



The biker, the homeless and the good Samaritan: Media coverage of eviction in a Washington D.C. Business Improvement District

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Title**The biker, the homeless and the good Samaritan
Media coverage of eviction in a D.C. Business Improvement District****Author**

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Abstract

"Feets in the street, then heads in the beds, and retail follows..." could be a definition of micro-transit induced gentrification. The quote shows the obsession of NoMa D.C. BID's President to transform the urban space with walkable infrastructure. But the irruption of homeless encampment breaks down the BID narrative as a vibrant place and happy community. What is The Washington Post coverage of this controversy ? Argumentative and narrative discursive analysis are applied to the press articles dealing with the necessity to clear the camp in order to facilitate BIDs resident movements, or, to the contrary, with the priority to care for homeless people. The chapter explores how the media orchestrates the public debate, reframes responsibilities and finally derivates the search for the structural causes of the crisis towards a happy end parable. The added value of the chapter concerning gentrification coverage is that it doesn't deliver a static vision of newspaper's engagement pro- or contra- gentrification, but a much more tactical and processual perspective of the journalistic fabric of urban conflicts ... and of its semiotic resolutions.

Introduction

In what way do the dominant print media shape public debate around urban gentrification in the United States? After reviewing several press titles, Brown-Sarracino and Rumpf (2011) conclude that pro, anti and neutral attitudes coexist and fluctuate. They recommend that the editorial strategy of each newspaper and the facts covered should be examined more closely.

Investigating this issue in Washington DC, Modan and Wells (2015) turn the question from an attitudinal to a processual one. They want to capture how media «reflect, promote, reframe particular values and sets of power» (page 316). Crises are moments of truth in the media coverage of gentrification. During critical episodes such as forced eviction, for example, several contradictory versions clash and newspapers must not only report and reflect arguments, but have also to deliver a consistent message, with the usual journalistic tools of narrativization. Crises offer opportunities to explore the key role of the media in decoding events, uncovering – or not uncovering – the racial and social divides that still polarize US societies, and recoding them into stories that keep readers motivated to buy daily newspapers.

The social life of public space and the sphere of public opinion constantly interact in the media coverage of gentrification. Yet Williamson and Rumming (2017) state that «dialogue

through paper press media between citizens, planning agencies, representatives of neoliberal stakeholders is rarely captured and analysed» (page 428). In consequence, I situate the research gap in that moment: when street-level citizens invite themselves into a local struggle over eviction of the homeless and contribute to making this social event into a «semiotic event» during which arguments are exchanged and stigmatization processes are disputed.

The chapter offers a micro-level argumentative and discursive analysis of The Washington Post coverage of the recurrent and violent eviction of a homeless encampment situated in the K street underpass in one of the Business Improvement Districts (BID) in the Nation's capital. This case shows how journalists address and name a complex entanglement of social, racial and economic marginalities and inequalities, how they orchestrate and perform a local controversy, and how finally they resolve it – at least discursively – through a positive story. This may demonstrate the strategy employed by the DC media to turn themselves into objective but implicitly pro-gentrifying operators. The newspaper shows facts (in this case, tents) but its journalists tend to invisibilize the structural causes of poverty and tend to ignore the capacity for agency and the right to claim for housing justice. They cautiously shift the debate when it comes to the realities of everyday racism toward the last black residents of a gentrified district.

Part 1 focuses on how urban social theories and local context illuminate the confrontation of great poverty and the renewal of public space renewal in a Business Improvement District in Washington DC. Part 2 introduces the methodological mix (argumentative and narrative discourse analysis) and presents The Post's reporting and shaping of the eviction story. Finally, Part 3 draws the lessons of the empirical inquiry and proposes a typology of the methods employed by The Post to neutralize the political and ideological charge of the event.

1. D.C. gentrification and the mobility – social nexus in planning and media discourse

11. BIDs as key players in DC gentrification

Washington has been a focus for research on gentrification for almost two decades and its centre, historically inhabited by lower-income Black communities, has been racially and socially repopulated with white, young, educated newcomers. The central districts have received increased public investment and have seen a meteoric rise in property values. The consequences of residential displacement in terms of social change, and its effects on race, ethnicity and social justice, have been extensively studied (Prince 2014, Hyra and Prince 2015, Hutson 2016).

