

# Homelessness and Media Activism in the Voluntary Sector: A Case Study

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## Introduction

Since the mid-1970s, the “postwar compromise” between government, big business, and organized labour has been gradually replaced by a neo-liberal political arrangement that enshrines in private capital the power and responsibility to generate wealth and requires individuals to assume greater responsibility for their personal security and the care of others. Some observers view this model as a positive, practicable framework for reforming the excesses and inefficiencies of government, curtailing the influence of “special interest” (particularly labour) groups over policymaking, and empowering citizens. For others, the neo-liberal rhetoric of freedom, flexibility, and individualism masks an insidious political project that is *really* about legitimating the privatization of public assets, eliminating the barriers (e.g., environmental regulations) to the accumulation of private capital, and enabling market forces to replace the state as the provider of basic welfare (e.g., Teeple, 1995). These critics point to the emergence of certain key indicators (a growing income gap between rich and poor, rising levels of food bank use, increased numbers of homeless, etc.) as evidence of an economic “system” that has colonized the “lifeworld” (Habermas, 1987), dismantling the institutional apparatus embedding lifeworld expectations (i.e., the welfare state), and transforming the ways we view the world and live in it.

In the face of such a bleak outlook, it is tempting to conclude that there are no alternatives. Yet, notwithstanding the negative effects that neo-liberal policies are having on human and natural environments, awareness, opposition and resistance on the part of advocacy groups and social movements has also occurred (e.g., Klein, 2000). The breadth of issues around which these groups have mobilized (e.g., global labour and human rights, environmental degradation, poverty, and homelessness) testifies to the myriad ways in which neo-

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liberalism has precipitated a “renaissance of political subjectivity” within civil society (Beck, 1997, p. 100). Moreover, if the issues around which these groups mobilize are varied, so too are the arenas where they articulate their struggles. Ongoing debates in Canada regarding same-sex marriage, marijuana decriminalization, private health care delivery, state-subsidized daycare, and social housing (among others) illustrate how Parliament and the courts, town and city halls, and political party conventions all operate as important arenas for problematizing matters of public importance. Despite the importance of these arenas, we argue that the central arena of mainstream mass media “overshadows all others” (Gamson, 2004, p. 243). Mass media play an integral role in debates about public policy not only because the key players in these other arenas are also part of the media “gallery,” but because policy actors also operate under an assumption that how media organizations “frame” issues and debates will influence how publics form their opinions. Not only do government departments, corporations, pressure groups, and many voluntary organizations “look to the mass media to assess their effectiveness,” but the media also help “spread changes in language use and political consciousness” (p. 243).

Access to the channels of mass communication is not available equally to all groups, however. For voluntary organizations, gaining admission to the media arena can pose considerable challenges. Even in the case of successful media activism, this success often comes only after addressing a number of important barriers and constraints, such as the commercial interests and orientations of mainstream mass media, the journalistic routines and news norms that determine what and who are newsworthy, the competition among different voluntary advocacy groups (and other organized collective actors) for publicity and public support, and the propensity of news media to report about events rather than issues. Combined, these factors have tended to circumscribe the range of possible meanings the media will convey about the voluntary sector. While charities and other voluntary groups often receive plenty of media attention for the services and activities (e.g., fundraising events) they provide, their ideas and arguments about public policy tend to be downplayed or ignored (Deacon, 1999; Grosenick, 2004; Greenberg, 2005). Despite these barriers and interpretive frameworks, however, it is important to note that the mass media are not a monolithic, internally cohesive institution open only to powerful groups and in service of a dominant ideology. Although the relationship between mass media and voluntary organizations is *asymmetrical* (i.e., in which charitable and other nonprofit groups operate at a symbolic and material disadvantage), these groups can foster or create opportunities to navigate those barriers and utilize the media to achieve their objectives and build capacity.<sup>1</sup>

The tension between constraints and opportunities for media activism in the voluntary sector provides a starting point for this study. We focus on the development and execution of a communication strategy and media campaign by a coalition of nonprofit groups in Ottawa, The Alliance to End Homeless-

ness (hereafter the Alliance). We are interested in examining the Alliance's communication strategies and activities, and especially the development of a media event in the winter of 2005 to promote the coalition and raise awareness about the problem of homelessness in the national capital region. This campaign was part of a broader policy initiative to pressure federal and provincial governments into delivering a sustainable, affordable housing strategy. After providing some background comments about the Alliance, we will discuss some of the constraints the coalition faced in preparing and launching its media event, and how it attempted to overcome these challenges to re-frame the problem of homelessness and strengthen public policy in this area.

### **Case Background: The Alliance to End Homelessness**

The Alliance to End Homelessness was established in 1996 as a vehicle for streamlining advocacy and service-delivery activities to combat homelessness by Ottawa-based non-profit organizations and university researchers. Consisting of more than 70 community agencies, academics, social housing providers, and agents of the municipal government (i.e., within the housing branch), the Alliance works to provide affordable housing for all citizens in Ottawa. It is composed of a Research and Evaluation Working Group (REWG), a Public Awareness Working Group (PAWG), and a Steering Committee comprising individuals in leadership positions from 16 member organizations. Whereas the REWG facilitates research into homelessness in Ottawa and across Canada and tracks extant and emerging homelessness issues, the PAWG is essentially responsible for the public dissemination and publicity of key findings from REWG reports. The Steering Committee receives all findings and recommendations from the REWG and the PAWG and determines the coalition's position on policy issues, frames requests for funding and calls for research, and determines the development and execution of communications strategies and activities.

