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# Homeless People as Agents of Self-representation: Exploring the Potential of Enhanced Participation in a Community Newspaper Project

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**Abstract:** Homeless people are subjected to disadvantageous representations in the media, also lacking opportunities for self-representation. This article reports on the findings of two preparatory stages of a project that involves homeless people in the publication of their own newspaper. The findings show that homeless people want to represent themselves through self-created news and to address homelessness as a social issue through people's life stories, which has the potential to challenge mainstream media practices related to portraying homelessness. At the same time, the analysis reveals several issues that need to be considered while implementing such projects. For example, self-empowerment may sometimes come at the price of disempowerment of others. This emphasizes the importance of carefully structuring the facilitating processes to promote homeless people's genuine media participation, and to support individual and community empowerment.

**Keywords:** homelessness; media participation; self-representation; empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

Homeless people are among the most marginalized and voiceless societal groups (Edgar, 2009), being subjected to systematic discrimination and societal exclusion. This is often fed by mainstream media, whose representations tend to support the main stereotypical presumptions of the homeless as tramps, smelly, dirty, obnoxious, or drunk (Mao et al., 2011; Ravenhill, 2016). Some alternative media, such as community media or street papers, do speak for homeless people (Doudaki & Carpentier 2021a; Howley, 2003), yet the opportunities they are given to articulate their own voices are limited (Torck, 2001).

This article presents the findings of the preparatory stages of a community newspaper project that aims to engage homeless people in processes of empowerment, through which they can regain their voice and represent themselves and other homeless people through self-created news. Such an effort assumes that homeless people acting as agents of self-representation can challenge the stereotypical and simplified ways, in which mainstream media portray homelessness. But more importantly, the project symbolizes innovative participation opportunities that lead to the empowerment of individuals and the homeless community complementing media by allowing homeless people to become active media voices. Such a project can potentially contribute to altering how the public understands homelessness and how media report on it, and more importantly, to shifting the unequal power relations in favor of the homeless people.

The article elaborates on the findings of two sets of preparatory-stage interviews. These interviews focus on the attitudes of homeless people towards becoming agents of self-representation, and on the issues and dimensions of homelessness that are deemed of relevance to be communicated by the homeless community. As this study argues, the evaluation of the preparatory stages of such projects is important to create the conditions for genuine participation (see Doudaki & Carpentier, 2021b). This is achieved by identifying and taking into consideration the views, attitudes and preferences of the involved actors –in this case homeless people– as it concerns the types and modes of participation and content to be published, together with the potential risks and pitfalls of such processes.

## APPROACHES TO HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness, as a concept, requires an understanding of the broader context of possible living situations and homes. Definitions involving statutory, legal, statistical, or housing shortage data are often unsuitable for categorizing homelessness (Busch-Geertsema, 2010) and distinctions between absolute and relative (see Hwang, 2001), and apparent, hidden, and potential homelessness (see Hradecký & Hradecká, 1996), should be avoided as they oversimplify the complexity of this phenomenon. The NGO FEANTSA developed a European typology on homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) in 2005 (FEANTSA, 2006), which as Edgar (2009) explains, identifies three domains that constitute home – physical, social, and legal – and direct homelessness is the outcome of the absence of two or all three. ETHOS distinguishes between 4 main categories of homelessness: rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing and inadequate housing, which are further divided into 13 subcategories covering all living situations where at least one of the three domains of home is absent.

ETHOS provides a continuum definition of living situations (Amore et al., 2011; Edgar, 2009), covering not only people who live on the streets, stay in night shelters, or in accommodation for the homeless, but also people who are released from penal or medical institutions without having a home to go to and immigrants in temporary accommodation. Furthermore, ETHOS includes people who occupy land illegally or live in non-conventional structures, unfit or extremely overcrowded housing and people who live under the threat of eviction or violence.

All these categories are intertwined, and the journey from inadequate housing to rooflessness may be swift as multiple factors contribute to homelessness. It is not only economic factors or lack of housing but also relationship, family or health related factors, that may involve domestic or gender-related violence, family break-up, divorce, death, mental or physical health issues, or addictions (Edgar, 2009).

