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# WHEN EMPATHY IS NOT ENOUGH

## The possibilities for solidarity in The San Francisco Homeless Project

Anita Varma

*Journalism that humanizes marginalized communities can advance social justice by appealing to collective solidarity. News reporting, however, often encourages audience empathy instead of solidarity by representing social injustice as individual problems. This paper examines mechanisms of empathy and solidarity in two news outlets that participated in The San Francisco Homeless Project. The San Francisco Homeless Project was a collaborative journalistic effort in June 2016 that called for attention and action to address homelessness. The San Francisco Chronicle's coverage represents homeless people as beset with individual problems, which encourages empathy, and its accompanying solutions journalism suggests expanded individual services to address these problems. On the other hand, AlterNet emphasizes shared conditions that homeless people endure, which situates homelessness as a social injustice and invites solidarity against systemic factors that produce and maintain homelessness. This distinction is important because strictly evoking empathy for individuals places journalism on a trajectory to suggest individualistic remedies to an issue like homelessness, whereas inviting solidarity charts a course for large-scale social change.*

**KEYWORDS** American journalism; empathy; homeless representation; humanizing techniques; social justice; solidarity

### Introduction

Journalism is frequently critiqued for its dehumanizing representations of marginalized communities (Gitlin 1980; Hall 1997a; Chouliaraki 2013). By representing these communities as “deviant” due to their politics, identities, and lived experiences, journalism participates in relegating some communities to the margins of society while others enjoy the privileges of being represented as central and “normal” (Hallin 1994; Hall 1997b). On occasion, however, journalism makes a concerted effort to offer recuperative representations of marginalized communities on the grounds that the status quo is stripping people of their dignity. For instance, The San Francisco Homeless Project (SF Homeless Project) was a day of coordinated coverage on June 29, 2016 across more than 70 news media outlets. This coverage, comprised of more than 300 articles, argued that homelessness is inhumane, and that the soaring rate of homelessness in San Francisco creates a particularly egregious contrast with the city's booming economic prosperity (SF Homeless Project 2016). This study analyzes the rhetorical techniques and implications of how journalism humanizes marginalized communities, with particular focus on the trajectories for social change that follow from journalism inviting empathy versus solidarity.

Although empathy and solidarity are similarly oriented around care beyond self-interest and are not mutually exclusive, the two concepts explain distinct dynamics within

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journalism about marginalized communities. Empathy is a psychological construct that describes how individuals cognitively and emotionally react to another individual's experiences (Davis 1983, 113; Zaki, Bolger, and Ochsner 2008, 399), whereas solidarity describes a political commitment against injustice that translates into collective action (Rehg 1994; Chouliaraki 2013). When journalists construe an issue like homelessness as systemic and socially unjust, their texts issue a corresponding invitation to the audience to stand in solidarity with the marginalized community<sup>1</sup> in question. On the other hand, when journalists represent the same issue in terms of individual problems, their texts invite the audience to empathize.

The contested meaning of homelessness in American public discourse makes how journalism humanizes homeless people especially significant. As critical urban geography scholars and journalism scholars have explained, discourse about American homelessness has involved decades of contentious political debates over whether homelessness is primarily a matter of individual problems or a systemic issue (Campbell and Reeves 1989; Iyengar 1990; Baum and Burnes 1993; Mitchell 1997, 317–318; Min 1999; Pascale 2005). When homelessness is defined as an individual problem, public discourse focuses on homeless individuals' pathologies of drug addiction, alcoholism, and mental illness. In contrast, when defined as a systemic social injustice, homelessness becomes an outgrowth of a competitive for-profit housing market, such that homeless people embody a troubling challenge to the promises of American meritocracy (Campbell and Reeves 1989; Min 1999).

This paper begins by conceptually distinguishing between empathy and solidarity. Then, I apply this conceptual framework to a case study of the SF Homeless Project using the "faces of homelessness" feature and solutions journalism that appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *AlterNet's* "faces of" feature. Both *The Chronicle* and *AlterNet* humanize homeless people, but *The Chronicle* does so by construing homelessness as a problem that afflicts individuals (and can be remedied through individualistic services) which invites audience empathy, whereas *AlterNet* represents homelessness as a social injustice due to shared lived conditions across a community, which invites audience solidarity. I conclude by explaining the limits of empathy in journalism and the possibilities for solidarity to help journalists advance social justice.

### Collective Solidarity in Contrast to Individualized Empathy

Solidarity and empathy are close-knit but distinct concepts. Both posit that people have the capacity to be concerned about matters outside their direct experience. However, a major limitation of empathy is that it is individualistic, which inhibits social justice, while solidarity is collective and provides a method for advancing social justice.