An important element in the urban reconquest of downtown DC is the linking of public and private capital through Business Improvement Districts. DC's BIDs are non-profit organizations authorized by the city to complement public policies and provide additional services in sanitation and in the maintenance of public space (e.g. street furniture, lighting, cleaning, landscaping) (Schaller 2019). The BIDs have gradually developed significant contributions to city branding and place making. The continuous celebration of redevelopment captured in trendy restaurants or yoga opportunities, together with the displacement and replacement of local community, erases the former identity of places and associations with the 1960s marches for black civil rights (Oluwafemi 2017).

Created in 2007, North Massachusetts Avenue BID (abbreviated to NoMa, echoing New York's SoHo), covers 35 blocks in DC's Golden Triangle, directly north and west of the

White House. This BID is emblematic of new-build gentrification (Davidson 2018), a type of gentrification that differs from the classic process of residential migration by middle-class intellectuals and progressives that began in the 1970s. This process occurred two decades later and was mainly driven by public and private investors. The reason lies in the area's urban morphology. NoMa stretches along and backs onto the railway lines of Union Station. It mainly covers very large brownfield plots made up of a mix of vacant land, old industries and coal yards, parking lots, a few streets of dilapidated terraces and a few federal offices. The brownfield plots were gradually brought up by real-estate companies and some administrative buildings were also sold to private bodies for refurbishment and leasing. Beginning in the 2010s, glass facades of offices and luxury condos proliferated. Now, with almost 30,000 inhabitants, NoMa's "no longer belongs to the wrong side of the tracks" (Hoffer, The Washington Post 2015). The district has the reputation of a lively weekend destination for tourists and DCers. As early as 2013, The Post labelled the place "D.C.'s Sim City of gentrification" (Yates 2013).

Are BIDs public municipal bodies designed to make day-to-day life easier for city folk or are they objective platforms for the furtherance of financial and real estate interests? Before looking at the media coverage of BID activity and public discourse, it must be recognised that ambiguity and contradictions run through the long history of relationships between BIDs and the District Government. «The BIDs' professional staffs, particularly the executive directors, seem to eschew any close identification with the District or other governmental institutions. Most see themselves as part of the private sector and not part of government» explains **Wolf** (2006, p. 70). BIDs were created and are supported by the DC government but adopt an entrepreneurial profile and communication profile. They claim to protect the interests of residents and talk frequently of the "BID community", but the infrastructures and services they press the public authorities to deliver to residents raise the value of urban projects and serve the locally highly active pro-growth coalition. BID Directors constantly urge municipal authorities to steer public money towards the best public infrastructure for the BID so that the BID can match the new infrastructure with "community projects" (mainly art and environment). As Thompson-Summers and Howell noted regarding the Starburst Plaza development (Thompson Summers and Howell 2019), in mobility planning, the interface between public infrastructure and the social and racial question remains problematic.

12. The gentrification mobility fix and its exclusionary effects

Mobility planning is a good example of the capacity of the directors of the NoMa BID to put pressure on the city administration and to channel public money. The process occurs in the transit and micro-transit policy and planning.

In 2012, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority put \$25 million into the refurbishment of a subway station (Nasri and Zhang 2014). Named NoMa/Gallaudet, the new station seemed to give an official imprimatur to the BID name (which still sounded strange, Hedgpeth, The Post, 4 nov 2011) and contributed to the erasure of the district's former black identity and the memory of the 1960s racial struggles that took place there (Rusk 2017). Scholars classified the metro station building in the category of transit-induced gentrification (**Dawkins and Moeckel 2016**).

Cycling and walking infrastructure also became a public and private policy goal. «Feet in the streets, then heads in the beds, and retail follows" are the words of the NoMa BID President at a public meeting with District Department of Transportation (Urban Land Institute, 2019). The NoMa BID pursues a constant and intensive communication strategy around its excellent

walking and cycling scores. These scores measure the possibility for pedestrians and cyclists to move safely, comfortably and more or less directly to a number of BID destinations for work, shopping or leisure. They are defined by urban experts working for real estate developers and help to situate the potential value of urban sites throughout US cities (Hall and Rame 2018). Since the early 2010s, the district has been implementing complete schemes to upgrade the street layout, carrying out resurfacing works on First Street NE, then New York Avenue Bridge, then L, M and N Streets. More space was dedicated to buses, bike lanes and sidewalks, less for cars. BID services immediately planted flowers and trees, and implemented street signage, new lightning and BID flags in these schemes. Over the same period, the metropolitan cycle branch trail opened and NoMa BID punctuated the bike corridor with community projects such as murals, dogparks and green parklets. In 2019, the BID foundation also completed a green corridor running through three consecutive blocks to facilitate local trips. It is therefore not surprising that The Washington Post's discourse around NoMa emphasises the considerable changes that have occurred in less than two decades (The Washington Post, Hoffer, February 6, 2015, The Post, Williams, May 4th 2020, The Post, Lerner, July 23 2020). The newspaper has consistently reported on the connection between the transformation of public space, investment in mobility infrastructure and urban redevelopment, hesitating between categorising NoMa as a transit-oriented neighbourhood or a micro-transit village.