These complexities make clear that a thorough understanding of homelessness has practical implications for the quantity and quality of policy and social services (see Dvořák, 2020; Hradecký et al., 2012 Kliment & Dočekal, 2016; Mao et al., 2001), and for the public perception of homelessness, which are all mediated and co-constructed by the media and their representations of homelessness.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE MEDIA

Mainstream media tend to present homeless people and homelessness in stereotypical and simplistic ways. These representations may reinforce the stereotypical images of the obnoxious, dirty, and drunk tramp (Ravenhill, 2016) and strengthen the stigmatization of homeless people in contemporary Western societies (Doudaki & Carpentier, 2021a). Stigmatization poses a grave risk for homeless people, who already suffer from low self-esteem, low self-acceptance, and high social exclusion levels (Dvořák, 2020).

Although mainstream media depict homeless people both positively and negatively (Best, 2010), the unfavorable depictions are more prevalent as deficits and deviant characteristics of homeless people are discussed to a significantly greater extent (Buck et al., 2004). Mainstream media often represent homeless people as dangerous criminals, drug abusers, mentally ill, or as having contagious diseases (Buck et al., 2004; Lind & Danowski, 1999; Min, 1999). At best, they are seen as the victims of violence (Schneider, 2012) or as “helpless, dependent for their salvation on society’s benevolence, while the rest of the society is assumed to be healthy and powerful” (Doudaki & Carpentier, 2019, p. 10). Furthermore, as media tend to use simplistic stereotypes and give very little or no room to representing the complexities of human nature, homeless people are homogenized as an undistinguishable social category (Dvořák, 2020; Min, 1999).

Representation of homelessness as a social issue is both scarce and highly insufficient, as mainstream media usually do not link their content to broader issues of homelessness nor present it as a matter for public action (Best, 2010). Thus, although portraying the homeless as victims may contribute to public awareness, it has limited impact given that the media focus on homelessness episodically, especially in winter, without mentioning its causes or possible solutions, which leaves homeless people unnoticed for most of the year (Best, 2010; Bunis et al., 1996; Hodgetts et al., 2006; Schneider, 2012). The periodicity and stereotypical media representations pose a risk in the form of the public's compassion fatigue (Bunis et al., 1996; Link et al., 1995).

One issue of misrepresentation relates to whom is given attention as homeless. Although roofless people only represent the tip of the iceberg of all homeless people, they receive the greatest media attention (Busch-Geertsema, 2010). This aspect is connected to journalists' inadequate training and understanding of homelessness, as well as to the criteria of newsworthiness and the competition to attract large audiences. Roofless people form a highly vulnerable part of the population often suffering from mental disorders or drug and alcohol addiction and may provide readymade controversial material, that is considered newsworthy.

Another issue is that of voice, because homeless people rarely have the benefit of an active voice in the media (Schneider, 2012). Related to this is the kind of voice they are permitted to articulate. For example, when homeless people are quoted, this is done in such a way that they share their first-hand experiences but rarely address homelessness in general (Hrast, 2008). As Schneider (2012) claims, such a practice contributes to the perception of homelessness as an individual rather than a social problem.

However, media that resist these discourses and offer alternative representations of homelessness do exist. A prime example is the street paper, which is a publication that aims to support homeless people by offering them the opportunity not only to become the vendors of the publication and gain an income but to reconnect with the fabric of society. The content of street papers focuses on homelessness and other issues of social inequality, using an inclusive discourse on these issues and raising awareness on social injustice, and thus seeking to bring in the voices and perspectives of the homeless and the poor (Doudaki & Carpentier, 2019).

Some street papers feature stories and commentary that go beyond reporting economic conditions or social policy changes – they document and analyze the impact these changes have on the lives of the homeless (Howley, 2003). Street papers represent the voice of the poor and seek to critically engage the reading public in ongoing deliberations over fundamental economic, social, and political justice issues, as well as to engage social service workers, community activists, and the poor in public journalism (Howley, 2003). Thus, they represent an alternative to mainstream media, as they help to disrupt the stereotypical depictions

of homelessness and provide the homeless with opportunities to have their voices expressed (Doudaki & Carpentier, 2021a; Torck, 2001).

