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**Title: The “I am Denver” Chief Storytelling Office: a critical co-creative media to change the dominant narrative of gentrification?**

**Abstract. —** The chapter deals with the setting up of the “I am Denver” participatory storytelling project in Denver, launched in 2018 in order to change the mainstream media narrative about gentrification which is not representative of the diversity of local cultures and communities. The “I am Denver” storytelling project tackles this issue by producing and editing two main types of contents: documentaries about the history and culture of local minority communities (especially Native, Black and Latinx, but also LGBTQIA+ communities); and short inhabitants’ daily life stories told at “storytelling labs”. The stories are video recorded and shared on social media platforms. Drawing on a socio-semiotic and discourse analysis of this media project (its design, its contents) I examine the objectives and the potential effects of this one-of-a-kind project.

**Key-words**: Denver; participatory storytelling; alternative media; gentrification of memory; daily life culture.

During the summer of 2017, the City of Detroit launched a new – and unprecedented for a governmental institution – “Chief Storytelling Office”. The service consists in a newsroom composed of journalists and video producers, headed (from July 2017 until January 2020) by “Chief Storyteller” Aaron Foley, a trained journalist and the former editor of *Blac Detroit*, a local magazine that promotes the black culture and community. In order to “combat psychological gentrification and the media portrayals of Detroit focusing on white entrepreneurs”[[1]](#footnote-2), the service produces stories that celebrate the black, Latinx and long-time residents’ culture and initiatives, before publishing these stories on a dedicated website (theneighborhoods.org). In 2018, the cities of Atlanta and Denver opened similar services, pursuing the same goal: building a narrative of reconciliation between the dominant media narrative that celebrates gentrification and the anti-gentrification protests’ narrative, that lacks visibility. They also want to correct the distorted image of the inner-city urban neighborhoods given by the dominant media (Costera Meijer 2013).

This chapter studies how the Denver Chief Storytelling Office (CSO later) tries to slow the gentrification process down through the production of multiple representations of the city and the diversity of its people, seeking to create an alternative narrative. In a similar way as in other cities worldwide, gentrification happened and accelerated in Denver in the late 2000s and in the 2010s. A critique of gentrification emerged (for academic works see Sbicca 2019; Jackson and Buckman 2020), forcing the local government to address this issue. As an illustration, the CSO presents its latest documentary with the following statement: “gentrification has caused population shifts and historic buildings have been razed in the name of development. To preserve that history, the City of Denver has embarked in an exploration of the diverse communities that have helped shape our city”. In charge of a storytelling project called “I am Denver”, the CSO produces two types of contents: film documentaries and short personal stories (inspired by the “Humans of New York” project[[2]](#footnote-3)) of inhabitants. Most of them were video recorded at “storytelling labs” during which residents are invited to come and tell their personal stories and their bond to the city.

My objective is twofold. First, I intend to describe the mission, the design, the means and the functioning of the “I am Denver” storytelling project, and also define this hybrid object. Then, setting side by side an analysis of the officials’ discourse about the project and an analysis of the contents produced, I shall evaluate its potential symbolic and political effects. Before this, it is necessary to further contextualize the relationship between the media, gentrification and underrepresented communities.

Not only do the discourses and representations made of a city contribute to the making up of a place image, but they also contribute to the construction of the material place itself (Noyer and Raoul 2011; Raoul 2017; Mennel 2019). For example, media portrayals of gentrifying neighborhoods (Zukin 2008), restaurant reviews (Zukin, Lindeman, et Hurson 2017), geo-tagged tweets referring to such places (Gibbons, Nara, et Appleyard 2017) will likely increase the desirability of a neighborhood. Thus, these representations have an influence on one of the decisive requirements for gentrification to occur, that is a cultural preference for inner city residence by a certain segment of the service class (Hamnett 1991), and more broadly by the middle-class professionals. The media representations confer symbolic value to once devaluated places, which will attract new potential home buyers, thus spurring the gentrification process.‬ ‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬‬

For a long time, the academic literature suggested that media coverage was overwhelmingly supportive of gentrification, with for example Neil Smith implying that the media is a “revanchist” tool of the elite, helping real estate developers setting up gentrification strategies (Smith 1996; Tolfo and Doucet 2021). Although this view has been nuanced by several studies showing that media coverage is much more diverse, going from wholly supportive to strictly critical (Brown-Saracino and Rumpf 2011), recent works argue that since the mid-2000s, contemporary media critiques of gentrification “are constructed through a decidedly middle-class lens” and that “working-class or immigrant perspectives are themselves “evicted” from narratives” about gentrification (Tolfo and Doucet 2021). This is of the utmost importance for this study since the CSO in Denver – and also in Detroit (Renoir 2021) – has been implemented specifically to reintegrate the working-class and long-time residents perspectives into the narratives of urban change. Besides, media representations of working-class, immigrants and ethnic minority neighborhoods tend to distort the reality by insisting on various social problems in an unbalanced way, and in the end, to stigmatize these populations (Champagne 1991; Wacquant 2006; Berthaut 2013).

