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## 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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Canada – we examine the way that media discourse can contribute to the stigmatisation and regulation of rooming houses,<sup>1</sup> defined as houses or sometimes hotels with multiple rooms rented singly and inexpensively to low-income tenants, without private bathroom and/or kitchen facilities. The analysis illustrates the way that news stories frame rooming houses as dangerous spaces housing vulnerable people requiring state intervention.

Often characterised by poor and unstable housing conditions, rooming houses typically cater to disadvantaged persons, such as low-income tenants who may have disabilities, addictions, or other health problems (Hwang, Wilkins, Tjepkema, O'Campo, & Dunn, 2009). Such accommodations may also house college students seeking affordable units (Allinson, 2006; Sage, Smith, & Hubbard, 2012). By contrast with contemporary conditions, where rooming houses are relatively rare and disdained, in the early twentieth century, such accommodations provided respectable shelter for single persons in industrial cities (Breckinridge & Abbott, 1910; Burgess, 1928; Harris, 1992). As the urban middle class grew and increasingly pursued home ownership, rooming houses became stigmatised and marginalised (Campsie, 1994; Miron, 1993; Schwartz, 2015). As North American governments built social housing in the decades after the World War II, other affordable housing options such as rooming houses diminished (Campsie, 1994). Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, as the production of social housing declined, cities have faced a crisis of housing affordability for the most disadvantaged (Antolin, 1986; Kaufman & Distasio, 2014). Combined with enhanced municipal bylaw enforcement that closes non-compliant operations, processes of gentrification and displacement seriously threaten the viability of the rooming housing option in many cities (Abu-Lughod, 1994; Slater, 2004, 2006). Rooming houses have few vocal supporters (Campsie, 1994); moreover, communities and local regulators often perceive them as an existential threat, both to their occupants and to the neighbourhoods they inhabit.

Goffman (1968) suggested that stigma – whether of housing, health status, or space – is socially constructed and produced through interaction and discourse. Collective activities that involve residents, media, and the state in social and regulatory processes that reproduce inequality are common to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of disadvantaged populations and their housing options (Goffman, 1974; Wacquant, 2016). The stigmatisation of public housing has been well documented. For example, Hastings (2004) found that people's explanations of issues in social housing estates in Britain often employed pathologised discourse about the problems of the residents and the housing forms as unhealthy, disadvantaged, and dangerous. August (2014) suggested that rhetoric about isolation and disorganisation underpinned arguments for redeveloping social housing in Toronto. News coverage contributed to stigmatisation of public housing in Glasgow (Kearns, Kearns, &

Lawson, 2013) and Limerick (Devereux, Haynes, & Power, 2011) through the preponderance of negative stories and sensational language. As Tighe's (2010) review demonstrated, public opposition reinforced by negative press coverage presents a significant obstacle to providing affordable housing.

Processes that involve sources, journalists, and audiences (Pan & Kosicki, 1993) help the media to shape consensus and political dialogue as they turn to authorities such as police, elected officials, and government staff for sources (Shaw & Martin, 1992). As Shaw and Martin (1992, p. 903) noted, 'The press does not tell us what to believe, but does suggest what we collectively may agree to discuss and perhaps act on'. The media are not neutral in how they present or frame stories (Fowler, 1991). Entman (1993, p. 52) explained: 'Framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described' [original emphases]. By its nature, the media has a built-in bias for 'bad news' events that capture readers' attention and suit the periodicity of daily publications (Fowler, 1991; MacLean, 1981).

