

# Achieving Citizenship and Recognition through Blogging about Homelessness

Barbara Schneider<sup>1</sup>

---

## ARTICLE INFO

Available Online August 2014

### Key words:

Blogging;  
Homelessness;  
Citizenship;  
Recognition

## ABSTRACT

This article describes a blog written by four men who were homeless in a western Canadian city in 2010. The blog was an attempt to promote communication between homeless people and the domiciled public, to assert the agency of homeless people, and to promote social integration through their participation in public discourse about homelessness. The bloggers explicitly set out to engage in civic action. In doing this they positioned themselves as advocates and therefore citizens—people with the right and responsibility to describe the “realities” of homelessness, critique existing social structures, take part in public dialogue about homelessness, advocate for change, and stand up for homeless people. This was a subject position that was not previously available to them. The blog project is an example of “lived citizenship,” citizenship as active participatory practice, and a way to achieve what Nancy Fraser calls a politics of recognition.

---

## Introduction

This article describes a blog written by four men who were homeless in a western Canadian city in 2010. A blog is a website with chronologically organized postings starting with the most recent, often with links to other sites, written by anyone who wants to write a blog. Although only authors can post to a blog, readers typically have the opportunity to comment on anything they see on a blog. Readers can also become “followers” of the blog and see who other followers are. The blog that this article describes can be found at <http://livinghomelessourwritetospeak.blogspot.com>. The goal of the blog project was to involve homeless people themselves as creators of representations of homelessness and to explore the benefits to them of having the opportunity to write in a public forum.

While poverty and homelessness are seen generally as primarily issues of the distribution of material resources, they have also been connected to a wider debate about citizenship, inclusion, and respect (Lister, 2002). Poverty is seen as a source of social exclusion, conceptualized by Berghman (1995) as “the denial—or non-realization—of citizenship rights” (p. 19), rather than simply a matter of resource redistribution or labour market participation. This wider debate about citizenship has been marshaled to promote the active participation of people who experience poverty and homelessness in public discourse about poverty and in decision making about their own lives, rather than being “passive objects of choices made on their behalf” (Lister, 2002, p. 38). As Beresford and Croft (1995) point out, participation in political debate is the primary means through which people who experience poverty and homelessness can promote their perspectives, goals, and aspirations. While not denying the material conditions that constitute the lives of homeless people, the blog project was an attempt to shift the focus from the material to the symbolic, to assert the agency of homeless people, and to promote social integration through participation in public discourse about homelessness.

## Participation in public discourse about homelessness

That homeless people do not participate in public discourse about homelessness seems to be the case, as evidenced in earlier two studies (Schneider, et al. 2010; Schneider, 2012a) that provided the impetus for initiating the blog. In those studies, I took seriously Silverstone’s (2007) contention that the media have become the central meeting place in society. He offers the concept of the mediapolis, in which news media are seen as central to civic life, in many respects constituting an extension of the ancient Greek *polis* or the shared space for civic communication. The mediapolis is the “space of appearance,” “through which we learn

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor, Department of Communication and Culture, University of Calgary, Canada. Email: [baschnei@ucalgary.ca](mailto:baschnei@ucalgary.ca)

about those who are and who are not like us... [through which] we are constructed as human (or not)" (p. 31). It is a technologically mediated forum where contemporary social issues, including poverty and homelessness, can be discussed.

Silverstone compares his idea of the mediapolis to the idea of the public sphere, conceptualized by Habermas as an imaginary community "made up of people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (Habermas, 1962/1991, p. 176). Habermas was particularly concerned with the public sphere as a site of rational-critical debate in which everyone has the ability and opportunity for equal participation. He was also concerned about the implications of this debate for citizenship and democracy. For Silverstone, this is a utopian ideal that misrepresents "both the possibilities and limits of human communication in the world" (p. 34). In Silverstone's mediapolis, the space of appearance is mostly elitist and exclusive. Not all people have equal access to the public meeting place, particularly not those who occupy marginal locations in society.

