

Accounts from the Tales of Endurance Project

Introduction

I have wanted to work within the contexts of homelessness for a very long time now. I grew up constantly traveling to cities, in particular Boston, Hartford and Providence. It seemed like no matter where I went, there was a homeless man or woman around me on some street corner or alleyway. My initial response was to feel sorry for them, and for some people that is enough, however I knew I wanted to do something about this problem. It wasn't until an encounter I had my sophomore year in college that I experienced another side to homelessness. I was sitting outside Penn Station in New York City when I noticed a homeless man sitting on a bench. He asked me to come over and talk to him. Of course my initial reaction was I was fear, but at the same time I realized he wasn't asking me for anything except my attention. We must have spent half an hour just talking about life, the city, where I was from and what I was doing there and I asked similar questions about his life. By the time I had to get up to catch my train, I had come to an important realization. Establishing communication with the homeless is as substantial to well-being as offering food or money. The human condition depends on communication in order to survive. More importantly, that many homeless people are approachable.

Within New York City and throughout the world, homelessness is a serious issue of human distress. According to a study conducted in 1988, there are as many as 3 million homeless within the United states, with an annual increase of 28%. Additionally, it is safe to assume that roughly 50% of these homeless face serious mental illness (Axelson, 1988). According to one study, depression is the most common ailment facing the homeless today. When depressed, cop-

ing methods that are inherent to humans become challenged, which is why several contemplate suicide. In addition to depression, there are several other factors which contribute to their troubled and unstable conditions. Homeless populations experience several life crises which occur around the same time whether it be the death of loved ones, drug abuse or family rejection (Gorry, 1990).

In my own encounters with the homeless, I have witnessed the amount of avoidance they experience. Many feel scared or nervous in approaching the homeless while others could careless and would not like to acknowledge their existence. According to the journal "Homelessness and Mental Illness in New York City," people assume the homeless to be dangerous individuals who are deviant and will do anything for survival at first glance (Hopper, 1988). What such people fail to realize in their assumptions however is the fact that the experiences that shape the lives of the homeless are not so far from those that could happen at any day within their own lives. Therefore, the primary issue that I am looking to address is the lack of attention and understanding the homeless receive from the outside world.

All too often, we find ourselves in the presence of the homeless, without experiencing any sort of an intimate social interaction. The hard truth about these encounters is that they, unlike many other daily social interactions, tend to be very evasive and cold. What this project is designed to do is provide an audience of viewers an alternate way of understanding the homeless, one that involves engaging storytelling in an on-line environment that could be more comfortable than an initial street encounter. I emphasize that this technique, which appears impersonal and distant, acts as a stable foundation to which the eventual processes of physically assisting them and engaging in face to face interactions can follow. The various tools that my project utilizes

include digital audio and video recording along with the incorporation of a blog where people can voice their own conclusions about the interviews I conduct. The blog will also function as a place to begin to generate an audience for my interviews.

Precedents

I began by researching prior methods of conversing with the homeless to try and get a feel for how I would carry out my own interviewing processes. I also wanted to make sure I understood the kinds of communicative problems the homeless have been facing as well to come up with how a social network could provide a stepping stone towards a better understanding of their situations.

I discovered that the majority of homeless social interactions when talking about personal matters occur more often within a clinical environment and that this approach is flawed in several ways. For example, there has been psychiatrists' inability to relate to the homeless condition which creates a very fragile and unfriendly relationship (Gory, 1990). Another issue studies have shown is that because of the emotional disconnect that psychiatrists and social workers have with the homeless, many homeless people avoid the shelters and psychiatric facilities altogether. A similar distaste is apparent in most homeless reactions to other homeless. They see each other as insensitive and untrustworthy for the most part. All of them are working on the basic primal instincts of survival, which leads to stealing or fighting one another in the streets and shelters to stay alive. Shelters further encourage this activity, as hundreds of independent-minded homeless gather together in close quarters(Lafuente, 1995).

The other issue that I needed to was how would my project be different, and better for homeless social encounters. What were the implications of homeless material on the internet and more specifically social networks and how it could positively contribute to the situation. I found that the exposure that online social networks can offer to social problems is the most vital resource. There are thousands of issues that are addressed on the internet everyday, each bearing its own significance to the world. Social networking can offer important information that tends to be overlooked and unknown by other media sources such as TV and newspaper. People become allowed to step out of “popular news” that a source like the associated press offers and into a world of information and connection that pertains to their own interests. If ever there was a comfortable place to begin understanding the homeless community, it would be on-line.