In the same way that the mass media and public discourse stigmatise social housing, negative framing can affect other forms of low-cost housing and its occupants. Half-way houses for offenders frequently encounter community resistance and planning efforts to restrict their numbers and locations (Lauber, 1995). Neighbours often resist group homes for psychiatric survivors (Finkler & Grant, 2011), perhaps because media reports frequently link those living with mental illness to crime, violence, transience, and dependency (Klin & Lemish, 2008; Philo et al., 1994; Sieff, 2003). Similarly, the emergence of homeless encampments drew attention to the marginalisation of homeless shelters (Herring, 2014). Rather than focusing on systemic causes of homelessness, the media frequently resort to individual stories of substance abuse and victimhood that portray the homeless as passive, sick, or deviant (Calder, Richter, Burns, & Mao, 2011; Liu & Blomley, 2013). Several studies showed that the media stereotyped the poor as living with dysfunction, violence, and other moral failings (Bullock, Fraser Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Iyengar, 1990). In a chilling study of the impact of media approaches, Rose and Baumgartner (2013) demonstrated the direct effect of negative media framing on US poverty policy: bad press reduced spending on programmes for the poor. Media framing of issues matters because it influences public policy and shapes possible solutions (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Weaver & Elliott, 1985). Thus, public policies and planning regulations to manage rooming houses develop and are implemented in a social context framed in part by discourses appearing in local media.

This paper explores the media treatment of rooming houses in Halifax, with findings that offer broader lessons on the cultural treatment of maligned

affordable housing options. We began the media scan as part of a mixed-methods research programme trying to document the number and location of rooming houses in the city (Lee, Grant, & Ramos, 2017). Housing options for low-income single persons under the age of 55 who are ineligible for social housing were in short supply (SHS, 2015); central neighbourhoods were gentrifying (Prouse, Grant, Radice, Ramos, & Shakotko, 2014); and media reports suggested that the number of rooming houses was falling (Bousquet, 2013). We intended to update an earlier inventory of rooming houses in Halifax (Charlebois, Anderson, Connolly, & Mulder, 1996), and subsequently interview local experts to understand factors threatening supply (Lee et al., 2017; Derksen, 2016). Despite a bylaw in place since 2003, city officials had limited data available on licensed rooming houses, and virtually nothing on unlicensed ones. Lee et al. (2017) identified two categories of Halifax rooming houses: regular ones meet the criteria of the city's bylaw and may or may not be licensed; 'quasi-rooming houses' are designed in a way to avoid meeting some elements of the bylaw definition (usually the requirement that individually-rented rooms be equipped with keyed locks). Through an intensive search of many sources (including media reports, city directories, and housing advertisements), we ultimately identified 208 rooming houses that operated in Halifax at some point between 1995 and 2015, of which fewer than 20 held licenses under the municipal bylaw in 2015 (Lee et al., 2017). Many rooming houses identified had closed over the two decades.

By systematically analysing news stories we seek to understand the social context within which issues related to rooming houses are discussed and strategies for intervention initiated. Here we focus on describing the picture of rooming houses presented through those stories. Media frame public interventions and policy around rooming houses in ways that affect local planning practice. Given its police powers, local government has mechanisms to transform newsworthy social problems associated with poverty into 'illegal' uses that the state can regulate. Our key questions here are two-fold: How do local media portray rooming houses and the people associated with them? How do they socially construct the case for municipal regulation?

In the next section, we briefly review the rooming house as an affordable housing option to consider factors that may threaten its viability and enforce its marginalisation. We then present evidence of the way that the popular press reported on rooming houses in Halifax. Our analysis suggests that media portray rooming houses not as homes but rather as risky structures: dangerous, dilapidated, transitional, and dehumanising sites of crime and distress occupied by troubled and marginalised residents marked by difference. The public discourse around rooming houses constructs them as a unique social and spatial problem necessitating regulation and enforcement. As we try to understand the context within which regulating rooming houses became a planning function, we interpret the planning context as involving

interaction among many actors: residents, journalists, planning staff, councillors. The media provide an important source of communication: setting agendas and framing arguments. Over the two decades discussed here, planning became the intervener designated to protect residents of rooming houses from exploitative landlords or dangerous co-occupants, and to safeguard the neighbourhoods the buildings inhabit.

