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## **Do You Speak Pittsburghese? Media Technology and Metalinguistic Expertise**

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Drawing on Asif Agha's (2003) work on "enregistration," I am studying how a set of linguistic forms that can be heard in southwestern Pennsylvania have come to be thought of as unique to the Pittsburgh area and tightly linked to local identity (Johnstone, Andrus and Danielson 2006; Johnstone and Kiesling 2008). This paper explores the roles of newspapers, a website, an online discussion board, and a Wikipedia entry in this process. I focus on how the sources of expertise about what is known as "Pittsburghese" have changed over time, tracing how increasingly interactive communications media have been involved in reallocating rights to describe and evaluate local speech and making it possible to contest these rights in various ways.

It is well known that popular representations of "the facts" about stigmatized varieties can be racist and/or discriminatory in other ways (Ronkin and Karn 1999) (Hill 1995). I thus suggest that sociolinguists sometimes need to work against the reallocation of knowledge-producing rights about language varieties to an ever-broader swath of the general public. To do this, we have to redraw the boundary between technical expertise and popular expertise and reclaim expertise in the domain of linguistic variation for people who use systematic technical procedures rather than personal experience or belief. Surprisingly, one of the most interactive of communications media turns out to be an effective platform on which to do this.

I begin with an overview of the development of "dialect awareness" in Pittsburgh in the context of local economic history. I then talk briefly about metalinguistic discourse about Pittsburgh speech in three communications media, focusing on representations of and contestation over expertise in pre-internet newspapers, where the only possibility of interactivity was the writing of after-the-fact letters to the editor; on a website that allowed readers to post in a tightly constrained format but not to respond to other posters; and in an email forum where people could post in relatively unconstrained ways and respond to others. I turn finally to the development of a Wikipedia entry about

Pittsburgh English, where a student and I purposely worked to reclaim expertise about local speech from the general public and relocate it in academic research.

### **Pittsburgh speech and “Pittsburghese”**

Pittsburgh is in southwestern Pennsylvania, separated from the East Coast of the U.S. by the Allegheny Front of the Appalachian Mountains and from nearby cities by political and cultural boundaries. People in the area have always had a sense of geographical exceptionalism (see, for example, Zelinsky (1980)). Local identity was, and is, linked to the city rather than to the state or the region, and the identity of the city was linked to the dominant industry of the region, steelmaking in all its phases, from coal-mining to the production of coke fuel for the blast furnaces to the final rolling, molding, and pressing operations. Pittsburgh was the “Iron City,” the “Smoky City,” the “Steel City;” the local football team was named the Steelers; local folk heroes were larger-than-life steelworkers like Joe Magarac, and most working-class boys assumed they would follow their fathers into the mines and mills.

Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the only linguistic variation most Pittsburghers were aware of was variation between English and the many languages spoken by Eastern and Southern European immigrants to come to the area to work in the steel industry. Working-class Pittsburghers whose parents spoke no English, or accented English, learned the English of their peers. In keeping with the “doctrine of first effective settlement” (Labov 2001:503-504), many aspects of the English of the original English-speaking settlers of the region, most of whom were Scots-Irish, were carried along over many generations. By 1950, Pittsburghers whose ancestry was Slovak, Croatian, or Italian were using Scots-Irish words like *nebbby*, *slippy*, and *you’uns* and constructions like the ones illustrated in “This shirt needs ironed,” “My mother was 80 whenever she died,” or “Anymore, electric heating is cheaper than gas.” Since most working-class Pittsburghers heard only the variants they themselves used, variability was not a resource for sociolinguistic work. An outsider studying the area could have correlated the use of local forms with local birth and residence (Kiesling and Wisnosky 2003). From insiders’ perspective, though, like that of one of the people I interviewed, “Everybody talked that way,” so “[we] didn’t even hear it.”

