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

**Abstract.** — « Feet in the street, then heads in the beds, and retail follows... » could be a definition of micro-transit induced gentrification. The quote shows the obsession of NoMa D.C. Business Improvement District (BID)'s President to transform the urban space with walkable infrastructure. But the irruption of homeless encampment breaks down the BID narrative as a vibrant place and happy community. How does *The Washington Post* cover this problem of coexistence in public space? Two methods, argumentative analysis and narrative discourse study, are applied to the press articles dealing with the necessity to clear the camp in order to facilitate BIDs resident movements, or, on the contrary, to primarily care for homeless people. The chapter explores how the media orchestrates the public debate, reframes responsibilities and finally derivate the search for the structural causes of the crisis towards a happy end parable. The added value of the chapter concerning gentrification coverage is that the newspaper doesn't deliver a static vision pro- or contra- gentrification, but a much more tactical and processual perspective of the media fabric of urban conflicts and of its semiotic resolutions.

**Key words :** Media; gentrification; BID Urbanism; homeless eviction; argumentative discourse analysis; *The Washington Post*; Washington D.C.

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

In their investigation of this issue in Washington DC, Modan and Wells (Modan and Wells 2015) turn the question from an attitudinal to a processual one. They capture how the media « reflect, promote, reframe particular values and sets of power » (Modan and Wells 2011, 316). Crises are pivotal moments of truth in the media coverage of gentrification. During critical episodes such as forced eviction, distinct narratives clash with one another. The newspapers report facts and provide arguments to readers who shape their own opinion. Crises offer opportunities to explore the role of the media in decoding events, uncovering – or not uncovering – the racial and social divides that polarise US societies, and recoding them into stories that encourage readers to buy daily newspapers.

The social life of public space and the sphere of public opinion constantly interact in the media coverage of gentrification. Yet Williamson and Rumping claim that « dialogue through paper press media between citizens, planning agencies, representatives of neoliberal stakeholders is rarely captured and analysed » (Williamson and Rumping 2017, 428). This chapter aims to address this very dialogue in a dynamic and dialectic way. Micro-level discourse analysis is used to analyse *The Washington Post* coverage of the recurring and violent evictions from a homeless encampment located in one of Washington DC's most privileged central places. The following research questions are raised. How do journalists address the social, racial and economic marginalities and inequalities? How do they orchestrate and perform a local controversy? How do they finally integrate some of their reader's opinions and resolve it – at least discursively – through a positive story?

The first part of the chapter highlights the ways in which urban social theories and a local context shed light on the confrontation between great poverty and the renewal of public space in a Washington DC BID. The second part introduces the methodology, and presents *The Washington Post's* reporting and shaping of an eviction narrative. The third part draws the lessons of the empirical inquiry and suggests a typology of the methods employed by this newspaper to neutralise the political and ideological aspects of the event.

### ***Gentrification and mobility nexus in planning and in media discourse***

Washington has been a focus for research on gentrification for almost two decades. Its centre was essentially home to lower -income Black communities but was repopulated with white, young, educated newcomers from the late 1980s to the 2010s (Huston 2015, Hyra and Prince 2016). The central districts have received increased public investment and have seen an increase in office and residential constructions on brownfield land, resulting in skyrocketing property values (Schaller 2019 provides comparative analysis and places Washington DC downtown just behind New York in terms of financial attractiveness). Prince (Prince 2014) and Hutson (Huston 2016) insist on the fact that the impact of BIDs in the capital in terms of residential displacement has entirely altered the centric districts, in particular their social and ethnic balance.

An important element in the urban reconquest of downtown DC is the linking of public and private capital through BIDs. In DC, these are non-profit organizations authorized by the city to complement public policies and provide additional services in sanitation and in the maintenance of public space (eg street furniture, lighting, cleaning, landscaping). In addition, they constantly strive to change the district's internal and external image. Schaller (Schaller 2019) has critically and extensively examined the strategy of various BIDs strategies which aim to shape local identity and contribute to place-making, while Oluwafemi's work (Oluwafemi 2017) has specifically focussed on the BID used as a case study for this chapter. Both concluded that the BID's official narrative continuously celebrates the city's redevelopment captured in trendy restaurants or yoga opportunities. Both also note that the BID's actions in sustaining urban regeneration and new constructions contribute to the displacement and replacement of the local community as well as the erasure of the former identity of places.

