

Paula Mathieu and Diana George

Not Going It Alone: Public Writing, Independent Media, and the Circulation of Homeless Advocacy

This article argues that the teaching of public writing should not neglect issues of circulation and local need. In a series of case studies involving small press papers and homeless advocacy, the authors seek to extend recent work begun by Susan Wells, John Trimbur, and Nancy Welch, which raises crucial questions about public rhetoric in the writing classroom.

Everybody's paper is nobody's paper.

—Peter Maurin

In “Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Post-Publicity Era,” Nancy Welch recounts some of the challenges her students faced when trying to find a public audience (or in Susan Wells’s terms, “construct a responsive public”) for their final projects in a women’s studies seminar. Welch’s students composed multimedia texts, ranging from posters to comic books to a poem designed with cutout magazine letters reminiscent of a ransom note. Once the students began circulating their works, however, problems arose. One student managed to draw police attention when she illegally posted her ransom-note-poem on a utility box—not quite the “responsive public” we suspect she was hoping for. Welch draws on this and other students’ stories to argue compellingly that composition theorists need to address what she calls “two interrelated silences”

CCC 61:1 / SEPTEMBER 2009

in our current literature: “the silence regarding the conversion of public spaces into private-for-profit property”; and “a silence regarding a rich history of in-the-street working class rhetorical action against the interests of capital and the state forces in place to protect those interests” (474–75). As something of an afterthought, Welch admits that she was disturbed by “how frequently students felt . . . that going public means going it alone,” yet she concedes that her course “dr[ew] out no specific lessons to the contrary” (477). In other words, for Welch’s students—and many others working with public writing—engaging in public discourse remains an individual act, an expression of “personally responsible citizenship” (Johanek and Puckett 142).

In an earlier related discussion, John Trimbur argues that teachers of composition frequently equate the act of writing with the activity of composing. Neglecting delivery, according to Trimbur, is a problem because it causes teachers and students “to miss altogether the complex delivery systems through which writing circulates” (189). “To my mind,” writes Trimbur, “delivery can no longer be thought of simply as a technical aspect of public discourse. It must be seen also as ethical and political—a democratic aspiration to devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions, and knowledge and thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on the issues of the day” (190). Trimbur’s argument is crucial for understanding how the complexities of textual circulation must be a vital concern to writing teachers, especially teachers of public writing.

In *Moving beyond Academic Discourse*, Christian Weisser worries that “few compositionists know where ‘the public’ is located, and even fewer have thought in depth about what public writing might entail beyond letters to the editor of a newspaper or their local congressman” (92). He charges “most” writing teachers with a lack of “contextual/historical understanding” of public writing (95). While we disagree with his characterization of most writing teachers, we do agree with his position that the best way to theorize and deepen our understanding of public writing is to “examine the sites in which public writing occurs” (95). For Weisser, such sites can teach us about the context of a public issue, the history and past discussions around an issue, styles of argumentation, as well as who can speak, how they can speak, and how they are evaluated (97). To this list, we would add that such sites can help us understand how public messages do and do not circulate and why it is important to be part of a network of communication rather than imagine that anyone can truly “go it alone” when it comes to writing that aims to make a difference.

In this article, we seek both to address the silences Welch identifies and to take on a challenge implied by Welch, Trimbur, and Weisser: to lead students to create and circulate meaningful acts of public rhetoric. To do this, we offer three cases of independent media advocacy for and by homeless people. These are media groups with which we have both worked closely as writers and activists. These cases offer useful lessons on *not going it alone*, lessons that can instruct writing teachers and their students on not merely how to *compose* public documents but how to study, understand, and, as Trimbur suggests, enable their *circulation* as well. Our work has led us to conclude that delivery systems need not be impenetrable or overwhelming but rather are often quite localized and specific. The cases we present here of homeless advocacy in independent media are especially useful as ways of understanding the complexity and interpersonal, interdependent nature of circulating public writing. Moreover, in working with homeless people and homeless-advocacy issues, as both of us have done for many years, we have discovered that the privatization of public space and rhetorical action in the streets (those two silences) are decidedly ethical and political matters, often involving life and death.

In standing resolutely apart from the mainstream, the independent press has played a vital role in the history of freedom of speech in this country. Such publications as Samuel Cornish and John B. Russwurm's *Freedom's Journal* (est. 1827), William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* (est. 1831), Frederick Douglass's *The North Star* (est. 1847), Amelia Bloomer's *The Lily* (est. 1849), Piet Vlag and Max Eastman's *The Masses* (est. 1911), *The Daily Worker* (est. 1924), *The Catholic Worker* (est. 1933), and many others offered a strong and clear voice in opposition to public policy of the time. Although some of today's independent press papers have been nearly as bold as their famous predecessors, many simply tell a different story than what most citizens are likely to get on the nightly news. Still, that different story is crucial to the notion of not going it alone.