This was demonstrated in my previous studies, in which I was interested in how homeless people were represented and the extent to which the voices of homeless people appeared in the newspapers. The first study (Schneider, et al., 2010) was a content analysis of articles about homelessness that appeared in four Canadian newspapers over a period of one year (2007-2008). The second (Schneider, 2012a) took a closer look at quotation patterns in those articles to determine the sources called upon by journalists and how those sources were quoted. I found that "experts" or professionals were quoted about 70% of the time and homeless people only 16% of the time. The remaining 14% of quotes came from the general public. When homeless people were quoted, they were primarily "telling their story," providing something for the experts to comment upon. They were almost never quoted offering abstract statements about homelessness or commenting on possible solutions. In addition, in spite of generally positive or neutral coverage of homelessness and homeless people, an overarching narrative of regulation and control of homeless people in order to maintain social order threaded through all this coverage. If mainstream media provide the site of public debate in society, homeless people are not participating in the discussion about homelessness in any meaningful way.

Alternative media would seem to offer homeless people the opportunity to go beyond telling their stories, to participate in public discourse about homelessness, and to be able to talk about causes, or solutions, or other aspects of homelessness as they think appropriate without the mediation of journalists. The citizen journalism movement, also known as public journalism or participatory journalism, among others names, allows "the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006) to contribute to public discussion on any issue they wish. While there is considerable debate about whether such contributions constitute a form of journalism (e. g. Lasica, 2003), there can be no doubt that the internet and specifically blogging have opened the door to widespread dissemination of the views of millions of people who would otherwise not have been able to distribute their ideas to such a potentially wide audience.

The internet is widely regarded as an extension of the public sphere and a means for promoting citizen-based democracy (e. g. Dahlberg, 2001). Silverstone (2007) is more circumspect, seeing the internet as a singular, fragmenting medium, not likely on its own to bring about a new social or political culture. Nevertheless, it seems to offer a means to accomplish what Fraser (2000) calls a politics of recognition. She describes the politics of recognition as related to but by no means the same as the long-standing idea of identity politics. She characterizes identity politics as rooted in Hegel's idea that identity is constructed dialogically. "One becomes an individual subject only by virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject" (p. 109). If one is misrecognized or denied recognition, then one's ability to maintain a positive identity suffers. If one belongs to a devalued or stigmatized group in society one is likely to internalize a negative self image and be unable to develop a positive cultural identity of one's own. The goal of identity politics then is to establish new positive representations of such groups and to gain the acceptance of society at large. Fraser critiques this approach to recognition as reifying group identities and asserts that being misrecognized is not simply a matter of belonging to a group that is looked down upon or marginalized in society; it is "rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem" (p. 113). Homeless people are misrecognized because they are regarded as somehow less than full members of society and not fit to participate as peers in public discourse about homelessness.

On the internet, however, homeless people are free to choose how they will participate in public debate, offering the possibility of recognition. Much has been written about blogs and blogging. Scholars have

examined the content of blogs, who reads and writes blogs, how blogging has changed over time, and the implications of blogs for public participation and democracy (e. g. Bruhns& Jacobs, 2006.) While much of the literature on blogging has focused on the relationship between blogs and mainstream journalism (e. g. Tremayne, 2007), according to Herring et al., (2004), this literature has underestimated the extent to which blogs are forms of individual self expression. Blogs are both intensely personal and intensely public. They offer the “opportunity for authors to reach out and connect with an audience never before accessible to them, while maintaining control over their personal expressive spaces” (Bruns& Jacobs, 2006, p. 5). Blogs “combine the personal and the public in ways that are distinctive to the blog as a rhetorical form, and they allow bloggers to cultivate the self in a public way” (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). They “allow the private domain to become public and privatize a portion of the public sphere” (Papacharissi, 2007, p. 35). Blogging seemed the ideal medium for giving homeless people the possibility of taking part in public discourse about homelessness.

### **Creating The Homeless Blog**

The living homeless our write to speak blog was initiated by me rather than by the homeless writers. The blog itself was created using free software available on [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com). I approached an agency that runs a group of shelters and transitional housing settings in our city. Staff agreed to put up posters in the common areas announcing the eight-week “writing group,” and allowed us to meet in the computer room in one of their buildings. Participants had access to this room during the Tuesday evening writing group sessions and during the day when it was open for use by residents. We had reservations about doing the project on the site of a homeless service provider as we thought this might constrain the writers from saying anything negative about service providers. However, we settled on this location as we were afraid that we would not have any participants if it was not easy for them to attend. This was confirmed in our final interviews with the participants—they said they would not have attended if it had been located elsewhere.