There is one final holdout in the BID's physical recapture of the urban realm: the section where K and L streets cross the Union Station railway lines. As the only means for cars to cross the railway, both underpasses are frequently blocked by traffic. In very hot and very cold seasons, they are also often occupied by homeless, a situation that encapsulates the tensions between the social impacts of gentrification (poverty, eviction) and mobility policies. Cresswell argues that the BIDs act as a 'new point of friction' in twenty-first century urban mobility policies (2010 p 26, cited by Rink and Gamedze, p. 644). Along with Sheller (2019), he condemns the deeply contested nature of urban mobility transition. He shows that it is through the capacity to dictate who is mobile and how, and who is immobile and how, that the mandate to gentrify is enforced in every space and place in a city. DC researchers had already raised the social and racial dimension of new mobility conflicts, especially during Adrian Fenty term as mayor (Gibson 2013). From this perspective, the evictions from the tunnels are important in that they represent one of the last acts in the sanitisation of NoMa's public space. The question is whether the media makes or not the connection between active mobility planning and homelessness.

13. How newspaper do (or don't) connect mobility and social trends in gentrified areas

The US print media have faced a series of major shocks and challenges during the period of BID development in downtown DC. Even dominant titles such as The Washington Post have been under constant financial pressure. The paper shed staff and cut budgets, but in the end fell into the hands of Amazon boss Jeff Bezos in 2013.

Knobel (2018) investigated the long-term transformation of the political economy of journalism and the evolution of editorial style, norms and values. Knobel sees two main drivers of The Washington Post adaptation. One is technology. Because of the emergence of the internet and smartphones, The Post has been obliged to become partly an online publication that seeks to sell every article, achieve good metrics and maximise clicks. The second is trends in information demand. The emergence of social media and the rise of opinionated cable news have produced a saturated communication sphere. As a matter of survival, The Post, like other famous US titles such as the New York Times, differs from other news outlets. It seeks to

protect its credibility and the brand by distributing high quality journalism. However, faced with a diminution in reporting capacity, journalists have had to reframe the way they handle local news and the local readership.

There are many advantages to going local for a newspaper that is also a national and international press title. The fabric of information is cheaper and the potential relationship with the readership denser. In order to save costs, The Washington Post produces simple, original and meaningful stories that do not require substantive archival research and take only a few hours or days to complete. Journalists can rely on interviews and straightforward reporting techniques. The controversial issues raised and the storyification process distinguish the reporting from other media, which simply repeat information that is easily found elsewhere). The aim of this kind of editorial work is to win hearts and minds, that is to say to combine rational factual reporting with emotional handling of information so as retain the loyalty of local readers (McChesney 2016). Another important point for journalists is to include street level citizens as contributors to the reporting activity, in order to instil loyalty towards “their” media.

The NoMa tunnel affair causes a problem for The Washington Post because the positive mainstream discourse around the NoMa metamorphosis intersects with much more complex and nuanced coverage of homeless evictions. This factor is already present in critical studies on media coverage of homelessness. Buck and Toro (2004) consider that media coverage has not simply become more negative toward homelessness in recent years, but it has become more varied and at the same time more sophisticated.

On the one hand, homeless evictions have been reported in the media for decades (Lugo Ocando 2019), so homelessness no longer seems so scandalous, in fact is no longer “news”. On the other hand, journalists write about homelessness because they want to cover news that pushes emotional buttons and attracts the public’s interest to hot topics “on the doorstep”. However, tackling the issue from a directly political perspective is dangerous, since it is hard for journalists to measure whether or not the editorial line meshes with public opinion on the question of homelessness (Tsai *et al.* 2017). They also constantly fear what they call the “compassion fatigue”. As they follow a delicate line between feelings of care and feelings of blame around the issue of homelessness (Barrett *and al.* 2016), “papers arbitrate a public debate that is less and less oriented toward the policy questions” (Buck and Toro 2004, p. 306).

To conclude this first part, linking the critical literature on media and the literature on microtransit induced gentrification provides valuable theoretical context and illuminates the problem faced by The Post during the tunnel controversy. We will now present the methods and materials that feed into the empirical study.