North Massachusetts Avenue BID (abbreviated to NoMa, echoing New York's SoHo), was created in 2007. It covers 35 blocks in DC's Golden Triangle, directly North and West of the White House. This BID is emblematic of new-build gentrification. This consists in « luxury apartment complexes or townhouses [...] built on reclaimed brownfield land » (Davidson and Lees 2010 395). It therefore differs from the classic process of residential migration by middle-class intellectuals and progressives that began in the 1970s. New-build gentrification is mainly driven by public and private investors. The reason lies in the area's urban morphology and land-use. NoMa stretches along and backs onto the railway lines of Union Station. It mainly covers very large plots made up of a mix of vacant land, old industries and coal yards, parking lots, a few streets of dilapidated terraces and some large federal offices such as the General accounting office which covers approximately 2 million square feet. These plots were gradually brought up by real-estate companies and a number of administrative buildings were sold to private

bodies for refurbishment and leasing. Local journalists witnessed social and physical change, which was in particular reflected in the proliferation of offices with glass facades and luxury condos. Today, NoMa is home to almost 30,000 inhabitants and « no longer belongs to the wrong side of the tracks » (Hoffer 2015). Its reputation as a dirty, vacant and poor district is gradually being replaced by the image of a regenerated, even lively weekend destination for tourists and DCers. As early as 2013, *The Washington Post* labelled the place « D.C.'s Sim City of gentrification » (Yates 2013). This article connects the social and the architectural modification of NoMa and insists on the accelerated rhythm of change.

BIDs are bodies designed to improve basic urban services such as green space provision and maintenance and public transport (Schaller 2019). They rapidly became objective platforms for the furtherance of financial and real estate interests. It is therefore worth questioning the ways in which these institutions attempt to strike a balance between the mere maintenance of public space and the active role they appear to play in gentrification processes. This issue has been raised for a long time. Before looking at the media coverage of the BID's activities and public discourse, it must be acknowledged that ambiguity and contradictions run through the long history of relationships between BIDs and the District Government. Wolf has argued that « The BIDs' professional staffs, particularly the executive directors, seem to eschew any close identification with the District or other governmental institutions. Most see themselves as part of the private sector and not part of government » (Wolf 2006, 70). He further explains that although BIDs were created and are supported by the DC government, they adopt an entrepreneurial profile and communication profile. BIDs claim to protect the interests of residents and frequently refer to the « BID community ». Yet the infrastructures and services they press the public authorities to deliver to residents raise the value of urban projects and serve the highly active local pro-growth coalition. BID Directors constantly urge municipal authorities to steer public money towards the best public infrastructure for the BID in order for it to match this new amenity with so-called «community projects». These can include street-art initiatives, environmental upgrading, the provision of children playgrounds (Howell 2019) or street furniture, the organisation of street festivals (Thompson Summers and Howell 2019) and, increasingly, the provision of mobility infrastructure such as cycle lanes.

### ***The gentrification mobility fix and its exclusionary effects***

Transport and mobility planning is a good example of the NoMa BID directors' capacity to put pressure on the city administration and pool public money. In particular, the BID urged

Washington officials to develop transit and micro facilities, respectively in the early and late 2010s.

In 2012, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority invested \$25 million into the refurbishment of the NoMa/Gallaudet subway station north of Union Central (Nasri and Zhang 2014). The station appears to give an official imprimatur to NoMa but the name was given by the BID to the area in 2007 and a journalist argued that locals still find it rather odd (Hedgpeth 2011). The celebration of the metro station «rebirth» contributed to the erasure of the district's former black identity and memory. Few old people still knew that this very place was where the 1960s DC racial struggles occurred and the national headquarters of the Urban League was located (Rusk 2017). The metro station project can be considered as a case of transit-induced gentrification (Dawkins and Moeckel 2016): public transport was funded and planned in the central area that private investors were redeveloping and the investment was made at the time of the redevelopment. Real estate businesses thus find it easier to attract clients as offices become easily accessible to white suburbanites. This process was followed in NoMa: the DC municipality transferred some important administrative services to the area shortly after the metro station reopened. During the second phase of the transformation (2014-2020), NoMa developers built luxury condos as well as offices and the BID asked the public authorities to resurface the roads, sidewalks and provide new microtransit infrastructure. This process can be referred to as « microtransit induced gentrification ». During this period, the metro station was less useful because the district began to turn into an enclave, populated by affluent, white workers and residents. It is nevertheless carefully maintained and still considered as a key facility and a resource in contrast with other districts. A « residential dissonance » gradually occurred: the number of commuters decreased and the metro station became less busy - European observers would most likely say quite empty, yet it was still maintained through public resources and the contribution of taxpayers from the entire metropolis (Phani Kumara *et al.* 2018).