For the past several years, the two of us have focused much of our attention on those small independent newspapers and on the kinds of writing that are, if we are honest with ourselves, rarely read outside small circles of like-minded individuals. The alternative press papers and newsletters that concern us here emerge from nonprofit organizations with a social justice emphasis—organizations like Catholic Worker Houses, homeless coalitions, local land trusts, women's shelters, and prisoner and jail projects, for example. While the papers we engage here might seem insignificant or even self-indulgent at times, they stand in stark contrast to the giant media conglomerates that produce most of the information most U.S. Americans hear, see, or read every day (see George).

This is especially evident to those readers who consider themselves, for want of a better term, “news hounds.” The fact is, listeners to NPR in the morning hear the same stories they read in the *New York Times*. If they go to Google News, which boasts stories from over 4,500 news sources, they likely get the same stories they heard on NPR and read in the *New York Times*. If they then turn on any of the major network or cable news programs in the evening, they will see the same stories they heard on NPR, read in the *New York Times*, and found on the Internet. Moreover, these stories will feature essentially the same angle with very few differences. Many are, in fact, the same wire stories taken from AP or Reuters. There are reasons for that phenomenon—most of them corporate and financial—and we don’t want to demonize wire stories in the mainstream media. Good papers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* do rely on wire stories, but they also have their own reporters, many of whom are among the best in the world, and most of whom do not make up stories despite the bad actions of the occasional charlatan. Our concern, instead, is with the overwhelming reliance on wire stories that has led to a sameness in coverage that leaves the overall impression that there are no alternative ways to tell these stories.

It is within and despite this oversaturated corporate media environment that the alternative press seeks to find an audience in its efforts to play even a limited role in helping to circulate and keep alive important public, human concerns. For students assigned, perhaps, to claim a public voice in a writing class, facing this media-saturated environment can make that prospect seem unlikely, if not impossible. The default letter-to-the-editor assignment (critiqued by Welch, Wells, and Weisser) can often seem like the only way “in” to the mainstream press, even though such student-generated letters are rarely sent and even more rarely published. And even if they are both sent and published, how often do students experience their words as part of a larger discussion?

Important to students, teachers, and scholars of public writing are small, independent public media outlets, which can and do create troubles for even large institutions, as the following cases attest. What we argue here, with the cases that follow, is that public writing can be an agent of social advocacy and of political action, not limited to special interest groups but at the center of policy debate and change. Moreover, we argue that because the independent and dissident press has played and continues to play this role, it is important that any class focused on public rhetoric or public writing examine independent media texts in the contexts of their histories as social agents.

Case 1: Public Writing around an Atlanta City Park, Atlanta, Georgia

Contrary to popular belief about the marginal nature of alternative press papers, *Hospitality*, which is written by the Open Door Community in Atlanta, has forced city officials to deal directly with advocates for the homeless at each stage of their plans for what the city represents as “improving” the downtown. Writing in the tradition of papers like the *Masses* and the *Catholic Worker*, *Hospitality* has become a point of contention in both city hall and in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. In 1996, Murphy Davis, co-founder of the Open Door Community, wrote these words in an article she called “Woodruff Park and the Search for Common Ground”:

Woodruff Park is a 1.7-acre tract of land in the center of downtown Atlanta. . . . The park, formerly known as Central City Park, most recently emerged from behind a curtain of chain link with a five-million-dollar facelift. This new park is, more than anything else, a spot to look at. It is not a public gathering place: indeed, there is no area of the park that encourages gathering, conversation, play, human exchange, or interrelatedness of any kind.

. . . In 1993 we [The Open Door Community] won one of the only (narrowly defined) major political victories in the history of our political action and advocacy. We tested the city ordinance that prohibited lying on a city park bench (or against a tree). In two actions in September and October of 1993, twelve of our number were arrested and went to jail for “slouching” or lying on the benches of Woodruff Park. The city council rescinded the law. Amazing.

Exactly one year later, the park was closed for a five-million-dollar renovation. Nimrod Long, whose firm was paid three hundred thousand dollars for a new design, was frank. He said that they were charged with the mission of creating a park that would be inhospitable to homeless people. . . .

Well, we can be proud of the fact that they darn well did their job. This park clearly does not invite homeless people to gather. Trouble is, if we mandate a public space inhospitable to any one group of people, we end up with a public space that is inhospitable to everybody.

By now, this article has been anthologized at least three times—once in the *Open Door Reader*, a book-length collection of articles from the first ten years of *Hospitality*, and twice in *Reading Culture*, a textbook for first-year composition. The importance of this article, though a fine stand-alone piece of prose easily taught in a writing class, cannot be located in the writing alone.