### Rooming houses as an affordable housing option

As industrial cities grew during the nineteenth century, builders struggled to keep up with the demand for accommodations, and the boarding house – often operated by widows trying to make ends meet by providing tenants with rooms and meals – became common (Faflik, 2008; Harris, 1992). In Manhattan, most of the population boarded at mid-century, although the nineteenth century-cartoonist Thomas Butler Gunn – himself a lodger – wrote ‘a Boarding-House is, emphatically, NOT a home’ (Faflik, 2008, p. xxiii). By the early-twentieth century, social critics increasingly voiced concerns about overcrowding and poor housing conditions for families in rooming houses, though some called such structures suitable for single persons (Breckinridge & Abbott, 1910). Developing its concentric zone theory of urban development during the 1920s, the Chicago school of sociology identified rooming houses as common in the impoverished transition zone in the inner city (Burgess, 1928). Discussing types of urban slums, Whyte (1943, pp. 36–37) wrote, ‘...we have the rooming house district which has been well described... Since members of the rooming house population have very little contact with one another, it is accurate to say that such a district is largely lacking in social organization’. With improved pension benefits for widows and better incomes for the working classes by mid-twentieth century, the management model and demand for single-room occupancies changed. Over time, the rooming house transitioned from a reasonably respectable housing option for everyone to being labelled a slum residence for the most disadvantaged and socially isolated.

By late-twentieth century, rooming houses provided accommodations of last resort to poor individuals (Campsie, 1994). A Halifax reporter ranked the option low on the housing spectrum: ‘homelessness is merely the bottom of a housing continuum, that ranges from shelter and rooming houses on the low end, through social housing and apartments, all the way up to high end condos’ (Bousquet, 2013, online). Critics frequently noted the shortcomings of rooming houses as home environments, since structures often proved crowded, run-down, unclean, with poor facilities and infrastructure and no privacy or security (Mifflin & Wilton, 2005). Many jurisdictions consequently developed regulations and bylaws to manage perceived risks including occupancy levels, fire, vermin, and sanitary conditions (CMHC, 2001; Freeman, 2013; Gordon & Lazarus, 1981). Whitzman and Slater (2006) argued that

planning policy explicitly tried to manage the growth of low-rent housing options to 'stabilise' some Toronto neighbourhoods. Over the last few decades, many cities vigorously enforced fire and safety standards and began to license rooming houses (Public Interest and City of Toronto, 2015). As Heather Smith (2003) found in Vancouver, however, municipal policy can have unintended consequences. Closing affordable units may reduce perceived risks in formerly 'edgy' areas, thus contributing to gentrification that displaces less affluent households (Skaburskis, 2010; Slater, 2004; Whitzman & Slater, 2006).

By the turn of the millennium the constituency for rooming houses was shifting: landlords increasingly renovated housing to accommodate university students in areas near post-secondary institutions (Sage et al., 2012; Smith & Holt, 2007). High concentrations of student rooming houses reinforced marginalisation in some areas (Sage et al., 2012), and led to concerns regarding 'student ghettos' or 'studentification' in some cities (Public Interest and City of Toronto, 2015; The Courier, 2012), including Halifax.

### The Halifax study

Halifax Regional Municipality (known as Halifax or HRM) is a mid-sized city of over 400,000 on Canada's Atlantic coast. In recent decades, the city became known for its lively music scene (Grant, Haggett, & Morton, 2009), and its universities attracted increasing numbers of students and researchers, bolstering the city's claim to be a 'smart city' (Grant & Kronstal, 2010). Although its growth rate trails that of larger Canadian cities, Halifax has experienced significant neighbourhood change, with gentrification and displacement in inner city districts (Prouse et al., 2014; Grant & Gregory, 2016). Over recent years, housing advocates became increasingly concerned about the loss of affordable options, including rooming houses (Bousquet, 2013; SHS Consulting, 2015).

To conduct the study, we examined local articles published in five print and online news media in Halifax between 1 January 1996 and 31 December 2015, to understand how local media framed issues related to rooming houses. We chose 1996, the year the last systematic inventory of rooming houses in Halifax was conducted, as our starting point. Over the period several sources provided local news. Halifax has a local service of the national public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), which provided online stories. The *Chronicle Herald* is one of Canada's oldest independent dailies. *The Daily News* published until 2004, and the free newspaper, *Metro Halifax*, began printing in 2008. *The Coast* published weekly. We collected all items that included the keyword 'rooming house' somewhere in the text, using the Eureka.cc publication database. Periods of data availability varied, as some media had not contributed complete sets of articles to the database; in some cases, we could supplement availability through microfiche records. The search harvested 272 articles for the years 1996 through 2015: after removing duplicate content, we analysed 261 stories (Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1.** Data collected.