Geographic and social mobility during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made local linguistic features hearable to working-class Pittsburghers, as they began to come into contact with people who spoke differently and, accordingly, began to adjust their speech to sound more correct or cosmopolitan or, alternatively, more like their peers’. By the 1950s, with labor unions at their strongest, working-class Pittsburghers could afford to move from the densely packed, mono-ethnic neighborhoods near the mills, where they had grown up, to the suburbs, and to take vacations at East-coast beaches. They began to

notice linguistic variation correlated with where a person was from and what his or her social status was, and they began to use this variation to do social work

The local steel industry, in decline since the 1920s, had been propped up during World War II for the production of war materiel. But advances in transportation technology such as the development of powerful diesel locomotives meant that steelmaking no longer required the same set of co-present geographical conditions as before, and steelmakers had begun to look for production sites where labor was cheaper. The industry began to shrink again after the war. The sudden collapse in the 1980s of what was left of the city's steel production put a generation of working-class Pittsburghers out of work, forcing many to move away and all to wonder who they now were, and who cared.

The decline of the steel industry caused people to look for new ways to imagine what it meant to be a Pittsburgher, and a set of local linguistic forms that were now associated with localness and working-class lack of pretension were available for this purpose. Over the past 50 years, "Pittsburghese" has come to be iconic of local identity, to the point that almost every reference to localness in the media includes (or is) a reference to local speech. A stereotypical working-class Pittsburgher is sometimes referred to as a "Yinzer," a term built on the 2<sup>nd</sup>-person plural pronoun *yinz* (from *you'uns*), Pittsburghese shirts, coffee mugs, and shot glasses are for sale almost everywhere local souvenirs are for sale, and characters ranging from graffiti artists to the Mayor to talking dolls use Pittsburghese.

### **Expertise and Interactivity**

Local rules for and understandings about text-building reflect and shape local rules for and understandings of expertise and knowledge production. As Geoffrey Raymond (2000, Heritage and Raymond 2005) shows, expertise is not simply brought into interaction as a pre-existing right, but rather negotiated in interaction. The rules of engagement for such negotiation differ from activity to activity and from era to era. Popular Western ideas about expertise, authorship, and intellectual property are partly based on the idea that knowledge can be produced by a single individual, acting alone, and this idea is still thought to underlie standard science (Charney 2003). Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, scientific expertise, produced via systematic empirical procedures, has increasingly moved out of the purview of educated laypeople and into the narrower purview of accredited experts in universities and industrial research laboratories. But just as "the death of the author" was becoming a major concern of later 20<sup>th</sup> century humanistic thought, computer networks began to afford increasingly interactive communications media. As a result, new challenges to the isolated-genius model of

science and new sorts of claims to expertise have become increasingly performable and visible.

In contemporary discourse about communication technology, the term “interactivity” sometimes refers to one axis along which participation rights vary.<sup>1</sup> Along this axis, a communication medium which is understood to involve a single, controlling, author and a relatively passive, knowledge-absorbing audience (like a print newspaper) is considered less interactive than a medium that allows for audience feedback or multiple fillers of the author role, or which dissolves the author-audience distinction altogether. The more immediate the feedback, the more interactive the medium, so that an online newspaper that allows for instant reader commentary is more interactive than a print one that allows only for letters to the editor. A blog, with one organizing voice and multiple commentary voices, is less interactive than a wiki, where all participants can assume the role of author, editor, or audience member.

In what follows, I trace changes in how expertise about Pittsburgh speech is allocated, claimed, and negotiated in four increasingly interactive communications technologies: print newspapers, a somewhat interactive website, a more interactive email discussion forum, and a wiki. My methods center on discourse analysis of the structural and functional elements of texts, contextualized through more than nine years of sociolinguistic interviewing, participant observation, and other kinds of ethnographic and experimental data collection.

### **Newspaper Articles, 1952-1992**

A corpus of newspaper articles about Pittsburgh speech dating from the 1950s through the early 1990s shows how popular, person-on-the-street expertise, epistemically based on personal experience and personal observation, came to be supplemented and in some cases replaced by technical expertise based on specialized knowledge and knowledge-producing procedures like scholarly research. Print newspaper reports from this period are minimally interactive, and, as preserved in the historical record, even less so. Although readers could write letters to the editor meant to support or correct the knowledge claims made in an article, the letters were not published with the articles, there was never any guarantee that a correction would be made, and such letters were not archived together with the articles they responded to.

