

Study of a homeless person's online journal: *The Panther's Tale*

Maryse Marpsat, INED, France.

This paper describes how a book - *Le monde d'Albert la Panthère, cybernaute et sans-domicile à Honolulu* (The world of Albert the Panther, netsurfer and homeless in Honolulu) - came about, informed mainly by the online journal (or diary) written by Albert Vanderburg, the self-styled "Panther". Albert kept a very regular journal on the Web from the very first day when he found himself homeless in Honolulu, in the US State of Hawaii, in October 1997. Here, I shall outline what this diary adds to what we know about the homeless, and the various sources of virtual and other data, as well as the methods for checking and processing them that I used for this work.

Discovering the data

In early 2001, I was writing a research report on longitudinal aspects of homelessness, part of which dealt with a computerized system for recording homeless shelter users in the United States (Automated National Client-Specific Homeless Services Recording - ANCHOR).

To canvass the views of service managers on the use of this fairly complex system, I consulted the archives of a US web newsgroup on homelessness to which a large number of service providers contributed.

Having found the discussion of the ANCHOR system, I scrolled through some of the contributions that ranged across other issues. This is where I came across a message signed *Albert the Panther* with a link to a site where I discovered the online journal of Albert Vanderburg, *The Panther*.

The diary

Albert Vanderburg became homeless in October 1997. He embarked on this new phase of his life by beginning to keep an open access diary.

From that day to this (late 2004), he has made several entries a week, generally in the morning, from the University of Hawaii library, some of whose computers are user walk-in accessible. His diary is divided into Tales, each corresponding to a numbered entry. Although undated, the entries can be timelined because they are listed by the number of years since becoming homeless, the Chinese calendar year (Albert, like some others of his generation - he was born in 1940 - and life course, is drawn to Eastern culture), and collected into small named groups, by which Albert usually signals his feelings at the time, or pinpoints a precise moment: e.g., *The season of the Ram*, or *Gods and Monsters* (the title of a film he went to see with his friend, Helen).

He wrote 214 Tales in his first year on the street, 199 the second, 202 the third, 231 the fourth, 147 the fifth, and 153 the sixth. Along with this are a few non-sequential entries, the *Miscellaneous Wags*, the transcription of sections of the notebooks kept on his first trip to India where he spent about a year around the age of thirty, and a few retrospective narratives describing his past up to the start of the Tales proper (the *Complete Tales of the Past*).

I came across his journal when he had reached Tale 668 and began to correspond with him, exchanging several emails a week on a wide range of topics. Much later on, I asked for permission to analyse his writings using the Alceste text analysis program. I began with a text analysis on the first 668 Tales, up to the start of Albert's fourth year of homelessness. The idea of this was to preserve a measure of internal consistency relative to my presence as an observer, which at times altered the content of Albert's writings due to his penchant for replying publicly (i.e., in his diary) to questions which he thinks other readers should know about, or adding comments to them. It was also the poorest time of his life, with under \$100 a month to live on until he began receiving *General Assistance* (a care-in-the-community allowance which he calls *Crazy Money*), which he got only from Tale 622 onwards.

Later, given the potential of his diary for improving public knowledge (especially in France, where an English diary might not readily find a wide readership) about homelessness, I suggested that he co-author the book with me, which he very kindly agreed to do. The work combines extracts from his journal with my comments to create a thematic flow, position it in relation to similar diaries, and give a perspective and context to Albert's opinions.

Data types, collection and editing

In addition to the several thousand-page diary itself, I used a range of online and other resources:

- I consulted many other online "personal diaries" to position Albert's diary among other similar journals;
- I regularly read the online versions of Honolulu's two dailies, and systematically searched for all articles on homelessness in recent years;
- as for any research, I consulted a long series of sociological articles and reports, many on the Web, especially several research reports on housing and the homeless in Hawaii and articles on personal home pages (individuals' websites);
- to check some aspects of Albert Vanderburg's story - he was on the fringes of the New York art scene in the 1960s - I researched various Internet databases (e.g., New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) database), which enabled me to control the retrospective part of his diary. I also, with his permission, emailed various individuals who supplied me with documents or clues to his past;
- I researched the archives of chat rooms/newsgroups that Albert Vanderburg had contributed to over the past decade to gain a clearer insight into his frame of mind at specific points in the past and the discussions he had had with certain persons;
- Yale University has a website of archival holdings on the composer Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) whom Albert knew and admired; their correspondence is catalogued, which bears out Albert's own claims for it;
- finally, I made two trips to Honolulu, in June 2003 and June 2004, to supplement these "virtual" data with an actual on-site look at the places and meetings with the characters that people his diary, and homeless service providers in Honolulu. The cordial reception extended to me by the director of the IHS men's shelter where Albert lives meant that I was able to

tour the facility, the vicinity of the women's shelter, and to meet the heads of various homeless programmes, especially the hot meal distribution services that Albert sometimes refers to and a mobile outreach health service. I was able to talk to a number of IHS staff, but unfortunately not with the wardens. I stayed in contact (by post and email) with those I met who process statistics on the homeless in Honolulu.