2. Public space for pedestrians or for homeless? The discursive orchestration of a local controversy

21. Combining critical discursive methodologies

Content analysis, critical discourse analysis, argumentative analysis, semiotic and functional linguistics, all these disciplines and methods are representative of a linguistic and discursive turn in urban studies. Critical discourse analysis helps social scientists to uncover the dominant discourse encoded in texts. However, I follow Reisigl (2020) in his analysis that social scientists sometimes use the term discourse somewhat superficially, often confusing two subdisciplines.

One is narratology, which seeks to understand how the communicative outcomes of storytelling are achieved. Narrative is one of the products of journalism. Newspaper stories put events in chronological order and fulfil the purpose of informing (and entertaining) their readership. This makes it easier for readers to build their own opinion and construct their personal and social identities. Of course, private-focused bodies (such as BIDs) and local authorities, e.g. transport authorities, also manipulate meanings and produce stories, especially around green, smart and sustainable activities (Joss *et al.* 2017). The analysis of the media coverage of gentrification can be summed up as the exploration of the extent to which the media duplicate, replicate or reframe other stories (Brown Saracino and Rumpf 2011).

Another line of research consists in investigating the analytical and functional semiotics of media texts. Breaking texts down into grammatical and semiotic sequences helps us to understand how journalists write their articles and how they develop meaning-making with the resources of language. Social scientists and linguists have also employed this approach as an attempt to critically deconstruct media discourses, for example during migrant evictions (Serafis *et al.* 2020), and in order to study cycling policies (Kiernan 2018) or urban models (Kennedy 2016). I have also used this method and confirmed its capacity to illuminate the discursive strategy of a local politician seeking to “overpoliticize” the planning question and his cycle lane projects (Baron 2019). I therefore propose to combine both approaches. First, I will deconstruct the Post articles into argumentative components, separating values and ethical/ political elements, goals or desired futures, circumstances or spatio-temporal information. I also will delineate the sequences into descriptive, explicative and instructive elements. This will help me to understand the performative dimensions of the discourse and the way the identity of the BID community and of DC citizenship is reframed through the story of the media tell about the tunnel controversy.

A corpus of 21 articles was collected by cross-referencing Factiva, Europresse and NewsLibrary archival website with the search terms '#NoMa, 'K Street tunnel' and 'Homeless' 'transit', 'bike lanes', 'walkable' in the Washington Post paper and online editions, including blog entries and reader comments. To complete the investigation, I collected and analysed all the NoMa BID publicity material disseminated on its website, as well as the DDOT plans and maps of road and street planning and maintenance in the district.

22. A BID vs DC government clash revisited

The battle of the underpass begins in the end of summer 2019 in the pages of the Washington Post. Since the spring months, the BID board of directors has been urging the District Department of transportation to calm car traffic and complete street schemes in the tunnel, and to accelerate the provision of a continuous bike lane. Planning is evidently a way to regain explicit control over the site so as to get rid of the homeless (overwhelmingly black, male and very poor). In its traditional role of complementing and supplementing public infrastructure policy, the BID board supports the conversion of the tunnel into an art gallery and is planning to install a “rain light” that will keep the tunnel intensely illuminated they might, thereby preventing anyone sleeping there. As in many gentrification cases, the BID’s measure is typical of an exclusionary implicit design act disguised as an aesthetic initiative (Lindner and Sandoval 2021). The Post had been sensible to the topic for a long time (Alpert, october 15, 2014) and echoes the BID project on May 3 2019 (The Post, Lewis, may 23, 2019).

After a police clearout, BID sets up barriers to block access to K street sidewalks so that the tents cannot return, and BID President publishes an open letter in The Post (august 29th 2019) justifying the zoning restrictions. The letter develops two main points: the scarcity of public space and the priority of functional mobility needs over any other public issue. NoMa is presented as a very fast-growing district where public space is already packed. Tents might have been tolerable in the past, but the district has run out of carrying capacity. NoMa residents are presented as victims of the homeless and the BID President argues for their right to safe roads and pedestrian comfort. Directly targeting the deficiencies of the District POLICE, the letter also portrays the inhabitants of the tunnel as a dangerous group of drunks and drug dealers, typically blurring race- and class-based fear of the other with ideas about personal security and traffic safety.