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<sup>1</sup> As MacMillan (2002) points out, the term “interactive” has been used in many different ways in the literature on human-to-human interaction, human-machine interaction, and new media. In the eventual fuller version of the paper I will need to discuss this literature and operationalize the term more carefully for my own use.

There are 21 articles in this corpus, which was assembled by a librarian at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and from the files of Patricia Parslow. All are from local publications and are about Pittsburgh speech. There are four articles from the 1950s, three from the 1960s, seven from the 1970s, four from the 1980s, and three from the 1990-1992 period..

In articles dating from 1952 to 1965, observations about local speech and explanations for its peculiarities are presented in the voice of the article's author and members of the general public, often outsiders who have moved to the city. The first article in the corpus is a collection of observations paraphrased from letters to the editor, including "a woman from Philadelphia who moved here several years ago" and a man from Minneapolis". Writer Gilbert Love's voice is heard mainly as the compiler, although his own observations are once presented: "Many of us deny that we use those phrases..." Another writer describes the observations of "a friend, newly come to Pittsburgh," who, "like all newcomers...duly noted the rising inflection which native Pittsburghers employ..." In two articles by George Swetnam, the sole voice is that of the writer, who bases his claims about local speech on his own experience, including noticing a "well-educated friend" use *anymore* in a distinctive way.

The first article that cites an academic expert is from 1967. The expert is Robert Parslow, then a recently-arrived instructor of linguistics at the University of Pittsburgh, whose specialty was dialectology (Paulston, Personal communication, Feb. 19, 2008). (He was working on a doctoral dissertation under Raven McDavid, Editor of the *Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest*, who was then at the University of Michigan.) Parslow, quoted extensively in the article, mentions the Linguistic Atlas of the United States, but (as quoted) cites no source for most of his claims, representing them as common expert knowledge. Parslow's voice dominates in three subsequent articles (1973, 1978, 1979), which are about his planned research in Pittsburgh. Other articles after 1967 almost invariably cite —usually by name -- one or more sources identified as having technical expertise: a secondary English teacher, "speech teachers," H. L. Mencken, Frederick Cassidy and Joan Hall of the *Dictionary of Regional American English*, and other "educators," "scholars," and "local linguists." When articles begin, in the 1980s, to turn from treating local speech as an interesting oddity to talking about its situational appropriateness or inappropriateness, experts come to include job counselors and corporate Human Relations managers.

However, people on the street continue to be quoted from time to time. Sometimes their views are contrasted with "professional opinion," but in two articles from the early 1990s ordinary citizens are represented as having the same degree of expertise as technical specialists, just arising from a different source. In an article about local speech in the

Lawrenceville neighborhood, each source is identified by means of a similar appositive phrase: Samuel Lewis ("manager of Kay Drug Co. on Butler Street"), Sam McCool ("author of 'Sam McCool's New Pittsburghese'"), Richard Enos ("a Carnegie Mellon University English professor who teaches rhetoric"), Christina Bratt Paulston ("a University of Pittsburgh Linguistics Professor"), Maryanna Baldauf ("a lifelong neighborhood resident").

The newspaper articles in the corpus sometimes set textual exposition of “the facts” about Pittsburgh speech (whether the source for these facts be popular or technical) against a visual background of popular representations of the dialect and its speakers, sometimes including a cartoon illustration and almost always including a headline employing the local spelling of a word thought to be local. Because it is in writing, in the body of the article the voice of the experts is meant to be taken as authoritative. The role of the popular voice is ambiguous. When it appears in a headline, the popular voice has the effect of framing the more expert voice. What the popular voice says about local speech is often visually presented as an illustration of what the scholarly voice says, even though the two representations of local speech are often in conflict. On the whole, though, the development over time is clearly towards the privileging of technical expertise over person-in-the-street anecdotal observation.

