www.openair.org

Linking Street Vendors to the Internet

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Abstract

In this essay the authors provide a history of an innovative internet experiment to increase information about and coordinate advocacy on behalf of street vending and street markets around the world. They explain the experiences that led them to set up this site, as well as the positive and negative features of attempting to promote informal street markets through a computer network that in itself creates interesting paradoxes.

I. Introduction

The Internet is part and parcel of economic globalization. The Internet, and the globalized economy which it supports, have changed the organization of retail consumption, lifestyle, and employment, which has resulted in capital concentration and increased income inequality. The likely outcome for retail sector restructuring will be in the extremes of the size distribution: greater corporate concentration (e.g. Wal Marts) and more activity in the informal sector (e.g. flea markets and street vendors); a greater amount of stores selling upscale items (e.g. Calvin Klein; Christian Dior) and more stores selling items for the very poor (e.g. used clothing, taco stands); a greater amount of remote shopping (hard copy catalogs and the Internet) and more face-to-face shopping with local informal traders. Many government and corporate officials do not perceive the growth of informal trading as a natural or benign outcome of contemporary economic forces - an employment and consumer safety net. Instead, they see it as a threat to larger sized businesses, the tax base, public order, and elite aesthetics.

A downside of the Internet is its tendency to further accentuate the divide between the haves and have nots: information apartheid. We tried to counter this by creating an educational website focusing on
formal and informal open air marketplaces around the world. Without budget or formal organization, we hoped to use our knowledge and contacts to create virtual networks to provide advocacy for and assistance to this low tech sector of the world.

*Impetus for OPENAIR MARKET NET*

In 1993 and 1994 the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) began to remove a large street market that had been in existence for over a hundred years. On Sundays, in good weather, 1200 vendors would provide goods and services to over 20,000 customers (Morales, et al., 1995). The majority of vendors and shoppers were poor and minorities, but it also drew people from all classes and from all over the metropolitan region. It was Chicago’s oldest integrated neighborhood and is world famous as the birthplace of urban electrified Blues, the root music of rock ‘n’ roll. Through the influx of different immigrant and migrant groups into the neighborhood, and unplanned evolution, it pioneered the concept of ‘shoppertainment’, transforming a utilitarian retail experience into an entertainment-eating-socializing-shopping destination activity. On Sunday, before or after Church, for poor and working class Chicagoans, Maxwell Street was the place to be.

However, Maxwell Street is near Chicago’s downtown (the Loop) and, as one of the last parcels of such land to remain non-upper-middle-class, it has become very profitable real estate for those who can buy it cheaply and then use their political muscle to gentrify the area. Politically connected real estate developers wanted to acquire the area for their own gains and to do a favor for the mayor, whose vision of Chicago is to gentrify all neighborhoods that surround the Loop as a way to bring more upper income people to live inside Chicago rather than the suburbs, and to eliminate poor people from areas where tourists might see them. To deflect political fallout, UIC was enlisted to seize the neighborhood using the law of eminent domain under the pretext of campus expansion. In a partnership deal, the University then gave more than half the area to private real estate developers to demolish and replace with luxury condominiums and an upscale retail-shopping district. This technique of using a public
institution’s expansion as the apparent necessity for demolishing poor minority neighborhoods was heavily used in the United States in the 1960s and was referred to as ‘Urban Renewal is really Negro Removal’.

The authors were part of a community coalition engaged in the daunting task of assisting powerless unorganized market vendors in the fight to save this large public street market and the surrounding neighborhood. It was important to be able to communicate cost-effectively with each other, and with community allies, scholars, politicians, and the press. Trying to save Maxwell Street was a battle, and in warfare communication is key. If the cost of communication could be reduced, we would be a more effective fighting force. The Internet was, after all, developed as a defense project for the Pentagon.

At the time we knew little about the Internet and could get no assistance in that area. Therefore, our main method of communication was by phone and fax, which we found to be cumbersome. It was time consuming and inadequate to the task at hand to efficiently transmit information. Our adversaries, UIC and the City of Chicago, had full-time lawyers, lobbyists, public relations staff, and press secretaries. They were not using the Internet either, but they did not need to as their staff, allies, and resources were already in place and had media access. The annual budget of UIC was close to a billion dollars.