This paper argues that social justice means that the dignity of everyone in a society is respected (Habermas 1993, 2010; Kant 1997; Young 2000, 2011). Young (2011, 33–41) distinguishes between distributive justice and social justice, and defines social justice not in terms of resource allocation but in terms of lived conditions that uphold people's dignity or, in Kant's (1997, 42) terms, their "intrinsic worth."<sup>2</sup> Marginalization is a specific form of social injustice that takes place when people do not have a say in changing their fundamental lived conditions (such as whether they have shelter) due to systemic constraints (Mitchell 1997, 322; Young 2011, 53–55). Jeremy Waldron (1991, 301–302, 320) has argued that homelessness is a case of marginalization, particularly in light of punitive measures that criminalize homeless people's very existence. Inviting solidarity with a marginalized

community is one way to challenge social injustice (Scholz 2008), which makes it an important resource for journalism that seeks to foster social change (Ettema and Glasser 1998, 200–201).

Solidarity is commonly conflated with intragroup bonds, such as national solidarity, where members of the same nation stand together. A richer conception of solidarity, that is often present in journalism that seeks to humanize marginalized communities, is Iris Marion Young's (2000, 222) theory of solidarity as a bond or commitment that spans differences and translates into collective action. Journalism often invites people outside of a particular community to stand in solidarity on the grounds that everyone's dignity should be respected in a just society. For example, a unifying theme across muckraking journalism in the 1890s was concern for marginalized groups' dignity (such as child laborers and tenement residents, discussed in Streitmatter 2015), and a similar concern for dignity has guided much of the social movements press in the Abolition movement, women's suffrage movement, and Civil Rights Movement (Alexander 2006; Ostertag 2006). In each case, journalism invited audiences to stand against social injustice that did not necessarily personally affect them.

In this regard, solidarity with marginalized communities is "mysterious," Jeffrey Alexander (2006) says, because it diverges from rational choice explanations for human behavior that emphasize self-interest. Relatedly, William Rehg (1994, 71) considers solidarity a matter of "taking an interest in others' interests"—even if these are the interests of a distant community. Communities may be socially distant despite being geographically proximal, which is the case with homeless people who live on the same city blocks as housed residents in San Francisco. People may not instinctively stand in solidarity with dissimilar people; therefore journalism has a role to play in helping people develop what Rehg calls a "solidaristic disposition" (172) in audiences in the service of addressing social injustice.

A solidaristic disposition is distinct from an empathetic disposition, however, as empathy is a psychological construct while solidarity is a political concept. Although empathy is a boon for coaxing people away from self-centeredness, a major limitation of empathy, based on literature in social psychology, is that it is an individual construct. At a basic level, empathy means feeling for another person by imagining what it would be like to be in another person's shoes. A prominent definition of empathy among psychologists is "the reactions of one *individual* to the observed experiences of another" which can be divided into "a cognitive, intellectual reaction on the one hand (an ability simply to understand the other person's perspective), and a more visceral, emotional reaction on the other" (Davis 1983, 113, emphasis added). Other definitions are similarly anchored at the level of the individual, such as Zaki, Bolger, and Ochsner's (2008, 399, emphasis added) definition of empathy as "the capacity to feel the emotions of other *individuals*." Further compounding the limits of empathy, empirical studies of empathy fatigue indicate that this capacity is finite, as empathy can lead to people becoming weary and desensitized across settings including journalism, social work, education, and health care (Kinnick, Krugman, and Cameron 1996; Hoijer 2004; Newell and MacNeil 2010; Lee, Laurenson, and Whitfield 2012; Vastfjall et al. 2014).

Solidarity is a method for social justice, whereas empathy is a method for compassionate pity. Compassionate pity means feeling for the suffering of others (Nussbaum 1996, 50; Hoijer 2004, 514; Zembylas 2013, 504–505), but as Chouliaraki (2013) has argued, feeling pity privately does little to affect public change for people living within social injustice. Pity is "a feeling that does not lead to any action" (Zembylas 2013, 507), which is why

sentimental stories about despondent individuals may fall short of sparking social change or even suggesting that large-scale social change in the direction of social justice is possible. Instead, these narratives cue audience empathy and may foster the development of tempered, incremental improvements (that orbit around improving individual circumstances), but do not bring systemic conditions into focus. In contrast, narratives that construe the same ongoing issue as a social injustice discursively establish grounds for solidarity in action.

Although empathy and solidarity are not mutually exclusive, empathy and solidarity should be distinguished because empathy is a matter of emotional feeling that gives rise to compassionate pity (which Lillie Chouliaraki [2013] characterizes as a private experience), whereas solidarity is a public political commitment to social justice (discussed in Rehg 2007, 17). Empathy is not enough on its own to advance social justice because concern remains at the level of an onlooker with a psychological connection to discrete victims. On the other hand, standing in solidarity means making an active political commitment to a broader social group. The argument could be made that empathy and solidarity are inextricably intertwined, since in the absence of empathy, it would be difficult to imagine people standing in solidarity. However, empathy may foster solidarity, but only if audiences make a leap from the individualistic logic of empathy to the collective concern of solidarity. Journalistic techniques that represent homelessness as an individual problem invite empathy but often minimize the scale of social injustice. In contrast, as Chouliaraki (2013) has suggested, genuine solidarity goes beyond empathy by catalyzing collective action.

