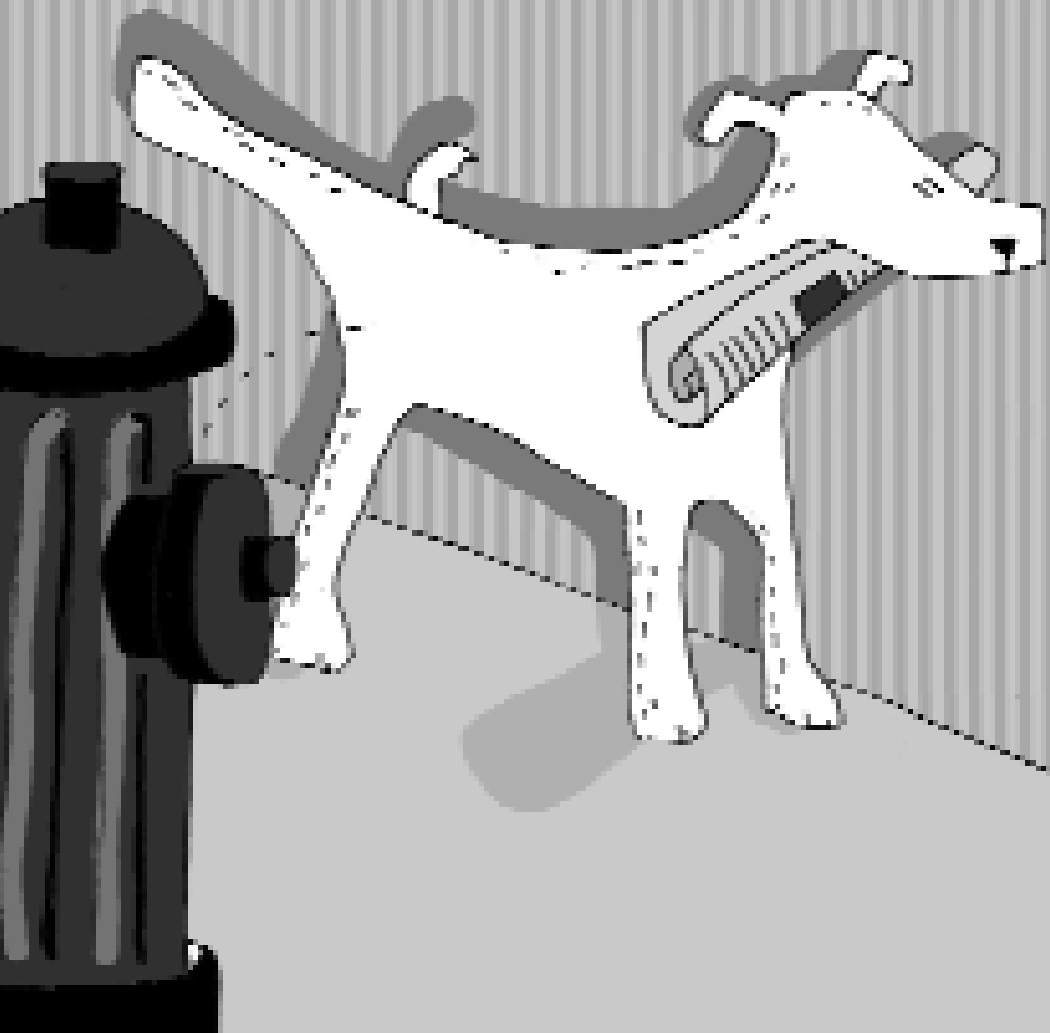


# ECHOES FROM

*street newspapers and empowerment*



# THE CURB

by isabelle mailloux-béique

“you really can’t have true democracy  
until there’s equal access  
to all means of communication”

— Steven Dunnifer<sup>1</sup>

where it all began...

Street newspapers play an important role in processes of social change. By refusing to be silenced, the voices of street journalists challenge dominant discourses and put forward dissenting views on social realities. Montréal’s street newspaper, *L’ITINÉRAIRE*, serves as an excellent case study through which to examine the importance that street newspapers play in marginalized communities.