The Alliance occupies a distinct political space within the broader sector of anti-poverty and anti-homelessness work in Canada. Its history as a research group and policy advocate has led it to focus primarily on what we describe as "back-stage" communications activities. This has entailed advising policymakers and delivering recommendations with an understanding and awareness about the institutionalized structure of policymaking across different levels of government and the challenges this can pose in terms of effecting timely and quick decisions. Its goal of achieving "greater recognition from municipal and provincial bodies" makes it a good example of an organization pursuing what Fraser describes as *affirmative politics of redistribution*, i.e., ensuring "surface reallocations of existing goods to existing groups" without overtly challenging "the deep structures that generate class disadvantage" (1995, pp. 86–87). Thus, the Alliance does not outright oppose or confront the configuration and legitimacy of the capitalist system; rather it calls for what are essentially structural adjustments to improve the system's delivery of benefits to a wider segment

of the population. By way of comparison, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) calls for a *transformative politics of redistribution*, which entails a “deep restructuring of the relations of production” (Fraser, 1995, p. 87) premised upon an alternative worldview that challenges the dominant system and its attendant discourses (see Shantz, 2002). It pursues a more radical agenda of “front-stage” communications activities: publicly performed grievances designed exclusively to grab public and media attention. In other words, where the Alliance has traditionally utilized “softer” advocacy tactics, such as submitting proposals to parliamentary committees, advising municipal housing authorities on immediate and emerging housing needs and, more recently, attempting to *negotiate* the terms of media publicity for its projects and activities, the carefully orchestrated and executed “direct action” tactics of OCAP disrupt and de-stabilize that system, attempt to call its basic premises into question, and demand media attention for doing so.<sup>2</sup>

We conducted our research from January–May 2005, when the organization was developing a public awareness campaign to promote its inaugural Report Card on Homelessness. According to national standards, households should be able to meet their housing needs on 30 percent of their income. Yet the Report Card notes that in Ottawa more than 65,000 families spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing and thus live at risk of becoming homeless. Moreover, in 2004 more than 1% of the city’s population (i.e., 8,500 individuals) stayed in an emergency shelter, including almost 1,100 children from more than 600 different families. According to the Alliance, these are disproportionately high numbers for the nation’s capital, a city of approximately 850,000 residents with a municipal government that has been responsive over the years to the housing needs of the poor (Klodawsky et al., 2001). These figures also represent a considerable jump in similar data reported only seven years earlier by the municipal government.<sup>3</sup>

Our methodology had two main components: first, content and discourse analysis of organizational documents and news coverage<sup>4</sup> about homelessness; and second, participant observation in PAWG meetings. As participant observers, our role was primarily informational. We provided the Alliance with information about the organizational routines, news values, and production demands of journalists, which they used to determine the timing of their media event and how they might produce a report card that would be as accessible to journalists and the public as possible. We also produced a research review of the literature on media coverage of homelessness (which was presented to the PAWG early in its strategy meetings). It was not our role to advise on what the key messages of their campaign should be. While we were often asked to be a sounding board for their ideas and occasionally provided our insights, the organization made all decisions about its communication strategies. The research team also performed targeted, semi-structured interviews with journalists in Ottawa following the campaign. We refer obliquely to some of those

interviews here; however, these data are the subject of the first author's broader, ongoing project.

## **Releasing the Report Card: Constraints on Voluntary Sector Media Activism**

We want the Report Card to be a resource for every citizen in Ottawa. Ideally, it should be on every kitchen table, in every doctor's office, and on the desks of every reporter and MP. When someone wants to know what homelessness is and who the homeless are, the Report Card should be the tool they refer to first.

—Alliance Coordinator  
(Public Awareness Working Group  
Strategy Meeting, January 2005)

The Report Card was designed as a tool for public education and awareness, and the Alliance decided to make it the centerpiece of a campaign based on a combination of what Deacon, in his study of media and the voluntary sector in Britain, called "issue," "profile," and "resource" motives (1999). *Issue motives* refer to occasions when an organization attempts to use the media to "raise issues for broader public or political discussion" (p. 60). As the most important dimension of its campaign, the Alliance wished to draw public attention to the issue of homelessness in Ottawa and to generate public pressure on the federal and provincial governments to deliver on past election promises of instituting a long-term affordable housing strategy. *Profile motives* concern attempts to enhance the credibility of the organization among the media, and public and political institutions. Recognizing the cacophony of voices speaking to the general problem of homelessness, the Alliance wanted to promote itself as the most credible source on the issue to whom journalists would turn for reliable issue-based commentary and analysis. Finally, *resource motives* refer to those attempts to increase the organization's public profile to "attract funds, grants and volunteers" (p. 60). Although the Alliance was not interested in securing a cadre of volunteers and/or workers per se, as a coalition many of its member organizations depend on volunteer support for delivering services and programs. Moreover, it was clear that organization members believed that increased public presence and visibility would lead to higher levels of government funding for homelessness in general and for the organization in particular.

When it came to developing its communications plan, the Alliance had to address an assemblage of action constraints and to strike a balance between what Ryan (2004) describes as the challenges of under-determination and over-determination in media strategizing. "Under-determined approaches [to communications planning] under-emphasize the formidable barriers to mass media access" (2004, p. 486). For example, to make a strategic intervention in a "framing contest" requires more than just *awareness* of the media's propen-

sity to personalize stories or a facility with some of the general skills involved in writing an effective news release. By contrast, “over-determined approaches lean heavily on analyses of media power structures noting consolidation of ownership, overlapping boards of directorates, etc.” (p. 486). Whereas under-determination typically leads to action without consequences, over-determination typically lead to inaction that stems from a sense of despair on the part of organizations that may perceive (sometimes accurately) media power structures to be impenetrable. The Alliance effectively struck a balance between under-determination and over-determination in developing its media strategy. The following section briefly discusses the challenges the coalition faced when entering into the media arena and how it framed the issue of homelessness. It also outlines the possible short- and long-term implications of its strategy.