### **An Interactive Website, 1997- 2003**

In the 1990s, the development of more interactive media enabled the center of epistemic balance to shift. A website called “Pittsburghese” (<http://pittsburghese.com>) encouraged visitors to contribute entries to a list of “Pittsburghese” words and phrases.

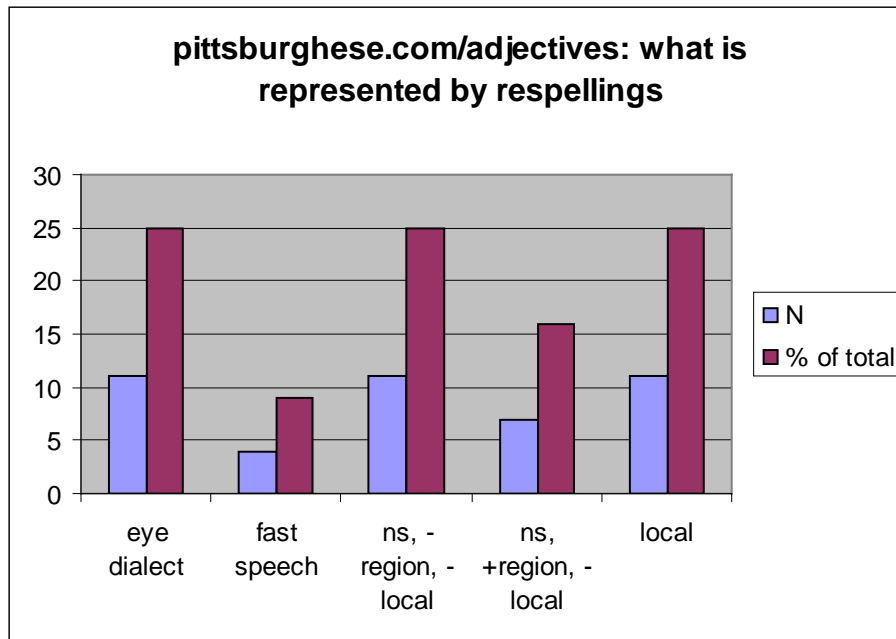
Pittsburghese.com was the work of a local web designer, Alan Freed, who mounted it in 1997 as a way of calling attention to his web-design business (Skirble 2000, Freed, email to Barbara Johnstone, June 27, 2002). The site also carried banner ads for small, Pittsburgh-based enterprises such as souvenir and photo suppliers. Promising that readers could “learn Pittsburghese in a day,” the site included some “Pittsburghese calisthenics,” a “translator,” and “audio quiz,” as well as a link to a recording of a Voice of America radio program that featured the site. Starting in 2002, at my instigation, a tab called “For Actual Research” linked to a page about my research on the dialect and, from there, to the Pittsburgh Speech and Society website.

The most popular section, however, was the “Glossary.” Here, visitors could fill in a form on which they listed their name and location and a word or phrase (often spelled in a way that was meant to indicate its nonstandard pronunciation) with a definition and an example sentence:

Bawdle

**Bottle.** Gimme a bawdle of arn!*(Submitted by Hank Smoot, Springfield)*

Contributions automatically appeared on the site unless Freed deemed them obscene. In 2002, the site was getting 100,000 hits a month, mainly from ex-Pittsburghers living elsewhere, and the glossary had grown to thousands of items (p-g article). I am not concerned here with evaluating the actual claims people make about local speech in any of the media I am discussing. Figure 1 gives a sense of what sorts of things glossary entries did.



**Figure 1: What is represented by respellings in the “adjectives” section of the Pittsburghese.com glossary**

As Figure 1 shows, 25% of the entries in the “adjectives” section of the glossary represented “eye dialect,” nonstandard spellings of standard pronunciations such as “cawfing” for “coughing.” Nine per cent represented casual standard pronunciation as shaped by “fast speech “rules: an example is “ig’nernt” for “ignorant.” Another quarter of the entries appeared to represent nonstandard usage, but of either a very widespread or a very idiosyncratic nature, as in entries for words like “inneresting” (a widespread nonstandard pronunciation of “interesting”) and “jiagunda” (possibly a family’s or even an individual’s term for “huge”). An additional 25% were words that do vary regionally in U.S. English but are not associated with Pittsburgh speech in any other source: “cattywumpus” for “diagonally across from” or “ascared” for “scared.” A quarter of the entries represent words or pronunciations that are widely understood, by linguists and/or Pittsburghers, to be limited in geographical range and widely heard in the Pittsburgh area:

“lahsy” represents the local monophthongal /aw/ in “lousy,” “slippy” is a word of Scots-Irish origin meaning “slippery.”