Originally “The Search for Common Ground” appeared on the front page of *Hospitality* in a layout that spoke directly to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and challenged city planners. By pasting the *Journal-Constitution’s* report on

Woodruff Park renovations into the center of Davis's article, *Hospitality* editors were laying bare what they saw as the *Journal-Constitution's* nearsightedness. Like all face-lifts, the park's \$5 million makeover attempted to cover up and ignore more serious problems. In fact, the city had, for years, been trying various strategies to move the homeless from downtown. The *Journal-Constitution* article, which was patched into Davis's, notes that as far back as the early 1970s, when Coke executive Robert Woodruff gave money for the park, he worried aloud that a park in this spot might "attract some of the winos" (Hiskey, "Raising"). Where the *Journal-Constitution* saw a story about development, *Hospitality* saw a story about poverty, race, and the politics of public space. Reviewing what she calls "a policy of removal," Davis reminds readers that earlier development projects begun in the 1950s when race was very clearly the issue split African American neighborhoods with interstate highways and razed whole low- and middle-income neighborhoods for a stadium, a civic center, and parking lots. "These practices, which began thirty years ago," she writes, "resulted in much of the poverty and homelessness in the African American population we see in our city today."

In the 1990s, to make way for the Olympic Village, "[s]eventy-two acres of low-income, mixed-use" land were plowed under (Davis 2). Woodruff Park was the latest in this cleanup effort. In preparation for the Olympics, Atlanta did not want a large homeless population visible downtown where visitors from around the world might run into them, and Woodruff Park (like Centennial Park, where much of the Olympic celebrating took place) was a favorite spot for people living in the streets. "The Search for Common Ground" appeared a few months before the Olympics opened and nearly five months after the park had been renovated, so the article itself had no real effect on the city's plans to redo the park. Moreover, if this article were the end of it, then we might say that *Hospitality* took a good shot at the establishment, but that was about it.

Over the next few years, however, the Open Door maintained ongoing coverage of development plans with stories that challenged the mayor, the city council, and downtown developers. All that time, the *Journal-Constitution* continued to cover Open Door actions and to respond to challenges put forward



by the paper. *Hospitality* reminded the homeless that they could not be arrested for lying down on a public bench. (Officers often threatened them with arrest even after the law was rescinded.) Open Door volunteers passed out flyers demanding public toilets so that the homeless would not be jailed for breaking “quality of life” ordinances. Members of the community challenged police to arrest them for lying down, and *Hospitality* published pictures of these actions.

And, while *Hospitality* articles sometimes suggested that the police were the villains in these situations, several police made it clear that they were under orders (“straight from city hall”) to harass—to move homeless people along early in the morning while they were sleeping. For many of the police, it was a work issue: To keep their jobs, they had to follow orders.

In fact, the Open Door actually gave a few disgruntled police a way of talking back to superiors. One fall afternoon in 2003, the Open Door got a call from a local police officer tired of being told to harass people sleeping on benches and in parks. He asked the community to come witness the harassment. When Open Door volunteers arrived, the officers asked if they would be willing to be arrested as a new test case. They were, even though one community member was still on parole, and any arrest threatened that parole. Once volunteers were lying down, this officer called his superior and asked what to do. He had, he claimed, asked this group to move along, and they refused. When he was told to make an arrest, the officer asked the key question: “What do I charge them with?” He was told they would get back to him. While they were waiting for the official word, the police went out and bought coffee for their Open Door volunteers, saying, “This is likely to take awhile.” In the end, no one was arrested. The word came down again that there was no law against sleeping on benches in public parks.

This is the sort of event that could not have happened if the police did not know that some of them had allies at the Open Door. They had, this officer told the Open Door, been complaining to superiors for months about harassing the homeless with non-existent laws. They could only test their orders with outside help. And *Hospitality* offered that help. Articles in *Hospitality* continued to speak to *Journal-Constitution* editorials that sported headlines like, “City Doesn’t Belong Just to Bums and Winos,” and especially to *Journal-Constitution* columnist Colin Campbell, who at one point called attempts to distribute food in the park “a pathetic picnic” (“Why Feed”).

In 2003, during Mayor Shirley Franklin’s hundred days of what she called “Let’s Do Downtown,” the Open Door joined with other groups and continued

to distribute food in the park. In his column, Campbell called the community “misguided do-gooders” who encouraged “crack-heads,” “bums,” and “winos” to hang around. Mayor Franklin issued a ban on all public food distribution and claimed, in the *Journal-Constitution*, that there were at least a half-dozen indoor places where the homeless could easily walk from Woodruff Park for a sit-down meal. Of course, the Open Door took up the challenge, and during one of its outdoor meals, Murphy Davis called the mayor’s office to ask where those places might be because, she said, she had a line of people right there waiting for food. After Davis waited on hold for a long time, the Mayor’s office came back with the news that they actually couldn’t locate the half-dozen places. They could locate one, which served only on Sunday afternoons. Police threatened to close the soup line and then had to admit that there was no law against this action; this event (minus Davis’s talk with the mayor) was also covered in the *Journal-Constitution*.

