

**Place-Based Authenticity:
How Grassroots Actors in Urban Environments Gain Positive News Coverage**

by

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Authenticity is credited to the success of social movements. This project seeks to extend existing literatures on social movements and authenticity to see how places and spaces interact with grassroots actors and social movement organizations to produce authenticity. Using the local news media as a frame through which to view authenticity, I textually analyze 106 local news articles about a contentious urban development project in Pittsburgh, PA. I find that (1) the news media is receptive to place as an indicator of authenticity and (2) combining grassroots and institutional authenticity was important in creating the idea that a broader “community” was generally opposed to the development project. These findings could have important implications for how authenticity plays a role in community representation in urban politics, which, in turn, contributes to the broader justice-oriented discussion on how people and organizations contribute to discourses related to urban land use, development, and community preservation.

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1.0 Introduction

Appearing authentic is the process of appearing real, of having access to a perspective that cuts through opposing viewpoints and gets at a core idea. Authenticity is a process rather than a quality; it is actively constructed and continuously assessed over time. In the context of social movement organizations (SMOs), those with access to these perspectives are conferred a type of legitimacy and the privilege of representing of a given group. Social movement scholars have used authenticity as a guide to understand how social movements are assessed by a broad range of actors in the external social environment (Luna 2017; Walker and Stepick 2020). These environments however, are often conceptualized as purely social environments; in other words, as interactions between spatially detached groups. Here I seek to extend theories of authenticity to incorporate spatial dimensions, to see how places and spaces serve as mechanisms that interact with the social ecology to produce authenticity.

Authenticity intersects with the broader social ecology in the context of urban governance, defined as the political process of allocating resources in cities, and in social movements, defined as a “collective challenge, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow 2011:9). In particular, the concept of “community” is frequently discussed in urban governance and social movements because it signifies consent between those making decisions and those who are impacted by those decisions. In essence, decisions involving the allocation of resources become easier to make if they have community support. This community support needs to appear authentic (or real) to have this effect. How various actors, groups, and institutions wield community as a concept, therefore, have tangible and important implications for decision-making processes, particularly in the context of

urban development. Community, like authenticity, is a process and it is also actively constructed and continuously assessed over time. This paper examines how the processes of authenticity and community are constructed and assessed within a broader social ecosystem. In particular, how do space and place contribute to authentic valuations of community and how do civic action groups use these authentic valuations as a means of leveraging political opportunities?

To answer these questions, I use an urban development project in Pittsburgh, PA as an empirical case and I examine this case through the lens of the local news media, which are an important judge of authenticity (Sobieraj 2010; Walker and Stepick 2020). By examining how the media value various actors, organizations, and practices, throughout the case's lifecycle, we can see what factors contribute to authentic valuations in the news articles themselves. Through this process and using Walker and Stepick's (2020) conceptualization of grassroots and institutional authenticity, I find that residents and inhabitants of neighborhoods affected by the urban development project were framed as authentically grassroots by the news media. Importantly, they were valued as such because they were situated in place and time. Longtime residents could offer idealized versions of civil society by virtue of their experiences in their neighborhoods; however, on their own they lacked institutional authenticity, or the ability to represent a certain group in broader discourses. Although they could speak to how they represented their respective neighborhoods, they could not speak for a general community. Here, I find that civic action groups conferred their institutional authenticity to residents. The result is that residents were evaluated by the media as both grassroots (idealizing their neighborhoods/communities) and institutionally (representing their neighborhood) authentic. The combination of these factors likely produced an overall valuation that a general "community" was opposed to the development project (as opposed to a few residents in a neighborhood or even a single unified neighborhood opposition) and was

also an intentional tactic used by Pittsburghers for Public Transit, a civic action group. These findings could have important implications for how authenticity plays a role in community representation not only in the media, but in urban politics generally. This, in turn contributes to the broader justice-oriented discussion on how people and organizations contribute to discourses related to urban land use, development, and community preservation.

1.1 Contextual Background: The Mon-Oakland Connector

In February 2022, community members filed into a Pittsburgh charter school’s auditorium on a rainy Thursday evening. In one of his first community meetings as mayor, Ed Gainey announced an end to the Mon-Oakland Connector project, to which attendees erupted in applause and celebration. However, just a few years ago, residents doubted the possibility of this outcome. From 2015 to 2020, the Mon-Oakland Connector had considerable momentum – it was backed by various neighborhood organizations and civic action groups, the city government, the city’s two largest universities, and the city’s largest philanthropic organizations. It promised to connect an up-and-coming neighborhood development with an established economic center—where Pittsburgh’s flagship universities and hospitals are housed — by way of environmentally, non-auto centric means of mobility. All of this at the expense of the foundations who owned the site, who promised a shuttle service that would operate free of charge to residents. This all sounded very appealing to some, especially those who wanted to see an economic and technological revitalization in Pittsburgh. But ultimately the project was cancelled. How did the momentum behind this project grind to a halt?

The Mon-Oakland Connector sought to link two of Pittsburgh’s neighborhoods via a multimodal path that would support micro-transit shuttles, as well as bike and pedestrian traffic. One neighborhood, Oakland, is home to two of the city’s leading universities – the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). These institutions, among others, contributed to the economic development of the Oakland neighborhood, making it the third largest economic hub in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, after downtown Philadelphia and downtown Pittsburgh. The other neighborhood, Hazelwood, is a post-industrial community, which was home to the city’s last operating steel mill, the Hazelwood Coke Works, that closed in 1998. The Mon-Oakland Connector project was interlinked with the development of this site, which was purchased by a consortium of the city’s largest philanthropic organizations¹ in 2002– The Heinz Endowments, the Richard King Mellon Foundation, and the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation. The consortium, calling themselves Almono Limited Partnership (a portmanteau of Pittsburgh’s three rivers: the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio rivers) promised equitable and environmentally sustainable development driven by new technologies, particularly autonomous cars, robotics, and artificial intelligence. The 178-acre site, the largest piece of undeveloped land in the city, continued to sit mostly undeveloped two decades after it was acquired by Almono. The goal of the Mon-Oakland Connector was to spur growth in the apparently stagnating development by connecting it to the research universities in Oakland. Introduced in 2015, the Mon-Oakland Connector first appeared in an application by the Pittsburgh’s Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) in a bid to a state grant, but also to the U.S. Department of

