

# News media representations of homelessness: Do economic news production pressures prevent journalists from adequately reporting complex social issues

## Abstract

This study used both content and frame analyses to test news-media representations of homelessness in *The Courier-Mail* newspaper for evidence of restricted journalism practice. Specifically, it sought signs of either direct manipulation of issue representation based on ideological grounds, and also evidence of news organisations prioritising low-cost news production over Public Sphere journalistic news values. The study found that news stories from the earlier parts of the longitudinal study showed stereotypical misrepresentations of homelessness for public deliberation which might be attributed to either, or both of the nominated restricting factors. However news stories from the latter part of the study saw a distinct change in the way the issue was represented, indicating a journalistic capacity to thoughtfully and sensitively represent a complex social issue to the public. Further study is recommended to ascertain how and why this change occurred, so that journalistic practice might be further improved.

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## Introduction:

Jurgen Habermas's description of the Public Sphere describes a dual role for journalism in terms of being both a canvas for providing a broad diversity of information to the public on issues of social concern, and also a forum for debate on how those issues might be addressed (Outhwaite, 1996). However a range of critique has developed over time variously identifying interference and limitation in this process. Notions of direct interference on ideological grounds generally stem from Marxist understandings of material 'Base' and ideological 'Superstructure' (Marx, 2001), where news reportage of issues and ideas that question or threaten established power systems is limited or eliminated from mainstream commercial news-media (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Other forms of journalistic limitation are seen to stem from news organisations prioritising economic efficiency over the journalistic ethos. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) point out that news organisations have only limited resources to create 'the news' according to a deadline, yet are confronted with a potentially infinite number of unpredictable daily occurrences. In response, they attempt to situate journalists close to social structures that are certain to produce a form of news that is readily accepted by the broader public because it is timely, coherent and authoritative (Tuchman, 1973; Fishman, 1980). Most often these organisational priorities are fulfilled by government bureaucracy, with a series of studies indicating much of journalism concerns an almost symbiotic relationship between journalists, politicians and bureaucrats (Tuchman, 1978; Bennett, 1994, pp. 23 – 29; Dorman, 1994, p.76; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994).

However, the journalist-government/bureaucrat relationship presents a double-edged sword. While the relationship is perceived as mutually advantageous to both journalists and bureaucracy, because bureaucracy has the direct opportunity to get its message 'out there', and news organisations are furnished with an economically efficient mechanism for filling the news 'hole', the process is also seen to distort the Public Sphere. Those in government and bureaucratic power-positions are understood to be disproportionately advantaged because they become primary definers of how social issues are publicly expressed, and therefore how they are often initially understood by the public (Sigal, 1973; Hall, 1987). Stakeholders from outside the relationship, however, often struggle to gain a voice in the public arena because they do not immediately meet the journalistic requirement of authoritative credibility (Tuchman, 1978). The situation is considered problematic because, as Van Gorp (2005, p.488) notes, the 'authoritative' sources used by journalists are not averse to promoting understandings of social issues that go to their own benefit.

Socially marginalised groups are seen to be specifically disadvantaged by this process because alternative interpretations of their position are often inherently complex. The extra effort required by journalists to adequately identify, verify and succinctly articulate these differing and often difficult positions is seen to clash with their news organisations' need for quick, clean, clear copy from recognisable authoritative sources. Consequently, rather than investigate the underlying complexity of social issues and deepen public understanding through Habermas's Public Sphere process, journalists are instead seen to re-transmit issue-defining statements from an often self-serving 'authority' source. The irony is that the statements from 'authority' are themselves often reiterations of already existing, false public assumptions, particularly in relation to marginalised groups and socially offensive behaviour (Golding and Middleton, 1982; Entman, 1995; Atkinson, Oerton and Burns, 1998; Thomas, 1998; Ward, 1997; Hazelton 1997; Francis, et al., 2005).

Martin's (1997) observations on inaccurate news-media representations of homeless people are a case in point, and especially pointed. Blame, he contends, lies with journalists and their specific use of sources. Journalists' reliance on 'authoritative' official sources steers them away from the voices of diverse groups of homeless persons, causing them to encounter homeless individuals from a distance and therefore in much the same way that ordinary citizens experience homeless people. As a result, depictions tend to revert to what is already 'known', resulting in a reiteration of existing stereotypes. In Martin's study this amounted to a reduction of the issue to its most visible, least variable, and most common manifestation --- single men begging for change in the CBD (pp. 242-243).

### Situating The Study

This study sought to examine to what degree, if any, coverage of homelessness in Brisbane's *The Courier-Mail* newspaper could be seen to exhibit characteristics of restricted journalism practice, both in the amount of coverage given to the issue, and the way the issue was given context. It went about this task by conducting a longitudinal study that analysed coverage of the issue across two broad time periods, each of which concerned government initiatives on homelessness. The first period was one of 28 months. At the temporal centre of this period was a controversial Brisbane City Council project designed to address increasing homelessness in Brisbane's inner northern suburbs during a period of urban renewal and an up-market real estate boom. The second broad time period is one of twelve

months that occurred some seven years later, when the Australian federal government specifically highlighted and promoted policy initiatives aimed at addressing growing homelessness problems across the country. Each of these two broad periods offered the opportunity analyse the amount of coverage of the issue within the context of a powerful real estate industry (Marx, 2001; Herman and Chomsky, 1988), the degree to which journalists relied on government sources for their stories (Tuchman, 1978; Bennett, 1994, pp. 23 – 29; Dorman, 1994, p.76; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994), the contextual tone or 'angles' used by journalists to tell those stories to the public (Golding and Middleton, 1982; Entman, 1995; Atkinson, Oerton and Burns, 1998; Thomas, 1998; Ward, 1997; Hazelton 1997; Francis, et al., 2005; Martin, 1997) , and whether there was any link between the types of stories being produced and the types of sources being used.

The first broad time period also offered further opportunities to more precisely analyse any restrictive factors at play. At the temporal centre of this first 28-month period was a four-month sub-period during which the Brisbane City Council ran a controversial homeless support facility. The support facility was controversial because it was established in a popular suburban park situated at the heart of an area experiencing an up-market real estate boom. By providing this facility, the city council gave visible and material form to many of the elements of homelessness that otherwise remain abstract in terms of the general public's understanding. In doing so, they also provided the journalistic circumstances that Tuchman (1973) refers to as a 'snapshot'. Tuchman maintains that journalists often prefer to work with a material instance of an issue identifiable within a specific period in time, and the city council support facility can be understood to provide journalists with exactly that opportunity. It also provides the study with an opportunity to examine and compare the effects of the 'snapshot' on the amount of coverage, and the 'angles' and sources used by journalists to produce news stories, before, during and after the existence of the city council facility. These comparisons may shed further light on whether and how reportage of homelessness was affected by the restrictive factors outlined above.

