



# A poverty of voices

## Street papers as communicative democracy

■ **Kevin Howley**

*DePauw University, USA*

### ABSTRACT

The 1990s witnessed two distinct but related trends in journalism: the rise of public journalism and the emergence of street newspapers. This article contrasts public journalism and street newspapers in an effort to explicate the distinguishing features of each. In doing so, it illuminates the distinctions between liberal-minded media reform movements, such as public journalism, and far more radical alternatives to journalistic practice as represented by street newspapers. Throughout it is argued that street papers are a unique form of communicative democracy. In their capacity as the voice of the poor, street newspapers seek to critically engage the reading public in ongoing deliberations over fundamental issues of economic, social and political justice. A brief assessment of *Street Feat* – a street newspaper in Halifax, Nova Scotia – provides an empirical basis for this discussion.

KEY WORDS ■ advocacy journalism ■ alternative press ■ civic journalism  
■ native reporting ■ public journalism ■ *Street Feat* ■ street newspapers

The 1990s witnessed the development of two distinct but related trends in journalism theory and practice: the rise of public journalism as an acceptable, if somewhat controversial alternative to ‘traditional’ news routines; and the emergence of street newspapers as a cultural form. The similarities in philosophy, orientation and approach between the two movements are noteworthy. For instance, both public journalism and street papers start from the premise that democratic principles are severely compromised by contemporary journalistic forms and practices. Furthermore, by fundamentally altering the relationship between journalists and reading publics, each movement seeks to improve the character, conduct and quality of public life. In this regard, both movements might be viewed as pragmatic responses to growing dissatisfaction with press performance and accountability.

Equally instructive, however, are the distinctions between public journalism and street papers. Public journalism is, by and large, an effort by established media outlets and journalism professionals to reorient their work, ostensibly to enhance civic discourse and promote greater public participation in political processes. And yet, despite their insistence that journalists be more assertive in 'making public life work', proponents of public journalism remain ambivalent regarding their role as advocates for particular causes or positions. Conversely, the staff and volunteers at street papers work with and advocate on behalf of the homeless, the unemployed and the working poor. With relatively few exceptions, street newspapers explicitly promote themselves as instruments of progressive social change. Moreover, in publishing material written by people living in poverty, street papers consciously align themselves with the philosophy and tradition associated with alternative media. To employ Dorothy Kidd's (1999) useful definition of alternative media, street newspapers are committed to 'altering' prevailing social conditions and do so, in part, by publishing 'native' accounts of economic injustice from the local communities that they serve.

Yet another distinction between public journalism and street papers lies in the origins and diffusion of each movement. By and large, the public journalism movement is unique to the United States. With a few exceptions, this experiment has limited appeal around the world.<sup>1</sup> For its part, the street paper movement is a global phenomenon. Street newspapers are commonplace in cities across North America, Europe, Africa and Australia. And yet, despite the worldwide proliferation of the form, street papers have not received much attention in academic circles. The substantial and growing body of literature on public journalism stands in stark contrast to the relative paucity of scholarship on street newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

This article attempts to address this disparity. More concretely, in this article I contrast public journalism and street papers in an effort to explicate the distinguishing features of each. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the distinctions between what I see as a modest, often self-serving, and altogether liberal-minded media reform movement, such as public journalism, and a far more radical alternative to journalistic practice, as represented by street papers. Throughout this article, I argue that street papers are a unique form of communicative democracy. That is to say, in their capacity as the voice of the poor, street papers seek to engage reading publics in a critically informed dialogue over fundamental issues of economic, social and political justice. A brief assessment of *Street Feat*, a street newspaper produced and distributed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, provides an empirical basis for this discussion. These observations and analyses are based on participatory action research conducted by the author at *Street Feat* throughout the summer of 2001.

This article is part of a larger project, which seeks to reassert the relationship between symbolic politics and material politics. Put another way, my work examines the relationship between the struggle over the meanings produced and circulated through communication technologies and media organizations and broader questions over material relations of power. As such, this project draws on the theory and practice of ‘communicative democracy’ – popular struggles which seek to expand the range of voices available in the media, create more egalitarian public spheres and promote and enhance democratic processes (Hackett, 2000). In this formulation, then, street papers are but one site of many where the struggle for communicative democracy takes place on a daily basis.

Furthermore, I would posit that work of this sort takes on greater urgency in an era when concerns over stark imbalances in political and economic power are tempered by sanguine observations of symbolic and cultural power. That is to say, the explosion of new media forms coupled with recent findings in audience studies has led some cultural critics to overstate the power and autonomy of media consumers. While theories of the active audience are essential for understanding the complex and dynamic role media play in our everyday lives, these analyses exhibit a disturbing tendency to downplay significant disparities in political and economic relations. As a result, an uncritical assessment of ‘semiotic democracy’ (Fiske, 1987) threatens to push the politics of material redistribution off the scholarly agenda.

Through its appropriation of the instruments of newspaper production and distribution, coupled with its calls for social and economic justice, the street paper movement forcefully articulates the relationship between cultural politics and material politics in contemporary society. Put differently, street newspapers underscore the glaring power differentials between those with considerable economic, material and symbolic capital and those with little or no access to such resources. Nowhere is this tendency more evident, or more disturbing, than in the field of journalism. As media consolidation proceeds virtually unchecked and the practice of journalism increasingly comes to resemble that of the public relations industry, there is a pronounced lack of diversity of opinion and perspective in news, information, and public affairs reporting – a poverty of voices.