¹ The McCune Foundation was originally involved in the purchase but sold its share to the Richard King Mellon Foundation in 2016

Transportation’s “Smart Cities” competition. However, the residents of affected neighborhoods were not informed about the project by city officials, but by reporting from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Residents, particularly in Four Mile Run (colloquially called “The Run”), were skeptical of the project, if not completely opposed. After losing Smart Cities grant to nearby Cincinnati, the project was mostly dormant until 2018. The Mon-Oakland Connector resurfaced, this time attached to the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority’s (PWSA) Four Mile Run Stormwater Mitigation Project. For residents of the Run, critically needed stormwater mitigation was tied up with an unpopular development project. It was around this time that Pittsburghers for Public Transit (PPT), a self-described “grassroots union of transit riders,” launched a campaign to organize residents in The Run, Hazelwood, and surrounding communities in opposition to the Mon-Oakland Connector. Sustained opposition against the project by residents and PPT members continued through 2022.

The broader social context is important to consider in this case as well. Deindustrialization and neoliberalization produced substantial population loss in the latter half of the twentieth century, and that trend continues two decades into the twenty-first century. These pressures incentivize the ‘retooling’ of Pittsburgh’s formerly industrial economy to that of new sources of growth – particularly ‘new-tech’ avenues as a means of creating a ‘smart city.’ The Hazelwood Green site centers this “techno-optimist” approach, as one activist described it (Transit Center 2021). More broadly, these shifts signal substantial changes in the processes associated with urban development, chiefly who is involved with decision making. The fact that Pittsburgh’s philanthropic organizations purchased the site of the former steel mill comforted some, claiming that the foundations have the best interests of the community in mind, but the introduction of philanthropic foundations into urban development (especially one of this scale) ultimately signals

a broader trend: the increasing prominence of philanthro-capitalism in urban governance, especially after the neoliberal shift. Philanthro-capitalism is by no means a new phenomenon (see Andrew Carnegie’s investment in Pittsburgh and beyond), but shifts in economic thinking at the upper levels of government had a noticeable effect on the organizational composition of urban governance; in particular, the prominence of non-profits and philanthropic organizations in decision-making increased substantially because neoliberal policies on the federal level reduced public funding streams for cities, which in turn made cities increasingly dependent on private and philanthropic organizations to compensate for budget shortfalls (Brenner 2009; Levine 2020; Pacewicz 2016).

Urban social movement organizations (SMOs) also changed to in response to shifting urban dynamics. Pacewicz (2015) documents a trend where cooperation among movement leaders and various political interests in cities is increasingly prominent because funding streams are more likely to be awarded to ‘cooperative’ leaders and organizations. This trend incentivizes higher levels of professionalization among organizations who seek to be a part of urban politics, to have a “seat at the table” as Levine (2020:58) calls it. Community-based organizations (CBOs) are the prototypical example. CBOs are typically non-profit civic action groups seek to represent community interests in contemporary decision-making circles. In the Mon-Oakland Connector case, the prominent CBO is the Hazelwood Initiative (part of the Greater Hazelwood Community Collaborative, a collection of CBOs situated in the Greater Hazelwood area). CBOs are not the only organizations in the field, however, and other civic action groups played a substantial role in shaping community discourses around representation, particularly PPT. Authenticity is important in these dynamics because they influence which organization represents the “true” community interest, if one truly exists at all (Levine 2020).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Authenticity and Valuation

Authenticity, as social movement scholars have conceived it, is the process of appearing ‘real’ to a constituency. Authenticity plays a major role in the discursive side of social movement studies. It is the means by which various actors and organizations interact with the broader public sphere (Habermas 1991/1962). Interaction with the public sphere, however, is not enough. These interactions need to be deemed “correct” by an audience; in other words, they need to be positively valued by the intended audience. This interaction work, seeking a positive (or “correct”) valuation from target audiences, has been the focus of the three major contributions to the literature on authenticity over the last decade. First, Sobieraj’s (2010, 2011) work on mobilizations around presidential elections marked an important contribution for authenticity as a valuative framework because it demonstrates the independence of the actors (those who seek authenticity) and the audience (those providing the valuation). For Sobieraj, those who seek authenticity are not always valued as such. For social movements, Sobieraj points to a “paradox” where SMOs and those engaged in collective action have a pre-conceived notion of what journalists look for, but conforming to these normative assumptions make them less appealing to journalists overall. Here, Sobieraj points to a central conflict between *legitimacy* (i.e., conveying professionalization) and *authenticity* (i.e., appearing real), concluding that SMOs attempting to appear legitimate undermine their efforts to appear authentic (Sobieraj 2010:524). Although Sobieraj’s contribution is extensive, it does not necessarily contend with where authenticity originates. Luna (2017) suggests that authenticity comes from experience. This has important implications for the role of

representation in conveying authenticity, especially for marginalized groups. By examining the dynamics of two oppositional SMOs engaging in abortion politics, Luna argues that both sides engage in “proximity practices,” which “emphasize their side’s congruence with the ‘true’ experience of the marginal community to be represented” (Luna 2017:435). The idea that authenticity derives from experience (or proximity to it) is important when considering how to extend theories of authenticity to place and space.

