

**THE HOMELESS, STREET NEWSPAPERS,  
AND THE WORLD THAT HOUSES THEM**

**Honors Capstone for School of Communication**

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Spring 2008

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On any given day in the District of Columbia, about 6,000 men, women and children are homeless. In this city that houses a president, in this metropolis that buzzes with the catchwords and mission statements of countless NGOs, there exists an inequality of embarrassing proportions. It is an inequality that many pass by, many choose to ignore, and that few dare to address. Dappled grey blankets, old begging hands, rickety overstuffed shopping carts – homelessness remains the untouchable in a society addicted to feel-good causes and guilt-free philanthropy. For those in the media world, homelessness can often lead to stereotyping and type-casting – the mandatory stories of those who fell through the cracks, the tired stories of affordable housing and governmental promises of change. Few think of the press as a force serving to the homeless community. No, that task belongs to the soup kitchen, to the rehab clinic, to the housing authority. Not to journalists. As objective non-partisans, it is the media's job to report on such occurrences, yes, but to get involved; never. Still, alternative media, desktop publishing and a bit of creativity have forged a junction between community development and journalism. Street newspapers, or papers produced and sold by the homeless, have taken root, with the District's own *Street Sense* celebrating its fourth successful year in November 2007.

This January, I began a semester-long editorial internship with *Street Sense*, working over 20 hours a week with vendors, volunteers and staff while producing articles and content focusing on homelessness and poverty issues in the District. This experience has given me a

unique window through which to understand street papers, relying on my training as a student of both print journalism and international development at American University.

Although studies have been done on the media's perception of homelessness and the role of street papers as a tool for empowerment, the literature on street papers is minimal, with no comprehensive body of research available. Few of the works encompass the full spectrum of street papers as an alternative media source, tool for empowerment, and method of combating stereotypes. My capstone will venture into some of these aspects, drawing on the existing research, primary sources and interviews with vendors and participants in the street newspaper model.

As in most media analysis and comparison, the final result lacks concrete cause-and-effect conclusions. Hopefully however, this paper will contribute to the greater understanding of the role of niche publications like *Street Sense* and promote an increased respect and cooperation among street papers and other media forms.

Structurally, the paper has seven main sections, which can be divided into a descriptive overview of street newspapers and an analytical discussion of their role vis-à-vis traditional media. Barring occasional overlap, the three descriptive sections will address the global reach of street newspapers, their history in North America and finally, *Street Sense* in depth. The four analytical sections will first place street newspapers into alternative and dissident media frameworks, and then reinforce those frameworks with a comparison of coverage, a look into challenges and criticisms of mainstream media and lastly a requisite section on the challenges and criticisms of street newspapers.

## **INTERNATIONAL SCOPE**

Although much of this paper will focus on North American street papers, particularly *Street Sense*, modern-day street newspapers in fact have a global reach, with the International Network of Street Papers reporting a presence in 29 countries on six continents. The organization boasts of a combined annual circulation of approximately 30 million papers among its 80 member street papers. The INSP, founded in 1994 and based in Glasgow, serves as one unifying branch of the movement, along with other regional collectives such as the North American Street Newspaper Association. The INSP is recognized as an independent British non-profit, with the majority of its funding coming from grants, donations, and membership and conference fees from its member papers.<sup>1</sup>

The Charter of the INSP highlights six key imperatives of its members. First, papers must be moving the marginalized toward self-sufficiency by offering economic and social development. They must funnel all net profits into supporting the vendors, other marginalized sectors or the business with an independent auditor reviewing the accounts annually. Papers must advocate for the socially excluded and offer vendors a place in the media universe. Paper must be attempting to break “the cycle of dependency through empowerment” by producing issues that vendors can proudly sell to an appreciating public. Social responsibility must figure prominently in all editorial, environmental and personnel decisions and policies, with excess overhead and professional costs diverted to focus spending on vendor support. Finally, papers are expected to support both each other and prospective new members of the INSP.<sup>2</sup>

Charters and associations such as these have resulted in uniformity of mission and operating practice among street papers, if not in editorial content and style. There is also a

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<sup>1</sup> International Network of Street News Papers. “Annual Review 2006.” Available from <<http://www.street-papers.org/INSP%20ANNUAL%20REVIEW%20FINAL.pdf>>, accessed 10 April 2008: 6.

<sup>2</sup> International Network of Street News Papers. “The INSP Charter.” Internet. Available from <<http://www.street-papers.com/42.htm>>, accessed 10 March 2008.

considerable amount of cooperation and resource sharing, notable within the typically competitive media industry.<sup>3</sup> The INSP features a consultancy branch called Poverty Solutions that provides start-up assistance to new papers, focusing on those in the developing world; professional development training for existing papers; and international funding streams for specific anti-poverty efforts.<sup>4</sup> The organization also created, in the summer of 2007, the Street News Service, a Web portal of searchable content that member papers can reproduce free of charge.<sup>5</sup> An annual conference, started in 1995, introduces new techniques and training, while building a community and a network within the organization's far-flung membership.<sup>6</sup>

## HISTORY

According to the Web site of the North American Street Newspaper Association, the ancestry of this particular breed of periodical began with the Salvation Army's *War Cry*, a Cleveland weekly sold by homeless vendors at the turn of the twentieth century, from 1872 until the 1920s. *War Cry* was unique in that it offered suggestions to the general public on giving back to the less fortunate. It also relied exclusively on the homeless to sell the weekly editions.<sup>7</sup>

Publishing in a similar time frame, the Cincinnati-based *Hobo News* served as a media voice for the hobo population in the 1920s. The paper, published by the International

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Howley, "A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy." *Journalism*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2003), 279.

