Reframing the Discourse: Organizational Identity and Image in a Houston Street Paper

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Many social theorists and rhetoricians writing about public engagement have examined the confluence and divergence of external and internal images in community organizations. While these studies vary in degree, there is a consensus that a coherent narrative must exist in order for a group to sustain its efforts in both social and economic realms. While I attempt to present one personal example regarding organizational image and influence, I have resisted any inclination toward the "scholastic fallacy."[1] This is a story about my experience trying to understand a homeless organization that struggles with the same issues as those it tries to help. It competes with the city, other non-profits, and the conflicting ideologies of potential donors. Over the last two months, I have been helping Real Advocacy, a street newspaper organization in Houston, set up operations and begin the work of aiding homeless individuals to whom they give voice. Ultimately, this paper claims the organizations that help homeless individuals reclaim their identities also struggle with their own subjectivity.

The time I spent with members of Real Advocacy led me to conclude that social constructions of homelessness are just that: constructions. In reality, homelessness and organizations devoted to their advocacy are shaped by complex socio-economic and interpersonal forces, refuting the easy solidarity imagined by educational theorists like Ruby Payne.[2] I agree with Payne as she explains the secret and shared discourse systems related to homelessness, specifically poverty. However, she implies that there is an imagined solidarity among homeless individuals that subjugates their personal identities. This aspect seems to perpetuate the binary images of the homeless that have been prescribed through modern media techniques. These categories instruct the American public to view homelessness through two identity lenses: Romanticism and Realism. John Allen's book, Homelessness in American Literature, takes issue with these binaries and deconstructs the antipodal images associated with them.

Indeed, neither of these depictions clearly conveys the identities of the homeless individual. Even worse, as seen in recent popular culture trends and comedies that satirize it, homelessness is even seen as a fashionable alternative lifestyle.[3] Although some individuals do choose homelessness, the plight of the population is seen as monolithic and causes for it are usually bankrolled together. Allen provides a compelling argument that the image of the homeless is lumped in with social normative perception and framed as a social disease. It is seen as

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1 Pierre Bourdieu uses this term to criticize spurious attempts at objectivity or unbiased narrative.

2 Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* imagines in her chapter "The Hidden Rules of Poverty" that homeless individuals share some transcendent understanding of their condition, and therefore distribute resources in an egalitarian fashion, further entrenching themselves in poverty. This denies the subjectivity and unique contextual factors of the homeless individual.

3 See the television show, "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia," and the film *Zoolander* for its treatment of derelict fashion as hyperbole for examples of popular culture that takes up the homelessness issue.

a scourge upon a community of consumerism. However, his greatest contribution is how the homeless individual's image rests somewhere between the wise, avuncular and otherworldly mendicant, and the lovable and charming tramp. He continues to explain that "in the 1980s, everyone discovered the homeless"; with this increase in their visibility, the discursive systems representative of the homeless started to "describe the process of gentrification, increased rent, and urban renewal that lead to the elimination of the skid row 'bum'" (9).

Larger systems of power were working their way into the manufacturing of homeless culture. No longer was the displaced person seen as strictly abject, degraded, or simply shown as morally unpalatable. Allen claims that his view complicates the issues of homelessness and its diverse members. His text concludes "more study should be given to texts in American literature which represents homeless individuals as purposeful, active members of society" as a way to reduce the "distance exist[ing] between the reader and the homeless individual" (10). Collapsing this distance between the reader and the homeless individual becomes the goal of the activist model.

The goal of the street newspaper movement, established in the early 1970s with the now defunct Homeless Times in Portland, Oregon,[4] is to reframe the discourse associated with poverty and housing. Instead of employing language that is aggressive, speculative, and overtly in favor of the bottom line, most street papers privilege the personal, emotional, and individual exigencies of the vendor. In fact, this focus is so ubiquitous, a United Kingdom street paper,

The Big Issue, has been the subject of controversy among the movement for its willingness to cover celebrity and national news, diminishing the voice of the vendor in an effort to garner a wider readership.

