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Solidarity Reporting on Marginalization: A Grounded Alternative to Monitorial Reporting's Emphasis on Officials

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ABSTRACT

A dominant *monitorial reporting method* means that journalism shines a spotlight on officials' activities, plans, and statements. While this reporting method has brought official wrongdoing to light, monitorial reporting has also participated in amplifying, emphasizing, and normalizing problematic official definitions that neglect structural factors contributing to persistent issues of marginalization. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study articulates a grounded alternative called a *solidarity reporting method* for covering marginalization. A solidarity reporting method means that journalism prioritizes marginalized people's definitions, shared conditions, and ongoing struggles—which may challenge the definitional parameters that officials attempt to set. A case study of a 2016 journalistic collaboration called the San Francisco Homeless Project demonstrates how a solidarity reporting method enriches journalism on homelessness by representing the firsthand observations and perspectives of people subjected to social injustice, and accounting for structural conditions. Solidarity reporting helps advance journalism's pursuit of truth.

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Monitoring officials is a pillar of journalism as a public service. Shining a spotlight to reveal officials' activities, plans, and statements means, at best, that officials must remain accountable to the public. However, journalism practitioners and scholars have raised concerns about how a monitorial reporting method also leads to journalism that amplifies, emphasizes, and normalizes skewed official definitions—rather than challenging them (Marro 1985; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2006; Christians et al. 2009; Jack 2019; Lowery 2020; Rosen 2020; Bauer 2022). This study articulates a grounded alternative called a *solidarity reporting method*. Journalism aligned with this distinctive approach (1) amplifies the firsthand observations and perspectives of people directly affected by ongoing issues of marginalization, (2) represents ongoing grassroots efforts to address these issues, and (3) accounts for the structural roots of injustice that officials may not always acknowledge. A solidarity reporting method moves journalism

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away from magnifying officials and toward representing the truth of marginalized people's shared experiences, struggles, and needs.

This article begins by conceptually contrasting monitorial and solidarity reporting methods, and then uses this distinction to conduct critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 325 stories published as part of a 2016 local journalistic collaboration called the San Francisco Homeless Project. Focusing on monitorial and solidarity reporting is not meant to suggest reducing journalism to a binary, particularly in light of a wide range of "journalisms" (Loosen et al. 2022¹) and continually shifting boundaries of journalism (Carlson 2015). Instead, this study articulates key differences between two reporting methods for covering marginalization. The empirical portion of this article classifies reporting methods in the 325 stories published as part of the Project, qualitatively examines their constitutive practices, and illustrates how solidarity reporting represents and contextualizes homelessness. This study contributes an explanation of what solidarity reporting is, how it is already practiced in generalist local news outlets, and argues that solidarity reporting enriches coverage of marginalization.

Contrasting Monitorial and Solidarity Reporting Methods

Monitorial reporting is where many discussions of journalism's role in society begin. Classically positioned as the reporting method "at the heart of journalistic activity" (Christians et al. 2009, 157) and likened to a "police patrol" or "burglar alarm" (Zaller 2003), monitorial reporting means journalists keep a watchful eye on officials. Aligned with routines of objectivity and normalized in dominant professional practice, journalists adhere to a monitorial reporting method when they prioritize covering officials' press conferences, quoting press releases and official statistics, and publishing interviews with officials. The promise of monitorial reporting is that it will render officials accountable to the public.

While some monitorial reporting fulfills this promise by independently interrogating officials' claims and calling for accountability when officials are derelict of duty in the manner of watchdog reporting, not all monitorial reporting reaches a watchdog standard. Bennett (1990), for example, examines how "news professionals ... tend to 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic" (106). Instead of consistently holding power accountable, indexing means that reporters may emphasize and legitimize officials' definitions of contentious issues. Relatedly, "guard dog" critiques of the press have identified how news organizations affirm and defer to official power rather than placing a check on it (Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien 1995).

A central problem with monitorial reporting is that it may "privilege[] elite sources" (Robinson and Culver 2019, 376) who "become the 'primary definers' for society, and their perspectives create a unidimensional social world that is hostile to 'others'" (378). "Objective"² reporting routines were originally supposed to provide a rigorous method for professional journalists to avoid becoming pawns in propaganda and public relations (Schudson 1978; Schudson and Anderson 2009). Yet as Hall et al. (1978) argue, "the very rules which aim to preserve the impartiality of the media, and which grew out of desires for greater professional neutrality, also serve powerfully to orientate the media in the

'definitions of social reality' which their 'accredited sources'—the institutional spokesmen—provide" (58). Even in stories about social injustice, monitorial reporting has relegated people experiencing the issue to the margins of coverage while emphasizing sources with official titles (Lattimore 2020).