Following the celebration of station rebirth and, consequently, of the NoMa district, the BID paid great heed to cycling and walking infrastructures in the late 2010's. Speaking at a public meeting held with the District Department of Transportation, the BID President said: « Feet in the streets, then heads in the beds, and retail follows » (Urban Land Institute, 2019). From this moment, the NoMa BID developed a constant and intensive communication strategy to highlight its excellent walking and cycling scores, which were designed by real estate professionals and consultants (Hall and Ram 2018). On the one hand, they describe the transformation of public space, on the other they are part of place-making and place-branding

strategies. They measure the possibility for pedestrians and cyclists to move safely, comfortably and more or less directly to a number of BID destinations for work, shopping or leisure. Since the early 2010s, the district has carried out schemes to upgrade the street layout, to resurface a number of roads: First Street NE, then New York Avenue Bridge, then L, M and N Streets. More space was allocated to buses, bike lanes and sidewalks at the expense of cars. BID services immediately planted flowers and trees, added street signage, new lightning and BID flags throughout the area. Over the same period, the metropolitan cycle branch trail opened and the NoMa BID developed a number of community projects along this corridor. These included murals, dog parks and green parklets. In 2019, the BID foundation also completed a green corridor running through three consecutive blocks to facilitate local trips. NoMa walk and cycle scores are constantly growing and are part of the BID's communication strategy. It is therefore unsurprising that the *Washington Post's* discourse around NoMa emphasises the considerable changes that have occurred in less than two decades (Hoffer 2015, Lerner 2020). Over the past twenty years, the newspaper has documented the connection between the transformation of public space and the investment in mobility infrastructure and urban redevelopment. Observers sometimes refer to NoMa as a transit-oriented neighbourhood, sometimes as a micro-transit village. The former refers to a residential cluster which is dependent on public transport (here the refurbished metro station and the proximate Union Station), the latter to a centric urban area offering dense sustainable mobility facilities (bike, walking facilities) and numerous retail units.

There is one final holdout in the BID's physical recapture of the transport infrastructure and urban realm reconquest: the section where K and L streets cross the Union Station railway lines. As the only means for cars to cross the railway, both underpasses are frequently blocked by traffic. In very hot and very cold seasons, they are also often occupied by the homeless. The transformation of these tunnels therefore encapsulates the tensions and ambiguities between the social impacts of gentrification (poverty, eviction) and mobility policies (their adaptation for transit and micro transit practices). Cresswell argues that BIDs have acted as a 'new point of friction' in twenty-first century urban mobility policies throughout America (2010 26, cited by Rink and Gamedze 644). Along with Sheller (Sheller 2019), Cresswell contends that planning decisions which aim to foster the mobility transition are not only made in order to address traffic problems or improve air quality: they are also instrumentalized by business interest in order to accelerate the gentrification process. Moreover, Cresswell shows that it is through the capacity to dictate who is mobile and how and the reasons why they are, that the mandate to gentrify is enforced in every space and place in a city. DC researchers had already raised the social and ethnic dimension of new mobility conflicts, especially during Adrian Fenty's term as Mayor

(Gibson 2013). From this perspective, the evictions from the tunnels are important in that they represent one of the last acts in the gentrification of NoMa's public space. The question is whether or not the media make the connection between active mobility planning and homelessness.