One of the things we did was to research the monetary value of this market and also provide “social” or non-monetary indicators of its benefits (Morales, et al., 1995). Despite the best efforts of ourselves, many vendors, and community residents, the old Maxwell Street Market area was sealed off by police in September of 1994 and ceased to exist.² Thousands of poor people (mostly of color) lost important income earning and cross-cultural business networking opportunities, a source of discount shopping, and a rich multicultural social amenity (see Counts, 1996; Sargent and Spiegler, 1995; Whiteis, 1994).

As much as we blamed UIC and the City of Chicago, we also saw similar phenomena elsewhere, such as the closing of the 125th Street...
street-market in Harlem (New York Times, 1990; Sargent and Spiegler, 1995) and conflicts between street vendors and city authorities in Mexico City (Cross, 1998) and other cities around the world. UIC and the City of Chicago were not uniquely evil, just local representatives of larger forces operating throughout the world: creators of severe income inequality but unwilling to see the scruffy downsides of it; rhetorical proponents of self-help but eliminators of entrepreneurial opportunities for the poor; advocates of cultural diversity but, in fact, generators of class separation.

Outdoor markets and street vending appear to many people as a neighborhood amenity, increasing the amount of friendly pedestrian activity on streets and sidewalks, augmenting the availability of low cost goods and services (especially produce), facilitating the acquisition of social capital, creating a sense of community, and acting as a crime deterrent (Jacobs, 1961). Open-air style markets are regularly proposed as a strategy to rejuvenate dying commercial areas (Spitzer and Baum, 1994; Festing, 1998). Yet to many established businesses and local governments, they are competition for tax paying businesses, creators of congestion, and concentrators of poor people: unsanitary, dangerous, and ugly.3

We thought that vendors and neighborhoods might have a better chance of saving these local markets if they could network with others and get the message of their positive functions out to the public and the media. There were several scholars and planners doing research on markets and vendors but, for the most part, they did not know of each other’s existence.3 In the course of our work, we have met many people who greatly appreciate the existence of street vendors and other types of micro-scale marketers but felt, as individuals, they could not fight the political and economic forces poised against this sector. With so many demands on a person’s time, it was hard to expect concerned people and shoppers to become actively involved about this sector, especially if they felt they were a lone voice.

Preserving an historic street market is a public good and like other public goods it faces the free rider problem. People receive the benefit
of the good whether or not they contribute to the production of it. Therefore, without government, the good tends not to get produced because of the lack of a private incentive to do it (Kaul, et al., 1999). Many voluntary organizations die when most of the membership opts for letting just a few people do all the work. The tendency is then for no one to participate.

It is our view that a person would be more willing to use time and resources to advocate for poor street or market vendors if they felt that others are doing it and they have a support and information network. People feel out of the norm if they think they are alone in their views but can be encouraged to help and take action if they see others doing it. We wanted to provide a sense of community for those who see it as a social amenity and are interested in seeing social justice rendered for this important but relatively powerless sector.

Soon after the loss of old Maxwell Street, while licking our wounds, we set out to learn to use the Internet in order to set up a website for markets and vendors over the entire world. We did not want what happened at Maxwell Street to happen elsewhere. If there were such a threat, we wanted to make our website available to those threatened, so they could get their message out to potential supporters, local policy makers, and the media. There are proponents for enterprise development for low income people on both the political left and the right. We hoped to use the website to encourage them into action. Openair-Market Net<http://www.openair.org> was launched in November 1995, with no budget or paid staff. Could the Internet be like the six-shot pistol of the old West, an equalizer? Could it help level the playing field for some of the least powerful?

In the next sections we will present how we link high-tech to the low-tech sphere, a few examples of vendor battles to show how things work in practice, and our plans for the future.

II. Using High Tech Virtual Links to Promote Low Tech Face-to-Face Links

A central question here is how can high technology help a low technology sector - how can a website assist low income street vendors
with little education, many of whom do not have access to computers or to telephones? We felt that a website could provide advantages in five broad areas.

*Influencing Decision Makers*

Policy makers overwhelmingly tend to support the political positions of fixed location established business owners, large organizations, and real estate developers. These are important elements of the local tax abuse, which pay the salaries of local politicians and their patronage workers. These established interest groups can easily make their views known to local politicians but the working poor or small scale entrepreneurs are seldom able to make their views known and considered.