A research assistant and I began the project in January, 2010, bringing coffee and doughnuts each week. Membership was variable in the first few weeks, but by the fourth week we had settled into a routine and a feeling of community with four men who were committed to the blog and who attended all the remaining sessions. As one said, it was nice to find something in common with others—the writing. We completed the eight weeks we had agreed to at the beginning and then held two additional sessions at two-week intervals for a total of 12 weeks.

The initial meeting was spent familiarizing the participants with the project. This involved explaining the findings of my previous research on media representations of homelessness and looking at newspaper articles about homelessness and analyzing them as a group, focusing on who was being quoted in the articles and what they were saying. Participants quickly developed a sense that their voice was largely underrepresented. As one said, referring to *Street Talk* (our city’s now-defunct street newspaper), “It turns out that most of the people writing for it are not homeless people.” Another brought in a fairly long article on homelessness from a local magazine. He went from being very pleased that homelessness was getting this kind of coverage to being somewhat dismayed when I pointed out that in the six pages of the article, not one homeless person was quoted, although many experts were. The first session also involved brainstorming topics of interest to each participant. We made a list of topics, which became the starting point for writing for the blog.

The second session was spent discussing writing strategies. We began with the idea that we would teach participants something about writing, but soon realized that the people who were there had come because they had a sense of themselves as writers and were already very good writers. Our main message to them was about the importance of thinking about their purpose and writing for an audience, rather than just ranting about whatever they felt like. We suggested that they ask themselves who they were writing for, why the topic was important, and why the audience should care. Blog entries from another homeless blog<sup>2</sup>were used to generate discussion of what worked well or not so well to address an audience.

---

<sup>2</sup>A number of homeless blogs exist, most famously The Homeless Guy blog of Kevin Barbieux. The homeless blog is in fact now a sub-genre of blogs.  
<http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/>  
[\(http://wanderingscribe.blogspot.com/\)](http://wanderingscribe.blogspot.com/)  
<http://homelessnation.org/en>

Each successive session involved approximately 15 – 20 minutes of discussion and brainstorming of topics followed by time at the computer. Some participants wrote outside of the sessions and spent the time at each session posting their work to the blog, while others used the time to complete their writing for the blog. Each writer had been given a memory stick so he could write posts at the public library or in the shelter computer room and bring them to the sessions. After the 12-week session was over, three of the writers discontinued posting to the blog. One writer, however, took on the blog as his own, and continued to post regularly for two more years and intermittently for another year after that (Schneider, 2012).

At the end of the 12 weeks, the research assistant conducted interviews with each of the bloggers. These were conducted outside the setting of the homeless shelter, in coffee shops and at the library. Each lasted about an hour. The bloggers were asked to reflect on their experiences, what they thought they had accomplished with their writing, and what they had gained from the project.

### **Blogging about homelessness**

In this section I present excerpts from the material on the blogs to give readers a sense of each writer's personality and writing style. Among all four participants, twenty-five entries were posted to the blog within the three-month period. The blog format, which has no prescribed format or length requirement for entries, offers a degree of stylistic freedom that enabled participants to write in their own way, making it relatively easy for them to simply sit down and write. Tim Barber was the only writer to use his real name; the other three used pseudonyms. Each writer had a distinctive personal style of entries. Tim's usually took the form of a letter addressed directly to readers using the second person (you) and ending with a complimentary close (talk with you soon). Viscount has a long history in post-secondary education, and his blog entries took a very academic tone and format. Anonymous 45 wrote short essays with identifiable threads from one entry into the next. And finally, AlexS, who was not as comfortable with computers as the others, wrote his entries on paper before typing them up to post to the blog.

The writers took up a wide range of topics related to homelessness. They wrote about shelter policies and practices and possible solutions and ways of dealing with homelessness. They also told personal stories about how they became homeless and about their experiences in various kinds of housing. They expressed their opinions about smoking in shelters, described the impact of homelessness on health, provided information about drugs and addictions, and illustrated how it feels to be caught in the bureaucracy of homelessness.