### **Public journalism: reinventing the news?**

Tracing the evolution of public journalism, Renita Coleman (1997: 60) notes: ‘The official christening of public journalism can be traced to 1990, with Jay Rosen widely considered the founding intellectual father and Davis Merritt as

his professional counterpart'. But Rosen and Merritt were not alone in their efforts; there was 'considerable consensus' among academics and practitioners from across the country who were 'asking themselves the same questions, debating the same concerns, and many were coming up with the same answers' (p. 60). Far from being a coherent, let alone internally consistent, set of practices – proponents are reluctant to codify rules for fear of pre-empting innovation and experimentation – public journalism nonetheless resonates with editors, reporters and reading publics in small towns and big cities alike (Charity, 1995).

If, as some critics argue, the press is part of the problem with American politics, public journalism is viewed as a partial solution. In an effort to overcome America's growing cynicism and political apathy, proponents of public journalism insist that news professionals reassert journalism's role in promoting informed and enlightened self-governance. That is to say, by urging news workers to assume a leadership role in their communities, public journalism hopes to ignite citizens' interest in public affairs and rekindle people's participation in the everyday lives of their local communities (Carey, 1999). In short, by 'getting the connections right' between the press and the reading public, journalists can help revitalize American political culture (Rosen, 1996).

To that end, public journalism is guided by the following principles. First, public journalism rejects the notion that reporters can and must remain 'detached' and 'objective' observers of public life. According to Glasser and Craft (1997: 123), 'claims of objectivity run counter to the principles of public journalism insofar as the former encourage journalists to position themselves outside or beyond the communities they seek to serve'. Public journalism insists that reporters and editors acknowledge, embrace and assert their position as members of the community. This is not to suggest, however, that standards of fairness and accuracy in reporting are to be dismissed or ignored. Rather, by avoiding the pretense of neutrality and conceding their relationship to social, political and economic institutions and actors, public journalists are better able to accurately reflect the varied, often competing perspectives and opinions within the community.

Public journalism's second principle follows from this. By facilitating polyvocal discussion within the community, public journalism re-conceives the newspaper as a 'conversational commons': a public space for the deliberation of issues of importance to the social, economic, and political life of the community (Anderson et al., 1997). In shifting the newspaper's function from an information conduit to a forum for dialogue and exchange, public journalism treats the public as citizens first and foremost. The implications of this dialogic approach to the press are many. To begin with, public journalism does

more than simply provide information to consumers; rather it invites news-readers to be participants in public discourse. Rather than leave decision-making to 'experts' whose views represent vested, often monied interests, public journalism encourages so-called 'ordinary citizens' to engage in informed and considered public deliberation.

In doing so, public journalism assumes yet another role: to promote listening skills within and between different cultural groups and political constituencies. This 'conversational journalism' understands news to be something other than a commodity but 'as a co-creation of journalists and the people of the community; news is derived, in large measure, from their mutually defined relationship' (Anderson et al., 1997: 113). This move signals an important shift in journalistic values: a movement away from reporting conflict and toward achieving resolution; a movement away from merely stating a problem toward finding solutions; and finally, a movement away from gratuitous style and toward substantive reportage. As a result, so the thinking goes, news becomes less safe, predictable and stylized and, therefore, more varied, substantive and, potentially at least, more relevant to wider publics (Merritt, 1998).

Admirable as its goals are, the public journalism movement has raised the ire of print, radio and television journalists across the United States. For some practitioners, public journalism is nothing new. Small town newspapers have long assumed a leadership role in their communities. From this perspective, public journalism is a new name for community journalism, a time-honored practice in rural America (Ray, 1995). Others are wary of academics that prescribe 'special projects' designed to promote greater public participation in setting the news agenda. Bruce Gellerman, a reporter for WBUR, public radio in Boston, puts it bluntly: 'I don't buy it. It's an intellectual circle jerk. People who don't do journalism or haven't done it in years are trying to tell us how to do it. I think it's garbage' (quoted in Waddell, 1997: 70). Others question the altruistic motivations behind public journalism projects. In the wake of declining readerships and falling advertising revenues, public journalism is viewed as little more than a marketing gimmick designed to boost sagging sales (Altschull, 1997).

Likewise, academics challenge public journalism's basic assumptions and dispute the validity of some of the movement's claims. For instance, some critics argue that public journalism's atheoretical approach undermines its laudable goals and compromises the project's efficacy. 'If public journalism is to emerge as a fully developed journalistic theory and practice, public journalism advocates must therefore take their point of departure in understandings of publicness, public life, politics, and citizenship. Public journalism practice

needs a coherent, guiding philosophy' (Haas and Steiner, 2000: 139). Others take issue with claims that public journalism is a genuine grassroots movement. As Claussen and Shafer (1997: 6) observe: 'The innovators have been the scores of news organizations that have engaged in civic journalism experiments, incorporating its tenets as part of their corporate policies and objectives'. All of this suggests that public journalism's achievements may be, at worst, disingenuous or, at best, short-lived. Indeed, a recent study suggests that despite the fanfare accompanying public journalism projects, there is little evidence that these experiments have resulted in substantive changes in newspaper content, let alone significantly altered the attitudes of news workers or newsreaders for that matter (Blaizer and Lemert, 2000).