### *Cultural and Material Resources*

Much of the scholarly literature on advocacy and activism prioritizes the notion of “resources”; however, this research has been surprisingly “slippery and vague” (Cress & Snow, 1996, p. 1090) in terms of specifying what resources are and how they facilitate struggles for justice. Researchers working in the area of social movement studies have attempted to address this lacuna by developing taxonomies of movement resources (Cress & Snow, 1996; Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). For primarily descriptive purposes, we selectively draw on these studies to distinguish between *cultural* and *material* resources.

We conceptualize *cultural resources* as the experiences and knowledge a social actor (i.e., an individual or group) accrues through historical engagements with social structures. In the context of voluntary sector media activism, this experience and knowledge varies and might include becoming aware of how to organize a public awareness campaign; how to prepare a media release; how to “translate” complex or technical information into the discourses of journalism and everyday life; or how to develop a Web site that hosts and disseminates information to the public and key stakeholders. Voluntary groups that are “rich” in the cultural resources required for effective public communication will be able to generate a repertoire of communication strategies and tactics, including scanning the media environment to hosting events that generate public interest and expand awareness, developing key messages or “frames” that resonate with the broader socio-cultural context and ensuring consistency in the delivery of those messages by spokespeople, and evaluating the resulting news coverage to measure the impact or results of the group’s media activities with an eye to altering or modifying future courses of communicative action (Ryan, 1991). However, like material resources (which we discuss below), cultural resources and competencies are “neither universally available nor evenly distributed” (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004, p. 126). A deficient supply of cultural resources can leave organizations discouraged about their ability to be heard, or skeptical about the media’s role in reaching bystander publics,

constructing or fostering a collective identity, and/or reinforcing affective bonds among members or constituents.

Researchers often argue that voluntary organizations will have difficulty influencing policy and media agendas because they lack necessary *capital* and other forms of material resources. Capital is normally conceptualized in fiscal terms, i.e., as money and the types of things that money can buy (e.g., office space, communications technology, research materials, and transportation; Cress & Snow, 1996). As Edwards and McCarthy note, “money is a necessity. No matter how many other resources [an organization] mobilizes, it will incur costs and someone has to pay the bills” (2004, p. 128). Research on media coverage of the voluntary sector in the UK (Deacon et. al., 1995), the United States (Jacobs & Glass, 2002), and Canada (Greenberg & Walters, 2004) also illustrates the correlation between access to financial resources and media attention. As these studies suggest, money is useful for not only meeting the material resource needs of the organization but also because it helps contribute to its accumulation of cultural capital. The kinds of media activism skills identified above are (in theory) available to all; however, those individuals who possess such skill-sets tend to be specialists with a combination of advanced academic training and professional experience within the media industries. In short, money helps to pay for the informational infrastructure and expertise required for informing and/or driving public policy debates.

### *Competition and Conflict Within the Voluntary Sector*

Although different voluntary organizations may agree about desirable policy outcomes, this is not sufficient to guarantee that these organizations will cooperate or even lend one another strategic or tactical support. Even in such cases where two organizational actors devoted to fighting poverty, homelessness, or other structural inequalities are working toward the same goal, it is possible that they might engage in competitive struggle to frame the situation and influence policy. As Rucht argues, competition and conflict can emerge when groups “differ in their ideological leanings, social bases, experiences, and strategic preferences” (2004, p. 204). Research on environmental activism, for example, is ripe with cases of collaboration, competition, and conflict among groups with differing agendas and goals (e.g. Donati, 1996). Across and within the voluntary sector there exist individuals and groups with a propensity for either radical or moderate strategies, and these differences can be brought to bear upon an organization’s methods and style of protest. Moreover, struggles over scarce and (in many cases) diminishing resources, over prospective constituents/adherents, and over desirable policy solutions can also influence the kinds of strategies an organization will develop or the tactics it will utilize.<sup>5</sup>

### *Media Logic: Market Orientation and News Norms and Routines*

According to Gitlin (1980), an organization that seeks to challenge the status quo will be “caught in a fundamental and inescapable dilemma. If it stands

outside the dominant realm of discourse, it is liable to be consigned to marginality and political irrelevance; its issues are domesticated, its deeper challenge to the social order sealed off, trivialized and contained. If, on the other hand, it plays by conventional political rules in order to acquire an image of credibility, it is liable to be assimilated into the hegemonic political worldview... and its oppositional edge is blunted" (pp. 290–91).

As businesses in a competitive market economy, news organizations make money by attracting audiences, particularly the wealthier segments of the population who will support corporate advertisers through purchasing decisions and behaviour. As the media industry becomes increasingly competitive, news organizations have responded (in part) by shifting attention away from contentious public issues that might be research- and resource-intensive to reporting on lifestyle stories and other forms of "junk food news" (e.g., Hackett et al., 2000). While reporters do not consciously advance the commercial self-interests of advertisers, they are also not immune to editorial pressures to soften coverage about contentious domestic issues, such as poverty and homelessness. As Hackett and Zhao argue, stark portrayals of the "realities of dispossession and social inequality" are likely to be avoided in the interest of not disturbing audiences and advertisers (1998, p. 143).

