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## Evoking Empathy or Enacting Solidarity with Marginalized Communities? A Case Study of Journalistic Humanizing Techniques in the *San Francisco Homeless Project*

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### ABSTRACT

American journalists regularly humanize marginalized communities in an attempt to bridge social distance. Journalists' techniques for doing so may constrain representations to the level of individual turmoil and resilience without accounting for structural factors, however, which has troubling social justice implications. This study examines how journalists humanize homeless people in the case of the collaborative San Francisco Homeless Project. Textual analysis of 325 stories complemented by in-depth interviews with journalists finds that journalists predominantly evoke *empathy* at a personal level and less frequently enact *solidarity* at a political level. Personal stories humanize members of marginalized communities through narratives of individual exceptionalism and relatability, which establish grounds for empathy. In contrast, politicized stories enact solidarity through a technique of *radical inclusion* that begins with marginalized people's analytical perspectives. With an ethic of empathy, journalism may encourage interpersonal harmony at an individual level but does little to bring the shared conditions of social injustice experienced across a community into focus—whereas with an ethic of solidarity, journalism becomes equipped to represent paths toward a more just society.

### KEYWORDS

American journalism;  
marginalized communities;  
homeless representation;  
humanizing techniques;  
solidarity; empathy

Since the 1960s, American journalism has conserved and contributed to public ambivalence about whether homelessness constitutes a social injustice that warrants solidarity, or an unfortunate twist of individual fate that warrants empathy (Campbell and Reeves 1989; Blasi 1994; Min 1999; Shields 2001; Schneider 2012; related discussion in Iyengar 1990). Using the case of the 2016 San Francisco Homeless Project (SF Homeless Project), this study offers a textual analysis complemented by in-depth interviews to examine the dynamics of how journalists render members of marginalized communities human, and interrogates the social justice implications of their techniques. This study finds that humanizing techniques, when they are used, tend to either evoke empathy at an individual level or enact solidarity at a community level. While both empathy and solidarity encourage concern for marginalized communities, the logic of empathy constrains this

concern to worthy or exceptional individuals, whereas solidarity techniques expand the scope of concern to the entire affected community.

Journalism on homelessness provides an unusual case because prior research indicates that unlike many issues where journalists claim to strive for balance and detachment (critiqued in Ettema and Glasser 1998), most journalists do not aim for impartiality when they represent homeless people (Campbell and Reeves 1989; Min 1999; Schneider 2013). Instead, many journalists declare their desire to help homeless people through news coverage—which begins, for many, by humanizing them. At the same time, the perspectives of people experiencing homelessness are often absent from news coverage. In a study of sourcing in news stories about homelessness, Schneider (2012) finds that journalists disproportionately quote experts and, although “homeless people are not completely deprived of a voice, [they] are limited to the devalued voice of experience” (p. 71). Rote inclusion of marginalized people in journalism, then, does not ensure that journalists substantively humanize marginalized people. The empirical contribution of this study is a close analysis not only of the presence or absence of marginalized communities in journalism, but the conditions of their inclusion and the social justice implications of these conditions. Empathy and solidarity, analogous to the distinction between episodic and systemic framing (Iyengar 1990), contributes vocabulary for identifying and analyzing a latent organizing structure in journalistic storytelling.

This paper begins by developing a theoretical framework that conceptually defines solidarity by contrasting it with empathy, and then distinguishes between *personalizing* and *politicizing* an issue like local homelessness. Then, this paper provides a case study of humanizing techniques based on analysis of 325 articles (all of which were published as part of the SF Homeless Project) and nine interviews with journalists who wrote for the Project. Personalized stories establish homeless people’s shared humanity with housed readers based on external indicators such as good deeds and similarities to housed people, whereas politicized stories presume this humanity by representing homeless people’s perspectives on the issue of housing. Through the act of including marginalized people’s analytical perspectives beyond pathos and inviting homeless people into discourse about their lived conditions on the basis of their shared lived experience, journalists enact solidarity. The logic of politicized stories stands in stark contrast to personalized stories’ contingencies of seeking evidence to validate homeless individuals’ worthiness. This paper concludes by arguing that solidarity in journalism moves beyond the narrow individualism of empathy and is therefore better aligned with journalism fulfilling its public service role.

## **Solidarity Through Politicization, Empathy Through Personalization**

Solidarity is a commitment to social justice that translates into action (Habermas 1990; Rehg 1994; Bayertz 1999; Scholz 2008; Laitinen and Pessi 2015; Varma 2019), when social justice is defined as dignity for everyone in a society (Habermas 1990; Rehg 1994; White 1995; Kant 1997; Young and Allen 2011). In journalism that humanizes marginalized communities, solidarity provides an alternative to empathy as it shifts focus from the relatable individual to the contours of systemic factors that affect entire communities. In the context of homelessness, solidarity in journalism construes the meaning of homelessness as a matter of politics that can and should be addressed through systemic change to the

housing system, while empathy in journalism positions homelessness as primarily a matter of needing greater interpersonal understanding and harmony between housed and homeless people. Stories that evoke empathy emphasize the kindness of neighbors, the generosity of charitable organizations, and often focus on stories of “one of the good ones” for whom the existing system suffices (see related discussion of “the system works” narrative in journalism in Broersma 2010, 25).