Using the Internet to provide the vendors’ view of an issue and to showcase information supporting the importance of street markets is a method that politicians and officials may heed and respect. This information can be vital to officials who are searching for alternatives to urban planning schemes that rule out street vending, and can also be an important resource that vendors can point to in their discussions with officials who may not seek out such alternatives by themselves.

*Providing in-depth information to the media and potential allies*

Politicians are sensitive to media coverage of an issue and may be reluctant to create and/or implement a policy that could bring unfavorable reporting or put the spotlight on questionable deals. Sometimes the media may cover a story once but then drop it. Putting the issue on the web makes it accessible for people new to the issue and it encourages on-going participation. It gives an issue permanence. Virtually it will not go away. Journalists often discard paper press releases but may visit a web site. A website can provide a brief introductory presentation of an issue or event just like a press release. However, it also has the advantage, at the click of a mouse, of allowing access to detail. A reporter can electronically copy from the website and paste quotes into a draft of an article. They can easily query the principal parties involved, if contact information (e-mail, phone number) is provided. When a reporter has trouble reaching a person
with no e-mail or phone, they may get to that person quicker through an interested third party with e-mail who can contact the interviewee for the reporter.

Supporting Activists

Potential allies of this sector face costs and benefits to becoming activists. Costs not only involve spending political capital but also spending time to learn about issues, sending postal letters of protest to the appropriate people, finding out who the appropriate people are to put pressure upon, and learning about meetings. By putting background papers, sample letters, lists of supporters, and addresses (particularly e-mail addresses) of key participants on the web, the cost to become active in supporting a particular vendor issue is reduced. Letters and phone calls can similarly convey this information, but it is more cost and time effective to do it using the Internet. We place information on the website to appeal to a wide range of users: planners, academics, shoppers, vendors and activists. We get queries from people who have visited the website just looking for good places to shop to find bargains but who get actively interested in a policy issue from visiting the website.

Finding Advocates/Intermediaries

To cover vendor or market issues in another city or country requires finding informed people on the scene who are willing and able to report to us in a timely manner. Through reports on the Internet or in newspapers we can learn about a vendor or market battle but someone on the scene is needed, on an ongoing basis, to interpret and report to us. The following are two examples of this.

In Baltimore, we created a website for the Arabber Preservation Society, a local organization advocating for African-American Horse Cart produce vendors. Arabbers have been around Baltimore since the 18th century and are a cultural institution, a source of jobs, and a way for shut-ins and people without good transit to get fresh produce. Real Estate development interests and animal rights activists were trying to eliminate them through regulation and by demolishing their inner city stables. We first heard about the Arabber issue from newspapers. From
those articles we were eventually able to contact the President of the Arabber Preservation Society, Steve Blake. At first, he sent us material via postal mail to put on the website, which was time consuming to type up to enter into the computer. Then he learned to use e-mail and finally he found someone local to put up a website for him. It was easy to do, since they could use material from the website we originally set up for him. Now, we have a link to him and no longer have to maintain his website. He no longer needs our web help and now uses e-mail - a success. He uses his website to educate about the Arabber issue, raise awareness and money for his non-profit organization, and continue to keep pressure on the Mayor to preserve the Arabbers. By-products of our placing the Arabber Preservation Society on the web was their participation in the 24 Hours in Cyberspace event, which was covered in newspapers and a book (Mathews, 1996), receipt of a grant from the Maryland Arts Council to produce a video, and a resolution in the City Council endorsing Arabber Preservation. In an interview, Blake told us he appreciates “the opportunity to combine 18th century technology with 20th century technology to keep Arabbing alive well into the 21st century.”

In New York City, a vendor organization was created to support the right of street artists to sell their art on public sidewalks. From newspaper articles, we got in contact with the leader, Robert Lederman. But in this case, the vendor leader was already using e-mail and knew about the Internet. We were able to set up a website very quickly using information sent to us via e-mail. Once the page was set up, the vendor leader could visit it and suggest changes that would improve the readability and accuracy of the information. We were frequently updated with new information as things evolved so we could add or make changes to the website. It is important that an issues-oriented website contains contact information for someone who is knowledgeable and prepared to respond to queries. Many people will have questions or reservations before they decide about an issue; and can act only if they feel their uncertainties have been satisfied.