Homelessness in New York City (Part 1)

★★★★☆

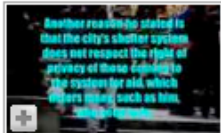
I made this documentary for health class in January 2005. It's not very good....**homelessness homeless people nyc new york city manhattan** documentary public awareness

From: [brothermage](#)
Views: 3,171
Added: 1 year ago

Tags: [homelessness](#) [homeless](#) [people](#) [nyc](#) [new york city](#) [manhattan](#) [documentary](#) [public awareness](#)

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Time: **05:43**



Homelessness in New York City (Part 2)

★★★★☆

I made this documentary for health class in January 2005. It's not very good....**homelessness homeless people nyc new york city manhattan** documentary public awareness

From: [brothermage](#)
Views: 947
Added: 1 year ago

Tags: [homelessness](#) [homeless](#) [people](#) [nyc](#) [new york city](#) [manhattan](#) [documentary](#) [public awareness](#)



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Time: **06:56**

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2teacv4W7Iv>)

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfRaIS3vVMM>)

You-Tube has a wide variety of digital videos featuring footage of the homeless. One such video is called “Homelessness in New York City.” The video itself is about five minutes in length and contains interviews of various homeless explaining their dislikes with public policy as well as commentary on the quality of shelters available in the city.

	A Day In The Life of A Homeless Man - Part 2 A documentary 2 friends and I made depicting the life of a homeless man in the streets of San Francisco. Part 1 - http://youtube . Tags: homeless documentary san francisco Time: 07:49	★★★★★ From: lnknptheory Views: 1,961 Added: 1 year ago More in People & Blogs
<hr/>		
	A Day In The Life of A Homeless Man - Part 1 A documentary 2 friends and I made depicting the life of a homeless man in the streets of San Francisco. Part 2 - http://youtube . Tags: homeless documentary san francisco Time: 06:29	★★★★★ From: lnknptheory Views: 2,847 Added: 1 year ago More in People & Blogs

Another You-Tube piece called “A day in the life of a homeless man- Part 1 and 2” is a hand held video documentary about the day in the life of a homeless man in San Francisco. The production on this piece was very good, with a music track, subtitles and multiple angles of footage (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPWOOGxOxDJI>) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXwiMQGVsVY>). It is also a look into how hostile and aggressive homeless can be to one another.

Surprisingly, this leads to the most popular and widely distributed videos of the homeless on You-Tube which are regarded as purely entertainment. The “Bum Fights” series is based on taking videos of the homeless being taken advantage of with pranks or pitting them against one another. Even though this video series is mocking the homeless community in an extremely distasteful manner, several of their installments has upwards of 300,000 views on You-Tube, so in the sense of distribution, this is unfortunately successful.



Bum Fights

BUM FIGHTS!!!...stupid funny retarded shit



From: [hendrix910](#)

Views: 531,265

Added: 8 months ago

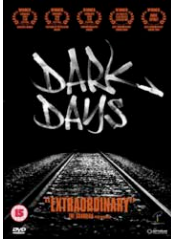
More in [Entertainment](#)

Tags: [stupid](#) [funny](#) [retarded](#) [shit](#)

Time: **02:20**

(http://www.youtube.com/verify_age?next_url=/watch%3Fv%3DnKh2RG0NaG0).

There are also several sites which contain video blogs and interviews with the homeless. One such site is Homelessnation.org. This is a website dedicated to getting the homeless of Canada heard and connected within their own social network of about 3000 people as well as the rest of the world. The content of these videos varies from actual homeless interviews to activists fighting for them (www.homelessnation.org). Another site is called the homeless family's blog at Blogspot. This is a narrative series of entries which talks about a family, homeless for two and a half years in Jacksonville, Florida and their road to recovery. The title bar of their website contains an important statement describing the reason for their site and others like it: "Can this site help end homelessness? No. What it can do is give a shard of hope for others, and a reminder to spin doctors to quit daydreaming (<http://homelessfamily.blogspot.com/>)." A final site I looked at in reference to my own project was the site called The Homeless Guy. He has been homeless on and off for 25 years and now writes a few entries a week in his blog, talking of his experiences, his family, and his hope and dreams for his life to come. (<http://thehomelessguy.wordpress.com/>)



Film through documentary is also an important source in the effort to generate attention and understanding. One documentary in particular was an important foundation into the idea of capturing interviews in order to generate a powerful and persuasive film about homeless life in New York City. “Dark Days” was a film directed by Marc Singer in 2000 which showed the dark and dangerous world of the homeless which was further enhanced by the tragic stories of the film’s “main characters.” More recently, a documentary film was created called “Easy Street” directed by Stephen Ashton and Andrew Lee. The film explores the lives of five homeless individuals over the course of a year in St. Petersburg, Florida. The film dissects the lives and problems which face the homeless through story-telling and live encounters (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1804843813911660722&pr=goog-sl>).

