriam's Kitchen DC Twestival tickets are on sale NOW! Proceeds will benefit Concern Worldwide (last year MK was the beneficiary). http://bit.ly/cE2iPi

Book Twestival Tickets TWESTIVAL Washington 2010 #dctwestival Washington, DC
bit.ly
Event: TWESTIVAL Washington 2010 #dctwestival by Twestival Global, Shadow Room, Washington, DC

March 11 at 7:12am · Comment · Like

which she can then tie back to the homeless guests' experiences. For example, over Thanksgiving she tweeted "What's your favorite food at Thanksgiving?"; during the snowstorm she asked "What's your favorite activity in the snow?" In May she asked, "Who do you think should control what's in your food?" accompanied by a link to a *Washington Post* story about the FDA's plan to limit salt in processed foods. These often generate some response, which she then might steer to heighten awareness about the experiences of homelessness. Occasionally, I have seen Roccanti and the leaders of other DC homeless service nonprofits banter back and forth about a particular local news story. The goal, Roccanti says, is not to make people sad or demoralized by noticing the difficulties of living on the streets, but rather to highlight that steps can be taken. In the process, she wants to convey that working with Miriam's Kitchen means working in a "bright, welcoming" place "where people aren't afraid to interact with homeless men and women."

The "One thing you can do today" updates encourage the readers to see themselves in some way connected to homeless individuals. In contrast, the wish lists and thank-yous encourage the readers to see themselves connected to homeless people through the work of Miriam's Kitchen. Yet they also highlight a capacity unique to the web: power of circulation through online networks. As she writes the updates, Roccanti tries to anticipate what might make her readers "re-tweet" or "share" the updates. When her thank-yous illustrate that the donations came because people forwarded the Kitchen updates, she shows them how to channel this Internet power. Roccanti knows that her wish lists are re-tweeted frequently (she learns this through a system of Google alerts and by tracking all Miriam's Kitchen related posts on Twitter.) The cycle of requests and acknowledgements projects a spirit of celebration and encouragement among a group of people who may not have any other connection to the Kitchen. Roccanti observes that most of the Twitter followers do not have any other connection to the Kitchen. She wants them to maintain and develop their connection as an online community that makes a difference.

The updates that receive the most comments and re-tweets are the "On the Menu" updates, which are sent out twice daily. The emphasis on the Kitchen's homemade and healthy cooking reminds the online audience about Kitchen's ethos of putting the needs of its guests first. Roccanti uses the language of restaurant menus in these updates: entrees are "drizzled" with sauce; breads and desserts are "homemade," "warm" and "fresh;" grits are "stone-ground." They offer "braised cabbage with cilantro," and, as if pesto itself were not classy enough, they offer "arugula pesto." The overall message: this is not your basic soup kitchen. The menu updates dispel any stereotypical image of a dark, musty place where people line up to receive globs of gray, unappetizing food. They highlight as well how Miriam's Kitchen accounts for the most common diseases among their guests, including diabetes and hypertension. Furthermore, the updates fit well into the Twitter and Facebook model, where it's expected that we'll hear about everyday events. The "On the Menu" updates call people's attention again and again to the larger work of Miriam's Kitchen.

Social networking is an especially productive media for reminding people of on-going urgency. Although it is possible to see Miriam's Kitchen's Twitter and Facebook posts without signing up as "followers" or "friends," most people who come across Roccanti's status updates choose to receive them. The status updates are distributed to each reader as part of an on-going stream of updates, which they access by logging into their Twitter or Facebook accounts. The stream of updates rushes along quickly: for example, Miriam's Kitchen follows over 2500 people on Twitter, and when Roccanti looks at one screen's worth of Twitter feed, she sees updates posted in the previous second. People check their updates randomly throughout the day, which means that anyone in the stream has a chance of being seen by anyone else, but few (if any) people are likely to see *all* the updates from all of the people they are following. At the same time, one is *expected* to post regular updates; doing so is seen as part of the contract between friends/ followers. Because viewers can control how many of the new updates they will scroll through at

a given time, the constant barrage of updates is not experienced same way as a slew of emails piling up in an in-box or a stack of solicitation envelopes delivered to one's home. People choose to follow people or organizations and choose when to look at their updates. Usually, they scroll through the page of compiled status updates and respond to or forward any that stand out as important or amusing.