Although the tone of the entries, and that of the site as a whole, was meant to be humorous, it was by no means clear to all its readers and contributors that the activity was intended as a joke. A reporter for the Voice of America who reported on the site represented it as “entertaining” and set her report to the background of a polka with lyrics about the Pittsburgh Steelers (the local professional American football team). However, she also represented her discovery of the site as the discovery that the dialect of her youth was real, not just a nostalgic figment of the collective imagination (Skirble 2000). Although the site’s designer and webmaster, Alan Freed, later claimed that “there’s not a serious word on the whole site” (Freed, email to Barbara Johnstone, 30 Jan., 2008), he also admitted that “every so often people were taking us seriously.” Beginning in 2001 or so, this became clear to me, too, when Freed became aware of my work with the dialect and started referring queries he got from students to me. (When I told him about the new Pittsburgh Speech and Society website in June of 2002 he immediately created the link to it, and to me, which I mentioned above.) In other words, the nature of the expertise the site represented was ambiguous: was the person-on-the-street (or person-on-the-World Wide Web) expertise that appeared on the site the kind of expertise you could draw on for, say, a term paper, or not? Freed insisted that the representation of local speech on his website did not represent technical expertise, but some of the site’s users either thought it did or did not ask themselves the question.

Around 2003, webmaster Freed stopped maintaining the site and turned off the interactive feature that allowed people to contribute new words. According to a newspaper interview, he felt that he had lost control of the site’s content: “It got to the point where people were submitting anything Myron Cope [a local sports announcer with a distinctive speaking style] had ever said in his life,” Freed was quoted as saying (Fleming 2008).

Because anyone could post to it and editorial control was minimal, the site diffused expertise about local speech far beyond the few carefully selected local people-on-the-street whose voices appeared in the later newspaper articles. Anyone with internet access could, in this medium, claim expertise about local speech simply by posting an entry to the list. Participants were unable to argue for their expertise or explicitly indicate its source. Because the form that created the database entries behind the site constrained what kinds of information posters could provide -- name, place, word, definition, example -- the only way posters could make any sort of claim about the source of their expertise about Pittsburgh speech was by listing Pittsburgh or some nearby place as their location. People not in the Pittsburgh area had no other way to support the implicit claim

to expertise they made by posting on the site. Nor did this medium afford users any way to contest the expertise of others.

### **An Email Discussion Forum, 2002-2003**

An email discussion board from 2002-2003 afforded an equally large arena for expertise. But because it was more interactive than the website, the forum encouraged participants to make explicit reference to the sources of their expertise, and expertise was sometimes the focus of discussion.

The forum was one a number of discussion threads about topics or events on which a Pittsburgh TV station, WTAE, recently reported. It could be accessed from the station's homepage. This thread was initiated on March 22, 2002, probably in connection with reporting about an academic workshop on Pittsburgh speech that started that day. The version of the discussion prompt to which most contributions appeared to respond was "Is Our Local Dialect Charming Or Embarrassing?" Our analysis of the discussion board (Johnstone and Baumgardt 2004) considered the roughly 9 ½ month period from its inception until Jan. 10, 2003. The segment contains 19,253 words; it includes 101 participants, who provide a total of 180 responses.

