

Reflections

Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing and Service Learning

Volume 12, Issue 1, Fall 2012

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The Goals of Grassroots Publishing In the Aftermath of the Arab Spring: Updates on a Work in Progress

Stephen J. Parks,
Syracuse University

Our mission is to provide opportunities for local communities to represent themselves by telling their stories in their own words. We document stories of local communities because we believe their voices matter in addressing issues of national and global significance. We value these stories as a way for communities to reflect upon and analyze their own experience through literacy and oral performance. We are committed to working with communities, writers, editors and translators to develop strategies that assure these stories will be heard in the larger world.

—*New City Community Press, circa 2000*

I was heading downtown and all I could see are these big clouds of smoke coming up from most of the regime's buildings.

The people of Benghazi were attacking unarmed. All they had was gas, matches, rage and will.

—*Ibrahim Shebani, "LIBYA: Four days of the Revolution," circa 2012*

Over a decade ago, Nick Pollard told me of a local poet in London, Vivian Underwood, who as a teenager had written a small book of poetry. Published in 1972, *Poems*, available at the local Centerprise bookshop, sold over 15,000 copies. The point of this story, Pollard told me, is that the total number of sales exceeded those of the then national poet laureate, but did so in a small geographical area, a sub-section of the city of London. This was the power of community publishing. When done well, it could reach deep into a neighborhood, echoing and supporting a collective vision of community, while also articulating common goals and aspirations. It was out of this belief that New City Community Press (NCCP) was launched.

In the more than ten years of its existence, NCCP has published over twenty books, supported local writing groups, sponsored public readings, and helped to organize international writing festivals. In total, NCCP has highlighted the personal stories, testimonies, and political insights of hundreds of neighborhood residents, activists, and organizers. It has done so out of the growing belief that the distribution of these stories could affect local debate, shift the terms of power, and open up greater opportunities for democratic dialogue.

Over the past several years, as local, national, and global events have pushed the meaning of democracy towards sometimes surprising ends, I would argue that traditional and new forms of community publishing can play an even more engaged, activist role. For publications that reach deep into a community's identity, that identity is only as powerful as the organizing that enacts and follows through on the vision expressed. Ultimately, democratic dialogue is the only as effective as the activist practices it produces.

For that reason, I have come to believe that long-standing community publication projects, like NCCP, need to directly join their resources to the rhetorical and material work of local and global activists, embedding democratic dialogue within a call for progressive structural change. With this in mind, I want to use the following pages to briefly show NCCP's developing relationship to the question of community organizing, share a forthcoming essay from a forthcoming community publication on the Arab Spring, and conclude with a discussion of what it might entail to work for democracy in the current political moment.

Writing Beyond the Curriculum

NCCP was initiated in Philadelphia. It was started during a time when I worked at Temple University and, with Eli Goldblatt, was actively developing a "Writing Beyond the Curriculum" (WBC) model of a university writing program. NCCP was designed to be the outreach element of our emerging community writing/partnership groups. As such, the initial publications were distributed across the city and featured writing by urban youth, undocumented workers, disability activists, and marginalized neighborhood residents. In the case of some publications, such as *Espejos y Ventanas: Oral Histories of Mexican Farmworkers and Their Families*, these "local" voices gained national and international attention, reaching an audience far beyond our initial expectations.

Still, each of these publications was developed and articulated within a "Writing Beyond the Curriculum" model. To that end, their principle goals were to support a series of writing courses linked to community organizations, to improve the literacy skills of those involved, and, ultimately, to demonstrate the insights of local residents. During the period of WBC's growth, then, there were a series of such partnerships that came together, did a piece of literacy work, and then dissipated. As noted, NCCP books stood as testimony to the results of this effort. In my more cynical moments, I would call these partnerships "bubble communities" for the way life was breathed into them, only to watch them pop as they hit the harsh reality of structural oppression. That is, I found it difficult to argue much progressive structural change had occurred as the result of our work.