Media source	Code	Period available	Number of articles
CBC Nova Scotia	CBC	2007–2015	37
Chronicle-Herald	CH	1999–2015	175
Daily News	DN	1996–2004	41
Metro Halifax	Metro	2008–2015	18
The Coast (weekly)	Coast	1995–2015	1
Total			272 <sup>a</sup>

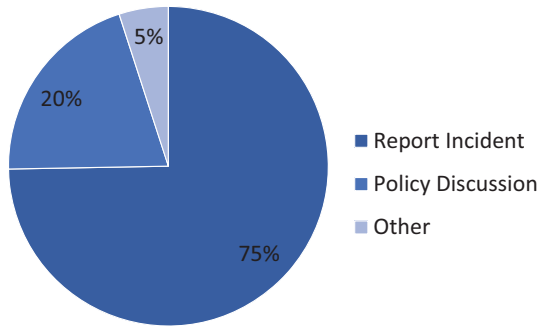
<sup>a</sup>After removing duplicate textual content, we analysed 261 stories.

We conducted qualitative content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004) to identify salient themes in the coverage. We did this by coding the *focus* of articles; analysing headlines, headers, and body of articles; and coding *tone*. These elements are commonly analysed in content analysis of texts (see Di Gregorio, Price, Saunders, & Brockhaus, 2012; Douglas Gould and Company, 2004). We coded focus into three categories: we looked at whether the article covered an event or incident such as a fire or crime at a location, considered housing policy (for instance regulation of rooming houses or licensing), or generally discussed other issues. We examined headlines of articles and the header to cross check the coding of focus, and to help pinpoint tone and identify broader themes discussed below. We classified three tones. Some stories had a negative tone, for instance, using derogatory words – such as ‘slum’, ‘derelict’, or ‘ghetto’ – to refer to a rooming house. Those that promoted rooming houses as a viable affordable housing option, for instance, were coded as having a ‘positive’ tone. When a story mentioned a rooming house without adjectives, without linking it to negative or positive outcomes, or by presenting balanced perspectives, we coded that as ‘neutral’. Based on focus, headlines and headers, and tone we probed further with thematic analysis of the overall article to examine how the media framed elements of the story, the actors involved, and problems or solutions identified (Derksen, 2016). We noted which actors were quoted to categorise them as housing advocates, municipal officials, landlords, tenants, neighbours, and community organisation representatives. We then examined how actors talked about rooming houses. Using an adaptive coding approach, we added and adjusted categories as we read and reread the articles. Following discourse analysis strategies, we identified sample text excerpts to illustrate key findings.

### The discourse around rooming houses

The words ‘rooming house’ often appeared as adjectives modifying a problematic event, such as fire, assault, or death. Figure 1 shows that approximately 75% of the stories reported on such incidents or trials related to them. Half the stories examined used the words ‘rooming house’ as an extra modifier, as in ‘Rooming house fire sparks melee’ (CBC, 10 July 2000). Building type

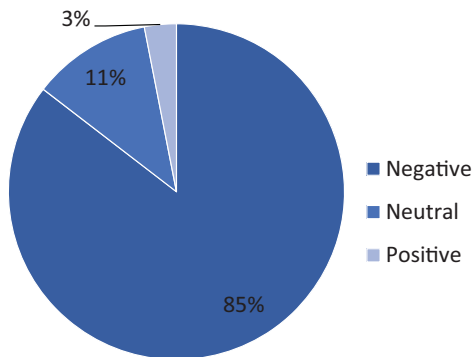




**Figure 1.** Main focus of articles.

commonly appears as a marker of discussions about fire: as in 'house fire', 'apartment fire', 'trailer fire'. The data show, though, that rooming house frequently appears in association with words rarely linked to other housing forms. For instance, while headlines and stories report on a 'notorious rooming house' or discuss a 'rooming house slaying', it is hard to imagine that a reporter would write about a 'house slaying'. About 20% of the stories located contained the word in the title (see [Table 2](#)), explicitly linking the housing type to community problems. Twenty per cent of the stories discussed policy or regulations affecting rooming houses.