The third and most recent contribution is Walker and Stepick (2020)’s theory of authenticity, which incorporates many of Sobieraj and Luna’s contributions. The purpose of Walker and Stepick’s theory is to generate a perspective of social movement valuation that goes beyond traditional conceptualizations, such as frame resonance (Babb 1996; Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss 2016; Snow, Vilienghart, and Ketelaars 2019) and Charles Tilly’s WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, commitment) framework (Tilly 1999; Wouters 2018; Wouters and Walgrave 2017). Asserting that these frameworks are “overly movement centric” (18), they advance a theory of authenticity as a means of assessing social movements’ worth to broader audiences. This approach helps bridge a conceptual obstacle in the social movement literature in which researchers tend to over-emphasize the causal effects of social movement organizations (SMOs) and movement actors in their respective environments (McAdam and Boudet 2012:2). Social ecological factors, such as political context (Meyer 2004), public opinion (Agnone 2007; Ondercin and Banaszak 2016), and the structure of civil society (Della Porta 2020; Snow, Soule, et al. 2019), thus play a more prominent role in this conceptualization, while at the same time actions by movement actors are not completely discounted. Within this framework, individuals and organizations can still take actions that increase or decrease their perceived authenticity, which in

turn increases or decreases their perceived value to various actors and institutions within the field to differing effects.

For Walker and Stepick, authenticity takes two analytic forms: grassroots authenticity and institutional authenticity. Grassroots movements are typically defined by their limited access to resources and/or by lower levels of professionalization (Almeida and Stearns 1998; Blee 2013; McCarthy and Zald 1977). These factors imbue certain SMOs with grassroots authenticity, because these limited resources and low levels of professionalization are associated with the notion that the lack of resources allow unfettered views into idealized versions of civil society (Brulle 2000:91; Habermas 1996; Pacewicz 2015, 2016:144). Authentically grassroots SMOs are hypothesized to have better success in recruitment and mobilization efforts, favorable journalistic coverage, and general favor with the public. Conversely, SMOs risk inauthentic (or “Astro-turf”) valuations, which hold negative consequences for mobilization, news coverage, and general favor. Institutional authenticity measures the extent to which, “movement actors are judged as ‘typical’ or ‘atypical’ relative to other movement actors” (Walker and Stepick 2020:3). Institutional authenticity is also directly tied to actors’ access to both political and economic resources:

When politicians seek endorsements, when congressional committees are searching for organizations to provide testimony, or when funders convene prototypical representatives of particular interest communities, one would expect that they would favor groups that are clear and obvious representatives of, say, a ‘civil rights,’ ‘environmental,’ or ‘anti-abortion’ SMO, with implications for organizational survival (Walker and Stepick 2020:9).

Just as groups with high institutional authenticity are more likely to be recognized by policy makers and other elites, so too are they more likely to receive greater access to economic resources, but at the same time paint themselves as targets by other SMOs, who are vying for similar recognition by political elites and funders. More professionalized groups have a greater capacity to seize funding opportunities, such as through the grant writing process (Hunter and Staggenborg

1986; Staggenborg 1988, 2020). In his study of community-based organizations (CBOs) in Boston, Levine (2020:156) notes that funders – which were mostly philanthropic organizations – were more likely to support organizations that had “a long track record of success” and these funders were less enthusiastic to support CBOs that they evaluated as the “‘low capacity’ and ‘politically weak,’” concluding that, “private funders played a pivotal role in affecting organizational survival.” Levine (2020:155) also finds that funders typically offered piecemeal funding, meaning that organizations applied to multiple sources of funding for a single project, which complicates and compounds the already costly grant writing process, in terms of time and resources that are expended.

Authenticity is essential in considering how organizations interact with the broader social ecosystem. As a valuative process, it influences not only how organizations are perceived, but how they survive. Walker and Stepick’s framework ties resources to authenticity, which is a considerable and valuable conceptual step. In coming to a more comprehensive theoretical view of how social movement organizations (or organizations more generally) interact with their environment, it is necessary to consider the role of place in generating authenticity because both place and authenticity relate to perceived meaning and value.

2.2 Emplacing Authenticity in a Broader Social Ecology

In sociology, place is composed of three elements: geographic location, material form, and investment with meaning and value; and it is distinct from space. Spaces are “abstract geometries” void of cultural meaning, a space becomes a place when “it ensconces history or utopia, danger or security, identity or memory” (Gieryn 2000:465). This idea that place is associated with meaning

is where authenticity naturally intersects with the literature on place and space. What is an “authentic” place? Who deems places authentic? And what is the relationship between places and experience?

Contenting with authenticity and place requires an examination of the intersection of various literatures, which Zhang and Zhao call (2019) “thinking ecologically.” Thinking ecologically necessitates a “sensitivity to the regularities emerging out of interactions among multiple social organizations/actors or among social organizations/actors and their environments” (Abbott 2005; Zhang and Zhao 2019:103). When thinking ecologically, there are two primary perspectives that center different variables that shape social movements, spatial ecology and social ecology, but a synthesis of the two is required for ecological thinking.

Spatial ecology describes the environment in terms of places and spaces. The “critical geography tradition” is salient to this discussion, which centers how places are constructed and how those constructions contribute to inequality. Originating with the work of Henri Lefebvre (1970, 1991, 2009) and Manuel Castells (1977, 1983) among others, the critical geography tradition argues that economic and political interests determine how places are physically constructed and how they are culturally interpreted. This tradition, however, risks overemphasizing structural factors in their analysis, leading them to “overlook the play of agency and contingency in place-making” (Gieryn 2000:469). Here, Logan and Molotch’s ([1987] 2007) theory of place offer a substantial contribution by introducing room for agency. Logan and Molotch center the commoditization of place and the tension that introduces between a place’s use-value (how a place is used by those who live there) and its exchange-value (how a place is valued in markets, typically outside of the place in question). In particular, the concept of the Growth Machine and Growth Coalitions put people at the center of this tension by defining those

in power by the ability to extract the maximum amount of wealth and resources out of a place. Importantly, this framework also allows room for collective action; for example, it accounts for those who seek to preserve their place's use-value in the face of this extraction.