Institutionally, however, it was a very successful model, supporting a myriad of programming, gaining approximately 1.5 million dollars in funding, and creating an on-going endowment to continue such programming well into the future. Eventually, however, university support for the work of WBC and NCCP went away. Although I often felt no real change had occurred in the lives of the involved communities, the college could only see these efforts as “political agitation” and/or “social work.” Threatened with being essentially starved of funds and shut down, I moved NCCP outside of Temple University and, eventually, to Syracuse University; Eli Goldblatt moved towards a partnership with Treehouse Books. Our sustaining collaboration continued, but was now practiced in two different locations. (For my version of this history, see *Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love*. To see Eli’s version of this history, see *Because We Live Here*.)

In Syracuse, which has its own rich history of industrial growth and decline linked to progressive movements for economic/social justice, NCCP found a supportive university and community network within which to expand its work. Over the next several years, multiple writing group/book projects were launched which featured the voices of urban schoolchildren, union workers, and community activists. (See “Emergent Strategies,” with Nick Pollard, for a partial accounting of this work.) In fact, the press had gained such a strong local reputation, that NCCP was invited to act as a community liaison by a local foundation for residents whose neighborhood was in the midst of a redevelopment project. Located just off of the restaurant district of downtown, the neighborhood had been home to many small and large industries during its heyday, a period which also saw the neighborhood act as an economic incubator for the aspirations of recent immigrant populations. As with many such industrial neighborhoods, economic downturns had devastated opportunity, if not the community’s spirit. The goal of the redevelopment project was to revitalize both business and community prospects.

Here is where the story moves towards the role of writing beyond the printed page of community publications. It is one type of project to support a neighborhood’s ability to “tell their story.” This had marked my work in Philadelphia. It is, as I discovered, another thing

entirely to link the “story telling” to efforts to fundamentally change power relations through actual community organizing. Yet, for this project, as part of the process of collecting neighborhood insights, a door-to-door interview campaign was initiated. The collected insights about the residents concerning their hopes/concerns for the neighborhood were shared at a resulting open neighborhood forum. Not surprisingly, there was deep ambivalence about the redevelopment efforts. Or rather, there was broad support for efforts to improve the community, but ambivalence about the ability of the residents to be active participants in that process. As a result of the neighborhood forum, there were calls to form a new neighborhood coalition, an organization which would attempt to be an active force in the community. Our work soon turned to such efforts.

All of these actions occurred before a single word was printed on a page, turned into a book, and distributed across the neighborhood. Yet the immediate fact of the printed word being joined to community organizing efforts, efforts mistakenly seen as against the redevelopment project, created a harsh backlash. As a result, there was an immediate loss of funding from national grant organizations for our neighborhood projects, strained partnerships with the “mover and shakers” involved, and the creation of lingering distrust about whether the community was being “manipulated” by “outsiders.” Here it must also be noted that the development project had initiated its own power-sharing plan, which while disputed in some sections of the neighborhood, was also respected and supported in others. The point here is that who were “outsiders” and/or “manipulators” was greatly dependent on a person’s position in the neighborhood. In spirit, however, I believed everyone imagined they were working toward the same goal of community-led progress.

Despite this deeply conflicted context, the work continued. The new residents organization sponsored a community picnic, supported completely by their own efforts, which made real their claim to be community-based. At this picnic writing prompts about the community were circulated. Later, writing groups focused on the neighborhood were initiated. Eventually, NCCP helped to create an aligned local neighborhood press, under control of the residents, linked to the emergent community organization, as a means to reframe the image

of residents and their goals as a community. Entitled “HOME,” their first publication featured personal testimonies such as the one by Susan Hamilton:

My initial encounter with the neighborhood was accidental—I got lost on streets that veer off on a diagonal and that took me to an unexpected destination. In the same way, I didn’t really plan to live here. I owned a home on the Southwest side, and though I was dissatisfied with its lack of porches, its small yard, and the size of the mortgage payment, I was not actively looking to move. Then an acquaintance who knows I like old houses urged me to tour one that was coming up for sale on Holland Street. The previous owner had died in her 90s, leaving this house something like a museum. Most of its Victorian splendor was intact, right down to the intricately wrought metal pulls on the pantry drawers, and I was immediately hooked. The area didn’t frighten me; it reminded me of Deep Rondo, the inner-city, racially mixed neighborhood in St. Paul where I lived as a young child. I had been working as a community organizer on the Near Westside, so I already knew some of my new neighbors. But I wasn’t blind to the problems, such as the drug house across the street and decades of neglect by local government. The lot next door, where a house had been set afire to cover up a burglary, had been vacant for more than a decade and used as an informal dump. When I bought my house, I began cleaning out the lot’s trash and trying to mow the thicket of weeds, some taller than my head, with a push mower. When drug dealers would congregate at the curb, I walked around them, picking up the food wrappers and subtly giving the message that I too had a role to play and a claim to that space.

A little over two years later, early in the morning of Labor Day 1998, a freak storm blasted Syracuse. I was awakened by the shriek of a box fan being blown out of the window by 115 mph winds. I closed windows and laid back down on the bed, which moved as the whole house swayed. Lightning flashed green outside, like strobe lights, and thunder punctuated the sound of falling trees. When I got dressed and went downstairs, I could not see out the windows because they were all streaked with rain. I opened the back door and could see only leaves where my car was parked. My dog Che, terrorized by the storm, cowered at my feet. Before I could decide whether to take refuge in the basement, the worst of the storm passed. The electricity went out—and would

not be restored for a week. Peering out the front door, I could vaguely see the shapes of big trees on the ground, power lines snared in their branches. Then I heard voices from the darkness. A group of young men from the surrounding houses appeared, holding cans of beer and flashlights. They asked if I was OK, and I told them I was afraid that my car had been crushed. Disregarding the danger of fallen electrical wires, a couple of them scrambled over branches to reach the backyard and returned to report that the car was unscathed under a mound of small twigs. Then the guys moved on to the next house, calling out to the tenants to see if they needed help.

As I came back inside to comfort my dog, I realized that for the first time I really felt at home in this neighborhood, where people do look out for each other and pull together during crises. During the next week of post-storm recovery, people shared food from their freezers, told where ice could be purchased, helped one another cut up trees that littered yards, and cheered together when the Hydro Ontario trucks sent from Canada finally restored power to our streets.

Though still neglected by local government, we could take care of each other.

When published, *HOME* demonstrated a much different argument about residents than typically seen. Typically, residents were portrayed as poor, uninformed, and ungrateful by mainstream publications/organizations. *HOME* demonstrated that long-term and short-term neighbors wanted a developed neighborhood, but one that respected its traditions of diversity, hard work, and community support. The book implicitly argued that these values had not been sufficiently recognized by those in authority both historically and in the present moment—that they had not been brought into the actual power sharing of *any project in terms that the resident organization recognized* (italics here expressing the fundamental nature of true representation). It was also an attempt to reframe the students involved in the project that were being portrayed as manipulative and insensitive to the “actual” needs of the residents. Through the press, the collaboration of students/faculty was shown to be directed by the residents. A different power dynamic than the criticism’s had implied had also been created.

NCCP had clearly published such books before. Yet only when these stories were supported by an activist organization were the concerns expressed raised to the level that local leaders, real estate developers, non-profit organizers, grant foundations took notice and responded—initially in very harsh terms, but eventually in collaboration. The fact of the neighborhood organization had reframed the book as a vehicle to claim the power to control their neighborhood, a claim which eventually enabled partnerships with many community, business, and religious organizations focused on structurally addressing primary concerns in the neighborhood, such as crime. (This element of the story should be told by Ben Kuebrich who worked with residents to record their concerns about police conduct as part of a police/neighborhood delegation, publishing a book which became a site of citywide debate, entitled *I Witness*.) Publishing plus organizing had helped to create the possibility of grassroots community-led structural change to occur.

