

## **Framing Homelessness for the Canadian Public: The News Media and Homelessness**

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### *Abstract*

In Canada newspapers remain a significant source of information available to the public. However, little research has been done on Canadian news media representations of homelessness and their reflection of or influence on social norms and values. In this paper the authors review the literature exploring news media depictions of homelessness from the perspectives of news framing, media influence on social norms and values, and the construction of news. Examples from Canadian newspapers are provided to demonstrate the media's framing and portrayal of people who are homeless or their issues and circumstances. In relation to the framing of the homeless and their situations, the authors describe four primary factors that influence the media in their selection of frames. The paper concludes with targeted analysis about the importance of understanding how and why the media frame their stories about the homeless as they do, and what further research is needed.

*Keywords:* homelessness, news media, news framing, influencing factors

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### *Résumé*

Au Canada, la presse demeure une source d'information importante pour le public. Cependant, peu de recherches ont été menées sur les représentations dans les nouveaux médias de l'itinérance et du miroir qu'elles offrent des normes sociales et des valeurs ainsi que de leur influence sur ces normes et valeurs. Les auteurs présentent une revue de la littérature portant sur la description de l'itinérance dans les nouveaux médias, dans une perspective de cadrage de l'information, d'influence des médias sur les normes et valeurs sociales et de construction de l'information. Des exemples tirés de la presse canadienne illustrent le cadrage des médias et le portrait qui est fait des sans abris, de leurs problèmes et des contextes. Quatre facteurs fondamentaux influencent les médias dans la sélection des cadrages liés à l'itinérance. En conclusion est soulignée l'importance de comprendre comment et pourquoi les médias cadrent leurs récits sur l'itinérance comme ils le font.

*Mots clés:* l'itinérance, médias, cadrage nouvelles, l'influence des médias

### **Introduction**

Homelessness can be defined in many ways and has been attributed to numerous causes (Frankish *et al.* 2005). As such, the news media can present a story related to individuals who are homeless in many ways, and newspapers, television, and radio are influential voices for informing the public and for framing opinions on social issues (Milio 1987). The news media's interest in and portrayal of the homeless and homelessness issues are the focus of this literature review, which includes examples from Canadian newspapers. We address the presence of homelessness and homeless people as an issue in Canadian news media and the need for research on this topic, and provide an overview of frames related to homelessness. We then discuss some theories on news media content, supported by examples from major Canadian newspapers.

Homelessness is increasing in Canada and "has become an obvious crisis in large urban areas" (Frankish *et al.* 2005: S24). The term *homelessness*, which gained widespread media attention in the 1980s (Hulchanski *et al.* 2009: 6), has come to mean "a poverty that includes being unhoused." The nature of who was homeless is considered to have changed at this time from referring to transient populations or to individuals without social connections to connoting a physical lack of

housing. It has been related to U.S. and Canadian government policies such as psychiatric deinstitutionalization and deregulation, and social program cutbacks (Hulchanski *et al.* 2009). Due to the lack of Canadian research, much of what is believed about homelessness in Canada has been inferred from U.S. studies (Hulchanski *et al.* 2009). However, although parallels have been observed between the two countries in terms of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century economic patterns and government social policies (Varney and van Vliet 2008), their homeless populations differ, as do social supports and geography (Hulchanski *et al.* 2009). The amount and type of media coverage of homelessness—in particular, how homeless people and homelessness are socially constructed (Schneider and Ingram 1993)—might influence or reflect whether and how homelessness issues are addressed. All of these factors point to a need for research.

Research indicates that news media can influence public perceptions of the relative salience of issues (Iyengar and Kinder 2010). Mass media coverage of social problems can increase public awareness, but can also mobilize public support for certain solutions and affect policy making. Therefore, this research can illuminate current and historical input into public dialogue on homelessness. Furthermore, because the public learns of real-world issues through socially constructed concepts, knowledge of how these concepts are constructed might help effect social change (Hackett and Zhao 1998). For example, participants in a successful social movement must be able to define new frames (Kitzinger 2004). Specifically, advocates for the homeless who understand prevalent frames might more successfully present alternative frames to influence public opinion and enhance their own credibility (Greenberg *et al.* 2005).