### **A Case Study of Solidarity and Empathy in the SF Homeless Project**

Beginning in the 1960s, American journalism has represented homeless people as “vagrants,” lunatics, and as individuals who are adults capable of making individual choices—and therefore can and should live with the consequences of their own decisions (Campbell and Reeves 1989, 21–23). Over the past 50 years, the meaning of homelessness in American journalism has expanded but often hewed to essentializing categories that claim people are homeless because they are addicted to drugs and alcohol, mentally ill, or choose not to live in housing (Williams 1984; Baum and Burnes 1993, 2, 17–23). The SF Homeless Project both conserved and challenged stigma attached to homeless people through techniques that appealed to empathy and solidarity.

#### *The Landscape and Motivations for the SF Homeless Project*

Spearheaded by *The San Francisco Chronicle* and later emulated in cities such as Seattle, San Diego, and Los Angeles, the SF Homeless Project consisted of more than 70 news organizations on the local, metropolitan, and national level inundating audiences with coverage of homelessness in the Bay Area on June 29, 2016. Participants included organizations such as *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Mission Local*, *Ripple*, *Mother Jones*, Google News Lab, *AlterNet*, *San Francisco Public Press*, KQED, CNBC, and *TechCrunch*.

The SF Homeless Project stated on social media that it sought to demand social change to address homelessness (Bay Area Homeless 2016), making it a case of journalism going beyond the routines of strictly objective, informational reporting by calling for social change. Specific routes toward social change varied across and within news outlets, but the

SF Homeless Project was unified behind their widely published letter to the city of San Francisco, which stated that they were “fundamentally ... driven by the desire to stop calling what we see on our streets the new normal” (SF Homeless Project 2016). The SF Homeless Project welcomed solutions journalism, which is often likened to a European movement called “constructive journalism” and traces its heritage to the public journalism movement. Solutions journalism seeks to not only inform people of issues but to suggest and report on specific, effective ways to resolve these long-term issues (Dyer 2015).

Several news outlets that participated in the SF Homeless Project used a “faces of homelessness” format to humanize homeless people. Two examples of “faces of homelessness” features that were published as part of the SF Homeless Project are particularly instructive for explaining the contrast between how journalism appeals to empathy versus solidarity when humanizing a marginalized community: the present study analyzes *The San Francisco Chronicle’s* feature (which invited individual empathy with homeless people) and its accompanying solutions journalism, as well as *AlterNet’s* feature (which invited collective solidarity with homeless people). Before analyzing specific techniques for doing so, the following section provides background on each publication’s scope and journalistic approach to covering homelessness.

### *Background on The San Francisco Chronicle and AlterNet*

Founded in 1865, *The San Francisco Chronicle* is the flagship daily newspaper in San Francisco. *The Chronicle* has had a homeless beat for more than a decade, unlike most daily news outlets. *The Chronicle* has consistently covered homelessness, though progressive local news outlets such as *48 Hills* have critiqued its use of anti-homeless rhetoric and endorsement of conservative approaches to addressing homelessness (Redmond 2016). During and prior to the SF Homeless Project, *The Chronicle* has regularly represented homeless people as “a problem in need of a solution” (Amster 2008, 7), which Randall Amster (2008, 80) argues is consonant with a “dominant culture [that] heavily stigmatizes poverty as an ‘individual pathology’ more than a structural phenomenon.” *The Chronicle’s* solutions journalism showcased—and endorsed—the city’s managerial approach to homelessness of shepherding homeless people into services and increasing the number of services available (critiqued in Cloke, Johnsen, and May 2005; Murphy 2009).

*AlterNet*, on the other hand, is a national, Web-only news outlet established in 1998 that describes itself as “strategic journalism” with “an active role in helping our community funnel its energy into change” (“About AlterNet”). As a progressive, online-only news magazine, *AlterNet* provides perspectives often omitted from mainstream media outlets. Aligned with its oppositional, critical approach to reporting, *AlterNet’s* feature humanized homeless people by suggesting that a starting point for addressing homelessness is recognizing it as a social injustice with roots in systemic—not strictly individual—factors.

### **Methods**

This study offers a textual analysis of published news articles, which is grounded in digital and in-person observation of the larger SF Homeless Project. For the textual analysis, I collected written stories that were published online as part of the SF Homeless Project, which resulted in a set of 325 stories. Then, I identified a subset of stories that represented homeless people. Since this study analyzes how journalists humanize homeless people,

stories that did not represent homeless people were excluded. About 50 articles met this selection criterion. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser and Holton 2004; Corbin and Strauss 2008) informed my approach to the initial analysis and emergent categorization of the articles, and led me to the key concepts of empathy and solidarity. When selectively coding, I categorized stories as primarily humanizing homeless people by focusing on their individual problems (through portraits and profiles) or as primarily humanizing homeless people by representing shared conditions that denigrate homeless people's dignity—and therefore constitute a social injustice.

Locating latent appeals to empathy and solidarity in journalism focuses on the level at which journalists anchor their discourse about a marginalized community. Appealing to solidarity in journalism does not often take the form of explicit call-to-action phrases (Chouliaraki 2013, 138) such as “attend a rally” or “vote ‘yes’ on ballot measures to help the homeless” at the end of an article (with the exception of opinion-editorials). Similarly, journalists seldom appeal to empathy by commanding the reader to “feel compassion for a homeless person.” Instead, appeals to solidarity arise through techniques such as vivid lists of shared characteristics of “homeless people,” and appeals to empathy arise through the use of homeless individuals' names and faces to evoke personal emotional strife.