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

It is widely acknowledged that the rise of digital media and the restructuring of the newspaper industry has meant that local print media in the US have faced a series of major shocks and challenges since the turn of the century. Even dominant titles such as the *Washington Post* have been under constant financial pressure for decades. The paper shed staff and cut budgets in the 90's and the 00's and eventually fell into the hands of Amazon boss Jeff Bezos in 2013. This event is not unique, many newspapers have been bought in these decades, yet it has raised concern about the capacity of this media to maintain its tradition of «watchdog journalism».

Knobel (Knobel 2018) has investigated the long-term transformation of journalism's political economy and the evolution of editorial style, norms and values. He identified two main drivers that allow to explain the adaptation of *The Washington Post*. The first is technology: because of the emergence of the internet and smartphones, the newspaper has been forced to provide part of its content in an attempt to sell every article, achieve good metrics and maximise clicks. These goals are of course critical for the media advertising business model. The second has regard to trends in information demand. The emergence of social media and the rise of opinionated cable news have led to a saturation of the communication sphere. As a matter of survival, the *Post*, like other famous US titles such as the *New York Times* aims to distinguish itself from other news outlets. It seeks to protect its credibility and brand by distributing so-called high-quality journalism. In order to achieve this, journalists need to dedicate enough time to their work, carry out long surveys and multiply the facets of an investigation in order to get a deeper understanding of any current affair. However, journalists have been faced with a diminution in reporting capacity and have had to reframe the way they handle local news and the local readership.

Moreover, *The Washington Post* is an international, national and local newspaper. Its journalists talk to the world as much as they address the residents on the federal capital street's corner. There are many advantages to going local for a newspaper that is also a national and international media. The fabric of information is cheaper and the potential relationship with the

readership denser. In order to save costs, *The Washington Post* produces simple, original and meaningful stories that do not require substantive archival research and take only a few hours or days to complete. Journalists can rely on interviews and straightforward reporting techniques. Still, the « high quality journalism » label jealously defended by the *Washington Post* means that even local affairs are cautiously treated. The controversial issues raised, the making of narratives, their organisation into serial stories distinguish the *Washington Post* reports from other local media reports, which simply repeat information that is easily found elsewhere. The aim of this kind of editorial work is to appear as a mirror of the DCsts daily life, to nurture identity and local pride, to win hearts and minds, that is to say to combine rational factual reporting with emotional handling of information so as retain the loyalty of local readers and their subscription (McChesney 2016). Another important point for journalists (especially working for local media) is to include street level citizens as contributors to the reporting activity, in order to instil loyalty towards «their» media.

The NoMa tunnel affair raises issues for *The Washington Post* for a number of reasons. Some are to the way the question of homelessness connects with others and undermines the harmonisation of discursive lines. The coverage of poverty and homelessness irrupts in the positive coverage of NoMa's metamorphosis. The local paper very frequently features NoMa in the Saturday leisure pages and puts it forward as a place offering great dining opportunities and other leisure activities (cinemas, beer festivals, etc.). The irruption of the homeless generated some degree of perplexity among journalists and for some months, a kind of discursive polyphony with the coexistence of various narratives of the tunnel affair.

A second set of reasons stem from the growing difficulty the media face in their attempt to cover homelessness in US cities in general and more specifically in D.C. Buck and Toro (Buck and Toro 2004) have stated that homeless media coverage in the US is becoming less and less empathic and does not rely more on public policies to solve the problem. Consequently, the problem of homelessness is less and less dealt with from a policy perspective. Lugo Ocando (Lugo Ocando 2019) has claimed that readers lose interest when the media frequently cover the inefficient eviction of homeless people, who return a few days later. Tsai *et al.* (Tsai *et al.* 2017) have shown that homelessness is a risky issue for the media, since it is hard for journalists to measure whether or not the editorial line meshes with the public opinion, which is increasingly polarised: feelings of care and feelings of blame around the issue of homelessness may be unevenly balanced, and journalists fear what they refer to as readers' "compassion fatigue" (Barrett *and al.* 2016). That is why *The Washington Post* journalists open new avenues and question in an evolutive manner.