### **Examining the Literature: Methodology**

In this section we discuss the method of review used in this paper. Theory is based on Goffman (1974), who defined frames as cognitive structures used to organize experience, and later researchers on framing (e.g., Shoemaker and Reese 1996, who consider the message to be a dependent variable, contrary to previous media effects literature). We have also drawn on news media studies, including construction of the political spectacle (Edelman 1988), media effects (Iyengar 1991), and Shields' (2001) work on U.S. media representations of homelessness. Frames can be described as “a specific set of expectations used to make sense of some aspect of the social world in a specific situation and time”

(Baran and Davis 2008: 282), although different authors use the term in different ways (Kitzinger 2007). They can refer both to how a topic is presented in media and to audience/reader reception processes. Although a given story might contain several frames, usually one will dominate (Iyengar 1991). News frames help the journalist and the reader to make sense of information and events. They are defined both by what they include and by what they omit (Entman 1993) and are present even in articles that adhere to journalistic standards of objectivity (Hackett and Zao 1998) and balance (Kitzinger 2007).

A literature search was conducted to identify scholarly publications related to homelessness in Canadian news media. On media representations of homelessness, two databases, EBSCO's Academic Search Complete and PubMed were searched using terms "homeless and media"; ("homeless" or "homelessness") and "media"; ("homeless" or homelessness) and "mass media"; ("homeless" or "homelessness") and "press"; and ("homeless" or homelessness) and ("frame" or "framing"). These databases were chosen as representative of social scientific and health sciences databases. These searches returned 38 results for the years 2000 to 2010. The first author also included sources from an earlier search by another coauthor of academic literature and Canadian Newsstand, a University of Alberta full-text database of major Canadian newspapers. As a cross-check, she searched Google Scholar on September 4, 2010, using the term "homeless" combined with "Canada" and "media," "mass media," or "newspaper," which returned 874 articles, books, websites, or dissertations and theses, including several articles that were not obtained from PubMed or Academic Search Complete. She reviewed all titles and abstracts of peer-reviewed publications for the use of terms "homeless" or "homelessness" and "communication," "media perception," or "newspaper," or synonyms. Web of Science keyword searches produced nine articles, all pre-2000, only one of which directly related to representations of homelessness and news media (Kinnick *et al.* 1996). Located articles' citations were also traced where applicable.

## **Canadian Newspaper Coverage of Homelessness**

### *Why Study News Media?*

The public, for the most part, learns about people who are homeless through personal observation and through mass media (Krewski *et al.* 2004). Some researchers have argued that the media directly and purposefully influence the public's opinion about topics such as home-

lessness regardless of the public's desire for this (Buck *et al.* 2004), but others have reported that the public looks to the media to be influenced and affected (Soukup 2002), although news media are not the only source of information (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

The literature is divided on individual resistance to media portrayals (Baran and Davis 2008, Shoemaker and Reese 1996); some research has indicated that individuals are influenced by their personal status and beliefs but also by any contact with and communication about homeless people (Lee *et al.* 1990). Other factors that might influence receptiveness to media frames include social membership, especially regarding issues around housing, political affiliation, and expressed religiosity (Forte 2002). Independent of the degree of media effects, furthermore, policymakers “operate under an assumption that how media organizations ‘frame’ issues and debates will influence how publics form their opinions” (Greenberg *et al.* 2005: 132) and so respond to media representations.

Television studies have revealed that the content and structure of news stories influence what issues viewers consider important (agenda setting; McCombs and Shaw 1972) and the criteria they use to evaluate politicians' performances and to attribute responsibility for a given issue (priming; Iyengar and Kinder 2010). Whether a circumstance such as homelessness is even presented as a social problem—that is, as something that needs addressing—can influence public opinion on actions and policy formation (Edelman 1988, Best 2010). Social policies and legislation are often challenged if the society is unreceptive to them (Lee *et al.* 1991). Conversely, mass media portrayals also reflect social norms. To the extent that mass media reflects the diverse values, beliefs and perceptions of homelessness, media content analysis can inform policy making (Kendall 2005) and is worth investigating.

### *Why Study Newspapers?*

Newspapers have been portrayed as a dying medium in North America (Robinson and Martin 2009). In Canada, however, newspaper readership has not declined to the same extent as in the U.S. In 2009 three quarters of adult Canadians living in markets with daily newspapers reported that they read a newspaper at least weekly (Canadian Newspaper Association 2009). Canadian newspapers therefore appear to be a useful source of research data, although newspaper readership characteristics might affect study generalizability (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007).