More critically, communication historian Michael Schudson (1999) argues that for all of its progressive trappings, the public journalism movement is conservative in its approach to journalistic practices as well as in its assumptions about the press' role in democratic societies. Operating as it does from within a trustee model of the press – one which bestows upon a self-appointed professional class the complex and contested tasks of defining news values and determining newsworthiness – the public journalism movement makes its appeal not to the public but to an elite.

Public journalism, in other words, stops short of offering a fourth model of journalism in democracy, one in which authority is vested not in the market, not in the party, and not in the journalist but in the public. *Nothing in public journalism removes power from the journalists or the corporations they work for.* (Schudson, 1999: 122; emphasis added)

Despite a professed commitment to increase public participation in news routines and enhance journalism's accountability to reading publics, on the whole the current practice of public journalism is undemocratic.

### **Street papers: democratizing journalistic practice**

In November 1989, about the same time that newsrooms across the United States launched their first public journalism experiments, *Street News* made its debut in New York City. Conceived as a sociocultural hybrid – equal parts community service program, consciousness-raising effort and underground newspaper – *Street News* enlisted the swelling ranks of New York City's homeless population to produce and distribute the paper. Billing itself as 'America's motivational nonprofit newspaper', *Street News* offered vendors a modest but nonetheless viable alternative to panhandling. In doing so, *Street News* sought

to publicize the plight of the city's poor while providing the homeless with gainful employment.

Hawking the paper on street corners and in subway stations throughout the city, vendors would keep 50 cents for every 75-cent paper they sold. The remaining money was split between covering the paper's operating expenses and a general 'apartment fund'. The fund was established to help vendors save towards a deposit on accommodations. Early reports indicated that as many as 75 vendors used their savings to get off the streets or out of the city's notoriously grim shelters and into their own apartments (Jacobs, 1990). With a growing number of success stories to its credit *Street News* soon became a hit with readers, an impressive list of celebrity contributors and the local business community (McAuley, 1990).

The paper served as a prototype for street papers around the world. Among those papers that took inspiration from *Street News* are Chicago's *StreetWise*, Toronto's *Spare Change*, London's *The Big Issue* and two Parisian street papers *La Rue* and *Macaadam Journal* (Leone, 1995).

The proliferation of street papers around the world is impressive given the labor and capital intensive nature of these efforts, not to mention the formidable financial and logistical obstacles associated with sustaining a new publication in an increasingly competitive business environment. Even more remarkably, these local papers are coordinating their efforts, sharing their (limited) resources and building a broad-based coalition of practitioners and advocates at both the national and international level (Harris, 1998). Currently, the North American Street Newspaper Association (NASNA) boasts a membership of nearly 50 publications from across the United States and Canada. Similarly, the International Network of Street Papers (INSP) has representatives in countries across Europe and Africa and throughout Australia. And yet, apart from inevitable linguistic and cultural differences between local variants – distinctions that manifest themselves most noticeably in the format, page layout and design of the individual papers – street papers are rather consistent in their approach and philosophy.

For instance, most street papers embody the principles of participatory communication. To be sure, like the phrases 'community', 'alternative' and 'radical' media, 'participatory communication' is a loaded and hotly contested term (White, 1994). Nonetheless, street papers are participatory inasmuch as they invite 'non-professional' journalists, especially the homeless, the working poor and their advocates, to write for these publications. What's more, many street papers include these constituencies on their editorial boards and in other decision-making positions. In this regard, street papers are yet another variant of what John Downing (1984, 2001) describes as 'self-managed' media organizations.

That is to say, street papers are written, produced and distributed by the homeless, the unemployed and the working poor – voices that are rarely heard let alone acknowledged in either corporate or state-run media. In this regard, street papers are part of a long tradition associated with the underground or alternative press. Indeed, as Norma Fay Green reminds us, ‘When the mainstream media ignore, distort, or bury news of an issue such as homelessness, alternative publications spring up to fill the void’ (Green, 1998: 47). Viewed in this light, street papers constitute an alternative public sphere for the publication of views, opinions and perspectives of marginalized constituencies.<sup>3</sup>

Put in more theoretical terms, street papers enable the impoverished and the working poor – a ‘subaltern counterpublic’ to follow Nancy Fraser’s (1993) useful formulation – to construct a discursive space in which they can articulate their shared concerns and from which they might publicize these concerns to wider publics. In this way, street papers more fully realize public journalism’s potential.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, rather than ‘bracket’ or abstract social inequalities, street papers underscore and thematize power differentials within the community. In sum, unlike public journalism, which seeks to achieve consensus through informed deliberation among a community of equals, street papers highlight structural differences within the community and emphasize the contested character of community relations. A brief overview of street paper form and content demonstrates the significance of articulating such differences especially as this relates to issues of social and economic justice.

Typically, mainstream media coverage of homelessness falls into one of two broad categories: the sensationalized coverage of the tragic death of an ‘anonymous’ street person or the ‘feel-good piece’ on charitable giving. By contrast, *street papers provide consistent and substantive coverage of such issues as affordable housing, health care, employment, and social services as they relate directly to the homeless and the working poor*. As such, street papers represent a first line of defense against dramatic changes in social and economic policy: draconian measures that go largely unreported in mainstream media outlets and which are most immediately and deeply felt by the poor (Messman, 1999; Van Lier, 1999). Librarian Chris Dodge argues that in a major media market like San Francisco, a street publication called *Street Spirit* is by far:

the most significant source of firsthand news and advocacy related to poor and homeless people in California, it documents – in articles devoid of newspeak and spin control – the increasing criminalization of poor people under laws that make it illegal to loiter. (Dodge, 1999: 61)

Indeed, it is the publication of highly personalized accounts of life on the streets, coupled with fearless critiques of contemporary economic conditions



and regressive (often repressive) social policy, that make street papers a distinctive and decidedly democratic form of journalism.

