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In Defense of Print: A Manifesto of Stories

Paula Mathieu

“I want someone, maybe my grandchild, to find my work one day, a long time from now, in the attic, pick it up, and learn something about her great-great grandmother, get a glimpse of how she lived her life and what mattered to her.” Stephanie Parker, a senior English major, said this to me when I asked her whom she wanted as the audience of her thesis project.

“You’ll want to get it printed then,” I said. “Probably bound, with a resilient cover. Make it something that will last. Make several copies.”

Nine months later, she completed a compelling work of creative nonfiction, interweaving carefully wrought scenes from her grandmother’s life with the story of her decline from a rare form of dementia that robbed her of speech prior to memory. After writing, discussing revising, editing, formatting, and spending time at a local print shop choosing binding options, Parker completed *And That Is That: How My Grandmother’s Battle with Dementia Taught Me to Speak Without Words*, an honors-winning project that included 77 pages of writing and over 20,000 words. She included this as the conclusion of her introduction:

I wrote the following pages as much for my family (both the living and those yet to be born) as for myself. It is a chronicle of an amazing woman with an arguably ordinary life, as seen through the eyes of someone who knew her for a relatively short time, yet felt inexplicably familiar with the workings and motivations of her heart. Imagine if such insights existed for all the relatives lost to us, particularly those we were born too late to meet? It is, perhaps, a thought powerful enough to encourage even the most reticent hand to pick up a pen or a laptop and give voice to the stories waiting to be told.

That thesis project was completed seven years ago, but the power of Stephanie’s motivations, her writing, and her commitment to sturdy-print format remain with me. I recently emailed Stephanie to ask her about this project and her reflections several years on. She’s now a lawyer in the Boston area and this work of nonfiction sits on a shelf in her home.

I asked her about the life of her project after completing it. Her immediate family was her first audience: “I gave a copy to my grandfather right after I wrote it (he passed away about a year later), and I think his copy ended up back with me. . . . Print format was definitely important for sharing with my grandfather, since he was not adept at using the computer (plus, hard copy is just easier to read than on a screen).”

Stephanie's mother has her own copy of the project, which she considered sharing with some of her closest friends. "I'm not sure if she ever ended up doing that," Stephanie wrote. In that sense, the copy remains her mother's—intimate, detailed writing about her own mother—that she can share or withhold selectively, carefully.

An online version of this thesis also exists, archived among other English Department thesis projects at Boston College, and Stephanie admits to having looked at both the digital and print form. Her reflection about the uses and limitations of print and digital are worth sharing in detail:

In today's world, the amount of digital content we are hit with and have to absorb on a daily basis is enormous. We have so many emails, so many attachments to emails, so many saved "favorite" websites, that I think it actually becomes that much harder to really "save" anything in a meaningful sense. If we forget we have something, or can't easily pull it up, do we really even have it? I think physical copies of important possessions, like family memoirs, are easier to keep track of and, assuming they aren't stuffed in a remote corner of the attic, stay more present in our minds because our eyes land on them from time to time. I believe that I think about my memoir (and, by extension, my grandmother) more frequently because I often see it sitting right there on my shelf. I like having the digital copy as a backup just in case I ever need it, but I really only think of myself as "having" something when I have it in hard copy.

Stephanie's project thus lives in two different media and each one enjoys a very different life. A future thesis student or faculty member might find her project digitally. They might closely read it all or skim a page or two. It might be read for writing ideas, for how to approach a large nonfiction project, or how to write mindfully about family. It has the *potential* to be read by anyone, everyone, and to be a good teacher to someone. Yet it also has the potential not to be visited at all, to exist as one of billions of files in a digital cloud.

But in print, Stephanie's thesis circulates less often and less widely, but for the micropublics with whom she or her mother shares it, a connection is made. A physical exchange, but also a deeply interpersonal one. The singularity of the act—of giving, of reading—becomes, for a moment, visible, and the reader is intimately involved in an act of personal circulation. She becomes, for that time, the audience addressed in a rhetorical and material way.

Because the materiality of her project was such a central decision for her, Stephanie continues to actively consider what memories and keepsakes can remain digital and what should be printed. As a photographer, she maintains both digital and print copies of her photos. She replied parenthetically, "(I doubt anyone else my age does this, but I do!)." She described to me a long project she recently completed:

As a gift for my mom, I went back and created physical photo albums for

over 10 years of family photos that only existed on digital files, because I feel that strongly about maintaining hard copies of our family memories. Digital is great in the short term (5-10 years from creation), but once you are more than 10 years out, I think the risk of losing track of digital files increases substantially. (Parker)



In our interconnected world where we're told that nothing on the Internet ever dies, it's easy to believe that posterity can be found in online publication. Every millennial job seeker is warned that an Instagram pic or tweet can and will follow them to the grave—or the unemployment line—so be careful, very careful about what you put out there. But while a certain kind of forever can be found online, I have seen enough iterations of the World Wide Web to know that certainty is not guaranteed in online environments.