Findings

One of the hardest decisions for me to make with this project was on how the video interviews themselves would look. Being a design project, I initially wanted to be creative with them, changing exposure values or altering the colors to create a more interesting visual element. In thinking about the project further, I realized something that initially I had not addressed. I looked at this project as something that I created, but in actuality, this is a project made possible by the various homeless individuals that I interviewed. This was my project, however, these were their lives. The challenge then became to design a website and a series of videos which

would best reflect the conditions that they were facing in the most serious way as possible. I eventually went with the low-resolution, black and white feel. The hand-held approach I feel related nicely with the setting and appearances of the interviewed. Overall, I think the visual element came out very nicely.

After the first week of iterations, I was concerned at how people were receiving the interviews. The Word-press Blog as well as the You-tube website got very few hits in the initial stages of development. It seemed that I had over-estimated the distributive processes of the internet. There were additional methods I had to take in order to elicit an audience for this project. I was also worried about the content itself within the videos. So many of the popular videos available on the internet today are comical, which mine were not. They were upsetting to watch, which I understood, however I knew that within their content were factual, intriguing stories of strength which I felt could definitely create attention. I was also noticing that in my initial attempts at interviews, I was approaching homeless who were unwilling to talk to me, feeling that I would not understand them or that they were too upset and angry to go back and talk about the roots of their conditions. There were also those who I would approach that were too weak either mentally or physically to even talk to me. I decided I couldn't just try and interview anyone, I had to find a certain type of homeless person. One who was independent, hadn't lost the ability to be social, and who could clearly communicate a message about themselves as well as the implications of homelessness within New York City. After all, the quality of these interviews would decide the success or failure of the project itself.

In the second week of iterations, I made it a goal of mine to effectively promote the material and the website to an audience, through as many social networks as I knew about. These

networks included The Face-Book, My-Space, You-Tube, Gothamist, Technorati, creating a Swickie tag search object, and using Word-Press tag functions to generate traffic. Along with uploading another homeless interview to the blog, I also decided to add a purely observational piece of footage. I chose to record a homeless donation table on a bust Saturday in Union Square and document the amount of interaction it was receiving over the course of four minutes. I discovered it is difficult not to begin to take an activist stance when you listen to so many persuasive stories of struggle. I thought it would be beneficial to observe the other organizations fighting for the homeless as well as see user responses to this video approach. By the end of my second week on the project, my blog had gone from 10 hits during the first week, to 350 by the second. Promoting the site had begun to generate traffic to “TalesofEndurance.wordpress.com” in large numbers. The week of the 9th-15th of December generated an award for the project by You-Tube as the 93rd most popular nonprofit/activism video of the week.

Also important to the project was the comments and discussions left by the viewers about what they had seen. Their feedback was necessary to see if my video was really making a difference to people’s initial reactions of the homeless. Here are just some of the responses to the site:

That experience plus recently moving to the city and passing homeless EVERY day on my way to work makes this project extremely interesting, humbling, and uncomfortable. I say uncomfortable because it is honest. I am sure I am not alone when I say I do not know how to deal with homeless people. I know they are human. I know they need love, but how do you show it? Is giving them a dollar as you pass the answer? Anyways take a few minutes, listen to the stories, read the reflections, and take some time to think about it, I know I am going to be. Feel free to comment.

<http://talesofendurance.wordpress.com/>

Here is a link posted on someone else's blog for my site (www.robinsok.wordpress.com)

The following three comments were left to me on facebook (www.thefacebook.com):



Kyle Linn MacQueen (Simmons) wrote
at 7:37pm on December 14th, 2007

Pat – These videos are really insightful. I see many homeless people in Boston too and it is so sad how people walk right by them as if they are nothing. What you have proven is that they are real people facing real problems – problems/challenges that we may have faced at some time in our own life (i.e. depression, addiction). It especially bothered me that no one was willing to spare any change for the homeless – is it really that much to give? This is an excellent project and I appreciate you revealing these sad truths.