In addition to a commercial orientation, journalistic norms and routines also operate as constraints on voluntary organizations that seek to use the media to advocate for changes in public policy. News norms provide the orienting guidelines reporters draw upon to standardize their newsgathering, to help them "visualize the facts" (Ericson, 1998), and to select the sources that viewers, listeners, and readers should listen to, look at, and read. Numerous studies have demonstrated that news organizations "impose order" on the social world by assigning reporters to institutional arenas (e.g., courts, city hall, police, etc.) where predictable, newsworthy events featuring official individuals are located (e.g., Ericson et al., 1987). The upshot of this is twofold. First, the perspectives of sources from the state and corporate sectors will be privileged in either volume or type of news coverage. And second, if or when voluntary organizations are included, they are generally used to offer a reaction to the established claims of the primary definers or to identify the services and programs available for addressing the symptoms of dispossession that may be the focus of the news piece. Thus, even when voluntary actors feature as quotable sources, "journalists apply different standards of evidence" (Ryan, 2004, p. 491).

### *Media Representations of Homelessness*

Perhaps the most significant obstacle facing advocates for the homeless are the extant cultural myths and stereotypes that have been constructed through news and popular media discourse. Klodawsky et al. (2001) demonstrate in a textual analysis of local Ottawa press coverage that media representations typify homeless people as passive, isolated, overwhelmingly white, male, substance

abusers who have been effectively contained in the downtown core. Similarly, Grzyb (2005) argues that media coverage of homelessness perpetuates common stereotypes about the “choice” homeless people make to live on the streets, and sensationalizes homelessness by giving disproportional attention to the infrequent instances of violence and anti-social behaviours (e.g., panhandling) involving homeless individuals. In an analysis of 14 years of U.S. nightly network news coverage, Shields (2001) demonstrates that news narratives that focus on the moral turpitude of individuals often obscure socio-economic factors underpinning homelessness. These studies echo the analysis of representations of homelessness in the UK, in which Platt observes that homeless people tend to be typified as victims of circumstance and personal failure, individuals “for whom things are done rather than who get things done for themselves” (1999, p. 105).

Representations such as these are troubling because they not only contribute to “compassion fatigue” (Kinnick et. al., 1996) but they also inform the kinds of policy solutions that tend to get considered for dealing with the problem. One study argued that policymakers in Canada “have been strongly influenced by popular understandings of the meanings and causes of “poverty” (Klodawsky et. al., 2001, p. 128). Although empirical evidence for media effects on policymakers are not provided in past research, homeless people are typically controlled through laws targeting their modes of survival (e.g., sleeping in public, panhandling, squeegeeing, etc.). Their behaviour also tends to become criminalized at the same time as they are segregated from the general population (e.g., Amster, 2003). For many years, social housing was restricted to families with dependent children or to seniors, relegating individuals like single men and women, for whom homelessness was considered to be a “chosen lifestyle,” to emergency shelters. Similarly, with news coverage of homelessness prioritizing individual failings over structural problems, the preferred solution is often charity in lieu of systemic change (Shields, 2001).

### **From Constraints to Action: Framing Homelessness**

The constraints noted above can lead voluntary organizations to wonder whether the time and energy required to effectively attract mainstream media attention is worth their while. Responses by these organizations to misrepresentation and/or under-representation of homelessness assume a variety of forms that are typically context specific. Many organizations react by shifting their attention and focus away from mainstream news media, choosing instead to bury themselves in the business of everyday delivery of social services and programs. Most simply choose to operate without a proactive communications program, responding to media attention when it arises and complaining the rest of the time about a general lack of media interest in what they do. Others have created their own communicative opportunities by establishing alternative or radical forms of media production (Downing, 2001; Atton, 2002), such as free newspapers, circulars, documentary videos, and street theatre. Notwithstand-

ing the positive impact independent media production can have in transforming citizens from readers and consumers into writers and producers, the decision to boycott the mainstream can be problematic. On the one hand, it ignores the “cracks in media institutions, [and the] potential media opportunities born of contradictions in the massive market-driven system” (Ryan, 2004, p. 492). More importantly, for many voluntary organizations mainstream media attention is still considered to be a measure of success that validates their role as a credible source of information and awareness for the broader public.

Our approach to voluntary sector media campaigns shares much in common with studies that conceptualize news media as “fields of struggle” (Gamson, 1990, 2004; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Ryan, 1991, 2004), in which groups with uneven resources battle to influence individuals and groups in both the political arena and civil society. While the contours of the media field tend to provide privileged access to more powerful groups, these privileges and patterns can also change over time. Sometimes these changes occur as a result of developments in the formal spheres of politics and economics (e.g., changing policies and regulations) that operate beyond the immediate control of voluntary groups, and at other times these actors can themselves “change the contours through actions that create new discursive opportunities” (Gamson, 2004, p. 249). Although such opportunities to reach the public and influence policymaking do exist, they tend to differ in form and scope from what are available to more powerful institutional sources. Government and corporate actors, for example, are normally in a better position to leverage their resource advantages by operating in secrecy when a low profile is desirable or through inundating media with promotional materials when a higher profile is needed. By contrast, voluntary organizations, particularly those with access to fewer material and cultural resources, are infrequently contacted for comment about issues that affect them, and rarely do they have the ability to deflect media scrutiny when problems arise. Thus, because they carry lower status as newsworthy sources, voluntary organizations interested in accessing the media arena must rely on normatively persuasive actions and claims that “fit” within the conventions of professional news production (p. 249).

Normative persuasion entails attempts at convincing people to change how they make sense of the world by introducing new “frames” or interpretive schemas that invoke different orienting values and beliefs. Frame sponsors must be able to relate their message to the dominant definitional frameworks of either the broader society or key audiences (e.g., policymakers, other charities and nonprofits, etc.) that are the targets of the communications campaign. This suggests that voluntary organizations are more than just carriers of extant symbols that derive from already existing ideologies (Benford & Snow, 2000). Rather, these groups are “deeply embroiled, along with the media, local governments, and the state, in ... the politics of signification” (2000, p. 613; see also Hall, 1982). Framing, in other words, involves a process of “selectively

punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action” (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137) to inform both how people will understand the world and to guide their action upon that world.