Constructing the conditions for empathy begins by establishing a “target” as similar to the observer, establishing the target’s worthiness (to make the case that their problems are not their own fault), and encouraging affective role taking to “walk a mile” in the target’s shoes to imagine how it would feel to live in their particular situation (Hoffman 2000). Empathy develops through identification, which Davis (1996) describes as an “active attempt by one individual to get ‘inside’ the other” (p. 5). Evoking emotional similarities “increas[es] the likelihood and/or intensity of the observer’s empathic response” (Davis 1996, 15). Humanizing marginalized people on the basis of similarity and worth constructs grounds for empathy yet falls short of representing the political dimensions of homelessness that warrant solidarity. Designating certain homeless people as “the good ones” appeals to empathy, but in practice means that the systemic factors that unjustly marginalize all homeless people recede from view (see related discussion of empathy’s narrow “spotlight” in Bloom 2016, 87–91).

Empathy in journalism practice manifests in *personalization* techniques. Outside of the particular case of homelessness, Stuart Hall (1973) explicates personalization in the following terms: “Personalization . . . is the *isolation of the person from his relevant social and institutional context*” (emphasis added, pp. 236–237). Isolating homeless people from “relevant social and institutional context” diverges from solidarity because it means journalists do not provide an account of the systemic factors that give rise to homelessness. Mundane details about a person are arguably pertinent to representing their lives, but personalized journalism does not simply develop comprehensive biographical portraits. Instead, as the following empirical study demonstrates, personalized journalism focuses on individuals’ exceptional qualities and their relatability to a comparatively privileged audience which both serve to *qualify* the claim that members of marginalized communities are indeed human—and suggest that others who lack exceptional or relatable qualities may not be.

In contrast to empathy through individual personalization, solidarity shifts focus to the community-level and construes homelessness as socially unjust regardless of the merits, relatability, or personal demons of the individuals it affects. Journalists enact solidarity by using *politicization* techniques to emphasize the community-wide constraints that prevent people from lifting themselves out of marginalization, and represent perspectives on how to address social injustice at a structural level. Moving beyond the realm of personal and private misfortune as grounds for empathic dismay, politicizing techniques represent social injustice as grounds for solidarity in action. One critical way journalists enact solidarity is through *radical inclusion*, which means that journalists represent the perspectives of “all affected” (Rehg 1994, 123) by a social injustice—beginning with members of marginalized communities (Durham 1998, 136; Harding 1993, 137). Here, the term “radical” refers to and builds upon Christians et al.’s (2009) discussion of normative roles of the press, in which they define a radical press as one that represents “the roots of the power relations in society” (p. 181) to challenge structures that perpetuate oppression (p. 184) in solidarity with those affected.

Empathy and solidarity are not mutually exclusive in theory, yet as this study will show, in practice they tend to move journalists in distinct directions: personalization means evacuating context in favor of individualism (Hall 1973, 236–237) while politicizing involves contextualizing marginalization with a backdrop of institutional factors. American journalists' predominant reliance on individualized empathy is consistent with their value of "rugged individualism" (Gans 2004, 50–51) as a cornerstone of the American cultural imaginary—whereas structural causes of homelessness call the promises of individualism into question (Campbell and Reeves 1989, 23). Furthermore, journalists are regularly socialized to prioritize simplicity as a desirable genre convention (Darnton 1975; Harcup 2014, 153), which also helps explain why stories in the SF Homeless Project seldom offer complex narratives that integrate empathy and solidarity.

Although empathy may seem desirable for marginalized communities, appealing strictly to empathy can backfire by contributing to audience fatigue from vicarious traumatization, empathic over-arousal, and desensitization (Moeller 1999; Höjjer 2004; Varma 2019). When over-aroused, observers may detach from the target with whom they previously empathized, or they may end up "blaming the victim for his or her own distress" (Hoffman 2000, 8)—which was particularly common in local public discourse about homelessness leading up to the SF Homeless Project (Miller 2016).

### Case Study: The San Francisco Homeless Project

The SF Homeless Project took place on 29 June 2016, with coverage throughout the week. Conceived as a decentralized effort rather than a cohesive campaign with a formal agenda, the SF Homeless Project was the first of its kind as a day of media action dedicated to covering homelessness across more than 70 news outlets. Participating outlets in the SF Homeless Project (such as *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *SFist*, *Mission Local*, *Hoodline*, *48 Hills*, *Berkeleyside*, *San Francisco Public Press*, *KQED*, and *San Jose Mercury News*) ranged from large flagship news outlets with hundreds of staff journalists to community news sites with small staffs of five people or fewer. Participating journalists ranged from recent college graduates who had been writing professionally for less than five years to career journalists who have covered the Bay Area for more than 30 years.

Such a wide journalistic collaboration is unusual in the Bay Area, given a climate of competition among local news outlets. When interviewed, several participants noted that their news outlets usually compete with each other, but because the issue of homelessness has become so dire,<sup>1</sup> they chose to exchange competition for collaboration—though they retained control over story content. The only requisite for participation was to cover homelessness on June 29. A joint "Letter to the City" signed by participating news outlets explained,

Though this is a united effort, we do not claim to speak with one voice. There are many lenses through which the issue of homelessness can be viewed ... We want to inspire and incite each other as much as we want to prod city and civic leaders. (SF Homeless Project, June 29, 2016)

Humanizing people experiencing homelessness was a chief aim of the Project, according to editors who led the Project and journalists who participated. As one journalist remarked when interviewed, "A lot of this coverage was motivated by humanizing people who live on the street." At the same time, contributors were cognizant that they were reporting

from a position of considerable social distance due to comparative privilege, and expressed uncertainty about how to humanize an unfamiliar community: “I always feel conflicted when I’m covering marginalized communities because you feel like you’re dropping in and this is their life,” said another reporter. How to humanize marginalized communities effectively and respectfully was a recurring theme of journalists’ self-described storytelling goals at the time of the Project.

The two research questions guiding this work are: (1) How do journalists humanize marginalized communities, such as homeless people? (2) What are the social justice implications of journalistic humanizing techniques?