Social networking sites like these solve part of the problem of circulation by giving Roccanti steady access to a broad set of people who have indicated some interest in hearing what is going on at Miriam's Kitchen. And while she has to compete with what she calls the "clutter" and "noise" of the Twitter feed, the sites nevertheless reinforce the exigency Miriam's Kitchen wishes to circulate, an exigency that says "we must pay attention" and "we can do things in our daily lives to address this," though the things we do need not be big or drastic. Roccanti is careful to manage the urgency so that it is never so overwhelming that people shut it off. Moreover, she's careful to stress the successes of the program and the on-going enthusiasm of the staff and other volunteers. The optimistic ethos of Miriam's Kitchen combines with "do it on your own timeline" and "stay tuned for more."

Stranger Relations? Chronic Homelessness, Deliberation, and Public Voice

The menu updates are *not* intended for the guests themselves, who often are in line or have already eaten when the update is sent out. As is true for links about issues relating to homelessness and hunger, and updates about events and media coverage relating to Miriam's Kitchen, the goal of the menu updates is to build relationships directly with non-homeless people. When Roccanti describes her online audience, she is quite aware that she's appealing to volunteers and donors. In the time that I have been following Miriam's Kitchen have I infrequently seen a homeless person enter into the discussion**,** and then it's often to say "thank you" or to give a thumbs up about a recent wish list item or donation.

Roccanti knows that many of Miriam's Kitchen's guests are on Facebook, but she does not actively reach out to friend them or invite them to chime in. She does not link to their personal blogs or other online presence; she does not specifically address Miriam's Kitchen guests; she does not interact with them on Facebook much, since those activities would show up on Miriam's Kitchen's page in a manner that might "out" them as guests. The social networking space, then, seems to be a space where middle class people mobilize each other to help poor people. What democratic model do these interactions reinforce?

Before I examine that further, I want to address what some may consider a barrier to guests' participation in these online social networks. We might assume that homeless people do not write on Miriam's Kitchen's Facebook wall or comment on her tweets because they lack computer access. Yet, for many in this particular population, this is not the case. According to Roccanti, guests use Miriam's Kitchen website regularly. The website includes contact information for case managers, schedules for their after breakfast programs, updates about their new dinner program. Many of Miriam's Kitchen's guests have their own Facebook accounts, have e-mail accounts, and use online resources to stay connected. The People for Fairness Coalition, an advocacy group of homeless men who meets at Miriam's Kitchen, currently is building their website. In their weekly meetings, the activists share email addresses for each other, government services, nonprofit organizations and other supporters. Homeless men and women can access computers and the Internet through the DC libraries (a situation that is not universally true; in many cities the library creates codes explicitly designed to restrict such access). And other homeless service nonprofits, such as Thrive DC, have computer labs where volunteers are on hand to assist people in setting up and retrieving email, surfing the web, and other activities. I don't mean to suggest that all homeless people have easy access to the Internet, but I do think that the active Internet use among a significant portion of Miriam's Kitchen's guests suggests that we need another

explanation for why the guests choose not to participate in these social networking exchanges.

When I asked Roccanti whether she thought Miriam's Kitchen's social networking should facilitate a conversation among all followers, fans, and the homeless guests at Miriam's Kitchen, she responded, "I don't think the nonprofit has to be that link." And I think she's right.

As I noted earlier, the main people Miriam's Kitchen serve are chronically homeless men, a population potentially very resistant and distrustful of others. In "Helping or Hating the Homeless," Peter Marin identifies two categories of homeless people—those who have had homelessness forced upon them yet still believe in our social system enough to want to get back into it, and those for whom the conditions that led to their homelessness bespeak such a profound failure in our social system that they don't try to get back in. Marin writes of Alice, raped, traumatized, and when she eventually left the hospital, jobless and homeless:

> Everything that happened to Alice—the rape, the loss of job and apartment, the breakdown—was part and parcel of a world gone radically wrong, a world, for Alice, no longer to be counted on, no longer worth living in. Her homelessness can be seen as flight, as failure of will or nerve, even, perhaps, as disease. But it can also be seen as a mute, furious refusal, a self-imposed exile far less appealing to the rest of us than ordinary life, but better, in Alice's terms (309).