### Method

In order to examine both the volume of coverage given to homelessness in *The Courier-Mail* newspaper, as well as the way the issue was qualitatively represented, both Content and Frame analyses were performed on the gathered data. The data were initially gathered by using a Factiva search of *The Courier-Mail* based on the word 'homeless' for each of the selected

periods. The returned results were then vetted for relevance so that the data set was limited to items that related to the issue of homelessness or homeless people in the urban-renewal area for the first broad period, and to homelessness or homeless people more generally in the second broad period.

It is acknowledged that differences in the search criteria will have led to some difficulties in the comparison of the volumes of coverage in each broad period. However it is proffered that on balance the specific differences pertaining to the search in each period go some way to mitigating each other so that the observed trends in volume of coverage remain valid. Specifically, while the first part of the study used a strict geographical limiter that was not applied to the second part of the study, the first part of the study runs some 16 months longer than the second, and also features the effects of Tuchman's 'snapshot' principle which should have encouraged greater journalistic attention.

In terms of assessing the way homelessness was portrayed, this study used a framing analysis based on the understanding that journalists contextualise and shape news content within some familiar frame of reference and according to some latent structure of meaning (McQuail, 2000, p.495). The frames become manifest in the text by virtue of the journalist's selection of sources for information, and the inclusion or exclusion of the key words, stock phrases, and stereotypical images that they provide (Entman, 1993, p. 53). The point here is that a single news event can be framed in various ways depending on the sources a journalist relies on, and whether the journalist chooses to highlight or exclude the various elements of the information they provide (Chyi and McCombs, 2004; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991). Clearly these inclusions or omissions can affect an audience's perception of an issue, and any subsequent engagement they may choose to have in the Public Sphere.

Van Gorp (2005, p.95) notes that there are two potential methods of investigating the existence of frames. A deductive approach involves specifying a set of frames *a priori*, and then seeking the extent that these frames occur in news items. This is useful when there is a strong notion on the researcher's behalf of the frames likely to occur in the data. An inductive approach is more useful when the specifics of the likely-appearing frames are less certain. Under an inductive approach, a preliminary analysis of the data is done first to reveal the entire spectrum of relevant frames. These are then quantitatively confirmed in a secondary analysis. The analysis approach used in this case-study utilised a combination of both approaches for reasons that are detailed in the following Data and Analysis section.

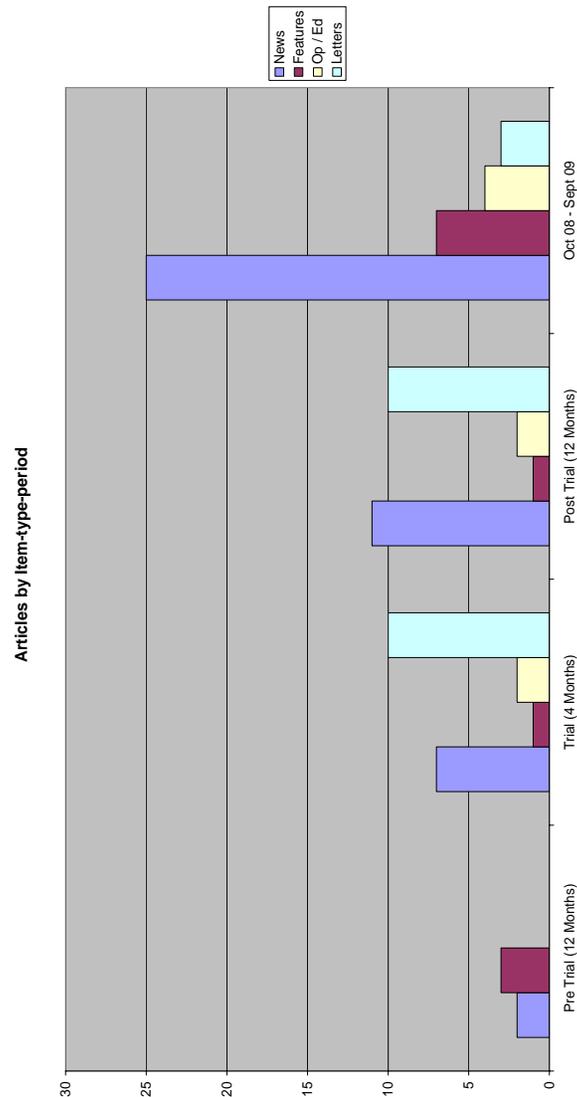
## Data and Analysis

At a broad level, notions of journalistic restriction stemming from ideological hegemony (Marx and Engels, 2001; Marcuse, 1964; Herman and Chomsky, 1988) would lead to expectations that the degree of homelessness reporting in *The Courier-Mail* would likely be non-existent or at best minimal across the entire period of the study. However, *Figure 1* (below) shows that while such an expectation appears fulfilled in the data pertaining to the earliest periods of the study, coverage of homelessness increased significantly across the study's full span. From an extremely low base where only two news stories pertaining to homelessness were published in the first twelve-month period, seven news stories were published in the four-month existence of the trial homeless facility, and a further eleven news stories were published in the twelve months immediately following the facility's closure. The largest number of news stories pertaining to homelessness was published in the latest period examined by the study and matched a period of Federal Government emphasis on homelessness policy. The 25 news stories published in *The Courier-Mail* during this period represent more than a doubling of the number published for the equivalent period following the closure of the trial facility.

The two largest volumes of news coverage initially seem to align with two broadly accepted sets of triggers for increased journalistic interest. *Figure 1* (above) shows the first spike in coverage occurs during the existence of the Brisbane City Council's trial homeless shelter, and this sudden increase can perhaps be explained according to Tuchman's (1978) notion that journalists work best with a material 'snapshot' instance of an issue, rather than an issue in abstract terms. The seven news stories published during this period would equate to 21 stories over a full twelve months if the rate of publication was maintained. But it might in addition be argued that given the homelessness facility is the initiative of the Brisbane City Council, the increased media coverage could also result from organisational economic pressures causing journalists to seek 'news' from the most authoritative and economically efficient sources. The pressures of deadlines are seen to force journalists to favour sources that are bureaucratically equipped to efficiently and economically provide authoritative information, and governments are generally seen to fit this requirement (Tuchman, 1978; Fishman, 1980 Bennett, 1994, pp. 23 – 29; Shoemaker, and Reese 1996, p.130). The journalist-government relationship might also be seen to account for the second peak in coverage which aligns with the Federal Government's policy emphasis on dealing with homelessness. However, further analysis of the sources used by journalists during this period (discussed later) suggests that while government action and emphasis does seem to garner heightened

journalistic attention in this case, the supposed ‘symbiotic’ relationship (Sigal, 1979) between journalists and government may not be as straightforward as earlier studies have suggested.