This is where the spatial ecology meets the social ecology. Social ecology describes the environment in terms of groups and organizations, sometimes referred to as a field (Crossley and Diani 2019; Diani 2015; Zald and McCarthy 1980). Importantly, social ecology refers to a wide range of actors, institutions, and organizations with whom collective actors interact. The most substantial shift in recent years has been reconceptualizing the relationship between collective actors and their targets. Traditionally, social movement scholars acknowledged clear distinctions between SMOs and their targets, typically government or sometimes private institutions. Recent studies of urban development projects, civic action groups, and the broader urban political dynamics have all demonstrated a fundamental shift in how urban politics are carried out. In particular, the distinction between SMOs on the one hand and governmental institutions on the other hand are becoming increasingly blurred. As Lichterman (2020) argues, this blurred distinction makes it difficult to label actors and institutions as 'social movements,' 'non-profits,' or 'volunteer groups;' therefore, a "bigger box" is necessary to properly capture the social ecology of the city.

These actors and organizations are inherently bound in places (Gieryn 2000), as such considerable attention has been placed in the relationship between place and community and their respective roles in urban governance. Levine's (2016, 2017, 2020) treatment of community-based organizations (CBOs) in Boston examines the relationship between urban governance and this new social ecology, and how the idea of community and place are invoked in decision-making processes. The questions raised about how are communities constructed and what factors lead to

authentic valuations of these constructions are at the center of this project. How do people's interactions with the social ecology (especially through the media) produce authentic places and authentic actors and what role to these valuations play in collective action? I assert that Zhang and Zhao's (2019:107) ecological thinking is essential in generating a perspective that "would bring space, time, organization, and environment together," and one that could extend Walker and Stepick's (2020) theory of authenticity. This perspective is crucial to answering these questions and arriving at a more comprehensive theory of authenticity that accounts for both the place-based dynamics in the social ecosystem and how social movements utilize these processes to achieve outcomes.

3.0 Methods

To get at this broader perspective, I situate my analysis in the Pittsburgh news media as a lens through which to examine how they valued the authenticity of the various actors and institutions and the role place played in those valuations. I have collected a convenience sample of 106 news articles that were published over the course of the project's lifecycle (2013-2022), as summarized in Table 1. The most common outlets that were sampled were Pittsburgh's institutional publication, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette ($n= 67$, including 5 editorials); WESA, Pittsburgh's NPR affiliate ($n= 19$); and the Pittsburgh City Paper ($n = 10$). I sampled articles either explicitly mentioning the Mon-Oakland Connector and/or the Hazelwood Green Development site. Although I conceptualize the Mon-Oakland Connector as a case study, I include articles about the Hazelwood Green development in the sample because the conceptual basis of the Mon-Oakland Connector project was firmly rooted in the development of that site. Walker and Stepick (2020:17) argue that media as a valuable frame of reference for valuation because, "Like policy makers, journalists need to make decisions under serious time pressures about which advocacy groups, if any, to include in their reporting, and editors must make decisions about the relative prominence of coverage to assign to particular stories once reported." They expect that the media is receptive to institutional authenticity in their tenth proposition: "Journalists' perceptions of an SMO's institutional authenticity will lead to greater news media coverage of an SMO." Therefore, a compressive sample of the news articles surrounding the Mon-Oakland and Hazelwood Green projects are expected to provide a glimpse into the valuative framework used by media. The valuative framework of the media provides too a mediated glimpse into the public sphere (Habermas 1991/1962) and access to civil society (Sobieraj 2011).

I used a combination of documentary analysis and a series of four exploratory interviews conducted with members of the Four Mile Run community and Pittsburghers for Public Transit. Limited field observations in public meetings were also conducted. These interviews and field observations provided supplemental contextual evidence to documentary data. I entered the field with my connections at Pittsburghers for Public Transit (PPT), the SMO that was extensively involved with opposition to the MOC and with whom I had made a few connections through the organization’s public meetings. Through these meetings I met several of the organization’s full-time staff, including the Executive director. Using snowball sampling, I first asked PPT’s executive Director for an initial interview which helped contextualize and refine themes and interview scripts further interviews. Given the leadership’s connections they made during the campaign, I was put into contact with several community members within Four Mile Run. Using these data sources, I systematically analyzed articles, interviews, and field observations using the MAXQDA software as an analytic and organizational tool.

Table 1. Number of News Articles by Publication Source

News Outlet	<i>Number of Articles</i> (<i>N = 106</i>)
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	62
WESA	19
PGH City Paper	10
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (editorials)	5
Public Source	3
The Tribune Review	2
Pittsburgh Business Times	1
The New York Times	1
Transit Center	1
WPXI	1
WTAE	1

3.1 Analytic Framework and Procedure

An important debate within the methodological literature is the extent to which qualitative analysis is purely inductive or theory driven. It is important to note that I decided not to pursue a strictly deductive, Grounded Theory approach (see: Glaser and Strauss 1967); rather I framed my analytic lens around both Timmermans and Tavory's (2012) theory of abductive analysis and Paul Lichterman's (2002) "Theory-driven Participant Observation." On the one hand, Timmermans and Tavory's (2012:162) abductive analysis is rooted in inductive grounded-theory logics, which they describe as a "creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" in order to make novel theoretical contributions. On the other hand, Lichterman's approach reframes Burawoy's (1998; Burawoy et al. 1991) Extended Case Method by suggesting that the goal is not to generate novel theory, but for the researcher to "extend [their] view of a case by theorizing it as a very specific instance of social and cultural structures or institutional forces at work" (Lichterman 2002:122–23). I found both these perspectives useful in that Lichterman's theory-driven method takes a more pragmatic approach to the role of the researcher in the field and to the goal of the project, while Timmermans and Tavory provides a useful analytic heuristic for approaching the data. In sum, the data were analyzed using an iterative, theory-driven approach.