First, it would be fitting to describe myself a little, because the stories to be told here are about people, ordinary people who, for many different reasons, end up in extraordinary and often extreme situations. I am such a person. I have experienced harsh alienation most of my life. I have walked a path of my choosing and was a slave to a rather dark part of myself for more than ten years. When I reached the age of 22, I realized that my self-destructive behaviour would soon lead me to death unless something drastic happened. With little faith or courage in sight, I began a provocative and drawn-out process of profound transformation. My outlook on life and on myself took a new turn.

My personal journey parallels how media activism came into my life. I realized that things weren’t right, that they had to change, and that I had to be part of this change. While reintegrating myself into society—mainly by going back to university in communication studies—I once again felt alienation all around me, but this time I wasn’t causing it. It was present, all around, like a heavy load on my shoulders, something I could not ignore. I was profoundly disturbed by the world we live in, with its mass-consumption, culture of performance, lies, profit, waste, violence, stereotyping, injustice, and the destruction and conformity it entails for us all.

## jumping into the solution: activism

My first step towards a solution took place in the winter of 2001, during the Summit of the Americas in Québec City. Convinced that my feeling of powerlessness and frustration had to stop, I made a small but decisive move. I walked into a café on St-Laurent Boulevard to attend, somewhat nervously, my first local Indymedia meeting (CMAQ - *Centre des médias alternatifs du Québec*).

Since then, being involved in this media project has been a concrete way to follow and act upon the principles I believe in and try to live by. More importantly, I play an active role in the global justice movement. This empowering experience has led me to believe that all of us, together and in our own different ways, can contribute to imagining and putting into place new ways of being and doing.

Empowerment is at the core of autonomous media. It is a process of becoming aware of the ability to affect change. It involves freedom from oppression, servitude, and prejudice by becoming an active member in the development of individual and collective well-being. It results in a new-found sense of autonomy and power. The realization of possessing the power to instigate change may sound insignificant, but it is in fact everything.

Open and participatory in nature, autonomous media create opportunities for people to bring about change through different strategies. I have been able to witness the relationship between participatory media and empowerment in Montréal's street newspaper, L'ITINÉRAIRE. You may have seen one of its many street vendors walking through Montréal, selling the latest issue of this monthly publication. I have interviewed some of the street journalists, as they are known, that work with L'ITINÉRAIRE. It has been a rich, colourful, and insightful experience, as this chapter will reveal.

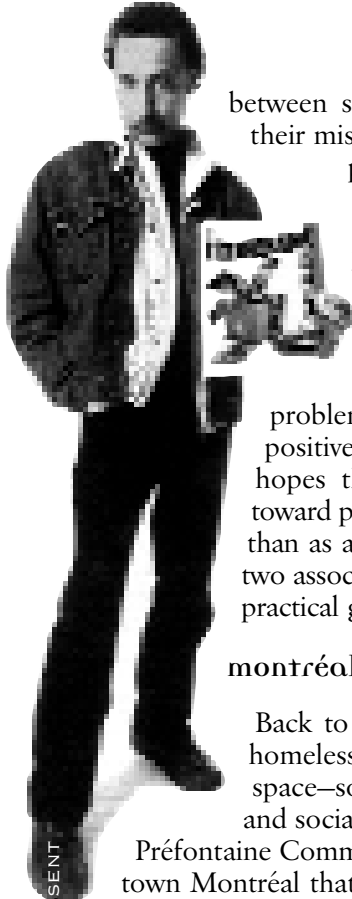
## street newspapers: an eclectic movement

L'ITINÉRAIRE is not a unique phenomenon. Brussels, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, London, Montevideo, Namibia, Stockholm, Stuttgart, and Vancouver are but some cities, among many, with their own street paper. These types of newspapers, having diversity and autonomy as their strength, come in countless shapes and forms; yet for simplicity-sake, this chapter will describe the two most prominent models—the European and the American.