Here is an incomplete list of websites that I either created or helped create that were inadvertently lost due to web upgrades, platform changes, or lack of domain renewal:

- A WPA funded site for scenarios for teaching in online environments. It was six months of work of two graduate students, myself being one.
- A student-made publication on place-based writing featuring 15 text-and-image essays written by first-year college writers in a class I taught.
- A website for sharing baby pictures of our daughter with family and friends.
- A website for *Tactics of Hope*, which I never did much with, but someone else bought the domain tacticsofhope.org and now it's a site promoting social entrepreneurialism.

Once something digital is lost, unless you're much better at keeping back-up files and using Wayback Machine than I am, it is really lost. Of the above missing websites, all that remains are scraps: word document drafts, a few screenshots, a pdf or two.



Street newspapers, which are print publications, are sold on the streets of many cities around the world, created by organizations with a mission to give people facing homelessness a source for income and a public voice. Many publications, like my local *Spare Change News* in Boston, combines professional journalism on social issues with first-hand accounts of homelessness, written by vendors of the paper.

Tim Harris, founder of *Spare Change News* and director and founder of Seattle's *Real Change News* makes a strong case for why, in the digital age, street papers cling to their print model. He locates the transformational magic of street papers in the

encounter that takes place between a vendor and his or her customer. In exchanging the paper for its cover price, two people meet, talk, and for a brief moment, co-exist and form a relationship. Harris describes this in a 2014 interview:

That's what I've really come to understand as the most powerful thing about the project, is the meaning that is created through relationships. What really winds up being transformational on both sides of the relationship, both for readers and for our vendors, is that people who otherwise probably would never talk to each other, much less recognize each other's humanity and fundamental worth, wind up forming these relationships that have enormous meaning for them. And one of the things that I hear from our vendors over and over again is that the money isn't the most important thing to them about selling the paper. The most important thing to them is their customers and the people that they talk to and get to know, and offer them that sense of being embedded in this network of caring relationships. (Harris)

Could a network of caring relationships be formed via digital writing or via a manifestation that isn't print? Probably. And street papers do have strong online presences and even digital subscriptions for readers geographically distanced from the locations where papers are sold. But there's something importantly palpable about two people encountering each other, having an interaction, whether it be short or long, and giving and offering something tangible, of value, to each other.

Customers sometimes give vendors the cost of an issue and then say, "Keep the paper." This act might be done with the best of intentions; recognizing that each issue represents \$2 to a vendor, refusing the paper might seem like a goodwill gesture, a desire to help out. But such an act subverts the exchange, the moment of reciprocity, the recognition that each party in this interaction has something to gain and offer the other. And I strongly believe that the gains are far more than the physical print publication. It might be a conversation. It might be the first time a vendor hears his or her name spoken that day. It might be a customer having his or her first-ever conversation with someone who has been homeless. For either party, the encounter might not be earth-shattering or transformational, but in that material and verbal exchange, something small and beautiful happens. And I don't see exactly how that could happen in the same way in a non-print setting.



From 1998 to 2001, when I worked part-time for Chicago's Neighborhood Writing Alliance, publisher of *The Journal of Ordinary Thought (JOT)*, the writers and staff talked often about circulation and the value of accidental readers. Barbershops, hair salons, and diners were locations where copies of the journals were left, so they could be picked up, maybe read, maybe carried somewhere else, maybe something else. Also each writer, when his or her work appeared in print, received their own copies of the journal, beautifully bound and designed, with an arresting cover photo. Those

copies—was it 10 per writer, I can't now remember—were precious to each writer, and they carefully decided whether and how to keep and distribute them.

When the StreetWise writers' group published a special issue of *JOT*, entitled "This IS My Job," the physical copies were sources of pride, accomplishment, and for one writer, represented conquering fears of reading and writing. The print issues were coupled with public readings, and I remember Robert, who had recently learned to read and had never addressed a crowd publicly in his life, clinging to his issue of *JOT* before, during, and after his reading. He was so nervous. "What if I freeze. What if I can't read this," he said to me while waiting his turn to read before a crowd of about 100.

"These are your words, Robert. You wrote it," I assured him. "You know this story better than anyone."

When he walked on stage, he began by saying, "My name is Robert, and I'm as nervous as a cat." The crowd cheered supportively for him. "You can do it," someone called out. More clapping. Robert slowly and carefully read his story, "A Day of Selling *StreetWise*," about being disrespected by a customer and in return promising to write about the encounter.¹ Then he stepped off the stage, still holding tight to the journal to which he contributed.