In practice, qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA, was the primary means by which the data were organized and analyzed. After all the documents and interviews were collected and imported into the software, they were systematically characterized using MAXQDA's document variables. This step served to organize and get an overall sense of the data. Once organized, analysis was guided by standard coding practices for ethnographic and interview data (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Lareau 2021) that has been extended to documentary data. In particular, the

coding process for these documents and supplementary interviews began with an “open coding” phase that identified “specific analytic dimensions and categories” (Emerson et al. 2011:175). Here, the existing literature helped produce some of these categories. As the data were coded, I drafted memos that identified key ideas and themes related to the project. After these themes were identified, a second round of focused coding began, which is a “fine-grained, line-by-line analysis” of documents related to the salient themes (Emerson et al. 2011:191). Continual reference to the existing literature as well as refinement through memos guided the extension of theoretical insights through observations in the case.

3.2 Limitations

The primary methodological shortcoming is in sampling in both data sources. Interviews are obviously limited in number ($n=4$), and do not cover all of activists’ activities in opposing the Mon-Oakland Connector, nor does the sample reach proper saturation (Small 2009:25). Additionally, the sampling method of the local news media may limit the study’s validity. The relatively large local news outlets (The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, The Pittsburgh City Paper and the WESA), along with a few smaller outlets, were sampled based on convenience. Ultimately, these sampling limitations may lead to broader issues of validity; however, validity issues may be counteracted by the limited scope and scale of the case. Despite these limitations, the insights from the data are nonetheless useful in conceptualizing the public process.

4.0 Discussion

4.1 Authenticity in the News Media

When the news media coverage surrounding the Mon-Oakland Connector and Hazelwood Green development sites was examined through a broader socio-ecological lens, a few major themes emerged that can help situate urban social movements within a broader evaluative framework beyond strictly social movement organizations (SMOs). As noted above, Walker and Stepick (2020) conceptualize two forms of authenticity – grassroots and institutional. An SMO is perceived as authentically grassroots when the actors associated with the group align with an idealized version of civil society. A group is perceived to be institutionally authentic when actors/groups are considered “typical” for a given movement field. The media serve as a valuable frame of reference for authentic valuations, given the time pressures associated with the journalistic process and journalists and the media more broadly are hypothesized to be receptive to both institutional and grassroots authenticity (Walker and Stepick 2020).

Given increasing complexity of local civic action in urban settings, theories of authenticity could benefit from a broader examination of how the social ecology —one that considers both elements of ‘traditional’ social ecology (e.g., the political/social/economic context) and a spatial ecology (e.g., characteristics of geography, place, and space) — interact with various groups, actors, and institutions in the social ecosystem. Walker and Stepick provide a useful baseline from which to extend their theory of authenticity to incorporate social and spatial features of the social ecosystem. Through this extension of the existing theory, we can arrive at a more comprehensive and dynamic framework for evaluation beyond strictly SMOs, which has the potential to apply this

valuative framework to other areas of civic life. To this end, I examined how authenticity was conveyed in the local Pittsburgh news media using the Mon-Oakland Connector and the Hazelwood Green development projects as a case study. Here, three themes were identified. First, residents and inhabitants of these neighborhoods were framed as authentically grassroots – they offered an idealized version of civil society, not necessarily by virtue of their lack of resources or spontaneity of tactics, but by their relationship to a place (a location with inscribed meaning). To this end, civic action groups like Pittsburghers for Public Transit played a central role by extending their institutional authenticity to residents. The result is that residents are evaluated by the media as authentic both grassroots (idealizing their neighborhoods/communities) and institutional (representatives for their neighborhood), which produced an overall valuation that a general “community” was opposed to the Mon-Oakland Connector project.

4.2 Overview of Socio-Spatial Themes

Most of the organizations that were explicitly mentioned in the news media surrounding the Mon-Oakland Connector and Hazelwood Green development projects were either government entities (city, county, state, and federal), nonprofit institutions (universities, philanthropic organizations), nonprofit groups (civic action groups, community-based organizations), or private companies. The social ecology of these projects was incredibly complex, but less overtly complex was the spatial form of the project area. A few major neighborhoods dominated news coverage for these projects. Hazelwood, where the site of the Hazelwood Green development is located, Oakland, where the major universities (University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University) and hospitals in Pittsburgh are housed; and Four Mile Run, a small neighborhood that would be

the site of the Mon-Oakland Connector. Hazelwood and Four Mile Run appeared in the media most frequently; Hazelwood was associated with growth and development and Four Mile Run was associated with opposition. Neighboring communities like Oakland, Greenfield, and Hazelwood were referenced, but not seen as major spatial factors in characterizing the context of the development project. Because these projects concerned the development and land use, they naturally tie in with aspects of territoriality – neighborhoods, in particular, served as the primary means of spatial organization. Although larger levels of spatial organization were heavily present (e.g., city, regional, and occasionally national), most of the media’s framing of the territoriality of these projects remained at the neighborhood level.

In the news media coverage surrounding the Mon-Oakland Connector and Hazelwood Green development project, spatial characteristics played an important role in territorializing the projects. Besides associating people with spaces (*residents*), the most prominent spatial themes in the media consisted of *connectivity* (connecting one place to another), *access* (accessing spaces), *temporality* (past, present, and future spatial relations), *concentration* (density of space), *scale and shift* (relative size and translation between levels of spatial organization), *sense of place* (‘feel’ of a space), and *proximity* (being near or far in relation to other spaces). These spatial characteristics intersect with various aspects of the social ecology. Table 2 summarizes these interactions with the three most prominent social ecological themes that intersected with each of the eight prominent spatial ecological themes.