Over time, more people will have access to the Internet so it will become more likely that vendor association leaders will have e-mail or
know someone who has. And vendor leaders will be more familiar with the importance of the Internet for getting messages out to the public. It would be useful to have emissaries, using a laptop computer with a cellular or satellite connection, to visit low income places around the world where there are outdoor style markets to show local vendor groups what the Internet is and find vendors or people at local universities with e-mail access who can be intermediaries.

Interaction of Research and Practice

One of the criticisms of both academics and practitioners is that they rarely interact, thus impoverishing their ability to effectively promote new proposals and agendas. Scholars and activists who are interested in informal markets and street vendors span a variety of disciplines. They do not read the same journals or go to the same professional meetings. The website is a way to learn about each other’s existence and to share research, particularly research at an early stage of inception. People can post working papers and research abstracts on the website with e-mail addresses, so people can easily, and at low cost, contact and query each other or even work on a project together from different continents. Research journals tend to be narrowly focused, have high formal standards, and are static. A website can be broadly focused, allow for a variety of information, and can be easily updated. On Openair Market Net, information is provided by shoppers, market managers, and vendors, as well as proposals of Master’s and Ph.D. dissertation research and projects of journalists and seasoned researchers. Because of this breadth, Openair Market Net can facilitate an ongoing discussion between scholars and advocates rarely available in print media. Both can benefit from this process. Scholars can identify new sites and informants and collect basic data, while advocates can find out about cases similar to their own, and other ways in which their problems have been resolved.

Another advantage of such a site is that it allows advocates and vendors to make direct contact with potential consultants who can help them open new markets or resolve problems with old ones. Many of our contributors are in effect consultants providing free information
that provides general information while also advertising their own availability to do in-depth studies leading to specific recommendations.

Marketing the Markets

It is our view that, in general, the greatest help one can give a microenterprise is to bring customers to it and the Internet is a vehicle for doing that. From a 1999 survey of 3000 computer users, Jupiter Communications reports that using the Internet for research on shopping is the third most popular activity on the Internet. The first is using e-mail and the second is using search engines. (Yaukey 2000).

An important part of the website is to provide links and information on markets to encourage potential tourists and locals to shop at these markets. Visiting outdoor markets is a leisure activity of many people. However, most markets can not afford to advertise often. Frequently, information may be available only by word-of-mouth. We extend this word-of-mouth by putting information about markets (location, hours of operation, type of merchandise sold, etc.) via links to websites, tips for searching, and an interactive bulletin board style discussion forum. For those wanting to prepare a webpage for themselves, we provide free design advice, which is a menu item on Openair Market Net.

It is helpful for businesses to observe other firms in the same industry to see how others operate. It may be difficult and expensive to do that by real world travel. However, it can be done easily and cheaply through surfing our website, which then may stimulate a real world visit. And if a person has questions, they can usually ask them to a significant person at these other markets because most (but not all) websites have contact information attached to them. The real world experienced-based information gained by contacting others actually working in the field can be better than advice obtained from many fee-based general-business consultants.

We wanted to make the website especially attractive to potential market customers. The idea is to make the website fun and informative, giving more information about markets than perhaps many consumers
really want. We have always felt that if customers are to have the benefits from shopping at these markets, they should also take some responsibility for learning about and advocating for them. Some may do this.

III. Problems with Using Internet to Support Markets

Virtual Shopping

One question to be asked is the effect of Internet commerce on real local street markets. Internet commerce (like catalogue sales) is primarily geared towards the type of consumer and consumer goods that are offered in shopping malls and discount outlets, not the type of goods sold at neighborhood markets. Some flea market vendors do argue that Internet auction sites such as Ebay and Yahoo seem to have had a deleterious impact on their collectible and antique sales by capturing vendors away from the local markets (Spotts, 1999), but the President of the National Association of Resale and Thrift shops thinks that Internet auctions help her industry by popularizing secondhand goods as chic (Kaufman, 2000). Plus, the street market provides much more than just a given product - it provides a social opportunity to mingle and an economic opportunity to compare prices and see what is available. The Internet can be an important resource for businesses throughout the world to reach consumers directly, but our goal is not to promote individual merchants as much as the street markets themselves, as a unique marketing environment with local multiplier effects, that still plays an important role in the world.

