Thinking Outside the Charity Box: Media Coverage of Homelessness

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› **Abstract**_*Academic interest in the many problematic features of media coverage of homelessness has a long history within the field (see for example Campbell and Reeves, 1989; Iyengar, 1991; Devereux, 1998; Hodgetts et al., 2005; Mao et al., 2012; Feantsa, 2014; Caeiro and Gonçalves, 2015). Existing research evidences convincingly how media content concerning homelessness reproduces and circulates dominant discourses that are partial, selective and ideological. In failing to adequately explain, contextualize or critique the root (i.e. structural) causes of homelessness, media coverage may be said to contribute to its further perpetuation (see Hodgetts et al., 2006). Content produced and circulated by the mainstream media (and content concerning social inequality in particular) remains an important area of study and analysis because it has been shown to be significant in the shaping of public beliefs and likely policy responses. This 'Think Piece' attempts to do two things. First, following a Political Economy approach, it explains media coverage of homelessness through a particular focus on the organizational and production contexts of media content regarding homelessness. Second, it outlines some ways in which dominant media discourses concerning homelessness can be challenged. In the age of media conglomeration in which the public sphere is continuing to contract, the prospects for the emergence of a critical journalism about homelessness remain bleak. Academics and activists concerned about homelessness however need to re-double their efforts to inform and challenge received 'wisdom' about homelessness through re-negotiating their relationships with the mainstream media and through greater use of alternative media strategies. There is also a challenge to be met by many NGOs who themselves recycle stereotypes concerning the homeless.*

› **Keywords**_*homelessness, homeless, media, discourse, disgust, ideology, political economy, routines of production, stigmatization*

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Introduction

On Christmas Day many television news programmes in Europe, and elsewhere, will routinely include a feature on how the homeless have fared that day. Such reports, which have become a staple of contemporary journalism, follow a very predictable and sometimes highly problematic narrative. Usually told through 'charity', 'human interest' and 'deservedness/undeservedness' frames; these news reports typically focus on the actions and opinions of volunteers and charitable organisations (see Devereux, 1998 for an elaboration). In contrast to reporting norms at other times in the year in which the homeless are often rendered voiceless, they occasionally include a few words from individual homeless men or women. Overall, these reports may be read as functioning to salve consciences and to reassure audiences that on Christmas Day – at the very least – all is well with the world – including the lives of the homeless.

The sometimes obscene convention of reporters fleetingly parachuting in on the lives of some of the homeless on Christmas Day (and on Thanksgiving Day in the United States) bookends the last quarter of the calendar year in which homelessness is more likely to be visible in the media (see Bunis *et al.,* 1996; Meert *et al.,* 2004). Even well intentioned journalists who spend a night or two on the streets and write seasonal 'human interest' stories which purport to be from the perspective of the homeless, may in fact serve to further circulate hackneyed well-worn understandings of homelessness which do little to challenge existing assumptions or propose long-term solutions. The repeated use of the 'human interest' genre may work to make a connection between audiences and the homeless and to simplify what are often complex issues, however they are weak on explaining just exactly why homeless persists. Whatever their motivations, it is common for this uneven and sometimes even overly sentimental form of journalism to result in a short-term public response in the form of either donations or offers to volunteer. One problem with the media's lop-sided and narrow approach to homelessness coverage is that it begs some obvious questions: what about the homeless for the remaining months of the year? Why is homelessness commonly reported on without reference to structural causes? Can we imagine alternative ways for the mainstream media to explain homelessness more thoroughly and that will allow us to break out of coverage routines that are cyclical, predictable and largely uncritical? Although the mainstream media are not responsible for homelessness, they occupy a privileged and powerful position in influencing public knowledge concerning homelessness. It is therefore essential that we have a critical understanding of the forces that shape this form of media content, which has a bearing on public understandings and beliefs.

While it is common for journalists and for other media professionals to say that they are in the business of reporting on the social world in 'objective' terms, media coverage of homelessness and other directly related issues such as poverty, income inequality, housing policy, 'house-squatting', migration and social welfare evidence how the mass media reproduce dominant discourses which work, in no small way, to uphold the *status quo* (see Platt, 1999).