<sup>4</sup> International Network of Street News Papers. "Consultancy." Internet. Available from <<http://www.street-papers.com/52.htm>>, accessed 10 March 2008.

<sup>5</sup> International Network of Street News Papers. "News Services." Internet. Available from <<http://www.street-papers.com/15.htm>>, accessed 10 March 2008.

<sup>6</sup> International Network of Street News Papers. "Conference." Internet. Available from <<http://www.street-papers.com/54.htm>>, accessed 10 March 2008.

<sup>7</sup> North American Street Newspaper Association. "About Street Newspapers." Internet. Available from <<http://www.nasna.org/stpaper.html>>, accessed 11 March 2008.

Brotherhood Welfare Association, offered articles on labor, unemployment, and the hobo lifestyle.<sup>8</sup>

The direct precursor to modern street papers emerged in the 1970s. The *Homeless Times* was founded in Portland, Oregon in 1972 and is believed to have been the first, although it has now folded.<sup>9</sup> *Street News*, a 1989 New York City publication, is considered the first of the '90s crop of papers. The 28-page monthly reached a circulation of 200,000 by May 1990, according to an article in *Management Review*, with full-page advertisements going for \$3,500 a piece and a core of 120 vendors.<sup>10</sup>

*Street News* became a global archetype for homeless outreach. In a 1995 *Editor and Publisher* article, Caverly Stringer, a vendor and senior editor of the paper, was quoted as saying, "Street News was the perfect thing for its time... People were growing unsympathetic toward homelessness. The paper gave them a way to contribute and get something for their money... People were tumbling all over our vendors, trying to pick up the paper."<sup>11</sup>

He noted the unique nature of the paper, adding, "There was nothing in the world like it, and the public was excited to see so many people working again, instead of panhandling."

Yet, the welcome reception among the stereotypically cold and callous New Yorkers was short-lived. In 1995, *Street News* stopped its presses following a bout of bad publicity surrounding excessive spending and a Metropolitan Transit Authority ordinance banning vendors from selling in the subways.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Chris Dodge, "Words on the Street: Homeless People's Newspapers." *American Libraries*, Vol. 30, No. 7 (Aug 1999): 61.

<sup>9</sup> North American Street Newspaper Association. "About Street Newspapers."

<sup>10</sup> Dorri Jacobs, "Wanted: Jobs for a Homeless Workforce," *Management Review*, New York: May 1990. Vol. 79, Iss. 5: 41.

<sup>11</sup> Shawn McAllister. "Street News may fold." *Editor & Publisher*. New York: Feb 25, 1995. Vol. 128, Iss. 8: 16

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Such short-life spans are common in dissident or alternative media, with few publications surviving past the decade mark.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, today's San Francisco *Street Sheet* holds the title of oldest existing homeless street newspaper, started just a few months after its East Coast counterpart in December 1989. Throughout the decade, similar publications arose in many major cities with the North American Street Newspaper Association claiming an annual average of five new papers mid-decade.<sup>14</sup> In the States, such a rise reflects increasing numbers of homelessness – a 1991 study of 182 cities found that homeless rates tripled between 1981 and 1989<sup>15</sup> – but, more significantly, a shifting attitude and availability of desktop publishing and alternative media. Whether such publications will continue to flourish into the new millennium or go down in a burst of glory a la *Street News* remains to be seen. However, the trend appears to be stable for now. In 2007, Denver, Nashville and Providence all gained their own street newspapers<sup>16</sup> and the INSP reported gaining an additional 23 new members throughout the year.<sup>17</sup>

### **STREET SENSE**

Two volunteers at the National Coalition for the Homeless, Laura Thompson Osuri and Ted Henson, founded the District's street paper in 2003. Initial talks began in August and by November, the first print run of 5,000 copies had hit the streets. Literally.

Originally a monthly periodical featuring 16 pages of news, editorials and vendor-generated content, *Street Sense* began with a mere 10 homeless participants, or vendors, and no paid staff. Vendors, in street newspapers parlance, are homeless or formerly homeless individuals who buy the paper at a reduced cost, 50 percent or lower if following the INSP

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<sup>13</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, "Voices of Revolution," (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 276.

<sup>14</sup> North American Street Newspaper Association. "About Street Newspapers."

<sup>15</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless, "How Many People Experience Homelessness?" August 2007. Internet, Available from <[http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/How\\_Many.pdf](http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/How_Many.pdf)>, accessed 10 April 2004.

<sup>16</sup> North American Street Newspaper Association, "About Street Newspapers."

<sup>17</sup> International Network of Street News Papers. "Annual Review 2006," 4.

standards. Typically this translates to about twenty-five cents. Vendors then sell the paper in any manner they wish, often choosing favorite ‘spots’ or neighborhoods with regular clientele or busy foot-traffic. At *Street Sense*, vendors buy the paper for a quarter and sell it for one dollar, although they frequently report receiving larger donations depending on the customers and the sales pitch. The average *Street Sense* vendor makes about \$40 a day. Vendors are not considered to be employed by the papers; instead, they are registered as independent contractors.