Considering this and drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, ranging from media studies to urban studies and discourse analysis, and specifically some literature about mechanisms which try to “give voice to the voiceless” (Ferron 2012; Ferron, *al.* 2022), this chapter raises a series of questions. Can a narrative change have an effect on the gentrification process in itself? How is the “I am Denver” project designed to achieve this goal? Can the project give way to progressive politics of self-representation and direct participation or is it a superficial mode of participation, only serving the promotion of the local government?

To answer these questions, the methodology of this chapter draws on an analysis of the strategies and discourses of the actors in charge of the CSO, as well as a content analysis of the videos produced (6 documentaries and about 90 short inhabitants’ stories) by the “I am Denver” project. Precisely, we restrict the analysis to examining the scenography of the enunciation (as defined by Maingueneau in Angermuller, Maingueneau and Wodak 2014) and to identifying narrative themes that come out of the multiple stories. The set of data is completed with one semi-structured videoconference interview with Denver Chief Storyteller Rowena Alegria and her main collaborator, multimedia journalist Roxana Soto (duration: 1 hour 42 minutes), and with “I am Denver” media and social media metrics[[3]](#footnote-4).

The chapter will first describe and circumscribe the “I am Denver” storytelling project before taking into consideration three levels of analysis. It will look, firstly, at how the service is designed to foster the social recognition of marginalized groups, secondly, at its ambition to rewrite the city’s history and finally, at the role of participatory storytelling in the creation of new media narratives.

# The “I am Denver” storytelling project: a hybrid media object

The “I am Denver” storytelling project is led by the Chief Storytelling Office (CSO), an internal City Hall service created specifically in 2018, at the initiative of Rowena Alegria (the current “Chief Storyteller”), who was formerly Mayor Michael Hancock’s communication director for three years. She conceived the project, proposed it to the Mayor who backed it and allocated a budget. Since 2018, the CSO has been located inside the agency for Human Rights and Community Partnerships (HRCP) at the City of Denver (even though its presence is not visible on the agency’s web pages). It does not depend on the Communication and Marketing Department, nor on the Mayor’s Office, although it works in close collaboration with them. First and foremost, it is a communication project and a media object, but a hybrid one and like no other media.

## An alternative media, a co-creative media, a state media… or none of the above?

Although the “I am Denver” project carried by the CSO does not introduce itself as a media, it has most of the defining characteristics of a media. It is led by journalists, it employs other multimedia technicians (video, sound and film editors), and it is a material apparatus which relies on a technical support (a web page, and videos posted on social media platforms) and facilitates communication through the production and circulation of signs, messages and sociocultural representations (Sonnac and Gabszewicz, 2013). Many scholars distinguish between mainstream and alternative media. Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2007, 18) use four criteria to make the distinction: mainstream media are usually considered to be a) large-scale and geared towards large, homogenous audiences, b) state-owned or commercial companies, c) vertically (or hierarchically) structured organizations staffed by professionals and d) carriers of dominant discourses and representations. The CSO has a complex position in regard with these criteria.

On the organizational side, the CSO has a staff of four people and a budget of around $300 000 annually, so it is a small-scale project. The budget comes from the City Hall, directly from the Mayor’s Office, so it is state-owned. It is staffed by professionals (one journalist/editor and storyteller, one multimedia journalist, and two sound, video and film editors) and has some degree of hierarchy but very few compared to typical mainstream media. Moreover, their organizational methods are very flexible. Rowena Alegria claims that “*the strategy is ever evolving*” and adds: “*I tell my team that everything is a test because nobody’s done this before*” (interview with author, 07/08/2021). On the strategic and operational side (the type of audience, the type of contents and representations it produces), it posts and shares its contents on various social media so technically it can be seen by a large audience, but its main digital public space consists of a web page inside the City of Denver website and it focuses on reaching underserved communities and marginalized groups. Last but not least and I will look further on this at the next section, the “I am Denver” project seeks to produce non-dominant discourses and representations and stresses the importance of self-representation.