Where Allen argues that our shared literature should shift cultural valuation for the homeless individual, the street paper argues for a more direct social activism. Instead of including homeless literature in the canon, street papers want to directly influence the potential homeless writer. This kind of activism wants to incorporate the marginalized individual into already existing power structures, but base it in a material reality rather than an intellectual one. Yet, a marginalized group should not have to be assimilated into the ideologically dominant sphere. Instead, homeless literacy that mirrors the skill sets of the dominant discursive system should be instituted.[5] In order to do so, an identity must be established by the literacy sponsor, a position that comes with its own ideological aims. This search for identity among powerful entities necessitates a different kind of language acquisition. Its use in homeless representation is essential to understanding the power of discourse and securing a beneficial image. In a way, as Caroline Wiedmar mentions in her article, "The Politics of Reading Street Papers," the newly shifting discursive systems that defined homelessness began to identify them as "people with social difficulties" and the buyers of these papers also "have unwittingly become agents of political and social change simply by buying a publication" (437). She continues to discuss her own relationship with the street paper and finds that a shift in identity between vendors and readers has a direct impact on the types

4 For more complete information, see the International Network of Street Papers, the umbrella organization for street papers.

5 Chicago's *Street Wise* became one of the first street papers to champion literacy programs in the homeless sphere.

of organizational discourse available in a city.[6] It is then up to the homeless organization to impact the discursive traditions in a given space.

Like Wiedmar, Brenton Faber in Community Action and Organizational Change spends a great deal of time examining the semiotics an organization must negotiate to claim its identity. His general thesis claims that an organization transforms itself through shifting its discourse; to be clear, he espouses that an image can most effectively change by its ability to reframe language and reconstruct prescribed images. He suggests that "stories broker change because they mediate between social structures and individual agency" (25). This implies that stories can undermine the hegemonic control of a preexisting force that insidiously pinions the individual. By creating a narrative, a person can diagnose organizational difficulties so that change may occur. Faber proves useful to Real Advocacy. It is in the formative stages of image creation, and, therefore, exists on contentious ground. It has other contextual models and factors with which to interact, and these elements appear to offer a different organizational pattern than Real Advocacy seeks. The most prescriptive organizations regarding the homeless are churches. Instead of providing the homeless with resources that allow them to extricate themselves from poverty and marginalization, most churches provide basic food and shelter needs temporarily. An activist model is seen as anathema to many of the churches in proximity to Real Advocacy's influence.

Andrew Price, the Financial Director of Real Advocacy, and I asked numerous churches, of all denominations, for vendor

space, coordination with their resources and programs, among other things. None even showed an interest in joining our efforts. These churches were interested in replicating their own agenda rather than remediating homelessness. As Faber claims, "power is both limiting and producing" (114). The churches were intent upon replicating the outreach model, and therefore, limited the extent to which they would help the homeless. This claim is not an indictment against faith- based organizations. It is, however, an illustration of how the street paper organization sees itself as differently engaged in the community. The outreach model of engagement believes that basic needs should be provided to temporarily alleviate the physical demands of homelessness by organizing food drives, canned goods, banquet dinners, and other events. The social enterprise model asserts that lines of power should be made visible, and should be restructured between "authorities and the individual" (Faber 114). By giving a homeless individual the material resources to become a member of the capitalist system, the organization is automatically shaping its identity as oppositional to the outreach model. This organizational plan recognizes that power is partly assigned to human agency, but that "[individuals] cannot claim to be completely separate from social structures" (Faber 121). Furthermore, as the previous citation implies, contextual factors other than human agency are just as important. Discourse in Houston is variegated and models for homeless vendors are present, such as Houston's largest print paper, The Houston Chronicle. The Houston homeless population receives some direct benefit from this partnership, but there are no direct efforts to prevent or eliminate homelessness in the city or the surrounding

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6   Kevin Lynch's work, *The Image of the City*, studies the effects of psychology and well-being in relation to urban spaces within a city.

areas, a need that is staggering as suggested by recent statistics.

In Houston alone, during the January homeless census, it was estimated that 40,000 people in Harris Country received some kind of assistance from a homeless organization with 10,000 people actually living on the streets or in shelters.[7] The largest segment of this population belongs to families with multiple children. Currently, it remains that nearly 30% of the homeless in Harris County are children. Although this population is enormous, many of these individuals are never able to remove themselves from homelessness. Houston's downtown area is unable to physically expand which directly affects the central location from which vendors build relationships and sell papers. In some ways, this fault in urban planning directly influences the vendor/reader identity and the health of a social activist organization. Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan discuss this at length in their study of literacy in urban spaces, City Comp. Much of their research is taken from service learning evaluations in light of architectural and urban planning theory. The study's thesis reveals what many homeless organizations realize on a daily basis: "Urban/city contexts, then, are negotiated, not given; they both construct, and are constructed by, their inhabitants" (1). Because of predetermined and restricted space for vendors to sell papers, a Houston homeless organization will have many obstacles to work through, including Houston's commuter and vehicle culture which severely limits readership. This becomes one aspect of power that shapes an organization.