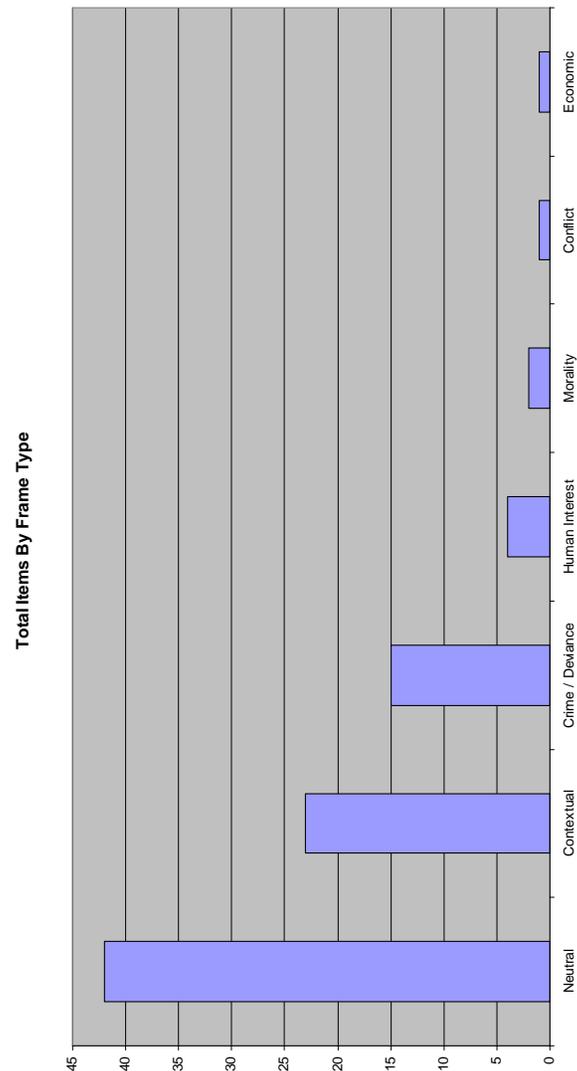
**Figure 1**



In terms of Public Sphere operations, it is interesting to note that during the period of the existence of the trial homeless support facility and the twelve-month period immediately following its closure, the number of ‘Letters to the Editor’ published in *The Courier-Mail* on this subject (20) exceeded the number of news stories published (17) (Figure 1, above). It was not within the bounds of this study to investigate the frames constructed by these letters or consider how the ratio of publication reflects on journalists’ and journalism’s contribution to an ideal Public Sphere. However given Habermas’s understanding that an ideally operating Public Sphere provides both a source of publicly accessible information as well as a forum for debate based on that information, the raw numbers might give some indication that on this occasion that *The Courier-Mail* may have been fulfilling this Public Sphere role.

While the increasing volume of coverage of the homelessness issue appears to run counter to understandings of journalistic restriction grounded in Marxist notions of economic Base and ideological Superstructure, these findings alone do not shed light on the types of stories being told concerning the issue. For this reason a framing analysis was undertaken. At first it seemed useful to examine the framing of homelessness according to a notion gained from a substantial literature review by Semetco and Valkenberg (2000) that in all news involving issues reported in terms of public affairs, five frames seem to predominate: Conflict, Human Interest, Economic Consequences, Morality, and Attribution of Responsibility (p.95). However, a preliminary inductive analysis showed that in this case, despite strong government involvement at local and federal levels, this approach was less than ideal in two respects. Firstly, across all periods covered by the study, even when all homelessness items of any kind were examined, only eight out of the 88 items could be seen to be framed in terms of four of the nominated five ‘dominant’ frames. Specifically, only eight out of 88 items could reasonably be considered as matching a Conflict, Human Interest, Economic Consequences or Morality frame (Figure 2, below). When the study’s focus is narrowed to consider ‘news’ items only, only two news stories were found to be framed in a way defined according to any of those four categories. On this basis, four of the five frames considered predominant over ‘all news’, can be seen as fundamentally insignificant in terms of news coverage of homelessness by *The Courier-Mail*. This raises questions over the aptness of the generalised approach to framing analysis used in public affairs reporting, to the reporting of social issues such as homelessness, and, potentially to the analysis social issues more broadly.

Figure 2



The second difficulty in terms of the ‘five predominant frames’ approach concerns the remaining fifth frame: ‘Attribution of Responsibility’. This frame was initially considered to be the most pertinent for the study, given the focus on journalism’s Public-Sphere role as both educator and debate-forum for public responses to social issues. The concept for the ‘Attribution of Responsibility’ frame stems from Iyengar’s (1991) notion of ‘Episodic’ and ‘Thematic’ frames. ‘Episodic’ news frames focus on specific events or particular cases in isolation, and are perceived to make the audience less likely to hold public officials accountable for the existence of some problems, and also less likely to hold them responsible for alleviating them. ‘Thematic’ news frames, on the other hand, place issues and events in a broader structural and social context and are perceived to encourage an audience understanding of issues at a societal level both in terms of cause and responsibility for solution (Iyengar, 1991 p.2). The frames themselves are constructed by journalists when they select and emphasise certain news-story elements over and above others in the range available to them, (Entman, 1993).

However, again a preliminary inductive analysis indicated that an interrogation of the data based strictly on an ‘Attribution of Responsibility’ frame would not, in this case, adequately express the most significant content of the data. This is because, while some of the news stories were ‘Episodic’, and did not report homelessness as linked to various other social or structural factors, they never-the-less discussed attribution of responsibility in terms of government either solving or not solving ‘the problem’(e.g. Targett, 2000; Callinan, 2000). Much of this ‘Attribution of Responsibility’ involved political debate concerning the success or otherwise of government responses to homelessness. However these stories could not be seen as likely to increase public understanding of the issue of homelessness in Habermas’s Public-Sphere sense as they did not explain why government should shoulder the responsibility, or even what, exactly, it should be held responsible for.

Conversely, other news stories examined in the study might well be considered to be ‘Thematic’, in that they did contextualise homelessness as linked to other issues such as mental illness, substance abuse and unemployment (e.g. ‘Numbers of homeless increasing’ 2009; Christiansen, 2009). However, these stories did not necessarily do so in ways that might help an audience attribute responsibility to either societal structures or public figures, either in terms of addressing causes or implementing solutions. Public understanding of the complexity of the issue may well be deepened by these frames in the Public-Sphere sense, but not necessarily in ways that might assist audiences to ‘attribute responsibility’, and pursue accountability and a solution. Consequently, while ‘Episodic’ ‘Thematic’, and even

'Attribution of Responsibility' frames were identifiable in terms of their structural elements, the likely effects on an audience of the information in those stories would have been almost contradictory to those envisaged by Iyengar (1991). Episodic frames mostly provided little or no context to the issue and yet attributed responsibility, while thematic frames provided a more nuanced understanding of the issue but without exploring responsibilities for cause or solution.