To effectively inform thought and guide action, organizations interested in promoting social change must be able to *diagnose* the problem and identify who is to blame, provide a *prognosis* of solutions, and *motivate* individuals and groups by providing a rationale for engaging in collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000, pp. 615–18). When articulated together, these “core framing tasks” comprise what Ryan (1991) calls a “framing package.” The extent to which a voluntary organization will succeed in activating supporters, transforming bystanders into adherents, and exacting concessions from targets will depend in large part upon the degrees of elasticity, interpretive scope, inclusivity and exclusivity, and resonance of the framing package (Benford & Snow, 2000). Ideally, frames that are more flexible and generic, that connect to the everyday lived experiences of individuals and groups across social categories (e.g., class, race, gender), and that can be shown to be “empirically credible” (p. 620) are more likely to succeed in informing media and public discourse.

#### *Launching the Report Card: Addressing News Norms and Routines*

In planning the release of its report card, the Alliance was faced with a definitional challenge. On the one hand, it would need to frame the problem of homelessness in such a manner that would conform to the dominant assumptions of mainstream journalism (and thus resonate with the broader socio-cultural context). At the same time, as we have noted above, it was also tasked with having to challenge those assumptions for reproducing images of homelessness that obscure the structural causes of poverty and dispossession. Successfully amplifying and extending the framing of the problem first required that journalists become aware of the coalition and its position. Simply producing the report card and hoping it would capture the attention of journalists was insufficient — indeed, as one social policy correspondent argues, “skilful, proactive handling of the media” is crucial for resource-poor organizations that wish to get their messages heard (Brindle, 1999, p. 46; see also Ryan, 1991). The Alliance believed that if it wished to become a credible source for journalists on the problem of homelessness, it would have to enter the media arena and play according to already established rules of the game.

On Wednesday, 2 March 2005, at 10 a.m., the Alliance released the first Report Card on Homelessness for the City of Ottawa. Determining the date and time of the event was a subject of considerable discussion and debate. Planning for the media event began in mid-January and fell under the responsibility of the PAWG, which advised the Steering Committee of its recommendation that the launch take place in late February or early March. This timeframe was chosen for several reasons. First, the PAWG reasoned that Ottawa’s Winterlude Festival, which runs for two weeks in February, is a time when local news organizations typically focus on issues pertaining to the festival (i.e., its

historical context, interesting events, people, etc.). The committee believed that most news media would not only direct more newsgathering resources to covering the festival, but that it would also not want to report about a blemish on the city's reputation at a time of increased tourism, civic optimism, and pride — they felt that even if the report card was covered, it would not generate the interest required for sustained issue attention. Second, realizing that news attention and public sympathy for the homeless tends to peak when the weather turns cold (Shields, 2001; Grzyb, 2005), the Alliance determined that holding the event closer to the spring might delimit media interest and attention. Third, the decision to hold the media conference in mid-morning was based on an understanding that it would give television reporters sufficient time to assemble their materials for the lunch-hour news, to maximize exposure on hourly radio news broadcasts throughout the day, and to allow print journalists time to locate secondary sources if needed to file for the following day. Finally, the planning committee felt it needed as much lead time as possible to prepare its key messages, develop a “media kit” of facts sheets and other background information, and organize a successful media conference. In large part this was due to the coalition's bureaucratic decision-making structure; all strategic recommendations about public communication would be developed by the PAWG but brought to the Steering Committee for discussion, debate, and a final decision. Steering Committee meetings were held infrequently, however, due to the competing schedules and time commitments of members.

Considerable discussion ensued amongst both the PAWG and Steering Committee about the “ideal location” for the media conference. Some felt that the site should approximate the space where homeless people spend much of their time (i.e., on the street). Others felt that an outdoor setting in winter was risky due to uncertainties in the weather. In the end, a compromise was reached and the event was held at Options Bytown, a non-profit housing corporation (Options Bytown is also a coalition member organization with representation on the Steering Committee). In anticipation of a positive media turnout on the day of the launch the Alliance ensured that several coalition representatives were on hand to answer journalists' questions. Two members of the Steering Committee, who could speak to the significance of the research findings, and a client of Options Bytown, who could speak to his personal experiences of being homeless, formally introduced the Report Card in both English and French and addressed opening questions from reporters. Thus, the Alliance successfully provided a diversity of sources, from experts with institutional credibility to individuals with the credibility of “lived experience,” to address different dimensions of the homelessness problem.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, a media kit containing a copy of the news release (which had already been sent to all local media organizations two days prior to the launch), copies of the Report Card in both English and French, and a fact sheet describing the Alliance and its objectives provided journalists with enough basic information around which they could build their stories.

### *“The Surprising Face of Homelessness”*

Among the central findings of the REWG was the significant numbers of homeless people in Ottawa who do not fit the image of the disheveled, drunk, lazy, middle-aged, white male living in the downtown core that past studies identify as the typical image of homelessness in mainstream news and popular media (Min, 1999; Klodawsky et al., 2001; Shields, 2001; Grzyb, 2005). Although the Report Card demonstrated that the majority of Ottawa’s homeless population comprises middle-aged men, in the eyes of the Alliance there were a surprisingly disproportionate number of homeless single women, children, and seniors. Given the objective of educating the public about the diversity of the homeless population in Ottawa, a strategic decision was made to focus the framing of the issue around the “surprising faces” of homelessness by downplaying the demographic of those most affected and focusing on those seen to be most vulnerable.