Monitorial reporting remains prominent in journalism practice and education, but critics continue to question its presumed value. For example, Cherian George (2013) has urged scholars to recognize that monitoring society is no longer an activity reserved for the press, and therefore warrants reconsideration as journalism's central concern: "Currently, the monitorial burden is shared with other institutions and individuals, including civil society organizations and citizen journalists ... On the other hand, the function of promoting respect for diversity and pluralism, together with conciliation and *solidarity*, is one that perhaps no institution can perform better than the press" (emphasis added, p. 500; related discussion in Anderson 2021).

Solidarity is also a core journalistic activity, though it is seldom acknowledged as such. Characteristic of reporting that seeks redress for marginalized communities, solidarity is a cornerstone of many of the most enduring examples of the power of journalism in the United States (Varma 2022). Coverage of lynching reported by Ida B. Wells, conditions in mental asylums exposed by Nellie Bly, and tenement conditions documented by Jacob Riis are three early examples of solidarity reporting that prioritized grounded experience instead of emphasizing officials' preferred definitions. Solidarity reporting is found across a range of journalism venues, including generalist local news outlets. This approach is congruent with the underlying logic of "journalisms" such as community, activist, advocacy (González and Torres 2011), constructive (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2018), public service, impact (Carpentier 2005), social movement (Ostertag 2007), and engaged journalism (Wenzel 2020; Wenzel and Crittenden 2021; Wenzel 2019; Nelson 2021; Ferrucci, Nelson, and Davis 2020; Schmidt, Nelson, and Lawrence 2022).³

Solidarity in journalism has been utilized most frequently and intentionally in spaces such as the Black press, ethnic press, and labor press (Ostertag 2007). These venues, created by and for people who saw their communities represented as criminals, intruders, and social parasites in mainstream news outlets, have self-consciously sought to repair the damage wrought by dominant media representations (Alamo-Pastrana and Hoynes 2020; Schudson 1998). Solidarity also arises in local news outlets, which are the focus of the present study.

When reporting in solidarity, journalists represent the perspectives of people directly subjected to marginalization, community-based efforts to address marginalization, and negligence on the part of powerful institutions that have not adequately addressed the issue. With a focus on structural causes instead of individual circumstances or pitiable bad luck (Varma 2020), solidarity reporting accounts for why people cannot simply choose to end their own marginalization as a matter of personal preference or individual autonomy—even if officials do not acknowledge the reality of structural barriers. Solidarity is aligned with journalistic consensus that lived experience matters as a valuable source of grounded truth. The following qualitative analysis of the San Francisco Homeless Project illustrates the differences between monitorial and solidarity reporting on local homelessness and then explains the significance of these differences for representing the lived realities of social injustice.

Analyzing Reporting Methods in the San Francisco Homeless Project

The San Francisco Homeless Project was a journalistic collaboration across more than 70 news outlets, and yielded 325 articles in addition to livestreamed events, in-person panels, and social media posts on June 29, 2016. Participating news outlets were primarily generalist and local to the Bay Area of Northern California, and often in competition with each other for the same audience (Wang 2016). Most participating news outlets did not have missions dedicated to addressing homelessness in the traditions of activist or social movement journalism.⁴

Stories published as part of the Project were manually collected for this study from June 2016 to December 2016 using participating news outlets' websites, local news aggregators, and by searching for "#sfhomelessproject" on Twitter and Facebook. These stories were not published centrally as a syndicated series, nor was there a comprehensive list of participating news outlets or a roster of individual contributors. One piece of shared content called a "Letter to the City" (SF Homeless Project 2016) outlined the aims of the Project and was republished across multiple participating news organizations, though not all. Then, with Institutional Review Board approval, in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists, editors, and columnists who participated in the Project.

The Project constituted a "media day" on which editors, reporters, and columnists said they sought to "flood" news sites, channels and platforms with coverage of local homelessness (Moorhead 2022, 1894). The effort attracted national media attention including a *New York Times* story (Fuller 2016) that described *San Francisco Chronicle* editor Audrey Cooper's frustration with local homelessness. Participating journalists and editors said they saw value in a concerted effort to insist on greater recognition and action to address homelessness in one of the wealthiest regions in the world.