Media and the Perpetuation of Homelessness:

In spite of their professional ideologies and sometimes self-congratulatory image, much media coverage of homelessness can be shown in fact to contribute to its perpetuation. This is achieved through a combination of factors including: (1) a failure to adequately explain what homelessness is; (2) a seeming reluctance to focus on the structural causes of homelessness; (3) the use of stereotypes which narrowly define, homogenize, stigmatize, exoticise and infantilize homeless people; (4) an overemphasis on charity as being the most appropriate (and inevitable) response to homelessness; (5) a focus on the 'heroic' acts of homelessness activists or celebrities such as footballers, media personalities and rock stars 'doing their bit' for the homeless; (6) persistent source bias – i.e. an over-reliance on the views of state and NGO spokespersons, as opposed to the lived experiences of the homeless themselves (see Devereux, 1998); (7) a failure to engage critically with the politically powerful as to their role and responsibility in resolving homelessness in the longer-term and (8) a distinct lack of reflexivity on the part of journalists on the likely impact of media reporting on homelessness on public perceptions and the actions (or not) of policy makers.

Taken in combination, all of these factors coalesce to create a context in which homelessness is represented as being *inevitable* (which it is not) and resulting from the individual weaknesses of homeless people themselves rather than from structural causes such as state decisions to close psychiatric hospitals; to cut funding for drug rehabilitation programmes; to regenerate (for that read 'gentrify') inner city spaces; to withdraw from social housing provision or to attempt to remove rent controls in an increasingly deregulated housing market. A further issue within recent public discourse concerns the actions and opinions of populist politicians and others who attempt to mobilize anti-immigrant sentiment by expressing latter-day concern for 'our own' homeless. Such discursive strategies attempt to pit the indigenous homeless against the needs of asylum seekers and refugees who also have precarious living conditions and are at serious risk of being homeless.

In common with media coverage of other vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers, refugees, economic migrants, those dependent on welfare, the disabled, nomadic groups (e.g. Roma; Travellers and Gypsies), stereotypes abound. Homelessness is represented reductively through images of elderly male alcoholic rough sleepers who invariably beg and are work-shy. The use of such homogenized stereotypes may work as a sort of journalistic shorthand but they also serve to narrow public understandings of what constitutes homelessness and conceal many other groups who are homeless such as the young or entire families who have been evicted by profit-hungry landlords. Moreover, the association of the visible homeless with specific places (such as underneath the arches of the Pont Marie Bridge in Paris or 'Skid Row' in Los Angeles) results in places becoming stigmatised and understood as being dangerous 'no-go' areas. Many NGOs working with homeless people are themselves guilty of reproducing stereotypical images of the homeless. They may argue that the decision to use images of elderly (and presumably alcoholic) rough sleepers works to convince members of the public to donate money to their fundraising campaigns, but the repeated use of such images adds little to furthering public understandings of what homelessness is and its underlying causes.

Pity, sympathy, condescension and an emphasis on charity are all key ingredients. While negative discourses concerning the homeless have a very long history, they have, arguably, become even more pronounced as Neo-Liberalism has assumed its hegemonic position and as the media's public sphere role has shrunk even further owing to increased privatization and conglomeration. The rise of even more pronounced classed, gendered and racialized disgust discourses concerning the poor and marginalized in the media more generally (see for example *Benefits Street* and *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* Channel 4, UK) present a further set of challenges as does the creeping decline in investigative journalism in age of 'infotainment' (see Devereux, 2014). Disgust (see Tyler, 2013) discourses centered on the homeless may be witnessed in media-generated moral panics concerning 'aggressive' begging, 'scamming', 'welfare fraud' and street-drinking. As concrete evidence of this, on Christmas Eve 2014 cages were installed over street benches in the city of Angouleme in Southwest France. It was reported that the decision was taken with the agreement of local traders who were "concerned with how business would be affected by drunken people." The prominent regional daily newspaper *Sud Ouest* stated that the Champ de Mars shopping area, which housed the benches "… had become the scene of regular fights between homeless people, often involving dogs and drug deals." Seven years earlier, disgust for the homeless in the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil was evidenced in the controversial decision by the mayor to order the spraying emergency doorways of a shopping centre with a foul-smelling odour in order to disperse a small number of homeless men and women who were sleeping

there at night (*New York Times*, August 29th 2007). Further contempt for the homeless may be seen in the decisions to install 'anti-tramp' spikes outside apartments and offices in London as well as the replacement of the seats in the Paris Metro stations with ones which made it next to impossible for the homeless to rest or sleep there. One recent Norwegian study noted how the public disgust felt for 'outgroups' such as the homeless focused on their lack of social warmth and competence (Dalsklev and Kunst, 2015).