### ***Public space for pedestrians or for the homeless? The orchestration of a local controversy***

Content analysis, critical discourse analysis, argumentative analysis, semiotic and functional linguistics all reflect a linguistic and discursive turn in urban studies. Critical Discourse Analysis helps social scientists to uncover the dominant discourse encoded in texts, has gained significant momentum since the 1990's. It has been deployed as a methodology to understand the urban policy implementation process and in particular, the ways in which key actors exercise power. Much of the discourse-based research in urban policy has drawn upon the writings of Norman Fairclough (Fairclough 1995) and seeks to provide a critical scrutiny of texts with the methodological assumption that the political sphere is an arena in which different interest groups (including media businesses) seek to establish a particular narrative or version of events as a means to pursue political objectives. However, I follow Reisigl (2020), who has argued that social scientists occasionally use the term discourse somewhat superficially, often confusing two subdisciplines.

One of the paths which CDA can take is narratological study, which seeks to understand how the communicative outcomes of storytelling are achieved. A concrete instantiation of discourse are storylines, which Hajer has described as « a condensed statement summarising complex narratives, used by people as short hand in discussions » (2006, 69). Storylines sit at a higher level of aggregation than individual texts, but a lower level than broad cultural repertoires. Hajer addressed the acid rain storyline and showed how it selectively mobilised aspects of reality and embodied narratives, symbols and metaphors in order to shape meanings and influence coalition-building in the environmental policy agenda-setting process. This concept has been broadly used. Newspapers create stories in order to inform and entertain their readers. Stories also make it easier for readers to shape their own opinion and construct their personal and social identities. Of course, private-focused bodies (such as BIDs) and local authorities also create stories and storylines. All of these circulate, echo and sometimes conflict with one another. The analysis of the media coverage of gentrification can hence be summed up as the exploration of the extent to which the media duplicate, replicate or reframe other stories (Brown-Saracino and Rumpf 2011).

Another line of research in CDA consists in an investigation of the semiotics of media texts, which can rely on a linguistic approach. Breaking texts down into grammatical and semiotic sequences helps us to understand how journalists write their articles and how they develop meaning-making with the resources of language. Social scientists and linguists have

also employed this approach as an attempt to critically deconstruct media discourses, for example during migrant evictions (Serafis *et al.* 2020), or in order to study sustainable mobility policies (Kiernan 2018) or urban models (Kennedy 2016). I have also used this method and demonstrated its capacity to shed light on the discursive strategy of a local politician seeking to «over-politicise» his cycling agenda (Baron 2019).

In this chapter, I combine both approaches. I will first deconstruct articles published by the *Post* into argumentative components, separating values and ethical/ political elements, goals or desired futures, circumstances or spatio-temporal information. I will also delineate the sequences into descriptive, explicative and instructive elements. This will allow to understand the performative dimensions of the discourse and the way the identity of the BID community and of DC citizenship is reframed through the media «storyfication» of homelessness in the NoMa tunnel.

The literature review carried out for this research allowed to identify papers and online documentation about the NoMa district, its history and the BID as well as maps and grey literature produced by the District of Columbia Department of Planning and Department and Transport. A search in the Factiva, Europresse and NewsLibrary databases using advanced research features (#NoMa, #BID NoMa, # NoMa DC ...) also allowed to gather 150 articles (45 000 words) published in the *The Washington Post* from 2007 to the end of 2021. The literature survey included paper and online editions as well as blog entries and reader comments. A three steps protocol was then implemented in order to limit the amount of information and target the texts submitted to the CDA.

The first step consisted in developing a typology of paper types and sidelining 97 descriptive articles mainly corresponding to brief news, miscellaneous, real estate information and dining out recommendations: 97 articles were sidelined. For the second step, a list of thematic in-depth papers concerning NoMa transformation drawn up. Seven main themes were delineated: public space improvement, art and the environment; transport and mobility infrastructures and services; socio-demographic change and local community initiatives; local conflicts and security; brownfield redevelopment and new residential development, retail and public services, and a group of « other » themes. The issue of homeless people's presence concerned 38 articles present in four of the six themes, which demonstrated the transversality of the question. In these 38 papers, 21 articles were been carefully analysed. They are opinion papers, interviews or open letters published by *The Washington Post* which provide coverage of the tunnel controversy in order to cover the tunnel controversy plus representative thematic articles. This shortlist corresponds to the final corpus of this research project.