Aside from social criticism, street papers also provide practical information and advice for the homeless, the unemployed and the working poor. For example, in addition to printing job listings, publicizing training programs and running classified ads from local non-profits, Chicago's *StreetWise* operates its own career development center (Dum, 1997). And, like other street papers, *StreetWise* features vendor profiles documenting 'success stories' of people moving out of poverty. On a less hopeful but no less significant note, street papers also run obituaries for street people whose lives and deaths go unremarked in daily newspapers. In this regard, street papers articulate the anger and grief that survivors feel when one of their compatriots dies, thereby providing the paper's readership with a measure of comfort.<sup>5</sup>

Yet another aspect of street papers worth noting is their tendency to draw upon earlier newspaper styles and forms. Street papers have revived the publication of short fiction and poetry, once a staple of the tabloid newspaper. Although the quality of this writing is uneven, poetry and fiction are exceptional vehicles for engaging readers and moving them to consider subject matter they might otherwise avoid in a 'hard news story'. At its best, so-called 'street writing' recalls the literary realism of the late 19th century inasmuch as it eloquently captures the anger, frustration and isolation common to street life. What's more, this literary work provides an additional revenue stream for financially strapped street publications. For example, Edmonton's *Our Voice* supplements its yearly income through the publication of *Street Songs*, an anthology of poetry written by homeless vendors and contributors. One indication of the popularity, if not the profitability of this work, was the inclusion of a number of street poets at the 2000 Blue Metro Literary Conference in Montreal. One of North America's premier literary events, the Blue Metro, held several events featuring the journalistic and literary work of street writers.

Typically, however, street papers rely most heavily on direct sales and subscriptions. In some instances, government grants and private contributions help sustain these efforts. More often street papers accept advertising revenue from local businesses, religious groups and social service organizations which support the paper's efforts in providing an alternative to panhandling. The role of advertising in supporting street papers is hotly debated among street paper advocates. For some, advertising is anathema; for others advertising is part and parcel of running a newspaper. The issue gets far more complex when the question arises of what sort of advertising is deemed acceptable for a street newspaper. For example, during my stay at *Street Feat*, a concerned reader called to question the wisdom of running an ad from one of Halifax's most

expensive restaurants in the pages of a street newspaper. This sort of contradiction is quite common in street papers as it is in other forms of alternative media.

Furthermore, providing employment opportunities, however modest they may be, to people on the street or in need of supplemental income is a common feature of the street paper. In this way, street papers instill advocacy journalism with even greater urgency; not only do street papers publicize the desperate living conditions of homeless people, they work toward markedly improving the lives of the poor. Money earned by selling street papers often means the difference between living on the streets or in a shelter and being able to afford a meal, bus fare or living accommodations (see e.g. Kendall, 2000). As such, street papers are exemplars of social change journalism insofar as these projects have a palpable effect on the everyday lived experience of vendors. In sum, street papers address disparities in economic, political and symbolic power; disparities that are articulated within and through the dominant values, practices and institutions (including the news and culture industries) of late capitalist societies.

All of this is not to suggest, however, that street papers are free from the same constraints and internal contradictions that plague other forms of alternative media (Comedia, 1984). Boukhari (1999), for example, speaks of the 'discord' within the movement surrounding the street paper's mission, its organizational structure, its content and its political activism. Chicago's *StreetWise* is a case in point. Despite the paper's success – with a circulation of well over 20,000, *StreetWise* is arguably one of the most successful street papers in the US – questions over the paper's editorial integrity led to the forced resignation of key personnel. According to some observers, *StreetWise* is undergoing a corporate makeover designed to attract advertisers. As a result, the paper has all but surrendered its role as an advocate for the homeless (Kharkar, 2001).

Furthermore, like other forms of alternative media that rely on volunteerism and low-wage laborers, street papers are susceptible to high turnover rates and worker burnout. As a result, street papers struggle to conduct effective community outreach projects, achieve and maintain editorial consistency, coordinate promotional and marketing activities, and adhere to production schedules. In a related fashion, compassion fatigue among readers compromises the long-term viability of street papers. All too often, people purchase street papers out of guilt or sympathy for individual vendors without taking the time to read the paper, let alone think about and act upon the issues raised by these publications. This tendency is especially troubling for street papers as they attempt to promote among their readership a critical consciousness of contemporary social, political and economic relations.

Equally worrisome, increased competition between street papers threatens to undermine the success of the entire movement. For example, the expansion of the UK-based *The Big Issue* into American markets has put local publications on the defensive (Murphy, 1998). Eager to attract upscale readers, *The Big Issue* features arts and entertainment news with only occasional pieces explicitly related to homelessness or poverty (Torck, 2001). Smaller street papers fear they are unable to compete with the glossy, general interest magazine. And whereas most street papers prominently feature the writing of homeless people, *The Big Issue* relegates this material to a few pages in a section called 'Street Lights'. All of this has led to healthy, if sometimes acrimonious debates over the form and function of street papers.

Here we can detect the tensions between competing visions of street papers. On one side of the debate are activists who use the paper to address issues related to social and economic injustice; on the other are business-oriented publishers providing entrepreneurial opportunities to the homeless.