Despite the opportunities that street papers offer for alternative representations of homelessness, the voices of homeless people included in these publications typically receive only limited space and are restricted to specific writing genres (Torck, 2001). The cases homeless people are given enhanced, let alone, full media participation opportunities connected to control over the decision-making process of news-making, are rare.

The project that this article reports on aims to address this scarcity by creating opportunities for homeless people to become agents of self-representation through enhanced media participation. Such a publishing project might not only complement traditional and alternative media in the context of the coverage of issues of homelessness, but more importantly, can function as a space of empowerment for homeless people. The project would, by giving the homeless enhanced power over how their living situation shall be represented, give them also back their voice.

## **AGENCY OF SELF-REPRESENTATION, PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT**

This article explores the possibilities of homeless people acting as agents of self-representation in the media. An agent of self-representation is a person who uses their voice to represent themselves and their community, in the public sphere and the media, through processes and practices of enhanced participation.

Before examining the attitudes of homeless people towards participation and self-representation in the media and what they think is relevant to be communicated about homelessness in the media, it is necessary to take a closer look at participation. According to Carpentier (2011; 2016), participation refers to equalizing power inequalities not only in decision-making processes but also power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors. This approach to participation emphasizes power-sharing, which is more than merely taking part in a process, and which is vital for enhancing societal equity and social justice.

Processes and practices of enhanced participation in the public sphere create opportunities for marginalized and socially excluded groups to strive for social justice and for challenging stereotypes, especially related to power distribution, reversing processes of marginalization and exclusion of the powerless (Adams, 2008). These practices facilitate the promotion of human and democratic rights, equity, public accountability, and the fostering of empowerment, which is a process through which the voiceless regain their voice. It is essential to consider participation, empowerment, and power as inseparable elements. Participation leads to empowerment and thence to shifts in power. Empowerment is a process of the transformation of power relations in the exercise of authority (Cavalieri

& Almeida, 2018; Wilkins, 2000), and as Borodkina et al. (2013) argue, it promotes and supports the representation of those commonly viewed as powerless. The empowering process enables people to gain more personal, interpersonal, and political power (Cavalieri & Almeida, 2018) and grants more control over their lives because it enhances decision-making capabilities (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Individual empowerment further promotes a higher rate of self-esteem, self-acceptance, and awareness of one's social environment and higher levels of self-esteem and self-acceptance contribute to laying solid foundations for empowerment processes (Cavalieri & Almeida, 2018).

Empowerment is not only an outcome of participation (Adams, 2008; Arnstein, 1969), but its level is proportional. Arnstein (1969) claims that participation equals empowerment, and the higher the level of the former, so is that of the latter. Arnstein identifies three forms of enhanced participation: partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. Partnership brings opportunities for the participants to negotiate power with the traditional powerholders. At the same time, it fosters the exercise of power between participants and conventional powerholders. Delegated power allows participants to gain dominant roles in the decision-making process through ongoing negotiations. Finally, through citizen control participants are in complete control over decision-making and planning and oversee policy and managerial aspects (Arnstein, 1969). Citizen control is hereafter referred to as full participation, i.e., a process where each member has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions (Pateman, 1970).

The project that this article reports on focuses on creating opportunities for homeless people to become agents of self-representation through processes of enhanced and full participation in the media. These concern the participation of individuals and groups, in this case homeless people, "in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media organizational decision-making (structural participation)" (Carpentier, 2011, p. 68), on equal terms. Both content-related and structural participation are important for rebalancing unequal power relations, as they relate to creating spaces and opportunities for both free expression, and horizontal and democratic processes of organization and decision-making (Carpentier, 2011).