## **A BID vs DC government clash revisited**

The public debate orchestrated by the media over the presence of homeless people in this area began at the end of the summer 2019. Two lines of news appeared in *The Post* in spring that year. One concerned the BID board of directors urging the District Department of transportation to calm car traffic in NoMa. The main idea disclosed in the article was that the BID pledged the DC Municipality to complete the street schemes and to accelerate the provision of a continuous bike lane in NoMa. The second line of news concerned the efforts of the NoMa BID to transform the public realm. *The Post* reported the BID street art projects and the conversion of one of the tunnels into an art gallery. Several articles referred to the international design competition launched by BID and the design of an art installation named “rain light” in one of the tunnels. The newspaper gave short articles in the « transport and mobility planning » section, or in the « weekend opportunities » section (eg Lewis 2019), but doesn't link both subjects. At this time, any scholar in urban studies can make the link and integrate both stories in a same BID strategy that consists in upgrading the public space, regaining control over the streets and sustaining the search for investors in residential projects. The street art project is typical of an exclusionary implicit design act disguised as an aesthetic initiative (Lindner and Sandoval 2021). Then, during the hottest days of that summer, *The Post* published 8 articles focusing on homeless encampments, the threat of police evictions and several attempts at vacating the area. At this time, no connection between the former themes and this information were made.

After an eviction, the BID set up barriers with its logo to block access to K street sidewalks in order to stop the homeless from returning. At the same time, the BID President published a lengthy open letter in *The Washington Post* (Jasper, 2019) to justify the zoning restriction: she called all of the underpasses « unsafe and unsanitary environments » and urged that « something be done to recognize and protect the right of D.C. residents, workers, and visitors to safely use and pass through public space in NoMa ». The letter developed a focal point: NoMa was presented as a very fast-growing district where public space was already packed. NoMa residents' rising smart mobility practices (walking and biking) were put forward as reasons to clear the sidewalks from tents. Hence, tents might have been tolerated in the past, but no longer were although the so-called problem dates back to the construction of Central Union Central station. NoMa has run out of homeless carrying capacity. NoMa residents were presented as victims of the homeless and the BID President argued for their right to safe roads

and pedestrian comfort. The letter directly targeted the deficiencies of the District police and portrayed the inhabitants of the tunnel as a dangerous group of drunks and drug dealers, typically blurring race- and class-based fear of the other with ideas about personal security and traffic safety.

*The Washington Post* nurtures the controversy and orchestrates the public debate for about six months with various types of publications. The newspaper alternates between ground level reports on the precarious nature of homeless life, opinion pieces about the encampment as a public problem and even recommendations to official stakeholders. Columnist Dvorak wrote a piece titled «Artpark vs tent cities» in which he contrasted the long-term efforts at public space reconquest and the crude reality of DC's structural poverty (Dvorak 2019). Consistent with its long tradition of «watchdog» journalism on local government policies and practices (Knobel 2018), *The Post* criticised the failure of DC social housing policies (Jamison 2019) but opened its pages to a municipal reply to the BID President's letter. The head of Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless rejected the responsibility for the homeless problem on the real-estate developers (directly targeting BID officials) whose speculation contributed to the continuous rise of housing prices. Meanwhile, the situation was blocked: the BID barriers were removed and the homeless were once more blocking the sidewalks. *The Washington Post* called for peaceful negotiation – « To solve DC's homeless problem, the city must talk to those affected » (Young, 2019) – but, as time went by and with winter looming, the newspaper reported the failure of an institutional response: « Getting rid of the homeless won't make homelessness go away » (Dvorak, 2020).

### ***The arrival of a good Samaritan (discursively) closes an insuperable public problem***

The cold winter months brought more tents into the tunnel and the question remained the same: is there room for the homeless on the sidewalks of a gentrified district ? After journalists Heim and Moyer published an article warning of an imminent new police clearance (January 10, 2020), the debate suddenly took a new turn. On 14 January 2020, *The Washington Post* published a letter from a street-level NoMa resident in her 30s, who lived one block from the tunnel and worked for the Sierra club. This lady took a diametrically opposed position to the previously mentioned approaches and arguments. Under the title « There is room enough in NoMa for all », she denounced the violent eviction she witnessed and expressed her bitterness, anger and dismay with the following words :«It is important that we who live in NoMa acknowledge that there is a severe shortage of affordable housing in the District and that the

gentrification of this neighborhood and others like it has made that problem worse. Those of us fortunate enough to be able to live in fancy new apartment buildings have an obligation to advocate for real solutions. My ideal NoMa neighborhood is not a picture-perfect corporate utopia but rather a community that is inclusive, accessible and welcoming to all.» For her, neither policing nor justifications for the design of an exclusionary public space should be undertaken in the name of NoMa's residents. She argued that the homeless did not occupy the entire space and that the movement of pedestrians and the presence of tents are easily compatible. The homeless had been present for so long that the insecurity argument put forward by the BID President was not an issue. The homeless are citizens, residents and part of the community.