An unusual aspect of the Project was minimal cross-newsroom coordination (Varma 2020, 1708). The only criteria to be considered part of the Project was to cover local homelessness⁵ on June 29, 2016. In this regard, the Project offers a case consistent with dynamics of the broader news landscape in which competing outlets cover the same issues of marginalization, and often rely on the same reporting methods to do so—resulting in similar (and repetitive) coverage across news outlets, even without intentional coordination.

Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study investigates four empirical questions through the case of the Project: first, what reporting methods do local journalists use when reporting on homelessness? How prevalent is solidarity reporting compared to monitorial reporting, based on the proportions of stories published as part of the Project that align with each reporting method? What specific practices constitute monitorial and solidarity reporting methods? Finally, how does solidarity reporting account for structural factors contributing to homelessness?

Methods

CDA provides an analytical approach for "scrutiniz[ing] [media] as a site of power, of struggle, and also as a site where language is often apparently transparent" (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 12). As Wodak and Meyer explain, "CDA researchers are interested in the way discourse (re)produces social domination ... and how dominated groups may

discursively resist such abuse” (9). This makes CDA a clear fit with the focus of the present study on power dynamics within journalism on social injustice. Drawing upon Reynolds (2019), this study identifies and analyzes power dimensions and dynamics to articulate the Project’s reporting methods.

First, using Wodak and Meyer’s (2009) distinction between discourses that affirm domination and discourses that resist domination (12) as a point of departure for this analysis, and following Reynolds (2019) guidance on CDA as a multidimensional, iterative coding approach (60), the 325 stories published as part of the Project were initially classified based on whether people presently experiencing homelessness were directly quoted or not. Since some stories quote both dominating and dominated groups, this initial round of classification counted stories that included even one quote from a person experiencing homelessness in the “directly quoted” category.

The next round of coding classified stories based on “whose perspectives are being validated” which Reynolds (2019) calls “values coding” (60). The perspectives validated were not always the same as the identities of the sources in a story. In other words, directly quoting a marginalized source did not necessarily mean that a marginalized source’s perspective appeared in the story. Some people experiencing homelessness were solely quoted in emotional terms, without any indication of their views on issues affecting them (Varma 2020). Stories were coded based on whether they were aligned with perspectives (or “primary definitions,” Hall et al. 1978, 57) that originated from: (1) specific officials, (2) “the city,” defined in bureaucratic-institutional or business terms, (3) nonprofit organizations, including the charitable philanthropic sector, or (4) people experiencing homelessness (including grassroots efforts led by people who had previously experienced homelessness).

For the final round of coding, perspectives-coded stories were synthesized into reporting methods based on the specific reporting practices each story displayed, using the conceptual typology in Table 1.⁶ Categories were also created for reporting methods that fell outside of the monitorial versus solidarity division—such as opinion pieces written by officials, opinion columns assessing the city’s response, and meta-coverage of the Project. To identify reporting practices and to distinguish these sub-categories from topic descriptions, gerund verbs such as “tracking,” “anchoring,” “adopting,” or “explaining” (listed in Table 2) were used to articulate the practices discernible from the text which, at the level of method, are transferable to other articles rather than being unique to the particular story at hand. Labeling these practices took into account whose perspectives shaped the story, who was quoted, and what surrounding context the story included in addition to direct quotes, if any, to validate or invalidate claims from sources. Then, to illustrate the concrete differences between monitorial and solidarity reporting, this study provides a close reading of four stories that all reported on the Project’s core focus: why homelessness persists and how to address it.

Findings and Analysis

Table 2 provides a full list of reporting methods, constitutive practices, and proportions across the entire Project. The proportion of monitorial reporting was approximately double the proportion of solidarity reporting in the Project. 73 stories were aligned with a monitorial reporting method (22.46% of the Project), while 35 stories were

Table 1. Conceptualizing reporting methods.