Using methods outlined next, the empirical portion of this study finds that when journalists humanized homeless people, they predominantly appealed to empathy, occasionally appealed to solidarity, and rarely incorporated both empathy and solidarity into a single story in the SF Homeless Project. Then, this study analyzes three primary humanizing techniques (individual profiling, evoking emotional similarities, and radical inclusion) to assess their social justice implications.

## Methods

Claims in this study are based on textual analysis (Fürsich 2009) of articles complemented by in-depth interviews with reporters who contributed to the Project. During the week of 29 June 2016, I gathered data by going to each news website of the signatories of the “Letter to the City” and supplemented the list of participating news outlets by searching Twitter for the hashtag #sfhomelessproject and #bayareahomelessproject, which yielded several news outlets that participated in the Project despite not signing the letter to the city. In total, coverage appended with either an editor’s note that the story was part of the #sfhomelessproject or coverage of homelessness in the designated time period by a signatory of the letter to the city led to a set of 325 stories.

Coverage rarely used the words “solidarity” or “empathy,” though both concepts were central to the SF Homeless Project’s content and practices. Across journalism, solidarity and empathy do not often manifest as direct appeals (Chouliaraki 2013, 138; Varma 2019). Instead, empathy and solidarity arise through rhetorical techniques for personalization and politicization that this study locates in where journalists anchor narratives, who they use as sources, the content of quotes, and the descriptive terms journalists use to represent marginalized people. Key distinguishing features of personalization from politicization are listed in Table 1, which also summarizes the classification scheme used when coding stories into categories visualized in Figure 1.

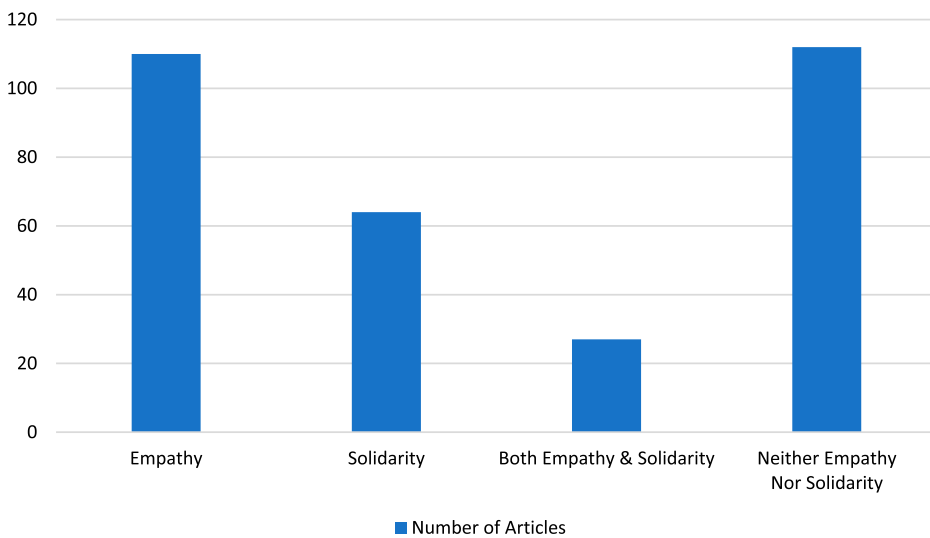
Developing the classification scheme began with the logic of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser and Holton 2004; Corbin and Strauss 2008) to construct emergent categories.<sup>2</sup> As a preliminary step, I grouped stories based on topic. Empathy was a unifying logic across topical categories that profiled homeless individuals or called attention to the assortment of ways homeless people are similar to housed people. In contrast, other stories were consistently framed around shared lived conditions rather than selected individuals, accounted for the broader landscape of the housing crisis in the Bay Area, and replaced emotional language of relatability, resilience, and exemplary behavior with political discourse—all of which is conceptually aligned with solidarity. Stories that combined humanizing techniques and logics constituted the “both empathy and solidarity”

**Table 1.** Personalization & politicization in journalism that humanizes marginalized communities.

	Personalization	Politicization
Appeals to	Empathy	Solidarity
Anchors narrative to	Individual	Community
Humanizes by focusing on	Characters	Shared lived conditions
Humanity of marginalized community	Established on the basis of similarity and evidence of worth	Presumed
Stories of	Exemplary behavior, personal circumstances, resilience	Systemic constraints, marginalization
Point of representation	Represent marginalized people's similarity to audience "They're just like us"	Represent social injustice that denigrates a marginalized community's dignity
Ideal outcome	Compassion (attitude change)	Social justice (structural change)
Invites audience to	Engage in affective role-taking	Take collective action

category.<sup>3</sup> Criteria for empathy stories of individual-framing and emotional language that evoke similarity and evidence of individual characters' worth made this category consistently discrete and recognizable. Solidarity stories represented homeless people as a community with a shared backdrop of constraints due to the Bay Area housing and rental market, which was uniformly absent from empathy stories.

To assess article counts by story type, I manually sorted the 325 stories that comprised the SF Homeless Project into categories of "empathy," "solidarity," "both," and "neither."<sup>4</sup> In the empathy category, stories emphasize emotion, similarity, and individual exceptionalism. In the solidarity category, stories focus on shared lived conditions across a community of unhoused people, with an emphasis on structural factors in the Bay Area's housing and rental market. Stories that display "both" empathy and solidarity offer individual stories and then shift into broadening the scope of the story to represent shared conditions and structural factors. Finally, the category of "neither" consists of stories that (i)



**Figure 1.** Narrative appeals in San Francisco homeless project articles.

dehumanize homeless people (by, for instance, describing the sole homeless person quoted as “a one-armed meth addict” or strictly referring to homeless people in terms of associated costs), (ii) use a bureaucratic frame to report administrative processes in San Francisco instead of people affected by these processes, or (iii) focus on an individual with institutional power who is not homeless (such as the mayor). Stories and techniques that comprised the articles in the “neither” category offer an area for future research consistent with journalism studies on the systematic exclusion and dehumanization of marginalized communities (Christians, Ferré, and Fackler 1993; Entman 1992; Hall 1973) while the present study focuses on humanizing techniques, which is an understudied area in journalism studies.