Taking this into account it became apparent that providing contextual links for the issue of homelessness, even if not in terms of attributing responsibility, was more in line with Habermas's concept of the news-media's role in an ideally operating Public Sphere, and also this study's primary focus on journalism's capacity to constructively contribute to that process. On this basis, the study did not seek evidence of 'Attribution of Responsibility' frames *per se*, but instead searched to identify 'Contextualising' frames that were likely to explain homelessness to the broader public in terms of causes or effects. When a 'Contextualising' frame of this nature was applied to the data it identified 26% of the total items (23 out of 88) published in *The Courier-Mail* as matching the frame definition (Figure 2, above). This proved to be the second most common frame across the entire study.

While Semetco and Valkenberg's (2000) notion of five frames accounting for "... all the frames that have been found in the news" (p.95) did not seem particularly applicable in this case, further preliminary analysis did find clear evidence of other frames that have been identified in research dealing specifically with representations of marginalised groups. Firstly, research into news-media representations of poverty (Entman, 1995; Atkinson, Oerton and Burns, 1998; Thomas, 1998) and mental illness (Ward, 1997; Hazelton 1997; Francis, et al., 2005), indicates that news coverage concerning people dealing with such issues consistently linked them with concepts of immorality, disorder, 'dangerousness', crime, and violence. When a 'Crime/Social-Deviance' frame was applied to the data in this study it proved to be the third most common identifiable frame, with 17% of all items across the whole study (15 of 88) depicting homelessness within this context (Figure 2, above).

The second similarity between *The Courier-Mail*'s depictions of homelessness and findings from research into news-media depictions of other social issues concerns the existence of 'Neutral' frames. Kensicki, (2004) has noted that social issues are sometimes not placed within any particular frame or explanatory context whatsoever. Instead, such issues are seen to 'simply exist'. Klodawsky et al. (2002) in particular point out that news-media

representations of homelessness frequently indicate the issue to be a stubborn unchanging problem affecting hapless, passive 'others'. With this in mind a preliminary inductive study of the data showed evidence that this might also be the case for *The Courier-Mail*'s coverage of homelessness. When a 'Neutral' frame was applied to the data it showed that 48% of all items published matched this frame, making the 'Neutral' frame the most frequently used framing device across the whole of the study. Gandy and Brown (1998) consider such 'Neutral' framing may undermine the audience's belief in their own capacity to suggest and effect social change to such issues, and this is clearly at odds with Habermas's concept of an ideally operating Public Sphere and the news media's role in that process.

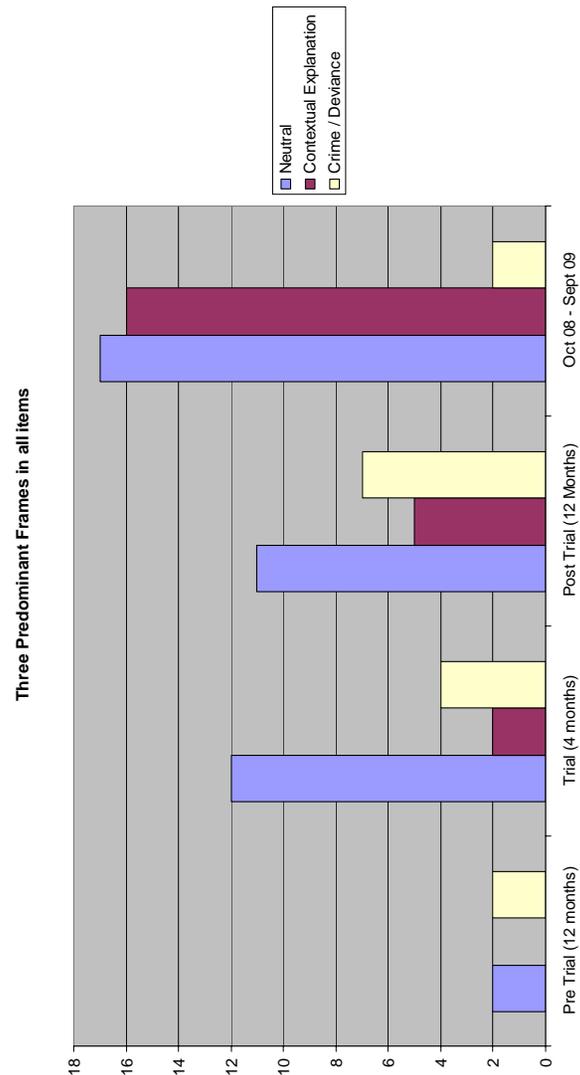
Ninety-one percent of all items published in *The Courier-Mail* across all the periods investigated fitted the 'Neutral' (48%), 'Contextualising' (26%), or 'Criminal/Deviance' (17%) frames. Consequently, further analysis within the study focused on these three frames, while the eight other items (9%) that fitted the four other frames nominated as predominant by Semetco and Valkenberg (2000) were ignored.

Whereas Figure 2 shows the relationships between the frames evident in *all* items published in *The Courier-Mail* as a total across *all* the combined time-periods of the study, Figure 3 (below) shows a more specific analysis in two respects. First, the relationships shown are reduced to the three identified predominant frames only (which constitute 90% of all frames identified in Figure 2), and second the occurrence of the three predominating frames is broken down according to the study's focus on the four significant time periods.

From the breakdown from Figure 3 (above) three features become evident. First it is clear that, ignoring the minimal coverage in the first twelve-month period preceding the trial homelessness facility, the 'Neutral' frame predominates, both overall and also in each individual period. The Neutral frame constitutes 66% of all coverage during the existence of the trial homeless shelter, 48% of all coverage in the following twelve months, and 49% of all coverage in the final period of the study corresponding with a federal government focus on homelessness policy. The persistence of 'Neutral' framing, indicating that homelessness 'simply exists' and is not linked to broader social/structural factors (Kensicki, 2004), is seen to be counter-productive to an ideally operating Public Sphere. Gandy and Brown, (1998), Kensicki (2004), and Klodawsky et al. (2002) all postulate that failing to link social issues to social and structural antecedents contributes to a public sense of impotence, apathy, and eventual disengagement from the

political process. This seems the antithesis of Habermas's idealised Public Sphere.