In many ways, the conflict comes down to a clash between two philosophies for achieving social change. Unlike *The Big Issue*, papers like *Street Sheet* [San Francisco, CA] and *Making Change* [Santa Monica, CA] do not claim to be eliminating homelessness by giving their vendors employment; their aim is simply to give the poor a voice, a little bit of money and a place to find respectable work (Lloyd, 1998).

In this light, street papers confront the same question that has faced the alternative press for decades: Is it possible (or desirable for that matter) to publish a dissident newspaper<sup>6</sup> – that is, a publication committed to progressive social change – and still attract a wide audience?

Notwithstanding these competing approaches to social change strategies, the salient feature of the street paper movement is its commitment to communicative democracy.

At first glance, most street papers seem to share an editorial vision akin to the mission of many a social reformer – to comfort the afflicted by afflicting the comfortable. Closer reading reveals differences in content and quality, but also a deeper shared element: unheard voices from the underexplored universe of the inner city. (Garafola, 2000)

By providing such a forum for the voices of the poor, street papers democratize journalistic practice in a far more fundamental and substantive fashion than does public journalism in its present form. As such, street papers represent a significant new form of communicative democracy.<sup>7</sup> A closer look at one such publication, *Street Feat*, supports this assertion. Here, special emphasis is placed on *Street Feat's* publication of 'native reports' from people living in poverty and the paper's commitment to progressive social change.

### *Street Feat*: the voice of the poor

In a front-page editorial appearing in *Street Feat's* December 1997 premiere issue, the paper's founders, Michael Burke and Roberto Menendez, discuss the rationale behind establishing a local street newspaper.<sup>8</sup> The editorial notes the indifference of local media outlets toward the growing ranks of the impoverished and the working poor throughout the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). Moreover, the editorial implies that news organizations are complicit in supporting both the provincial and federal government's fiscal conservatism – an agenda that promotes deficit reduction at the expense of essential social services and favors corporate interests over the public interest.

Associating the new publication with the traditions of the alternative press, the editorial argues, 'the poor and the disadvantaged need a voice to express their concerns, to tell their stories, and to bring their message to the public and to elected officials' (Burke and Menendez, 1997: 1). In the pages of *Street Feat*, the editorial continues, issues such as the lack of affordable housing, chronic unemployment and drastic cutbacks in social assistance and health care programs will be publicized – through critical commentary and personal observation – in an effort to engage the local citizenry in forthright and meaningful discussion over questions of social and economic justice.

Addressing the issue of poverty as it does, *Street Feat* shares a number of salient features with public journalism as described earlier. Unlike most public journalism projects, however, *Street Feat* democratizes journalistic practices by recognizing the *value* and acknowledging the *authority* of the poor and by making these voices public. Returning to Michael Schudson's formulation, *Street Feat* provides a fourth model of journalism: an approach that makes its appeal directly to the public by encouraging 'non-professionals' to try their hand at newspaper writing and thereby address issues and concerns that receive scant attention in mainstream media outlets. Like other street papers, then, *Street Feat* makes 'salient social inequities the very subject matter (or focal point) of deliberation' (Haas and Steiner, 2001: 127). From its inception *Street Feat* has featured stories and commentary that go beyond merely reporting changes in social policy and economic conditions. Rather these stories – written by union representatives, social service workers, community activists and people struggling to survive on social assistance – document and analyze the impact these changing conditions have on the lives of the poor, working families, 'street kids' and welfare recipients.

This 'native' reporting rejects conventional journalism's dependence on 'official sources' for news and opinion. Here, then, expertise is not the sole domain of elected officials, business leaders or academics. Rather, expert knowledge is constructed through and draws upon the everyday lived experi-

ence of the working poor, the homeless and those who work on their behalf. *Street Feat's* contributors likewise repudiate news routines like the photo opportunity, the press briefing and other pseudo-events. Rather, *Street Feat's* news-gathering activities are intimately tied to the social network of the poor. Reporters recount incidents and conversations on street corners, in social service offices, at soup kitchens and food banks.

In this way, *Street Feat* taps into and privileges what cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) described as 'local knowledge'. For example, in a story about the federal government's April Fool's Day 1996 cutbacks in social assistance payments, long-time *Street Feat* editorial contributor Peter McGuigan highlights the contradictions between jobs programs, unemployment insurance and recently enacted 'reforms'.

Although these [jobs] might attract some on employment insurance, or pensions or part time work, they are not very useful to those on social assistance due to its rules. Because the recipient is only allowed to earn \$50/month before losing the remainder dollar-for-dollar, the part time guard positions paying about \$75 a week would hardly be worthwhile. However, if the person were on EI [Employment Insurance], earnings of \$50/week are allowed so the guard position would be somewhat attractive despite the wonderful Canadian winter. (McGuigan, 1996: 3)

In this piece, as in much of his writing, Peter McGuigan evaluates policy changes from the perspective of a social assistance recipient. Rather than deal in abstractions based on economic forecasts, budget projections and other 'official' pronouncements, McGuigan's analysis is grounded in his experience as a social assistance recipient and school-crossing guard. Herein we find a crucial distinction between public journalism and street papers. Whereas public journalism tends to frame policy deliberations in terms of competing economic and political philosophies, street papers reveal the human cost of social policy based on political expediency and accounting columns and ledgers. In doing so, street papers foreground social inequalities within local communities and illuminate the interconnected and interdependent nature of social relations: a dimension of public life that is poorly articulated in contemporary journalism.