In-depth interviews with contributing journalists provided insight into their humanizing practices and approaches that are not detectable from the published text alone. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval in 2016, I solicited interviews with reporters based on bylines on stories that humanized homeless people, and referrals from journalists to their peers.<sup>5</sup> I also interviewed two editors who journalists suggested I speak to for insight into the origins and execution of the Project. In total, twelve journalists, columnists, and editors were interviewed.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this study on news coverage, columnists and editors were removed to focus on nine journalists’ accounts of how they approached humanizing in the field.

## Analysis

The SF Homeless Project discursively constructed the meaning of homelessness through narratives that tended to either represent homelessness as a personal issue that can be diffused through empathy (33.85%), or as a social injustice that affects entire communities and therefore warrants solidarity (19.69%). Only 8.31% of stories appealed to both empathy and solidarity. In other words, a third of the stories in the SF Homeless Project emphasized empathy, less than a fifth emphasized solidarity, and less than a tenth displayed both. [Figure 1](#) visualizes the number of articles in each category.

Based on the textual analysis, primary techniques for personalization include (i) profiling exemplary individuals and (ii) evoking emotional similarities, both of which adhere to a dominant narrative of “they’re just like us” (when “they” are members of a marginalized community and “us” consists of comparatively privileged readers). The critical technique for humanizing marginalized communities through politicization is (i) radical inclusion, wherein journalists represent people’s perspectives on shared conditions that produce and reinforce marginalization, and prospects for change.

### ***“They’re Just Like Us”: Personalization Techniques that Create the Conditions for Empathy***

#### ***Profiling Exemplary and Relatable Individuals***

A prominent personalization technique in the SF Homeless Project was “profiling,” which means that journalists place a spotlight on an individual’s background, daily activities, and contributions to a community. These profiles humanize homeless people by including details that make the homeless person similar to the reader—such as their social identity with a city, neighborhood, or family. Seldom of an “everyman” character, profiles focus on



a person who is especially accomplished or unique (Student Voices 1999) with an underlying logic of exceptionalism.

For example, two profiles of homeless individuals published as part of the SF Homeless Project anchor homelessness to the individual, and are aligned with a discourse of the “deserving poor” (Blasi 1994; Min 1999; Pascale 2005) that consists of “model” homeless citizens who also bear similarity to the audience. The first profile is of a homeless man who helps other homeless people, reads *The New York Times* and Black newspapers in the public library, and joins “everything” because, like most adults who are discontent without purpose, he says, “I don’t want to sit around doing nothing.” In contrast to constructing homeless people as lackadaisical, slovenly, and parasitic on the city’s resources (a media narrative critiqued in Min 1999), Journalist 1 represents the profiled individual as someone who has struggled from an early age due to circumstances outside of his control (such as his mother’s sudden death when he was eight years old), and who nevertheless attempts to serve and support his peers. In stark contrast to a faceless drifter silently seeking a handout, the homeless man profiled is described as a community-builder and “everybody knows his name.”

Journalist 1’s second profile also designates its titular character as a member of the “deserving poor.” This individual spends his days cleaning the streets with a broom instead of dirtying the streets. In the lead paragraph, Journalist 1 writes, “[He] is an easy man to spot. In a city where everybody complains about how filthy the street is, he’s the one with the broom.” Contesting the stereotype of homeless people as layabouts who worsen public street conditions, the journalist quotes the individual as saying, “I just started sweeping. It was something to do. I try to do something positive, keep the neighborhood clean ... I’m a sorry person if I can’t sweep with a broom.” Here, the quote alludes to the common criticism of homeless people as looking for handouts without contributing to society (Blasi 1994). Journalist 1 does not state this criticism explicitly, but inclusion of the quote indicates the homeless individual’s implied awareness of it and agreement that he needs to contribute to the city, even if he is homeless.

This profile of the street-sweeper provides an example of how personalization casts homelessness as an interpersonal issue, rather than a social injustice: a particularly evocative passage in the profile describes his harrowing experience of almost dying outside—until a kind neighbor helped him. He spent a stormy night outside, when

a neighbor arriving at her office ... found him leaning against a building and told him to come inside. She gave him a blanket and he took a nap on her couch. He thinks that if she hadn’t been there, he might have died of exposure.

The underlying message of this anecdote is that homeless people may, in occasional desperate moments outside of their control (such as winter weather) need help, but sufficient help can come from compassionate neighbors rather than requiring systemic reform.

By offering cases of exceptional individuals who defy negative stereotypes of homeless people, the journalist’s personalized profiles provide a latent argument in favor of viewing particular homeless people as affable and capable of contributing to society—not burdens on it. At the same time, the stories suggest that homeless people warrant empathy *if* they are contributing to local society and are relatable to a housed audience. Homeless people who are not relatable or plucky recede from view and from the sphere of concern that the articles construct around “the good ones.” Analogous to the “model minority” stereotype

critiqued in race studies (Pollock 2004; Reyes 2007), representing a subset of individuals within a marginalized community as having distinctive comparative worth encourages concern for upstanding individuals in the affected community—but not necessarily the rest. Furthermore, the structural conditions that explain why they are unhoused (eviction, poverty, and no available single room occupancies) are mentioned briefly but are not treated as particularly newsworthy compared to the emotional dimensions of individuals remaining positive despite homelessness.