### **Are People Who Are Homeless Visible in Media?**

Homelessness and the social issues surrounding it make for compelling stories (Lee *et al.* 1991). Although book authors and screenwriters seem to have accepted this notion (Grzyb 2004), North American news media began to pay attention to the homeless only in the mid-1980s (Buck *et al.* 2004). Kramer and Lee (1999) argued that people who are homeless are invisible because they are not valued. Gans (1979) described the poor as invisible except when they become a problem to the mainstream community. In general, news media have little coverage of social determinants of health, including poverty and homelessness (Hayes *et al.* 2007). These two have been separated as issues in U.S. media since the 1990s, and reports on homelessness have outnumbered those on poverty or hunger, perhaps because the general public reacts more sympathetically to the topic of homelessness or because solutions seem easier (Kendall 2005).

What constitutes news in Western media tends to be large-scale events that are close to home, relevant, and negative, and have a clearly defined meaning, a short time scale, drama, personification, and action (McQuail 2005). Homelessness meets few of these criteria. As well, much news focuses on celebrities (Gans 1979), a status reached only rarely by homeless people (for an exception, see Lloyd and McGovern 2008). Journalists have said that they do not enjoy dealing with homeless people and they can often choose not to (Reynalds 2006).

### **Framing Homelessness**

Goffman (1974) defined frames as mental constructs individuals use to organize and make sense of their experiences. Later researchers have studied how individuals and organizations, including mass media, construct frames to influence others (Kendall 2005) and the effectiveness of frames (Cress and Snow 2000). In the following section we review the literature on media frames which can and have been used in relation to homelessness. Examples from Canadian newspapers are provided to demonstrate framing of people who are homeless or their situations. Because of the different conceptualizations, there is some overlap among frames.

#### *Types of Frames*

Although movies or novels might portray homeless characters subtly, “such complexity is almost never shown in television news or on the pages of American newspapers. We stereotype and simplify the news

without even thinking about it” (Kittross 1999: 82), distorting social characteristics of homeless people and, in the process, understating the difficulties in assessing their needs. We will now describe themes related to homelessness and give Canadian examples.

*Episodic versus thematic frames.* In a television study, Iyengar (1991) distinguished between thematic and episodic frames. Thematic framing focuses attention on systemic roots of social problems and social responsibility (Iyengar 1991), which can be combined with an argument that the situation needs addressing. It is based on statistics and trends, such as food bank usage rates or food costs (Kendall 2005). High-profile organizations, such as government and advocacy groups, can thus draw public attention to homelessness as a social problem requiring intervention (Best 2010). For example, a *Globe and Mail* editorialist used a thematic frame in attributing a rise in the Toronto homeless population to deinstitutionalization of people with mental illness (“Have We Abandoned” 1997), supporting this assertion with statistics on hostel residents with mental illness. To provide balance (Hackett and Zhao 1998) but still within the thematic frame, the newspaper published a letter by two psychiatrists (Goering and Wasylenki 1997: A23) who cited opposing statistics but also presented an alternative frame (i.e., homelessness caused by “the interaction of individual vulnerabilities and structural factors” such as employment and housing availability rather than deinstitutionalization policies). Thematic framing can, however, render subjects faceless by presenting them as statistics rather than as persons with experiences (Kendall 2005), as in the previous example. Cress and Snow (2000) offered a further refinement on thematic framing by delineating diagnostic frames, which describe the problem; prognostic frames, which delineate how to fix it; and motivational frames, aimed at prompting action. The above different types of thematic frames interact with political, organizational, and tactical factors that enable homelessness advocacy groups to achieve goals.

Episodic frames, on the other hand, focus on the individual, encouraging viewers to blame individuals for their situations (Iyengar 1991). In her analysis of Canadian news media coverage of the death of an infant in a homeless shelter, Robson (2005) observes that the mother is labelled as “bad”. In another Canadian example, individuals losing accommodations are presented in the *Globe and Mail* as “people who refuse to take the medications prescribed” (“Have We Abandoned” 1997: A16), thereby assigning responsibility to them (Kitzinger 2007). A homeless person as the “threatening villain” (McNulty 1992)<sup>1</sup> is presented in the reference to a murder committed by a man who “suffered

from paranoid schizophrenia and used crack cocaine.” Similarly, anti-poverty advocates’ portrayals of individual homeless people, although aimed at disrupting stereotypes, might direct public attention away from systemic (e.g., economic or political) factors (e.g., Hodgetts and Chamberlain 2006). Shields (2001) found that U.S. network news favoured episodic frames over thematic by a ratio of 80 to 20. Kendall (2005) describes four types of frames applied to individuals who are poor and/or homeless: sympathetic, negative, exceptionalistic, and charitable. Sympathetic frames tend to focus on children, the elderly, and the ill, and can evoke either positive or negative audience reactions. Exceptionalism frames are inspirational stories about people overcoming adversity (Kendall 2005).