After working through the organization's thoughts on the poor urban planning in Houston its effects on vendor access, Andrew set up a tactical solution. He suggests organizers situate vendors in a community establishment, like the Fiesta or Kroger near Montrose. He believes that this will prevent panhandling by other homeless individuals while creating an outlet for the vendor to sell papers. Because the vendor is not only selling a paper but also trying to build a readership, panhandlers will have nothing in the way of exchange value. Therefore, the vendor/reader relationship will have direct socio-economic consequences on people in the community while, hopefully, dispelling the negativity of panhandling. This example showed me how the vendor and reader are completely transformed by the contextual factors of the environment. This also has a shaping influence on the community and organizational identity in that environment.

Often, these relationships, especially in relation to the social activism present in street papers, come from separate geographic locations. Over the course of two months, I spoke with three of the members of Real Advocacy and was able to get a working definition of the processes and problems associated with the street paper movement in general. I was acting as both coordinator and contact point to get the organization in touch with non-profits such as churches and camps. Also, I was able to set up a meeting and reference point to create a publicity trailer for Real Advocacy. Additionally, using my position as a student, I secured an educational discount for design software imperative to the publication of the magazine. Finally, at my last meeting with the group, I was able to discuss with a professional grant writer, Susan, some of the frequent roadblocks and obstacles associated with social activism and securing funding for an organization. She was extremely helpful and discussed the chief proposal issues she had encountered over the

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7   See the Coalition for the Homeless 2010 census.

past thirty years. Essentially, she claimed that success in funding was directly related to changes in the discursive systems of an organization, leading to the possibility of renewal or extirpation of an organizational image.

One such example related to organizational identity, reciprocity, and engagement is based on my time spent with the volunteers at Real Advocacy. Andrew ascribes the ubiquitous presence of street papers in Seattle, Washington, as the beginning of his involvement, and the foundational point in which his identity intertwined with the organization's identity. He "was frequently engaging in conversation with the vendors there and the personal stories they told." After moving to Houston, Andrew became invested in the belief that the homeless population could remain "hopeful and energetic, despite their predicament, because selling papers empowered them and gave them pride in the ability to overcome their situation." This organizational model believes in the empowerment of the individual through micro-enterprise. This model shapes the entire street paper movement and defines it as a "Homeless Empowerment Project."

The nexus for the HEP comes in the publication model for Real Advocacy. People who are homeless buy and resell the magazines as a way to "earn money," which ultimately allows them to become "more independent and self-sufficient." Andrew continues by explaining that the public receives a unique insight into the homeless world because it gathers information from a directly connected voice. In this way, Andrew seems to be saying that the counter-public influences the public sphere by developing a "mutually insightful relationship with the vendors whom they regularly encounter on their way to and from work, school, and

home." For Andrew, as well as others in the organization, this confluence of counter-public space as it shapes the dominant systems of business and commerce affected him powerfully and provides a testament to the personal impact of social activism. As he worked in downtown Seattle, where Real Change News, figures prominently in the alternative press, Andrew encountered a homeless man harassing a passerby:

> Steven suffers from a form of mental illness that makes social interactions awkward for him. One of the few times I saw him, it was clear that he used alcohol to self-medicate a condition from which some unaffordable pharmaceutical could probably help....Shortly after that bus ride, I later recognized Steven selling the paper on a regular basis in front of my neighborhood grocery store. One day I decided to buy one of his papers.

This decision to begin a relationship with Steven shaped the dynamic and multivalent identities of both Andrew and Steven. While he indicts a system that oppresses those lacking the material resources to assuage and eliminate their emotional and physical ills, Andrew also believes that community literacy projects also remediate. He continues in his description of the vendor/reader relationship he begins with Steven: "'Look on page seven,' he said. 'There's a picture of me at a protest to end homeless encampment sweeps.' Sure enough, he had been photographed at one of Real Change's community organizing rallies and was grinning with pride...".