### *Evoking Emotional Similarities*

Evoking emotional similarities in the SF Homeless Project usually began with a nominal category, such as homeless people who are also voters, parents, or volunteers. Emphasizing emotional commonalities capitalize on what Hoffman (2000) identifies as a “familiarity bias,” which makes people “more likely to empathize ... with people who are similar to oneself than with people who are different” (p. 206). In stories like Journalist 2’s, similarity between homeless and housed people is anchored to the companionship and care that pet owners—homeless and housed alike—feel for their pets.

Like Journalist 1’s profiles, Journalist 2’s story calls for compassion for homeless people by contesting stigmatizing stereotypes of them. Journalist 2’s story acknowledges the common stereotype of homeless people as using animals to guilt passersby into donating, and challenges this stereotype by personalizing homeless pet owners as a group who, like housed pet owners, are emotionally devoted and prioritize their pets’ needs over their own. The story begins with a poignant quote from a person identified as “a man named Sam” talking about his dog: “Rick is the only one who has ever really loved me ... The only one I’ve loved who hasn’t ever hurt me.” Rick is then described as “a three-year-old Chihuahua mix.” Sam continues to profess his devotion to his dog: “I don’t know what I’d do without him ... I don’t always take good care of myself, but I always take good care of Rick.” According to Journalist 2’s story, homeless people love their pets and would be devastated without the companionship they provide. These emotional terms cast homeless people as lonely pet owners who are often unfairly maligned as using pets for selfish ends or mistreating them through neglect. Journalist 2 further reports that homeless people are in some cases better caregivers for pets than housed pet owners.

When interviewed, Journalist 2 characterized the story as feeling-focused and stated that her aim was to engage her audience on an emotional level. Journalist 2 said she challenged the idea that homeless people are abusive towards animals partly because, as a pet owner, she saw emotional similarities between herself and the pet owner who she interviewed for the story:

I’ve had ‘mammogram’ written on the top of my planner for three weeks, but if my dog does anything, I’m like ‘we’re going right now.’ It totally makes sense to me that the same is true for these people. *Just because they don’t have houses doesn’t mean that they’re not like me.* (emphasis added)

Grounded in emotional similarity, the discourse of homeless pet owners being “like” housed pet owners (including the journalist) is aligned with the logic of empathy.

When asked about her storytelling goal, Journalist 2 responded that she sought to humanize homeless people by representing what is shared in common between homeless pet owners and housed pet owners:

I think in an ideal case it's something where it helps people realize that *homeless people are people too* ... In a perfect situation, the first step would be seeing *the homeless guy with the dog loves his dog the way you love your dog* in that that's something we share (emphasis added).

Here, personalized journalism that uses the technique of evoking emotional similarities argues that members of a marginalized group should be regarded as human because “they’re just like us”—in this case, using evidence of loving pet ownership as an external indicator of shared humanity.

Journalist 2’s hope that the story could prompt realization among readers “that homeless people are people too” by representing what she called “commonalities ... [that are] one step in making everyone treat each other better” points to the potential journalists envision for empathy to spark attitude change. Other journalists whose stories displayed personalization techniques with an appeal to empathy echoed Journalist 2’s hope. Revisiting the origin of a story on homeless people’s relatable civic activities, Journalist 3 reflected, “Here we are, we’re struggling to *get people to view these individuals as humans*” (emphasis added), and positioned the Project as convincing housed people to view “these individuals” as people. Journalist 4 described the motive behind her story as twofold, and specified empathy explicitly: first, to “hopefully trigger a little more of our natural inclination to feel empathy,” and second, “[getting] people to care about these *people as people*.” All three journalists showcased similarities between housed and unhoused people in their respective articles.

Dependent on homeless people’s relatability, personalization techniques offer no way for journalists to humanize homeless people who may *not* share much in common with housed people—particularly if they are preoccupied with trying to survive. In contrast, politicization moves from the particularistic logic of empathy to a systemic logic of solidarity. As the following section will illustrate, journalists who use politicization techniques broaden the scope of homelessness and its newsworthiness from fostering interpersonal understanding to accounting for the politics of a housing system that produces homelessness and affects entire communities.

### ***Politicization Techniques that Enact Solidarity***

Politicization techniques shift journalism from evoking pathos to accounting for politics. Unlike the personalization techniques analyzed thus far that attempt to establish the humanity of marginalized communities on the contingent basis of similarity to the observing group, politicization techniques take as a given that members of marginalized communities are human—regardless of their similarity, relatability, or external worthiness. Instead of focusing on characters in isolation of their structural conditions and attempting to establish that homeless people are “just like us,” politicization techniques humanize by representing the shared lived conditions across a marginalized community with an overarching narrative that invites solidarity against the injustice of the status quo.

Solidarity in the SF Homeless Project manifested in stories that anchored homelessness at the level of the community and focused on systemic barriers that prevent people from exiting homelessness. Rather than individualizing people experiencing homelessness, these stories reported the growing breadth of people experiencing homelessness and

reasons for it. 19.69% of stories in the SF Homeless Project took this approach. Within the solidarity category, 70.31% of stories referenced homeless people's shared lived conditions without directly quoting them while 29.69% of solidarity stories displayed a politicization technique of *radical inclusion*.

What distinguishes "radical inclusion" from "inclusion" is that journalists who engage in this technique quote homeless people for their views on what would help them, and offer accounts of shared conditions that affect the entire community<sup>7</sup> to represent power structures beyond individual fortitude. For example, radical inclusion in the SF Homeless Project took the form of journalists asking people affected by policies for their views on them—such as property confiscation or a proposed tent ban (discussed next). Humanizing, then, takes place not through journalists amassing and presenting evidence that homeless people are indeed people "just like" housed readers, but instead through the act of including their analytical perspectives on how to address the social injustice they endure in common. Though used in only 5.85% of the entire SF Homeless Project, radical inclusion offers an important technique for journalists because it demonstrates how publicizing marginalized people's perspectives enriches and expands discourse on longstanding issues like homelessness.