*Sympathetic versus unsympathetic frames.* Some researchers have considered media coverage of homelessness to be overall sympathetic (e.g., Buck *et al.* 2004). For instance, a Canadian local newspaper article describes how housing for special-needs individuals who have been homeless might “add value to neighbourhoods” (Berger 2010: A17). On the other hand, a journalist told Reynalds (2006) that news media in general cover most stories negatively, noting the two maxims of broadcast news underscoring media reliance on controversy, drama, and criminality: “If it’s sleazy, it’s easy,” meaning easy to present, and “If it bleeds, it leads.” Some reporters stereotype homeless people as victims (Olasky 1992). Compassion for the homeless expressed overtly through terms such as *forgotten*, *ignored*, or *invisible* was found to be rare in news media (Lind and Danowski 1999), and mass media often present an event such as the death of a homeless person out of context (Kendall 2005). Negative frames are considered below as deviance frames.

*Deviance frames.* Mainstream news media reports on homelessness “typically focus on what the homeless have done wrong” (Kendall 2005: 117). Many refer to crimes or unfortunate events. This frame was evident in the *Calgary Herald* article “Homeless Pair Face Vandalism Charges” (2007), in which two men charged with mischief are characterized as homeless, although a crime report might not state that a person charged was housed. Including this information, although factually correct, can suggest causation to readers (Kitzinger 2007). Similarly, a *Toronto Star* summary article reporting a homeless man’s death in a Toronto garage includes details of his prior convictions for having sexual relations with minors although they did not relate to his death (Bill and Moloney 1997). “The standard news frames construct the homeless as deviant, fortifying the boundaries between ‘us’ and



‘them’” (Shields 2001: 194). It is worth noting, however, that the public has been shown to resist the “wild and crazy” image of homeless people (Lee *et al.* 1991).

In a 1990s U.S. study of radio and television, homelessness was often found paired with substance use or mental illness, and with diseases such as HIV/AIDS, linking stigma of the body with social stigma (Lind and Danowski 1999). In a Canadian context, a *Toronto Star* article (Bohuslawsky 1998) featured two homeless men with mental illnesses, although research has indicated that “the majority of the homeless are not personally inadequate” (Fiske 1999: 6). Similarly, an *Edmonton Journal* review of a documentary on homelessness (Kellogg 1997: C1) begins with a dramatic depiction of an “alcoholic” homeless man attempting to panhandle while shouting abuses at passers-by. More nuanced portrayals appear only later in the article, which readers might not be exposed to if they do not finish the article or if the article is shortened for publication. Newspaper articles are written in “inverted pyramid” structure, with content considered important at the beginning. Editing for length is accomplished by deleting paragraphs from the end of the article rather than by rewriting (Hackett and Zhao 1998).

*Conflict frames.* Stories of conflicts between homeless activists and traditional service providers, and community opposition to tent cities have featured business people and other community members using a “we” that excludes the homeless, thereby locating the homeless as “others” (Fiske 1999) and contesting their right to use public space (Hodgetts *et al.* 2008). A *Windsor Star* article described the public library fencing off its outside heating ducts to prevent homeless people from congregating there because of “security problems” and “intimidation,” as quoted by a librarian (Battagello 1997). Another example of a conflict frame might involve advocacy groups disputing government statistics (Kendall 2005). This was evident in the *Globe and Mail* in 1997 in a letter to the editor challenging the link between psychiatric disorders and homelessness (see above, Goering and Wasylenki 1997). In a follow-up letter to the editor, a writer (Matas 1997: A18) described Goering and Wasylenki’s statistics as “misleading” and argued that the two, “for their own reasons, seem intent on decoupling mental illness and homelessness in the public mind... common sense, however would tell us otherwise.”

*Dependence frame.* This frame includes articles on social assistance programs and poverty cycles, or portraying certain groups, such as older individuals, as a social burden (Kendall 2005). In a *Montreal Gazette* article (“City Chips in \$100,000,” 2004: A7), for example, in-

ner-city street youth are described as physically and verbally abusive toward the public, requiring municipal funding for additional workers. A city official interviewed describes the goal of homeless youth sharing the space “while respecting others” but does not refer to other urban dwellers’ needing to respect the homeless. Similarly, when a reporter describes homeless people’s lack of access to public transit, she relates it to medical costs to the taxpayer resulting from individuals’ having to walk farther than they would if they had transit access. These costs were reported as increasing if the person has been “addicted to the bottle for years.” To support this assertion, the journalist quotes a health care worker on how homeless people compound their problems (“It doesn’t even dawn on them to wash their socks”; Philp 1997a: A1).