	Monitorial Reporting Method	Solidarity Reporting Method
Criteria for deciding to report	Involvement of officials, elites	Dignity of a community is at stake
Sourcing priorities	Officials, elites, experts with institutional affiliations	People directly subjected to marginalization, people involved in grassroots efforts to meet basic needs, research that accounts for structural causes of marginalization
Framing	Bureaucratic response, officials' activities, research from dominant institutes	Shared conditions, community response (grassroots), grounded research based on analyzing lived experiences and historical context
Narrative structure	Inverted pyramid, reporting official priorities, exposing activities and disagreement among elites	Woven vignettes that represent shared conditions beyond individual circumstance, accounts of structural conditions that inhibit change
Values embedded in method	Transparency, accountability	Grounded insight, accountability
Criteria for amplification	Title, affiliation, institutional power	Direct experience, grounded observation, grassroots power
Journalists' personal preferences and political views	Undetectable from the story, method requires a professional commitment to neutrality	Undetectable from the story, method requires a professional commitment to dignity for all people

aligned with a solidarity reporting method (10.77% of the Project). Stories that did not align with a monitorial or solidarity method included opinion pieces, profiles of people working in advocacy and direct services, emotional character studies of exemplary and relatable individuals experiencing homelessness (previously analyzed in Varma 2020), direct appeals for charitable support, and meta-coverage which announced that a news outlet was participating in the Project.

Through close textual analysis, specific practices aligned with monitorial and solidarity reporting were identified and each published story was coded based on these practices. This analysis yielded three reporting practices that constitute a monitorial method, and three reporting practices that constitute a solidarity method. Monitorial practices include: (1) amplifying and indexing an individual official's actions, proposals, and comments on homelessness and housing, (2) tracking the city's bureaucratic-administrative response to rising homelessness (particularly when stories lead with managers of "city services")⁷, and (3) adopting an elitist gaze that objectifies unhoused people as disruptive, dangerous, and in need of top-down control. Solidarity practices, found in stories that position people experiencing the issue as primary definers instead of officials, include: (1) representing the perspectives of people subjected to marginalization, (2) amplifying people who were previously unhoused and now engage in grassroots efforts to help meet shared needs⁸, and (3) explaining structural causes of persistent marginalization using public data, including public health research and historical archives.⁹ To illustrate the significance of solidarity reporting, the following close reading compares a monitorial story anchored in official definitions of homelessness to solidarity stories that incorporate marginalized people's definitions.

Table 2. Methods and practices in the San Francisco homeless project.

Method	Practice	Number of Stories in Project	Percentage of Stories in Project
Monitorial	Tracking city response	51	15.69%
Monitorial	Indexing individual officials	12	3.69%
Monitorial	Adopting elite gaze and official frames	10	3.08%
Solidarity	Amplifying marginalized people's perspectives based on shared experiences	15	4.62%
Solidarity	Representing grassroots efforts	5	1.54%
Solidarity	Explaining structural causes through public data, research, history	15	4.62%
Solidarity & Empathy (Mixed)	Some solidarity - Leading with a personal anecdote followed by structural explanation	13	4.00%
Empathy	Personalizing homelessness through emotional narratives	110	33.85%
Opinion	Assessing city response	32	9.85%
Opinion	Amplifying officials	6	1.85%
Opinion	Appealing for charitable support	6	1.85%
Meta-Coverage	Announcing participation in collaboration	33	10.15%
Meta-Coverage	Critiquing stereotypes	5	1.54%
No written text	Video/audio only	12	3.69%

Monitorial Reporting on Official Statements, Solidarity Reporting on Lived Realities

Monitorial and solidarity stories published as part of the Project reported on the scope of homelessness, barriers to resolving it, and potential avenues for improved support, but differed with respect to whose definitions were emphasized: officials (in monitorial reporting) or people experiencing homelessness (in solidarity reporting). The following close reading of four stories published as part of the Project illustrates the difference between a monitorial reporting method and a solidarity reporting method in coverage of marginalization. The first story, aligned with monitorial reporting, conveys a powerful city official's views and action plans for addressing homelessness. The next three stories, aligned with solidarity reporting, go deeper by accounting for the structural factors that make homelessness a persistent issue based on firsthand observations and self-described needs of people living unhoused.