Basically, therefore, data gathered from the Web are not used differently to other data. The same kind of consistency-checking is needed of the different sources, whether virtual or physical. A reference found on the Web may lead to a visit, or the consultation of a work in a library, since the two kinds of data are not separable. Ethical considerations also apply, and "diary" type data must not be used without the author's permission.

But Internet data widen the researcher's field of investigation. Without the opportunities this offered, the research on Albert's diary would never have happened, even had there been a hard copy version of the diary, since there would have been no reason for it to come to the notice of a researcher in Paris working on homelessness.

Processing the textual data

The diary proper was processed in two different ways: one by an empirical method of segmenting the text by themes; the other being a textual analysis using the Alceste program to supplement the previous analysis. For example, the detachment, not to say split consciousness, displayed by Albert in recounting humiliating episodes for him (like scavenging discarded food scraps or cigarette butts from ashtrays) comes clearly through from the textual analysis, where the classes for food and cigarette scavenging have very few personal pronouns (unlike another to do with feelings). This calls to mind the split consciousness which Michael Pollak (2000) refers to different circumstances where the individual's status is violated - life in the concentration camps. Such split consciousness, argues Pollak, is a way of "preserving self-respect" (p. 222).

Key outcomes and insights

Albert Vanderburg's pathway into homelessness may be described as "improbable" (Poliak, 1991): from joining the army at age seventeen, to becoming a painter, holding a succession of temporary office jobs from Texas via London and Delhi to New York, he ended up homeless in Honolulu at the age of nearly sixty. He then began to keep a journal of this new phase of his life, which he posted on the Internet.

Albert's singular qualities and his complex life course pattern, whereby he is at ease with others in the homeless community while able to communicate easily with better-off individuals, make his diary a gateway to a world which most of us, if we are lucky, will never inhabit personally. The first part of this work deals with Albert's life in the five years after becoming homeless, and the glimpses his narrative gives us of the lives of other homeless people (chapters 1 to 4). But to be used as an information source, Albert's diary must be positioned among others of the same kind, and a better understanding gained of Web confessional practices (chapters 5 and 6). Finally, unique as Albert's pathway is, it goes with the grain of pathways that can be seen among others of his generation, a singular combination of the same collective life courses, and hence has a quality of universality (chapters 7 and 8).

Becoming homeless

Albert's diary gives insights into how homeless people themselves experience their physical and mental situation, and the obstacles they face when they become homeless and have to adapt to life on the streets. It also helps to dispel a number of stereotypic conceptions about the homeless, to appreciate the diversity of their pathways and the complexity of their needs, which go beyond the purely physical aspects of their plight.

One widely-canvassed theory is that there is a process - variously an adaptation or a sharp descent in which homeless people pass through a series of inevitable stages to end up in relative stability, albeit described differently by different authors. It is true to say that there is an adjustment to street homelessness, and a learning, as it were, of street survival skills. But not everyone's past lives fit them equally for that learning process. The duration of street homelessness is not the only shaping factor in the plight of the homeless, who go into their spell of homelessness with advantages and disadvantages which cause them to inhabit their newly-acquired social space in different ways (Marpsat, Firdion, 2000, p. 287-321). They each therefore "piece together" (Lévy-Strauss 1962, Snow and Anderson 1996) a mixed bag of things - institutionalized assistance, living on their wits, support from family and friends - by which to ensure their mental and physical survival. The piecing together differs from person to person, and changes over time with the point-in-time resources available.

Adaptation is always uncertain, and pieced-together assemblages shaky. The homeless are beset by many and changing constraints, and their adaptation is challenged to varying degrees by different sets of circumstances: bad weather that makes rough sleeping unpleasant and even life-threatening; official restrictions on places where the homeless can seek nighttime and daytime refuge and rest; a newly-opened shelter; welfare benefits being awarded or stopped; a change in relations with their close circle; their health, etc.

The Panther's Tale, the journal kept by Albert from the time he became homeless, gives a minutely detailed description of these stages of adaptation to a new lifestyle and the different aspects of his new circumstances. Referring to many extracts from his diary, the first part of the work deals partly with the issue of becoming settled into homelessness from the physical, relational and psychological angles, and partly with the uncertainty of that situation which may be upset at any time, requiring a fresh adaptation which in turn causes further inner turmoil.