As shown in [Figure 2](#), the tone of articles was overwhelmingly negative. Only nine stories had a predominantly positive tone, with sources quoted suggesting that well-managed rooming houses provided a viable affordable option. Thirty stories were neutral: for instance, one mentioned that a new development was rising on a site of a former rooming house, without further comment. About 85% of stories presented a negative tone, critical of rooming houses. Words linked with rooming houses in the stories included condemned, squalid, derelict, decrepit, unlicensed, rundown, substandard, eyesore, monster,



**Figure 2.** Dominant tone of articles.

**Table 2.** Sample headlines including ‘rooming house’ in the title.

Headline	Source	Date
Tough living for the poor: report slams rooming houses	Daily News	2 May 1996
A record of rooming-house deaths	Daily News	7 Dec. 1997
City closes rooming house where three men have died	Daily News	13 Feb. 1998
Rooming houses to stay empty: city scraps plan to force repair of six north-end buildings	Daily News	16 May 1999
Rooming-house death accidental – police	Chronicle-Herald	29 Oct. 1999
Rooming house lacked alarms: smoke detectors missing in two rooms in building damaged by fire	Chronicle-Herald	11 July 2000
Rooming house brawl seriously injures man	Chronicle-Herald	18 Nov. 2000
New rental rules could temporarily displace rooming-house tenants	Chronicle-Herald	21 Nov. 2001
Rooming house reform sought	Daily News	19 June 2001
Dwellings now must be warm, safe, dry: New bylaw singles out rooming houses in municipality	Chronicle-Herald	17 Dec. 2002
Rooming-house bylaw not misguided	Daily News	13 Jan. 2003
‘Crack house’ under probe: city departments investigating rooming house, site of 2 killings	Chronicle-Herald	17 Sep. 2004
Suspicious blaze destroys notorious rooming house	Daily News	8 Oct. 2004
Ousted rooming house residents shun shelters	Chronicle-Herald	16 Oct. 2004
Influx of rooming houses unwelcome	Chronicle Herald	8 Apr. 2005
Police charge man with murder in Dartmouth rooming-house slaying	CBC Nova Scotia	14 May 2009
Landlord who ran rooming house with 14 rooms fined \$18,500	Chronicle-Herald	12 May 2010
Oil leak forces out rooming house tenants	CBC Nova Scotia	28 Jan. 2011
Residents shiver on street during rooming-house fire	Daily News	7 Mar. 2011
Rooming house fire leaves tenants homeless	Metro Halifax	10 Mar. 2013
Rooming houses are disappearing in HRM	The Coast	28 Nov. 2013
Man to stand trial in rooming house death	Chronicle-Herald	25 Oct. 2014
Halifax called on to crack down on decrepit, unlicensed rooming houses	CBC Nova Scotia	23 May 2015

dilapidated, low-income, disgusting, controversial, seedy, illegal, deplorable, slum, blight, jungle, and overpriced. Multiple stories contained stock negative phrases such as not fit to live in, Cockroach Hotel, poorly maintained, crack house, drug house, student ghetto, slummy, transient feel, murder house, and scourge of the neighbourhood. Some properties earning the moniker ‘notorious’ appeared in dozens of stories in association with fires, assaults, murders, and evictions: one property was specifically mentioned 33 times. Coverage often cited critics disparaging the rooming house option as ‘not much better than homelessness’. The *Chronicle Herald* (13 October 2000)<sup>3</sup> quoted housing advocates describing rooming houses: ‘I don’t know if anybody in this room would call that a home. ... Though some street people technically have a place to sleep, whether in an abandoned building or a derelict rooming house, they should be considered homeless too’. Rooming houses were typically construed as inadequate shelter, with residents ‘staring down the barrel of homelessness’ (*Chronicle Herald* 11 February 2004). The *Daily News* (8 May 2007) quoted a neighbouring property owner alleging drug dealing from a property as saying, ‘There is nothing good about houses like that. They serve no function in our society’. Some stories implied that creating a rooming house would be a tragedy: a *Daily News* story (21 December 1997) noted, the once elegant ‘King

Edward Inn on Agricola Street has been *saved* from being turned into a rooming house' (emphasis added).