**Figure 3**

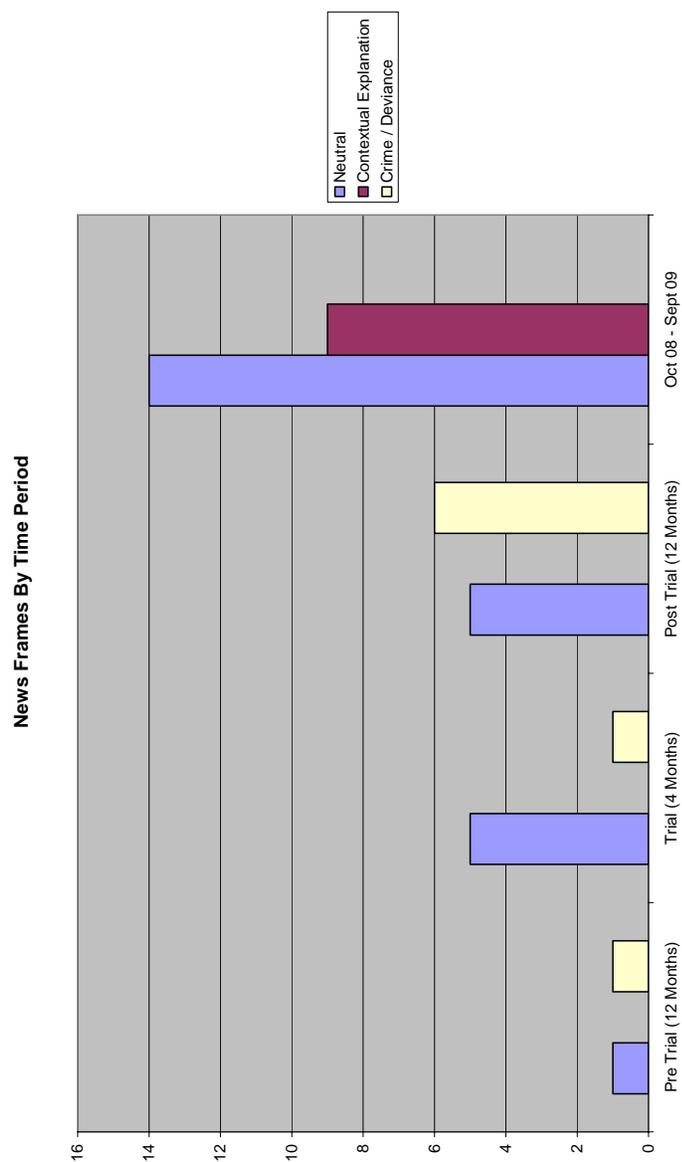


However, while the 'Neutral' frame does predominate in this study, the data also indicate an increasing propensity to place the issue of homelessness into some broader context of understanding. From a low of 11% during the existence of the trial homelessness facility, the proportion of contextualising frames rises to 22% in the following 12 months and then to 46% in the final period of the study. In fact, the ratio of 'Neutral' to 'Contextual' frames improves in a Public-Sphere sense from a low of 3:1 during the period of the trial homelessness facility, to 2:1 in the following twelve months, to an almost 1:1 ratio for the final period of the study (*Figure 3*, above).

Public understanding of the issue may also be further improved by the reduced use of 'Crime/Deviance' frames. Golding and Middleton (1982) have asserted that news-media coverage of social problems has typically reiterated false public assumptions through stereotypical portrayals of those affected by the issue. Most often this involved a disproportionate linking of marginalised groups to concepts of crime and social deviance (Kelly, 1996; Atkinson, Oerton and Burns, 1998; Thomas, 1998). However, the data in this study indicate that while 'Crime/Deviance' frames were double the number of 'Contextualising' frames during the existence of the trial homelessness facility, and some 30% more in the following twelve months, they fell to only 6% of the overall number of frames in the study's final period and were actually outnumbered at a ratio of 8:1 by 'Contextual' frames (*Figure 3*, above). This result does seem to indicate journalism as contributing more positively to the Habermas's Public Sphere process.

Up to this point the findings depicted in figures one, two and three have dealt with *all* items published in *The Courier-Mail* pertaining to the issue of homelessness. That is, they included news stories, editorials and letters to the editor. However, when news stories only are analysed (*Figure 4*, below), a further three features become clearly evident. First, as with the findings from the overall data, it is clear that journalists most commonly use a neutral frame to depict homelessness in their news stories. Fifty-nine percent of all news stories published across all periods used a neutral frame, with the Contextualising frame comprising 21% of the total, and the Crime/Deviance frame 20% of the total published news stories.

Figure 4



However, what is most stark in *Figure 4* (above) is the change in the distribution of the frames in each period, most notably a shift away from journalists' emphasis on framing homelessness as linked to 'Crime/Deviance', to an emphasis on 'Contextualising' the issue in terms of cause and effect. During the entire twenty-eight months comprising the initial period of the study, no news stories whatsoever placed the issue of homelessness into a broader social or structural context. Instead, 58% of news stories portrayed a neutral frame, and 42% a 'Crime/Deviance' frame, thereby reflecting previous research findings that news reporting of social issues presents them as either stubborn, unchanging fixtures of society (Kensicki, 2004; Klodawsky et al. 2002), or the realm of the criminal and socially deviant (Golding and Middleton, 1982; Kelly, 1996; Atkinson, Oerton and Burns, 1998; Thomas, 1998).

Yet in the final twelve-month period aligning with the federal government's emphasis on homelessness policy, the framing emphasis is almost reversed. Again, only two of the three predominant frames are identified. However, while the 'Neutral' frame still clearly predominates with 60% of the total frames, the 'Crime/Deviance' frame is completely absent and it is the 'Contextual' frame that accounts for the remaining 40% of news story depictions. This finding contrasts with established literature and is potentially more favourable in terms of journalists' contributions to the Public Sphere process.

The question then arises as to why such a stark shift occurred in the way journalists presented their information. Previous research indicates that journalism struggles to act positively in a Public Sphere sense concerning social issues, because journalism itself has become a routinised process configured and confined by organisational demands for deadline-driven economic efficiency in gathering and presenting information from publicly recognisable authoritative sources (Tuchman, 1973; Fishman, 1980; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Most often this process is best realised by journalists linking closely with PR-savvy bureaucracies and government (Tuchman, 1978; Bennett, 1994, pp. 23 – 29; Dorman, 1994, p.76; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). However, while these links are seen to fit organisational efficiency demands, they are seen as deficient in a Public Sphere sense. Martin (1997) contends that journalists' reliance on 'authoritative' official sources steers them away from the voices of diverse groups of homeless persons, causing them to encounter homeless individuals from a distance and therefore in much the same way as ordinary citizens experience homeless people. As a result, depictions tend to revert to what is already 'known', resulting in a reiteration of inaccurate existing stereotypes (Martin 1997).