In terms of the present discussion, this approach has significant implications for public journalism as it is currently understood and practiced. As media historian John Pauly argues, operating from 'more native ground' has important implications for public journalism if it is to serve democracy in any meaningful sense:

What public journalism needs, in short, is a culturally informed theory and practice of feature reporting. So far it has accepted conventional practice in treating political reporting as the profession's highest achievement (and ultimate career goal). A democratic society, however, needs feature reporting to encourage

the social solidarity and empathy that make public life possible (Pauly, 1999: 147).

The stories related in the pages of *Street Feat* take on this decidedly cultural approach to reportage. As a result, readers are encouraged to consider the broader social implications of welfare reform. That is to say, *Street Feat's* native reporting questions the underlying assumptions of welfare reform measures that are touted by elected officials and media pundits alike as 'fiscally responsible' tax relief for the middle class and economic incentives to low-income groups.

Not surprisingly, women write some of *Street Feat's* most compelling essays on 'the poverty trap' – the cycle of economic dependency that breeds desperation and despair. For instance, in a piece entitled 'Poverty is SINGLE and SHE has a CHILD', Linda Harpell compiles disturbing statistics, gleaned from provincial and federal sources, that indicate the depth and extent of poverty among Canadian women. A moving and forceful critique of gender inequities, the article observes the difficult economic decisions single mothers face on a daily basis. 'The mother of a poor family often scrimps on her own food to feed the kids. At times, the parent is faced with another hard choice: feed the children or use some of the grocery money to meet medical needs' (Harpell, 2000: 4). Without sensationalizing, articles like this elicit empathetic responses in letters to the editor and provide a sense of common struggle among women living in poverty. Moreover, essays like this one go beyond mere mention of the underlying conditions of a growing but woefully under-reported societal problem to provide practical information services specifically for single working mothers. Harpell's essay includes interviews with sympathetic and reassuring representatives from local social service agencies such as the Elizabeth Fry Society, a legal aid organization for women.

Significantly, this native reporting is complemented by 'expert analysis' of a different sort. For instance, *Street Feat* frequently reprints the critical commentary by Jim Stanford, an economist for the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). With keen wit and analytical aplomb, Stanford deconstructs the rhetoric of free-market capitalism in a manner that is at once accessible and relevant to working-class readers. What's more, Stanford's columns reveal the bait and switch tactics behind middle-class tax cuts. In this way, Stanford encourages well-to-do audiences to reconsider the wisdom of fiscal conservatism as the Canadian government in recent years has articulated it. For instance, in a column titled 'Arithmetic for Finance Ministers', Stanford (2000: 6) writes:

Several measures are bundled as a 'middle-income' tax package account for fully half of the total tax savings announced in the [FY 2001] budget. The middle and high-income bracket thresholds will increase, the middle tax rate will be cut . . .

But to get the full amount, that taxpayer must earn \$85,000 or more, a status enjoyed by only the richest 3 percent of taxpayers in Canada.

Appearing as it does in a newspaper committed to social and economic justice, pieces like this help readers make connections between global trade agreements, national fiscal policy and the actual lived experience of those living in poverty. It bears repeating that neither conventional journalism nor recent experiments in public journalism articulate these relationships in a substantive fashion. In its quest to achieve consensus, public journalism fails to address how disparate social groups within a community experience changes in social and economic policy, let alone how these groups compete over scarce resources.

## **Conclusion**

This article attempts to highlight the distinctions between two journalistic movements that share a number of salient features but which nonetheless diverge in their approach to journalistic theory and practice. Throughout this discussion, I have suggested that what makes the street paper movement distinctive from public journalism is its commitment to communicative democracy. Despite liberal-pluralist rhetoric to the contrary, public journalism's capacity to promote a more responsive and responsible press is questionable.

In an assessment of the growing body of literature on public journalism, Hanno Hardt cautions that the role of media foundations in legitimizing, supporting, and shaping the public journalism movement requires far more critical attention and assessment than it has currently received. For example, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Kettering Foundation fund the Project on Public Life and the Press. The Pew Center for Civic Journalism receives its support from the Pew Charitable Trust. The former is based in the Department of Journalism at New York University while the latter is based at Columbia University. Hardt notes that a few years ago alliances such as these would have been unthinkable for fear of compromising journalistic independence. Hardt (1999: 199) continues:

the prominence of media foundations as powerful institutional forces in various professional and educational arenas of public life has never been raised as a political issue with potentially undesirable influences on the process of journalism or journalism education.

Viewed in this light, public journalism's ability to insulate itself from a system of private ownership and capital accumulation – two determining factors that have historically undermined the independence of working journalists and

compromised the principles of free expression – seems unlikely. For all of the movement's talk of fundamentally altering the press' relationship with reading publics and improving the quality of civic life, public journalism stops short of a substantive, critically informed evaluation of capitalism as a system of economic, social and political relations.

By contrast, street papers challenge the basic assumption that capitalism is a viable, let alone an equitable system of human relations. Indeed, it is rather telling that street newspapers emerged as a cultural form at precisely the same moment that the struggles against transnational capitalism and the movement for global justice began to coalesce in the industrial West, in the 'new democracies' of the East and in the impoverished South. It comes as no surprise, then, that despite differences within the street paper movement, there is a concerted effort to reorient prevailing discursive formations surrounding the inevitability, or the desirability for that matter, of free-market capitalism. In doing so, street papers articulate a growing dissatisfaction with contemporary journalistic forms and practices that serve the narrow interests of political and economic elites thereby failing to consider alternatives based on a moral political economy.