The articles analyzed below were published in three generalist news outlets serving a local audience: *CBS Bay Area* (KPIX, established in 1948), *San Jose Mercury News* (founded in 1851), and *San Francisco Examiner* (founded in 1863). All three outlets are focused on local news, and all three have won prestigious journalism awards. The *Examiner* won Pulitzer Prizes for local reporting (1951) and spot news photography (1987), *Mercury News* won

Pulitzer Prizes for international reporting (1986) and general news reporting (1990), and *KPIX* received a Peabody Award for their reporting on the AIDS epidemic (1986).¹⁰

In the subset of stories coded as monitorial or solidarity reporting, *CBS Bay Area* (*KPIX*) solely published stories aligned with monitorial reporting, while the *Examiner* and *Mercury News* published stories aligned with monitorial reporting and stories aligned with solidarity reporting. Locating solidarity reporting in outlets like the *Examiner* and *Mercury News* is significant since this indicates that the method is not unique to organizations with a mission statement focused on equity or social justice. *CBS Bay Area*, as a local affiliate of *CBS*, is one of the largest brands that participated in the Project, and their coverage solely aligning with monitorial reporting suggests that although major corporate brands may join a trend of covering issues of social injustice, their participation does not necessarily mean their reporting methods change based on the context. For a full list of which news outlets published monitorial reporting, solidarity reporting, or both types of reporting, see the Appendix (Supplemental Data).¹¹ The following monitorial story encapsulates official claims that recurred across monitorial stories published as part of the Project.

Monitorial Reporting: Amplifying Official Plans to Solve Homelessness. “San Francisco Homeless Czar: ‘We Must Do Better’” (Walker 2016) illustrates a monitorial practice of indexing an official’s definition of an issue (consistent with Bennett 1990; 1985). This article, published on *CBS Bay Area*’s news site, quotes one source: the new director of the San Francisco Department of Homelessness, Jeff Kositsky. The lead positions Kositsky as a determined director who “has heard the city’s frustration and is prepared to do something about it” (Walker 2016, para. 1). The article then quotes Kositsky promising that the city will “do better” (para. 1). Far afield from the language of an adversarial watchdog yet aligned with a monitorial reporting method that shines a spotlight on officials, the story describes Kositsky as “the kind of man who tears up when he hears stories of people suffering on our streets” due to having “a big heart” while remaining “serious about the business of reforming the city’s approach” (para. 2-3).

The rest of the article summarizes the city’s official plans, priorities, and definition of homelessness, which is a consistent tendency in other monitorial stories published as part of the Project that report city supervisors’ proposed ballot measures, mayors’ resource allocations, and state and federal agencies’ responses. The article reports that Kositsky’s “first goal will be bringing order to the city’s labyrinth of social services, organizing them all under one governing body that will be able to better keep track of those who are, or who may become, homeless” (para. 5). Kositsky states, “We are going to go out and offer people assistance, we’re going to offer people housing” (para. 6). What Kositsky and the city consider “housing” is unspecified in this story, which becomes a key concern in solidarity reporting.

The seventh paragraph of the nine-paragraph monitorial story introduces “the most discussed flashpoint in the city’s struggle with homelessness”: tent encampments. Kositsky “insists that the wave of tent encampments need to be rolled back” (para. 7) and is quoted at length:

“The level of crime, sexual assaults, unhealthy conditions happening in those encampments is horrifying, there really are these post-apocalyptic places that I’ve been to that

aren't good for anybody—not the people who are there, or the people living nearby. We know where the encampments are, we have a list, we know the size, we know how dangerous they may or may not be—it's not going to be hard to work that list till we get to the end" (para. 7).

What it means to "work that list" when people in encampments do not have anywhere else to live and the city does not have sufficient temporary housing for the number of people in need is unaddressed in this story. Consistent with monitorial reporting's focus on officials, the story does not include the views or experiences of people who live in encampments.

The story also reports Kositsky's definition of the scope of the San Francisco Department of Homelessness. Setting the parameters of his office, Kositsky says, "This new department, our job is not to solve affordability in the city, to solve mental health in the city, these are problems that are important that we need to work on but we're going to stay in our lane. Our job is to get people who are on the streets, off the streets" (para. 8). The story does not address how "getting people who are on the streets, off the streets" (para. 8) can happen without tackling the lack of affordable housing in the city. Instead, the story is structured around the official's articulation of the problem, remedy, and boundaries of the issue.

Across monitorial stories published as part of the Project, officials' claims regularly stood alone. Bay Area mayors (past and present), city supervisors, spokespeople for city departments such as Public Works, as well as state and federal elected officials were all used as sources in monitorial reporting, with diagnoses, plans, and promises from mayors, city supervisors, and Kositsky dominating coverage. Monitorial reporting revealed city officials' plans for addressing homelessness, but did not address how (or whether) these plans would address the structural factors contributing to homelessness—in contrast to solidarity reporting, discussed next.