*Attributions frames.* Two types of responsibility can be attributed for any social issue: responsibility as to cause and as to treatment (Iyengar 1991). Few media accounts place homelessness in a historical context (Shields 2001), and often attribution is only inferred, with words such as *because* or *why* rarely used (Lind and Danowski 1999). Many U.S. news accounts of homelessness relate to natural disasters or attribute it to bad luck, with systemic forces, government policies, or economic trends rarely cited as having a causal influence. American Marcuse (1988) described stories on homelessness as publicizing, in the sense of portraying their situation, but neutralizing by focusing blame on the homeless themselves. In a Canadian context, Adams *et al.* (2007: A23) applauded the City of Toronto for an initiative to supply safe affordable housing for homeless people but also blamed the people involved by stating, “Most of the individuals I have assisted in finding housing do not want to live in a ‘project’.”

*Seasonal frames.* News stories on homelessness often appear around Thanksgiving and Christmas in the context of a charitable undertaking. The *Montreal Gazette*, for example, reported: “The Brewery Mission on Clark St., which provides food and shelter for the city’s homeless and itinerants, will be 100 years old in 1989—and so will its tradition of providing an annual Christmas dinner” (Buchignani 1988: A4). Some authors have differentiated a cold weather frame. They noted that stories related to homelessness tend to appear as the weather grows colder, which gives the audience a reason to sympathize but does not address solutions (Shields 2001). However, news reports on homelessness fall off in January and February, which are usually colder than the Thanksgiving-Christmas period (Bunis *et al.* 1996), suggesting that, rather than cold weather, seasons traditionally associated with charity might “temporarily widen the span of sympathy” (Reeves 1999: 48). In-

creased numbers of stories on homelessness have also been observed in the context of tourism, for example in cities hosting Olympics or other major events (Lind and Danowski 1999; e.g., Woo 2010).

*Solutions frames.* Many of these relate to charitable works and to short-term solutions such as providing meals (Lind and Dankowski 1999). For example, a *Montreal Gazette* article (Astor 2000) reported on an innovative program in which Cirque du Soleil gives runaway and homeless Montreal youth career opportunities. However, “while the appearance is that media are covering a social problem, we are really ignoring a social problem and focusing on individuals who are working to alleviate the problem through volunteer efforts” (Shields 2001: 209). In this way, the problem is recast as one for volunteers such as Cirque du Soleil to solve (Fiske 1999). Citing Foucault, Edelman (1988: 23) noted that solutions are also a “signal of the limits of tolerance” for the individuals in question.

### **Influences on Frames**

How homelessness is framed can depend on a number of issues, including journalistic norms, organizational norms and routines, and perceptions as well as social construction of the issue. In the sections that follow, we will describe these in more detail.

*Journalistic norms.* Objectivity is a long-standing normative value of journalism (McQuail 2005). Whereas homeless people might want the media to advocate for them (Reynalds 2006), objectivity has long been entrenched in journalistic culture, although “journalism has become more explicitly interpretive” and the concept of objectivity is a contested one (Hackett and Zhao 1998: 82). It is associated with such practices as presenting several viewpoints and attribution of sources, which might marginalize advocacy groups (see below).

Another journalistic norm is press freedom. However, an inherent tension exists between freedom and the media norm of accountability. Media workers are accountable to their audience but also to advertisers or sponsors, content suppliers, the subjects of their reports, owners and shareholders, government bodies, social institutions affected by or dependent on media, public opinion, interest groups, and so on. They might therefore avoid topics, including homelessness, that could make stakeholders uncomfortable (Hackett and Zhao 1998, McQuail 2005). In Canada regulation of mass media has been relaxed in recent years, resulting in a trend toward concentration of ownership (Winseck 2008) that might limit the number of information sources and, therefore, the

number of frames on homelessness available to the public, but little research has been conducted on media usage, ownership, diversity, or policy (Savage 2008). As well, little is known about the impact of new media, which might oppose the effects of media concentration (Savage 2008).