In a 2007 editorial, founder and current executive director Laura Thompson Osuri remembers “waiting outside the offices of the National Coalition for the Homeless in a cold drizzle with a couple of bundles of papers and a box of bagels, hoping that at least one vendor would come by during the first two hours of *Street Sense*’s first day in print.”<sup>18</sup> The paper remained under the auspices of the National Coalition for one year, before gaining sponsorship from the People’s Law Resource Center and eventually becoming fully independent in March 2005. In October of that year, Osuri became the paper’s first full-time employee, taking up the mantle of executive director.

The paper’s mission highlights two goals. First, the paper serves “as a vehicle for elevating voices and public debate on issues relating to poverty,” and at the same time, it provides an economic opportunity for the homeless and formerly homeless of the District. By 2007, the paper had converted to bi-weekly publication, hired a full-time editor and vendor manager, and contracted approximately active 60 vendors, up 33 percent from 2006. Circulation increased to about 22,000 papers a month, an increase of 48 percent over the previous year’s circulation.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout its brief history, the paper has consistently upheld its commitment to its vendors, providing some with the necessary leg up out of dire poverty. In the first year, about

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<sup>18</sup> Laura Thompson Osuri, “Street Sense: Four Years of Changing Lives and Perceptions,” *Street Sense*, Nov. 14, 2007, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Street Sense*, “Annual Report 2007,” Print material.

two-dozen vendors secured full-time employment, with many opportunities coming while vendors were out in public selling the paper.<sup>20</sup> According to a survey of 50 vendors in December 2007, 40 percent of vendors lived in shelters, 29 percent in their own place (apartments or rented rooms), and 8 percent lived on the street. The remaining vendors lived in the houses of family members and friends.<sup>21</sup> The Vendor Code of Conduct outlines the ten basic rules of vending, including respect for staff, customers, volunteers and other vendors; private property restrictions; and an agreement not to sell the paper while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Many *Street Sense*'s vendors represent the chronically homeless population, or individuals who have been homeless for a year or more.<sup>22</sup> About 41 percent of 50 vendors surveyed in late 2007 had been homeless for one to four years.<sup>23</sup>

Besides the basic code of conduct, *Street Sense* places few restrictions on the vendors, who can sell the paper when and where they choose and do what they wish during their free time. Most vendors sell during commuter and lunch hours at busy Metro stops or tourist destinations, though many also have their own favorite locales throughout the city. Mark Jones, a long-time vendor, frequently sells by the CVS in Tenleytown, and speaks highly of the American University students who buy the paper.

Jones sells about a thousand copies a month, earning enough to get off the street and into a small basement apartment. The December 2007 vendor survey showed that 19 percent of *Street Sense* vendors had moved into their own apartments or rented rooms since they put on a vest and began selling the paper. Almost a quarter, or 21 percent, secured full- or part-time jobs while

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<sup>20</sup> Street Sense, "D.C.'s First Homeless Newspaper Celebrates One-Year Anniversary," Nov. 15 2004. Internet. Available from <[http://www.streetsense.org/press\\_release.jsp](http://www.streetsense.org/press_release.jsp)>. accessed 15 April 2008.

<sup>21</sup> "Who are the Street Sense Vendors," *Street Sense*, Jan. 9, 2008, 8.

<sup>22</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness, "Chronic Homelessness," Internet, Available from <<http://naeh.org/section/policy/focusareas/chronic>>, accessed 5 April 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Street Sense. "Annual Report 2007." Print material.

working with the paper.<sup>24</sup> Some, like vendor James Davis, works at Ritz Camera and continues to sell the paper in his free time for extra income. Others, like veteran vendor Martin Walker, have used the paper as a stepping-stone. Walker, who began selling in late 2006, received a job as commercial truck driver in April 2008 and is no longer working as a vendor.

Stories those of Jones, Walker, and Davis show the potential of street newspapers, when run by dedicated and committed individuals like Osuri and Henson. While any start-up street paper requires significant amounts of hard work, ingenuity and faith, the basic framework is essentially pre-established. In fact, at the bare bones level, most street newspapers follow a similar organizational structure with a handful of paid staffers, a crew of vendors and a dedicated coterie of volunteers. As a bridge between the non-profit and journalism worlds, volunteers are essential to maintain operations at most street papers.<sup>25</sup> At *Street Sense*, volunteers man the office, deal with vendors, write and edit articles, lay out pages, plan fundraisers and lead writing workshops. At points, a volunteer or a volunteer intern (like myself) will be the only person present in the office. Besides the volunteers, a full-time executive director, an editor-in-chief and a vendor manager staff *Street Sense*. The vendor manager position is subsidized in part by AmeriCorps.

Because of the limited staffing, vendors often serve as ad-hoc volunteers in the office. At *Street Sense*, vendors will carry the paper from the delivery drop-off to the office, answer phones, clean up or provide general handy-man assistance when they are able. Vendors typically receive free papers in exchange for their help. This keeps the office well staffed, offers informal extra cash for the vendors and gets more papers on the street.

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<sup>24</sup> Street Sense. "Annual Report 2007." Print material.

<sup>25</sup> Chris Dodge, "Words on the Street: Homeless People's Newspapers," 60.