The participation process allows homeless people to regain their voice and has the capacity to promote their self-esteem, self-acceptance, and deeper awareness of their social environment (Cavalieri & Almeida, 2018), functioning as a form of training in democratic participation and decision-making. Furthermore, if the process is carefully and respectfully organized and facilitated, it introduces a powerful tool for disrupting the social exclusion of homeless people through the presence of their unmediated voices. Consequently, communication between homeless people and the public may become more direct, and the former, as agents of self-representation, may also challenge the stereotypes that

mainstream media use when representing homeless people and homelessness (Jolls & Johnsen, 2017). This process does not guarantee that the public will change its perception of homelessness. One important factor is the limited reach that projects of this type usually have within the broader public. Yet, it may both complement and influence responsible and ethical journalism in offering alternative representations of homelessness (Jolls & Johnsen, 2017).

Although projects that promote enhanced forms of participation in communicative processes and in the media create substantial opportunities of empowerment, visibility and unmediated expression for the groups involved, these projects are not without risks. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) suggest, aiming to engage groups and individuals in participatory processes may, while promising empowerment, actually foster the reproduction of existing unequal power relations (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Participation may support, in practice, separatism and more complex and hidden forms of oppression (Arnstein, 1969), and does not necessarily help in dealing with conflicts or foster democratic processes and practices (Wiedemann & Femers, 1993).

Participatory projects aimed at involving vulnerable groups should be designed and implemented in ways that create the conditions for genuine participation at all levels. For this reason, when the groups involved lack basic resources, these resources must be made available. Such resources include not only the provision of safe spaces and basic infrastructure and equipment, and training in producing and publishing content and in operating media equipment, but also support and guidance in developing processes and routines of collaborative decision-making and management, and in dealing with tensions and conflicts (Adams, 2008; Croft & Beresford, 1993). Additionally, guidance in establishing reflective mechanisms that enable the participants to evaluate the participatory process and its outcomes (Croft & Beresford, 1993; Hardina, 2002), and adjust their practices, is crucial.

## **ATTITUDES OF HOMELESS PEOPLE TOWARD BECOMING AGENTS OF SELF-REPRESENTATION**

This article reports on the findings of the preparatory stages of a project that involves the engagement of homeless people in the publication of their own community newspaper, hosted in a day center for homeless people in Brno, in the Czech Republic. This publication project is part of the “Empowering Media” doctoral project which aims at developing opportunities for homeless people to become agents of self-representation and studying their lived experiences through long-term (three to four years) ethnographic research. The “Empowering Media” project further seeks to develop guidelines for mediating

full media participation for marginalized groups with a focus on homelessness striving for finding balance between individual and community empowerment.

The community newspaper project that this article focuses on is currently at the stage of preparation. It aims to counter the simplified and stereotypically negative representations of homelessness that abound in mainstream media, which do not address the broader social dimensions of homelessness (Buck et al., 2004; Min, 1999; Schneider, 2012). This newspaper project aims to offer genuine opportunities for enhanced and full participation to homeless people, as these opportunities are generally limited even in alternative and participatory media projects, such as those of street papers (Torck, 2001). Facilitating enhanced and, if possible, full media participation creates opportunities for the involved individuals' empowerment, and in the case of heavily marginalized groups, such as the homeless, their reconnection with society, the regaining of their voice and their rehumanization (Carpentier et al., 2021; Doudaki & Carpentier, 2021a).

This article reports on the findings of two of the preparatory stages of the community newspaper project. The first stage focuses on the attitudes of homeless people towards becoming agents of self-representation, and the second stage on the topics, issues and dimensions of homelessness that are relevant to be shared in such a participatory media outlet. The evaluation of these stages is important in designing and setting up the conditions for a participatory media outlet that would take into consideration homeless people's attitudes, feelings, understandings and prioritizations, so that enhanced or full participation does not end up an empty shell being externally imposed and thus, predicated to fail.

