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## RESEÑA

Bárbara Contreras Montero, Áurea Puerto García, Azahara Sánchez Hurtado, Susana Tomé Sánchez. Homeless people in the press. Report 2009 / *Las personas sin hogar en la prensa. Informe 2009.* Madrid, Ed. Fundamentos, 2011

Reseña realizada por Arne Saeys

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### Reseña:

The mass media in general and newspapers in particular are effective tools to represent the actual state of a society. In the contemporary information society, however, the mass media are also instruments to generate and to sustain predominant social attitudes. Depending on how the information is framed, the media can either play the role of society's watchdog or create and reinforce certain prejudices and stereotypes in the collective imaginary about specific social groups. In the case of news items about homeless people, the authors of *Las Personas Sin Hogar En La Prensa* observe that the media tend to reinforce stereotypes rather than to criticize social injustice.

In order to know which information and which images about homeless people are transmitted by the media, the network for the homeless people '*enredpsh*' launched in 2006 a series of annual reports. Published in book form with the aid of the *Fundación San Martín de Porres*, the latest issue of this series reports the results of an analysis of 540 news items related to homelessness in Spanish newspapers.

The book consists of ten chapters, plus a conclusion and an appendix. After a brief introduction (Chapter 1), an overview of the research methodology (Chapter 2) and a quantitative overview of the newspapers items (Chapter 3), the central chapters of the book (Chapter 4-10) are dedicated to a content analysis of the news items related to homelessness.

In the presentation of their data, the authors have used a double classification. First, they classified the news items under a limited number of thematic topics that indicate the major issues discussed in relation to homelessness. These thematic categories are the titles of the six main chapters. Secondly, within the thematic chap-

ters, the news items are classified according to their territorial origin (the Autonomous Communities of Spain).

This way, the fourth chapter *Composition of public and private intervention* highlights how social intervention is depicted in the press, comparing the performances of both public and private organizations (such as the Third Sector). Here we find the news related to the care facilities for the homeless and/or their activities. The action protocols set out the systematic procedures to deal with the situation of homeless people. This section includes, above all, those measures taken by the Social Services, the Police or the Third Sector Organizations before the evictions. Depending on the geographic location in Spain, there is evidence that some evictions have been accompanied by social intervention, while in other cases the intervention was effected only through police repression. Interpreting the news items, the authors conclude that voluntary work is one of the basic pillars of support delivered to the homeless.

The fifth chapter, *Opening and Closing of Facilities and Services*, gathers all the news items dealing with the facilities and services for the homeless and examines how these facilities and services depend on the budget allocation by public or private institutions. Following the news items throughout the year, the authors noticed in their analysis of the proposals and the effective inaugurations of services (by public, private or combined initiatives) the slow pace of proceeding from the proposals to the effective opening of the centers while at the same time they noticed the speed with which the centers are closed down. Regarding social emergency devices, they distinguish between the centers that actually provide sustained care services (or regularly during periods of extreme cold or heat) and those that provide ad hoc services. During the cold, heat and rural campaigns, it can be observed how and when the opening of centers and the implementation of special services follow the periods of extreme temperatures.

The sixth chapter, *Urban movements (neighbors and merchants)* addresses two kinds of urban reactions to homelessness: citizens who denounce the poor living conditions of the homeless and citizens who accuse the homeless for the problems of urban coexistence. Cases in which citizens stand up for the homeless people are reflected in the press by complaints made by neighbors, traders, NGOs and others about the bad situation of people who end up homeless. In the cases in which citizens complain about the homeless, there is a tendency in both society and the media to criminalize the lifestyle of the homeless. With the creation of stereotypes and the consequent reduction in opportunities in everyday life, they construct a negative social image that remains in the collective imagination. Most news items highlight how the neighbors and merchants feel affected by the presence of homeless people near their homes or their stores. The media, however, do not dedicate the same attention to how the homeless people themselves perceive the same situation. Only in a limited amount of news items, the homeless people trying to be heard are given a voice. When picking up an event related to them, the news items are usually not concerned with the opinions of the homeless people themselves regarding their situation. Even less common are the news items that report manifestations of people

who are in a situation of severe social exclusion joining forces to express their discomfort.

*Violence and social vulnerability* is the title of the seventh chapter. This is one of the most dense and extensive chapters in the number of news items covered. Regarding violent situations experienced by the homeless, the authors distinguish between the violence suffered by the homeless, the attacks between homeless people themselves and attacks carried out by them. The authors emphasize that aggression toward the homeless is often conducted by young people or adolescents who sometimes even record the scene with their mobile phones as a trophy. Regarding the aggression among the homeless themselves, it should be noted that this violence is often characterized by issues related to the structural violence they suffer. The section Judicial administrative cases includes news items related to legal proceedings in which a homeless person has been involved. Because of the slow pace of the judicial administration, it is common that news items deal with older events. Several news items relate to mortality, mainly reporting the death by 'natural causes' of middle-aged homeless people (30 to 50 years old). Although living on the streets is detrimental to one's health, these 'natural deaths' are nevertheless alarming because the causes of these deaths could have been prevented. In some cases, news items mention murder as the cause of death. Similar to the news items covering natural deaths, the items covering murders illustrate the morbidity of the press when digging into unnecessary details. Highlighting lurid and macabre details rather than informational value transform the event into a sensational spectacle. In the end, the authors also mention news items covering non-mortal accidents, in particular the high number of fires in which homeless people are involved.

The eighth chapter discusses *New Initiatives* that gather news items with the solutions and the political positions taken trying to resolve the problem of homelessness as well as news items referring to recreational activities that promote integration of the homeless through leisure, sports and the arts. In addition, there is a section that summarizes the research, the publications and the workshops about homelessness that took place in Spain during 2009, with special attention to the IVth Nocturnal Homeless Count in the city of Madrid.

In the ninth chapter, *Trends in exclusion*, the authors shed a light on how much the demand for the services addressed at the homeless has increased because of the global financial crisis. This section points to the oversaturation of the homeless shelters and the growing demand for help from entire families. The shelters' capacity is limited because of restrictions partly on behalf of the public administration and partly on behalf of the organizations working with the homeless.

The chapter on *National and International News* includes a series of general information and is noteworthy for its scope and impact. This chapter highlights a number of actions carried out by voluntary associations in Spain on the one hand and international news on the other hand. The book ends with a synthesis, general conclu-

sions and an appendix that informs the reader where to find the news items that have been analyzed.

To conclude, I believe this book is a useful tool for those engaged with homelessness in a professional, voluntary or academic way, and for those who are simply interested in knowing the state of the phenomenon in Spain. The book, however, is overly descriptive and lacks a more theoretical analysis and conclusions. Nevertheless, the systematic overview of news items gives some insight into the way the Spanish press deals with the issue of homelessness.

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