Echoing my conclusions about reader/vendor identity transformation,

Andrew concludes that "every vendor's identity goes through a transformation-- sometimes more, sometimes less." For Real Advocacy, it became readily apparent that each member of the organization understood that the most important member of it were the homeless in the community. The reciprocal relationship finds satisfaction for the homeless individual through his ability to speak from a certain standpoint, like Steven was able to do. For a reader, or an organizational member, the appeal comes from the ability to see the transformation and approximate its existence through publication and the reshaping of identity that comes with it.

Even though the most obvious identity dynamic for Real Advocacy comes from the vendor/reader relationship, the organization itself is shaped by extant factors, too. Currently without a salary, Real Advocacy is dependent on volunteer effort, but will soon be opening part- time positions, complete with "performance incentives and bonuses in order to retain a skilled and competitive staff." This organizational model will, no doubt, continue to reshape the identity of Real Advocacy. In fact, as Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau points out in Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies, securing funding and business models are some of the most important issues to influence organizational sustainability and image where many social activists are "comfort[able] in adopting the capitalistic frameworks ... [seen as] a productive trend" where the organization "view their social activism partly as a 'business of direct action' that is 'into the business of redistribution of wealth'" (146). Sheridan-Rabideau comments that activists like street papers rely much on grant funding and therefore must take into account the grant's ability to prod and change the

organization's structure (134). She describes one central way in which many grassroots efforts are garnering more success in financial security: shifting discursive systems.

As her experiences with GirlZone, a feminist organization, taught her, employing language that is traditionally seen as pejorative to the belief systems and ideological geography of a funder can be disastrous in securing that funding. This leads to her to assert "it is not economics, then, but rather the privileging of the economic system over other values that the organizers...struggle with" (138). In my efforts to help with the burgeoning Houston street paper, I found through our various discussions that this is indeed true. Confronting the linguistic systems used in trying to fund an organization become essential in grant writing.

For anyone familiar with the street paper movement this will come as no surprise; however, a brief examination as to the discursive shift is important in understanding how Real Advocacy's identity may change as it grows. While in discussion with the executive grant writer for Pasadena ISD, Andrew brought up the subject of fiscal sponsorship. This term essentially allows an entity the ability to co-op a partnership with an existing 501(c) (3) to secure funding from that entity while giving them from 2%-4% of the funds they raise. Susan looked disturbed and slightly confused. She had never heard the term "fiscal sponsorship" but clearly understood the concept. I discovered, as did Andrew, that this term was negatively associated with financial burden. No organization that he approached was receptive to the idea, and it became immediately clear why. These organizations did not see fiscal sponsorship as a beneficially reciprocal thing; instead, it appeared that the

term would drain them of resources, eliminate their autonomy, and efface their identity.

Within the street paper system, however, this term was widely used to describe the kinds of mutually collaborative efforts that benefitted both parties. The term expressed to those outside the community was framed as "social enterprise." This new discursive term suggested self-determination, diligence, and creative thinking. In her evaluation of the inefficiency of the old discourse, Susan realized the claim that "literate activity is central to economic viability and perhaps their lack of other options" (138). Indeed, the frustration that Andrew and the other members felt was visibly lifted after this shift in discourse revealed itself. Faber's argument that organizational image in times of change is highly contested ground reveals itself to be very important here. He maintains that image is a complex weaving of "corporate name, products, employees, marketing strategies, and the ways in which the organization describes itself within the larger marketplace" (34). The aversion that other non-profits had toward the use of "fiscal sponsorship" clearly supports the need for a streamlined external and internal organizational image.

Sheridan-Rabideau says as much by claiming that discursive systems for grassroots identities must steer away from things that may "challenge the dominant paradigm" (138), opting instead to develop ways to "break into philanthropic giving, influence public policy" and institute "strategic rhetoric" (140-1). Therefore, Susan clearly saw that the shift from fiscal sponsorship to social enterprise "reflects how work and economic discourses rather than moral discourses have become the coin of the realm of granting circles" (141). With this shifting

rhetoric also came an implicit valuation on the entrepreneurial style.

As J. Gregory Dees argues in "Social Enterprises and Education" many grassroots organizations see businesses as the epitome of "abuse and exploitation that can accompany the pursuit of profits...and raise the specter of market hegemony" (1). Instead, this shift, he argues complements the endeavors of social activists who may employ entrepreneurship to "draw on social connections and other intangible assets to mobilize the tangible resources" (3). Sheridan- Rabideau supports this claim by reinforcing this shift reflected in an entrepreneurial model: "strategic shifts in language respond to the shift in funding organizations and society more generally away from a social and moral responsibility of citizens to a privatization of the social sector and individual responsibility" (141). In short, entrepreneurial models, as Andrew and the grant writer discussed, needed to be made out of larger segments that valued the "economic values of contemporary society" (141) over the moral framing of those individuals the organization was trying to help. This lead to the collected belief among our group that based on this social enterprise narrative language, social activism was successful only in its ability to make itself viable in the eyes of "a tight-knit group of conservative philanthropic elite" (143).