As it concerns the first stage, six in-depth interviews with homeless people were carried out, focusing on exploring their attitudes toward their own media participation. The sample consisted of three roofless and three houseless people, five male, and one female. All were between the ages of 38 and 61 and had finished either primary or secondary education. They had all been homeless for at least one year. The Czech language interviews were conducted in Brno, in 2018 and lasted from 90 to 120 minutes.<sup>1</sup> They were recorded and transcribed by the author, and were then analyzed implementing the main principles of textual analysis, using open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1999), in order to identify the main attitudes of the respondents toward their own media participation.<sup>2</sup>

According to Ajzen (1989, p. 241), "an attitude is an individuals' disposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object, person, institution, or event, or to any other discriminable aspect of the individuals' world." There are three interrelated components of attitudes: the cognitive, the affective, and

1 To protect their anonymity, each interviewee is allocated a code. For example, Stage 1 Interviewee 1 is coded as S1I1, and Stage 2 Interviewee 1 is coded as S2I1.

2 The author is responsible for translating into English the interview excerpts that are included in the article.



the conative (Ajzen, 1989; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). The cognitive component represents knowledge, thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and expectations related to the issue or situation. The affective component includes feelings, moods and preferences about the issue or situation, and the conative is an intention to behave in a certain way toward it (Ajzen, 1989; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005).

Overall, the response to the fundamental issue of whether homeless people want to become agents of self-representation was positive through the responses of the interviewees. Exploring the cognitive component of the homeless people's attitudes to becoming agents of self-representation showed that the interviewees perceive media as a way of changing or affecting society's perception of homelessness. The respondents found it difficult to imagine they could represent themselves in the media without anybody else directing them or editing the final content. They believe that the only way to express themselves in the media is by being asked by professional journalists to comment on an issue. At the same time, they would appreciate having the final word over the published content if they had the opportunity. As one interviewee (S1I4) mentioned: "Yeah, I could do that, I would really like that, to say I want this to be published but not that."

Exploring the affective component of their attitudes showed a mixture of emotions and preferences about becoming agents of self-representation. First, the interviewees shared negative emotions regarding low participation levels as they fear that their voices would be externally altered. This distrust was based on previous experiences with mainstream media, which only used their words without giving them the opportunity to express their opinions. On the other hand, they generally expressed very positive emotions toward the higher levels of participation, namely partnership and delegated power (see Arnstein, 1969). However, they were not very positive about full participation, as they did not feel confident or competent enough to create their own media. For example, an interviewee (S1I3) argued that "there are more eligible people, who have the experience and have been doing it for some time."

The conative, or behavioral, dimension pointed to inclinations toward partnership and delegated power. Hence, the interviewees showed a genuine interest in becoming agents of self-representation at the higher participation levels under the condition of having the final word concerning the content. As one interviewee (S1I4) said, "if I had the opportunity to write my own journalism, I would do it immediately. I have already done it once". This finding is related to the perception shared by several interviewees of an obligation to contribute to making their own news because it could potentially help other homeless people by enlightening the public and politicians on the complex life trajectories and circumstances leading to homelessness. Some interviewees also claimed that their motivation lies in providing truthful representations about homelessness.

At the same time, the interviewees who inclined toward higher forms of participation were cautious about full media participation. They argued that the ultimate control over the process should remain in professionals' hands, mainly because they recognized that it requires a high level of responsibility, specific journalism experience, and skills related to the formal aspects of news-making. As one interviewee (S1I2) argued, "the responsibility is huge. I would have to be responsible for lots of people, for lots of homeless, and I'm not responsible for them."

Gaining insight into homeless people's dispositions towards media participation is necessary in order to understand if homeless people want to engage in a participatory media project, to what extent and under which conditions, and what their thoughts and feelings are about such a prospect. This knowledge is important in setting the foundations of this type of project in a way that considers and addresses the prospective involved subjects' views, attitudes and preferences.