While I intend on writing a longer book length account of this experience, for the purposes of this article, I want to highlight the ways in which the simple documentation of a neighborhood story was seen as an insufficient response by a neighborhood faced with an immediate challenge (or so perceived) to their “way of life.” The “bubble” community of the first iteration of NCCP was not up to the task of moving “writing beyond the curriculum” toward actual social change. The residents, faced with fundamental challenges to their way of life, recognized that stories unconnected to efforts to organize were insufficient if the actual goal was to shift power relationships.

And here I would hazard to guess that most of the documentaries that emerge out of community-based partnership work either directly or indirectly to offer a challenge to the status quo, a call for a different dynamic between residents and the dominant hegemony in which they exist. The experience of this particular community project highlighted the need to rethink our role as community documentarians and to consider in what ways it also implies a related sense of community activists. To what extent, that is, are we morally obligated having taken up the former to also inhabit the latter subject position as well? And when that moment arrives, how does a claim to

support “writing beyond the curriculum” mutate into the need to push beyond the status quo toward progressive and structural change?

Writing a Revolution

Since 2012, NCCP has been working with activist/teachers from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to create a book focused on the meaning of democracy and democratic activism. The publication, initiated by the individuals in the book, was created during a summer period when they were all in Washington, D.C. The publication will feature individual testimonies from Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, as well as other countries in the region. Many of the participants were or are educators, community and/or school-based. All are under the age of 30. The individuals in the book wrote their own piece, were interviewed, or produced their chapter by some combination of these two methods.

In their stories, bombs explode in the next room; army soldiers hold guns to their heads; husbands are pulled out of cars, arrested, and taken away. It goes without saying that each of these individuals share experiences that are both striking in the terror they experienced and admirable for their courageous response. Here is an excerpt from one of the participants, Ibrahim Shebani. He named his piece “Libya: Four Days of the Revolution”:

[O]n the 15th of February, I received a phone call from one of my friends, Ahmed, telling me that Benghazi has awakened. There was a massive protest in front of the security directory. . . . by the mothers, daughters and wives of massacred Busleem prisoners. Everybody was chanting “Wake up, wake up Benghazi. The day you have long waited for had just come.” [We] couldn’t predict what was going to happen, but I was certain of only one thing, that I must leave for Benghazi.

I arrived to Benghazi on the 16th of February. . . . My friends Ahmed and “Suliman” came to pick me up from the airport and we went straight to downtown where many young Libyans had started already protesting and clashing with police forces loyal

to Gadafi. . . . [W]e could hear people chanting, whistling, and clashing with police forces. . . . [We] were very scared to join. I could clearly see the security trying to abort the protest. [I also saw] the angry protestors screaming “Down Down Gadhafi,” “The Police’s duty is to serve and protect the civilians,” and “People want the downfall of the regime.” This all took me by surprise and a boost of adrenaline rushed through my veins. I wanted to join the front line of the protestors and scream, say many things I had dreamed of saying. . . I turned on my mobile phone video camera, covered my head with my hood, and wore the sunglasses I had in my pocket. I went to join the protestors and I couldn’t stop screaming, “The people want the downfall of the regime.” [Soon the] security forces started chasing the protestors, capturing as many as possible. . . . We had to run to our car.

[On February 17th,] I woke up early like a little kid on his way to his first day of school; this is the day all of Benghazi was going out. Although I knew that the protest won’t start until at 3 pm, I just got ready and waited for my friends to pick me up. Suliam arrived at around 1:30. We drove towards downtown. As we were passing on the bridge of Juliana that crosses the lake of Benghazi where there is a massive garden often visited by families, I saw something I didn’t understand quite well at that time. The garden was full of workers wearing yellow helmets, probably over a 1,000, clearly immigrants, mostly Africans and some Asian. I looked at Suliman and told him, “See this is pretty smart. They brought workers to clean up the mess of the protest to show the world that nothing is happening in Benghazi.” I had no clue what the regime had in mind for the protestors. . . .