Digital and in-person observation took place on June 29, 2016. By following the hashtag “sfhomelessproject” on Twitter, Facebook, and medium.com, I collected articles, posts, and live streaming video and audio that comprised the SF Homeless Project. To further contextualize the “social situation” and “social institution” (Fairclough 1989, 25; related discussion in Fairclough 2001; Postill and Pink 2012) beyond digital texts, I traveled to San Francisco on the evening of June 29, 2016 for participant observation at a forum held as part of the SF Homeless Project, at the nonprofit organization HandUp called “Homelessness, Housing, and the Way Forward for San Francisco” (SPUR 2016) which provided additional background for the textual analysis of articles that follows.

The textual analysis in this paper focuses on two particularly explanatory examples: one appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle* and was part of a larger series called “Beyond Homelessness” that included solutions journalism series (also analyzed below), and the other was published in *AlterNet*. *The Chronicle* invites audience empathy with homeless individuals, while *AlterNet* anchors homelessness at the level of the community which positions it as an injustice and invites solidarity. *AlterNet* simultaneously invites empathy with particular individuals, but emphasized shared conditions across a discursively constructed homeless community. The following analysis focuses on empathy in *The Chronicle* and solidarity in *AlterNet*, not to suggest that empathy and solidarity are incommensurable, but to concretize the limits of empathy and the greater possibilities for solidarity in journalism to foster social justice for homeless people.

## Textual Analysis

### *Inviting Empathy with Homeless Individuals' Discrete Problems*

*The Chronicle's* “Portraits of Life on SF's Streets” offers “glimpses into the lives of 12 people whose experiences help tell the story of the streets” (Suzuki 2016).<sup>3</sup> The primary technique in the *Chronicle's* “faces of” feature is to develop portraits of a variety of individuals that each start with subheads that are the person's full name. The discourse in these portraits individualizes homelessness, which corresponds with the solutions in separate

*Chronicle* pieces (in the same series) that treat homelessness as an individual problem that can be solved through expanded (and more efficient) services.

The portraits feature begins with a photo of a person named Deanna Daly lying on the edge of a bed looking away from the camera in distress. Her portrait reads,

The little things are challenging when you live on the streets. There's no microwave or stove; no refrigerator; no washer and dryer; no escape from the noise. And, of course, there's no bathroom. It's hard to find a job—especially without a car or identification—two things that Deanna Daly, 31, doesn't have.

The imagery and centrality of a single person's name and face keep the focus on Daly, and invite the audience to empathize with her solitary plight.

Similarly, Christine Boyer is photographed alone and holds a sign that is cut off except for the word "Homeless." Unlike Daly, however, Boyer does not seem perturbed by her situation, based on the accompanying text:

'People around here are great,' says Christine Boyer, 52. 'They ... help us every day—I mean every day. It's just a normal living ... I keep a sign on our cart that says we're a homeless family with a disabled son and that we need food and blankets and clothing and stuff, and there's always little surprise gift bags outside our cart when we get up in the mornings. Sometimes shoes, sometimes blankets, clothes—most of the time food. And there's always at least one person a day that comes by and drops off a \$20 bill.'

With a sign, a location with generous people nearby, and a positive impression of local reactions to her request for help, *The Chronicle* represents Boyer as managing and even doing well. Boyer's portrait stirs empathy with regard to feeling compassion for her disabled son and gratitude for her altruistic neighbors. Neither Daly's nor Boyer's portrait mention why they are homeless.

Separately, the portrait series also includes stories of people who credit homeless services as the answer to their strife. For instance, Dawn Towner is pictured with her head in her hands as the accompanying text recounts her harrowing path to entering a Navigation Center. Entering a Navigation Center was almost thwarted due to transportation problems, the text explains, because "Towner, 54, and her son nearly missed their ride to the center in the Mission District, but made it." This happy ending concludes with Towner reveling in her good fortune and endorsing the Navigation Center as a dream come true: "I had to keep pinching myself ... I was so accepting the fact that I was going to be on the street the rest of my life, and I still can't believe that we're here." Here, Towner's quote echoes that of a lottery winner as she marvels at happenstance. Like the portraits of Daly and Boyer, Towner's portrait does not explain how she and her son became homeless—and each portrait makes clear that these individuals have vastly different experiences of "life on the streets" from one another.

Rhetoric in favor of services coupled with positioning services as a wise decision that some homeless individuals freely make suggests that addressing homelessness is, at least partly, a matter of individual decision-making and mindset. People cannot decide to afford housing but they can, these portraits suggest, decide to leave the streets by entering shelters. Donald Abel's portrait, for instance, is entirely focused on his decision to try a shelter: "I'm not going to die in the streets. I'm going to trust in the system and give Pier 80 a try." Similarly, David Tompkins reflects on the strides he has made by going to the same shelter and says that he is "becoming me again."