## **ISSUES, TOPICS AND DIMENSIONS OF RELEVANCE BY THE HOMELESS COMMUNITY**

Homeless people generally lack the opportunity to have their own voices published even when media give them some visibility, so a second area of investigation concerns the topics homeless people would like to communicate as agents of self-representation. In 2019 and 2020, in-depth interviews with 12 homeless people were conducted in Brno. The sample consisted of various homeless categories ranging from the roofless to people living in unfit or extremely overcrowded housing, of whom 11 were male, and 1 was female, and 11 were Czech and 1 was Slovak. Their ages ranged from 32 to 66 years. The periods of being homeless ranged from five months to 12 years. The transcribed 60-90 minute interviews were analyzed following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focused on exploring which stories homeless people prefer to share if they have the opportunity to act as agents of self-representation, about themselves as well as about other homeless people and homelessness in general.

### **UNIQUENESS AND HUMANNES**

One thematic area concerned homeless people's uniqueness and humanness. All the interviewees were fully aware that homeless people are individuals with specific patterns of behavior, habits and needs, and emphasized the importance of representing homeless people as unique individuals. This awareness contributed to the formation of a common aversion to being "lumped together" (repeated by several interviewees) and the need for emphasizing that all homeless people are, most importantly, humans. As one interviewee (S2I12) stressed, homeless

people are “very kind people [...] it seems to me, that people with a very good heart end up like this”.

The emphasis on homeless people’s humanness is connected to the importance of communicating their non-material needs. As explained by the interviewees, they have different life trajectories and everyday needs that include more than just housing, food, work, or health. They emphasized the social dimension of humanness, often forgotten in mainstream representations of homelessness, that homeless people need opportunities for self-expression, social contact and relationships.

## **LIFE STRUGGLES AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

Another issue, on which the interviewees focused, and which relates to the need for rehumanization of homeless people in media representations, is to make their life efforts and accomplishments visible. Hence, they attribute importance to making their everyday routines and living conditions visible, emphasizing that homeless people usually have to move around the city to acquire food, money, hygiene, or keep warm. They admitted that the main way to get money is by begging, explaining that this activity usually comes with a high level of shame and embarrassment which they sometimes try to overcome by getting drunk. Several interviewees stated that they occasionally manage to get a part-time job or receive social security benefits, which do not cover basic expenses or stable accommodation. Sharing these stories of discomfort and embarrassment, is for them, a way to communicate the everyday struggles of life, which are material, physical and emotional.

The interviewees emphasized the importance of making visible their efforts in being responsible, studying, working toward their future and not giving up, and sharing stories about their accomplishments, such as having worked for most of their lives, having children, dreams, and passions. Almost all the interviewees said they had been trying to change their situation and would continue doing so despite obstacles such as bad health, lack of work opportunities, incapability of working due to lack of sleep, or a safe place to return to after work. The presentation of these efforts will contribute, according to the interviewees, to their humanization and to challenging the stereotypical image of all homeless people as the drunk, dirty people who do not want to work.

## **INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The interviewees also felt it to be relevant to communicate the issue of responsibility, both individual and collective, as it concerns homelessness. One dimension that is important, for them, is that homelessness is a social issue and that the reasons for losing their home are both individual and societal, and can be related to health issues, unemployment, bureaucracy, mental health issues, divorce, debts, or addictions. For some interviewees, honesty about their own

responsibility is important to be shared. For example, one interviewee emphasized that becoming homeless was his fault, explaining that the main reason for losing his home was procrastination.

For the interviewees, addressing the broader social implications of homelessness, which society tends to ignore, might help their and other homeless people's efforts for social inclusion. Reflecting on the aversion of society towards issues of homelessness, one interviewee (S2I3) argued that it is because "society doesn't like to see its own fault". Furthermore, for some interviewees sharing their life stories is vital for society to realize that everybody can lose their home at some point in their lives, thus sharing their stories might help prevent people who have a home from losing it and becoming homeless. As one interviewee (S2I3) pointed out:

It is pretty easy [to become homeless], it is not like I always said to myself that it cannot happen to me. That's not true at all, and it can happen to anybody who is looking down on us today. It doesn't mean that in two years you won't be on the street too. It doesn't matter, you can be the best entrepreneur, I also had my car service, [...] and then he will think about, how only this could happen.