### ***Radical Inclusion of Marginalized Perspectives (Beyond Emotional Testimonials)***

Journalism that uses a technique of radical inclusion embeds a judgment that public discourse about marginalization should begin with marginalized people's perspectives, which moves discourse beyond the realm of emotional relatability and empathy. For example, Journalist 5's article focuses on homeless people's responses to a proposed tent ban, and Journalist 6's article represents consensus across a diverse group of people experiencing homelessness that their chief need is affordable rent.

The majority of Journalist 5's article quotes or paraphrases homeless people as they offer criticism of a proposed tent ban called Proposition Q. At the time of the SF Homeless Project (June 2016), Proposition Q was a proposed measure to prohibit tents on sidewalks in San Francisco, and included a mandate that city workers provide people with an alternative (either a shelter bed or a bus ticket to another city). Proposition Q also proposed enabling the city to confiscate belongings at encampments (Ballotpedia.com 2016). Homeless advocates characterized the measure as criminalizing homelessness. Proposition Q passed in the November 2016 election.

Journalist 5's article on the proposed ban does not contain an explicit statement against Proposition Q in the manner of opinion editorials, but instead develops a narrative starting with homeless people's reactions that, taken together, make the case that Proposition Q is flawed and unjust. Diverging from personalized journalism that would tether the article to particular individuals' relatable emotional reactions and exemplary resilience, Journalist 5 instead emphasizes shared conditions that contribute to a consensus among homeless people against Proposition Q. Journalist 5 offers a high-level and analytical account across "some dozen homeless residents" who

said the shelter system was broken and that frequent fights and stolen belongings turned them off from seeking such housing. All said the law would codify what is already common practice on the streets: city workers taking the property of homeless people and moving them from place to place.

By synthesizing responses to the tent ban, Journalist 5 humanizes homeless people as a collective (not an agglomeration of notable individuals) and represents Proposition Q in terms of its ramifications for homeless people as a community.

Journalist 5's story does not represent extensive back stories of each source quoted, nor does it designate sources as particularly exemplary or relatable to housed audiences. For example, Journalist 5 introduces a man who "moved to San Francisco for its status as a gay haven. [He] said he's been homeless for 35 years and that Public Works has taken his stuff time and again." In contrast to a personalized story, Journalist 5 does not provide a sad or detailed back story of circumstances leading to this man becoming homeless, and instead keeps focus on the proposed measure by immediately quoting his reaction to it. Notably, his reaction contextualizes the proposition as a continuation of criminalization policies rather than a new innovation: "They've been doing that for five mayors," Journalist 5 quotes him as saying. Another homeless person in the story argues that the tent ban would worsen their vulnerability rather than alleviating it, which Journalist 5 paraphrases as, "Some said confiscating belongings could jeopardize lives. A 35-year-old homeless woman who did not wish to be identified said the prospect of the city taking her tent away would invite more sexual violence, already a mainstay living on the streets." Recoiling against a tent ban is not represented in Journalist 5's story as a matter of personal calculus or emotional tribulation, as the concerns residents raise are not tethered to their individual circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Journalist 5's story demonstrates—through inclusion of perspectives grounded in lived experiences with a backdrop of the structural impediments that prevent the community from willingly discarding their tents—why and how the tent ban will not work. With a technique of radical inclusion, the point of using marginalized sources shifts from validating their status as relatable, worthy humans to amplifying their perspectives on policies that will affect (and may further compromise) their lived conditions.

The end of Journalist 5's article contains quotes from proponents of Proposition Q who defend it against claims of criminalizing homelessness. "All affected" by encampments is broadly defined to include not only people currently living in tents, but also local representatives who face complaints from housed constituents about encampments on city sidewalks. At the same time, Journalist 5 goes beyond presenting "both sides" agnostically, as the majority of the piece represents homeless people's opposition to the proposed tent ban. After quoting defenders of Proposition Q, Journalist 5 returns to the issues with Proposition Q's false assumption that shelter beds exist for homeless people who currently live in tents. Journalist 5 explains in the final part of the story,

Proponents of the law hope that the offer of shelter will be taken and that it won't become just another means of moving the homeless from place to place. But those on the street are skeptical that there are enough shelters to take them in.

This is affirmed by the numbers Journalist 5 provides, including the statistic that more than 4,000 of the 6,686 counted homeless as of 2015 do not have shelter and "the city does not have the thousands of units that would be required to take them in."

When interviewed, Journalist 5 said that he saw the persistence of homelessness as grounds for continued coverage and a way to build tension to insist on action (in contrast to journalism acting as a valve for releasing tension through empathy, as journalists who used personalization techniques suggested): "I think it's important to keep the pressure on

public officials and homeowners ... so that you don't normalize it. So that it doesn't become ... something that you see every day, that you get used to." Unlike stories that evoked empathy by assimilating the lived experiences of homelessness to render them relatable for a housed audience, Journalist 5 characterized his storytelling goal as rendering the indisputable differences between homeless and housed lived conditions in order to urge action.