Regardless of the model followed, most street newspapers operate under one basic principle—they are non-profit organizations and profits must be re-invested in one way or another into services for the homeless and for poor communities. The European model usually focuses on creating economic opportunities for street vendors (homeless or low-income people). The aim is to attract readers by producing a media that will cover subjects with a broad audience appeal. Take, for example, *THE BIG ISSUE*, which was created in London in 1991 and is one of the oldest street papers. It is produced by professionals, and sold by street vendors facing a variety of problems. The profits of the weekly magazine are reinvested in a wide-range of services for the homeless and the socially marginalized—including health care, education, and housing—in order to help build self-esteem and dignity. This model usually overlooks both the restricted access of marginalized groups to the means of communication, and the need to democratize media.

The American model views street newspapers as far more than a way for homeless people to earn money. Media are seen as political and social tools to be used by marginalized people to gain power in society by claiming a space to be heard. Street people themselves participate in the making of the newspapers by contributing articles and stories. Seattle's *REAL CHANGE* has been a pioneer. The central mandate of this by-weekly publication is to give a voice to low-income people. *REAL CHANGE* provides writing workshops twice a week to encourage people to write and publish in the paper. Actively engaged in the fight to end homelessness and poverty, *REAL CHANGE* is engaged in popular education on the realities of the homeless, in an attempt to break stereotypes popularly held by society. *L'ITINÉRAIRE*, Montréal's street newspaper, is closer to the American model since fifty percent of its content must be produced by homeless or low-income people.

Although each street newspaper is unique, networking has proven to be crucial. Using media and communication in the fight against poverty can be a daunting task. Hence the need arises to join together, forge links, share experiences, and foster cooperation. These objectives are at the heart of the world's two main street newspaper associations, the International Street Newspapers Association (INSP) and the North American Newspaper Association (NASNA). Both work as decentralized umbrella organizations, aimed at creating common spaces and ties



between street newspapers, and helping members accomplish their mission, whether by providing logistical support, political pressure, or facilitating exchanges in services.

Both INSP and NASNA identify poverty as a global problem, making their solidarity central to the battle they wage against poverty. *THE BIG ISSUE*, through INSP, recently participated in establishing a street paper in Japan, where poverty and homelessness have only recently been acknowledged as a social problem by the Japanese government. Encouraged by the positive public response received so far, the Japanese team hopes the street paper will help change people's attitudes toward poverty, which is often seen as a personal problem rather than as a social issue. As a way of promoting new projects, the two associations have also worked together to create a useful and practical guide on how to start a street newspaper.

### montréal's underground voices

Back to the Montréal pavement where, in 1990, a group of homeless people became interested in floating a community space—somewhere off the street, somewhere they could sit and socialize together. With the help of social workers from the Préfontaine Community Centre, they managed to open a space in downtown Montréal that same year.

The community was responsible for the space and the idea of creating a newsletter gradually came about as a way of informing the homeless community about their new space. *L'ITINÉRAIRE* was born. The first issue came out in May 1992, put together by four people from the homeless community with the help of a professional journalist and two social workers. It included poems, drawings, and stories. Some 1,000 copies were distributed throughout community centres, clinics, rehab centres, and shelters. Three more issues were published, but interest and energies gradually waned in late 1993, and the project came to an end.

In 1994, John Bird, a former homeless person and founder of London's street paper *THE BIG ISSUE*, visited *L'ITINÉRAIRE* and shared his experiences. To Bird, the survival of street newspapers depends on two things—reaching

a wide public and being active in the marketplace. This was a turning point for those interested in resurrecting L'ITINÉRAIRE. Instead of following the model advocated by Bird, they decided to hold onto the idea of a community-based newspaper with empowerment at its core, produced by a team of homeless and low-income people, as well as professionals, and to be sold in the streets to the general public. In May 1994, 10,000 copies of a revamped L'ITINÉRAIRE were sold for one dollar each in the streets of Montréal.