Although news coverage often reported on crime, fires, or murders occurring in rooming houses, coverage of residents generally proved sympathetic. In describing who lived in rooming houses, the media typically identified a category of resident that was poor, marginalised, and transient, with no choice of where to live and threatened by homelessness. Stories often pointed to concerns about substance abuse, mental illness, violence, and dependency. For instance, the *Chronicle Herald* (13 September 2004) suggested, 'The people who live in these rundown rooming houses are very vulnerable people, they're very poor individuals and they don't have the resources or the capacity or the understanding of how things work to make a call'. A *Daily News* op-ed described rooming houses as accommodating 'people of the lower-residential spectrum' (8 May 2007). A *Metro Halifax* story (16 June 2008) indicated that high rent and low shelter allowances were 'driving single men and women under 55 into rat-infested, bedbug-infested rooming houses... We're losing people every single day to homelessness'. Words such as 'vulnerable' appeared frequently, sometimes linked to calls for municipal action: for instance, CBC News (23 May 2015) reported, 'Many of the city's most vulnerable residents are living in rooming house-type dwellings, not licensed by the city and where conditions are unsafe, say housing advocates'.

In a few stories, reporters painted sympathetic yet tragic portraits of individual residents: what Iyengar (1990) called episodic framing, or documenting episodes in people's everyday lives. *Chronicle Herald* stories replete with bathos described one resident's 'shabby but tidy' home (13 September 2004), and another's 'dubious treasure ... found in someone else's garbage'. Three stories reported on individuals who formerly lived in rooming houses, but successfully moved on: 'I was down and out for awhile and I picked myself up', one said (*Chronicle Herald* 4 December 2004). Stories of empowered people living in single rooms appeared only in the context of reactions to evictions. The *Daily News* (13 October 2004) reported, 'As police went through the four rowhouses yesterday [to deliver eviction notices], some tenants reacted angrily to leaving their rooms for shelters when they have already paid October's rent. "No one's got the right to kick me out of my home," said resident [name omitted]. "It's the only home I've got."' A resident who 'has spent most of his life on the street or in low-income housing, said it makes him angry to see rooming houses closed and residents turned out without any place to stay' (*Daily News* 23 November 2004). Powerlessness in the face of elected officials, municipal staff, and landlords came through in the emotions residents expressed, which the media typically labelled 'anger'.

While reinforcing images of squalor and vilifying landlords as exploitative, on occasion stories challenged negative stereotypes of residents. For instance, the *Daily News* (10 January 2003) quoted a rooming house landlord:

[M]any people have misconceptions about rooming houses, because so many are in disrepair.

'They think the people that live there are a bunch of derelict human beings that society has either forgotten or would chose [sic] to forget, who live in squalid, cold, rodent-infested fire traps run by tyrannical, money-grubbing, heartless, non-caring landlords that would make Scrooge look like Mother Teresa – and that's just not true at all,' he said.

... [M]ost of his tenants work at minimum-wage jobs and can't afford to pay \$700 for a bachelor or one-bedroom apartment.

About 8% of news stories cast landlords as villains, sometimes describing them as greedy, exploitative, paternalistic, controlling, or 'unavailable for comment'. A journalist for the *Chronicle Herald* (13 September 2004) described threats from a landlord trying to avoid a story: 'If I see you, I'll break your neck. You understand?' Sometimes landlords were described as savvy business persons: 'Developers have exploited loopholes in city by-laws over the past three years to push the limits on housing aimed at students' (*Daily News* 13 September 2005). Only six articles used neutral or positive language – such as 'willing to cooperate with city officials' – to describe landlords.

The content and focus of stories changed through time. Around 2005, stories about rooming houses focussed on housing for students in upscale neighbourhoods near the universities began to appear in Halifax media. The *Chronicle Herald* (8 April 2005) led with a story titled 'Influx of rooming houses unwelcome'. Coverage reported neighbours' complaints of disorderly behaviour, poor management of garbage, and zoning infractions. A *Chronicle Herald* story (13 September 2005) quoted a local councillor, 'We've had troubles with homes being bought and transformed into monster student homes', while a resident noted, 'The houses around her Waterloo Street home have slowly been filling up with students, giving the area a transient feel'. Stories sometimes described university students as duped by landlords, but students were not portrayed as vulnerable in the same way as low-income residents. Stories suggested that neighbourhood residents' associations were working with local leaders to find policy and regulatory solutions to the new problem of what some officials called 'quasi-rooming houses'.