The portrait of Alberto Terrell serves as an endorsement for homeless people to give available services a chance. The image shows Terrell sitting on his own, surrounded by three different pairs of shoes. The portrait text explains, “It’s difficult being homeless,” says Alberto Terrell, 55. “I have medical problems and I needed a new pair of shoes, and that is the honest-to-God truth ... I have a quarter of a bone missing in my leg, so new shoes help me balance because I have a lift in my left leg.” Here, the text humanizes Terrell by calling attention to his particular physical issue, and weaves in Terrell’s recommendation that his peers go to “places that will help you”: “It’s hard, but you know what, if you try to at least go to some of the places that will help you, you feel a little better ... [New shoes] will be very helpful, and I really appreciate it.” Terrell’s portrait positions homelessness as an individual problem due to unique personal needs (such as a missing leg bone). It also positions services as the logical answer for homeless people to have these needs met. Instead of being resentful or wary of the bureaucratic processes involved with using services, Terrell’s gratitude affirms a discourse of service-positivity—which extends into the solutions journalism in the same series (discussed next). This overlooks reasons, discussed in Murphy (2009, 307, 321), that homeless people may wish to veer away from city services such as long waits, stringent rules, and instability if supportive measures end abruptly.

Each portrait appeals to readers to empathize with homeless individuals by positioning them as humans who experience hardships and inviting audiences to share in the joy and relief that some homeless individuals experience when they avail themselves of city services. Why these individuals became and remain homeless, however, is absent from the portraits. Some homeless individuals in *The Chronicle’s* portraits feature are satisfied with their daily lives, some express grave worries, and others have navigated difficulty by using city-provided services. Humanizing homeless people as distinctive individuals comports with individualistic solutions journalism (analyzed next) that focuses on individual factors that contribute to homelessness, rather than systemic factors.

### *“Solving Homelessness” Through Individualistic Services*

The argument could be made that solutions journalism addresses the limits of empathy, since offering solutions moves away from private pity by charting a course forward for public initiatives. Yet in the case of *The Chronicle*, their solutions journalism published as part of the SF Homeless Project persists in construing homelessness as a matter of personal problems (and illnesses), and does not account for the systemic factors that give rise to homelessness. Homeless people are construed not as needing collective action in solidarity to demand justice, but as individuals who need treatment from medical and service professionals (critiqued in Mitchell 1997, 317–318; Murphy 2009, 313–317). Although solutions journalism moves beyond private pity for homeless people, it may nevertheless stop short of envisioning large-scale systemic change by proposing expanded individual management strategies instead.

Each solutions story in *The Chronicle’s* “Beyond Homelessness” series addressed a different aspect of homelessness including the shelter system (Knight 2016; Fagan 2016a), mental illness among homeless people (Allday 2016), law enforcement (Alexander 2016), and supportive housing (Fagan 2016b). *The Chronicle’s* solutions journalism was consistent with its humanizing technique in the portraits feature in the sense that these stories represented homelessness as a matter of individuals struggling with problems. However,

unlike the portraits—which did not explain how homeless people become homeless and why they remain homeless—solutions journalism in *The Chronicle* offered four explanations, all of which focused on individual factors: (1) drug addiction and alcoholism, (2) mental illness, (3) disabilities and chronic illness, and (4) insufficient case management. The first three explanations trace homelessness to individual, medically treatable problems, whereas the fourth accounts for homeless people who do not have medical issues yet are still homeless. All four reasons for homelessness, *The Chronicle* suggests, can be addressed through expanded and improved services for homeless people.

With a managerial approach to homelessness, the underlying claim of these solutions stories is that homelessness is a problem that can be solved (at least partially) by moving homeless people into services and supportive environments—even though some homeless people have said they “weren’t interested in services” (Alexander 2016, para. 21). For instance, a story called “Enforcing Laws, Changing Attitudes” represents the frustration and empathy fatigue of a preschool teacher who has grown weary of calling city authorities to report homeless people doing drugs near the preschool, and expresses her dismay that nothing changes. The journalist concludes the article by arguing, “What is clear is that while few want homelessness criminalized, policing that is compassionate but insistent must play a role in helping people and getting them off the streets” (Alexander 2016, para. 65). “Compassionate but insistent” measures are consistent with San Francisco’s broader homelessness strategy (discussed in Murphy 2009, 311–316) that shifted from punitive to “helpful” strategies in 2004 but continued to focus on controlling homeless individuals rather than scrutinizing the system that produces the conditions that these individuals experience.