While counter-hegemonic interpretations of homelessness are in circulation – most notably in Street Newspapers or Street Magazines (see Howley, 2005 and 2009) like *The Big Issue* – and online in various social media settings, it is important to stress the continuing power and dominance of the mainstream media in shaping agendas and understandings of homelessness. In spite of the brave promises made concerning the possibilities afforded by citizen journalism, we should not be too complacent about online media as it, too, is the source of many myths and examples of disinformation about the homeless, most notably in the form of accounts of street begging 'scams' in various European (and other) capital cities. The stigmatization of the homeless even extends to the world of on-line gaming. The German 'Pennergame' (aka 'Dossergame') is an on-line game that asks participants to take on the role of 'dossers' whose aim is to win by becoming millionaires. The website for the London version invites players to become 'King of The Tramps.' While it admits that it does not deal with homelessness in a politically correct fashion, the site rehearses all the usual Neo-Liberal understandings of how homeless people can better themselves (See www.dossergame.co.uk).

The Political Economy of Media

Any understanding of media coverage of homelessness needs to be cognisant of the macro changes that are occurring more broadly within the media industries. Fenton (2011) shows how adoption of new media technologies and the rationalization of journalism as a profession have had a profoundly negative impact on news and newsmakers. Conglomeration has resulted in an insatiable search for profit, a reduction in the number of news outlets such as local and regional newspapers, cuts in the number of journalists employed, and greater pressures to generate content across media platforms. A growing number of journalists are desk-bound and spend their time 'mouse-chasing' or, in Fenton's words, 'Speeding it up and spreading it thin' (2011, p.65). The marketization of news and the economies being imposed by media conglomerates means fewer resources for a critical journalism. Democratic dialogue and debate are the main casualties in the crises affecting news journalism. While Fenton acknowledges the possibilities afforded by new media technologies in terms of the generation and distribution of news, she also cautions against a

utopian view of new media, as a panacea to the news needs of citizens. It has not brought about a renaissance in journalism. Curran (2012), similarly, shows how television news remains the most important source of trustworthy and credible news for audiences. All of the foregoing developments have serious implications for the likelihood or not for media coverage that critiques, challenges and informs. Devereux, Haynes and Power (2011) show how marketization processes have adversely affected the practice of journalism. From this perspective news is now primarily defined as a commodity. Crucially, McManus sees the marketization of news as: 'any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist's or news organizations best effort to maximise public understanding of those issues and events that the shape the community they claim to serve' (2009, p.219). From this point of view the increased marketization of news has radically reduced the possibility that the mass media can function as a public sphere informing *all* citizens about important social, economic and political issues that may affect their lives. Thus the practice of journalism is intrinsically ideological in that the net result is that existing power structures are rarely questioned. This is particularly the case in terms of how homelessness is represented and understood.

Media Content Matters

In spite of the protestations of some journalists, media content is *never* neutral. It is socially constructed and ideologically laden. At any one time, it contains many clues as to the make-up of the social structure that determines so much about all of our lives. Media content matters because it is within media content that the shaping and framing of our understanding and perceptions of the social world takes place. Media content provides us with the many 'scripts' necessary for us to negotiate and make sense of the everyday social contexts in which we find ourselves. Media content informs us about the personal and the political. Understanding media content is crucial in terms of reaching a more informed understanding of how we form views, opinions and attitudes about groups who are considered 'other'. The 'other' may comprise of a range of 'out' groups in any society. They may be the homeless; members of the LGBT community; the colonized; welfare recipients; residents of stigmatized neighbourhoods; ex-prisoners; the mentally ill and immigrants, for example. Those who are othered are regularly constructed as a threat to the moral and social order. Media content not only shapes our understanding of the social world but may also influence our actions (or inactions) about issues concerning fairness, justice and equality. Media content may work to convince us that homelessness is natural, inevitable and directly as a result of individual weaknesses such as alcohol or drug addiction. Media content influences not only the opinions and attitudes of the general public