The major benefit of framing the problem of homelessness as an issue affecting disproportionate numbers of women, children, and seniors was that it provided a “fresh” angle on an old story. Selectively emphasizing the impact of homelessness on these groups in both the news release and in the introductory comments at the media conference provided a “worthy victim” (cf. Herman & Chomsky, 1988) with whom the news audience could sympathize and connect on an emotional level. Media coverage of the event corresponded with the Alliance’s preferred framing of the issue. The following sample of news items (each a story lead-in) demonstrates the resonance of this focus on vulnerable groups:

An alarming report out tonight on the number of homeless in our city. According to a new report card from the Alliance to End Homelessness, the face of the problem is expanding to families and children [cut away to homeless pregnant single woman crying and expressing her fears about raising her child without a home]. (*New RO*, 2 March 2005; lead story)

We often hear numbers about the homeless but there are new figures out today that activists call “shocking.” Last year almost 9,000 people in Ottawa used emergency shelter. That represents about 1% of the city’s population. It seems to touch everyone. Single women and their children, teenagers, even seniors. (*CBC Local*, 2 March 2005; lead story)

More than 8,600 people in Ottawa had no place to call home last year, and nearly 13 per cent of those were children, according to a report card that attempts for the first time to document the city’s homeless population. (*Ottawa Citizen*, 2 March 2005, F1)

Seppo Haukkavaara never expected to celebrate his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in a homeless shelter. He came to Canada from Finland in the 1950s, looking for adventure. He found hard work, raising two sons and working full-time for 46 years... Today, he lives at the Salvation Army’s Booth Centre shelter. (*Ottawa Sun*, 3 March, p. 20)

Interestingly, these samples illustrate that what helped ensure the attention of local media was that the Alliance's framing of the homelessness problem so sharply contrasted with the media's common stock of images about the problem and the people most directly affected by it.

### *Framing Problems and Solutions*

Success in persuading officials to change policy is often based on the ability of advocacy groups to attribute responsibility for the problem or condition to a blameworthy agent. In his study of the emotional dimensions of protest, Jasper (1998, p. 410) distinguishes causal and remedial forms of blame, arguing that if a protest is to succeed, participants must know who is responsible for causing the problem and who is responsible for fixing it. This distinction between causal and remedial blame bears resemblance to what Benford and Snow (2000) define as *diagnostic* and *prognostic* framing strategies. Diagnostic framing entails identifying the problem and attributing responsibility for its cause (normally to authority figures, such as government, police, or, in some cases, the media itself), whereas prognostic framing entails determining "what is to be done" and thus "involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan" (2000, p. 616). While it is not necessary to establish a correspondence between diagnostic and prognostic frames, it is common that identifying "specific problems and causes tends to constrain the range of possible 'reasonable' solutions and strategies" (p. 616).

Given the emphasis on cause and blame, diagnostic frames normally entail forms of conflict that are amenable to the conventions of news reporting. This is particularly the case when the agent of harm is an institutional actor and where the victim (who may or may not be the claims-maker) is considered innocent or at least not culpable in their victimization. While recognizing the strategic value of focusing upon women, children, and seniors as the "surprising faces" of homelessness, the Alliance was nevertheless sensitive to the risks this posed in terms of re-victimizing already vulnerable people. The decision to include a homeless person on the panel of speakers at the media conference and to allow this individual to speak for himself rather than be spoken for not only reflected the client-centered nature of the coalition's work, but it also enabled the organization to come to terms with this communicative dilemma.<sup>7</sup>

The Alliance also helped diagnose the problem of homelessness by clearly identifying three structural causes: rising housing prices that push the poor out of the rental market; a chronically low minimum wage that prevents the working poor from being able to afford basic housing; and declining availability of social services and programs for the city's most vulnerable citizens. And in keeping with Benford and Snow's argument that effective diagnostic framing will identify an agent of harm, the Alliance was also able to capitalize on the political opportunity of a minority federal government budget that failed to deliver on past election campaign promises of funding and a workable plan

for affordable housing. Indeed, as spokesperson Tim Aubry explained: “We’re very disappointed that nothing was allocated in the [most recent federal] budget for creating much needed social housing or for developing a much needed social housing program.” The Alliance successfully presented journalists with a simple conflict narrative that pitted a politically vulnerable government against women and children living in poverty.

While it is a somewhat easier task to identify a problem and specify key causes for it, it is more difficult to articulate a clear and viable solution. Nevertheless, prognostic framing remains a core task of advocacy campaigns because it facilitates the shift from changing attitudes to guiding action. In short, without an “empirically credible” strategy for carrying out that plan, voluntary organizations will have difficulty achieving more than just a change in how the public *thinks about* and *makes sense of* the issue. In the case of the campaign against homelessness, the success in diagnosing the problem confronted the more difficult challenge of articulating a clear solution. While several of the Alliance’s spokespeople indicated that “the federal and provincial governments can and should do better,” they were somewhat ambiguous in explaining precisely *how* governments could do better or even what “better” might look like. In both the Report Card and media interviews, coalition members explained that homelessness was a “diverse problem requiring a diversity of solutions.” In large part, this open-ended prognostic frame was a product of the organization’s coalition structure. Although the various coalition members (e.g., mental health advocates, emergency shelter workers, academic researchers, and local government housing authorities) were in agreement that homelessness was a problem with clear structural causes, the differing areas of social service and policy advocacy were articulated in the diversity of solutions submitted by each member organization. Consequently, recommendations ranging from better funding for health care to more social housing and increased job training may indeed allay the push factors behind homelessness, but for journalists the lack of a tangible, clear-cut prognosis made it difficult to establish a narrative link between cause and solution. Indeed, one of the journalists we interviewed shortly after the media event indicated that he was “having trouble connecting the dots” between the cause of the problem and the best solutions for fixing it.