From 2005 on, stories sometimes gave voice to neighbours of rooming houses, especially those for university students. A *Chronicle Herald* story (8 April 2005) reported: 'A woman who lives near Dalhousie University says she's fast becoming frustrated with the number of illegal rooming houses springing up around her. 'We've lived here a long time and I'm getting resentful'. The neighbour worried about 'the impact when you go from an essentially owner-occupied, stable community residence to a rooming house dormitory'. The same story quoted a local councillor: 'It can become like

Animal House at times'. The discourse contrasted the stability and ownership of neighbours, who were experiencing despair and fear, with the transience and bad behaviour of rooming house occupants.

Elected officials and government staff appeared as sources in approximately 60% of news stories, giving them central roles in framing the discourse. Several stories quoted municipal council members suggesting that concerns about risk motivated regulatory action. The *Chronicle Herald* (21 November 2001) quoted one: 'I have no fear of closing down rooming houses ...Some people do, because they say it displaces these people. I would rather displace them than have them burn up in a fire'. Another appeared in the *Daily News* (27 October 2004): 'They're human beings, they've been dumped by society, they've been forgotten... But, as a councillor, I can't in all good consciousness [sic] have people die in these houses because I didn't do my job to get them out'. While some planners echoed such sentiments, others worried: 'But some tenants will possibly be "displaced" if city inspectors decide the building in which they're living is not up to snuff, [the planner] said' (*Chronicle Herald* 8 January 2003); one suggested that 'displacing people is the last resort' (*Chronicle Herald* 19 September 2005). Officials' statements emphasised responsibility with caution.

In stories that dealt with the city's role in addressing rooming house issues, media coverage typically portrayed the rooming house as a special category of community problem in which the state should intervene. In 1996, a study on rooming house conditions drew considerable attention to the need for regulation. The *Daily News* reported (2 May 1996), 'Metro Non-Profit Housing wants the new Halifax regional government to license and regulate the rooming houses on the Halifax side of the harbour to eliminate the worst of the problems'. Between 1996 and 2001, 13 stories mentioned policy on rooming houses, including the desire for municipal regulation: 'Inspectors yearn to go after dilapidated rooming houses, but often their hands are tied' (*Daily News* 8 December 1997). Concern about conditions led local officials to seek greater regulatory powers: *The Daily News* reported (17 February 1998),

Halifax Regional Municipality should move toward adopting a new rooming-house bylaw, even though it can't enforce it yet, a report from city staff said yesterday. The city has been waiting since 1996 for the province to pass legislation that would give it the power to regulate rooming houses.

Several stories documented municipal efforts to enforce health, safety, and fire standards in rooming houses. When city staff – fearing demolition – rescinded an order for landlords to repair six derelict rooming houses in the North End, the *Daily News* (16 May 1999) reported that a provincial politician said, 'If the city has gone as far as it can go, then it really needs to look at changing its bylaws and its minimum standards – raising the benchmark a little bit'. A story two years later acknowledged that regulation could affect

housing supply: the *Daily News* asked (14 October 2001), 'Could tenants be victims in slumlord crackdown?' Although the proposed new bylaw might 'force owners of boarding houses to keep their buildings in good shape and maintain habitable temperatures inside them' (*Daily News* 14 October 2001), staff warned that owners could close rooming houses instead of bringing them up to code, with evictions to result.

A cluster of 28 stories on regulation appeared between 2001 and 2005, as the city developed and implemented a bylaw. Discussions about regulation of rooming houses revealed tensions between the desire to improve living standards and reduce nuisances associated with rooming houses and fears that such actions could displace vulnerable people. A headline in the *Chronicle Herald* (8 January 2003) read, 'Anti-slum bylaw may leave more homeless'. After the city enacted a residential tenancy bylaw in 2003 to enable licensing of rooming houses, news stories increasingly labelled unlicensed structures as 'illegal' and used adjectives such as 'slum'. Critiques of municipal regulation multiplied with enforcement. A *Daily News* editorial (24 November 2004) opined:

When does the cure become worse than the disease? How about when the roof over your head is replaced by open sky, and the floor under your feet becomes the cold concrete of a sidewalk?