#### ***Tim Barber***

Tim Barber had been working on his proposal to curb homelessness before the writing group started and took advantage of this opportunity to get it out to a wider audience.

#### ***My Proposal to Curb Homelessness***

*To Whom It May Concern,*

*This is my proposal to help curb homelessness, and possibly rid the city of our city's homeless situation. My idea is to start a 3 Phase system, each requiring the building of supportive apartment-type dwellings.*

*There will be 3 buildings in all, possibly more depending on other ideas made available. I suggest (remember this is just a rough idea) the first building have at least 12 floors with 15 Units (apartments) on each floor. (The post goes on for several more screens, providing detailed information on how his plan could work.)*

#### ***Relapse***

*I thought I would update you on my circumstances. I really screwed up last Friday night. I ended up going out and having a few beer and then wound up using crack once again after actually having 3 and half months of clean time. I can tell you first hand that addiction is very powerful and it got a hold of me and I wound up falling. I now need to pick myself up and try and learn from my mistakes.... I thank all*

---

<http://view-sidewalk.blogspot.com/>  
<http://www.homelessinabbotsford.com/>  
<http://homelessmary.blogspot.com/>  
<http://jamiesbigvoice.blogspot.com/>  
<http://www.clickhomeless.com/>

*those that read my blog and hope you will continue to read articles from one of our 4 authors. I look forward to writing more in the near future.*

*Talk with you soon.*

*Tim Barber,*

*Homeless but not without HOPE*

This post produced the following comment from a reader.

**Comment from a Reader**

*Addiction is a powerful thing. One has to get rid of all the old and start anew. Some people may require explanations and apologies. As a recovering addict myself, I have been in this very spot and was very lucky to have a loved one in my life for support (very important). I now live a life of sobriety. I knew I could live this way after getting through a death of someone I loved endlessly. But only with good supports in place. I wish you luck.*

In a later post, Tim comments on his experience of writing for the blog.

**Working**

*It is hard to explain, but I feel as though this blog has in a way saved my life! I now have a purpose and a passion, and I hope that I can continue to write things that are worthy of a good blog. I know you probably think I am rambling on, but before this blog, I really felt like I was a nobody and that has all changed since then.... I do look forward to seeing all the comments on all of our blogs as it gives me strength to hear what each and every one of you has to say, regardless if I like what you have to say or not. Besides, isn't that what a blog is all about? I am personally still learning.*

Not all of Tim's posts were so positive in tone, as he detailed his struggles with addiction and other issues in his life. His signatures indicated this: *Homeless, but trying not to become Hopeless; Homeless, but regaining Hope; Homeless, but not without some Hope.*

**Viscount**

The next post comes from Viscount, a man who had considerable experience of higher education. He was concerned about some money that he claimed the shelter owed him. His post is followed by two reader comments posted about an hour apart.

**Vignette 1**

*As a person who has experienced different degrees of 'homelessness' in several countries the question of money and other material and nonmaterial resources has been a chronic pre-occupation and source of continuing grief for me; or, rather it is really the problem of consistently securing such resources that plagues me.... I would like to make clear that I don't believe that the shelter facility is actually malevolent and calculating in their dealings with clients, but clearly something is wrong with the overall management structure and operation when this kind of a basic and systematically unjust practice remains undetected and 'unvoiced' by relevant staff.*

**Comment from a Reader**

*A number of concerns regarding this person's plight come to bear: 1) Viscount appears quite capable of earning a living in communications. This blog is proof of that. 2) All homeless people need to realize that once a secure dwelling has been provided, it's time to look for work to support oneself, any kind of work, however menial. While the government has likely lost "your" money, please remember it was taxpayers' money to begin with.*

An hour later:

*I just read Viscount's history at another spot, and realize that suggesting finding work in the previous post was rather numbskullish on my part. You have likely worked more than I ever have. Obviously you have gone through some emotional and difficult times in your life, and have now thrown yourself upon the social welfare system. Nevertheless, I would encourage you to continue to take personal responsibility, and look for a better day ahead. I apologize if I was patronizing. The mercy of God is always there, and mankind still has to learn how to show it too.*

**Anonymous 45**

Anonymous45 wrote a series of essays, each entitled Homeless in Calgary. The following are very short excerpts from these essays.