There weren’t many people out in front of the court, but protestors already had started chanting “Constitution, freedom and equality.” We went and joined them, waiting for the rest to arrive. . . . Thousands of people were marching from downtown Benghazi. Now we were clearly over 5,000 Libyans, all in one voice, “Tell Moamer and his sons, Benghazi is full of real men” and provoking some Libyans who kept watching from distance out of fear telling them “Join us, join us, and no harm would

reach you.” We were getting more and more people. I couldn’t stop calling family and friends telling them about what I am witnessing!

We waited for the [rest of the] marching groups to join us, but no one arrived! We received a phone call from our friend Osama, according to him over 10,000 men were marching. . . . These men went over the bridge crossing the lake of Benghazi and had no clue what was waiting for them. . . . As they were coming down the bridge, mercenaries dressed in cleaners outfits and yellow helmets, supported by the army, started shooting at the unarmed protestors. They hit them with heavy artillery and aircrafts, Kalashnikovs, tear bombs, bats, machetes. Chaos broke through. Protestors were being pushed back. Those in the front lines were murdered. Many of them jumped in the lake and many of them were captured. People in front of the court were receiving phone calls. Anger was showing on the protestors’ faces. Everybody was shouting “People want the downfall of Gadhafi.” I saw rage and anger that nothing could stop.

On the 18th, I woke up early. . . I was heading downtown and all I could see are these big clouds of smoke coming up from most of the regime’s buildings. The people of Benghazi were attacking unarmed. All they had was gas, matches, rage and will. Security forces were being push backed from downtown towards either the “Alfadel Buomar brigade compound” or to the “security directory building.” I parked my car quite far and decided to walk to court. I was getting closer and the only thing I could see was a massive independence flag waving from the courthouse! This flag was even forbidden to talk about during the past 42 years and the majority of Libyans were born and raised under the Gadhafi regime didn’t even know it existed.

In front of the court there were thousands and thousands of protestors. Many of my friends that I haven’t seen for a while were there too; the feeling was indescribable. . . . I saw “Mohamed.” I called him “Hey what are you up to?” He said he had to go home to bring this satellite to the court. He was trying to connect on Aljazeera Live to show the world what was really happening in

front of the court of Benghazi. So far no proper videos were broadcasted, only some amateur camera phone videos. He was trying to find other people to come with him to carry the satellite.

It took us almost 45 minutes. . . [As we returned to the city], the streets were empty, the only thing you could see was the smoke of the burning buildings. We arrived safe to the court. That was my mission of the day. People were happy to see the satellite. Finally the world will be seeing what is really happening.

I felt so proud to be part of this small mission.

In addition to such experiences, individuals also tell stories of running for political office; teaching classes focused on gender equity; and leading workshops on democratic organizing. Activism, the book argues, comes in all forms, but takes place across the region as a united effort. It was not so a “spring” that occurred, these authors argue, as much as the emergence of a series of long-term grassroots efforts designed to foster a democratic spirit and set of concerted actions by a new generation. If the work in the city of Syracuse reframed the goals of NCCP, forcing it to recognize the need to link publication to local activism, the “Arab Spring” book poses the question of how community publishing can align itself with larger global efforts at grassroots activism.

In drawing such a connection, I recognize it would be far too simple to equate activists in Syracuse with those across the Middle East. Nor should the danger faced by those involved in the projects be equated. Reluctant real estate developers should not be compared to brutal dictators. And while I may have lost some funding for publishing *HOME*, the MENA lost friends, families, and, too often, their homes as well. Also some members of the MENA publication collective were even unable to participate fearing retribution would be taken out on their families. Yet, it would also be too simple not to establish connections but, instead, to assume that the two projects, two audiences, could not talk back and forth across religious, ethnic, language, and geographical barriers. Nor should it be assumed that no lessons could be drawn from the other’s project—that mutual insight is not possible. So instead of drawing simple connections

across continents, I want to suggest possible tactical and strategic possibilities suggested by both projects.