Perhaps if the *Journal-Constitution* had ignored these challenges, if Colin Campbell had just held his tongue (or pen) and hadn’t gotten upset enough to name both the paper and the community several times in his columns, much of what was written in *Hospitality*, a small press paper distributed free of charge to anyone who wants to read it, might have gone unnoticed. But that did not happen. We could continue with this story—with smaller stories of interactions (both good and bad) with police and downtown boosters and the mayor’s office and the Taskforce for the Homeless—but we don’t need to. In the end, there is no real resolution except that, so far, city developers have failed to keep the homeless out of sight, and we would argue that is because of both the words and the actions of groups like the Open Door, Food Not Bombs, the Taskforce for the Homeless, and others who would not remain silent, who demanded a public voice.¹ It is the case that alternative press papers do not simply “report the news,” but when papers like *Hospitality* act as advocates, they don’t pretend to be objective. As William Lloyd Garrison wrote in the January 1, 1831, inaugural issue of the *Liberator*:

I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or to speak, or to write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm . . . but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD

Very often, then, the aim is simply to be heard, to let the public know that oppositional voices do exist, to effect change.

“The Search for Common Ground” serves as a useful object lesson in circulation. The article has been anthologized in two different publications. As a textbook selection (in *Reading Culture*), it is an article about—a cultural read on—public space. It works well in the classroom because it raises questions about what public space is, what people expect from public space, and what the realities of city development can be. It also connects with students’ experiences so that they can talk back and do their own investigations of public spaces they know. As a good textbook piece, it is likely to be read for the way the writer sets up her argument, how she uses historical evidence, how her language addresses a broad audience—the kinds of lessons most common in first-year writing classes.

As a selection from *The Open Door Reader*, it is a part of the history of the community, a kind of cataloguing of *Hospitality*. In this context, the article might be called a “best of” piece, a tribute to its author. As a front-page story in a small press newspaper in Atlanta, however, “The Search for Common Ground” is about both advocacy and action in the larger politics of a major city. It is not placed there to be analyzed or to be archived. It enables relationships and advocacy, and it calls for action.

Case 2: Local Writing and the Boycott of Bumfights Videos, Boston, Massachusetts

Life has never been easy for homeless people, but in recent years, it may have gotten harder. Violence against homeless people worldwide has been on the rise in many forms, ranging from the symbolic to the material: verbal harassment, videos depicting homeless people in violent or humiliating encounters, laws criminalizing the presence of homeless people in public spaces, and random brutal and often lethal assaults. Here are a few examples from the year 2004:

Over a two-week period in Sao Paulo, Brazil, seven homeless people sleeping in alleys of a revitalizing area of downtown were killed by single blow to the back of the head, hit with a blunt instrument, like a club or night stick; nine others were critically wounded in the same spree. In Prague, two homeless men were doused with accelerant, set on fire, and critically burned while sleeping on public benches. In Capetown, two men were killed and several others were seriously injured in a spree of attacks against rough sleepers. In the United States, all of the following were newspaper headlines during 2004:

“Three Men Set Homeless Man on Fire” (Nashville, Tennessee, January)

“Homeless Man Beaten and Robbed by Six Youths” (Sarasota, Florida, January)

“Homeless Man Attacked as He Slept” (Los Angeles, February)

“Three Men Attack Homeless Woman with Baseball Bats” (Minneapolis, May)

“Group of Teenage Males Shoot Homeless Man with Paintball Gun. He Loses Eye” (Ewing, New Jersey, July)

“Four Teenagers Beat and Stole from Four Homeless Men in Videotaped Attacks” (Chicago, August)

“Homeless Man Was Shot Repeatedly with a Pellet Gun” (San Francisco, December) (National Coalition).

Some research indicates that violence expressed toward poor and homeless people is increasing, despite probable underreporting of such crimes. A report by a United Kingdom government agency likens the current level of personal victimization of homeless people to the “previous hidden problems of racial harassment and violence against women” (Ballintyne). The U.S. National Coalition for the Homeless has documented more than 281 violent acts against people targeted for being homeless; the group is seeking to have such attacks characterized as hate crimes.

“A war of words precedes a war of bodies,” writes political scientist Espen Barth Eide, in his research on instances of twentieth-century genocide (Vetlesen). A climate of hate and intolerance helps encourage acts of violence, as peace studies scholar Arne Johan Vetlesen documented in his research on the key role played by mass media in garnering Serbian public support for Bosnian genocide in Srebrenica. A similar war of words against the homeless occurs today. An editorial in the Dayton Sinclair Community College student newspaper, for example, proposed running over homeless people with cars as a way to combat panhandling: “If one more homeless bum asks me for change in the Oregon District,” wrote Jonathan Dillon, “I may have to start running them over when I see them on the street.” A mayoral candidate in Kingston, New York, claimed that the residents of a local shelter were “pedophiles, drunks, alcoholics and bums.” In San Francisco, the Hotel Council launched a billboard campaign to discourage tourists from giving to panhandlers; one depicted the

following postcard: “Today we rode a cable car, visited Alcatraz, and supported a drug habit. Giving to panhandlers doesn’t help, it hurts” (National Coalition).