A heavy reliance on vendor and volunteer contributions allows the paper to focus its funding on internal development and vendor enrichment programs. As a non-profit that also functions as a newspaper, *Street Sense*'s funding streams are diverse. The typical funding sources for news media – donor or group support, subscription and street sales, and advertising income – are notably harder to secure for members of the dissident, or alternative, press.<sup>26</sup> Dealing with cash-strapped partner organizations, disenfranchised target audiences and controversy-wary potential advertisers, much of the history of alternative media has been one of indigence.

Perhaps because of its dual identity, *Street Sense* has been able to avoid some financial pitfalls in its four-year history, with its income growing from just under \$30,000 in 2004 to \$155,501 in 2007. Expenses consistently remained just a trifle below the income line, with the organization reporting \$152,746 spent last year – the majority on salary and printing costs.

About 36 percent of the organization's income comes from individual donations. Grants, vendor sales, and fundraisers make a sizable hunk of the remainder, at 17, 16, and 12 percent respectively. Surprising for a print media organization, advertising sales provided only 9 percent of *Street Sense*'s 2007 income. The remaining 9 percent of the funding came from donated goods (4), subscriptions (2), miscellaneous income (2), and federal employee donations through the Combined Federal Campaign (1). "Street Verses," an anthology of poetry from the paper published in June 2007, also brought in some additional revenue for the organization.<sup>27</sup>

The paper hired an advertising sales manager in March 2008 to generate increased sales. The majority of *Street Sense*'s advertisements come from social service providers, churches or other religious groups, and the government. Like in many media forms, advertisements are a

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<sup>26</sup> Lauren Kessler, "The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History," (Sage: Beverly Hills, 1984), 156.

<sup>27</sup> Street Sense. "Annual Report." Print Material.

touchy issue for street papers. Kevin Howley, a media scholar who directly observed the operation of *Street Feat* in Nova Scotia in the summer of 2001, remarks that the product being advertised is particularly pertinent in street papers. During his time at *Street Feat*, one reader wrote in to protest an ad from one of the city's most expensive restaurants, a contradiction in the eyes of some.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless, advertising should target the demographic of the readership and for *Street Sense* and other street papers, this often means a dual focus towards both homeless readers and their upper-crust city patrons. According to a readership survey with about 550 respondents conducted early in 2008, most *Street Sense* readers work in either the non-profit or the governmental sector and about 62 percent of women. This information opens an array of the avenues for potential advertising. And since 80 percent of readers report reading at least half of each issue they buy, it appears that *Street Sense*'s content is being well-received by their audience.<sup>29</sup>

#### **STREET NEWSPAPERS AS ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

Street newspapers, as they emerged in the decade leading up to the new millennium, mirrored a cultural trend toward disillusionment with the traditional press.<sup>30</sup> However, despite the traditional objectivity of the field even among reformist movements, street newspapers took a distinctly partisan stance. There was little doubt the movers and shakers of the street newspapers pushed an agenda favorable to the indigent and homeless of their respective cities. Such distinction brands the street press as "radical," at least for some scholars.<sup>31</sup> It is even stated that

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<sup>28</sup> Kevin Howley, "A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy," 282.

<sup>29</sup> Laura Thompson Osuri, "What Our Readers Want," *Street Sense*. 19 March 2008, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Kevin Howley, "A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy," 274.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

street papers operate under the basic assumption that free-market capitalism – ostensibly the golden calf of mainstream media – is a desirable or ideal economic form.<sup>32</sup>

As such, street papers appear to fit neatly into media studies professor Dorothy Kidd's definition of alternative press. Imposing a slightly trite definition based on the dissection of "alternative" into "alter" and "native," Kidd states that such media must both work to change the status quo and remain local to its community.<sup>33</sup> The emphasis on change at a social, political or economic level distinguishes the alternative press from "corporate media, which view people as ever-narrower niches of consumers to be delivered to advertisers."<sup>34</sup> Similarly in a world of increasingly pre-packaged media, localized press creates a more personal relationship with the audience. "Alternative media grow, like native plants, in the communities they serve, allowing spaces to generate historical memories and analyses, nurture visions for their futures, and weed out the representations of the dominant media. They do this through a wide combination of genres, from news, storytelling, conversation and debate to music in local vernaculars."<sup>35</sup>

The trend of highly localized street papers, despite large-scale support networks like the INSP, establishes these media outlets as "native." In fact, attempts to conglomerate the papers have met with little success in the past. For example, a 1999 attempt by Chicago's *Streetwise* to establish a distribution network in Washington, D.C., resulted in only about half a dozen issues, mainly due to its out-of-state management and lack of local focus.<sup>36</sup>

As mentioned above, street newspapers distinctly involve an attempt to "alter" their environment, the other key criterion in Kidd's formula. Says Kevin Howley of DePauw

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<sup>32</sup> Kevin Howley, "A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy," 288.

<sup>33</sup> Dorothy Kidd, "The Value of Alternative Media." *Peace Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (March 1999), 116.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>36</sup> Street Sense. "About Us." Internet. Available from <[http://www.streetsense.org/about\\_street.jsp](http://www.streetsense.org/about_street.jsp)>, accessed 10 April 2008.