Chronically homeless people may not want to "come back in" to relationships with others; for their own reasons, they don't buy into the promises that specific actions on their part will lead to positive, supportive responses from the social, political and economic structures that have already rejected them. Their position poses a big challenge to those who work with them. For many, the rejection of society is coupled with—maybe caused by—mental illnesses or addictions, and the assumption

is that if we could treat those symptoms, the person would be willing to rejoin, start looking for work and housing. For some, that is true. Yet viewing their rejection as "mental illness" seems to gloss over the deeper sense of nihilism that may be based on an accurate understanding of the failures built into the capitalist, free-market, individualist structures around us.

The experience of public space for homeless people is radically different because they are not in that space voluntarily: homeless people have to interact constantly with strangers and conduct their daily lives in public view. In his analysis of the redevelopment of a Berkeley park where homeless men and women often stay, Mitchell writes,

> Public parks and streets . . .become places to go to the bathroom, sleep, drink, or make love—all socially legitimate activities when done in private but seemingly illegitimate when carried out in public. (118)

The presence of homeless people and their "illegitimate" uses of public space highlight the contradiction in democratic ideals: "[S]ince citizenship in modern democracy. . . rests on a foundation of *voluntary* association, and since homeless people are *involuntarily* public. . . they threaten the existence of a "legitimate"—i.e. voluntary—public" (118). People who have access to private space respond to homeless people in public space with a sense of rage, a fear sparked by the sense that their presence makes the idea of "public" unstable. Thus, whether or not a homeless person rejects society or tries to re-enter it, their very presence disturbs the "legitimate" structures of public spaces and public interactions. They feel the brunt of that disruption in their daily interactions, when they are ignored by "regular" people or when they are attacked by them. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, "From 1999 through 2008, in 263 cities and in 46 states, Puerto Rico and Washington, DC, there have been 880 acts of violence committed by

housed individuals, resulting in 244 deaths of homeless people and 636 victims of non-lethal violence" (para 1).

Roccanti emphasized that Miriam's Kitchen is one of the few spaces where their guests come indoors. For people who have learned to rely on only themselves, coming indoors can signal a willingness to trust, if only for a moment. For Miriam's Kitchen, that's enough of a step. In their main dining room, Miriam's Kitchen protects the anonymity of their guests. The expectation among volunteers and guests is that you will not engage others unless they initiate the interaction. The Kitchen does not ask people to sign in to get food. No one takes pictures (and if anyone takes out a camera, staff and guests alike will remind them of this rule).   Miriam's Kitchen is very aware that coming in from the streets is not the same as a being willing to engage in other kinds of social or political relationships. The Kitchen takes its cue from its guests.

Given this context, then, the online space honors this same intense protection of privacy—a privacy that is missing in the daily experiences of people whose every action is conducted in public and made to seem illegitimate. Inviting homeless guests into such a forum would violate the trust that the Kitchen wants to build: Roccanti explains, "We wouldn't take advantage of the trust we've built with them to mention that they are guests. . . It's not that I don't want to interact with them, it's that they need to be the ones to establish that connection online." Mitchell's definition of ideal public space includes the requirement that the space be "free of coercion;" Roccanti's attitude seems to exemplify that.   Mitchell's definition also requires the space to be "unmediated." Yet, for the guests, Miriam's Kitchen's social networking spaces are not unmediated spaces. Participation would take place under the gaze of Miriam's Kitchen and participants comments would reflect back on the organization itself.

Roccanti's response to my question also points out that homeless people who wish to engage in such public conversations about issues

of homelessness can (and do) participate in other online spaces; they are plentiful. Homeless forums, such as www.homelessforum.com, are self-described as "international forums for homeless or formerly homeless people and others wanting to learn about homelessness." In video blogs such as STREATS (www.streats.tv) and or YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/user/ToddCWiggins), homeless men and women speak about the conditions of being homelessness and invite others into public conversation through the comments section. In those venues, people who choose to identify themselves as homeless can, but they are not pressured to do so.