Today, between 18,000 and 22,000 copies of L'ITINÉRAIRE are sold by more than 100 street vendors every month, with an estimated readership of 50,000. Assisted by the chief editor and her assistant, street journalists submit articles and stories on a monthly basis. L'ITINÉRAIRE provides a unique avenue of expression for marginalized voices and ideas. It gives the public an alternative source of information because it features original content on economic, political, and cultural issues. Within the pages of L'ITINÉRAIRE, readers learn about issues silenced or ignored by the mainstream media—issues involving the social exclusion of various marginalized groups, such as sex workers, the homeless, people who receive social assistance, people living with HIV/AIDS, and those dealing with mental illness and addictions.

The street newspaper is run by the L'ITINÉRAIRE Community Group, which is headed by a board composed mainly of people from the street—people experiencing realities such as homelessness, addiction, alcoholism, and mental illnesses. The community group also runs *Le Café sur la rue* (The Café in the Street), and a space for low-cost internet access, thus offering a cohesive environment committed to the needs of the community. To sustain the different sections of the project, the Community Group employs professionals and low-income people enrolled in government programs that support community groups and workplace re-integration.

### the power to exist

Listening to stories of street journalists and street vendors involved in a participatory media project can help in the examination of how resistance and empowerment are inherent to autonomous media. The power of L'ITINÉRAIRE is manifested by the opportunity for people normally excluded—not just from the media but from society at large—to speak and be heard

on political and social issues. L'ITINÉRAIRE challenges the status quo by giving a voice to marginalized people thus bringing broader perspectives and alternative views to the public's attention.

It may seem strange that people find they need to create their own media in order to have a say in the public arena. But this is the reality, a reality that has been increasingly exposed by activists who argue that the current mass-media system is elitist, closed to dissenting voices, and hardly open to ordinary people and their concerns. For 54-year-old Arthur, who joined L'ITINÉRAIRE recently in an urgent need to make ends meet, it's an obvious truth. "In the mainstream press," he says, "you have to search a whole lot to find something that will talk to you socially; I mean that takes a real social point of view and defends it."<sup>2</sup>

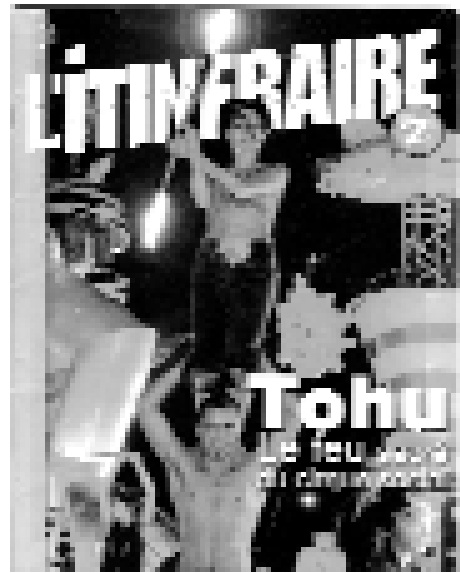
Ordinary people are the ones who experience the repercussions of events reported on and discussed in the media. They concretely feel the fallout of Premier Jean Charest's attempts to reengineer the state and the recent re-election of President Bush. As a daily observer of one of the most gentrified areas in Montréal, Sophia—a L'ITINÉRAIRE street vendor who has chosen to sell her copies on a street corner in Montréal's plateau district—believes the mainstream media better get real and start listening to the people affected by government policies. Linking this to the importance of street newspapers, she says, "L'ITINÉRAIRE is different from other types of media, because it talks about the real issues of people living in the streets. It's not about statistics, rumours. It's raw; it's real; it's as it is; it's current; it's what's going on."