Sending E-mail to Elected Officials

Initially, we expected to be able to use the Internet to focus e-mail traffic to elected officials to support specific vendors struggles. However, many politicians seem to be averse to communicating through this medium. A frustrating and demoralizing experience is to send an e-mail to a politician through their web page and then receive an automated irrelevant response. Top down one-way mechanical communication is not democratic communication. One Internet activist notes that few politicians read e-mail, and perhaps more importantly, they have no way of knowing whether an e-mail is really
from a constituent (Krause et al., 1999), so letter writing and faxes are more effective. We have, however, had some success in e-mail communication with staff in government agencies and aids to elected officials.

Internet as a Substitute or a Complement to In-Person Communication

While the Internet can allow the easy and economical dissemination of information, it cannot fully substitute for face-to-face human interaction, something which is probably becoming apparent in the collapse of so many dot-com businesses that thought all they had to do was set up a website and “they will come.” Instead, websites tied to pre-existing “real” businesses tend to be more successful, since customers can resolve issues in person when the web is inflexible. In our case, our low level of resources forces us to rely almost exclusively on the Internet, which limits our ability to reach out to street vendors around the world who are still outside the Internet.

Difficulty in Finding Advocates/Intermediaries

As part of the above lack of resources, but also because our project is to involve as many people as possible, we are compelled to rely on local advocates and intermediaries to provide information about issues confronting street markets. Ideally, an on-the-scene reporter would fulfill four criteria: concern for market issues, willingness to volunteer time, reporting/writing ability, and e-mail or fax access. However, it has been very hard to find such people. Our main source of information about vendor battles around the world is articles in newspapers and e-mails from researchers and people on the scene. People may report an incident to us but often are unable or unwilling to continuously update us.

In one city where we supported a vendor organization on an issue, the vendor leader had heard of the Internet and was grateful we were willing to help out. He said he would send us information and keep us apprised of the situation. He did it once, but either because it was difficult for him to write and he had limited time, he could not keep up
the correspondence. A third party (student or intern) at the scene who was computer literate could have helped keep that gate open.

Obtaining competent volunteer correspondents may be easier in the future when the Internet becomes more widespread. However, we will need either a budget to pay correspondents or better skill at soliciting volunteer reporters, appealing to social justice consciousness, global awareness, and/or self-interest in gaining experience and learning about and assisting this sector. At this stage, finding new active participants, partners, and formal organization sponsors seem to be the prescription for keeping it going.

IV. Vendor Battles Intervened In

Openair Market Net has already reported on or provided assistance in several vendor or market controversies in places such as Atlanta, Baltimore, Calcutta India, Evansville Indiana, Garland Texas, Mexico City, São Paulo Brazil, and Washington DC. Two of the most noteworthy examples are in New York and Chicago.

New York City Street Artists

Openair Market Net provides and operates the website for Artists’ Response To Illegal State Tactics (ARTIST)*, a New York City street artist association organized by Robert Lederman, a street artist himself. They are opposing Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s removal of artists from public spaces, part of the Mayor’s strategy to improve the “quality of life.” Following standard interpretation of the First Amendment of the US Constitution, the City’s street vending license regulations makes an exception to anyone who sells newspapers, books, periodicals, pamphlets, or other written matter. Prior to 1993, artists selling art in New York City on public streets were part of this exception but in that year Giuliani removed the exception for artists.

According to Lederman (1996), the Mayor works in collaboration with New York corporate and real estate development interests who “see sidewalk displays of paintings and street culture of any kind, as an ugly blemish damaging the exclusive appeal and market value of their properties and businesses.” Real estate associations and corporations
can control public spaces in New York City by forming their own independent governments or BID’s (Business Improvement Districts). These districts act as a quasi-government running key areas of the City. This essentially constitutes a privatization of public space, a form of social control harking back to the rationale for the development of suburban shopping malls.