The Publics of Miriam's Kitchen

Overall, we can identify several different groups of people who interact with and around Miriam's Kitchen. The Facebook friends and Twitter followers, along with the volunteers and donors on the Kitchen's email distribution lists, comprise one group: a group of predominately middle class people who may not have much experience with people who are homeless but who have expressed some interest in being linked to an organization like Miriam's Kitchen. These people are brought together as part of a network. They don't know each other, they don't necessarily speak to each other online, but they lurk and listen and in some small way continue to engage as a collection of people who share this interest. When Roccanti thanks someone for forwarding a wish list, and thanks someone else for sending in lotion, her acknowledgement affirms the potential capacity of the whole group. When she poses questions on Twitter about who should control food safety, or "what's in your fridge," she invites the group to imagine how their own lives are different from the homeless people for whom they have expressed compassion, and she does so in a forum where they can read each other's responses. The frequency and consistency of Roccanti's online interactions and her projection of the Miriam's Kitchen ethos as a bright, fun place where people address serious issues, invites the audience to identify as people who can help make change. She forwards links and videos to re-tweet

and re-post, so that Miriam's Kitchen's name and philosophy of a profound respect for the experiences of homeless people will circulate. The value of social networking here is not to bring people together for deliberation as much as to celebrate their power to circulate the Miriam's Kitchen ideal; the value of social networking is to frequently remind the group of the conditions of homelessness and of their own capacity to attenuate those conditions through their on-going relationship with Miriam's Kitchen. Is this a "public"?

At the same time, another group comes together within the walls of Miriam's Kitchen itself. During and after meals people come together for face-to-face conversations. Some people serve food and others eat it. Some gather to read and write poetry together, to create art together. If they choose, homeless guests can meet with case managers and access additional city resources. Within this context, staff and volunteers come together with chronically homeless men (and a few women) to create a space that serves as a respite from the streets without making demands. As a low-barrier organization, the Kitchen does not require guests to show ID or to present proof that they are not using drugs or drunk. The Kitchen does not require guests to show evidence of trying to get a job or a house or any other actions that would signal that they are trying to work to get back into the "normal" structures of society. Within this space, the group—staff, volunteers, guests—come together in a community that works to honor at a deep level each person's dignity. This characterization of Miriam's Kitchen aligns it with an argument Peter Marin makes about what society owes chronically homeless people. "We owe them a place to exist," he says, and we must provide it for them with great humility, with an awareness that "those who are the inevitable casualties of modern industrial capitalism and the free market system are entitled, by right, and by the simple virtue of their participation in that system, to whatever help they need" (317).

Keith Morton explores the ideals underlying this kind of service in his analysis, "The Ironies of Service: Charity, Project and Social Change in

Service-Learning." Morton observes that in most organizations, service is offered through one of three modes: direct aid (a charity model), measurable outcomes (a project model), or political action (a social change model). Morton acknowledges that most of the service-learning faculty in this audience (and, I would add, most advocates of participatory democracy) value social advocacy organizations most, because these are places where people within a community work together to discover the root causes of a problem and work together to analyze and choose best strategies for creating change, whether through pressuring government, corporations or other cultural systems. Morton argues that what we value in this model are the qualities the relationships that are built among across the community. Yet these positive qualities, he argues, are not inherent to social change organizations: they do *not* require that we take action by marching on city hall or boycott stores; they do *not* require that we even begin by expecting people to trust us or the larger political, economic or social systems what we operate in. Instead, the central value that makes such service worthwhile is building relationships based on respect and dignity, the principle of starting where people are and neither judging nor seeking to control them. After interviewing people who work and volunteer at a range of kinds of service organizations, he separates service into two parts: the kind of work one does (direct service, projects, or social advocacy) and the relationships one builds with the community (which can be "thin" or "thick"). "Thick" service in any mode acknowledges broader systemic causes for the concerns that mobilize people, and because of this, requires that organizers and community members approach each other as equals.