University, “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.” Howley argues that such papers broaden communicative democracy by multiplying the voices in the media and other public spheres. By airing the concerns and realities of an oft-neglected sub-sect of society, street papers work to expose other sectors of society to the issues of poverty in their home cities.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to spreading the concerns of the indigent and homeless, street newspapers offer editorial space and copy to their constituency, allowing actual writings of these marginalized communities to fill pages. This direct access to the public, with limited filtering and editing, is essential. Homeless persons are often spoken for by proxies, whether they are government agencies, non-profits, volunteer organizations or shelter staff. Regardless of intentions, these proxies “are motivated by a desire to exercise power and a need for control: the power of the purse strings, the ability to set policy, to allocate resources, to plan and design programs, to decide who will be helped and who will not, to determine whose interests will be represented, and to sanction or condemn certain practices, values or beliefs.”<sup>38</sup> At *Street Sense*, about half of all content is vendor-written and all writers are encouraged to include a voice from the homeless and poor individuals who will be affected by the story. Attempts to sanitize vendor or homeless content are avoided. In one instance in April 2008, a volunteer doing editing work wished to remove a line in an editorial mentioning that homeless men would be less likely to go to a new shelter because they would be forced to throw out their cigarettes upon entering. The volunteer worried the reference to smoking would send the wrong message. The editorial ran with the complaint about smoking policies intact.

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<sup>37</sup> Kevin Howley, “A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy,” 280.

<sup>38</sup> Gerald Daly, “Homeless: Policies, Strategies and Lives on the Street,” (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

Perhaps as significant then editorial representation, at many papers, the homeless and poor are given significant levels of power in the organization, serving on boards and in other positions of decision-making.<sup>39</sup> In Washington, two *Street Sense* vendors serve on the ten-person Board of Directors, and long-term vendors often double-serve as essential office volunteers. Editorial contributions are encouraged and vendors receive 20 percent of any advertising contracts they solicit. This space in the social consciousness cannot be filled by the traditional media forms, whether corporate or state-managed.<sup>40</sup>

In her book *The Dissident Press*, Lauren Kessler notes that the traditional news media have historically denied minorities and those laboring toward political and social change access to the free marketplace of ideas. While Kessler does not specifically speak to street newspapers, she applies her analysis to the abolitionists, utopians, feminists, socialists and others, documenting consistent trends in the trials and successes of those publishing for and among the marginalized of society. Adding that, “merely mentioning a group does not constitute access,” Kessler highlights three main shapes that lack of access can take:

“(1) complete exclusion from the popular media marketplace of the group, its ideas and goals; (2) exclusion of the ideas, goals and programs of the group, but inclusion of events (e.g. marches, strikes, demonstrations) in which the group participated; (3) ridicule, insult or stereotyping of the group and its ideas rather than discussion, explanation, and debate.”<sup>41</sup>

*Street Sense*, and street newspapers as a whole, may not meet all the characteristics of dissident media – holding divergent political, economic or social views from the mainstream, desiring to effect social change, wanting access to the traditional print media but excluded nonetheless.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kevin Howley, “A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy,” 279.

<sup>40</sup> Kevin Howley, “A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy,” 280.

<sup>41</sup> Lauren Kessler, “The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History,” 14.

<sup>42</sup> Lauren Kessler, “The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History,” 16.

However, the basic tag can be conferred to the homeless in general and by extension the street papers that seek to serve them. Speaking specifically to access, coverage of homelessness in the mainstream media has been declining since the early 1990s while homelessness nationwide increased. A combination of anti-vagrancy and middle-class apathy can be credited with the decline of homelessness as a issue in the public consciousness, which is especially dangerous when coupled with “a dominant official position that represents homeless persons as bums, drunks or drug addicts too lazy to work and not worthy of the public’s respect.”<sup>43</sup>

Another definition of dissident media hinges solely on the publication’s desire to effect a level of social change. Writes Rodger Streitmatter, “All dissident publications are alternative publications, but many of those alternative publications are not dissident.”<sup>44</sup>

Relying on these conglomerated definitions, it can be said that all street newspapers are alternative, using the “alter” and “native” breakdown provided by Kidd and confirmed by Howley. Furthermore, in terms of access to the traditional media, the homeless voices highlighted in the pages of street newspapers are clearly dissident, as later sections of this paper will show. Streitmatter’s requirement of wishing to change social norms may perhaps be the most exclusive of definition. Looking to the third section of the INSP Charter which states papers should be “aiming to provide vendors with a voice in the media and campaigning on behalf of the socially excluded,” it appears that street papers would fall squarely in line with the dissident media label.

Kaukab Jhumra Smith, the editor-in-chief at *Street Sense*, considers her paper to be less strident than the traditional dissent media implies, speaking of it as more of an extension of a

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<sup>43</sup> Daniele Torck, “Voices of Homeless People in Street Newspapers: A Cross-Cultural Exploration,” *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 12, No 3 (2001), 373.

<sup>44</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, “Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America,” xi.

homelessness beat. “We’re just shining a flashlight into an area where you wouldn’t ordinarily look. We not calling the sky red or green, while you’re calling it blue.”

### COMPARISON OF COVERAGE

An important characteristic of alternative media, according to Dorothy Kidd, is its tendency to break critical stories or supply the first in-depth analysis of major events.<sup>45</sup> As highly-specialized media organizations covering oft-ignored or marginalized sectors, street newspapers have the ability to speak quickly and authoritatively on homelessness or poverty happenings. For the purpose of this paper, I will discuss times and events when *Street Sense*’s coverage broke events or surpassed the coverage in local press, namely the *Washington Post*.