**Homeless in Calgary Part 3**

*Can education help solve the recurring problem of addictions in the homeless people?*

*....So, the big challenge is, how do we educate the persons who are prone to seek addictions to fill the empty parts of their lives? How do we convince them that none of the addictions really fulfill their needs or expectations; that none of them are worth the expense and risk to health and finances; that they are all illusions of the real thing that they pretend to be?*

**Homeless in Calgary Part 4: "Give me money, that's all I want"**

*"I know at last what distinguishes man from animals; financial worries."*

*-Romain Rolland*

*....When companies put emphasis on profits and returns on financial investment over respect for human beings, it is difficult to find a simple solution to unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. Some enterprising individuals have tried to convince companies to include ethics in their vision, goals, and values statements. But ethics appears to be one of the first goals to be abandoned during a financial crisis or recession. And there is no place on financial statements for the fundamental rights of human beings, or for the consciences of financial and other company executives.*

*Until humanity is factored back into the Pro Forma equations, unemployment, poverty, and homelessness will continue.*

**Homeless in Calgary Part 6: Subsidized Accommodation**

*My early experiences with housing for homeless individuals was similar to an old "Perils of Pauline" melodrama. (He goes on the detail these experiences.)*

**Homeless in Calgary Part 7: Appearance**

*Part of the stigma that the public has towards homeless people is the appearance of many of the persons that they see --- the stereotype of unshaven, long messy hair, with poorly-kept clothing, and backpacks or shopping carts. I was a bell-ringer for the Salvation Army during one Christmas season. I was dressed in a business suit....*

**Alex S**

AlexS wrote primarily about one topic that was a burning issue for him.

**The Garden Project**

*Since my last blog I have been able to move into my own apartment in a seniors complex. Now, looking at things with a fresh perspective, I am finding that it is easier to look beyond homelessness and toward building a more satisfying life in a community where I feel accepted.*

*The ingredients for my ideal community already exist within a very short distance from where I am living in the East village. The amenities that are most important to me would include access to a community garden, including greenhouse space and the ability to preserve, can and freeze our own produce. The end result, I hope, would also include regular access to a community kitchen.*

The bloggers explicitly set out to engage in civic action. In doing this they positioned themselves as advocates and therefore citizens—people with the right and responsibility to describe the “realities” of homelessness, critique existing social structures, take part in public dialogue about homelessness, advocate for change, and stand up for homeless people. This was a subject position that was not previously available to them. Poster (2001) describes it as “a ‘democratization’ of subject constitution because the acts of discourse are not limited to one-way address and are not constrained by the gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications” (p. 184). Our role in facilitating the blog gave it legitimacy in the eyes of the participants—they would not have had the confidence to do it without us. But it was their own work that produced the sense of engagement with homelessness issues and with a wider public.

### **Participant's perspectives**

The discussion in this section is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews that were conducted with the participants at the end of the 12-week writing group sessions.

#### ***Engaging in Public Discourse on Homelessness***

Having the opportunity to tell the housed public about the “realities” of being homeless and having people understand the experience of homelessness was important to the bloggers. Tim said that the blog enables him to tell people that, “it is not just about being homeless. It is about other issues in our lives that we have to deal with on a daily basis...I can make people aware that it is difficult, especially living in the downtown area. Being an addict, it is all around you.” He also said, “It is an opportunity to try and help state some of the concerns and possible ways to maybe eventually curb homelessness. I really like that this is a blog for only those that have been homeless or are presently homeless and you get to hear our views. It may help others to understand that we are willing to share our ideas and share some of the things that are not openly made public without worry of criticism from others. It also gives others an opportunity to give us feedback by leaving comments on anything we may have printed.”

Anonymous 45 wanted to share some of “the stuff” that happens in the homeless community with the general public because he feels it isn’t often heard. “I hope that the public will understand what is actually going on. There seems to be a lot of friction between people who are homeless and people who are not homeless in that those who are not homeless don’t seem to understand why people are homeless. There might be some mediation possibilities, but mostly communication possibilities in creating more understanding....During my experiences as a homeless person, I have overheard a lot of concerns and complaints expressed by other persons who are in the same predicament. I believe that the blog will help inform and educate others of these concerns, and hopefully some persons who are in a position to recommend changes can use information from the blog to help make improvements in the programs and services offered by their agencies....I hope that the blog continues to be updated by contributors, so that it will document solutions that are offered in addition to the problems encountered by homeless persons.”