That publication didn't make Robert money. It didn't change how most people in the city saw him when they passed him while he was selling *StreetWise*. But through writing and publication, he felt seen and acknowledged for his views, talents, and point of view. That bound issue of the journal could remain a physical reminder of that momentary community that Robert addressed and was honored by. Some people asked Robert and other writers to sign their copies of the journal. Some writers collected the signatures of most of the writers in the issue, so each sturdy black-and-white page bore a bright blue mark from the author. A small but indelible statement, "I was here."



Every Monday I meet in the third-floor apartment of a poet in Cambridge who runs weekly nonfiction writing workshops in his dining room. Most of the workshop attendees are working on book-length projects: One woman, a former NPR producer, is writing about reporting in Guatemala in 1979. One woman is a former prosecutor writing about the corruption case that made her rethink and ultimately change her career. One woman is writing a memoir about becoming a communist in the early 1970s after being born into one of Boston's wealthiest families. Another woman (yes, we are all women in this group) is writing a memoir about caring for her mother through a terminal illness to her death. I am writing a series of essays about growing up as the youngest of eight children in a large Catholic family filled with trauma and secrets.

Each week we must arrive with seven copies of 1000 words to share. We read our work aloud, we listen to each other, we scribble notes, we give feedback. We are trying to get things down, preserve history, work through difficult memories, and

write our way into deeper understanding. Much of the writing is captivating and worthy of an audience.

Surprisingly, or maybe not, we talk little, if at all, about what should or could come of these projects. The repeating Monday deadline of 1000 new words (how does Monday always reappear so quickly?) keeps us focused on the work at hand without looking too far down the road. And that is as it should be.

For now.

It scares me to write this, but sometimes I imagine my slowly growing collection of essays as a published collection. Each essay is written to stand on its own, but together they meditate on silence, shame, trauma, and whiteness in a way that, I hope, is greater than the sum of its parts. I dream of having my project picked up by a publisher, validated as worth reading, published as an expression of art. Is it simply my ego desiring recognition, or nostalgia for the printed page that eggs on my imagination? Much of the time I think one or both might be true. But at other moments, I believe that giving words to what was never said in my family is heavy work, and I want myself and readers to feel and hold the weight of its pages.

What about self publishing? Yes, this is an option, and may likely end up my only option. As an academic whose scholarly output is measured by published work, however, I would probably find that such a decision would render this work invalid. Self publishing would label this a personal project, not a professional one, at least institutionally.



One writer in my weekly writing group is working to rescue an online project and bring it into a form she can manage. Her husband, a retired Harvard professor, has extensive online PowerPoint slides, photographs, and lecture notes from classes he gave in Denmark for Harvard alums. She accompanied him on the many trips, and her writing is trying to capture the spirit of the travels along with some content of his scholarly work. She said she's not sure how long the domain that hosts it is paid for. Her husband is not well, so this project is hers alone. She can't remember how to use the e-book software they originally used, and there isn't an easy or direct way that she knows to print it. "There are so many photos," she tells us. "Beautiful photos."

Her project is trying to preserve words and images that are treasures to her. That fact is evident in her writing and talk about her husband, their travels, and his work. Even though this work is online, it goes largely unread in its current form. Anyone can access it. But if no one knows it is there, and if no one accesses it, is it as good as lost?



Paper and ink are fragile. Exposed to fire, dropped in a bathtub, or carried too roughly in a backpack, pages can burn, shrivel and tear. Print is slow, clunky, produces clutter, and each artifact can only be read one at a time. Paper is made from trees, which have other important work to do.

But all forms of publishing are imperfect and vulnerable. Online writing can get erased or forgotten. Platforms and devices for saving files become old or incompatible. Websites and blogs are left incomplete and abandoned.

The unreliability of preserving writing in any form seems apt: it's a physical reminder of writing's shaky, uncertain power. Sometimes words can change the world, but more often, the stark realities of our unjust world can fail to bend to even the most beautifully chosen words.

In the face of long odds, the impulse to write and share our words, in any form, seems idealistic, yet remarkably human. And as one human reaching out for connection to others, to readers, I believe that even in a digital world, sometimes having writing to hold, to carry, and to pass along to someone else still matters.

Notes

- 1 See Mathieu *Tactics of Hope* (36) to read the full story Robert wrote.

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Author Bio

Paula Mathieu works as Associate Professor of English at Boston College where she directs the First-Year Writing Program. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in rhetoric, writing and pedagogy. She wrote *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, and co-edited three essay collections, including *Circulating Communities*, with Steve Parks and Tiffany Rousculp. With Diana George, she has co-written articles about the rhetorical power of the dissident press. She also has published articles on the intersections between writing and contemplative practice.: “Excavating Indoor Voices: Inner Rhetoric and the Mindful Writing Teacher” (*Journal of Advanced Composition*, 2014) and “Being There: Mindfulness as Ethical Classroom Practice” (*JAEPL* 2016).