Particularly at the beginning of the discussion, where responses tend to be directly linked to the discussion question, contributions tend to be quite similar to one another. Here is a representative one:

stilesmom: I never realized I spoke Pittsburgheze until my children became older and asked me why I talk funny. Apparently, our teachers spoke the same way and we were never taught the short vowel sounds. I am too old to correct my speaking now. Many years ago, I lived in Rochester, NY and the people knew I was from Pittsburgh, and not only that, they knew I was from McKees Rocks. McKees Rocks has their very own thick Pittsburgh accent. Our dialect is charming and I am proud to speak it!!!! (C29)

As did stilesmom, participants often used personal-experience narratives to establish their right to speak by virtue of their "local knowledge" and as inductive support of evaluations of local speech. In addition or instead, participants often engaged in "feature dropping," using or listing words or phrases thought of as local as a way of indexing expertise relevant to evaluating the dialect, as exemplified in this contribution:

...[I've] been out of [there] for 17 years...and still say "melk" instead of milk, gum bands instead of rubber bands, redd up and jaetyet (did you eat yet.) ... (C20)

Using or mentioning a feature of “Pittsburghese” is an efficient, effective way to establish oneself as an authority who can credibly make evaluative arguments about the dialect.

A few participants noted academic or quasi-academic sources for their use or knowledge of “Pittsburghese.” One participant, for example, mentioned the author of a “Pittsburghese” dictionary (McCool 1982) (C26), another referred to an ongoing academic “study” (C16), and a third mentioned training in linguistics as a source of knowledge about dialect. However, displays of local experience and local knowledge were by far the most common ways of claiming authority to speak in the conversation.

New participants eventually entered the conversation, and despite efforts on the part of others to remind them that they were off topic, the focus shifted from evaluating “Pittsburghese” to evaluating Pittsburgh, usually negatively. Participants with screen names like Pghsucks said things like this:

...Plus, you have to remember that the truth hurts sometimes and everyone here will have to one day admit that the area is backward and THEN the rest of the country will be more that happy to welcome you into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century... (C109)

In this section of the conversation, participation rights are premised not on topic expertise but on “rationality,” the ability to sound, not local, but logical, and sometimes the explicit claim that one was being “rational”. The depiction of Pittsburghers that emerges is very negative - they are “lazy,” “trapped in a time-warp” with their “kielbasa-stuffed bellies lined up at the bar.” and so on.

### **A Wikipedia Entry, 2006**

The democratic diffusion of the right to create knowledge that we see in the progression from newspaper articles to website to discussion forum is often celebrated. However, as Ronkin and Karn (1999), Hill (1995), and others have shown, popular discourse about vernacular speech often encodes racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination, and this is as true for Pittsburgh speech as it is for any other non-standard way of speaking. Many Pittsburghers are deeply offended by representations of the dialect that suggest that they all speak alike, in a stupid-sounding way, and my initial foray into the study of the dialect was the result of a wish to correct some of this widely available misinformation.. Thus I turn, finally, to an effort by academics to reclaim expertise about Pittsburgh speech.

In 2006, Dan Baumgardt and I developed and posted a Wikipedia entry on Pittsburgh English (Pittsburgh English 2006). We chose this medium (in addition to a mounting a website) because we knew the people we wanted to reach – students and young adults –

would be likely to use it before turning to more traditional sources of information. We expected it to be extremely difficult to claim and maintain expertise in a forum that is interactive and in new ways and in which expertise is thought to be distributed even more democratically than in the media discussed above. It turned out to be relatively easy, for reasons I will touch on below.

A wiki (derived from the Hawaiian word for 'fast') is software that allows people to create and edit web pages quickly and easily; it is typically used for collaborative projects (Wiki). Wikis consist of a main page, a page on which drafts and edits can be made and transferred to the main page, and often a revision history function that allows users to see every version of the document and compare different versions. Wikipedia entries also have a Discussion page where users can comment on the topic or on each other's editing or editorial standards.

Anyone with internet access can edit a Wikipedia entry and/or contribute to the discussion. This initially created the expectation that expertise, if not irrelevant altogether, would have different sources in this medium than in a print encyclopedia, where topic authors are selected based largely on academic expertise. It has turned out, however, that the volunteer editors who patrol Wikipedia in fact rely on the citation of scholarly sources as a major criterion for evaluating entries. With three months of time and effort, we were able to replace the existing article on Pittsburgh English with an entirely different one in which every claim is attributed to a reputable, printed scholarly source, and every study of the Pittsburgh speech that we knew of was cited.