More precisely, Rowena Alegria and Roxana Soto (chief multimedia journalist at the CSO) contrast their journalistic practices with those of the mainstream media – they both have been employed by mainstream TV, radio, and/or newspapers in the past. They are less time-constrained and also less audience-oriented since their funding does not rely on advertising, even though they have audience performance targets. As Roxana Soto explains:

our interviews are not 10, 20, 15 minutes, sometimes they go over an hour. […] And we’ll ask questions that other people don’t ask cause obviously the news media doesn’t work like that. It’s like ‘Let’s go! […] Let’s put it up there! […] [A]nd then we move on to the next thing’.

Also, because they want to express the voices of the voiceless, they “*don’t use narrators or voice-overs*”, they “*don’t use a script going to a story*”. Instead, they let the ordinary people tell their stories on the first person, which is supposed to “*close the psychic distance*” with the audience and opens up a more emotional connection. As Rowena Alegria puts it:

It’s not our interpretation of a story, it’s these people having the chance to tell their own story. And I think that’s a huge difference from typical media or typical history in general. I mean, it gets interpreted. And we don’t do interpreting, we allow people to speak their truth.

These practices (both journalistic and organizational) correspond in various aspects with an alternative media ethos. According to Mowbray (in Atton (ed.) 2015, 29), alternative media practitioners “sought explicitly to work against the grain of traditional journalistic ‘regimes of objectivity’ […] by taking up […] a declared bias in solidarity with those who struggle against oppression and domination”.

Finally, the CSO produces three types of contents: first, film documentaries that all focus on underrepresented, minority communities and cultures (e. g. “Celebrating Indigenous Peoples’ Day”; “From Prohibited to Proud: The History of Drag in Denver”). Second, the “featured stories” section highlights noteworthy stories of inhabitants that are committed to support their communities or to advocate for specific causes. Third, the CSO has designed “storytelling labs” during which ordinary residents can come, write and tell their stories which are video recorded. Up to this day, there is about a hundred stories available on the website. These storytelling labs are organized by the CSO, usually in partnership with various local actors (schools, public libraries, performing artists and writers’ organizations, local community centers). They specifically target minority and underserved communities. While Denver’s population is around 55% White (non-hispanic), 9% Black or African-American, 29% Hispanic (including 22% White Hispanic), around 3.5% Asian and 3.5% Multiracial[[4]](#footnote-5), around two thirds of the storytelling labs’ participants belong to underrepresented communities. Whereas the “featured stories” imply an editorial choice with a staff member covering the ground to find stories, no editorial choice guides the stories from the lab. It encourages a wide participation from the community.

Nevertheless, it cannot be labelled an alternative media since it originated inside a local government and is directly funded by the City of Denver budget, which contradicts one of the most widespread definition of alternative media as a “third voice” between state media and private commercial media (Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpetier 2007). In this regard, it seems obvious to characterize it as a public service or a state media since its funding and ownership are public. But such characterization would not be fully relevant since its activities and practices strongly differ from public service broadcasters. For example, the CSO does not broadcast news. Also, even though the City council sets audience objectives and supervise the whole project, it does not intervene directly.

The “I Am Denver” project also differs from alternative media in the way it manages participation. All the CSO contents are edited and published by professional staff members (journalists and content creators/editors) and no content come from amateur or citizen journalism, unlike what is most frequently done in alternative media (Mowbray, in Atton (ed.) 2015). Likewise, the CSO encourages participation, but it does so in a superficial or *partial* way rather than through a full or *intensive* mode of participation that would involve giving a decision-making power to the residents over the types of contents the CSO should produce, or participation in daily management and overall direction over the storytelling project. Finally, in order to circumscribe more precisely the “I am Denver” project, one needs to look closer at the original vision and at the objectives of the service.

## The construction of a co-discourse to change the gentrification narrative

Originally, the project emerged out of the growing community concern about gentrification and displacement. Commenting on this issue, City of Denver’s Mayor Michael Hancock said that “one of the things that became clear was that the loss of cultural identity –the loss of our history– was one of the emotional flashpoints for people. People said, 'Our stories are being lost. Our history is being lost. How do we preserve that?' (Lundgren 2019). The CSO was launched to solve this problem and, until this day, its main goal has been to “rewrite[e] Denver’s history one untold story at the time”[[5]](#footnote-6). This is probably the main argument to finally qualify the CSO an alternative media, insofar as the project challenges the way social reality is defined and named by the dominant power (Couldry and Curran 2003, cited in Atton (ed.) 2015). More precisely, on its internet homepage, the project used to be described in the following way:

I Am Denver recognizes the individuals who have made this city. In the same way that historic preservation efforts honor and protect buildings, we honor and protect Denver’s history, culture and vision by recording and archiving in video, audio and photo the faces and voices of the people who make Denver.