In news articles centering the Hazelwood green development, the most common code combination was between Concentration and Eds/Meds/Tech. Conversely the most common combination in articles mentioning the Mon-Oakland Connector were Resident and Opposition and Resident and Transparency. These intersections suggest certain underlying ideas within the

socio-ecological context that appealed to the news media. In the case of the Hazelwood development, reporters centered institutionally authentic groups and organizations, which produced the focus on concentrating technological development in Hazelwood Green. Conversely, news coverage around the Mon-Oakland Connector centered residents, particularly their opposition and their grievances against the lack of institutional transparency. Contrary to the proposition by Walker and Stepick (2020:17), grassroots organizations in this case did not engage in “seemingly spontaneous and emotional mobilizations;” rather, resistance in Four Mile Run was a years-long process (2015-2021), with the most fervent opposition and frequent news coverage overlapping between 2018 and 2021. This suggests that other factors may be involved in signally grassroots valuations. In particular, grassroots valuations were seemingly extrapolated from residents’ location in space and their association with their *temporal* relation to their respective communities.

Table 2. Intersections between Spatial and Social Ecological Themes

Spatial Ecology	Social Ecology	Spatial Ecology	Social Ecology
Connectivity.....	Opposition Eds/Meds/Tech Government (all levels)	Scale and Shift....	Funding Government (all levels) Eds/Meds/Tech
Access.....	Funding Public Goods Opportunity	Sense of Place.....	History Eds/Meds/Tech Opportunity
Temporality.....	Funding Opportunity History	Proximity.....	Eds/Meds/Tech Opportunity Funding
Concentration....	Eds/Meds/Tech Funding Opportunity	Residents.....	Opposition Funding Transparency

4.3 Residents as Grassroots Representatives

The first step residents took toward envisioning idealized versions of their neighborhoods is identifying current and past issues. Being able to relate spaces, like neighborhoods, to the past, present, and future is what characterized the *temporality* as a code. Because these neighborhoods are different geographies, histories, and demographic compositions, residents related to their pasts, presents, and futures in ways that appeared authentically grassroots to the media.

Four Mile Run, for instance, is in a low-lying valley with major population centers above them, and the Monongahela River below them. This geography, in conjunction with the city's dated infrastructure, results in frequent flooding and "combined stormwater overflows" (CSOs), which are described as "volcanic eruption of water." Because the stormwater and sewer systems are combined, overflows pose a serious health risk; in one exploratory interview (pers. comm.), one resident attributes this problem to, "unregulated irresponsible over development of higher elevation places like Greenfield, Squirrel Hill, and Oakland, that's tens of thousands more toilet flushing. And it ends up in the Run, so the storm water comes, it can't hold the capacity..." The call for stormwater mitigation was common among residents from Four Mile Run as exemplified from this interaction captured news article covering a September 2018 Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority (PWSA) public meeting. PWSA executive director Bob Weimar asked the room "Most of you already know that we've got a stormwater problem. How many people know we have a storm water problem?" Almost every hand in the room went up. "It's fair to say that this is a systemic problem." (Krauss 2018). These "systemic" issues, naturally have been identified by the residents living there, but residents that were quoted in media were often accompanied by temporizing qualifiers, such as "long-time resident" "a Junction Hollow resident for three years" and "lifelong resident." By associating time and place the media plays a role in contextualizing

the residents' lived experiences and conferring upon them a type of grassroots authenticity. In other words, being "on the ground," as the residents were allows them to idealize the direction of their neighborhood.

Events over the course of the project's history also provisionally confirm some of Walker and Stepick's propositions. Spontaneous and emotional mobilizations also captured media attention. One example was an apparent spontaneous mobilization organized by a Hazelwood resident in August 2018, in which the organizer and residents conducted a simulated commute out of Hazelwood. The organizer told the media "There is currently no safe, level path out of Hazelwood for residents without access to an automobile... [it is] impossible even for able-bodied persons to navigate safely." (Jones 2018). Neighborhood affinity too, plays a role here. The idealized version of the civil society, which take the form of safer pedestrian infrastructure, are firmly rooted in geography, in the neighborhood of Hazelwood. While it is true that spontaneous mobilizations garner media attention, the quality that makes these events grassroots is that they are grounded in socio-spatial organizations, in a neighborhood or community.

4.4 Residents as Institutional Representatives

In relation to institutional authenticity, the quality associated with representing a group, Walker and Stepick argue that resource flows are linked with institutional authenticity. Greater resource flows mean greater capacity, higher levels of professionalization, and therefore, they are more likely to be valued as 'representative' or authentic. The associate greater institutional authenticity with greater news coverage, this only partially accounts for who was considered "typical" or representative of a given community. Here, residents of Four Mile Run and

Hazelwood, with organizational support by Pittsburghers for Public Transit, were deemed as representative of their communities. This contrasts with other organizations and institutions vying for institutional authenticity – particularly Pittsburgh’s government via Mayor Bill Peduto and the Department of Mobility and Infrastructure (DOMI), Almono, CMU, and the Hazelwood Initiative. Although these organizations were highly quoted, they were not associated with representing the community. Furthermore, spatial characteristics directly associated with community representation were *temporality* and *access*.

Figure 1, generated using MAXQDA’s code mapping tools, shows the organizations listed above in relation to the prominent spatial themes. The map generated by MAXQDA counts the number of times two codes were assigned to a segment together. The proximity of the codes represents the similarity of the codes in the data. Lines between codes indicate substantial (>20) intersections between the codes, with line thickness increasing with the number of intersections. Colors too were assigned based on a distance matrix calculated by MAXQDA using unweighted averages linkage as a clustering method. MAXQDA allows for zero to nine clusters, therefore as the number of clusters increases it places greater ‘stress’ on the model. With nine clusters displayed, this indicates substantial similarity between each respective color.