The data in the first three periods of the study seem to confirm Martin’s (1997) perspective. For convenience, *Figure 5* (below) conflates the breakdown of primary sources from the first three periods to one graph and shows that of the 20 news stories published in total during this period, 75% relied on ‘Official/Authority’ figures as primary sources (i.e. politicians, government spokespersons or representatives of functionary arms of government such as police). Only 10% of news stories used sources with some professional knowledge or expertise in homelessness, and only 5% of news stories had a homeless person as the primary source of information.

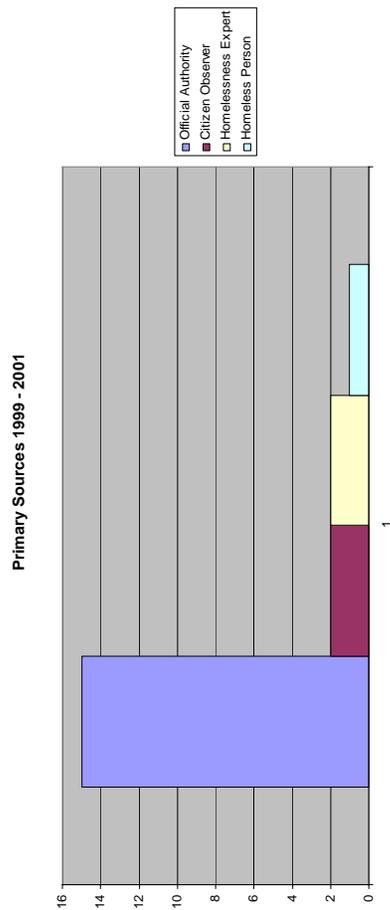


Figure 5

The resulting frames from this type of source-use are shown in *Figure 6* (below). As contended by Martin (1997), the dominance of ‘Official/Authority’ sources seems to be reflected in the dominance of ‘Neutral’ and ‘Crime/Deviance’ frames. Official/Authority sources featured as primary sources in 73% of the news stories that projected ‘Neutral’ frames, and 78% of the news stories projecting ‘Crime/Deviance’ frames (*Figure 6*).

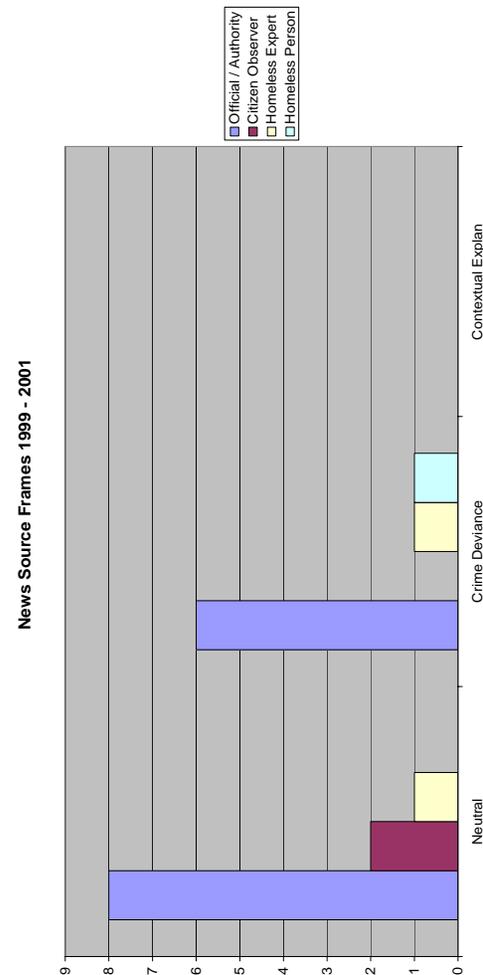


Figure 6

However, data from the final part of the study seem to challenge established understandings that organisational economic imperatives constrain journalists' use of sources in any absolute sense. This apparent greater autonomy in source selection also seems to have had a flow-on effect on the frames produced. Even though the period coincides with federal government emphasis on Homelessness policy, *Figure 7* (below) shows that only 16% of news stories used Government/Authority figures as primary sources. And while the most common primary sources in the period were ordinary citizens, sources with professional knowledge and expertise in homelessness, or homeless people themselves, were used as primary sources by journalists for 40% of the news stories. This is more than double the rate those types of sources were used in the previous section of the study, and occurs despite understandings that finding and interviewing such sources is more time-consuming and labour-intensive than accessing more media-savvy government representatives (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1973; Fishman, 1980).

As mentioned, the shift in primary source types also appears to have led to a shift in the framing of the homelessness issue (*Figure 8*, below). While the 'Neutral' frame is still clearly predominant overall, and only 40% of all the news stories during the period carry a 'Contextual' frame, seven of the nine contextual stories (78%) have people with expertise in addressing homelessness, or homeless people themselves as the primary sources, while only one contextually framed story had an 'Official/Authority' source. This result again conflicts with notions that news coverage will negatively present the situations of people dealing with social issues (Thomas, 1998; Francis, et al., 2005) in a way that further entrenches marginalisation (Campbell, 1997; Fico, 1984).