## HOME AND HOMELESSNESS

The interviewees find it important to share stories about what home is. For one of them, "hectic life in between cars, and people in the middle of the street is not a home" (S2I12). They generally view home not only as a place where they can spend the night but more as a space that provides privacy, warmth, and peace – a place that allows them to build and maintain relationships. Such depiction of a home may lead to the public gaining more sympathy, for it is based on shared experience (see Bastian et al., 2014; Conti, 2015). All interviewees showed an intuitive understanding of home concerning the physical, social, and legal domains that constitute it (see Edgar, 2009). One interviewee argued that these three domains might not be sufficient under certain circumstances. Having lived in fear and feeling vulnerable in social housing, he decided to spend the days and nights outside in the parks to feel safer. According to his experience, feeling safe may sometimes be more critical than the physical or legal aspects of homeness: "Home, I'd like to have like, I want peace, yeah, there doesn't have to be anything, no effects, peace, so when you close the door, so I knew, that nobody will bang on me [the door], relax, peace" (S2I6).

Accordingly, it is important that their versions of what homelessness is, should become visible as well. For some of the interviewees, homeless people are only those who sleep rough on the street or in the parks, which relates to rooflessness. However, most of them agreed that homelessness includes people who live in cottages or lodging houses, which corresponds to the range of the ETHOS

categories that include apart from rooflessness and houselessness, also insecure and inadequate housing. At the same time, one interviewee (S2I8) insisted on not being homeless even though he stayed in a one-room apartment with seven other people and spent most of his time drinking with other homeless people in the parks. This response points to the importance of self-perception about own condition, and advocates for cautiousness in imposing categories and definitions of homelessness to individuals.

### **SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND COMMUNITY IDENTIFICATION**

The interviewees' responses as to what they consider relevant to be communicated about homeless people, through own stories, is connected to how they see themselves and their own position in the homeless community. Two behavioral patterns emerged from the interviews. The first pattern was self-identification as an inseparable part of the community. The second pattern was quite the contrary, i.e., isolating or detaching from the community. Both have further implications for the stories homeless people want to share. Self-identification with the other members of the homeless community is related to compassion and a better understanding of the others. Distancing oneself is related to more judgemental opinions on other homeless people. For example, one interviewee (S2I6) claimed: "I don't even behave that way [...] I would never want to end up this way. Or another interviewee (S2I11) said: "[...] Look, I'm a squatter<sup>3</sup>, I don't lie on a bench or paper or so".

Some respondents described self-identification with others as a social vortex that hinders motivation to change their lives. One interviewee (S2I12) argued that "it will pull you in completely, the people you meet, you walk the street, you see the people, you know them, well, but you find out fourteen days later that you are back among them". In practice, distancing may work as a defense mechanism that fosters self-esteem boosting (see Diblasio & Belcher, 1993; Wojciszke & Struzynska-Kujalowicz, 2007). The interviewees who tend to distance themselves from the homeless community sometimes see members of the homeless community as major Others. For example, a few interviewees expressed substantial prejudice against Roma people, calling them thieves, who mistreat or physically attack other vulnerable homeless people.

These findings raise attention to two interconnected issues. One is that self-identification is in itself an important element to be communicated by the homeless individuals in the stories they create. At the same time, it has implications on how these individuals may communicate about other members of the homeless community and raises cautiousness on whether their representations reproduce negative stereotypes, othering parts of the homeless community.

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<sup>3</sup> A squatter is a person who unlawfully inhabits an otherwise uninhabited building or land.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article reports on the findings of the preparatory stages of a project that involves the engagement of homeless people in the publication of their own community newspaper within a low-threshold day center for homeless people in Brno, Czech Republic. This type of media outlet could potentially serve as an example of how media can function, on the basis of participatory processes and democratic organization, offering inclusive and rehumanizing perspectives on homelessness. Thus, it can serve as a suggestion of alternative media organization, practices and content, contributing to changing the perspectives on homelessness.