## **Discussion**

When deciding what communicative strategies to pursue and what kinds of resources to invest in such pursuits, advocacy groups normally take inventory of the broader political environment and “opportunity structure” for action (e.g., Kitschelt, 1986). When confronting the issue of homelessness and seeking government support to resolve it, the *political* opportunities for action tend to be more favourable when certain parties hold power (i.e., those more open to creating state subsidized social programs) or when the state’s budgetary resources are more plentiful. Such opportunities have been few and far between

during the ten years that the Alliance to End Homelessness has been active in Ottawa. Between 1984 and 1993, under Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, national housing programs were subject to close to \$2 billion in budget cuts. This approach to housing was continued under the Liberal government, whose fiscal policy agenda was equally regressive. At the provincial level, the election of the Conservative government in 1995 (and its re-election in 1999) was a definitive obstacle to the survival of what was a languishing provincial social welfare state. Key planks in the Conservative Party's *Common Sense Revolution*, its election document and policy platform, included dramatic reductions in social assistance and a cessation to the construction of all affordable housing projects (Ralph et al., 1997), mixed with an ideological assault on welfare recipients, youth offenders, and other marginalized groups. By the end of the 1990s, two factors (a growing homelessness problem across the nation and the underlying affordable housing crisis, along with effective political pressure from national, regional, and local advocacy groups) put housing and homelessness back on the national agenda. A new national homelessness strategy, the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) was put in place in 1999 for three years to help ensure community access to programs, services and support for alleviating homelessness in communities located in all provinces and territories. The two key components were the Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI), which was to create a more integrated and inclusive approach to homelessness in Canada with financial support to local communities, and the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP), which was a significant expansion of the national housing renovation plan. SCPI and RRAP were renewed in 2003 and, in the late fall of 2005 the outgoing Liberal government renewed those two programs for an additional fiscal year (2006).<sup>8</sup>

As this very cursory summary suggests, times change and so do the opportunities of voluntary organizations to shape opinions and influence policy agendas. The election of a minority Liberal government in 2004 opened potential opportunities for the Alliance and other advocates for the homeless. With a powerful opposition comprising the right wing Conservative Party and the separatist Bloc Quebecois, the nominally left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) could exercise considerable leverage over government policy. Indeed, referring to the Alliance's report card, Ottawa NDP MP Ed Broadbent chastised the government in the legislature for failing to deliver the affordable housing program it promised in the 2004 election (which, it should be noted, was first promised in the 2000 election). These pressures continued during the Liberal Party policy convention of 2005 when Party members overwhelmingly passed a "priority motion" that urged the government to "expedite the delivery of existing housing initiatives, and to develop and implement a national housing policy with measurable outcomes that will meet the needs of all low-income Canadians." Sensing a turning tide of parliamentary and public support, the government subsequently "struck a deal" with the NDP and modified its budget

to allocate close to \$5 billion from the surplus for additional spending on social programs, including \$1.6 billion on affordable housing for 2005–06, in return for support on all government motions. The subsequent defeat of the Liberal government in 2006 with the election of a minority Conservative government creates a new series of constraints and opportunities for housing advocates to continue putting homelessness and affordable housing on the national policy agenda. At the time of writing it is still too early to know the implications of the election for housing and homelessness.

Taking advantage of the political opportunities described above requires advocacy groups to assess the benefits that media publicity can afford. Yet scholarly research often notes the tensions and drawbacks for advocacy groups interested in courting media attention to increase awareness and improve their profile (Gitlin, 1980; Ryan, 1991; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Some groups will find themselves on the margins due to their subversive perspectives and claims. Unable to earn an audience of power brokers and policymakers, these groups must rely on front-stage strategies oriented around the power of publicity that mainstream news media provide. In doing so, these groups run the risk that coverage will focus more on the style and method of protest and less on the substance of their claims. The news coverage about demonstrations by groups such as the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) — e.g., the occupation of Allan Gardens Park in Toronto in 1999 and the violent confrontation with police at the provincial legislature in 2000 — illustrates how news consistently focuses on disruptive behaviour and “morally corrupt leadership.”<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, voluntary groups like the Alliance to End Homelessness advocate for similar policy outcomes as OCAP, but utilize different strategies and tactics. Less of an *oppositional* than an *alternative* policy actor, the Alliance does not challenge the underlying structural framework of capitalism but essentially calls for a more equitable distribution of wealth. For eight years, the Alliance relied on “soft” pressure tactics associated with “backstage” activism (i.e., advising policymakers, submitting proposals to parliamentary committees, and taking a “passive” role with respect to news media attention around the problems of homelessness and poverty). Over time, however, as the state of homelessness in Ottawa and across Canada worsened, the Alliance became more frustrated with what it saw as a lack of commitment on the part of government officials to advance an affordable housing strategy that had long been promised or to establish ongoing funding for homelessness programs such as SCPI. Recognizing the important role news media can play in advancing an organization’s cause, the Alliance became more promotionally oriented in its policy work and decided that, in addition to continuing its work with officials in all levels of government, it would also seek more publicity around the nature and extent of services being provided and for the results of its research in order to heighten public awareness of the many faces of homelessness and the solutions to end it. The media event surrounding the launch of the Report Card

illustrates the way in which the Alliance began to merge its back-stage and front-stage activism.