In 1993, the City’s BIDs attempted to eliminate all sidewalk vending and artist displays. The latter were reclassified as regular street vending and a license became a requirement. Since the City Council had previously frozen the total number of general vending licenses, this policy, in effect, created a street artist prohibition. From the Fall of 1993 more than 400 street artists were arrested and had their art confiscated for the “crime” of not having a license.

In a series of federal lawsuits, ARTIST contends that street artists have a constitutional First Amendment right to sell art on public sidewalks. In response, a 30 page brief prepared by the BIDs compares public displays of fine art to graffiti, litter and petty street crime (Lederman, 1996). The initial ruling supported the BID: Federal Judge Cedarbaum determined that, “...written matter is the heart of the First Amendment...” and “plaintiffs’ art does not carry either words or the particularized social and political messages upon which the First Amendment places special value.” However, on appeal by Lederman and his allies, the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit decided in favor of the street artists, barring the City from requiring artists to be licensed. Perhaps following the old saying that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” they concluded that:

_The City apparently looks upon visual art as mere “merchandise” lacking in communicative concepts or ideas... Visual art is as wide ranging in its depiction of ideas, concepts and emotions as any book, treatise, pamphlet or other writing, and is similarly entitled to full First Amendment protection._

When the city appealed, the Supreme Court let the Court of Appeals ruling stand, favoring the position of ARTIST. This ruling does not
prohibit the city from regulating street artists but it does say that regulation has to be reasonable and within a constitutional framework.

Giuliani’s reaction has been to ignore the ruling and continue to create policies that overly restrict artists’ presence in public space, resulting in continued arrests and confiscations. The City has also set up a Street Vendor Review Panel to extend restrictions to other types of street vendors (Allen, 1998a). According to Robert Lederman, the ultimate goal is to put more public space in private control so the City, large institutions, and private business can extract income directly or indirectly from this arrangement. The website continues to expand as Mr Lederman continues to get arrested, win law suits, hold press conferences, and write articles and news releases.

The website has functioned primarily as a way of keeping interested members of the public, reporters and officials up to date about these struggles. Lederman updates constantly with news about activities affecting vendors in the city, and with information about the progress of legal battles. It has also proved an important resource for vendors in other areas of the nation who have used the legal victories of ARTIST to guide their own court action. Lederman notes:

_The website has been the single most important tool in the ARTIST movement. I get hundreds of requests a month for info on our lawsuit, for copies of releases on the City’s anti-artist actions, for contact numbers, etc. The website provides, free of charge or any mailing costs, all of these documents to anyone in the world who wants them. It has been a tremendous resource for literally hundreds of college and high school students across the world who chose to use our issue as the subject of class reports and graduate studies on art, vending, civil disobedience or free speech. Without the resource of our website, the accomplishments we have made in protecting free speech for artists would have been impossible. Just to give one outstanding example, artists in Florida have won a similar case using our lawsuit, which they found out about from our website._ (private communication)

**Preserving Maxwell Street, Chicago**

In 1994, the Maxwell Street outdoor market was removed from its 120 year old location. Sixty old buildings, with businesses operating in
about half of them, including Original Jim’s Hot Dog Stand, the area’s historical anchor business, remain in the area. There are still some African-American street vendors peddling socks, perfume, Blues tapes, hats, incense, hair ornaments, jewelry, and t-shirts in a time honored tradition, and customers from all over the region continue to visit and shop in the neighborhood. Even though the area was heavily destroyed by the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), a preservation coalition was formed to memorialize the cultural and historical importance of this area which helped many immigrant populations merge into Chicago society through its function as a multi-cultural public bazaar. To do this, it is important to preserve as many buildings as possible and to keep as much of the local culture alive as possible. For the average person to be made aware of working class history, it is important that it be made concrete in a real world historic district as well as abstract in academic journals, archives, and websites. With falling real wages for unskilled labor during the 1990s, destroying such an important economic safety net area under the guise of “development” was also an affront to contemporary notions of social justice. The Maxwell Street Historic Preservation Coalition, to which the authors belong, wanted this history never to be forgotten so that it may help other such areas combat misguided urban renewal policies.12