The Post immediately frames the potential for controversy in the situation and orchestrates the public debate for about six months. The newspaper alternates between ground level reports on the precarious nature of the homeless life, opinion pieces about the encampment as a public problem and even recommendations to official stakeholders. With the title “Art park vs tent cities”, columnist Dvorak contrasts the long term efforts at urban reconquest and the crude reality of DC’s structural poverty (The Post, september 2, 2019). Consistently with its long tradition of “watchdog” journalism on local government policies and practices, The Post criticises the failure of DC social housing policies (The Post, Jamison april 11, 2019) but opens its pages to a municipal reply to the BID President’s letter. The head of Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless rejects the responsibility for the homeless problem on the real-estate developers (directly targeting BID officials) whose speculation continuously raises housing price. Meanwhile, the situation is blocked: once the barriers are removed, the homeless return after each police clearance. The Post argues for peaceful negotiation – “To solve DC’s homeless problem, the city must talk to those affected” (Young, The Post, october 11, 2019) – but, as time goes by, reports the failure of an institutional response: “Getting rid of the homeless won’t make homelessness go away” (Dvorak, The Post, january 9, 2020)

23. The arrival of a good Samaritan closes (discursively) an insuperable public problem

The cold winter months bring more tents to the K street tunnel and the question remains the same: is there or is there not room for homeless in the sidewalks of a gentrified district ? After Post journalists Heim and Moyer publish an article warning of an imminent new police clearance (January 10, 2020), the debate suddenly takes a new turn. On 14 January 2020, The Post publishes a letter from a street-level NoMa resident in her 30s, who lives one block from the tunnel and works for the Sierra club. The resident takes a diametrically opposing position to the approaches and arguments previously advanced either by institutions or journalists. Under the title “There is room enough in NoMa for all”, she denounces the violent eviction she witnessed the day before and expresses her bitterness, anger and dismay. Neither policing nor justifications for the design of an exclusionary public space should be undertaken in the name of Noma’s residents. She argues that the homeless do not occupy the entire space and that the movement of pedestrians and the presence of tents are easily compatible. The homeless have been present for so long that fear of the other is not an issue. The homeless are citizens, residents and part of the community.

The letter added to a storyline that the Washington Post had already developed a few weeks before, in the middle of the Christmas period. “Don’t believe the haters. Friendly

"neighbors are everywhere" was the kind of compassionate coverage Post journalists Heim and Guskin had already proposed to follow the tunnel affair on 21 December 2019, a story in which they reported spontaneous food distributions organized by students for NoMa homeless. The open letter from the resident confirms The Post's reorientation in the coverage of the tunnel affair. This initiative offers a good Samaritan story and, forgetting about the painful situation of the homeless, The Post celebrates the civic identity, social consciousness and generosity of DC residents (and readers). While the Post had in a previous edition explicitly interpreted NoMa BID's mural art projects as a cultural appropriation of local racial struggles (Ables, The Post, march 5, 2020), the newspaper fails to recognise this moment as an example of social appropriation, which is also a characteristic of the final stage of gentrification (Morris 2019). The journal took the opportunity of this resident's letter to close the controversy and solve the ethical and urban problem. In so doing, it semiotically converted a painful social event into a beautiful – but perhaps overused – moral parable.

Part 3. On the ambivalent and equivocal strategies of media coverage of gentrification

Two findings can be derived from the field study.

41. Media coverage of urban crises in gentrified neighbourhoods and its traps

The first finding concerns the newspaper's capacity to deal with an intricate web of policy problems (housing, transport, security ...) without considering the role of power relations and without addressing the causal and structural reasons for injustice. It is precisely here that we see the methodological interest in separating argumentative analysis and discursive investigation. It helps us grasp how the Washington Post journalists adopt a flexible position and cover a complex urban question in an ambivalent and attractive manner. The journalists construct a complete editorial sequence with an opening dilemma (art or tents?), then a kind of trial (adversarial interpretations of facts and comparison of possible solutions), then a happy ending (generosity wins).

During all three stages, various types of editorial coverage are proposed, so the media plays a variety of functional roles and create various narratives in the local debate (the successive police cleaning-ups, the blocking of pedestrian access to the tunnel, the reporting of food distributions). However, unlike social media and local free online press, they deliver more. They orchestrate a public debate in their pages and moderate an indirect institutional dialogue between the DC Government and the board of BID Presidents. Through the recurring strategy of publishing open letters, the newspaper can display a kaleidoscope of multiple subjectivities. This allows the newspaper to delegate the task of interpretation and argumentation to other voices. This strategy connects with The Post construction of its localness. The editors act as an echo chamber, mirroring diverse representations of reality and experiences among individuals from different social and institutional groups. The open letters convey arguments, but also beliefs, values, normative and ethical claims, as well as emotions. Doing this, the newspaper alternates rational and subjective representations of the problem, so that the reality of racialized and class-based eviction in a rich downtown enclave is diffracted into a profusion of interpretations and discourses.