*The Chronicle’s* solution stories endorse “fixing San Francisco’s homelessness problem” (Fagan 2016b, para. 1) by moving homeless people off the streets (para. 7), and do not suggest the possibility of radically transforming it through, for instance, a call for universal housing as a basic human right. Addressing homelessness by expanding services has long since been the overarching policy of cities across America (Mitchell 1997, 306–308; Murphy 2009, 311). In *The Chronicle*, addressing homelessness largely takes the form of advocating that the city (insistently) usher homeless people into services aimed at rehabilitation by reducing barriers to entry—and does not focus on systemic factors that produce homelessness, such as soaring housing rates, “economic decline, the dismantling of the welfare state ... gentrification and redevelopment in areas of inexpensive housing” (Mitchell 1997, 317). The scale of homelessness as a social injustice recedes from view as *The Chronicle* represents homelessness as a set of individual problems that can be remedied by providing social services—and does not offer solutions to the broader question of how to prevent people (including those who do not have addictions or mental illnesses) from becoming homeless in the first place. In contrast, *AlterNet* humanizes homeless people by construing homelessness as a community-wide lived experience that constitutes a social injustice—which cannot be rectified strictly through empathy and improved individual case management. Homelessness in *AlterNet* becomes a matter of societal inequality and an outcome of systemic policies.

### *Inviting Solidarity with a Marginalized Community*

*AlterNet’s* portrait feature positions the issue of homelessness at the level of the community, and represents homelessness as a social injustice. Each sub-section of “10 Things You Should Know About What It’s Really Like to Be Homeless: Separating Truth From

Fiction" (Nieves 2016) construes homelessness as a systemic issue through a technique of using subheadings that describe the shared lived experiences of homeless people. Formatted as a list, subheadings include "Homeless people are human," "Some homeless people have real jobs," "Not all homeless people are drug addicts or alcoholics," "Homeless people are often hungry and cold," "Being a homeless woman is terrifying," and "Being homeless is a full-time job." Like *The Chronicle*, *AlterNet* humanizes homeless people by quoting them in their own words. However, unlike *The Chronicle's* focus on individual problems, *AlterNet's* anchor of "homeless people" emphasizes collective identity and shared conditions. This rhetorical technique positions homelessness as a systemic injustice which invites audience solidarity.

By representing lived conditions as shared across "homeless people" and not personalized to a single individual, *AlterNet* makes clear that these constraints have been imposed rather than chosen, and are clearly not of homeless people's own making. *AlterNet* humanizes homeless people by representing their lived conditions not as the outcome of diagnosable disorders, but as indications that the status quo is systematically unjust because it marginalizes homeless people. Marginalization means that homeless people are not empowered to change their lived conditions as they choose.

Empathy and solidarity are not mutually exclusive, and *AlterNet* calls for both by representing homeless individuals' pain while also elevating discourse to the scale of a community experiencing social injustice. "Some homeless people have real jobs" begins by discussing a person named Patricia Gonzalez, but the first sentence of the sub-section indicates that the issue is about more than Gonzalez's particular circumstances: "Half a dozen of those interviewed are full-time workers who simply could not afford another apartment or room after they were forced from their residence" (para. 7, emphasis added). *AlterNet* represents Gonzalez as employed in two part-time jobs, leaving an abusive partner, and being priced out of the rental market resulted in her current state of "liv[ing] in her car with her 92-pound Italian mastiff mix, Michael, and ... [she] can not even go to a shelter because of the dog" (para. 8). While the story zooms in on individual factors (such as an abusive relationship and being a dog owner) that have contributed to Gonzalez's current situation which invites audience empathy, the subsection also makes the case that some homeless people are employed yet still cannot secure housing—which moves beyond scrutinizing Gonzalez's finances and relationships to the broader level of representing a systemic obstacle that prevents homeless people from reentering housing. "Some homeless people have real jobs" points to the lack of affordable housing in the Bay Area as the primary factor that produces homelessness—even for people who work, which suggests a failure of capitalism rather than a failure of particular individuals' work ethic. Homeless people finding jobs will not resolve homelessness, this section indicates, since many people are currently employed yet still cannot afford housing. *AlterNet* uses representations of individuals to make broader systemic claims about homelessness, which invites solidarity.

With a similar rhetorical technique that shifts between the individual and community within a subsection, "Homeless people are often hungry and cold" represents a person's particular experience and then connects this experience to a broader shared experience among homeless people. Gregory, in this case, often misses chances to receive free food from churches not because he prefers to panhandle or is service resistant, but "because he is worried about his shopping cart being stolen" if left unattended (para. 13). "Service resistance," in other words, may instead be an issue rooted in homeless people not

having a private, safe place to store their belongings (discussed in Murphy, 2009, 321). The portion of the section on Gregory appeals to empathy by painting a vivid picture of Gregory as he “cries himself to sleep from the hunger pains” (para. 13). However, the portrait does not conclude by encouraging pity for Gregory, and instead shifts to anchor homelessness at a systemic level:

*Virtually every homeless person interviewed said that despite their blanket cocoons and layers of clothing, they feel the weather acutely, especially in the middle of the night when it is coldest. The cold is the primary reason homeless people who don't otherwise drink said they drink alcohol, to numb themselves from the weather. (para. 14, emphasis added)*