Perhaps the proudest moment in *Street Sense*’s short history, journalistically speaking, can be summarized by the two *Wall Street Journal* plates hanging over the microwave in the modest church-house office. The plates were a gift from *Journal* reporter Michael Phillips, whose front-page piece highlighted the “biggest story in its [*Street Sense*’s] three-year history, an exposé of businesses that allegedly recruit the homeless to evict people from rental homes – and allegedly pay them less than the legal minimum wage to do so.”

The story was the result of a tip from vendor, which raised the paper’s interest enough to send an undercover volunteer to an area service provider, trying to get hired on one of the homeless eviction crews. When the volunteer had no luck, *Street Sense* sent one of its own vendors, Jake Ashford. Ashford got \$15 dollars for six hours of eviction work. *Street Sense* got its story. Executive director Laura Thompson Osuri bylined the front-page article herself for the April 4, 2006 issue.<sup>46</sup> The original article generated interest at Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton, a D.C. law firm, especially as it appeared that District eviction companies were violating the

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<sup>45</sup> Dorothy Kidd, “The Value of Alternative Media,” 113.

<sup>46</sup> Laura Thompson Osuri, “Homeless People Hired To Evict Tenants,” *Street Sense*, April 6, 2008. 1.

city's minimum wage laws of \$7 an hour.<sup>47</sup> By September, the firm was representing three homeless men in a class action suit against the eviction companies.<sup>48</sup> While the *Wall Street Journal* covered Ashford and Osuri's story on the front page in June of that year, the mainstream paper that perhaps serves D.C., the *Washington Post*, did not.

Since *Street Sense*'s creation in November 2003, it has been mentioned seven times in the *Post*. Most of these seven references merely note the paper as the occupation of quoted homeless men and women, however two articles focus heavily on the paper. One from 2003 highlights the paper's launch<sup>49</sup>; another from February 2007 speaks to the switch from monthly to bi-monthly publication.<sup>50</sup>

*Street Sense*'s coverage of the closure of D.C. Village, a family shelter housing 350 individuals in the southwest corner of the city, also sets it apart as a main source of news related to homelessness. The paper first reported on May 1, 2007 that the shelter would close that fall to make way for a metro bus operations center. The 780-word article had viewpoints from Mayor Adrian Fenty, city politician Tommy Wells, a spokeswoman for the transit authority, the head of the organization running the shelter, an advocacy director for another service provider, and a current D.C. Village resident.<sup>51</sup> The first mention of the shelter's closing in the *Post* came on the last day of that month, as part of a larger story on the controversies surrounding the proposed Nationals baseball stadium. The article mentions the lack of a plan "to relocate the families currently living in the homeless shelter at D.C. Village (which would be closed with the move of the garage)" as a hindrance to further progress in the negotiations between the city and the transit

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Phillips, "Homeless Reporter Gets Job, and Story, Evicting Others," *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2006, A1.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Cohn, "Eviction Firms Sued," *Street Sense*, Sept. 15, 2006, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Monte Reel, "Publication Hits Streets To Help the Homeless," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 27, 2003, T03.

<sup>50</sup> Chantel Harley, "For Homeless Staff, A Paper's Big News; Twice-a-Month Production Increases Jobs," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 8, 2007, T07.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Jackson, "Mayor Promises Housing if Family Shelter Closes," *Street Sense*, May 1, 2007, 1.

authority.<sup>52</sup> The plan is presented again, in mid-July, within a District brief that noted, “Metro will build a garage at the site of the D.C. Village homeless shelter, as long as the city finds other beds for those living there.”<sup>53</sup>

A similar pattern emerged following Mayor Fenty’s announcement to close Franklin Shelter, a 300-bed facility for men in the core of the city’s downtown. While the city is proposing opening an additional shelter with at least 125 beds to handle the overflow from Franklin’s closure, that second shelter requires substantial renovations and most likely will not be opened until 2010. The city plans to close Franklin October 1. This information was expressed in a 1000-word explanatory piece in *Street Sense*, highlighting the changes to the shelters and other elements of the mayor’s new innovative plan to eliminate homelessness.<sup>54</sup> In a *Washington Post* article that appeared the day following the mayor’s press conference, the gap between the shelters’ closing and opening dates is not mentioned. It is also stated that the second shelter will provide beds for women only. In reality, the shelter will house only men.<sup>55</sup> As of April 20, 2008, the error was not corrected.

#### CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA

As mentioned in Kessler’s discussion of access problems faced by minority groups, “the mainstream press has traditionally spoken to and for the homogenous middle. United by their belief in the current political, social and cultural ideas of their day, the audiences of conventional media a rather narrow spectrum of thought that reinforces these beliefs.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jacqueline Dupree, “Those Buses Really Do Have to Go,” *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2007, DZ03.

<sup>53</sup> District Briefing, *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2007, B04.

<sup>54</sup> Brittany Aubin, “Fenty’s Proposed \$19.2M Housing Plan Leaves Some Advocates Cold,” *Street Sense*, April 16, 2008, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Sylvia Moreno, “400 of the “most vulnerable” to get apartments,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2008, B04.