**Figure 7**

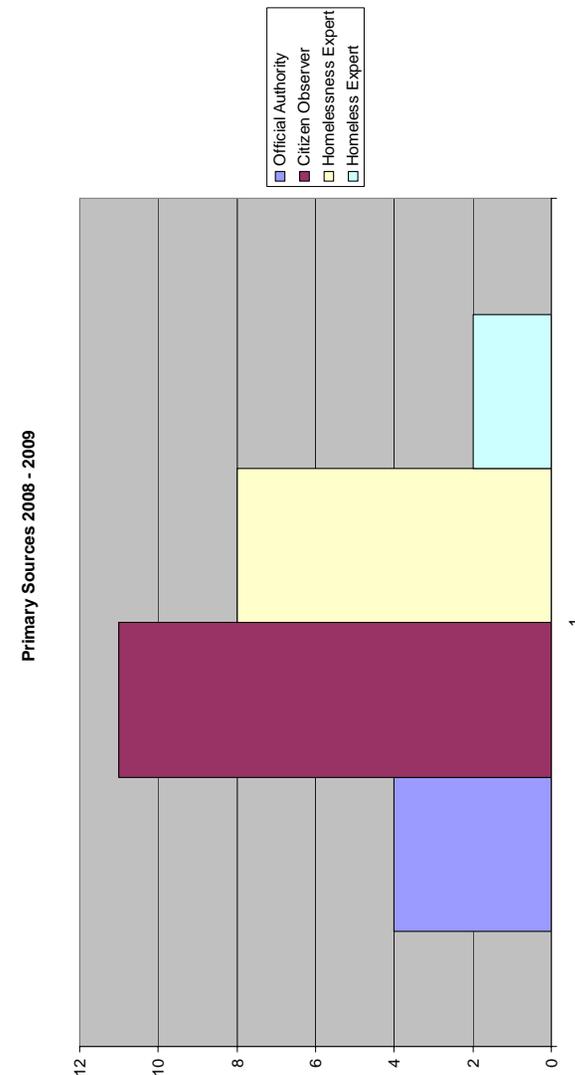
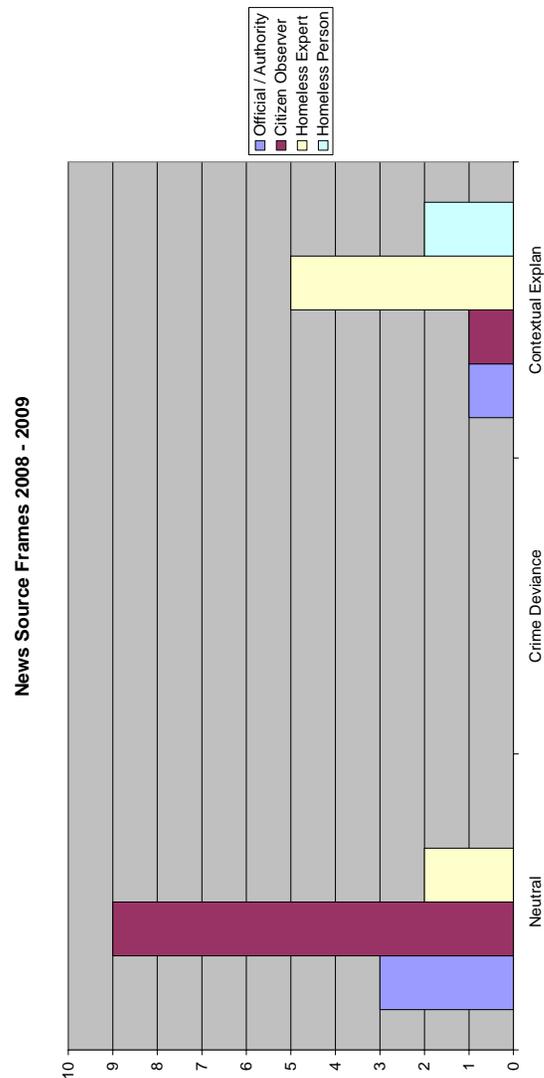


Figure 8



Findings

The results from this longitudinal study indicate a comparative shift in the way the social issue of homelessness is presented in *The Courier-Mail*, and this shift raises some questions concerning the applicability of some theoretical concepts that describe restrictions on journalistic practice. Across the study, the data indicate changes have occurred in three fundamental elements, including, the degree of journalistic attention given to the issue of homelessness, the way the issue is contextually represented, and the sources used by journalists to construct those contextual representations. This is not to say that reportage on the issue of homelessness has been ideal in Habermas’s Public Sphere sense, but rather that established understandings concerning severely restricted journalistic practice in this particular case do not appear to be absolute, and that factors more consistent with a higher degree of journalistic autonomy may well be in play.

Journalism critiques stemming from Marxist understandings of economic material ‘Base’ and associated ideological ‘Superstructure’ contend that if social issues challenge the efficacy of free-market profits, then those social issues will receive little or no exploration in the mainstream commercial press (Marx and Engels 2001, Marcuse 1964, Gramsci, 1971, Herman and Chomsky 1988). Part of this study specifically examined the issue of homelessness coverage within a geographical and temporal context of urban renewal, where the Urban Renewal Project operating during the first three periods of the study focussed on redeveloping lower socio-economic inner-city suburbs into up-market business and residential real estate. Marxist-based critique would likely see these circumstances as reducing or even eliminating mainstream commercial print reporting of the issue. However, while the interpretation may well have been sustained if the data from the first time-period of the study (covering the twelve months preceding the trial homeless shelter) were seen in isolation, subsequent increases for each of the following periods seem to contest such understandings. The volume of homelessness coverage increased across all the study’s periods, with rates of coverage peaking firstly during the existence of the trial homeless shelter and secondly during the final period of the study that coincided with the federal government’s policy emphasis on addressing homelessness (*Figure 1*).

While this increased quantity of coverage may challenge some Marxist-based critiques of a restricted journalism, the context, or the ‘angles’ used by journalists to tell the stories may still work against Public Sphere ideals. Contextualisation is deemed important in Public Sphere considerations because, as Iyengar (1991) has pointed out, public understanding is affected dependant upon whether an issue is described episodically or thematically.

According to Iyengar, 'thematic' news frames increase public understanding of issues by placing them in a broader structural and social context, while episodically contextualised news frames focus on individual instances of an issue in isolation, and are seen as less likely to prompt considerations of public accountability. Frame analysis has frequently been used to research public affairs reporting, with Semetco and Valkenberg (2000) noting the predominance of five particular frames in public affairs news which include 'Conflict', 'Human Interest', 'Economic Consequences', 'Morality' and Attribution of 'Responsibility' frames.

However, a preliminary analysis of the data found that this frame predominance was not repeated in the current study of homelessness. Four of the five frames considered dominant across all news ('Conflict', 'Human Interest', 'Economic Consequences' and 'Morality') combined to comprise only 9% of the total frames produced during the course of the study (*Figure 2*). Furthermore, the fifth frame ('Attribution of Responsibility') could be seen to be problematic in that it did not accurately express the most likely effect of news stories fitting that broad designation. Habermas' notion of an ideally functioning Public Sphere is one where the public has access to a broad cross-section of information and debate on social issues so that they are better able to make informed decisions about causes and solutions concerning those issues. This study found that many of the published items on homelessness pointed to the existence of the problem, but did not go on to explore it in terms of either cause or potential solutions. Similarly, coverage that did 'attribute responsibility' for implementing a solution pointed to the role of government but without clear indications of what specifically they should be responsible for, or why it was government's responsibility to begin with.

More evident than Semetco and Valkenberg's (2000) proposed five dominant frames were two other frames that have previously been more specifically identified in news reporting of marginalised groups. The first and most predominant frame in this study is a 'Neutral' frame, in which an issue is presented without links to broader social and structural factors (Kensicki, 2004). This has previously resulted in the issue of homelessness being depicted as a stubborn unchanging problem solely relating to passive, hapless others (Klodawsky et al., 2002). In this study, 68% of all news stories were found to fit Kensicki's understanding of a 'Neutral' frame, making it the most dominant frame of the overall study, and also the most common in each of the study's individual periods (*Figure 4*). These types of depictions are perceived as extremely problematic in a Public Sphere sense because, rather than increasing the broader public's understanding of the issue, and so increasing the possibility of their engagement in responses, 'Neutral' frames

are seen to contribute to a public sense of impotence, apathy, and eventual disengagement from the political process (Gandy and Brown, 1998; Kensicki 2004; Klodawsky et al. 2002).