Solidarity Reporting: Representing Grounded Insight into One-Way Bus Tickets, Shelters, and Affordability. Three solidarity stories demonstrate the difference between monitorial reporting and solidarity reporting, and how solidarity reporting helps enrich coverage of homelessness by accounting for structural factors that officials may not acknowledge. The first two stories reveal what the city defines as "housing" and "assistance," which make it clear why the city's approach leaves people unhoused and unsupported: the city counts people as "housed" when they receive one-way bus tickets out of town, and shelter conditions are often unsafe which contributes to people staying in encampments instead. The third story challenges Kositsky's claim that addressing housing affordability is a separate matter from addressing homelessness, and does so by reporting families' firsthand experiences of becoming homeless because they were priced out of housing. The following section explains specific solidarity reporting practices in each story that incorporate impacted people's observations, experiences, and perspectives and, as a result, account for structural factors that contribute to persistent homelessness.

(1) *Reporting Omitted Context for Official Metrics: Using Public Data Validated by Marginalized People's Observations*

"SF expanding program that has bused 10K homeless residents out of town in past decade" (Sabatini 2016, published in the *Examiner*) contextualizes official metrics for

counting people as housed. The story reports that the city considers a person housed if they receive a bus ticket out of San Francisco through a program called Homeward Bound. This official definition of “housed” is not new, according to the story, but it is context missing from monitorial stories with official statistics on rehousing and stories that exclusively quote Kositsky. The *Examiner* notes (as part of the story) that they uncovered data through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request and by reviewing evaluations of the Homeward Bound program.

Consistent with the logic of solidarity that corroborates truth claims based on grounded observation, this story contextualizes official data based on marginalized people’s definitions:

Homeless residents and their advocates appreciate the Greyhound service but are critical when city leaders call it a solution to homelessness. They also consider it misleading, if not outright lying, to count homeless people bused out of town as housed — which the City does (para. 8).

Here, the story accounts for how people experiencing homelessness (and people who work in solidarity with them) view the program and the city’s official definition that conflates busing with housing. This solidarity practice amplifies marginalized people’s observations as a means of critically analyzing official data.

For example, Bilal Ali, who is described as “a homeless man living at a city shelter” (para. 2) leads the story, and is later quoted as saying of the Homeward Bound program,

“I’ve seen people come and go,” Ali said. “That person goes back home to Chicago. What happens? Did that person get out of being homeless? Did they get a job? Or are they still homeless?”

“They’re still homeless,” Ali said.

The solution, he added, must be based on connecting residents to housing.

“They don’t do the tracking,” he said. “It’s just: ‘Get out of town. We will give you a ticket. Don’t come back’” (para. 51-54).

Kositsky mentions bus tickets in *CBS Bay Area*’s monitorial story (discussed in the previous section), but his quotes in that story do not specify that the city classifies people who receive one-way bus tickets from the program as housed. Defining “housing” as synonymous with “busing out of the city” is far from common usage. In the *Examiner*’s story, when asked, Kositsky acknowledges that there are “oversight limitations once people leave city limits” (para. 37), but the grounded insight and criticism of the program—as well as the city’s broad definition of “rehousing”—comes from sources like Ali.

Sourcing in this story includes public data acquired through FOIA, people who have observed the impact of the program while living unhoused, people who study housing and advocate for people living unhoused, as well as officials. Here, solidarity reporting includes context that officials omit. The following example illustrates how solidarity reporting also represents problems that officials may not acknowledge exist at all.

(2) Challenging Official Problem Definitions: Representing Grassroots Efforts that Address Officially-Unacknowledged Struggles

The article “Facing additional threats, San Jose homeless women often stay hidden from safety net” (Giwargis 2016, published in the *Mercury News*) explains why homeless women may not accept city assistance in the form of offers to go to shelters, and how they have developed community-based safety efforts.¹² The story calls attention to how people living unhoused take care of themselves and each other—and the dangers they face in shelters, which city officials do not consistently acknowledge in monitorial reporting published as part of the Project.