Videos such as *Bumfights* and *Bumhunters*, created by three college students who gave homeless people on the streets of Las Vegas small amounts of money, food, or alcohol to inflict violence on themselves and others (including pulling out one’s own teeth, breaking another’s leg, or setting one’s hair on fire), have sold more than 300,000 copies on the Internet. Several individuals in the video—including two Vietnam veterans—later claimed that they were coerced into the humiliating acts and filed civil claims. Although the filmmakers faced criminal and civil charges, the videos remain available and continue to sell briskly on the Internet and, as one local Boston activist discovered, in record stores.

In the fall of 2003, a volunteer at *Spare Change News*, Alex Tsouvalas, discovered that Newbury Comics, his favorite independent record chain, was selling copies of the *Bumfights* and *Bumhunter* videos. He spoke to the manager of Newbury Comics on behalf of *Spare Change* and tried quietly to convince the store to stop selling the videos. The manager seemed concerned and promised to follow up. Despite two months of phone calls and visits, Newbury Comics refused to talk with *Spare Change* further and continued to sell the video.

Soon after, the board of the nonprofit newspaper voted to organize a formal boycott of the record chain until they pulled the videos. The public writing the newspaper did around this issue was delicate: as an independent newspaper and advocacy group, it needed to outline concerns about this video without seeming to suggest censorship, which was how the record store publicly characterized the boycott.² An open letter to the manager of Newbury Comics (printed in the newspaper and circulated as a press release) made that fine distinction its main point:

Our problem with *Bumfights* is the coercive tactics the producers used to entice the homeless men to act in the film. Former Viet Nam Veterans, on the street in part because of post-traumatic mental illness and substance-abuse problems, were plied with food, alcohol, small amounts of cash, and promises of friendship in order to convince them to injure themselves and each other—and to sign a paper okaying it. These men are now pursuing civil litigation claiming that they did not give informed consent for their appearance. In connection with making these videos, there have been four arrests, seven felony charges and multiple misdemeanor convictions of the producers.

The issue here is not one of offensive content but of *coerced consent*. . . .

As newspaper publishers, we at the Homeless Empowerment Project value freedom of the press and of personal expression. We are not asking you to pull a

product we find distasteful. Rather, we are asking you to stop facilitating the act of profiteering off of the coerced humiliation of vulnerable people. Pulling this video will be not an act of censorship, but a bold move to say no to the exploitation of homeless people. (Tsouvalas 1)

The group's public writing included articles in the 9,000-circulation fortnightly newspaper, press releases, small leaflets handed out to passersby on the sidewalk in front of key Newbury Comics stores, slogans for posters, and a website. For five weeks—during the Christmas holiday rush—staff, vendors, and volunteers of the organization met on weekends to boycott the store and talk with shoppers and passersby. They gave shoppers small notes they could leave at the cash register, saying they would make purchases only after the videos were pulled.

Though the record chain refused to talk with *Spare Change*, coverage of the boycott began appearing in the mainstream press. Another independent Boston publication, the *Weekly Dig*, first wrote a story; next the *Boston Globe*—the mainstream daily newspaper—carried a small mention of it. Through the local blogging community, discussion of the boycott began appearing on the Internet. A break came when a reporter at New England Cable News noticed the press release because his wife worked at one of the area homeless shelters. The news crew interviewed Tsouvalas as well as a vendor of *Spare Change* who once narrowly escaped serious injury when teenagers set fire to his sleeping bag while he slept in a Boston park. When New England Cable News finished the interviews and were packing up to get a comment from Newbury Comics, a call came on their cell phone. The camera man quickly turned the cameras back on in order to get the organization's reaction to the news: Newbury Comics announced that it cancelled the scheduled interview and agreed to stop selling the video, "in response to the media circus." All gathered cheered and were incredulous that such a small publication had started a "media circus."

While public writing was central to this campaign, its circulation depended on an important network of relationships: the writing was first circulated via the newspaper, a nonprofit organization known in the community for its support of homeless people. The boycott was a rhetorical performance that took place through press releases, flyers and posters, and, importantly, its physical manifestation via repeated group presence and theatrics on Newbury Street sidewalks. Volunteers stood in the cold for more than a month of weekends, holding signs equating Newbury Comics to the Grinch and making personal connections with shoppers. The mainstream media played a supportive role by covering these actions in its pages. It's doubtful the record chain would have

perceived the boycott to be a “media circus” without the interest of the *Weekly Dig*, *Boston Globe*, and New England Cable News. The circulation of the public writing in this case relied on a network of relationships of advocacy groups, people meeting on the streets, and mainstream media, as well as a certain degree of serendipity: had the television reporter not felt a personal connection to the issue of homelessness, the boycott may have ended differently.