Describing the harm caused by mass-media distortions, Nick Couldry, a British academic, speaks of the symbolic power of media in "constructing reality."<sup>3</sup> Access to media is highly controlled and restricted, giving an exclusive minority of institutionalized and legitimized professionals the power to define reality and to disseminate their definition widely among the general population. Gaston, one of the original contributors to L'ITINÉRAIRE, now writes chronicles in the newspaper. He's 50-something, has been off all drugs for more than 20 years, and has had a roaming life, living in the streets from time to time. He has a clear sense of Couldry's theory about the immense power of this privileged minority, and says, "Experts have a lot of power these days; they pretend to hold absolute truth." He describes L'ITINÉRAIRE as a place for truth, a place where street experience is valued as a crucial element of information. "L'ITINÉRAIRE is

much more about truth, because it's people from the inside of things who write in the paper. If the paper deals with prostitution, there's likely to be a prostitute who writes an article. And who knows better than him or her about that? You won't be seeing that at *LA PRESSE*,"<sup>4</sup> Gaston says.

Many street journalists interviewed argue that people with experiences from the margins of society are important social experts. They may not have learned about complex social phenomena and acquired theoretical frameworks through schooling, but their life stories are definitely about core social truths. Arthur, a recent contributor to the paper, is encouraged by the attention readers give to street journalists, and says, "The vendor's tribune is really popular and that's really cool because it's the expression of people who aren't experts. It's lived experience. It's life expertise."<sup>5</sup> Whether for sex work, incarceration, homelessness, mental illness, or poverty, the voices of people who share their lived experiences are understood by those who work on the street newspaper as necessary contributions to the construction of social reality.

By stepping into public debate through the production of media, street journalists assert their existence. This inherent link between existence and voice is well described by Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire: "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. [...] Human beings are not built in silence but in words, in work, in action, and reflection on their action."<sup>6</sup> Being acknowledged and recognized is a victory in itself for marginalized people and stigmatized groups. As Robert Beaupré wrote in the pages of *L'ITINÉRAIRE*, "surviving traumas can produce deep wounds, making it a lifelong struggle for some to find their place in the world."<sup>7</sup> Gaston's reality reflects this statement; he suffered hardships in his childhood and has been fighting his inner demons for years. At *L'ITINÉRAIRE* he finally feels he belongs. It is where he has been able to see himself as a key figure in social change. "Step up—you have to step up for yourself in society. When you say that's enough, that's enough. You can't always be the victim of others; you have to do things to bring about change. And you don't necessarily do it to feel good, but it does feel good," he says of his experience as a street journalist.





Despite the evident power imbalance in naming, framing, and ordering social realities, the authority of mass-media to report on what goes on has become naturalized and is perceived as a given. Luckily, some people fight against this tyranny over meaning. Street journalists refuse the pervasive and highly questionable sense of normality in social discourses. Relying on their particular experiences, they negotiate what's generally considered normal and abnormal in society today by telling their stories. They also question the legitimacy of the social authorities in assessing and reinforcing social norms. Andrea Langlois, in her work on media and social movements, observes how mainstream media coverage of activism demonstrates how transgressions or alternative meanings are overlooked, twisted, and recuperated by mainstream media.<sup>8</sup> In its position of marginality, L'ITINÉRAIRE seeks to challenge this status quo by pushing these discourses into spaces for debate in society.

Furthermore, by making first-hand actors essential speakers of the social realities within L'ITINÉRAIRE's pages they, themselves, know too well, their voices are deservedly given legitimacy and authority. L'ITINÉRAIRE resists the mass media's monopoly over the construction of social reality by creating an opening in the public sphere for homeless and low-income people to be heard. "It's an extraordinary mode of transmission for people from the street to integrate themselves, find a job, come off of the streets, and deliver their message," says Sophia, who joined the newspaper to escape isolation. L'ITINÉRAIRE gives people the power to define themselves and to tell their own stories which isn't possible in the mainstream media. Their shared experiences work to free both the individual behind a story and the story's reader, from different forms of oppression.

From its inception, L'ITINÉRAIRE has served another more practical purpose—providing additional income to street vendors and an alternative to begging. The feminist movement has fought for women's financial independence to be recognized as a crucial factor toward emancipation. In a way, street newspapers fight the same battle. They give homeless and low-income people opportunities to attain financial autonomy. For Arthur, the inspiration to write in and sell the newspaper was based on an urgent financial need. As he puts it, "With a welfare cheque of 500 dollars a month, you can't eat for the whole month, so I'm happy to be financially independent. I can make ten to twenty dollars a day to eat, buy tobacco and a beer, and be able to function. I don't have to tax my mother; she's poor anyways."