*AlterNet* does not launch into an analysis of causality, but alludes to (and challenges) a dominant narrative that equates homeless people with irresponsible public drunkenness. This portion of the article flips the presumed causality of why homeless people drink, which constructs the grounds for solidarity: instead of alcoholism leading to homelessness, *AlterNet* represents homelessness as resulting in people turning to alcohol as a temporary salve for living exposed to the elements on city streets. This representation of alcohol use among homeless people makes the latent argument that homeless people use alcohol to take refuge from the cold and the indignity of exposure. “Solving” homelessness, then, cannot be strictly a matter of expanding rehab facilities for alcoholism because alcohol use is, in some cases, a reaction to homelessness rather than a cause of it—such that focusing exclusively on addressing individual alcohol use among homeless people would not reach the root causes of homelessness, *AlterNet* suggests. *AlterNet* constructs the grounds for collective solidarity by representing homelessness as a collective issue—which individual remedies are ill-suited to resolve.<sup>4</sup>

*AlterNet's* representation of the daily struggles that homeless people endure when attempting to navigate the city further indicates that the individualistic solutions that *The Chronicle* suggests in their series will fall flat. The final section of the *AlterNet* feature, “Being homeless is a full-time job,” brings into focus why the city's involvement may further marginalize homeless people by stripping them of their agency, rather than restoring it. Perhaps counterintuitively, this section construes homeless people as hardworking and tenacious—which disputes the generalization of the community being comprised of people who are not willing to work and lack persistence (critiqued in Campbell and Reeves 1989; Pascale 2005). This section does not name any individuals, but represents daily activities in detail that most people interviewed said take up their days, such as:

It takes three to four hours a day to collect enough cans to make \$30 or \$40 in recycling, several people said. It takes two to four hours of time, waiting on line, traveling to and fro, to take a shower at one of the free shower providers. Getting lunch is another half a day's preoccupation. Finding a spot to sleep, for those without, can take several hours as well. (para. 22)

Other tasks include “trying to navigate the city's bureaucracy” with “no means of transport,” compounded by the issue of having “their possessions stolen or confiscated by the police or city Department of Public Works crews” (para. 23). Decoupling these conditions from individuals' names serves to offer a broader account of what it means to be homeless and what it means to be marginalized: to live in conditions not of one's own making which include needing to comply with policies and enforcement through the hands of

powerful publicly appointed people, and struggling to meet basic human needs for food and hygiene (see related discussion in Waldron 1991).

Through techniques akin to social science grounded in individual accounts that generalizes beyond individuals, *AlterNet* makes the case that lived conditions of homeless people are not a matter of personal limitations and instead are a systemic matter that therefore warrant systemic action. *AlterNet* construes homeless people as living within conditions not of their own making, attempting to navigate the constraints that make them unable to avail themselves of services, and indicates that homeless people's present shared conditions denigrate their dignity or "inviolable worth" (Kant 1997, 42). *AlterNet* rhetorically positions homelessness at the scale of social injustice, which invites readers to stand in solidarity.

### The Limits of Empathy and the Possibilities for Solidarity in Journalism

The news features analyzed in this study humanize homelessness in distinctive ways, which have implications for whether these representations define homelessness as a social injustice that invites solidarity or as an individual problem that warrants empathy. *The Chronicle* used individual faces to stir empathy for people who are homeless due to particular, personal circumstances and implied that part of the challenge of addressing homelessness is that homeless people have distinct personal needs which, solutions journalism stories in the same series suggested, can be addressed by expanding city services and making them more efficient. *The Chronicle's* solutions journalism offers individualistic solutions such as rehabilitation and case management with supportive housing. Individualism in journalism shrouds systemic issues like homelessness in discourses of bad luck, pathological diagnoses, and the human propensity for poor decision-making (Campbell and Reeves 1989) which, *The Chronicle* suggested, can be addressed through increased efficiency of managing homeless individuals with expanded support for individuals with addiction and mental illness. On the other hand, *AlterNet* humanized homelessness by representing homeless people as a marginalized community living within shared, systemic conditions that denigrate their collective dignity. By representing homeless people's shared struggles (such as not having access to basic amenities, dealing with the city's practices of confiscating their possessions, and not being able to afford housing despite working full-time jobs), *AlterNet* paints homelessness not as a diagnosis but as a systemic issue. Instead of representing homeless people as individuals awaiting redemption from city services, *AlterNet* represents homeless people as a collective who speak about shared conditions that an unjust system has produced. The *Chronicle's* feature positions the reader to empathize, whereas *AlterNet* invites solidarity (as well as empathy) with homeless people.

This study has focused on the discursive meaning of homelessness that journalistic texts construct through techniques for humanizing homeless people, with specific focus on how these texts invite audience empathy and audience solidarity. To what extent audiences heed invitations to empathize or act in solidarity is an empirical question for future research.

Although *The Chronicle* moved beyond a relentless litany of tragic victims (which should mitigate the problem of journalism breeding audience empathy fatigue, discussed in Hoijer 2004, 525), solutions that construe social injustice in individualistic terms still fall short of infusing optimism about the possibilities for social change because these solutions presume a limited scope of what can be done about homelessness. These solutions

stipulate, for instance, that some homeless individuals are not “interested in services” (Alexander 2016, para. 21) and acknowledge that criminalization cannot force them to be receptive (para. 23–24, 33–34, 47). Based on this logic, if services are the only answer to help homeless people, then homeless people’s refusal of these services means that homelessness will inevitably persist. In contrast, journalism that situates homelessness as a social injustice scrutinizes the system that produces homelessness, instead of scrutinizing the individuals who experience homelessness. Journalism that invites solidarity against social injustice construes large-scale social change as both possible and plausible on the grounds that, in Habermas’ (2010, 476) terms, suffering is “not a natural destiny”—even for marginalized communities whose lack of dignity has become deeply entrenched in the cultural imaginary.