Within Miriam's Kitchen, guests find a space that accepts their disillusionment, a place that does not judge them for choosing to step outside of the dominant system. That space happens within the walls of Miriam's Kitchen, through the home-made meals and relationships with staff and volunteers that are steeped in a desire to offer respite from the systems that have failed them. Within this context, Miriam's Kitchen cannot and should not "friend" their guests or re-tweet guests' updates or

in any way expect them into jump into online exchanges with the donors and volunteers. Doing so would cause the respite to dissolve: they'd be forced to interact with and perhaps try to educate the people who believe in the very systems that have failed them.

I don't see Miriam's Kitchen's actions as a patronizing move, such as trying to protect the homeless from the potential ignorance of the public that comes together with Miriam's Kitchen on the social-networking sites. Instead, I see them respecting a desire *not* to engage in this conversation, a desire to leave that work—the work of bringing people to a place where they can imagine respectful relationships with homeless people—to the staff and volunteers.

At the same time, guests at Miriam's Kitchen who do retain some hope and trust in political and social systems are reaching out to the audiences that matter to them. The People for Fairness Coalition, begun in 2008, meet weekly at Miriam's Kitchen. Their goals are "Housing for all, safe and clean shelters for all, representation by currently or formerly homeless individuals on the city's decision-making boards, transparency in the city's decision-making through dialogue with and improved access to service providers and city officials" (Wiggins). The officers of this group are associated with particular subgroups of homeless people, including homeless women and homeless veterans, and the group as a whole conducts regular outreach on the streets, meeting with people who have given up hope and offering a connection to food, services, and other resources. The men and women sometimes refer to themselves as "caseworkers" for the chronically homeless, and they rely on their own experiences as current or formerly homeless people as part of their persuasive appeal. The other audiences the group addresses are government and service providers. The officers of the organizations testified before the DC City Council to share their stories and request funding to continue their outreach. They invite representatives from city departments to meet with them. The coalition members regularly attend meetings throughout DC to both learn more about organizing and more

about the services that they can provide for each other and for the men and women who have not yet come in off the streets.

When the People for Fairness Coalition meet, one of the Kitchen's case managers usually sits with them to answer questions about what kinds of support the Kitchen can lend, but the organization is run by and for homeless and formerly homeless people. Significantly, this group is not oriented toward the public of Roccanti's social networking sites; instead, it is oriented towards government and service providers as well as homeless individuals. These are the people with whom they are interested in working to improve the conditions for homeless people. They acknowledge the support that Miriam's Kitchen provides and appreciate any material support that volunteers or others might offer, but their work is not dependant on interacting with a generally middle-class public that has not experienced homeless.

Miriam's Kitchen's use of social networking as a tool of public formation takes place within a much broader context of online and off-line interactions. Examining their work demonstrates that no one site or set of exchanges is adequate to show us whether and how a public comes together. The Kitchen recognizes that their online presence is not the only online space where homeless and housed people might interact. Homeless people and advocates can reach that broader audience on homeless forums, YouTube, and through other social media. Moreover, the online public work of their social networking takes place alongside the Kitchen's physical spaces—alongside groups like the People for Fairness Coalition, alongside the face-to-face relationships that build among guests, volunteers, and staff, and alongside the chronically homeless people who come tentatively into the Kitchen, holding themselves apart. Miriam's Kitchen acknowledges that public space is not voluntary for those without a home; it offers some respite.

Moreover, when we understand the rhetorical moves that people use in social networking sites to create interdependence and reinforce a sense

of capacity, we can see that a great deal of public formation relies on people's ability not only to *generate* discourse, but also to *circulate* it. Often scholars evaluate public formation according to the quality of deliberation, but in social networking, the central component seems to be that of circulation, making things happen by sharing, forwarding, re-tweeting, and getting the words out there. We need to focus on the power of circulation, that critical component of the Internet that plays such a potent role in public formation.

When we examine the kind of public spaces that congeal online, and when we try to determine what we will value as ideal public spaces, we need to examine all of these contexts and all of the components of public formation. The lenses we use to evaluate the success or failure of public spaces must carefully attend to the varied needs and contexts of their public participants and to many components of public formation, including the power of circulation.

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