That article has since been edited, but the editing has only made it more technical and limited participation rights in the editing process to people familiar with the relevant scholarly literature. For example, the list of Pittsburgh words on the site has been edited repeatedly to remove entries that were sourced solely to personal experience. In early 2006 (before our revision was posted), there was a discussion of this issue on the Discussion page of the Pittsburgh English entry during which one of the entry's regular editors made it clear that local knowledge was not a valid source of expertise ("Personal experience isn't good enough"):

What references are needed for the direct terms? Most of it is probably from "experience"/tradition by living in Pittsburgh. --[Weatherman1126](#) 15:23, 28 January 2006 (UTC)

All information on Wikipedia needs to be [verifiable](#) and backed up with published [sources](#). Personal experience isn't good enough. Some dictionaries, such as the [American Heritage Dictionary](#), indicate that word is used only in a specific region, so if you can find a citation from one of

those that the word in question is unique to Pittsburgh, then that's citing a source. Published dialect surveys and atlases will also often show what words are used where, so that's another place to look for verification. -- [Angr](#) 16:14, 28 January 2006 (UTC)

Later, another regular editor threatened to delete all un-cited entries in the glossary:

The vast majority of these terms are not cited. These citations need to be added within the next week or I will be deleting them [the terms]. There is a references section, but that's not the same thing as citing; individual terms need to be sourcable. --[Chris Griswold](#) 17:06, 11 July 2006 (UTC)

In sum, despite being in material ways the most interactive of the media I have discussed, Wikipedia is the most insistent that the sole source of legitimate expertise is not only technical but in print. Ironically, the voice of ordinary Pittsburghers – unless they are linguists or can cite the literature of sociolinguistics and dialectology – is even less present than it was in the least interactive of media, the pre-internet print newspaper report.

## **Discussion**

My goal in this paper has been more to open up an area of inquiry than to make inquiry-ending claims. I hope I have been able to suggest how interesting the inquiry is turning out to be. I end by pointing to several things I have learned in the process of doing the work I have just summarized.

One thing I have discovered is how much difference it can make for sociolinguists to make themselves available to the journalistic media. This became clear to me in the analysis of old newspaper articles. Once he came onto the scene, Robert Parslow almost instantly managed to reframe local speech as a subject on which expertise was available and relevant. Pre-Parslow articles report casual observations by almost anyone; post-Parslow articles cite expert sources. As anyone who has talked to a reporter knows, representing ourselves as experts and talking to the public about what we know are risky endeavors. But in addition to critiquing journalistic practice, we can intervene in it, and it is surprisingly easy to do so.

For another thing, the pittsburghese.com site was one of the things that first raised my hackles about how Pittsburgh speech was being represented in the media, so it is interesting to see that, of the four, this is the medium that makes expertise of any kind least relevant. Posters to the site not only did not need to claim expertise in order to have

a voice in the interaction, they could not. And because the site was interactive in only one direction, nobody could object to a particular claim about local speech or suggest an alternative (except the webmaster, who eventually objected to the whole activity by shutting it down).

Finally, it is hardly a novel observation that the uses of technology, like the technology itself, are shaped by human meaning systems. The technical affordances of a communication medium do not determine what people do with it. Wikipedia provides a clear example of this. In a corpus-based factor analysis of linguistic features of Wikipedia and a similar collaborative authoring environment called Everything2, William Emigh and Susan Herring discovered that “the greater the degree of post-production editorial control afforded by the system, the more formal and standardized the language of the collaboratively-authored documents becomes” (2005:abstract) “Paradoxically,” Emigh and Herring note, “users who faithfully appropriate such systems create homogeneous entries, at odds with the goal of open-access authoring environments to create diverse content” (abstract). Whether or not this is a good thing in any larger sense, it has worked to our advantage, and I recommend it – time, labor, and all – to other sociolinguists who think our voices should be heard by the people we study.

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