This open letter added a new layer in the manifold perspectives in which the line of *The Washington Post* had been navigating for several months. It helped the media to transcend the institutional confrontation that did not offer a particularly attractive journalist angle. Compassion and good sentiments were more likely to «sell» this affair, and this reflects the findings of a long-term analysis of the way in which *The Post* has covered the urban crisis in America (Perisi 1998). As the Christmas period arrived, the media coverage of the tent battle changed its tone. « Don't believe the haters. Friendly neighbours are everywhere » argued *The Washington Post* journalists as they reported spontaneous food distributions organised by students (Heim and Guskin 2019). The open letter offered the media a good Samaritan story and, forgetting about the homeless's painful situation, *The Washington Post* celebrated the civic identity, social consciousness and generosity of DC residents (and readers). In so doing, it semiotically converted a painful social event into a beautiful – but perhaps overused – moral parable.

### ***On the ambivalent and equivocal strategies of media coverage of gentrification***

Two findings can be derived from this research. The first concerns the media coverage of urban crises in gentrified neighbourhoods and its traps. The finding concerns the newspaper's capacity to focus on a recurring event (here the evictions and social tensions they create) and to articulate it within an intricate web of policy problems (housing, transport, security ...) that involve institutional competencies, power relations as well as structural question of racism, segregation and injustice. This case study first highlights a «silo» approach of themes and the difficulty for journalists to articulate themes. This causes the media to express a sort of polyphony (various journalists taking diverse positionings) and to adopt a flexible, or even a sinuous position. Nevertheless, and from a temporal perspective, one can acknowledge that *The*

*Washington Post* constructs a complete editorial sequence with an opening dilemma (art or tents?), then a kind of trial (adversarial interpretations of facts and comparison of possible solutions expressed by the actors of this drama), then a happy ending (generosity wins).

A second finding lies in the understanding of this coverage as an orchestration, that is to say a semiological and temporal ordering of ideas and affect. During all three stages, various types of editorial coverage are proposed. The media therefore play a variety of functional roles and create a range of narratives in the local debate (eg the successive police clean-ups, the blocking of pedestrian access to the tunnel, the reporting of food distributions). However, unlike social media and local free online press, *The Washington Post* uses this controversy to position itself as an upper-level media capable of delivering more than repetitive street level reports of police violence and more than boring explanations concerning insufficient sheltering services. The media behaves as a stakeholder in this local affair, as it moderates an indirect institutional exchange between the DC municipality (and police) and the board of BID Presidents. The media also creates events, as it selects and publishes three open letters in its paper editions (one from the BID president, one from the Municipality service, one from the resident). This strategy of publishing open letters and writing over letters received in the redaction allows the newspaper to display a kaleidoscope of multiple subjectivities without appearing to support one political side. Hence, the reality of racialized and class-based eviction in a rich enclave is diffracted into a profusion of interpretations and discourses. This is in line with the perception of specialists of homeless media coverage, who insist on the way the question is being de-institutionalized and depoliticized by media which, in this case, delegate the task of interpretation and argumentation to the voices it cautiously selects.

Third, this strategy also connects with *The Post's* construction of one of its main symbolic resources: its roots and its localness. The editors act as an echo chamber, mirroring diverse representations of reality and experiences among individuals from different social and institutional groups. The open letters convey arguments, but also beliefs, values, normative and ethical claims, and perhaps most importantly, positive emotions. Christmas (that is perceptible in the selection of local news and in the overall tone of the newspaper) is a time when *The Post* valorizes happy-end stories and disseminates positive ideas among local readership. This is when the newspaper decided to put an end to the institutional perspective (a dialogue of the deaf) and to the sad perspective that presents DC as a divided and unjust society. While reporting a food distribution event, the newspaper's last article on this affair praises the local student's generosity toward homeless people.