NCCP began in a print-based community-publishing world—a world still marked by the strategies of Vivian Usherwood’s *Poems*. The publication of *HOME* bears the traces of that history. *HOME* was a printed book linked to a grassroots community effort that deployed classic organizing strategies—door-to-door interviews, public meetings, focus on key community issues, etc. The MENA publication occurs in a world of social media. To read Ibrahim Shebani’s engagement as an activist is to hear of cell phones, video cameras, satellite TV, international television stations blending with traditional strategies of street protest and mass organizing. To a great extent, the strategies of the MENA book demonstrate the ways in which “community publishing” now needs to occur across platforms and media, making the experiences and insights of its participants immediately available, part of the flow of rhetorical argument and material practices informing the actions of those involved. The “book” represents one moment in what would ultimately be a networked set of “publishing” actions designed to empower the work of those engaged in social/political struggles for justice.

While I do not want to claim these MENA activists’ linking of rhetorical social media work and grassroots strategies are “new” (rather I see them as having a track record of success), I do want to claim they represent a step forward for framing the traditional community-publishing project. For instance, in the case of the MENA project, we are actively building an accompanying website for the publication which will feature “links” to related organizations, efforts, and activists engaged in the work of democratizing their communities and countries. There is also discussion about creating an accessible database onto which protest/organizing footage could be collected/distributed—creating an on-going archive of sorts. And we are considering how to support/foster the myriad of technologies which allow conversation to occur in contexts where the act of conversation itself is dangerous and a cause for persecution. Here “traditional” boundaries of publishing as a means to reach an “audience” come up against more immediate needs of organizing in hostile environments.

All of this work exists with the knowledge that internet access can not be considered a common resource for many communities. Here the ability of “print” to physically move across communities enables a different form of circulation to occur. That is, the distribution network associated with printed books allows the ideas to circulate across communities where technology may not be as accessible; where cell phones, video cameras, and computers are not (or are no longer) the principle means by which ideas are shared. This was certainly the case in the Syracuse neighbourhood in which *HOME* was circulated; I would hazard to guess similar communities exist across the MENA countries as well. For this reason, the MENA book will be printed in both English and Arabic, circulated in the U.S.A. and MENA countries. Taken collectively, then, what *HOME* and the MENA book bring forth is the need to work across emergent and traditional technologies, always linked to a grassroots effort at changing actual structures of power through democratic activism. In doing this work, activist and academic communities are thinking through how to use the histories and resources of a community press to serve as a “organizing site” through which to capture the aspirations of their neighbours and to formulate actions in their efforts to bring democracy to their daily lives.

Clearly much more could be said about the possibilities of such cross-platform community publishing/activist efforts. And I do not want to pretend or to claim any unique knowledge or insight (nor any particular models for success) on how this will new form of hybrid community publishing, with its new responsibilities, will be accomplished. For me, this is a radically new experience, one in which I am learning whether a decade’s worth of publishing work *might* have produced resources to support the work of activists both local and global. I am suggesting, however, that as teachers, professors, and, more generally, citizens, we need to place ourselves in positions where our institutional resources can be used for purposes beyond our “writing careers.” For ultimately, if we are true to our rhetoric, many of the progressive arguments surrounding community literacy, service-learning, neighbourhood partnerships should lead us into such activist partnerships. That is, I believe we need to become active agents in the fostering of democratic dialogue and change if we are to impact the current political moment.

Democratic Dialogues/Democratic Actions

I want to end by invoking the work of Amartya Sen who argues for a definition of democracy that is premised on the need to foster public dialogue designed to correct fundamental injustices. Sen's work is particularly appropriate since he invokes different "MENA" kings, philosophers, and leaders throughout history as a means to demonstrate that attempts to open discussion, foster tolerance, and provide fundamental rights occurred in that region prior to Western Europe, while still acknowledging the West as an important site for theorizing democracy. This cross cultural/cross-historical framework is a useful to consider when articulating the meaning of democracy, as both a local and global practice.