Here, it is interesting to note that the mission statement insists on the collective making (“the individuals”, “the voices of the people”) of the city. In the media, Mayor Michael Hancock and Chief Storyteller Rowena Alegria have declared that the project tries to flip around City Hall communications. Instead of getting City Hall’s message out, it is about listening to the people’s voices, especially the voices of “underrepresented residents”, and help them get their message out (Bloomberg Cities 2019; Lundgren 2019). Surprisingly, given its institutional origin, the CSO resembles the hyperlocal and citizen media examined in other chapters of this volume (see S. Sadoux’s contribution) that try to spark off and sustain debates that tend to be ignored by the traditional and dominant media.

Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of the “I am Denver” project and of the actors’ discourses allows us to identify four interconnected goals. First, it seeks to “*reach underserved populations*”[[6]](#footnote-7) and communities and tell their stories. Second, Rowena Alegria and her staff want to do it “*in spite of today’s media*” that do not give an “*accurate reflection*” of who these communities are. They want to “*give a more honest representation*” of these communities. Hence, they develop a set of media practices that they label themselves “*alternative*”.

The third and fourth goals are best expressed by Rowena Alegria during the interview as she says: “*my goal was not just to tell stories and correct history. Like that’s not big enough, right? My goal was to make sure that these voices are heard in City Hall to influence policy*” (interview with author, videoconference Lille/Denver, 07/08/2021). So, there is the ambition to rewrite the history of the city, insisting on oral history and oral testimonies of ordinary people and, through the use of digital tools such as videos, making room for the marginalized communities’ histories in the official records of the city’s history. By doing so, the Storytelling Office is fighting what some scholars recently coined the “gentrification of memory”, defined as “the methodical and deliberate eviction of marginalized communities’ histories, in service of capital accumulation and dominant class interests” (Galiniki 2021; Tolfo and Doucet 2022). The last goal of the Office is to influence policy, that is to become a mediator during the drafting of neighborhood development plans and to be a conversation partner of the City of Denver Department of Community Planning and Development.

In the end, the CSO seems to be in line with the “digital storytelling” practice that emerged in the late 1990s at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley and which has permeated later a “co-creative” (or sometimes called “critical participatory”) media movement (Spurgeon and Burgess, in Atton (ed.) 2015). Indeed, in co-creative media, “creative practitioners and media professionals facilitate community-based self-representation in ways that critically engage with the social change potential of participatory media cultures” (Spurgeon 2015, 133). In this way, the CSO’s action facilitates the emergence of a (locally new) public problem thanks to the construction of a co-discourse (Auboussier 2015) which combines a counter-discourse (the anti-gentrification narrative) coming from a subaltern counter-public and an institutional discourse.

# The potential value of participatory storytelling to fight gentrification and to advocate for social change

In this second section of the chapter, I wish to provide an in-depth analysis of these questions. First, I examine how the enunciation scenography designed by the CSO during the storytelling labs aims at fostering social recognition. Second, I reflect on the CSO’s desire to rewrite the history of Denver and of its neighborhoods through the revalorization of everyday life, ordinary stories, practices and people. Finally, I ask whether these participatory storytelling practices give way to a new progressive politics of self-representation and direct participation or if it should be seen as new ambiguous and superficial modes of participation that only serve the promotion of the local government.

## A semiotic scenography to foster social recognition as a tool against gentrification

The storytelling labs design a scenography with a series of semiotic features that put a frame on the residents’ utterances. A photographic portrait of each participant is taken, from a middle distance, before (s)he tells his/her story in front of the camera (again filmed from a middle distance). At the end of their story, they have to perform a specific speech act: saying their names followed by the same catchphrase “and I am Denver”, which are the last words of each video (for example “I am Vanesha McGee and I am Denver”) and which is the hashtag used to promote the project on the social media: #IamDenver[[7]](#footnote-8). Finally, the videos are edited with a background instrumental music (usually a soft piano melody) that adds to the emotional side of the stories (Roxana Soto, interview with the author). Using this semiotic scenography, the storytelling labs seek to produce a sense of homogeneity and underline the sociopolitical relationship between the singularity of each personal story and the collective sense of belonging to the same community. Indeed, the portrait, as a typical journalistic genre models the representation of the relationship between the individuals and their community (Wrona 2005; 2012). It gives evidence of the recognition of an individual subject by a community (Beyaert-Geslin 2017).