<sup>56</sup> Lauren Kessler, “The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History,” 155.

In this sense, the above error from the *Washington Post* such coverage of homelessness and poverty issues by the *Washington Post* is consistent with larger trends in the news media world, highlighting the need for street newspapers as disseminators of information to both the homeless and the larger homogenous middle. Treatment of homelessness in traditional news media struggles with two main challenges – a failure to dedicate significant amounts of press energy to homelessness and a perpetuation of stereotypical or one-dimensional images of homeless persons.

Street newspapers address these concerns through a continuous focus of homelessness and poverty, such as “homeless beat” frame referenced by *Street Sense* editor Kaukab Smith, and through the emphasis on homeless voices, as referenced by Howley and others. As homeless individuals are typically socially and politically disenfranchised and lack a power to employ traditional means for effecting policy changes, this coverage helps amplify viewpoints that would normally be eclipsed by such power players as developers, city politicians and business leaders.<sup>57</sup>

Coverage of homelessness in the traditional press peaked in 1982, according to a 30-year study of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Tribune*. While the late-1980s saw about 800 articles published annually in the four collective behemoths of print, by 2003, the group ran about 200 articles a year combined.<sup>58</sup>

Within mainstream coverage, there persists a devaluation of homeless people as legitimate sources of information, which further distinguishes such traditional media from street newspapers. Rejecting press conferences and other pseudo-news events, street newspapers rely

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<sup>57</sup> James Forte, “Not in My Social World: A Cultural Analysis of Media Representations, Contested Spaces, and Sympathy for the Homeless,” *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, Vol. 29 (2002), 136.

<sup>58</sup> Philip Buck, Paul Toro, and Melanie Ramos. “Media and Professional Interest in Homelessness over 30 Years (1974-2003),” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2004), 157.

on homeless individuals and service providers as principal generators of information.<sup>59</sup> As such, the resulting stories are more likely to address the human costs of social policy, and to “document and analyze the impact these changing conditions have on the lives of the poor, working families, ‘street kids’ and welfare recipients.”<sup>60</sup>

Linkages of homelessness to drug abuse and mental illness have also persisted in the mainstream media.<sup>61</sup> “Whereas statistics consistently indicate a high incidence of homelessness among women and young children, the media (i.e., haves) continue to depict the ‘typical homeless person’ as male, insane, and drug addicted.”<sup>62</sup> Here is yet another area where street newspapers, with editorials, poetry and other forms of vendor content, can dispel such stereotypes and alert Kessler’s homogenous middle to their legitimate reality. Speaking at a personal level to the power of alternative media, Dorothy Kidd writes, “As an older, white listener, I have found it invaluable to have access to self-representation from communities that are not my own. It’s given me insights into many different ways of seeing, providing more information to think about issues and challenging my mainstream-fed perceptions.”<sup>63</sup>

#### **CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS OF STREET NEWSPAPERS:**

This paper would be amiss in not mentioning the criticisms that some street newspapers have confronted and continuing challenges faced by the genre.

In “A Tough Sell,” ethnographer Kurt Lindemann spent 50 hours observing the selling practices of San Francisco’s *Street Sheet* vendors, noting that often “homeless vendor performances that elicit good will and monetary donations must construct an ‘authentic’

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<sup>59</sup> Kevin Howley, “A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy,” 285.

<sup>60</sup> Kevin Howley, “A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy,” 284.

<sup>61</sup> Rebecca Ann Lind and James A. Danoski, “The Representations of the Homeless in U.S. Electronic Media: A Computational Linguistic Study,” in *Reading the Homeless*, ed. Eungjun Min, (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 118.

<sup>62</sup> William Roth. “The Assault on Social Policy.” (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Dorothy Kidd, “The Value of Alternative Media,” 117.

homeless identity that meets the expectations of passersby.”<sup>64</sup> Lindemann observes that the taglines, or performances, that best sell the monthly papers are those that make light of the homeless situation or ask for a donation – two approaches that border on the tradition of panhandling.<sup>65</sup> In San Francisco, vendors will also cultivate an image that conveys poverty – perhaps relying on cues from posture, clothing or lack of hygiene without appearing too frightening or destitute.<sup>66</sup>

“The vending interaction, far from being ‘a business deal between equals,’ serves to keep both homeless and housed in their respective ‘place,’” concludes Lindemann, adding that in many ways vending practices “transform the stigma of homelessness into a product consumed as one would a souvenir.”<sup>67</sup>

In addition to the actual vending practices, the content of street newspapers has also been accused of perpetuating stereotypes of homelessness. Danielle Torck notes that there is tendency to over-emphasize pathos in street papers, which “in many ways evokes traditional political and media discourse on poor and marginal people, reinforcing the negative social ethos of the homeless.”<sup>68</sup>

Torck, whose analysis of street papers also included San Francisco’s *Street Sheet*, acknowledges a diversity of content and approach in street papers and credits some as true agents of social-change journalism.<sup>69</sup> However, most she concludes, quoting Wright’s “Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Sub-cities, and Contested Landscapes,” are, “‘just another small business to help a few people, solve the conscience of the privileged, and maintain conditions as