but also perhaps more tellingly the perspectives of those who possess political power (see Golding and Midleton, 1982; McKendrick *et al.,* 2008). Media content which is purportedly about 'them' is more often than not really more about 'us' in that it circulates discourses which are comforting to the majority and which fail to challenge unequal relationships of power or suggest alternatives that might threaten or destabilize the *status quo*. Mainstream media content sets agendas and determines what the public see as being important. Media content works ideologically by representing issues such as homelessness selectively. What *isn't* included in media discourse concerning homelessness is often more important than what is. A telling example here is the press coverage of an award-winning sleeping bag – 'Street Swag' – designed for the homeless (see www.streetswags.org). In 2009, the Danish print media reported the praise lavished on the project by an elite figure (Crown Princess Mary of Denmark) and noted how the bag could be kept invisible on the streets. Such coverage may be read as an example of how media coverage normalizes rough sleeping, focuses on the utterances of elite figures and fails to pose awkward questions of those in authority.

Making The News

Media discourses usually begin in an organizational setting. An examination of the internal workings and ownership structures of media organizations can help us understand more about media coverage of homelessness. Production Research places the spotlight on the initial 'making' of media content. It investigates the culture of individual media organizations; the dynamics involved in 'gate-keeping', and the activities, experiences and ideologies of journalists and other media professionals (Gitlin, 1994). Production Research explains how and why particular discourses, ideologies, templates or frames come to predominate within media coverage. Influenced, in the main, by organizational sociology and by theories of political economy (Fenton, 2007; Mosco and Wasko, 1988) it has the potential to reveal *how*, *when* and *why* homelessness is covered in the way that it is – and by extension why it is routinely ignored by the media. Devereux (1998) demonstrates how, in an Irish context, television coverage of homelessness is determined by organizational routines and professional practices that result in coverage that is seasonal, episodic and more likely to focus on the actions of heroic figures who work with the homeless rather than the homeless themselves. Media coverage of homelessness is shaped by deeply embedded routines and editorial practices. Homelessness is not considered to be newsworthy *per se*, rather it is framed by temporal and cultural concerns (see Bunis *et al.,* 1996). The frequency of coverage is more likely to be greater during the months of October, November and December. Coverage is more likely to be 'episodic' rather than 'thematic' (see Iyengar, 1991)

and it is more likely to focus on individual rather than structural reasons for homelessness. Episodic coverage of homelessness helps to create a context in which the structural reasons for homelessness can either be downplayed or ignored. In a now classic study, Campbell and Reeves (1989) analyze the narratives of news reporting on Joyce Brown, a New York 'bag lady' (who was allegedly schizophrenic). She refused the attentions and offers of help from social workers. They argue that network television framed and narrated the question of homelessness through four distinct stages of the routine news package. They suggest that: 'the major socio-economic problem of homelessness which requires collective participation for resolution often plays out in the news as an isolated personal problem demanding individual attention' (1989: 23).

We should not be too surprised by the fact the media ownership structures may have a bearing on the coverage of homelessness (see Barker-Drummond and Kidd, 2009). Media ownership has become more concentrated and is now largely controlled by conglomerates. Private interests control the bulk of media content created and disseminated in our media saturated world. Increased privatization has meant a more pronounced focus on marketization, growing levels of sensationalism and infotainment. In 2008, for example, the Finnish owned Hungarian subscription based channel Story TV broadcast a 'reality' TV show called 'The Big Chance.' With strong echoes of the *Big Brother* TV Series, it featured 12 homeless people who were selected following interviews in homeless shelters in Budapest (see Hodgson, 2008). Advance publicity for the show claimed that the contestants were given a makeover prior to entering a luxury chateau for six months. The language used by the Story TV website is also noteworthy in terms of its disgust overtones. The homeless participants were to: "… give up the "illnesses of suffering" such as alcohol, gambling and smoking before learning a trade and looking for a job". As part of the series the participants were offered domestic economy instruction. Media reports noted that their instructor stated: "In principle, no one will go hungry, but… if someone takes four cream cakes instead of a main course, this is not only unhealthy, but selfish too, since it means three people will miss out on dessert" (Hodgson, 2008). *The Big Chance* is an example of a prevailing sensationalist trend within the media that represents the lives of the excluded in a voyeuristic and judgemental way and which explains poverty and exclusion in terms of individual weaknesses. While this emphasis may be intriguing and entertaining for audiences, it also helps confirm prejudices and keeps the spotlight away from the actions or inactions of the powerful concerning homelessness.