Street vendors occupy visible social spaces, on main streets within the city, thereby making the paper accessible and necessarily linked to the social actors who have produced it—it comes out of a person’s hand, not off a shelf. The act of selling the newspaper becomes part of the challenge to the stigmatization and exclusion faced by the marginalized. Stigmatization and exclusion come in many different forms; whether subtle or blatant, they linger and persist. The homeless, addicts, sex workers, prisoners, people on welfare, street kids are often regarded as outcasts in today’s society. They are considered undesirable because they are thought to be unproductive according to society’s increasingly persistent obsession with profitability and efficiency. It is a harmful perception for people on the margins. As Karen, one of the street vendors, says, “People have prejudices and I suffer from discrimination. I’m sometimes confronted with difficult encounters when I sell L’ITINÉRAIRE because people refuse to accept us as we are.”

Despite occasional prejudices, selling the newspaper brings visibility to street vendors and attracts, in most cases, positive attention. “I have this lady who buys the newspaper every month. She says I’m her favourite journalist. It makes me feel good. I want to keep doing it,” says Arthur. Street vendors engage in constructive and rewarding exchanges with passers-by. They see themselves as important players in the street, mainly because of their ability to listen and share with strangers. In the words of those I interviewed, they act as street-corner therapists, social contacts (especially for the elderly), direct sources of knowledge about different problems, and links to appropriate resources. A sense of strength arises when selling the newspaper, strength that comes out of a positive shift in public perception that reflects back onto the perception street vendors have of themselves.

Standing tall and proud while selling the newspaper on street corners, L’ITINÉRAIRE vendors work at the ground level of social change. Power dynamics may be unequal, but they insist on imposing their presence and carrying their message as front-line producers of change. Challenging people’s comfort levels and indifference, vendors continue to fight the battle for public recognition of their work. “It’s rewarding for me to work at L’ITINÉRAIRE. Work is the word,” Arthur says. Sophia has the same take on the subject as Arthur. She does not understand what people mean when they ask her why she does not work a real job. “It’s weird,” she says, “when they see the delivery guy from LA PRESSE, do they ask him this

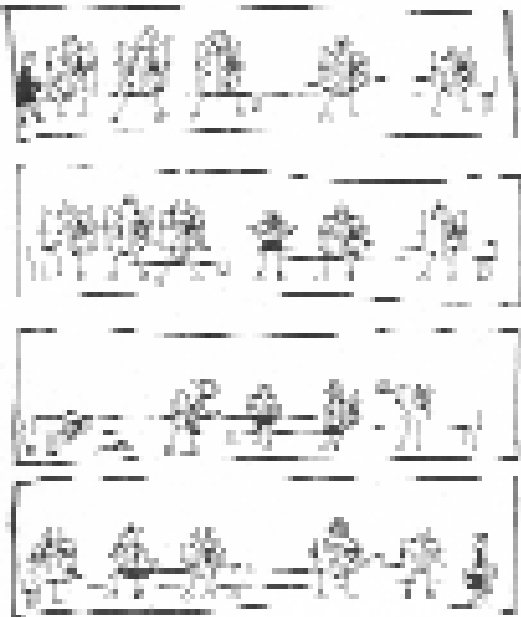
question?” The sense of freedom associated with being your own boss and working your own schedule is crucial for most vendors and journalists. It is a choice they make, as valid as any other says Mike, one of oldest street vendors, “I’ve been doing it for ten years. It’s hard, but I like to be in the street, to feel the pulse of the city. For me it’s a unique way of interacting with different kinds of people.” Street journalists and vendors challenge today’s traditional definitions of what it means to work and to be productive, defying once again what is commonly understood as normal.

