

DISPLACING THE DREAM

A Report on Bay Area Newspaper Coverage of Development and Gentrification

Brought to you by the Youth Media Council





Displacing the Dream: An Introduction

The world of news media can be a confusing place. Studies have repeatedly shown that public policy often follows the agenda set by the press.⁷ Given its profound influence on how we vote, think and understand our world, in an ideal world the role of the news media would be to shine light where there is none, expose inequity, amplify grassroots victories, and tell the stories of our communities from as many angles as there are voices. However, news media in the U.S. has for decades been increasingly owned and controlled by multibillion-dollar corporations, and the coverage often reflects the challenge posed when one corporation attempts to hold another to account through reporting. Whether intentional or by default, the stories that result from an overwhelmingly corporate-owned

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media tend to give voice to those in power, while those who struggle at the margins remain voiceless, creating a double-bind—serious danger combined with a lack of opportunity—that communities challenged by corporate control cannot afford to ignore.

The last decade of corporate control of our print media and public airwaves has been matched, if not surpassed, by the corporate control of other types of public space. From housing to parks and schools, urban communities face an unprecedented level of corporate-controlled development.⁸ The result has been mass displacement of poor and working-class people, disappearance of living-wage jobs, closure of public schools, and environmental degradation. This is most obvious in the southern gulf coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but the disaster-for-profit development currently under

way in New Orleans is just the most extreme manifestation of an underreported trend occurring throughout the United States: the overdevelopment of poor and working-class urban communities by predatory corporate developers.

In the Bay Area, the displacement of communities caused by corporate development poses a threat to the lives of thousands of residents, particularly black and immigrant people of color from poor or working-class neighborhoods. By examining the treatment of this issue in more than 300 stories from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Oakland Tribune*, and the *San Jose Mercury News*, *Displacing the Dream* takes a deep look at how this story is being covered, whose voices are heard loudest in coverage, and how key elements of the issue are framed. While focused on the Bay Area, the report also takes a brief comparative look at how race and racism is framed in coverage of similar issues in other areas during the same time period.

In the final section, *Displacing the Dream* makes recommendations to reporters about how to give this complex story the context it deserves, and offers media strategy ideas to organizers working to confront gentrification, displacement, and corporate development. Conducted in collaboration with dozens of local organizers, this analysis is intended to support campaigns for community-driven solutions to the problems posed by the lack of affordable housing, adequate education, and living-wage

jobs; the criminalization and over-incarceration of people of color; and the toxic environments in which many are forced to live. These strategies also have the potential to deepen relationships between journalists and the leaders who dedicate their lives to healthy community growth.

Sometimes there are inspired stories that stand out from the rest. These are our north stars. These stories and the journalists who write them show us what it might look like to have a public conversation about corporate development and gentrification that includes the voices, perspectives, and experiences of displaced residents and their advocates. *Displacing the Dream* seeks to highlight these stories and honor these journalists, for their work in an environment that increasingly serves the corporate bottom line rather than justice or truth. And yet these reporters shout it out, tell our stories, hand over the mike so we may speak for ourselves. And speak we do: As spokespeople in news stories, poets, journalists, bloggers, and graffiti artists, we create the media and cultural environment necessary for structural social change.

The Youth Media Council (YMC) was founded to help social justice activists create a new public narrative about race, age, public power, and transformation. YMC builds the power of grassroots movements and historically disenfranchised communities to influence public debate and media policy in the service of justice. Launched in 2001 to confront racism and anti-

youth bias in the media, YMC officially became a member-driven media strategy and action center in 2002. We have dedicated the last five years to using and transforming media to create a collaborative movement for racial justice and youth rights.

After more than six months of collective planning, participatory research, media monitoring, community analysis, and staff writing, the Youth Media Council is proud to present *Displacing the Dream*, an analysis of Bay Area coverage of development and displacement. As corporate giants exert more and more control over housing, jobs, and the environment, we hope this report will help spawn a new story about the power of the people—‘cause the power of the people don’t stop.



Youth Media Council



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2007 the Youth Media Council, along with other allied organizations that could no longer afford the skyrocketing rent, was nearly forced to relocate from our office space in central downtown Oakland. The reason? A New York developer had bought our office building and wanted to keep pace with the rising market rates of the new luxury condos and offices now blanketing the area. Just a month earlier, the *Oakland Tribune* moved out of its longtime headquarters in the historic downtown Tribune Tower building and into an office near the Oakland Coliseum. Why? MediaNews group had bought the *Tribune's* parent company and wanted to cut costs by consolidating its regional staff.⁹

These are just two examples of the market forces affecting organizations and communities throughout the Bay Area as they try to improve their jobs, schools and neighborhoods. In *Displacing the Dream*, we answer crucial



questions about framing the pressing issues of gentrification and development: How are opinion-leading newspapers covering the topic? What are the strengths and weaknesses of current coverage? What are the challenges and opportunities for both journalists and organizers who want to improve coverage in a consolidated news environment?

We analyzed coverage of housing, gentrification, and development in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Oakland Tribune*, and *San Jose Mercury* news from February 1, 2007, to April 30, 2007. Using a participatory process that involved our members, organizing groups, and research and policy allies, we applied a double-blind coding process and collective analysis of data to generate these key findings:

Primary Problems:

- Housing market issues such as subprime lending and the stagnation of the market were the primary problems raised in coverage; displacement and gentrification were not portrayed as problems.

Primary Solutions:

- Corporate-driven solutions, including market-rate housing and luxury retail development, overshadowed government and community driven solutions such as expanded affordable housing and improved social services.

Whose Voices Are Heard:

- The voices of government officials, corporate spokespeople, and other traditional experts dominated over those of community advocates and organizers at a rate of 6 to 1.
- Residents appeared in coverage primarily as “scene-setters” who described neighborhood conditions; they rarely appeared as experts who provide analysis or suggest solutions.

What’s Missing:

- Discussion of race and racism was nearly absent from coverage, despite the Bay Area’s racial diversity and the disproportionate impact of development on communities of color.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We expected this study to analyze the details of how displacement is discussed in coverage of urban development. Instead, we found almost no stories about displacement and an abundance of stories about market trends and corporate-driven development that detailed financial figures but ignored impacts on local neighborhoods and communities. It is clear from the results of this report that there is a rich terrain of stories left untold.

Journalists and community organizers alike have both the responsibility and the urgent opportunity to work together to improve local coverage of housing, development and gentrification. Local coverage can begin to reflect the realities of urban displacement and struggles for community control in the Bay Area by:

- centering community perspectives and voices
- highlighting the harmful effects of corporate development
- tracking disproportionate impacts on communities of color
- exploring community—and public-sector-driven solutions to urban development issues.

Our local newspapers face the same market forces that our communities do. With improved stories and an expanded public dialogue on gentrification, displacement and corporate development, together we can put what belongs to the public back into their hands. It begins with a story: Ours.



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