Journalist 6's article, like Journalist 5's, exhibits a humanizing technique of radical inclusion. In it, Journalist 6 represents homeless people's assessments of what would help them exit homelessness, which arrives at consensus among homeless people that the solution to homelessness is cheaper rent. Journalist 6 writes,

Many people living on the streets know that the only exit from homelessness is finding a home. But in a city with exorbitant rents, that becomes trickier than simply getting a job and submitting an application. *Some already work*, and others are on a fixed income. And leaving altogether often isn't a viable alternative. (emphasis added)

The lead frames the story as not being about a particular person who has not been able to transition out of homelessness despite having a job or exceptional individuals who recognize the importance of work, but instead as an explanation of a counterintuitive trend that represents the entrenched, systemic barriers preventing people from ending their own homelessness through individual fortitude.

The consistent message in Journalist 6's story across a diversity of backgrounds is that homeless people are unified by their collective need for more affordable housing.<sup>9</sup> One source is quoted as saying, "I would like affordable housing." Another source quoted in the article exclaims about rent prices, "2,000 bucks a month? I can't do that." When asked what would help with getting off the streets, the source says, "Not a shelter, I know ... Just lower rent." Similarly, a third source echoes the first two sources' prescription for what would help homeless people: "Cheaper rent ... It's expensive to live here, very expensive." Rather than positioning the solution to their homelessness as a matter of summoning a strong individual work ethic, improving interpersonal relations between homeless and housed people, or expanding shelters and services, all of the homeless people interviewed in Journalist 6's story express a shared need for housing congruent with lower income. Addressing homelessness, this article suggests, requires a structural and political approach: namely, changing the housing market to allow people with less capital to enter and remain in housing.

Like Journalist 5, Journalist 6 includes experts as well as people who live on the streets. In Journalist 6's story, these experts work in homelessness advocacy, and affirm homeless people's consensus that they need more affordable options. Journalist 6 writes, "Those who are tasked with helping the homeless get off the street are familiar with the refrain and know that housing is not easy to come by." Quoting officials in San Francisco housing advocacy from organizations such as San Francisco Public Works and the Coalition on Homelessness, Journalist 6 concludes the article with these officials identifying a structural problem in the housing market due to "a new influx of younger, wealthier residents" that have made "cities as a whole ... more unaffordable." The root of homelessness, the article suggests, is at the level of the structure of the housing market—not at the level of individual mindset—which brings into focus both the scope of the issue and the collective need for rent control in cities across the country.

## The Need for Solidarity (Beyond Empathy) in Journalism that Humanizes Marginalized Communities

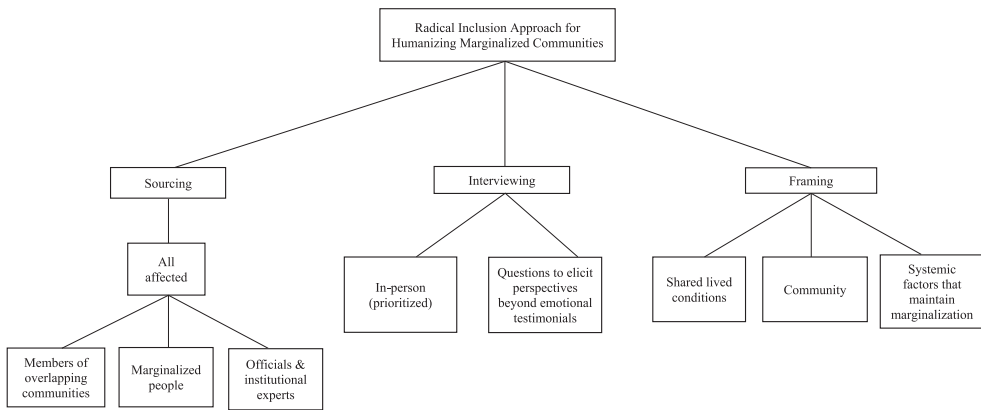
This study has analyzed journalistic techniques for humanizing marginalized people using the case of the SF Homeless Project. Not all stories in the Project humanized homeless people, but those that did primarily relied either on personalization or politicization techniques. Only 27 stories in the Project used both personalization and politicization within a single article, while 174 stories displayed either personalization or politicization. Although evoking empathy through personalization could be a prelude to enacting solidarity through politicization, this study did not find evidence that empathy regularly served as a rhetorical stepping stone for solidarity, and instead offers evidence from both textual analysis and in-depth interviews that empathy and solidarity tend to operate as distinct currents in journalists' humanizing practices. This is unsurprising, given journalists' socialized training that emphasizes simplicity as a desirable and vital cornerstone of narrative structure (Herbert 1999; critiqued in Bryant 2020). In addition to genre conventions, widespread encouragement for more empathy in journalism as a panacea for suspicion of journalists (Afune 2017; Bui 2018) may also contribute to journalists' alignment with empathy as an endpoint for storytelling, without consideration of its limitations (discussed in Plaisance 2019).<sup>10</sup>

The logic of empathy hinges on similarity between the "observer" and the "target" (Davis 1996, 13–15). Personalization techniques in journalism construct this similarity through an overarching discourse of "they're just like us" to provide grounds for audiences to identify with homeless individuals. The problem with this logic is that it loads contingencies onto marginalized people's humanity: humanity becomes dependent on housed people being able to identify with commonalities such as social roles, volunteerism, and emotions. These shared threads are thin and can break if, for instance, homeless people are not pet lovers, parents, or inclined to volunteer. To apply Martha Nussbaum's (1996) critique of empathy to journalism, journalists evoking empathy is a path toward compassion (p. 57), but is limiting because it "binds us to our own immediate sphere of life, to what has affected us, to what we see before us or can easily imagine ... [which] distorts the world for it effaces the equal value and dignity of all human lives" (p. 43; related discussion in Bloom 2016, 89). In journalism, empathy becomes a particularistic reporting approach that diminishes the scale, scope, and structure of constraints that act upon marginalized communities' lived realities.