Also, homelessness is often held out as an extreme situation of social alienation, as losing touch both with the network of family and friends, and with work. It may be true that the homeless often (but not always) have strained or non-existent links with their family or former friends, but this tells only part of the story. This book does not set out to portray the life of the homeless in the poetic terms sometimes used to extol the supposed freedom of the "hobo philosopher". But withdrawal from the previously known world - often already occurring when they become homeless - though it continues in street homelessness is also accompanied by another form of socialization: as the spell of homelessness lengthens, links with the "domiciled community" weaken without disappearing entirely, but are partly ousted by others with their fellow unfortunates. The methods of resource acquisition also diversify, and the concept of work, or at least resource-generating activity, has then to be understood in a wider sense than usual.

Like Pascale Pichon (1995), to study the way in which people “become” homeless, I shall refer to concept of a “career” as used by Goffman and Becker. In *Asylums* (1968/1961), Goffman considers the “long-term changes, significant enough to be considered as fundamental and common to all the members of a social group, even though affecting each one separately” (p. 179 in the French edition) and applies this to people admitted to a psychiatric hospital or another “total institution”. In *Outsiders* (1963), Becker uses the concept of “career” to include the notion of “those factors on which mobility from one position to another depends. (These) include both objective facts of social structure and changes in the perspectives, motivations and desires of the individual” (p. 24) and applies it, amongst others, to marijuana users. Likewise, it is through a series of initiation-style trials that the houseless person “becomes” a homeless person. These trials are not purely in terms of physical deprivation (sleep deprivation, hunger, cold) but also go to the individual’s self-image and identity.

Finally, it will highlight the various combinations of resources that the homeless described by Albert deploy to survive, especially the assembly of institutional assistance, support from other people (family, friends, passers-by), work, and “living on their wits” (undeclared work, theft, dealing, etc.). It will also be seen how drug abuse, becoming increasingly severe for some over the five years studied, undermines this fragile equilibrium.

Web confessionals

The use of Albert’s journal as a basis of research must be informed by a knowledge of the circumstances behind it, and of where it stands among similar journals that may exist. Chapters 5 and 6 make a series of points about autobiographical writings and the special case of the personal diaries that have proliferated on the Web: the apparent paradox of writing an intimate journal which one wishes the entire world to read, the singular relations between “diarists” and their readers, and the forms of self-presentation (in Goffman’s sense) by exploiting the technical possibilities of the new medium and working within its constraints. The case of Albert’s diary is positioned among several examples, including another journal written by an American homeless person, to determine wherein lies the originality of its approach, and what forms part of the “standard” features of this new form of confessionality.

The reasons given for starting up an online journal are akin to those for writing a paper diary, but somewhat changed by the potential audience for these jottings. Often, the idea is to record, as part of a coping strategy, a happy or unhappy period of life which will involve major changes: serious ill-health, a leaving, a relationship breakdown. Equally often, the aim is to construct, leave behind, or restore a self-image in which the author rejoices or sees him/herself. A third reason is the impulsion to communicate to and discover people who may be physically remote but with whom there is a meeting of minds. Some authors see writing a journal as a making a gift of themselves, in some cases impelled by their feeling of having received something from reading other online diaries. In yet other cases, it is to do with writing as such, whether as an exercise in style or to escape editorial control.

Other differentiating factors between online diaries relate to the potential readership, their varying use of technical resources, their content and how regularly they are updated.

There is some ambivalence in the relations between online diarists and their readers, the pleasure of being read and appreciated by a close circle and complete strangers being counterbalanced by qualms at family and friends discovering what they are not meant to

know, being attacked (“flamed”) for what one has done, or stalked by disturbing strangers. The mental picture that online diarists have of their readers, especially those that they do not know in real life, therefore exposes them to a wide gamut of emotions, ranging from ego-tripping to dread.

Finally, the image of the authors conveyed through these online journals is almost entirely textually-derived, as body language and posture cues transmitted by face-to-face interaction (the physical signs of embarrassment or ease, for example) are communicated on the Web mainly through literary skills.

Against this background, Albert’s diary displays some singular features. Firstly, unlike many authors, he does not introduce himself in a special page, but leaves the reader to build up their image of him as the Tales progress. He gives no clue to his situation, either in the title of his diary, or in any of the information on his home page. He therefore offers himself as an individual in all his complexity, rather than first and foremost as a homeless person. Others may take different stances, like Kevin, another author referred to in the book, a sort of self-appointed spokesperson for the homeless - a situation which forms the title of his online journal (*The Homeless Guy*) and recurs in most entries.

For Albert and Kevin, but also for some in the domiciled community, the site epitomizes the virtual image of a house, a private space in the sense of a space that the individual can do with as he will, and, in Albert’s case, where he has named the different pages as rooms - *The Reading Room*, *The Attic*, etc.