Case 3: International Anti-Violence Campaign and Unresolved Issues, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Spare Change News is one of a growing movement of street papers around the world. First published in the late 1980s in New York and San Francisco, street papers quickly spread to other cities and countries. Individual papers each operate a bit differently but share the mission of giving an income opportunity and a public voice to homeless people and of dispelling myths about homelessness in the minds of more affluent readers. At Boston’s *Spare Change*, for example, anyone who feels at risk of being homeless can visit the office and become a vendor by attending an orientation session and receiving several free newspapers, which they can sell to the reading public. Subsequently vendors buy papers for 25 cents and sell them to the public for \$1, earning 75 cents off of each copy—not much money, but often one can earn enough in a day for a room or a meal. All street papers are sold through an interaction between vendor and customer, and it is through those meetings that vendors often develop friendships—or may receive public ridicule and become a target of violence.

In 1996, street papers began networking and organizing on a national and international level. Today, more than 80 of these grassroots publications have agreed on a joint code of principles and formed the International Network of Street Papers (INSP)—which seeks to facilitate idea sharing and cooperation on a global scale to create income opportunities and global awareness about homelessness.³

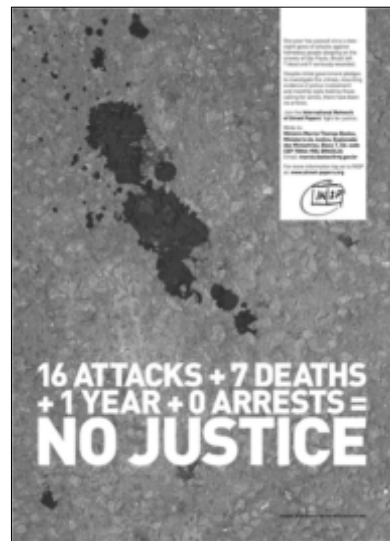
When the 2004 spree of attacks on homeless people in Brazil occurred with such precision and regularity, local homeless advocates feared possible police involvement, but authorities were reluctant to investigate. *Ocas*, the street paper in Sao Paulo, joined with other human rights groups to organize local demonstrations and vigils; they covered the story in detail in its newspaper, including personal profiles of each person who died and of those who lingered in hospitals. The story began to garner coverage in local and mainstream Brazilian media, and the mayor and Brazilian justice minister made public statements about the issue.

When INSP delegates gathered for their annual conference in early 2005, however, Luciano Rocco, the editor of *Ocas*, addressed the group with an update: despite monthly demonstrations of more than a thousand Sao Paulo residents and widespread coverage in both the Brazilian alternative and mainstream press, the murders remained uninvestigated. Widespread speculation was that government authorities, who publicly decried the crimes, wanted to rid the downtown of homeless people to pave the way for redevelopment. Rocco spoke with sadness and frustration: “We have done all we can to bring justice to this issue, but the violence continues and no one hears our protests. I turn to you with hopes of internationalizing this issue, to help bring more pressure from outside to Brazil.”

INSP delegates voted to make Brazil the focus of its advocacy campaign for the year. The group decided that timing and creating urgency were important. The first public campaign was staged to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the attacks and would include a press release, news stories, and a visual ad depicting the ground where one of the victims was attacked (translated into English, Spanish, Portuguese, and German). All of the media connected readers to a Web-based email campaign with a message going to the justice minister in Brazil. The whole packet was sent to all one hundred street publications around the world, and many ran the news story, the ad, or both:

Like the other cases in this article, this campaign operated through a network of relationships, this time among street papers, individual readers, and nongovernmental organizations—working both locally and internationally. Amnesty International in Wales, for example, publicly supported the campaign, as did vendors from various street papers in the United Kingdom, and the international NGO, Civicus. Despite this support and hundreds of emails by individuals around the world sent to the justice minister in Brazil, as of this writing, no arrests have been made.

To coincide with the recent UN Human Rights Day, the INSP created another press release, more articles, and more publicity. Currently, a reporter for HD cable news is now pursuing the story, and the INSP network is considering



ways to keep this campaign going. There is no happy ending to this story, at least not yet, but the work and the writing continues.

Public Writing and the Tactics of Not Going It Alone

Those of us interested in understanding and teaching rhetoric and public writing have much to learn from innovative grassroots media like *Hospitality* and street papers. They offer valuable cases for understanding how public appeals are created and circulated, and how and when social changes do occur. Exploring issues such as public space and the often-violent repression used to limit access to it, such cases directly take up Welch's concern with the privatization of space. Exploring how and when small-press papers do and don't promote change helps highlight important power differences between the rhetoric of someone like Bill Clinton (originally discussed by Wells and taken up by Welch) and the public writing by "the ordinary people who make up our country's multiethnic, working-class majority" (Welch 474). The politically connected and wealthy can exercise strategic control over space and thus have more reliable access to networks of circulation.

Those without such reliable access to networks of circulation, however, are not powerless, as our cases show. In *Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau describes the power of the marginalized or disenfranchised as "tactical," in that its power is fleeting, temporal, and found in "isolated actions" (37).⁴ The writing and campaigns organized by these tiny publications draw from a range of rhetorical stances and organize their writing around various projects—an article, a boycott, a campaign, an unjust ordinance. Each individual writing project is temporary but not isolated, in that it is a part of a movement or a campaign larger than itself.