Moving toward the media spotlight did not come at a huge cost. The decision to continue using so-called respectable methods of contention meant that the Alliance would not alienate itself from its key supporters within the municipal government or in the established political parties while it established itself as an “empirically credible” information resource and policy advocate in the eyes of journalists. At the time of the media campaign, the Alliance set up meetings with several politicians from all three levels of government to talk about its recommendations and gathered their feedback in the months that followed. It remains to be seen whether the rather short span of media attention to the Report Card and the broader issue of homelessness were sufficient to create long-term consequences for the Alliance. Short-term attention was evident as early as November 2005, at the time of the Alliance’s community forum on homelessness, when media were asking if the second Report Card would be available at that event. Many coalition members came to realize through their first media campaign the value of expending the time, energy, and resources required for a strategy aimed at achieving media visibility. The generally positive response of journalists to the Report Card also created a window of opportunity for future actions (at the time of writing the organization is in the process of planning the media campaign for its second annual Report Card). The Alliance will also have to continue to negotiate the challenge of establishing a framing strategy consonant with the broad organizational interests and objectives of each member group (Croteau & Hicks, 2003) to circumvent inter-organizational conflict, and resolve the ongoing resource commitments (time, money, personnel, etc.) required for implementing an effective communications strategy. At the same time, the success of the media coverage about the inaugural Report Card encouraged the Alliance’s Public Awareness Working Group to focus their work around the creation of a wide array of public awareness events, and to continue building a robust communications strategy through sustained media outreach and partnership development.<sup>10</sup>

The Alliance to End Homelessness experienced some notable successes in its first media campaign. Playing by the existing rules of the game, it was able to organize a media event that attracted the attention of almost all major local news organizations and generated a sufficient number of stories (over a short time period) focused on the issue and the message as opposed to the messenger. Expectations on the part of journalists will change at the time of the second Report Card in 2006. The Alliance will be more of a known entity, and more time and attention (and quite likely more scrutiny) will be paid from journalists and assignment editors to both the numbers of homeless and the means by which these data are generated. The Alliance will also have to modify its framing strategy as the release of a first report carries more news value than

subsequent reports. The organization will most certainly have to keep these factors in mind as it moves forward with its strategic planning.

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## NOTES

1. At first blush, our approach appears to adopt an instrumentalist interpretation of media use in the voluntary sector. As we outline in this paper, however, the importance of communication and prioritization of media planning within the voluntary sector suggests that while these organizations “use” media in furtherance of their goals and interests, they are also transformed through this process and can effect changes in the media as well.
2. We are not interested in judging whether the strategies and tactics of the Alliance are morally superior to OCAP (or vice versa). The purpose of contrasting them is to illustrate the range of approaches to media and policy activism that exists among organizations fighting homelessness and to suggest that an organization’s ideological standpoint and political disposition will likely condition its public communication activities.
3. According to the Region of Ottawa–Carleton, in 1999 more than 4,500 single individuals and 375 families with a total of 901 children used emergency shelters (Klodawsky et al., 2001). Reliable comparative data on homelessness is difficult to obtain. However, it is noteworthy that advocates for the homeless in Vancouver recently released statistics illustrating an almost twofold increase in the numbers of homeless people, from 628 in 2002 to 1,310 in 2004 (O'Brien, 2005). The significant difference between the Ottawa and Vancouver numbers suggests the importance of scrutinizing the research methodologies that generated these data – nevertheless, even by these numbers the Ottawa figures should give pause.

4. We surveyed news coverage about the Alliance from 1998–2005 and found that it appears as a source on homelessness issues in the local press (*Ottawa Citizen*, *Ottawa Sun*) and national press (*Globe and Mail*) in only 20 news items (excluding letters to the editor). We also monitored all local television, radio, and print media during the period of our research to examine representations of homelessness. The major problem we detected in this period was not misrepresentation but under-representation. Between January–April 2005, only 15 articles dealing with homelessness appeared in the *Ottawa Citizen*, while fewer than five stories appeared on all major local television (CBC, CTV, and New RO) and radio (CBC) stations combined.
5. The distinction we make above between the Alliance and OCAP is a case in point. Both see mainstream media as an effective vehicle for reaching the broader public, both appeal to the public for financial and moral support, but they also target very different constituencies, advance different and potentially contradictory public policy solutions, and differ markedly in their preferred strategies of contention (see Klodawsky et al., 2001; Shantz, 2002). Whereas the Alliance focuses much of its collective actions on influencing government officials, OCAP interventions are designed to be more confrontational, disruptive, and spectacular, and in this regard primarily target individuals within civil society.
6. These spokespeople also included executive directors of the Canadian Mental Health Association and several social housing agencies, a senior member of the Housing Branch at the City of Ottawa, and the Director of Community Programs with the Ottawa-Carleton Youth Services Bureau.
7. However, our analysis of the news coverage indicates that old journalistic habits may die hard, as the individual in question was only ever asked to explain what it “feels” like to be homeless. By contrast, representatives of the REWG and other coalition spokespeople were asked to explain what they “thought” were the most salient reasons for the problem and what desirable and practical solutions should be put in place.
8. The SCPI and RRAP were the two most important of six new programs announced by the federal government as part of the NHI <[http://www.homelessness.gc.ca/initiative/nhiprograms\\_e.asp](http://www.homelessness.gc.ca/initiative/nhiprograms_e.asp)>.
9. However, according to OCAP member and group strategist John Clarke, “the old ‘respectable’ methods of struggle are getting us nowhere. The strength that OCAP has developed lies in its ability to break out of the normal patterns of ‘consultation’ that have been put in place to contain the anger of those we represent” (Clarke, 2001, p. 13).
10. For example, the Alliance was able to apply for and receive another grant from the United Way of Ottawa for the second Report Card and the development of a Web site to host future reports. It also worked with the housing branch at the City of Ottawa to organize a one-day communications and media-relations workshop for service agencies and advocacy groups working to end homelessness. The program was paid for through the Community Capacity Building Initiative, a local program funded through the NHI (SCPI).