The area’s biggest and most visible claim to fame was that most of the early Postwar Chicago Blues musicians, newly arrived from the deep South, started their Chicago careers on Maxwell Street in the 1940s and 1950s. Using the Internet, the Coalition transmitted this historical fact to Blues scholars, Blues fans, and Blues Societies all over the world. They responded with hundreds of e-mails and letters to the Chancellor of UIC, asking him not to destroy Maxwell Street, but to create a Maxwell Street Historic District instead. To make the effort more noticeable, it was requested that copies of e-mails and letters also be sent to the Coalition so they could put them on the website. Bureaucrats might be more willing to read their e-mail if they knew other people were reading it as well. The Coalition then went to the media, using phone calls and visits, asking them to cover this issue of a
world-class landmark about to be destroyed. To corroborate what we said, they were invited to visit the Preserve Maxwell Street website or, if they were without Internet access, the Coalition mailed them a printout of at least a portion of the website.

If people wanted to find out still more about this issue, they could, of course, contact the Coalition and/or they could e-mail any of the hundreds of people who sent in letters or e-mails. This process gave the cause credibility and allowed a seemingly local issue to be transformed into an international issue. There were both real world events (protests, information booths, and newspaper articles) and virtual events (websites and e-mails) helping to persuade the City and UIC of the error of their ways. Real world events take more time to produce than the virtual events but the creation of the real world events was greatly facilitated by the Internet through quick and inexpensive dissemination of information. For example, recently there was an impromptu Blues jam session on Maxwell Street and a piece about Maxwell Street Preservation on National Public Radio (NPR). Using the Internet, we could get the word out to our supporters cheaply and quickly to come down to Maxwell Street to hear live authentic blues and listen to an important radio show. Without the Internet, it is likely our supporters would have missed both events.

The international spread of the Internet paid off when British independent film producers, who were also Blues fans, heard of our efforts from our website. They obtained a grant and came to Maxwell Street for 10 days to create a radio and video documentary about the struggle for Maxwell Street. The radio documentary already exists and is being broadcast on stations all over the world, and the video documentary is under production. (The audio documentary is also available as a real audio file on our website).

Several members of the Coalition are old Blues musicians with roots on Maxwell Street. They have created Blues songs, laments, and speeches to Mayor Daley, the UIC Chancellor, and even First Lady Hillary Clinton. These politicians would not come down to Maxwell Street to listen to this nor would the mainstream media carry this. But
we did put these songs, laments, and speeches on the website so that, directly or indirectly, they would take notice of it.

The results have been mixed. We have been able to increase awareness about Maxwell Street, creating a public relations cost for UIC and thereby causing a temporary halt in the demolitions. As of Spring 2000, street vendors still sell their wares, local people continue to shop and socialize in the area, and outside Blues jam sessions continue to take place in the summer months on the weekends. To deflect criticism, UIC and the City have developed their own “scorched earth” preservation plan for Maxwell Street, which they expect to start implementing within the next year. That plan calls for tearing down the buildings, preventing any of the vendors, merchants, or residents from remaining in the area, and constructing a parking structure on Maxwell Street with 13 “historical” facades pasted on it. The architecture critics for both of Chicago’s main daily newspapers have disparaged the plan. The Coalition continues to fight, build support, and try to put the area on the National Register of Historic Places. Having the website provides evidence of the Coalition’s existence, activities, and accomplishments. This is an important visual reminder to Coalition members to keep morale up during such an uphill civic battle as well as a constant reminder to the City and UIC that their actions are being monitored and reported on and that we won’t go away.

V. Plans for the Future

The key to the future of Openair Market Net is to decentralize, globalize, and obtain financial support to become sustainable. It is our hope that people will imitate this website around the world, allowing an inter-linking network of sites in different world regions and languages. We hope to see, someday, regional market meta-websites in places such as East Africa, South East Asia, and Central America, each run by local activists and scholars.

On the website, we would like to have a self-building searchable data base where an electronic forms questionnaire is available for people to report to us about marketplaces and vendor issues in their
region. Until we get that, people have to e-mail us information and then we read it and organize it as time permits. We hope to soon have working again our web-based discussion forum, which crashed when new software was loaded on the server.

A Usenet group on this topic (alt.culture.openair-market) has been created where discussions can take place. However, the Usenet is more esoteric than the web and gets filled with spam (advertisements). Fewer people have newsreaders or know how to use them compared to web browsers. The wave of the future, however, seems to be interactive web based forums and chat and we hope to make better use of that technology.