Closely related to this ability to take subject positions not previously available is the social power that accrued to at least one of the participants as a result of writing for the blog. The blog has given him a chance to interact with his service providers, two of whom, he says, sat down with him to discuss the blog for half an hour.<sup>3</sup> He also related a story about how workers at another shelter treated him more respectfully because they knew he could write on the blog about the shelter practices and how he was treated.

These bloggers make clear that they feel their perspective is not appreciated by the domiciled public. They are eager for people to know that they have a legitimate perspective and to understand it. They are also eager that it be a two-way conversation, as the next section makes clear.

#### ***Having their voices heard and responded to***

Although blogs are often compared to diaries (e.g. McNeill, 2009), in which there is no real expectation that the writing will be read by someone else, all of the writers in our group were very keen to have their posts read and to receive comments. This is an integral aspect of taking part in public discourse. Each of the writers commented on this, and several specifically asked for comment in their posts.

“I would like to reach government officials and have them comment on the blog.”

“I’m still waiting for comments. I notice we are getting more followers, but we are not getting a lot of comments. That is one thing I am hoping will pick up.”

“It hasn’t been seen widely enough yet.”

“I have had some people take a look at it. Some people haven’t read everything yet...but I’m hitting home.”

“I hope that, in the future, this blog will grow into a useful information exchange for those of us struggling out of homelessness.”

#### ***Building skills and confidence through blogging***

All the participants saw the writing as therapeutic and confidence building, letting them develop or rediscover skills, and helping them contribute to and reintegrate back into mainstream society. “Right at the

---

<sup>3</sup> A later interview with a staff member at the shelter revealed, however, that they sat down with him because they felt that he had some misunderstandings about shelter policies and procedures and wanted to be sure that he had his “facts” straight.

very beginning I wasn't sure how much I could contribute, but then it is amazing after I got started how many facets I found that could be started."

"It would make a person feel better about themselves by putting something out there that they have written. They might only want to do it anonymously, but they'll see it up there and think, 'Wow, I did that, and I don't even have to tell anybody.'"

"The writing group sessions were therapeutic in that I could get out stuff on paper that I have been struggling with and work it out that way instead of keeping it in internally and keeping it bottled up and getting more and more frustrated. A friend of mine said to me 'You've got to get out there and write a blog,' and I am finding that 'Hey I can do it,' which is something I was unsure of before."

"Sharing and relieving of pressures of unhappiness is the first thing, but also to retrieve some of the skills I have and use them in a practical critically-minded way... and consciousness raising."

"Thanks to all the instruction and encouragement in this project, I now have the ability and confidence to post a blog, and having done that, feel a personal sense of satisfaction and achievement in having made my own statement."

Tim in particular has gained in many ways by being involved in the project. He said the project gave him a feeling of inclusion not only in the writing group but a larger feeling of inclusion in society. "Even at work<sup>4</sup> they know that I write for the homeless. I tell them and they are like 'Wow! Really?' I still remember back 2 months ago when I was informed about this writing for the homeless and wasn't quite sure if I would be able to commit to an 8 week program of writing. I am really glad I did because I have become very passionate about writing and given the opportunity to state some of my opinion on what it is like to be homeless." He has made friends with one of his followers, meeting for coffee and a trip to the zoo. Being involved in the project has also given him opportunities to speak in front of various groups of people, including university students and professors, and members of the homeless helping community in Calgary. A blog is also an act of self-presentation that opens the blogger up to critique and evaluation (Maurer, 2009). At least one of our bloggers welcomed and appreciated this aspect of the blog and saw it as part of his journey toward sobriety and stability. Tim says that the blog has made him more honest with regard to his life, has given him the ability to confront, or at least write freely, about things that have happened in his life. "Putting it on paper, it makes it more truthful... makes you more aware of what happened. Accountable is the word. For me, it (writing) helps. And so what, if people see it and don't like me because of it, then whatever, who cares? It is for me. It is my life and I am the one that has got to deal with it. If it helps me, then great."