Empathy is arguably a step towards addressing homelessness in the Bay Area but is limited because it is a reaction to the individual *consequences* of homelessness and does not address the politics of homelessness’ systemic *causes*. *The Chronicle* constrained journalistic discourse to a logic of individualism and negotiated within the confines of the existing system that renders some people homeless. On the other hand, *AlterNet* used techniques that expanded the discursive meaning of homelessness by representing the systemic backdrop that produces behaviors commonly associated with homeless people.

That said, empathy should not be dismissed as inconsequential or a foregone conclusion. On the contrary, in the case of homelessness, housed people are apt to unforgivably blame homeless people for their own plight because their circumstances are often viewed as avoidable (Kinnick, Krugman, and Cameron 1996, 702)—despite conditions that contribute to rampant homelessness in cities like San Francisco being systemic (Mitchell 1997; Amster 2008; Murphy 2009). This suggests that journalism encouraging audience empathy is a step in a recuperative direction. However, the scale of social justice recedes from view when journalism represents homelessness strictly as a matter of individual problems that require better management. The level at which journalists humanize homeless people contributes to the meaning of homelessness.

Journalism that seeks to humanize marginalized communities often begins by symbolically transforming faceless swarms into human beings. Attending to particular individual circumstances is valuable for challenging sweeping generalizations about “the homeless.” Yet humanizing homeless people by focusing exclusively on their individual problems minimizes the scale of homelessness and invites people to react with empathetic compassion that gives rise to pity and incremental solutions instead of recognizing homelessness as a social injustice. Homelessness is not resolvable when construed as an individual problem, as decades of criminalizing, pathologizing, and “compassionate strategies” (tinged with paternalism) across the United States have indicated (Murphy 2009).

Journalism has the capacity to advance social justice and appeal to collective solidarity, but may stunt social change by defining a social issue in strictly individual terms which appeals to empathy. The key claim of this paper is not to dismiss empathy altogether, but instead to argue that empathy is not enough for journalism to address social injustice. Representing social injustice appeals to solidarity by calling attention to the ways that systemic lived conditions are not part of the inevitable progression of history nor are individuals who endure these conditions primarily responsible for their own plight. Journalism participates in designating what constitutes an individual problem versus a social injustice, which, when contrasted, brings the conceptual limits of empathy and possibilities for solidarity in journalism into focus. Whether journalism facilitates incremental change (by

encouraging empathy) or fosters societal transformation (by inviting solidarity) begins with how journalists humanize marginalized communities, which, in turn, charts a course for the possibilities for social change.

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## NOTES

1. Aligned with Benedict Anderson (1983, 6), this paper defines communities as comprised of people who often do not know each other personally and may never meet, but are nevertheless bonded on the basis of lived conditions shared in common. Communities, Iris Marion Young (2011, 43) argues, are formed “in the encounter and interaction between social collectivities that experience some differences in their way of life and forms of association, even if they also regard themselves as belonging to the same society”—such as encounters between housed and homeless people who also identify as San Franciscans.
2. Dignity, Immanuel Kant (1997, 42) has argued, means treating people respectfully and humanely, rather than as mechanized sources for products or services in the market, or as pawns for achieving strategic, self-serving aims. Dignity resides both at the level of the individual as well as the level of the community (Young 2011, 44). Schachter (1983, 852) offers a list of affronts to dignity, including: being stereotyped as inferior on the basis of group membership, a lack of privacy, not having basic needs for food and shelter met, discrimination, unequal political participation, and degrading living conditions. Lists of affronts to dignity are always incomplete, but are useful because “different aspects of the meaning of human dignity emerge from the plethora of experiences of what it means to be humiliated and deeply hurt” (Habermas 2010, 467–468).
3. Each *Chronicle* portrait appeared digitally on a separate slideshow page with a single paragraph, which is why the portraits are referenced by the names of people in the portrait instead of paragraph numbers.
4. Similarly, the subsection “Being a homeless woman is terrifying” specifies the experience of homeless women and invites empathy with homeless individuals in the subsection—while also appealing to solidarity with homeless people. This section represents practices among women who live on the streets in an effort to survive, such as: “Women often team up with men they are not interested in for protection from predators, housed or not, who prey on them. A 65-year-old homeless woman rides the bus at night to stay safe” (Nieves 2016, para. 15). *AlterNet* includes the individual experience of the 65-year-old woman riding the bus at night, but this is not the sole focus of the article: instead, the larger point is that women seek refuge in buses. The representation of homeless women’s shared experience positions safety as a public safety issue beyond personal phobias.

Here, *AlterNet* accounts for the particular experience of homeless women while also constructing them as part of a larger community.

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