As more than a space for bringing little-known realities to public attention, L’ITINÉRAIRE is a space for what academic Nancy Fraser calls subaltern politics. For Fraser, these spaces are “where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate opposing interpretations of their identities and interests.” Not only do street journalists challenge the prevalent sterility and complaisance of mainstream discourses, but through their contributions to the newspaper, they can also reclaim and create their own identity.

### limitations and future prospects

In the debate around autonomous media, some would argue that L’ITINÉRAIRE is not an autonomous media, primarily because its funding comes from government programs and publicity, and that it therefore adheres to the principles of mass-media, operating under various mechanisms of control and oppression. But it can equally be argued

that L’ITINÉRAIRE is not defined by where its funding comes from because, unlike corporate media, it remains a non-profit project with original content that defies dominant social discourses. The paper is very much an autonomous medium in that it is participatory and inclusive and thus offers marginalized people and groups a means for self-expression. It is a space of empowerment that is conducive to learning and experimenting.



And it is a space for the voices of resistance—a resistance that is becoming increasingly global. The voices in *L'ITINÉRAIRE* can be linked to larger social movements, although these links need to be strengthened. Many activists in global social justice movements seem to overlook street newspapers, although it is unclear as to why. Are such publications discredited, ignored, or simply forgotten? It is hard to say, but what is clear is that it is a challenge for street papers to be fully incorporated within a movement to which they actively contribute. An important step in the coming years will be for street papers to look beyond their own networks and to begin building bridges with the global justice movement, with the hope that it will be open to the integration of street papers and produce a wider perspective for social change.

Unfortunately, *L'ITINÉRAIRE* faces limitations that are common in the milieu. Most autonomous media must deal with an array of challenges. *L'ITINÉRAIRE*'s survival is constantly at risk as the paper struggles with funding, independence, and credibility, all while trying to fulfill its mission to recruit and train new street journalists, and to appeal to a wider readership.

At *L'ITINÉRAIRE*, the socially accepted norms of the workplace—such as hierarchies, performance and productivity—are negotiated on a daily basis. The relationship between the production staff and the journalists is a collaboration based on the principles of respect and equality, in a common effort to make things work to the benefit of all. The staff has no choice but to adapt to the abilities and the pace of the street journalists. Although the staff is responsible for meeting deadlines and coordinating production, one of their main tasks is to assist street journalists through the process of writing. This creates tension, which has proven to be the beauty of the project as well as its foremost challenge. Some say it feels like a miracle renewing itself each month.

*L'ITINÉRAIRE*'s most original characteristic is the population it aims to serve. Maintaining participation requires tremendous amounts of resources, energy, and time to stimulate and encourage. The balance between empowerment and economic factors is a primary concern. On the one hand, amateurism can be fatal because the street newspaper's survival depends on public support to be economically viable. On the other hand, focusing solely on quality and public response can easily lead to the sacrifice of empowerment by over-focusing on efficiency and professionalism. The tricky balance struck, which is negotiated and put to the test daily at *L'ITINÉRAIRE*, is its main measurement of success.

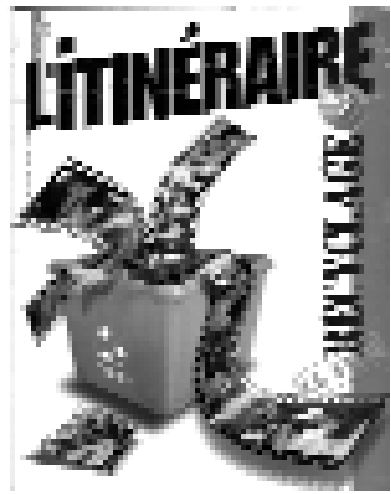
Over the years many challenges have threatened the newspaper's existence. A few years ago, because of financial difficulties, L'ITINÉRAIRE was on the verge of closing its doors. According to Arthur, the more than 100 people involved with the project would have lost a reason to live. With a sense of urgency, the newspaper went under many changes and miraculously succeeded in preventing the worst.