What's more, street papers struggle to realize these alternatives within and through a commitment to communicative democracy. As such, street papers represent a significant intervention into the fundamental relationship between symbolic or cultural power and the material relations of power in contemporary societies. Scholars with an interest in journalism theory, especially as it relates to the public sphere, the critical distinction between public opinion and political decision-making, and its press' principal role in explaining, or making sense of, everyday lived experience would do well to attend to the voices of the poor in the pages of street newspapers.

### **Acknowledgement**

This work was supported by a research and travel grant from the Marion and Jasper Whiting Foundation of Boston, MA.

### **Notes**

- 1 In recent years, scholars and practitioners in New Zealand and Australia have expressed an interest in public journalism. See Judy McGregor et al. (1999) and Cratis Hipporates (1998).



- 2 For a comprehensive review and critical assessment of the literature on public journalism see Hanno Hardt (1999).
- 3 This assertion is consistent with other arguments related to the alternative press. See for example, Chris Atton (1999). See also Susan Herbst (1994).
- 4 Here, I am drawing on Haas and Steiner's application of Nancy Fraser's work on the public sphere to the theory and practice of public journalism.
- 5 Throughout the 1980s and 1990s AIDS activists employed a similar device. In addition to celebrating the life of AIDS victims, this gesture helped promote a sense of solidarity within the gay community.
- 6 Here I'm drawing on Roger Streitmatter's (2001) useful distinction between alternative and dissident press. According to Streitmatter, dissident publications are distinguished from the alternative press in their primary aim to effect social change. In their commitment to communicative democracy and economic justice, street papers are clearly agents of change.
- 7 This statement requires some qualification. Street papers bear a striking resemblance to earlier forms, most notably *The Hobo News*, a periodical written by, for and about the hobo life in America. For more on this remarkable publication see Lynne Adrian (1998).
- 8 By training Michael Burke is a civil engineer and Roberto Menendez, who is no longer associated with *Street Feat*, is an architect. The two professionals were deeply involved with economic justice issues for many years before they hit upon the idea to start a street newspaper. Like many street-paper organizers, they had little experience in publishing. And yet, a growing number of activists view street papers as an exceptional vehicle for bringing issues of homelessness and poverty to wider publics while simultaneously providing work opportunities for those in need.

## References

- Adrian, Lynne (1998) ' "The World We Shall Win for Labor": Early Twentieth Century Hobo Self-Publication', in James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (eds) *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, pp. 101–28. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Altschull, J. Herbert (1997) 'A Crisis of Conscience: Is Community Journalism the Answer?' in Jay Black (ed.) *Mixed News: The Public /Civic/ Communitarianism Journalism Debate*, pp. 140–56. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Anderson, Rob, Robert Dardenne and George M. Killenberg (1997) 'The American Newspaper As The Public Conversational Commons', in Jay Black (ed.) *Mixed News: The Public/Civic/Communitarianism Journalism Debate*, pp. 96–117. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Atton, Chris (1999) 'A Reassessment of the Alternative Press', *Media, Culture & Society* 21(1): 51–76.
- Blaizer, Thomas F. and James B. Lemert (2000) 'Public Journalism and Changes in *The Seattle Times*', *Newspaper Research Journal* 21(3): 69–80.
- Boukhari, Sophie (1999) 'The Press Takes to the Street', *UNESCO Courier* 52(2): 43–4.

- Burke, Michael and Roberto Menendez (1997) 'The Launching of *Street Feat*', *Street Feat* (Dec.): 1–2.
- Carey, James (1999) 'In Defense of Public Journalism', in Theodore L. Glasser (ed.) *The Idea of Public Journalism*, pp. 49–66. New York: Guilford Press.
- Charity, Arthur (1995) *Doing Public Journalism*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Claussen, Dane and Richard Shafer (1997) 'On Community Journalism', *Grassroots Editor* (Fall): 3–7.
- Coleman, Renita (1997) 'The Intellectual Antecedents of Public Journalism', *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 21(1): 60–77.
- Comedia (1984) 'The Alternative Press: The Development of Underdevelopment', *Media, Culture & Society* 6: 95–102.
- Dodge, Chris (1999) 'Words on the Street: Homeless People's Newspapers', *American Libraries* (Aug.): 60–2.
- Downing, John (1984) *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Downing, John (2001) *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dum, Larry (1997) 'Papers for Homeless Offer Needy a Leg Up', *The New York Times* (31 Mar.).
- Fiske, John (1987) *Television Culture*. London: Methuen.
- Fraser, Nancy (1993) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 109–42. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Garafola, Nick (2000) 'The Word from the Curb: Street Papers Give Voice to People Locked Out of the Major Media', *Utne Reader* (Sept./Oct.).
- Geertz, Clifford (1983) 'Local Knowledge: Fact and Law in Comparative Perspective', in C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology*, pp. 167–234. New York: Basic Books.
- Glasser, Theodore (1999) *The Idea of Public Journalism*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Glasser, Theodore and Stephanie Craft (1997) 'Public Journalism and The Prospects For Press Accountability', in Jay Black (ed.) *Mixed News: The Public /Civic/ Communitarianism Journalism Debate*, pp. 120–37. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Green, Norma Fay (1998) 'Chicago *StreetWise* at the Crossroads: A Case Study of a Newspaper to Empower the Homeless in the 1990s', in James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (eds) *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, pp. 34–55. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Haas, Tanni and Linda Steiner (2001) 'Public Journalism as a Journalism of Publics', *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 2(2): 123–47.
- Hackett, Robert A. (2000) 'Taking Back The Media: Notes On The Potential For A Communicative Democracy Movement', *Studies in Political Economy* 63: 61–86.
- Hardt, Hanno (1999) 'Reinventing the Press for the Age of Commercial Appeals: Writings on and about Public Journalism', in Theodore Glasser (ed.) *The Idea of Public Journalism*, pp. 197–209. New York: Guilford Press.
- Harpell, Linda (2000) 'Poverty is SINGLE and SHE has a CHILD', *Street Feat*, 3(2): 4.
- Harris, Timothy (1998) 'An Idea Gone Global: Street Newspaper Movement Builds Internationally', *Real Change*, URL (consulted 7 August 2001): [http://www.realchangenews.org/pastarticles/feaes/articles/fea\\_janinsp.html](http://www.realchangenews.org/pastarticles/feaes/articles/fea_janinsp.html)