### **Implications for citizenship and recognition**

In the normal course of events, there is almost no possibility for communication between domiciled and homeless people. Most domiciled people live in the suburbs where typically there are no homeless shelters or homeless people wandering the streets. If domiciled people do encounter those who are homeless, they are unlikely to talk to them, and certainly not about their concerns and perspectives. Newspaper and other media reports of homelessness are the primary way that the domiciled public can get information about homelessness, and as I have established, the perspective of homeless people does not appear in the media in any meaningful way. The homeless blog therefore provided a means for homeless people to present their perspectives in a way that was previously not available to them.

Dahlberg (2001) outlines three positions on the internet as a means of promoting democratic debate: liberal-individualists, who see the internet as a site for the expression of individual interests; communitarians, who see the internet as enhancing communal spirit and values; and deliberatives, who see the internet as an expansion of the public sphere and of citizen participation in public discourse. In important ways, the genre of the blog promotes recognition by connecting all three of the possibilities identified by Dahlberg, and I believe that this is the source of the citizenship benefits for the bloggers in this project. The bloggers had the opportunity to express their individual interests, choosing what they would write about and how, without interference from the usual "authorities" in their lives, shelter staff and other

---

<sup>4</sup> He had a very temporary job at a construction site.

charitable agency representatives. The bloggers sought to achieve recognition of their expertise on homelessness. They wanted to assert their voices in the conversation about homelessness and to change perceptions of homeless people in general by describing their experiences of homelessness and offering their perspectives on various matters related to homelessness. They were able to represent themselves as individuals with opinions and perspectives, not just people with stories to tell (although they certainly did that too). This was an extremely important aspect of their participation in the project, leading them to feel that the possibility of recognition existed, even if it was not fully realized. They wanted responses to their posts—that someone would respond, whether positively or negatively, is a sign that their words, their very existence as a person, is recognized by someone else and thought worthy of a response. The combination *for me/for them* was an extremely powerful motivator for their continued participation.

They also created a community with a shared spirit and set of values. Most bloggers write and post their blogs in the comfort and privacy of their own homes. The bloggers in this project did not have that luxury, but nevertheless, they created both a physical community for the three months that the project took place and a virtual community among the readers of their blog. They hoped for more participation in their community from other homeless people, and if the project had lasted longer, might have been able to achieve this by persuading more of their colleagues to join the project. In having the opportunity to comment on issues relevant to the topic of homelessness, the bloggers in our project made a meaningful connection to society and in doing so created a kind of virtual home for themselves.

And finally, they also extended the public sphere. As Dahlberg (2001) points out, differences always exist between members of society, differences that “require a process of rational-critical discourse in order for privately oriented individuals to become publicly-oriented citizens” (p. 616). The public sphere, in Silverstone’s terms the mediapolis, is the primary public space in which dialogue takes place, but the traditional media provide no real opportunity for participation for homeless people. While the bloggers could not, of course, escape the wider social and economic context within which their lives unfold, they were able to offer their readers an understanding of the links between the personal and the political, sensitizing them to the ways in which the public and private spheres are inextricably linked.

The blog project is an example of what Lister (2007) calls “lived citizenship” (p. 55), citizenship as active participatory practice, as much about recognition as it is about access to formal (e. g. voting) rights. It offered the individuals involved a new identity as participants in public discourse about homelessness, including a sense of belonging. It also offered an opportunity to circumvent the control of the institutional authorities in their lives and to counteract cultural assumptions about their competence to take part in dialogue.

One of the challenges of thinking about citizenship in relation to homelessness is that most (though certainly not all) homeless people want to change their situations so that they are no longer homeless. That is, they want to leave the group rather than change the social identity of the group. Taylor’s discussion (1997) of the politics of recognition, offers a way to think about this challenge. He points to two opposing threads within the politics of recognition. On the one hand it includes a politics of universalism and equal dignity that requires acknowledgement that all human beings are equally worthy of and have equal right to the benefits and inclusion of citizenship. On the other hand it includes a politics of difference requiring acknowledgement of each individual or group’s right to a unique identity, distinct from everyone else. A citizenship discourse in which differences are celebrated and valued does not fit very well with discussions of homelessness. However, a politics of recognition in which every person is of equal moral worth and is entitled to participation in public discourse on a par with all others offers the possibility of realization of citizenship.