Contrary to official narratives that position people as needing to be rescued from tent encampments and shepherded into temporary alternatives (which officials like Kositsky characterize as unequivocally better), the article explains, “a coed shelter can be a terrifying place for a woman who’s been raped. It can trigger fears or bring back traumatic memories” (para. 9). Seeking safety, it turns out, is what leads some women into tent encampments, not away from them. For example, sexual assault survivors like Stephanie Castaneda, quoted in the story, have sought safety in a “women-only area” in a tent encampment:

For Castaneda, her ‘shelter’ became a place called The Jungle, an encampment ... [where] she created a women-only area—a tent where females could seek refuge from men who antagonized them, pressured them for sex or shot them with BBs. A rescued black pit bull guarded the tent from outsiders (para. 11).

Even if Castaneda had sought indoor shelter, the story notes that there is a severe shortage of beds—which is reported several times in solidarity stories, and counters monitorial stories’ quotes from city officials who regularly suggest placing people in temporary spaces that do not exist. Tent encampments, this story reveals, may be the only viable option for some unhoused people.

Solidarity stories do not, however, ignore the dangers of tent encampments that officials emphasize. The Jungle eventually became a site of “crime, drugs, and health hazards” (para. 11) and none of the sources quoted in the solidarity story dispute that characterization based on firsthand experience. After acknowledging these dangers, this story turns not to reassurances from officials that they are handling the issue, but instead to community-based safety initiatives that are already underway. For example, since Castaneda’s time living in an encampment, she has become “a street navigator” for a local nonprofit which means she “walks the streets she used to sleep on to look for homeless women in need. That’s called the peer-support model” (para. 14). In contrast to top-down governing strategies for tracking and moving unhoused people, this story introduces a grassroots model of people who have previously lived on the streets helping people who are still there. Unlike monitorial reporting, solidarity reporting represents marginalized people’s struggles and efforts to help each other.

(3) Questioning Official Simplification: Amplifying Marginalized People’s Experiences of Interconnected Structural Issues

Finally, “Navigating homelessness with children” (Payne 2016, published in the *Examiner*) challenges Kositsky’s definitions of homelessness and affordable housing as separate “lanes” (qtd. in Walker 2016, para. 8). The *Examiner*’s story begins with a single mother named Willie Iribarren, who is described as a “San Francisco resident” (para. 1) among more than 600

families experiencing homelessness (para. 9). The story amplifies Iribarren's experience of her family repeatedly becoming unhoused due to a lack of affordable housing:

When she first sought help, Iribarren was placed in housing with her young daughter and then-partner, where the family's portion of the rent was \$300 and the rest was subsidized. Then, the rent went up and the subsidy expired, skyrocketing their portion to \$1,300.

"It wasn't doable at all," Iribarren said. She then moved back to Hamilton Family Emergency Center shelter, where families can stay for 60 days (para. 4-5).

Iribarren's rent rising prohibitively is a common experience (reflective of rising housing costs across the Bay Area) that solidarity stories represent. This suggests that a "governing" (Walker 2016, para. 5) system unrelated to addressing housing affordability—which Kositsky declares in the monitorial story—cannot plausibly address the cycle of family homelessness.

By amplifying marginalized people's self-described experiences of interconnected structural issues leading to housing instability, the *Examiner's* story positions sources like Iribarren as primary definers, rather than emphasizing officials. This story reports the fact of housing affordability's role in homelessness, which monitorial stories published as part of the Project did not. Solidarity reporting, then, accounts for the lived realities of homelessness, and the structural factors that explain why it is a persistent issue.

Solidarity Reporting in the Service of Social Justice

This article has argued and illustrated that solidarity reporting helps enrich coverage of social injustice. A solidarity reporting method prioritizes insights into marginalization from people who have experienced it, while a monitorial reporting method prioritizes transparency into institutional power. By amplifying marginalized people's lived experiences and knowledge of structural factors contributing to marginalization, solidarity reporting can advance social justice for people whose struggles may otherwise remain unacknowledged or minimized.

Local news organizations and news collaboratives often emphasize their growing commitment to covering social justice issues. The San Francisco Homeless Project was the first cross-newsroom collaborative dedicated to covering local homelessness, which other cities later emulated. At the same time, as this study has demonstrated, the volume of coverage on an issue should not be mistaken for the comprehensiveness of coverage. Representation matters, as do the methods for constructing representation.

Solidarity reporting represents the truth of marginalized people's lived conditions beyond official statements (Franklin, Shankar, and Sainath 2014; White 1995). For marginalized people who have been excluded, ignored, and used as "color" in news coverage of their own communities for generations, substantive inclusion is an act of solidarity. With a solidarity method, coverage of marginalization changes from emphasizing claims from people with institutional credentials to prioritizing insights from people who have grounded observations, experiences, and perspectives based on living and navigating social injustice. As the examples in this study have shown, marginalized people offer a fuller picture of marginalization than officials may volunteer.