A critical discourse of arguments and narrative choices makes it possible to understand how the question of the atmosphere of DC BID streets, which Bartman has argued often resemble third world city streets (Bratman 2011), is obscured. This method allows us to capture how a media outlet recodes a singular event, reframes the question it may raise, and semiotically solves it by (re)producing unity from a fragmented and polarized public sphere.

The second main finding concerns the way the media neglects the mobility social fix. The finding lies in the response to the question raised in the opening of the chapter: do the media capture the notion of micro-transit induced gentrification? Are they able to address the design of public space through its neoliberal rationales and to connect the topic with demographic replacement and with class and ethnic conflicts, as scholars have done bike schemes ? (Hoffmann 2016, Stehlin 2019)

This research shows that leading DC institutions, *The Washington Post* included, still adopt too functionalist an approach to transport and mobility questions. Although the newspaper hosts the BID President perspective in its columns, it does not reproduce its caricatural lecture. It even allowed her to present arguments which led to her decline: the President who was appointed in 2011 was abruptly fired after the tunnel affair and replaced by the DC's former director of transportation and infrastructure on the Federal City Council. Such a choice hints of the pivotal role of mobility in the NoMa BID strategy. But, in this affair, the *Washington Post* lost an opportunity to connect its analysis of public space regeneration in the downtown to its role in denouncing social and ethnic issues. The newspaper allowed a resident to describe a relational and inclusive vision of public space and mobility in her letter. This vision considers public space as a shared space in which mobile subjects (pedestrians, cyclists, drivers...) and less mobile or non-mobile people (strollers, youngsters, old and disabled people, homeless and others ancillary or marginal groups) are all members of the community. This vision draws attention to an important characteristic of active mobilities (biking and walking): sustainable mobilities provide a much better opportunity to benefit from the social diversity of public space, to develop social relations and this produces local cohesion and harmony.

The newspaper did not dwell on the social consequences of NoMa's changing mobility practices. This may be due to the ambivalent discourse of residents who belong to the gentrifier class. The coexistence of strangers and poor people, when they belong to the community, can be part of the gentrifiers' aspirations of diversity and is in itself a demonstration of the « last steps of gentryfication » (Morris 2019). This may be one of the reasons why the newspaper overlooked parts of the resident's letter, namely those dealing with an inclusive mobility

narrative, and why the following Christmas articles exposed a depoliticized community narrative (Biehl *et al.* 2019).

## Conclusion

Three conceptual points formed the basis of this chapter: mobility, media and gentrification. Gentrification was introduced within the context of the rapid transformation of public space and the mobility model in Washington DC. The paper developed the notion of mobility and micro-transit induced gentrification. The role of leading newspaper in the Washington DC area was explored in the light of a very competitive local media market.

The empirical study was constructed using a corpus of *The Washington Post* articles covering the evictions of homeless populations within a Business Improvement District. Across analysis of the arguments and narrative resources was conducted to capture the media strategy employed to reach three goals:

- keeping the audience throughout the affair,
- avoiding the delivering of repetitive information
- escaping the stagnation in the face of a seemingly apparently insoluble institutional question.

Orchestration, moderation, subjectivization and narrativization (or creation of storylines) were the four main media strategies employed to reach these objectives, together with a constant pursuit of strong connection with the feelings and values of readers.

The response to the research question is that, in this specific episode, *The Washington Post* can be clearly considered as an indirect agent of gentrification. The newspaper did clearly not invisibilize the social problem of rich enclaves in the city. On the contrary, it dedicated a long series of issues to the city's social emergency. Nor does the newspaper present itself as an adherent to the BID argument that the mobility of insiders should be prioritized at the expense of outsiders' needs. However, the newspaper sides with the interests of the coalition of real estate developers as columnists « depoliticize » the public debate and shift the attention toward the praising of local solidarities and DC's virtues. By focusing on the community perceptions, needs and values, *The Washington Post* nurtured the BID's discourse of NoMa as a vibrant, singular and attractive district, which sustained the growth machine and the broader processes underpinning change in NoMa.



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