- Herbst, Susan (1994) *Politics on the Margins: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hippocrates, Cratis (1998) 'Public Journalism: Will it Work in Australia?', paper presented at the Communication Research Unit Annual Conference 24–25 September.
- Jacobs, Sally (1990) 'News is Uplifting Homeless in N.Y.', *The Boston Globe* (7 May): 1.
- Kendall, Anderson (2000) 'Paper Gives Homeless Chance to Improve Their Situations', *Dallas Morning News* (31 Dec.).
- Kharkar, Geeta (2001) 'Street Lies: Chicago Homeless Newspaper Fights a Corporate Takeover', *In These Times* (2 Apr.).
- Kidd, Dorothy (1999) 'The Value of Alternative Media', *Peace Review* 11(1): 113–19.
- Leone, Matthew (1995) 'Bye Bye Street News?', *Columbia Journalism Review* (May/Jun.): 22.
- Lloyd, Carol (1998) 'Homeless Papers Duel for Street Supremacy', *Salon* (13 Apr.).
- McAuley, Christine (1990) 'Liza Minnelli Sells Well, Particularly in Subway Trains', *The New York Times* (27 Feb.): A1.
- McGregor, Judy, Margie Comrie and Susan Fountaine (1999) 'Beyond the Feel-Good Factor: Measuring Public Journalism in the 1996 New Zealand Election Campaign', *Press/Politics* (Winter).
- McGuigan, Peter (1996) editorial contribution, *Street Feat*, 4(1): 3–9.
- Merritt, Davis (1998) *Public Journalism and Public Life: Why Telling the News is Not Enough*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Messman, Terry (1999) 'Dissenting Voices of the Street', *MediaFile* (May/Jun.).
- Murphy, Paul (1998) 'The British are Coming, The British are Coming: The Big Issue Aims to Colonize Los Angeles Street Newspaper Market', URL (consulted 7 August 2001): <http://csf.colorado.edu/mail/homeless/jan98/0089.html>
- Pauly, John J. (1999) 'Journalism and the Sociology of Public Life', in Theodore Glasser (ed.) *The Idea of Public Journalism*, pp. 134–51. New York: Guilford Press.
- Ray, Garrett (1995) 'Public Journalism is Nothing New to Most Small Papers', *Publisher's Auxiliary* 131(1): 5.
- Rosen, Jay (1996) *Getting the Connections Right: Public Journalism and the Troubles in the Press*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund.
- Schudson, Michael (1999) 'What Public Journalism Knows About Journalism But Doesn't Know About "Public" ', in Theodore Glasser (ed.) *The Idea of Public Journalism*, pp. 118–33. New York: Guilford Press.
- Stanford, Jim (2000) 'Arithmetic for Finance Ministers', *Street Feat*, 3(2): 6.
- Streitmatter, Roger (2001) *Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Torck, Daniele (2001) 'Voices of the Homeless People in Street Newspapers: A Cross-Cultural Exploration', *Discourse & Society* 12(3): 371–92.
- Van Lier, Piet (1999) 'Read All About It! – Street Papers Have the Real Story', *Jinn* (an online zine from Pacifica News Service), URL (consulted 7 August 2001): <http://www.pacificnews.org/jinn/stories/5.16/990806-papers.html>
- Waddell, Lynn (1997) 'The Sound of Dissent', in Jay Black (ed.) *Mixed News: The Public/Civic/Communitarianism Journalism Debate*, pp. 70–1. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

White, Shirley (1994) 'The Concept of Participation: Transforming Rhetoric into Reality', in Shirley White, K. Sandahandaw Nair and Joseph Ascroft (eds) *Participatory Communication: Working for Change and Development*. London: Sage.

### **Biographical note**

**Kevin Howley** (PhD, Indiana University, 1998) is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at DePauw University. His research interests include critical-cultural analysis of community media, political economy of media industries, cultural politics, media history, and emerging technologies. He is currently writing *Community Media: People, Places and Communication Technologies* for Cambridge University Press.

Address Pulliam Center for Contemporary Media, De Pauw University, Greencastle, IN 46135, USA. [email: [khowley@depauw.edu](mailto:khowley@depauw.edu)]