That's what happens when municipal building codes and bylaws, which are intended to cure the disease of substandard housing, force tenants into homelessness [sic]. ...

Rooming houses can best be described as the orphans of the family of residential alternatives. They rank above homeless shelters, but below everything else, including public housing. Their tenants often pay high rents for sparse accommodations, and the owners of the buildings are stereotyped as 'slumlords.' ...

... Regulations that create homelessness need to be re-evaluated, and changed.

News coverage of municipal efforts to enforce standards on rooming houses revealed ideological divides among political leaders, staff, and housing activists. In a *Chronicle Herald* story (8 January 2003), a planner responding to worries about rooming house evictions said 'It is not our intention to increase homelessness', but advised that the city will remove residents if serious health or safety risks are identified, and will help find them emergency shelter. In 2004, bylaw officers closed three rooming houses, leaving residents scrambling for shelter. A *Chronicle Herald* headline (22 September 2004) read: 'Homeless tenant says city broke its promise' as tenants could not find beds in shelters for several nights. Anti-poverty activists protested at council, noting that 'Seven more rooming houses are slated to be condemned because of this bylaw' (*Chronicle Herald* 27 October 2004). The *Daily News*

(23 November 2004) illuminated divergent views among city staff: 'City fire and bylaw officers shouldn't be so quick to close run-down rooming houses, if it results in tenants being turned into the streets, says Halifax Regional Municipality's senior planning policy analyst'.

In April 2005, news stories began to focus on regulating rooming houses for students in low-density neighbourhoods around the universities: four stories on the topic appeared that year. Planning staff suggested limiting the number of bedrooms permitted in 'single-family zones' so that homes could not be sub-divided into rooming houses (*Chronicle Herald* 8 April 2005). The *Daily News* (13 September 2005) noted that 'Developers have exploited loopholes in city by-laws over the past three years to push the limits on housing aimed at students'. It said that 'The city has taken the first step toward reining in a boom in "quasi-rooming houses" that threaten to ruin some of Halifax's toniest neighbourhoods'. Although planning staff raised concerns about the unique measures and a councillor worried about a court challenge, council approved tighter controls on the number of bedrooms permitted (maximum five) and limits on square footage (to prevent monster homes). A councillor was quoted: 'To me, this amendment is to protect neighbourhoods' (*Chronicle Herald* 13 September 2005). Stories in 2010 and 2013 reported on landlords fined under the policy. Stories on regulating rooming houses appeared in pulses as issues developed and city staff responded. Between 2006 and 2014 several years had no stories on regulating rooming houses; the largest number appeared in 2013 with three stories. Then in 2015, six stories appeared as council considered bylaw revisions. In 2015, a CBC Halifax investigation of rooming houses catering to international students drew attention to staff concerns related to managing the residential tenancies bylaw. CBC (20 May 2015) reported, 'Halifax's manager of building standards admits there's confusion about what a rooming house is so the city is coming up with a new definition to help make sure tenants are warm, dry and safe'. A story the next day continued (CBC 21 May 2015), 'A CBC News investigation has found numerous examples of buildings that even police and fire services call rooming houses, but which don't show up on the city's list of licensed properties'. On 23 May 2015 CBC quoted a housing advocate: 'Halifax students also fall prey to landlords who rent out space [sic] unsafe, unlicensed rooming houses'. The same worker worried about crowding and safety, noting 'consistent concerns with many of the city's unregistered, defacto [sic] rooming houses'. Discussing critiques of rooming houses, CBC noted (23 May 2015), 'The advocates say they'd like to see a revival of safe rooming houses in the city. They point out this was traditionally a respected form of housing, useful for single people who want a private room and shared amenities'. In the context of a dominant discourse that portrayed rooming houses as dangerous and unwanted, and where housing choices were diminishing rapidly, housing advocates

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).

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