To finish, the Washington Post provides a solution to an apparently insuperable policy problem. Christmas time (a period when the readership is much more open to empathic

attitudes to homelessness) is the right moment to end the dialogue of the deaf and the sad perspective that present DC as a divided and injust society.

The combination of argumentative and narrative critical discourse analysis makes it possible to understand how the question of why DC BID streets often resemble third world city streets (Bratman 2011) is obscured. By this approach, we are better able to capture how a media outlet recodes a singular event, reframes the question it may raise, and then solves it (semiotically speaking) by (re)producing unity from a fragmented and polarized public sphere.

42. Failed media opportunity to link mobility and community topics

The second finding lies in the response to the question raised in the opening of the chapter: do the media, capture the notion of micro-transit induced gentrification? Are they able to address the micro-level design of public space through its neoliberal rationales and to connect the topic with demographic and racial replacement and with class and race conflicts, as scholars do with bike schemes (Hoffmann 2016, Stehlin, 2019) or as Thompson-Summers do with the modification of DC Starbust Plaza layout ?

Yet the inquiry shows that leading DC institutions, The Post included, adopt too functionalist an approach to transport and mobility questions. For sure, The Post position doesn't support the BID President perspective, which was a failure as it was publicly rejected by BID's residents to be inhumane. This President, which was in place since 2011, was abruptly fired after the tunnel affair and replaced by the DC's former director of transportation and infrastructure on the Federal City Council (this choice of successor gives a hint of the centrality of mobility in NoMa BID's strategy). The Washington Post did not get too deeply involved in the conflict between mobility performance, public space attractiveness and the rights of the homeless. Instead of advocating for an inclusive approach of urban planning, The Journal left the resident's letter describe a more progressive and relational vision of urban mobility as a system of interactions on the move between pedestrians, cyclists, vehicles ... and non-mobile people such as strollers, homeless and others ancillary or marginal groups.

I argue that it is a kind of failure in the fact that the resolution of the problem didn't came from the media itself, but from the resident, who objectively belongs to the gentrifier class and proposed a mobility narrative may fit with a local narrative of community (Biehl et al. 2019). The empirics also demonstrates that public space as constituted by the coming together of strangers and others can be part of the gentrifiers' aspirations. This approach renews former researches depicting gentrified district residents as colonialists and supporters of displacement and exclusion (Zafar, The Post, May 25, 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter started with two interrelated conceptual points of departure: media and gentrification. Gentrification was theorized within the context of rapid transformation of public space in Washington DC. The paper developed in particular the perspective gentrification induced by transit and micro-transit (namely bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure). The role of the media was explored in the light of the local repositioning of Washington DC's leading newspaper in a very competitive communications industry. The research questions were as follows: to what extent does the media coverage of gentrification

employ a discursive ‘mobility fix’? How does media coverage legitimise urban growth agendas and their social consequences such as dispossession and displacement?

The empirical study was constructed from a selection of Washington Post articles covering evictions of the homeless within a business improvement district. It cast light on the fabric of arguments and storylines produced by journalists, institutional stakeholders and eye-witnesses. A cross analysis of the argumentative and narrative resources of editors was conducted to capture the media strategy employed to keep local audience while separating the problems of delivering repetitive information and stagnating before an apparently insoluble question. Orchestration, moderation, subjectivization and narrativization were the four main media strategies employed to that purpose, together with a constant pursuit of strong connection with the feelings and values of readers.

The response to the research question is that, in this specific episode, The Post can be clearly considered as an indirect agent of gentrification. Certainly, the newspaper does not invisibilize the social problem of rich enclaves in the city. On the contrary, it dedicates a long series of editions to the city’s social emergency. The Post does not present itself as an adherent to the BID argument that the mobility of insiders should be prioritized ahead of the needs of outsiders. However, while The Post apparently tends to contradict functionalist approach to mobility adopted by the BIDs, it is reluctant to consider the capacity for agency of the homeless. The newspaper evades questions of race, class and housing rights. By redirecting the narrative towards a Christmas story, it sides with the interests of the operators of gentrification. The journal may do this to protect its own business, but in so doing it espouses the BID strategy, which is fundamentally to support and develop local identity and community pride as the precursor and starting point for producing value and attracting tourism, investment, talent and trade.

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