It now feels like L'ITINÉRAIRE is back on track. Two young professionals work together with street journalists and new collaborators to create a revamped paper with an original aesthetic and fresh content. The current team is dedicated to making L'ITINÉRAIRE attractive and interesting to its readers. The team readily admits that the main challenge is to keep empowerment as a priority. Writing for the newspaper is demanding for the street journalists and the street vendors. Many have difficulty writing or reading, and feel alienated by technology, while others still deal with addiction or struggle with mental illness. The road to autonomy can be rocky, which makes L'ITINÉRAIRE a rich, yet complex and vulnerable, media project.

### last words

Active, daring, and at the forefront, street journalists play a crucial role in social change by making themselves visible in a positive and creative way. They speak up and engage in public dialogue, both through the paper and in the streets. Sophia says, "people come see me and say they read the newspaper, that they learned something and better understand certain issues. That's what gives me the guts to keep going." Well aware of its social duty to challenge insidious prejudices, L'ITINÉRAIRE persists in its mission. "It's our mission to break the prejudices people have, but it happens slowly," says Mike, who has been selling for ten years.

L'ITINÉRAIRE is a tool for educating the general public about the realities of the marginalized living in streets. It confronts pre-conceived notions and challenges widely accepted certainties. By being media producers and front-line distributors, street journalists reclaim their identities, engage in dissent, and engage in social change where it counts—right on the street corner.



## notes

\* I would like to express my gratitude to the gang at *L'itinéraire* for their generosity and shinning colours. Thank you to Audrey and Jérôme for opening the doors of the paper to me. A big thanks to the street journalists and vendors of *L'itinéraire* who generously accepted to answer my numerous questions. Finally, thank you to all at *L'itinéraire* for adding your grains of salt to the Montréal landscape for over ten years. You do this loyal reader so much good.

<sup>1</sup> Dunnifer, Steven. (n.d.). Proverb. Published online at: <http://www.lalutta.org/ivi.shtml> [accessed March 28, 2005].

<sup>2</sup> All interviews with the participants in the *L'itinéraire* project come from interviews conducted between July and September 2004 within the framework of the author's forthcoming Master's thesis (Université de Montréal). Names have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

<sup>3</sup> Couldry's work focuses mostly on media power and alternative media. See: Couldry, Nick. (2000). *The Place of Media Power*. London, U.K.: Routledge; or, Couldry, Nick. (2002). "Mediation and Alternative Media, or Relocating the Center of Media and Communication Studies," *Media International Australia Culture and Policy*, No. 103, pgs. 24-31.

<sup>4</sup> *La Presse* is the French-language agenda-setting corporate daily newspaper in Québec.

<sup>5</sup> The vendor's tribune is a space dedicated to street journalist and street vendors where in few words and a free style, contributors share their thoughts, hopes, struggles, gratitude, poems, and even recipes. It is one of the most widely read sections in *L'itinéraire*.

<sup>6</sup> Freire, Paulo. (1983). *Pédagogie des opprimés; suivi de conscientisation et révolution*. Paris: La Découverte, pg. 72. Free translation: *Exister humainement c'est dire le monde, c'est le modifier (...)* *Ce n'est pas dans le silence que les hommes se réalisent, mais dans la parole, dans le travail, dans l'action réflexion.*

<sup>7</sup> Robert Beaupré. *L'itinéraire*. No. 114, February 2004, pg. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Langlois, Andrea M. (2004). *Mediating Transgressions: The Global Justice Movement and Canadian News Media*. Unpublished Master's thesis: Concordia University.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, Nancy. (1992). "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Craig Calhoun (ed.). Cambridge, MA, U.S.: MIT Press.

## web resources

Big Issue, The: [www.bigissue.com](http://www.bigissue.com)

International Street Newspaper Association: [www.street-papers.com](http://www.street-papers.com)

*L'itinéraire*: [www.itineraire.ca](http://www.itineraire.ca)

North American Street Newspaper Association: [www.nasna.org](http://www.nasna.org)