INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HOUSING POLICY
2019, VOL. 19, NO. 2, 192–212
https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2018.1436848

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Regulating marginality: how the media characterises a maligned housing option

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ABSTRACT

Communities often stigmatise forms of housing targeting low-income tenants. This paper examines how media sources characterise one such form: rooming houses that provide multiple, low-cost, single-room accommodations in structures with shared bathrooms and/or kitchens. By analysing newspaper and online media coverage in Halifax, Canada, we illustrate the way the media describe the rooming house as a risky structure and its occupants as dangerous and marginalised persons requiring surveillance and regulation. Media coverage can play an important role in creating the social context within which local government fashions planning and housing policy interventions to control the size, location, and operation of unpopular housing options. In cities where market pressures drive gentrification, negative media coverage can contribute to the on-going loss of such affordable housing opportunities.

KEYWORDS Rooming house; marginality; regulation; media; planning

In growing cities, housing near the centre has become increasingly expensive, often displacing lower income households and individuals, and putting pressure on public housing stock in convenient locations (Abu-Lughod, 1994; Atkinson, 2004; Goetz, 2013). Neighbourhood change linked to such growth contributes to increasing levels of social and spatial polarisation (Newman & Ashton, 2004; Wei & Knox, 2014). It also leads to what Wacquant (2016, p. 1077) has called 'advanced marginality', wherein severely disadvantaged persons are relegated to increasingly marginal areas in the city. Although the loss of some affordable housing forms, such as public housing, has been well documented (Goetz, 2013), and scholars have written about evidence of the relocation of poverty to the suburban fringe (Kneebone & Berube, 2013), some equally marginalised but less-common forms of affordable housing targeting low-income single persons have received little scholarly attention. Through a study of news coverage in one community – Halifax, Nova Scotia,

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struggled to create social space for positive images of the single-room occupancy option.

Conclusions

Examining media coverage helps to illuminate some of the ways that communities socially construct local problems and planning solutions. New stories in Halifax suggest the generation of a perceived need for planning action in a social context where stories often identified the rooming house as a risky structure plagued by crime, fire, addictions, dirt, and vermin: a place where 'people with few choices' live (*Chronicle Herald*, 22 September 2004). The coverage marked the rooming house as a unique category of problem, perilously close to homelessness: housing, but not home. Only living in a shelter or on the street seemed more vilified as options in articles about evictions and fires: one displaced rooming house tenant relocated to a shelter noted, 'I have my pride. I don't really like to come to a place like this' (*Chronicle Herald*, 22 September 2004). Media stories about rooming houses in Halifax reflected similar negative media framing as found elsewhere for social housing (Kearns et al., 2013), poverty (Bullock et al., 2001), mental illness (Klin & Lemish, 2008), and homelessness (Calder et al., 2011; Truong, 2012). The way the media reports on topics such as rooming houses matters because coverage can affect public opinion and political action (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013).

Stories that mentioned rooming houses in Halifax reflected a cultural web of relationships, experiences, and understandings. Newsworthy events, such as fires or murders, attracted media attention to rooming houses, framing them as dangerous. Common tropes of dreadful housing conditions, nasty landlords, vulnerable residents, declining neighbourhoods, and government negligence pervaded the discourse. Stories about rooming house conditions often appeared as local debates about bylaws were occurring, and may have contributed to perceived pressure for municipal regulation and enforcement. Coverage of policy discussions reinforced the perception that rooming houses constitute a unique shelter type meriting special regulation and surveillance. Evictions resulting from enforcement of the bylaw generated sympathetic stories along with protests from housing advocates that raised the profile of the issue. While we do not claim that councillors and planners created and enforced policies specifically in response to media coverage, we argue that stories the media tells about rooming houses helped shape the context for local debates, within which planners made recommendations about appropriate courses of action and councillors took decisions that affected housing options.

Media coverage reflected and reproduced the idea that rooming houses are stigmatised accommodations. Such spaces and residents are

marginalised, saddled with 'a noxious identity, imposed from the outside' (Wacquant, 2016, p. 1083). Media analysis thus offers insights into how a community can turn a social problem – the undesirable low-income rooming house – into a regulatory problem that deems some properties 'illegal'. Negative coverage in Halifax reinforced fears and likely encouraged council members to press for closures. Planning regulations to cover elements – such as location (zoning), size (number of bedrooms, square footage), and privacy (keyed locks on bedrooms) – addressed some community concerns, but enforcement generated new problems when tenants faced evictions and renewed challenges of finding affordable accommodations. Analysis of the media coverage suggests that, by adopting planning regulations to govern some residential structures, local councillors prioritised the need to manage *risks* to safety posed by anomalous or marginalised structures such as rooming houses as more pressing than any *right* to housing that tenants may claim. Thus, for instance, perceived risk of fire served to justify evicting marginalised tenants who had nowhere to go. Rather than increasing the agency of tenants to report housing problems and seek redress from state powers, as envisioned by housing advocates who pushed for regulatory action, media coverage hints at how the bylaw undermined residents' security of tenure and housing options.

News coverage is interesting also for what it neglected. Good quality rooming houses rarely received media attention. Crime stories repeatedly mentioned rooming house sites, but reporters rarely considered systemic factors leading to poverty, violence, and terrible living conditions in rooming houses. Few pieces touched on the impact of gentrification on neighbourhoods, even though research suggests that many rooming houses disappeared from areas of dramatic recent social change (Prouse et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2017). The dominant trope of rooming house as the setting for bad news stories left little room for consideration of systemic factors that may undermine the viability of the rooming house as a housing option.

As practitioners, planners readily look for pragmatic regulatory solutions to community problems. Adopting physical solutions for problems that are inherently social and economic remains an occupational hazard. The media coverage of rooming houses in Halifax showed that many parties – planners, housing advocates, council members, and tenants – drew a halo over licensing as a strategy to resolve poor housing conditions and problems associated with specific housing forms. Planners dutifully developed plans, policies, and bylaws to regulate rooming houses, but news stories hint that they did not fully anticipate the closures and evictions that could result. Although our research focused on Halifax, similar processes of marginalisation of housing options for low-income residents are likely occurring in many cities. Examining media coverage of local planning and housing issues can offer useful

caveats to those who hope that regulation can resolve lingering challenges, such as ensuring suitable housing for the poorest among us.

Notes

1. Depending on time and place, the rooming house may be known as a lodging house, boarding house, residential hotel, house in multiple occupation, or single-room occupancy.
2. The list of articles analysed is available in Derksen (2016). Duplicate textual content appeared under other titles in various editions of a media source in 11 instances.
3. Media stories identified as evidence sources are not included in the reference list, but the full titles are available in Derksen (2016).

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Uytae Lee for his research assistance. The authors acknowledge the support provided by the Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership.

Funding

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [grant number 895-2011-1004].

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