Monitorial reporting's convention of emphasizing officials is a logical practice for achieving transparency, but risks limiting journalism's parameters for representing marginalization by adopting the definitions that officials prefer. Solidarity reporting preserves and incorporates the journalistic ethos of investigation, sourcing, verification, and adversarial interrogation, in the service of accounting for the grounded reality of enduring social injustice. Ultimately, a solidarity reporting method advances journalism's ongoing pursuit of truth.

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Notes

1. Loosen et al. (2022) encourage mapping different types of journalism in order to "study journalism *relationally*" (p. 41). Consistent with their approach to distinguishing journalisms by identifying "a specific motivation or reporting style" and "a particular thematic focus" (p. 46), this study focuses on the difference between monitorial reporting and solidarity reporting methods.
2. Journalists attempt objectivity by imitating scientific methods, but they are unavoidably engaged in moral discourses (Ettema and Glasser 1998). Popularly understood as both an ideal and method, journalistic objectivity has been associated with neutrality, balance, and professionalism – yet this usage of "objectivity" risks perpetuating a misnomer that obscures how dominant journalistic practices regularly defer to officials' preferred definitions (Baldrige 2020). Rather than providing journalists with "a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that ... biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work" (American Press Institute n.d.), objectivity routines often position journalists to define truth based on the subjectivity of officials (Jack 2019; Kilgo 2021; Nagle 2020). Therefore, this dynamic is more precisely characterized as "monitorial" than "objective."
3. Solidarity reporting also provides a justification for engagement journalism that scholars have noted is often missing or unarticulated. Nelson (2021), for example, urges more scholarly attention to interrogate why news organizations should engage with the idea of engaged journalism, and points out that "news publishers face the difficult challenge of deciding what groups they will prioritize trying to engage and why they will decide to do so" (p. 2359). A solidarity reporting method helps articulate not only engaged practices but also the underlying reasons for journalists to engage. In solidarity reporting, journalists prioritize communities whose dignity is disrespected under the status quo.
4. Notably, the news outlet *Street Spirit* ("an independent newspaper in the East Bay dedicated to covering homelessness and poverty from the perspective of those most impacted") did not participate in the Project (Rees 2016). *Street Spirit* later published criticism of the Project and the negative stereotypes it reinforced through coverage that "essentially endorsed the status quo" (Denney, August 16, 2016).
5. Although the collaboration specified San Francisco in its title, stories published as part of the Project included coverage of homelessness across the entire Bay Area of California (which spans the cities of San Francisco, San Jose, Berkeley, and Oakland).
6. 12 stories did not include any published written text and were solely visual or audio content. These stories were treated as a separate category, reflected in Table 2. Distinctive visual and audio reporting methods are an area for future research. The present study focuses on reporting methods that result in published written text.

7. These stories defined the city's response to homelessness in terms of the activities of elected officials, appointed administrators, businesses, nonprofits, and police. Stories in this category did not include the perspectives of anyone currently experiencing homelessness or anyone who had previously experienced it, and emphasized administrative changes to service provision, ballot measures, and official "counts" of people living unhoused.
8. Some stories represented previously unhoused people who joined nonprofit organizations engaged in providing direct services. However, features on nonprofit organizations that did not represent anyone currently or previously unhoused were classified as "tracking city response." This distinction takes into account the checkered history of the philanthropic sector that is a mix of community-based grassroots efforts and top-down charities (critiqued in Kendall 2020).
9. A fourth classification of "some solidarity" mixed solidarity and empathy (Varma 2020, 1710), which meant that the story began with an individual anecdote often focused on emotional, personal redemption and then moved into a structural explanation using policy research and history.
10. All three news outlets run advertising and have had a series of ownership changes: as of 2022, Paramount Global owns CBS, Alden Global Capital owns the *Mercury News*, and Clint Reilly Communications owns the *San Francisco Examiner*.
11. Stories aligned with monitorial reporting and stories aligned with solidarity reporting did not abide by a bifurcation between "mainstream" and "alternative" news outlets (consistent with Reynolds 2019, 64).
12. Similar themes and firsthand concerns arose in Project coverage of San Francisco shelters.

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