Sen's work is focused on the power of democratic states to address fundamental human injustices—the existence of torture, the growth of the sex slave trade, the perpetuation of gender discrimination. He believes that democratic government's are uniquely situated to address such issues. To argue this, he uses a study of famine in Bengal, India, during British occupation. In that study, Sen demonstrates that it was not the lack of food which led to the famine but the failure of the wages of marginalized workers to rise in response to the increased cost of food—partially attributed to the increase of British troops and consequent demand on food supplies. Providing support for worker wages would have eliminated the famine as well as addressed fundamental issues of poverty. It is Sen's contention that such famines have never occurred in a democracy, where public opinion, protest, and activism quickly draw attention to such issues. Such practices were not possible given British ruling practices in India. For a democracy to function adequately, then, requires a constant flow of information and discussion, a dialogic cross hatching that is endlessly informed by multiple sources. This is the necessary foundation to insure that recognized democratic or human rights are not just recognized, but actualized.

I want to suggest, then, that Sen's focus on democratic debate and fundamental injustices might provide a more invigorated framework upon which to base our political work in Composition/Rhetoric. In writing this, I am aware that, within Sen's theory, it is somewhat difficult to adequately assess what counts as a fundamental injustice

and, accordingly, the opposite category of a fundamental right. He initiates his project more as the ending of the negative than the articulation of the positive. Consequently, he frequently lists issues such as the lack of adequate health care, gender discrimination, and famine as essential injustices, putting forth how each demands a certain type of action based upon a person/community's location. When flipped to the positive, these are not necessarily different in kind from a generalized list of individual rights that most liberal humanists might endorse. For Sen, however, the focus on injustice is meant to also carry the burden of a duty toward others. For Sen, individual rights are placed within a larger paradigm of collective duty and collective duty requires action.

In developing an appropriate plan of action, Sen asks individuals to analyze how, from their unique position, they can collectively address (and collaboratively) redress a fundamental injustice—an injustice that clearly evidences a betrayal of basic humanity. He argues such actions should be premised upon creating an engaged democratic form of public debate, one that links rhetoric to action, argument to policy change, and stated political right to the capability to use it. In this way, we have not so much moved far from the concepts deployed by many scholars active in community partnership/publication work as much as shifted the paradigm in which they occur—they must be premised on a fundamental injustice. And here I would argue, a different type of partnership work is necessary.

For if community engagement has meant supporting after-school literacy projects, and neighborhood writing groups, Sen draws us into an analysis of the deeper cause—fundamental issues of the economic injustice and school funding formulas that cause literacy stratification. If community publishing has been a vehicle to foster debate between students and residents about urban crime, Sen mandates that we do more than just publish a story, we must move beyond the word to the actions that can address the injustice of police behaviour. Ultimately, Sen's focus on injustice moves us off our comfortable classroom and disciplinary based actions, pushing us into the streets where democratic words meet collective action. For now, the assessment is not whether words are written, but if injustices are resolved.

It is for this reason I have come to believe that community publishing can and should mean more than a circulation of stories. Our work can and should produce more than words on a page. It must be linked with local and global attempts to foster democratic dialogue and democratic rights. It must endlessly consider how the resources inherent in such work can be expanded across platforms, communities, and borders to foster the type of collaborative practices that address fundamental injustices—efforts that do not just ameliorate the problem, but alter the structure in which it exists. I am not so arrogant as to presume that any of the projects discussed here offer such solutions. I am sure, however, that the above experiences have led me to a new place from which to consider my future work.

I am also sure that to achieve this larger goal, as a field, we must analyze our own position, actively seek alliances and partnerships which turn private resources toward the public good, and move beyond an identity simply framed as writer, teacher, and publisher to the more complex and conflicted world of democratic activists. In doing so, we can might begin to reinvigorate the progressive elements of community publishing and partnership. We might, that is, begin to put in place the practices required for writing and publishing in a post-Arab Spring world.

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