In contrast to the logic of personalized journalism that attempts to establish individual homeless people's humanity, politicized journalism presumes it. Aligned with Christians, Ferré, and Fackler's (1993) argument that "human dignity does not rest on intention, moral merit, or subjective definitions of self-interest. It rests on the fact that we are, in this fundamental way that is beyond our intention, human" (p. 178), politicized journalism treats marginalized communities' shared humanity as a given instead of a potentially-falsifiable proposition in need of empirical verification. Radical inclusion, a critical technique journalists use to enact solidarity, brings ideas and shared perspectives into focus that are missing when marginalized people are only permitted to speak at the level of personal emotion with structural factors evacuated from view.

Radical inclusion moves away from patterns of systemic exclusion and from using victims as "color" in stories (critiqued in Schneider 2012) by instead including marginalized people's analytical perspectives. In practice, implementing radical inclusion begins with





**Figure 2.** Elements of a radical inclusion approach that humanizes marginalized communities.

journalists seeking out and speaking to marginalized people, which is consistent with well-established journalistic practices of interviewing relevant sources (Figure 2). Despite this consistency, and as this study's textual analysis has revealed, radical inclusion was seldom enacted in the SF Homeless Project: only 5.85% of stories displayed the technique. This small proportion indicates that radical inclusion in journalism is realizable, though it remained largely unmet in the SF Homeless Project.

The sea change that radical inclusion brings, and what makes the technique “radical” instead of plain “inclusion,” is when this category of stories is contrasted with stories that technically include homeless people but focus narrowly on singular characters with exceptional drive to lift themselves up by their bootstraps, and high emotional relatability to privileged audiences. Furthermore, as the analysis of all the stories that were published as part of the Project has shown, a third of the stories dehumanized or excluded homeless people which is consistent with established patterns in American journalism (Gitlin 1980; Hall 1997; Chouliaraki 2013) and far afield from the kind of substantive representation that radical inclusion fosters.

Radical inclusion offers journalists an egalitarian technique to bring the existing social hierarchy into focus—and to make it clear how this hierarchy can change, when the criteria for inclusion in discourse about ideas for change is based on lived experience, instead of being reserved exclusively for those with externally-validated worth or institutionally-legitimized expertise. In other words, radical inclusion provides a way for journalism to advance social justice by representing marginalized people as having perspectives grounded in lived expertise, as opposed to reinforcing the lines already drawn through institutional power structures that sideline and silence marginalized people—even in stories ostensibly about them. The point and promise of solidarity in journalism is to create a radically inclusive space in which people can offer perspectives grounded in lived, as well as learned, expertise.

A common thread across interview responses with journalists in the present study was that they do not strategize their humanizing techniques before setting out to write a story. Instead, they described their various approaches as “obvious,” “intuitive,” and “natural.” The power of solidarity in journalism could be better harnessed if



journalists were cognizant of its techniques and value. At a time when American journalists are being pressured to articulate and defend their values (Waisbord 2018), there is a moment of possibility for journalists to begin to engage in reflective practice by incorporating solidarity as a deliberate value in journalism that humanizes marginalized communities.

## Notes

1. In the years following the 2008 recession, homelessness and housing instability have become pervasive across the Bay Area, with a growing number of full-time workers, college students, and families unable to pay for housing they could previously afford (Angst 2019; Turner 2017). Coupled with a severe shortage of shelter beds and limited affordable housing availability, people began sleeping in their cars, at train stations, and in tents.
2. No software was used to classify stories, aside from moving text files of stories into folders for each category and listing indicators on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (summarized in Table 1).
3. In addition to my own coding, ten communication researchers have assessed the logic and terminology in the classification scheme to strengthen clarity. The classification scheme has also been presented at refereed international conferences, where respondents' feedback helped improve the articulation of the differences between the categories used in this article. Due to funding constraints and the development of this work as an individual project, a second coder was not used.
4. Twelve stories were solely audio-visual content with no accompanying written text, which I ultimately treated as a separate category for the purposes of medium consistency. Medium specificity of humanizing techniques is an area for future research.
5. Criteria for inclusion in interviews were (i) contributing to the SF Homeless Project, (ii) seeking to humanize homeless people through their participation (which was detectable through the content of their stories), and (iii) responding affirmatively to an outreach email for an uncompensated interview in the San Francisco, California metropolitan area from October 2016 to December 2016.
6. In-depth interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two and a half hours long. Consistent with in-depth interviewing, I used an outline of questions as a starting point but did not restrict the interview to a single set of questions and instead asked conversational questions to encourage the interviewee to describe their process for story development. Interviews were uncompensated, and were recorded and later transcribed. To approximate the proportion of participants in the Project who were interviewed, consider that if 70 news outlets had three participants apiece, this would mean 210 journalists, columnists, and editors in total. My interview sample comprised 5.71% of this approximated total. For the purposes of the present study, interviews serve as complementary evidence to the primary findings of textual analysis. Expanded interviews are an area for a future study.
7. Radical inclusion in journalism inevitably falls short of Habermas's ideal of including "all affected" by an issue (Rehg 1994, 123) given practical constraints. However, including homeless people and soliciting their perspectives and proposals for change takes strides towards Habermas' ideal.
8. This paper distinguishes circumstances from conditions to draw attention to the difference between journalists solely representing private, idiosyncratic factors (circumstances) versus accounting for constraints shared across a community that prevent people from simply choosing to live differently (conditions).
9. Journalist 6's article differentiates briefly between speakers' backgrounds, but does not do so with descriptors that signal their distinctive merit or emotional relatability to housed people.
10. A related area for future research would be to examine storytelling techniques in cinema and literary fiction that humanize marginalized communities to consider how journalists might fruitfully draw upon these narrative strategies to enrich their craft.

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