The second evident frame in this study that matches those found in news coverage concerning marginalised groups is one of crime and social deviance. Studies of news-media depictions of marginalised groups such as those in poverty, or those dealing with mental illness, have found that news reporting frequently links these people with further issues of immorality, disorder, 'dangerousness', crime, and violence. Golding and Middleton (1982) contend this continues to reiterate false public assumptions through disproportionate and stereotypical associations of marginalised groups with socially offensive behaviour (Entman, 1995; Atkinson, Oerton and Burns, 1998; Thomas, 1998; Ward, 1997; Hazelton 1997; Francis, et al., 2005). In this study, almost 20% of news stories reporting on homelessness included some significant reference to acts of crime or social deviance.

If these findings were understood only in terms of total occurrence across the length of the study, then journalist's contribution to Habermas' idealised Public Sphere would be seen as fundamentally lacking. Rather than providing variety and depth to reporting of a social issue, the results indicate that approximately 80% of all news stories published across the entire length of the study gave the issue either no contextualisation, or linked those people dealing with the issue with themes of crime or social deviance. However, when broken down into the specific periods, the data clearly indicate that representations have undergone a significant change. While the 'Neutral' frame was the most prominent frame in all individual periods, the final period of the study shows the 'Crime/Deviance' frame completely replaced by contextualised explanations of the issue. From a position where not one contextualising explanatory frame was identifiable in news stories during the first twenty-eight months of the study, contextualising explanatory frames constituted 40% of the news coverage in the final period. And whereas 'Crime/Deviance' frames constituted 42% of the news coverage in the first twenty-eight months, they are non-existent in the final twelve-month period. The shift seems to contest some understandings of limited and publicly unhelpful journalistic practice.

This shift in framing potentially also raises some further questions concerning the effects of organisational demands for journalistic efficiency in filling the 'news hole'. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) point to organisational pressures driving journalists along a path of greatest efficiency, directed by the need to balance authoritative information with the speed of its provision (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Striking this balance is often effected by using

established, media-capable bureaucracies, and most often these facilities are provided by government (Tuchman, 1973; Fishman, 1980; Fico, 1984; Campbell, 1997). In this case, three of the four periods constituting the study concerned direct government actions on the issue of homelessness, and so reporting might reasonably be assumed to be dominated by government or bureaucratic sources. However, the study found that while 'Official/Authority' sources linked to government dominated journalists' investigations in the two periods from the earliest section of the study, the same was not the case for the last time period. This is so despite it being a period of high-profile, specific emphasis by the federal government on the issue. Primary sources linked to government were used for 75% of the news stories in the earliest broad period of the study (*Figure 5*), but constituted only 16% of primary sources in the final period of the study (*Figure 7*). The reduction in dependence on government for sources is countered by an increase in the use of alternative sources. For example experts in the field of homelessness were primary sources in only 10% of news stories in the first broad period of the study (*Figure 5*), but constituted 32% of primary sources in the final period (*Figure 7*), despite the use of these sources being considered more time-consuming and labour-intensive, and so less organisationally efficient (Shoemaker and Reese 1996),

The use of different sources appeared to produce different frames of representation for the issue of homelessness and homeless people. In the twenty-eight months constituting the first part of the study, 'Neutral' or 'Crime/Deviance' frames appear in 80% of all news stories, and within these categories, 'Official/Authority' sources linked to government were the primary sources in 73% of the neutrally framed stories, and 78% of the news stories projecting a 'Crime/Deviance' frame (*Figure 6*). However, in the final period of the study, where 40% of news stories explained homelessness in a broader social-structural context, journalists used people with expertise in addressing homelessness, or homeless people themselves as the primary sources 78% of the time. Only one contextually framed story used an 'Official/Authority' figure as primary source (*Figure 8*).

## Conclusion

This study is, of course, limited both in its scope and purpose. The study of a single issue in a single newspaper is not the basis for any extrapolation to the broader journalistic situation. However, there are some signs in the coverage of homelessness by *The Courier-Mail* that show signs of positive Public Sphere contributions by journalists, apparently by virtue of their operating in

a manner more consistent with Public Sphere professionalism than organisationally driven restricted practice.

While some of the results indicated that journalists were sometimes restricted in their efforts in ways consonant with each of ideological, economic and logistical restrictions, other results indicated that these restrictions were not absolute. In this study, there were occasions where journalists reported on the issue of homelessness in a sophisticated and sensitive manner, brought about chiefly through accessing sources outside the bounds of what would be expected from 'News Net' theory.

It was not, however, within the bounds of this study to decipher why this was the case. Further research should be undertaken to establish which circumstances operate to generate these positive results, and what might be done to expand their operation to other issues and other areas. Such research might well take the form of a closer qualitative case study involving discussions with journalists, news organisation managers, and also professional representatives and advocates for socially marginalised groups, in order to explore their interactions with each other.

If a study successfully identified structures and processes that enhanced journalism reporting in these matters, there may well be positive flow-on effects at several levels.

- **Journalism Education**  
Student journalists are already taught generic skills in researching issues, identifying and accessing appropriate sources, and summarising and synthesising information. A refining and tailoring of these skills to better deal with complex social issues and the persons most affected by them would benefit the community as a whole, and marginalised groups in particular.
- **Inter-Disciplinary Knowledge**  
Many universities support schools of education in both the Journalism and Social Work fields. In terms of raising community awareness of social issues and marginalised groups, it could be that each school provides an as-yet untapped asset for the other. Inter-school links at both the research and undergraduate levels may well benefit both schools, and also the broader community.
- **Professional Journalists' Education**  
Journalists have shown that given the opportunity, they are both capable and willing to improve reporting on complex and sensitive

social matters. The *'Response Ability: Reporting on mental health and suicide'* resource pack for journalism education is a case in point. This educational tool is produced through a joint effort between the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, and the Department of Communication and Media Arts at the University of Newcastle, NSW. It is partly funded by The Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care under the National Mental Health Strategy and the National Suicide Prevention Strategy. It seems possible, with solid research and interdisciplinary cooperation, that a similar educational tool could be developed concerning situations pertinent to marginalised groups.

- **Recognition of Professional Journalist Efforts**  
In some ways it seems counter-intuitive that journalistic efforts that raise public awareness and understanding about their own community and circumstances are not formally and specifically recognised. Most accolades go to high-profile journalists who report the 'Big' stories: such as disasters. However, in terms of broad, long-term public benefit it may be that it is the 'quiet achievers' who actually contribute more to social improvement and wellbeing. A journalism award highlighting efforts to intelligently and sensitively improve public understanding of various social issues may potentially increase both journalists' and news organisations' interests in this area.

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