

A Critical Analysis of the discursive representation of homelessness in News 24, District Mail and GroundUp from 2018-2020

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Abstract

Even though homeless people are undeniably one of society's most vulnerable populations, they often face unsympathetic and unkind behaviours and attitudes when they interact with other members of the public. A significant source of negative attitudes towards homelessness, and thus a significant source of this behaviour, is the news media, which has power over how people understand and respond to homeless people, as well as social vulnerability in general (De Melo Resende, 2016:599). Further, the media plays a salient role in reifying the understanding of homelessness as either a social problem that has underlying societal structural problems requiring appropriate solutions, or not (Scheinder, 2013:47). Research indicates that in the case of the news media, the latter is the norm.

The aim of this study was to do an in-depth exploration of how media discourse frames and constructs the narratives of homelessness in their reportage in order to better understand the media's role as both a source of negative attitudes towards homelessness, and a place in which such attitudes are challenged. We sought to answer the following questions: (i) Which types of identities and activities are attributed to homeless people in news stories that topicalise them? (ii) How do the media construct, frame, reinforce and/or challenge linguistic stereotypes and stigmas that are associated with the homeless community?

In order to answer these research questions, a combination of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clark, 2012) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk, 1993) were used to analyse 48 media texts on the topic of homelessness from three local news outlets, namely the national news publication, News24, community newspaper, District Mail, and one fringe publication, GroundUp during a three-year span, from 2018-2020. Each of the three news publications chosen for this study report for different audiences and have dissimilar objectives. Thus, it was anticipated that this could account for differences in the reportage of homeless people between publications. The study found that in anti-homeless publications, homeless people are characterised as being unclean and dangerous substance abusers that are involved in criminal activity and pose a risk to public health. In contrast, in publications that show sympathy towards homelessness, homeless people are characterised as victims of injustice whose human rights are being violated by placing emphasis on their lack of access to necessities such as clean water and basic housing, and on the failure of local municipalities to care for their homeless populations.

Keywords: Homelessness; Critical Discourse Analysis; Media Analysis