The preparatory stages of the project, which this article focuses on, concern the exploration of homeless people's attitudes towards self-representation in the media, and their opinions and preferences regarding topics, issues and dimensions of homelessness, which they deem relevant to communicate in participatory publications. The evaluation and reflection on these first stages is a necessary component in the development of these types of projects. Considering and integrating the perspectives, preferences and needs of the actors and the communities involved in the projects' implementation is vital to create the conditions for their genuine participation. While academic publications usually focus on the successful outcomes of projects, there is the argument that it is important to have a structured and theoretically informed reflection on the early stages of the projects' development (see, e.g., Doudaki & Carpentier, 2021b), which can inform future projects and academic research.

The exploration of the attitudes of homeless people toward becoming agents of self-representation showed that homeless people are interested in sharing their stories and opinions through self-created news. Some of the interviewed homeless people feel socially responsible for doing so, as it could help other homeless people in their daily struggles and could prevent others from becoming homeless. These findings show that homeless people want to represent themselves; they want to create their own media, regain their voice and stand up for themselves and other homeless people, not only because they believe almost no professional journalists would do that, but because they have long been denied their voice.

The exploration of the topics, issues and stories the interviewed homeless people deem relevant to share, highlighted the importance of communicating the social dimensions of homelessness, not in abstract terms, but through people's life stories. A focus on homeless people's unique life stories and humanness within a social perspective angle has the potential of challenging mainstream media practices related to portraying homelessness. Furthermore, a more straightforward communication between the general public and homeless people may positively affect how the public views homelessness, by bringing the two sides closer or raising more understanding and compassion for homeless people.

At the same time, as the analysis of the interviews and the evaluation of these preparatory stages helped to reveal, there are several issues that need to be considered while designing and implementing projects that aim to facilitate enhanced media participation of homeless people. While the project aims for participation of homeless people at the highest levels it becomes clear that this cannot happen without careful planning, preparation and support. Full participation does not happen automatically; it takes time and might not be always attainable or desirable by all involved actors. It should not be neglected that any form of genuine participation is voluntary.

Also, some of the interviewees did have concerns regarding their eligibility to speak for the homeless community. They did not feel sufficiently competent or educated to handle the process. They argued for the need for further education and technical guidance, but were also reluctant to engage in full participation due to the increased responsibility that control over decision-making entails. These concerns need to be addressed. Pushing for full participation while the homeless people themselves are reluctant or not interested will lead to either a non-participatory project or a project that will collapse quickly. Hence, setting the foundations of participatory opportunities and practices and increasing independence gradually as it regards both content production and organization and management appears to be a suitable approach for individuals with low confidence and limited opportunities for social interaction.

Training and consultation related not only to media literacy skills or the technical aspects of creating media content and publishing, but also to the development of feedback mechanisms that will enhance a responsible and ethical approach towards publication, are deemed important. This role could be undertaken, at least in the early stages, by the project's initiators or facilitators. One crucial aspect of this process concerns the training regarding participation, in a democratic and inclusive fashion, taking into consideration the specificities of the involved actors. Therefore, it is important that homeless people are engaged in the decision-making processes from the beginning.

For example, as it became clear through the analysis, some homeless people show a higher degree of self-identification with other homeless people while others tend to detach and separate themselves from the homeless community. This aspect appears to relate with how they perceive other members of the homeless community, how they would potentially collaborate with these other members, and what stories they would like to share about them. This point needs to be addressed with the involvement of the homeless people. So, if there is a negative bias against some members of the homeless community it needs to be dealt with carefully and respectfully, pointing out the risks of harm, so as not to lead to the reproduction of vilification, marginalization and disempowerment of these members, which ends up disempowering the entire homeless community.

These types of projects that aim to facilitate forms of enhanced participation of highly marginalized societal groups in the media are faced with numerous challenges and a high degree of uncertainty. Still, it is important that they are set up and implemented, as creating the conditions for genuine media participation, in this case for homeless people, promotes their self-esteem, raises their dignity, and returns the voice to where it belongs, contributing to these people's empowerment and rehumanization.

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