As the price of computers drop, telephone access expands, and non-computer Internet devices proliferate, access to the Internet will be more common. More poor people will have access to the Internet or will know someone who does. This will enable our website to reach more people and for more people to reach us, strengthening its function as advocate, information repository, and a central forum for this sector. Our goal is not to be an information monopolist but to encourage others to get more involved with this sector and to engage in cooperative information exchange.

VI. Conclusion

The street vendor and informal market sectors are under assault all over the world. The economic forces of globalization, rapid technological change, and widening income disparity are causing this sector to grow at the same time it is, in general, facing government and corporate repression. We have just begun to tap the potential of the Internet to help this sector by trying to be an information and advocacy equalizer. The work we have done for horse cart peddlers in Baltimore, street artists in New York, and Maxwell Street preservation are examples of how the Internet can assist this sector, providing information and advocacy missing links. The biggest challenge is not technological but logistical and economic: to find local literate volunteer advocates and intermediaries, and to acquire a financial base to keep the project sustainable.
We hope we have demonstrated a way to use the Internet to help those on the bottom to survive in this faster changing, labor displacing, and more globally competitive world. There is growing criticism of current poverty alleviation and globalization strategies of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization. Perhaps a search for new ways in helping people from the bottom up may lead to more interest in Openair Market Net.
Endnotes

1. Like race apartheid, information apartheid is hard to stop. We found ourselves slipping into it from time to time: answering e-mails before postal mail queries, featuring markets with websites over markets without Internet presence, searching for correspondents with e-mail access rather than working with people who used only postal mail.

2. The City then created a sanitized New Maxwell Street Market on an empty street six blocks east at one third the size, restricted hours of operation, and with a vendor fee increase of 5000%. This new market is worth a visit but lacks the diversity, historical buildings, cultural richness, and economic safety net function of the old market.

3. Ray Suarez (1998) argues that the policy of trying to make cities look like suburbs has been a flop; that urban planners were and are wrong to conclude that what people really want is space, elbow room, and parking; that “the close, random, economically cross-pollinating, and hectic city street” should be discarded.

4. The Project for Public Spaces’ Public Markets Collaborative did hold an International Public Market Conference every two years but there was little focus on street vending. The emphasis was on planning and design issues of formal public markets. See for example: Spitzer and Baum, 1994. There was also little between-conference communication.

5. As academics, we operate Openair Market Net because it benefits us as a medium for gathering research material and as a social justice service for the world community. However, because we do not charge fees for the services we provide, its long-term sustainability is problematic. Besides out-of-pocket expenses such as for telephone, fax, and Internet services and support, the time required for continually adding and updating information and answering e-mail has grown rapidly. If funds were available, we could hire staff, teach fewer courses, and devote more time to it.

6. This website is available at <http://www.openair.org/alerts/artist/nyc.html>.)

8. Also assisting ARTIST in this battle were The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum, famous artists such as Claes Oldenburg, art critics, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the New York City Arts Coalition, the College Art Association; art dealers, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

9. This is available on the web at <http://www.openair.org/alerts/artist/ny2cir.html>.

10. Mayor Giuliani is quoted as saying: “This plan is some time in the making, and it is a very valuable one and necessary one to protecting our quality of life...If you allow too many to vend food, it gets out of control. You destroy diners and restaurants.” New York City Councilman Stephen DiBrienzah has a different view, “These vendors are as much a part of New York as the big buildings and the fancy restaurants. What is going on is outrageous and elitist.” (Allen, 1998b).

11. The City of New York recently arranged with a multi-national corporation to construct concrete advertising kiosks on sidewalks throughout New York City. Lederman claims that this will earn the City billions in ad revenues. As part of the deal to use public streets for advertising, the Mayor must eliminate street artists, vendors and newsstands. “If street vendors poured as much money into the Mayor’s pockets as the real estate lobby does, New York would be the “I Love Vendors” capital of the world.” Robert Lederman (1998).

12. In a conversation, national self-help activist Robert Woodson Sr. made the point that more Black urban commercial districts were destroyed by urban renewal than any Klu Klux Klan Night Riders.

13. The Chicago Tribune critic refers to is as “Mockery on Maxwell Street.” (Kamin, 1999).
References