Our cases teach us that successful circulation of public writing is not achieved by *going it alone*, but through networks of relationships, in alliances between those in power and those without, through moments of serendipity. Any changes made or attempted can't be located solely on the page, or in the act of composition, but also are found in the writing's circulation, in how it works in the world, fostering conversation, creating pressure, and even creating unexpected allies. Our understanding of rhetoric, as Trimbur argues, needs to be attendant to these complexities of delivery. *Producing* texts is not the exclusive rhetorical task of public writing in an increasingly complex, information-driven age. As Johndon Johnson-Eilola points out, it is of equal or greater importance to teach students to see and understand the connections among existing information and information sources in a media-saturated world.

Not Going It Alone in the Public Writing Classroom

What would change in a writing classroom if one were to understand public writing as an act equally dependent on composition and tactical acts of circulation? Here, we offer some ways that writing classes might encourage rhetorical practices that incorporate circulation as a central, local, and connected practice.

Public writing relies on networks of collaboration and community action to circulate, find readers, and keep an issue alive. These networks, however, need not be large and can even be found among students and within the classroom. A student in one of our classes, for example, created a final project designed to debunk myths about homelessness with a very specific public in mind: her boyfriend and his friends, who, she said, often ridiculed “the bums” who slept nearby campus. She carefully planned not only how best to rhetorically reach them—via well-researched and attractively designed handouts and a talk that she prepared—but when and how to most persuasively circulate her presentation. She planned first to have them watch the movie *With Honors* (which features Joe Pesci as a homeless man living in Harvard Square), then present her talk before heading to off-campus bars in the neighborhood where the group often taunted people on the streets.⁵

Similarly, students can make use of the networks of circulation and the organizations in which they are already active. One of our students, for example, wrote a letter to the university president critiquing the school’s invitation to a weapons manufacturer to take part in the Career Day on campus. Rather than merely sending the letter off to the president, however, this student circulated it among the members of the campus Global Justice Project, which helped plan demonstrations, symbolic actions, and a public campus forum. Much more was accomplished than a single letter, although that letter did eventually become a commentary in the student newspaper.

Beyond local networks, teachers and students can learn how to work with local or online alternative publications and advocacy groups that focus on issues about which they care. A comic book or poem can travel further and reach more readers through the help of even a very small press publication focused on a particular issue. In one of our classes, for example, *What’s Up Magazine*, a small press street paper, talked with students about an upcoming issue on the theme of “doing good.” One student wrote (and published), with this audience in mind, a feature story about her journey with a busload of students to protest the School of the Americas, a U.S. institution that trains foreign militaries in Latin America and that, critics say, violates human rights. This article allowed her to question whether and how the journey contributed any “good” to the

world, in the context of a magazine exploring that issue more broadly to a group of over two thousand interested readers.

In public writing, good composition is important but not determinative. One of our biggest frustrations early in our work with grassroots media was a feeling that if we could only find the right words or frame our argument in the most persuasive way, our appeal would prevail. Over time we have learned that while traditional compositional issues like tone, research, and framing issues are still vital to the process of public writing, equally so is the circulation and physical embodiment of the rhetoric—through relationships, theatrical performance, public demonstrations, or interactions. Welch confirms this idea when she describes a faculty public action that gained media attention not from its well-researched articles but only when attached to a theatrical bake sale and demonstration.

Finally, we have also learned humility. *The outcome of any single act of public writing is limited and relies on other actions, people, decision makers, and so on.* There is no rulebook for success, as the case study in Brazil shows. A long vision is needed to assess outcomes and gauge effects. To appreciate the efficacy of public writing, students should do more than read individual essays (like the anthologized *Hospitality* article) in textbooks.⁶ A front-page story in a small press newspaper in Atlanta is about both advocacy and action in the larger politics and networks of relations of a major city.

“Poverty,” wrote Catholic Worker co-founder Dorothy Day, “is a strange and elusive thing. . . . We need always to be thinking and writing about it, for if we are not among its victims, its reality fades from us” (*Long*). What alternative press papers do best is keep the story in front of us. These papers do not allow us to forget that there is a larger picture, a broader spectrum of positions out there than what we see in our day-to-day experience with the media. Coupled with action, these publications are at the center of communication practices in a democracy, and they are more accessible to students than mainstream newspapers as places to register their public voices. What we are suggesting here is that teaching public writing means we pay attention to more than the language used, the way the argument is made, and the author’s bio. Teaching writing should also be about understanding what role a piece of communication plays, can play, or has played in the world outside as well as inside our classrooms.

Acknowledgments

We thank the people working at community newspapers who provided inspiration, insight, and feedback as we wrote, namely Murphy Davis at the Open Door Community, Ed and the late MaryRuth Weir at New Hope House, and Lisa Maclean, Luciano Rocco, and Alex Tsouvalas from the International Network of Street Papers. Our thanks and gratitude also go to John Trimbur for his feedback and to CCC's reviewers Susan Miller-Cochran and Alice Gillam for their supportive comments and useful suggestions.