Fraser suggests that “parity of participation requires a status order that enables citizens to participate on a par with their fellows” (Thompson, 2006, p. 79), and advocates for a change in the status order so that everyone may participate. Such change will not be achieved in the blink of an eye, just because a prominent political theorist makes a cogent argument for it and because four homeless people in a particular city in Canada have written a blog. But we must have a strategy for moving toward such change and I believe that making opportunities for meaningful communication between housed and unhoused people is one possible strategy. Finding ways for marginalized people to achieve participation in public discourse may promote change in the status order that constrains participation. Such participation is a necessary aspect of working toward a status order in which parity of participation exists. Change in institutionalized patterns of human

value and worth is a slow process, what Ursula Franklin calls “earthworm work” (2006), in which the worm moves one tiny piece of earth at a time, until little by little a change in the landscape occurs. Perhaps the accumulation of numerous homeless blogs and persistence over a long period of time can make a dent. The key is that homeless people continue to have opportunities for communication in which they can demonstrate their capacity to take part in public discourse not only on issues relevant to their own lives, but also on social issues more generally.

## References

- Beresford, P. & Croft, S. (1995). “It’s our problem too.” *Critical Social Policy*, 15(2/3), 75-95.
- Berghman, J. (1995). Social exclusion in Europe. In G. Room (Ed.), *Beyond the threshold*. Bristol: Polity Press.
- Bruns, A. & Jacobs, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Uses of blogs*. New York
- Corbella, L. (2010). Personal Communication. Feb. 21, 2010.
- Dahlberg, L. (2001). The internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere. *Information, Communication & Society*, 4(4), 615-633.
- Franklin, U. (2006). *The Ursula Franklin reader: Pacifism as a map*. Toronto: Between the Lines.
- Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking recognition. *New Left Review*, 3, May/June, 107-120.
- Habermas, J. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.
- Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Bonus, S., & Wright, E. (2004, January). Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs. In *Proceedings of the Thirty-seventh Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37)*. Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Press.
- Lasica, J. D. (2003). What is Participatory Journalism? *Online Journalism Review*, August 7, 2003.
- Lister, R. ((2002). A politics of recognition and respect: Involving people with experience of poverty in decision making that affects their lives. *Social Policy and Society*, 1(1), 37-46.
- Lister, R. (2007). *Inclusive citizenship: Realizing the potential*. Citizenship Studies, 11(1), 49-61.
- Maurer, E. (2009). “Working consensus” and the rhetorical situation: The homeless blog’s negotiation of public meta-genre. In J. Giltrow & D. Stein (Eds.), *Genres in the internet*. pp. 113-142. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- McNeill, L. (2009). Brave new genre or generic colonialism?: Debates over ancestry in internet diaries. In J. Giltrow & D. Stein (Eds.), *Genres in the internet*. pp. 143-161. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Miller, C. & Shepherd, D. (2004). Blogging as social action: A genre analysis of Weblogs. <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2007). Audiences as media producers: Content analysis of 260 blogs. In M. Tremayne, (Ed.), *Blogging, citizenship, and the future of Media*. New York: Routledge.
- Rosen, J. (2006). The People Formerly Known as the Audience. *Press Think*, June 27, 2006.
- Schneider, B. (2012a). Sourcing homelessness: How journalists use quotations to frame homelessness. *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 13(1), 71–86.

- Schneider, B. (2012b). Blogging homelessness: Technology of the self or practice of freedom? *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 37, 405-419.
- Schneider, B., Chamberlain, K., & Hodgetts, D. (2010). Representations of homeless in four Canadian newspapers: Regulation, control, and social order. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 37(4), 147-171.
- Silverstone, R. (2007). *Media and morality: On the rise of the mediapolis*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Taylor, C. (1997). The politics of recognition. In A. Heble, P. Pennee & J. R. Struthers (Eds.), *New contexts of Canadian criticism*. Broadview Press.
- Thompson, S. (2006). *The political theory of recognition: A critical introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Tremayne, M. (Ed.), (2007).  *Blogging, citizenship, and the future of Media*. New York: Routledge.