Apart from its recording function, therefore, this diary plays a key role for Albert, both in maintaining his self-image, and in giving him the opportunity to have a place of his own.

A singular pathway, a conflation of several collective histories

Albert shares a number of social traits with many homeless people, like an abusive childhood or joining the army to escape his family. But he also experienced an “improbable” pathway which cut across different social circles and countries, and in which his homosexuality played a part. The idea here is to show how this pathway is essential to understanding the topics he addresses and his coping/subsistence strategies, but also how the different collective histories in which his generation was caught up underpin his life course pattern.

Three particular areas of American history are considered as bringing this generation effect into sharp focus: the American art scene from the post-war period to the 1970s, in which Albert was involved in the early 1960s when he lived with a New York artist and painted his first canvases; the beatnik and hippy movements, and how the counterculture and his trips to India and Nepal informed his view of poverty, his drug taking and his coming to terms with material insecurity; the computer and Internet boom, especially their recreational aspects, for the role they currently play in Albert’s life, the contacts that he has been able to keep up through them, and the support they provide him with in his situation. These three areas are themselves interlinked: the New York group of American painters of the 1960s hung around with the beatnik intellectuals; the development of computing and the Internet were linked to the Cold War but also the emergence of the student unrest of the late 1960s in the USA.

Repositioned in space and time in this way, Albert’s personal testimony assumes a universal value as describing one of the alternative pathways for someone of his generation.

Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches

All INED research into the homeless is based on combining quantitative and qualitative approaches (Marpsat, 2001). This is done in various ways: preliminary interviews done as part of the groundwork for statistical surveys proper enable certain hypotheses to be formulated: so, because references to an itinerant occupation - be it the army, working on mobile worksites, or in transport - were found to recur through the mens' accounts of their lives, a question on that was included in the statistical survey, revealing that over a quarter of the men had had such an occupation; in test phases, the questionnaire was modified to allow for respondents' different interpretations of the same word, and to remove questions identified in in-depth interviews as not meaningful for them; the operation of shelters, meal distribution sites and drop-in centres was observed in situ before, during and after the surveys, and their officials-in-charge were interviewed; when studying the survey coverage, interviews were done with people in situations akin to that of the respondents who were not - or not fully - caught by the statistical surveys for various reasons, like squatters, non French-speaking homeless people and street homeless people not using welfare services, some of whom were followed up over several months; when processing the data, interviews were used to inform, finesse or extrapolate the quantitative results.

In most cases, however, the results were derived essentially from statistical surveys, although ones developed and interpreted through the prism of qualitative work.

Not so here, where the basic material used is Albert's diary. The quantitative approaches, be it French or American survey data, Honolulu shelter registration data, or the results of a textual analysis by quantitative methods, were used only to reposition Albert's situation within a broader setting, to nuance the odd argument, or to supplement the analysis of what Albert says with a study of how he said it. In this way, it can be determined how the characteristics of Albert and his friends resemble or differ from those of other homeless people: so, although older, Albert's life course pattern shares many common traits with other homeless people, like army service and an abusive childhood. His impression that the homeless community do not work is qualified by the statistical findings that, in point-of-time terms, only a quarter to a third work, but that over a longer period, most have had one or more jobs. Finally, the textual analysis highlights the remove at which he describes certain aspects of his life, especially scavenging for food, alcohol and cigarettes, using very few possessive and personal pronouns, which, however, recur with much greater frequency when recounting his sex and love life.

Conversely, the study of his online journal requires caveats to be entered on the statistical results: the jottings dealing with his past show how far pre-street pathways can differ over and above their many common points; the diary itself shows how Albert and his practices evolve, and this is a time aspect that is missing from even those point-in-time surveys that include retrospective questions, and is not addressed in the same detail in a panel-type cohort survey where the same individual is interviewed at repeated intervals; finally, the journal shows the full importance assumed by symbolic and self-image aspects in the process by which the identity of being homeless is acquired.

Conclusion

In addition to information on the daily life of a homeless person at various stages in his “career”, this detailed examination of one individual’s life course shows the systemic linkages between the individual and contextual dimensions of such a pathway. In the different but similar national contexts of France and the United States, the repertoire of responses to the loss of social status can be identified, and the way in which Albert, as well as other respondents interviewed in Paris, draw on that repertoire to confront, circumvent, palliate their situation, or regain control over the events to which they have fallen prey.

As Michael Pollak (2000, p. 10) observes with regard to concentration camps, “any extreme experience gives insights into the components and conditions of the “normal” experience, whose familiarity often impedes analysis”. The study of the life of the homeless is also a source of knowledge about what housing represents for us all, not just in bricks-and-mortar terms, but as to its role in sustaining interpersonal relations, the relationship with the public and private space, and, more especially, in the development and maintenance of self-image.

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