*Organizational routines.* Related to journalistic norms are the organizational routines that support them. Reporters' reliance on politicians and corporate public relations departments as news sources, as well as fear of litigation and advertiser alienation, has meant that blame for social problems tends to be ascribed to individuals with the lowest status (Hackett and Zhao 1998). However, even journalistic routines aimed at promoting objectivity introduce bias, for example the practice of "balancing" an alternative viewpoint with an "expert" one (Tuchman 1978). For example, even if an advocacy group gains news media attention, the reporter might contrast their assertions with those of officials or "experts," casting doubt on the advocates' statements. The dilemma is illustrated in a *Globe and Mail* article (Philp 1997b: A10) reporting that fewer individuals who are homeless experience serious psychiatric disorder than shelter staff claim. A hostel manager responds that the "most profoundly mentally ill" would have been excluded from the study because of the methodology used. The researchers then are given the final word and state that this population is so small that excluding them would not affect the research findings, a claim that shelter staff are not given the opportunity to refute. Tuchman, Gans (1979), and others consider that even without direct outside interference media organizational routines will work to support the status quo. Routines have intensified because of tighter deadlines resulting from electronic news gathering, making a journalist more apt to "go by the book" (Weaver *et al.* 2007), for example relying on government sources for information on homelessness. McQuail (2005), however, has noted that much research on journalistic organizational routines is media centric and might overestimate normative effects.

*Influence of the individual.* Another normative influence resides in the population of journalists. In a comparative U.S. study, the demographic characteristics of journalists were found to have changed little between the 1970s and 2002: still predominantly male, white, university educated, and working for daily newspapers, although they were slightly older, fewer in number, and more conservative than 30 years earlier (Weaver *et al.* 2007). Statistics from 2005 indicate that the situation is similar in Canada (Weaver 2005), although a recent study found men to predominate only at the senior management levels

(International Women's Media Foundation 2011). Gans (1979) opined that the fact that most journalists are middle class guarantees that they will be loyal to the system and that their relative journalistic freedom exists "because they can be trusted to see and interpret the world in much the same way as the real holders of power, holding the same basic ideology and values" (McQuail 2005: 300), for example perpetuating the image of the person who is homeless as the "other" (Fiske 1999).

*Construction of social problems as political events.* Social problems are constructed through public discourse (Edelman 1988). In Toronto and Montreal in the late 1990s, Parnaby (2003) argues, "anti-squeegee claimants" ("squeegee kids' were homeless youth who washed windshields at traffic intersections and then asked for money) successfully framed the activity as a social problem requiring a legislated solution, rather than focusing attention on homelessness as the underlying problem in need of addressing. Construction of social problems is complicated by the reality that "a problem to some is a benefit to others" (Edelman 1988: 14); rising housing costs put more people at risk of homelessness but benefit homeowners. Constructing some social issues as problems also permits people to avert focus from other problems that might be more threatening to the dominant society: "Silence is meaningful when it represents avoidance of an issue that is divisive if mentioned" (p. 28).

### **Analysis and Recommendations**

This literature survey suggests that more research is needed on Canadian news representations of homelessness with a view to examining and understanding how homelessness and homeless people have been framed in news media over time. From the literature we have seen that the news media frames related to homelessness are varied, and one or several influencing factors might be at work—for example, journalistic norms, organizational routines, influence of the individual and/or construction of social problems as political events. The readership will, depending on the media frame used, be given specific points of view. Through the story frame, the public might gain understanding of the issues faced by people who are homeless and rally to address systemic factors underlying homelessness (thematic or attributions frames). Alternatively, they might be influenced to believe that the person who is homeless is a burden, danger or nuisance to society (episodic, deviance, conflict, dependence or solutions frames), "requiring a 'law-and-order' resolution" (Parnaby 2003: 283).

People without homes have suggested that news media workers try to obtain a fuller understanding of homelessness (Reynolds 2006). Indeed, increased understanding of the role of news media in public discourse on social issues can help to illuminate how democracy functions (Hackett and Zhao 1998). Research on homelessness can influence policy directly (Kidd and Davidson 2009) but also indirectly through researchers' interaction with news media practitioners, homeless people, or the public. Researchers can also provide information and analyses that support the work of homeless advocates (Buck *et al.* 2004), who will better understand prevalent frames and therefore be better equipped to counter them (Greenberg *et al.* 2005). As well, media professionals can gain insight into their actions, and the housed population who live side-by-side with fellow citizens without homes can become better informed on homelessness issues, join in the debate, and help work toward solutions.

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### **Notes**

1. McNulty (1992) identified five images of the homeless in mass print and broadcast media—"institutional avoiders," the mentally ill, families and children, runaway or abandoned teens, and threatening villains—and two communication models, one promoting a call to social action and the other suggesting hopelessness.

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