In her assessment, the grant writer told us a story in which an organization applied for a grant through an infant-death prevention foundation. After making a great presentation filled with reality-based solutions to eliminating deaths related to birth trauma, the organization denied the proposal. Following up, the proposer was enraged and touted that the proposal deserved funding because "it would save so many lives!" This

was true, but the proposal did not line up with the stated goals of the organization; clearly, it did not matter if the idea was innovative. In the end, the objectives of the organization were not met. Her assessment of the term fiscal sponsorship, a term that was deemed unfriendly to such a conservative and monolithic group, functioned in a parallel way. And, just as Faber struggled with reframing the discourse among the vocational school students, Andrew and I were left thinking about how to shift the rhetoric for the organization. Quite frankly, to use Faber's language, our willingness to create granter-friendly terminology implied a resistance to the granter, but also aggrandized its image.

We had to change the discourse, and thereby create a boundary with which to entreat funding. Faber explains this view: "By focusing on a specific agent and calling that agent 'powerful,' the people doing the resisting at least temporarily elevate and reinforce their opponent as powerful" (115). I agree; the organization seeks money, and elevating the status of a potential granter was obviously a large part of that. This acknowledgment made it all the more crucial for Real Advocacy to understand the kinds of discourse that would be less threatening to more conservative powerhouse foundations. This also required that the organization exert some power over the homeless individuals it would employ. Andrew, when I asked about the specific economic model associated with Real Advocacy retained that "the entrepreneurial model is reflected in the vendor program itself as vendors are self-employed distributors of the magazine and must learn to budget their time and finances accordingly." To further this end, and taking up the standard assigned by other street papers, Andrew assured me that each vendor

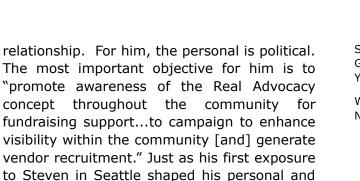must sign a code of conduct that forbids the use of alcohol or other drugs.

Interestingly, as a kind of culmination of my time with the organization, and an idea that addresses community literacy and engagement, Andrew was apprehensive about the perception of the homeless by potential readers. He cites this as his major concern in solidifying a cohesive relationship between vendors and Real Advocacy. Most recently, he and I discussed his application for a brand-image grant through a company named Causality. This organization did pro bono work to create and distribute a brand-logo for a non-profit. In short, our proposal was rejected and no reasons were given for its rejection. Andrew tells me he believes that the market for such brand grants are already taken up by "veteran organizations that are already heavily resourced and branded." He continues to express the frustration at such treatment, leading him to examine a few realities:

> [Causality] leverages their grant program as a means to solicit interest in partial matching grants, and secondly, that based on the awarded recipients, organizations that already have in-house branding teams and moderate to substantial marketing budgets are applying for even the smallest grant funding opportunities.

Andrew's conclusion again strengthens Sheridan-Rabideau's and Dees's arguments for a new discursive system that can combat and compete with "conservative, power-dominant organizations" (Sheridan-Rabideau 216).

After leaving behind this frustration, he and I continue to meditate on the nature of identity as practiced in the reader/vendor

relationship. For him, the personal is political. The most important objective for him is to "promote awareness of the Real Advocacy concept throughout the community for fundraising support...to campaign to enhance visibility within the community [and] generate vendor recruitment." Just as his first exposure to Steven in Seattle shaped his personal and eventually organizational identity, Andrew continues to believe in the potency of interpersonal exchange.

He feels that the essential action for the Real Advocacy team is to dispel the "reluctance some people may have to approach the homeless vendor" by "promoting knowledge and acceptance" of the cause. Andrew's goal is basically that of any social activist and grassroots causes: "marketing collateral to lower the barriers that prevent customers from recognizing and interacting with vendors to purchase magazines." Ultimately, the hope is that the bond between reader and vendor will not be forged over printed word, but secured by the faces selling and reading them. In this way, the individual is firmly situated in the organization's ability to control its image and also to retain its original vision.

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