Figure 1. Code Relations Map Between Organizations and Spatial Characteristics

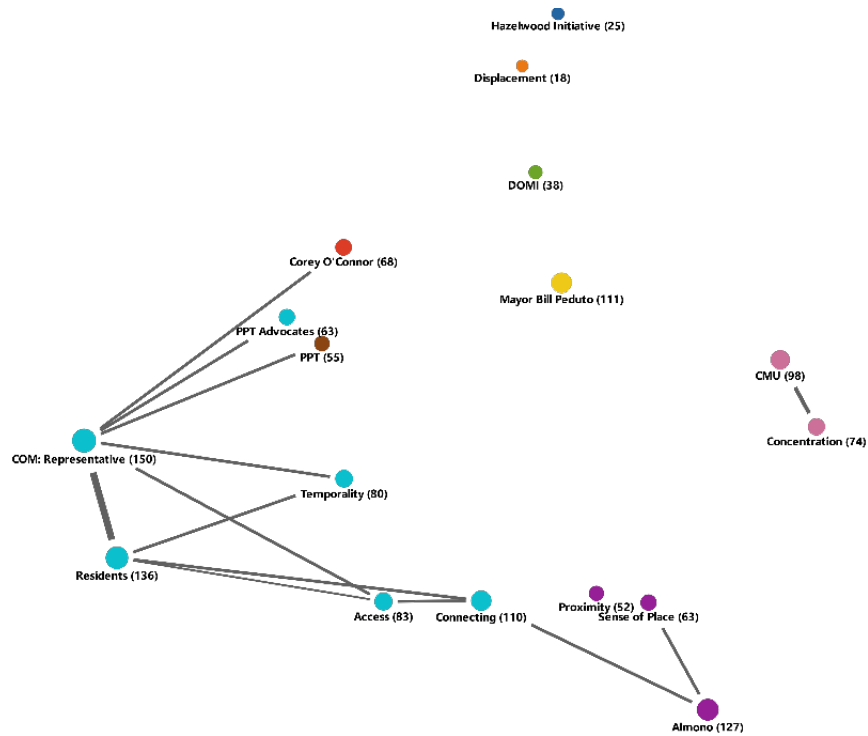


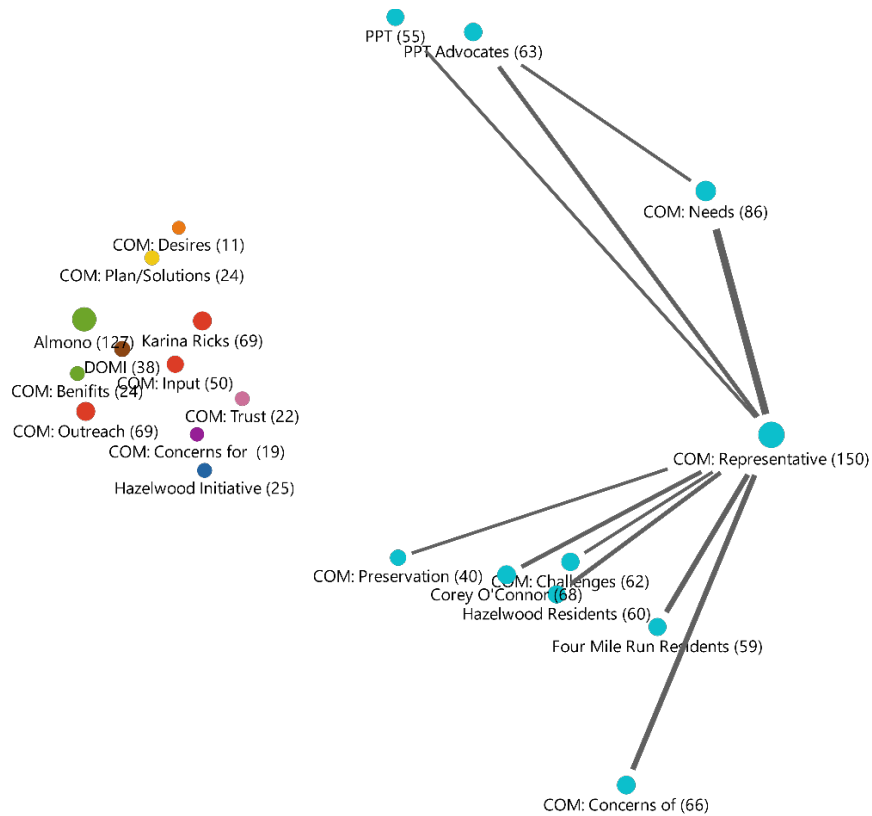
Figure 1 shows that residents, temporality, access, and connectivity were the salient spatial themes that intersected with community representation. There was strong overlap between the *residents* code and the code signifying community representation. This intersection between the codes indicates that residents were often valued as representatives of their communities by the news media. Additionally, there is a triangulation between the codes signifying community representation, residents, and temporality. The proximity of these codes, along with their cluster and ties indicate that temporality was also important for establishing community representation. Residents appeared grounded in these spatial characteristics in relation to other organizations displayed (Almono, the Hazelwood Initiative, CMU, DOMI, Mayor Bill Peduto). The organizations/people that overlapped strongly with community representation were the local councilor, Corey O'Connor, and PPT and its advocates.