Recent research evidences how media ownership structures are of significance in the reporting of homelessness. Mao *et al.* (2012) examined three Canadian newspapers' coverage of homelessness. Informed by agenda-setting theory and adopting a detailed content analysis approach, their study compared regional and national

newspaper coverage of homelessness in Canada. In addition to political and cultural contexts, they found that corporate ownership (in this instance a major multimedia conglomerate) was of significance in that such newspapers had *less* coverage of the complex issue of homelessness than their singly owned counterparts.

Challenging Representations:

While some recent analyses of news coverage of homelessness suggest that more sympathetic portrayals of homelessness may be emerging (see Rossall, 2011) it is the contention of this 'Think Piece' that many serious challenges remain for journalistic practice and for the Homeless NGO sector itself (for an overview of debates across Europe, see Feantsa, 2014) in terms of how homelessness is represented, explained and responded to.

Can anything be done to challenge media norms concerning homelessness?

There are lessons to be gained from the counter-hegemonic media strategies employed in the wider community sector (see Dean and Hastings, 2000). Writing in an Irish context, Haynes, Devereux and Power (2014) demonstrate how stigmatised neighbourhoods can resist, challenge and potentially alter dominant media representations of housing estates deemed to be problematic 'no-go' areas. They argue that while community based media (see Howley, 2009 and 2005) are important for constructing a positive self-image for marginalized groups, those working in the NGO sector also need to be empowered to challenge mainstream media that are consumed by the wider public. This means that NGO groups working with the homeless may need to rethink their working relationships with journalists and other media professionals. Conway, Cahill and Corcoran (2009) show how largely negative media coverage of Fatima Mansions (Dublin) was challenged and altered through the role of its residents in managing its media image. The community challenged the dominant negative storylines about their neighbourhood by emphasising positive stories, the strong social bonds, and locally based initiatives to address the neighbourhood's social problems. Media training helped the neighbourhoods' residents acquire resources to challenge their neighbourhood's 'spoiled identity' and residents became more proficient and refined in their offerings to the media (Conway, Cahill and Corcoran, 2009).

To what extent can NGOs working with the homeless influence the ways in which homelessness is covered in the mainstream media? It is worth considering that the production pressures which journalists find themselves increasingly under may be

used to the advantage of NGOs. In an environment in which the mass media are hungry for content, is it outside the bounds of possibility that NGOs working with the homeless would place a renewed emphasis on media training and the writing of press materials, which contain empirical (and challenging) evidence. There are also important lessons to be learned for those involved in journalism education. There is clearly a need for journalism to be taught not just as a vocational subject but also in the context of other disciplines focused on society, politics, economics, social justice and ethics. There is compelling evidence in countless studies of the ways in which media regularly get it wrong concerning the homeless. NGO's need to challenge such negative and ill-informed representations. This may involve regular media monitoring. It may also involve actively campaigning through social media when the media circulate content which is incorrect, ill-informed or which demonizes the homeless (See for example http://www.trueactivist.com/lazy-crazy-addicts-homeless-people-challenge-stereotypes/). In an era in which media content (and critical investigative journalism in particular) have become increasingly debased what are the implications for the coverage of homelessness? Fenton (2011) acknowledges the possibilities afforded by new media technologies in terms of the generation and distribution of news, but she also cautions against a utopian view of new media, as a panacea to the news needs of the public.

The many challenges outlined in this think piece are not just restricted to the mainstream media. Many NGO organizations working with the homeless are themselves guilty of perpetuating stereotypical images of homelessness and of underscoring charity as the most appropriate response (see Deutsche and Ryan, 1984, O'Sullivan, 2015). The dominant images used in advertising campaigns repeatedly use a very narrow framing of homelessness. Furthermore, the images (usually facial expressions of the homeless) have been critiqued as being exploitative (Andersson and Valentine, 2014) which serve to decontextualize, dehumanize and depoliticize homelessness. Homelessness is routinely equated with being male; elderly; alcoholic and rough sleeping. While some might argue that repeated use of this restricted interpretative framework is for practical and pragmatic reasons (i.e. to maximize public response in the form of donations etc.) it is also the case that, whatever about its effectiveness as a marketing/advertising strategy, it serves to add to a very limited public understanding of what homelessness actually is. The use of such stereotypes, the stress on charity as a response does very little to end homelessness.

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