Notes

Epigraph: Peter Maurin, the co-founder of the *Catholic Worker*, is quoted in Day, *Loaves*.

1. As of December 2006, the battle over Woodruff Park continues. The city has now removed benches from the park, forcing anyone (homeless or not) who might want to stop and rest to either use the grass or the steps leading up to the park.
2. Paula Mathieu served as a board member of *Spare Change* at the time and wrote many of the boycott's public statements. For more on the boycott, see Mathieu, "Newbury."
3. See www.street-papers.com. For more on INSP's anti-violence campaign in Brazil, see Mathieu, "Brazil."
4. For a fuller discussion of de Certeau's discussion of strategic and tactical power and discourse, see Mathieu, *Tactics*.
5. If one were to follow Michael Warner's definition of a public, this example would not count as public writing, because, according to Warner, a public relies on an address to strangers (74–87). But we agree with Rosa Eberly that writing classrooms constitute "protopublic spaces," and as such, we believe that addresses to other students can constitute effective protopublic discourse.
6. We are not suggesting that one should not teach essays from textbooks. In fact, papers like *Hospitality*, *Spare Change*, or *Ocas* (which publishes in Portuguese) are not widely distributed and are only casually archived. The availability of small press media, however, is growing due to online publication. The International Network of Street Papers, for example, is slowly building an online archive/news agency of content from street papers around the world, available online at www.streetnewsservice.org.

Works Cited

- Ballintyne, Scott. *Unsafe Streets: Street Homelessness and Crime*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 1999.
- Campbell, Colin. "Why Feed Homeless in Parks?" *Atlanta Journal Constitution* 30 Sept. 2003: 2B.
- Davis, Murphy. "Woodruff Park: The Search for Common Ground." *Hospitality* 15.3 (1996): 1+.
- Day, Dorothy. *Loaves and Fishes*. 1963. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Reprint, 1993.
- . *The Long Loneliness*. 1952. San Francisco: Harper, 1997.
- de Certeau, Michel. *Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Eberly, Rosa. "From Writers, Audience, and Communities to Publics: Writing Classrooms as Protopublic Spaces." *Rhetoric Review* 18.1 (1999): 165–78.
- George, Diana. "The Word on the Street: Public Discourse in a Culture of Disconnect." *Reflections* 2.2 (2002): 5–18.
- Hiskey, Michelle. "Raising Olympic Atlanta: A Makeover for Woodruff." *Atlanta Journal* and *Atlanta Constitution* 16 Oct. 1994: D4.
- Johanek, Michael C., and John Puckett. "The State of Civic Education: Preparing Citizens in an Era of Accountability." *Institutions of American Democracy: The Public Schools*. Ed. Susan Fuhrman and Marvin Lazerson. NY: Oxford UP, 2005. 130–59.
- Johnson-Eilola, Johndan. "Negative Spaces: From Production to Connection in Composition." *Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet*. Ed. Todd Taylor and Irene Ward. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. 17–33.
- Mathieu, Paula. "Brazil Nears Anniversary of Brutal Killings of Homeless." *Global Street News Service* July 2005. 3 June 2006 <http://www.streetnews-service.org/index.php?page=archive_detail&articleID=396>.
- . "Newbury Comics Pulls Bumfights Video in Response to HEP Boycott." *Global Street News Service*. 6 April 2004. 3 June 2006 <http://www.streetnews-service.org/index.php?page=archive_detail&articleID=212>.
- . *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 2005.
- National Coalition for the Homeless. "Hate, Violence and Death on Main Street USA." June 2004. 5 March 2005 <<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/hatecrimes/introduction.html>> [no longer available].
- Rocco, Luciano. "Update on Violence in Sao Paulo." Remarks given at the International Network of Street Papers Conference. Buenos Aires, Argentina. 2 May 2005.
- Trimbur, John. "Composition and the Circulation of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 52.2 (2000): 188–219.
- Tsouvalas, Alex. "An Open Letter to Newbury Comics." *Spare Change News* 5–18 Feb. 2004: 1.
- Vetlesen, Arne Johan. "Genocide: A Case for the Responsibility of the Bystander." *Journal of Peace Research* 37.4 (July 2000): 519–32.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.
- Weisser, Christian. *Moving beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.

Welch, Nancy. "Living Room: Teaching Writing in a Post-Publicity Era." *College Composition and Communication* 56.3 (2005): 470–92.

Wells, Susan. "Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?" *College Composition and Communication*. 47.3 (1996): 325–41.

Paula Mathieu

Paula Mathieu is associate professor of English at Boston College, where she directs the Writing Fellows Program. She is author of *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition* and co-editor of *Beyond English, Inc: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy*. From 2003 to 2006, she was deputy chair of the International Network of Street Papers.

Diana George

Diana George is professor of rhetoric and writing at Virginia Tech, where she directs the Composition Program and the Writing Center. Her work has appeared in a number of journals and collections, including *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *JAC*. With Marilyn Cooper and Dennis Lynch, she is a past Braddock Award recipient.