[Message](#) – [Report](#) – [Delete](#)



Paul Lennon Pedersen (New York, NY) wrote
at 12:39pm on December 14th, 2007

What's up with the 56 people who said maybe? Or worse, over 100 people saying no?!?! Jeez, come on, you guys don't even really have to GO anywhere, its ONLINE. At least SAY you're gonna look at it, even if you don't.

Oh yeah, I actually did look and its a really good idea. Way to go Pat.

[Message](#) – [Report](#) – [Delete](#)



Lilly Tobin wrote
at 9:29pm on December 15th, 2007

really nice work Pasquale. The stories are so rich. The shot on the street corner with the donations bin was heartwrenching. I hope you go further with this.

[Message](#) – [Report](#) – [Delete](#)

These two comments were left on the blog itself (www.talesofendurance.wordpress.com)

We pass by these people every day and have no idea what a glimpse into their lives would literally look like. This really is interesting work, Pasquale. I think so many people don't want to be bothered by an issue like this, but definitely is something that needs to be talked about. It is so easy to get wrapped up in your own life that you forget how many things you take for granted... like a hot shower. I went to San Diego not too long ago and I felt like the group of homeless people was astronomical. Great job, sweetheart. You really did a great job documenting this.

Comment by Dana December 10, 2007 @ 7:32 pm | [Edit This](#)

I think your project is amazing and I give you so much credit for going out there and doing something of this magnitude. I am definitely going to be passing this site along to other people to see.

Comment by Leah G December 11, 2007 @ 10:43 pm | [Edit This](#)

When I saw how the majority of the hits to my site came from the Facebook event I created for the project, I started to get worried. This was not a random user base at all, nor was it tested among activists and organizations. These viewers were all people I have known for a while or had recently come to know. The other potential problem I saw was that this project wasn't suppose to be about me at all, but rather emphasize the conditions of the homeless I interviewed. I advertised the project as my work, and was concerned that people would see it as just that because it was their friend's work. However, in looking back at this project now, and at the feedback I received, my friend's are exactly the type of audience I wanted to attract to this project. These were not people for the most part who have any contact with the homeless and face the same misconceptions towards them as others. I needed an audience who hadn't heard the voices of the homeless in these contexts before and that is what I got and possibly the reason why the project succeeded in conveying its message. As a result the five hundred people or so

who have seen my project so far have seen the homeless in another light, one which portrays the homeless as insightful and interesting individuals. Hopefully now, they will not be so quick to follow their initial judgments in passing them, and will be more willing to help.

Conclusion

If anything, this project has conveyed a more approachable side to the homeless that many people hadn't seen before. I feel it succeeded in its ability to creatively and accurately capture the stories of a few members of the homeless community around New York City. My approach did capture the personal, reflective elements of a documentary, but in creating installments of recordings I left the content of the blog more up to the user to view content pertaining to their own interests within the homeless realm. Especially after these interviews, I realize how important it is to challenge prior assumptions because without the experience, you will never know the truth about the situation.

There were a few additional elements I would like to add to increase the effectiveness of this project in further iterations. For example, increasing the numbers of the videos would be a way to improve the overall appeal of the site itself. The more videos that I put out there will only help increase traffic towards the blog. I was also thinking that the video interviews could be more episodic where actual content of the videos could be changed on a weekly basis. Another idea I have would be to go back to interview the same people. This technique it might draw in more people who prefer video diaries to see the progression or the digression of the individuals. One final approach I have thought about is if the traffic to the sites pick up, I could then begin to

add the elements which could increase further activism to helping the homeless out such as news and events pulled off or other sites.

The other important discovery through this process are the elements of homelessness which mirror lives of our own. The experiences of the homeless are those which are not far away from possible experiences which are or could effect our own lives, whether it be drug use or the loss of loved ones. This project is informative in several ways: The videos are visual guides into the limits that the human mind and condition can endure; They are also powerful proof that hope is present even in the most dire conditions. One incident in particular occurred when John, one of the homeless interviewed, told me that his homeless friend Scott had been telling him about how he didn't know why he should go on living. This coming from a man who lost his wife weeks earlier, his mother, and almost all of his possessions. Scott, who is experiencing the same depression, isolation and rejection as his friend, still is able to provide optimism and support. He in a sense was coaching Scott to stay alive, reminding him that things will in fact get better. There is more hope in mankind conveyed in these interviews than I have ever experienced in any other stories. How someone can inspire hope to someone when having none themselves is incredible, and further reason why these stories and one like it need to be told.

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