PPT used various tactics to strengthen its institutional authenticity, however, the organization elected not to confer itself with the institutional authenticity; rather, it elevated

residents to allow them to be representatives of their own communities. When PPT began its campaign against the Mon-Oakland Connector in 2019, its goal was to unify residents from Four Mile Run, Hazelwood, and surrounding communities not only against the project, but to articulate alternatives that had been generated by community members. This was an essential part of the campaign strategy because, as exploratory interviews field observations suggest, organizers in PPT were primarily concerned with being framed as “anti-progress” and/or “racist” for opposing the Mon-Oakland Connector. This would have had substantial negative effects on its valuation by both the media and a broader audience. Despite the apparent divisions between the communities before PPT’s campaign, and over the course of two years working with residents and community groups, they succeeded in generating a cohesive document – the “Our Money, Our Solutions” plan – that outlined “a community-generated alternative plan” to the Mon-Oakland Connector that centered extending existing public transit instead of using city funds to construct a privately-operated micro-shuttle. PPT’s follow up report, “A People’s Audit of the Mon-Oakland Connector” authored by a group of Carnegie Mellon University students called Tech4Society compared the Mon-Oakland Connector to the “Our Money, Our Solutions” proposal and concluded that, “an extension of Port Authority bus routes from Hazelwood to other neighborhoods would better serve residents, bringing them to grocery stores, business districts, and hospitals.” Over time, residents and community members echoed the points of the Our Money, Our Solutions plan during various marches, press conferences, and city council hearings. By focusing on residents’ grassroots authenticity, PPT was able to utilize its resources, expertise, and connections, to confer its institutional authenticity on residents. The synthesis of these ideas is exemplified by one Four Mile Run community member, “My neighbors have made it clear we do not need a private roadway. What we need is flood mitigation, walkable sidewalks, and better access to public transit.”

(Wilson-Fuoco 2018). Both grassroots authenticity and institutional authenticity are present when this resident is quoted: they both represent neighborhood (“my neighbors have made it clear”) and they posit an idealized version of civil society, one with flood mitigation, walkable sidewalks, and access to public transit. PPT members pointed to these reports as critical in shaping the conversation surrounding the Mon-Oakland Connector.

Figure 2. Code Relations Map Between Community and Selected Organizations



This is further demonstrated in Figure 2, which depicts a code map constructed using identical methods as Figure 1. Here, various aspects of community representation are mapped in relation to organizations, groups and institutions. Important to note here is the distinct clusters, one cluster with community representation as its anchor (the “community cluster”), and another that is set apart from it (the “Almono cluster”). In this latter cluster are the codes for the city government (DOMI and its then-director, Karina Ricks), the owner of the Hazelwood Green site (Almono),

and the Hazelwood Initiative (a Hazelwood community-based organization). In the community cluster, PPT and its advocates, the residents of Hazelwood and Four Mile Run, and the local councilor, Corey O'Connor are inked with community representation. Importantly, the code representing community needs (*COM: Needs*) lies between PPT and community representation, indicating that there is overlap between PPT and its advocates, representing the community, in general, in its needs in particular. This falls in line with the idea that PPT used its resources to synthesize community needs as a means of generating community representatives. Codes associated with residents of both Four Mile Run and Hazelwood were associated with identifying neighborhood challenges, which is consistent with the idea that residents provide authentically grassroots accounts of their lived experiences. In the Almono cluster, the various institutions and organizations in this cluster were generally associated with the Hazelwood Green development. This cluster suggests that these organizations and institutions engaged in extensive outreach (*COM: Outreach*) to respective communities, solicited community input (*COM: Input*), and attempted to outline the benefits of development and the Mon-Oakland Connector (*COM: Benefits*). However, the presence of the *COM: Trust* code indicates that media associated these organizations with a lack of community trust. In other words, they failed to represent the community adequately and were perceived institutionally inauthentic. From the data and exploratory interviews, this media valuation is likely the product of residents' general distrust these organizations, which can be attributed a perceived lack of transparency in the planning process (see Table 2). Overall, this figure shows the respective roles of residents and PPT, and how these dynamics produced a synthesized grassroots-institutional authenticity in the media

5.0 Conclusion

In sum, these findings suggest that an extended view of authenticity can be used to understand how the broader socio-ecological environment produces various public media valuations. In an extension of the theory, socio-spatial characteristics are hypothesized to contribute to valuations of both grassroots and institutional authenticity and these findings suggest that media valuation in particular is important to SMOs, as traditionally conceptualized, to the more broad “civic action group,” and even non-movement actors, organizations, and institutions. Attachment to space and time offer opportunities for the media to confer authenticity via contextualization, residents of particular neighborhoods and local community group are naturally able to benefit from this, especially when mobilized and organized by organizations with higher levels of professionalization, such as PPT. Mobilizing residents (rooted in time and place) and offering alternatives likely helped residents, PPT, and other opponents of the Mon-Oakland connector secure an end to the project. Opponents of the Mon-Oakland Connector likely used their authenticity as to leverage in the 2021 Mayoral Election Primary. Then-candidate Ed Gainey supported “ending privatized transit systems” (i.e., the Mon-Oakland Connector) and as Mayor officially ended the city’s support for the project in February 2022.

The outcome of the Mon-Oakland Connector was a nearly seven-year process. By extending Through an extension of Walker and Stepick’s model to include spatial as well as social dimensions of valuation and considering both SMO and non-SMO groups, organizations, and institutions, we can see that the media valuations of the various groups in the social ecology demonstrated a tendency to favor residents as people situated in place and time. PPT centered residents, while also using its organizational capacity to find new ways to create authentic beyond

one place or time, but to create a larger “community” that the media viewed as authentic. As a result, it was not just residents of the Run who were opposed to the Mon-Oakland connector, but the Mon-Oakland connector faced broader *community* opposition. This may help explain how the political and economic momentum of the Mon-Oakland Connector gradually decreased over time. This also may help explain how political opportunities, like the 2021 mayoral election, intersected with the case. It is reasonable to speculate that this apparent broader *community* valuation by the media provided a novel political opportunity for the Gainey campaign to utilize this constructed community against his opponent in the primary – incumbent mayor Bill Peduto, who championed both Mon-Oakland Connector and the Hazelwood development.

A broader conceptualization of authenticity beyond SMOs reveals potential avenues for further exploration of the social ecology in urban settings. In particular, it shows the importance of place and space within authenticity as an evaluative framework. The findings here suggest authenticity could help with conceptualizing various processes in the urban ecology, particularly how communities are represented and constructed by various actors and groups; the role of civic action groups in urban governance; and the how urban space informs these processes.

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