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<sup>64</sup> Kurt Lindemann, “A Tough Sell: Stigma as Souvenir in the Contested Performances of San Francisco’s Homeless ‘Street Sheet’ Vendors,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Vol. 27, Iss. 1 (Jan 2007), 42.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>68</sup> Daniele Torck, “Voices of Homeless People in Street Newspapers: A Cross-Cultural Exploration,” 371.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

they currently exist.”<sup>70</sup> Torck notes the common feature of referring to homeless persons by their first name only or anonymously as a hindrance to empowerment and “a custom that refuses them the instrument that allows an individual to assert himself as a subject.”<sup>71</sup>

Other problems plaguing street newspapers stem from a high turnover of institutional knowledge and burnout among workers and volunteers. Such issues challenge papers’ ability to maintain consistency in editorial content and administrative policies, promote and market effectively in the long term and stick to original timetables for production deadlines and organizational growth.<sup>72</sup> Speaking from my experience at *Street Sense*, I arrived when the executive director and the editor-in-chief (at that point the sole two staff members) were seven and four months pregnant respectively. With the director now out on maternity leave and the editor having various commitments both personal and professional that require her to be out of the office on occasions, there have been moments when my own three-month knowledge of the organization was the deepest in the office.

A larger issue in street newspapers is a growing dissonance between the global network of papers. Growing competition between newspapers, triggered by England’s *The Big Issue*’s attempts to distribute in U.S. metropolitan outlets, has highlighted the division between highly localized, homeless-centric papers and large-scale, general interest papers with homeless vendors. “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.”<sup>73</sup> Street papers’ ability to meet this short-term obstacles, as well address more fundamental issues raised by Torck and Lindemann, will

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<sup>70</sup> Daniele Torck, “Voices of Homeless People in Street Newspapers: A Cross-Cultural Exploration,” 389.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>72</sup> Kevin Howley, “Street Newspapers as Communicative Democracy,” 282.

<sup>73</sup> Kevin Howley, “Street Newspapers as Communicative Democracy,” 283.

determine their viability into the future.

## CONCLUSION

This paper began with a number – 6,000 – approximately the number of homeless residents living in the District on any given day. A similar number of words later, this paper has barely touched the surface of the complex relationship between the homeless, street newspapers and the world that houses them. As numerous voices, scholarly, journalistic and homeless, can attest, media representations and media power are critically important for the disenfranchised and marginalized homeless community.

Just as the homeless cannot, and should not, be spoken of a blanket entity or homogenous grouping, street newspapers cannot be categorized as unvaried, rigid medium. Howley has raised critical future concerns for the genre and noted a rising sense of competition and divergence of mission.

Street newspapers, as defined as papers merely sold by the homeless, cannot be seen as a universal good. Fundamental principals of empowerment and dignity, as well as journalistic integrity and commitment, need to be present to transform the bare bones model into a production that works for the paper, the vendors and their city. As highlighted by Lindemann and Torck, individual papers can have flaws, and individual papers can excel. My own ties to *Street Sense* undoubtedly have imposed some biases in that respect, despite a journalistic training in objectivity.

Street papers cannot be seen as a panacea to homelessness. Homelessness cannot be addressed merely through changes in media representations and small-time jobs, especially not at the operating scale of the majority of such papers. A complex re-working of social policy, one

that addresses school reform, affordable housing and healthcare, job training and development and other social programs, is the minimum requirement for the elimination of homelessness.

So what are street newspapers? They are, at the basics, an innovative approach to alternative and dissident media. They are method of counteracting predominant media stereotypes towards a marginalized or overlooked segment of society. They are a forum surrounding poverty in major metropolises and a breaking news source of issues of little import to the domiciled upper crust of those metropolises. They are a day job to the men and women working to hawk their print at metro stops and shopping malls from uptown to downtown.

Most importantly, street newspapers are an opportunity for a conversion, an invitation into a reality, a space for opinion that is sorely lacking in both news media and daily life. For those who scurry past their city's homeless residents, with eyes downcast and headphones blaring; for those who scour their daily newspapers reading of global disasters, but see no mention of the indigent and unsheltered at the door; for those people, street newspapers offer a chance at a relationship that has been pushed aside. And for the homeless individuals whose voices both fill pages and sell copies, street newspapers return a unique value to their experience, to their thoughts, and perhaps, to their very existence.

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**ARCHIVES (INCLUDED IN HARD COPY VERSION ONLY):**

*Jan. 23*

“Intern Insight: Coffee Break”

*Feb. 6*

“Childless Couples Lack a Spot in Shelters”

“Childless Pair Receives Unequal Treatment in DC Shelter System”

“Chilled to the Core: A Night Spent Counting the Forgotten”

*Feb. 20*

“U.S. VETS Struggles to Find a New Home”

*March 5*

“Loudoun Heals After Ugly Fight Over Homeless Center”

“Freddie Mac Grants 800,000 to Expand Model Program”

“Zagami House Provides a Safe Home for Families”

*March 19*

“Housing Dominates City Budget Hearings”

*April 2*

“Poet Helps Homeless Women Write Their Way Out of Crisis”

*April 16*

“DC Mayor Pledges \$25M for 700 Units of Affordable Housing”

“Shuttered Shelters, High Ambitions: Fenty’s Proposed \$19.2M Housing Plan Leaves Some Advocates Cold”

“What About Gales Shelter?”

*April 30*

“Homeless Residents Advocate for Drug-Free Zones Around Shelters”

“Path to Recovery Littered with Obstacles in District”