Furthermore, this semiotic scenography invites the residents to “give an account” of themselves, a discursive practice which establishes a dialogue between the “I” who is speaking and the “you” (sometimes fictional) who is listening. This practice facilitates the development of one’s own subjectivity and helps recognize the radical alterity of other people (Butler 2005). Thus, the storytelling labs’ enunciation scenography seems to facilitate social recognition both for the speaker and for the receiver.

Finally, the catchphrase and hashtag #IamDenver looks like an attempt to reinforce the residents’ identification to their city, both as a land called Denver, as a community, and as a governing institution that rules that portion of land. The words “I am Denver” strongly refer to identity and identification. Here, identity joins recognition, especially social recognition of minorities and dominated social groups (since the participants are predominantly from minority social groups), which is at the core of the politics of multiculturalism (Ricœur 2005). This initiative can be considered the first step of a policy that fights gentrification insofar as one of the problems caused by gentrification put in light in recent works is the disregard gentrifiers (or newcomers) often express for the community they settle in (Donnelly 2018). Moreover, even when it does not cause displacement, gentrification have negative effects on the sense of place of long-term residents who can feel “out-of-placeness” when the familiar places (shops, cafes, services, meeting places, other people in the neighborhood) become unfamiliar (Shaw and Hagemans 2015). If social recognition is a first step in order to reinforce the long-term residents sense of place, cultural and historical recognition would be a second one.

## The construction of ordinary legitimacies to build a “right to memory” for marginalized groups

One of the CSO’s main objectives (as stated on its web homepage) consists in archiving ordinary people’s stories to protect the collective memory in the same way that historic preservation protects buildings. Mayor Michael Hancock described the Office of Storytelling as compiling “a digitized encyclopedia” of the people’s stories. The CSO proposes to record the personal stories of ordinary people, stories about their everyday life. The office’s goal is to make sure they are

*correcting a history that has left people of color out, poor people, LGBTQ people, people who were living with disabilities… They were not part of the City’s official history even though I knew darn well that was wrong. You know, we had helped to build the city and we had been here the whole entire time* (Rowena Alegria, interview with the author).

This brings us to the crucial and complex question of how history is written (and by whom) and of how memory is being constituted (and by whom). As Rowena Alegria puts it, the CSO’s goal is in line with what historians call “history from below”, defined as “rescuing stories from the inequalities of collective memory, and national history” (Hitchcock 2013; see also Cerutti 2015). In this perspective, recording and valuing everyday stories and everyday life might be seen as a practice of social resistance against various modes of domination that are naturalized by the official written history (Certeau 1975) and against the colonization of ordinary cultural practices by the modernist system of power (Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 1990).

First in a very broad and symbolic sense, the rewriting of history, by giving voice to the voiceless (and giving a name to the nameless with the catchphrase “I am [name of the person] and I am Denver”) and by promoting the use of oral histories, can be interpreted as an act of “deinfantilization” of the citizens, hence an act of democratization (Certeau 1975). Second, more precisely and in a more practical sense, the “I am Denver” storytelling labs stories frequently deal with daily life themes and issues. For example, listening to the stories, one easily notices the importance of a “home” theme and of the role the home plays in the inhabitants’ place attachment[[8]](#footnote-9). Many ordinary and resistant practices are based around the home (like “homemade” and “do-it-yourself” objects) and start with the claim of being home (Certeau, Giard and Mayol 1990). Thus, by giving value and visibility to the long-term residents’ sense of place, the “I am Denver” project questions the “out-of-placeness” feeling (Shaw and Hagemans 2015), as well as the issue of displacement as results of gentrification.

Furthermore, the CSO’s most recent documentary, titled “Qué viva la raza! Honoring a Denver legacy” (February 2022, 32 minutes), is an overview of the more than 150-year history of the Mexicano, Chicano, Latino peoples in Denver. It has served as a blueprint to create the “Latino/Chicano Historic Context Study”, a new document that will be used to guide preservation planning focused on specific ethnic, racial or cultural groups. The CSO is also working in partnership with the Department of Community Planning Development as a mediator and facilitator to bring the neighborhood voices into the official conversations about neighborhood planning. This way they can express their voices to decide what are the rules of a neighborhood: how high will the buildings be, what will mobility look like, how many parks will exist, etc. (Rowena Alegria, interview with author).

Thus, the CSO is fostering the construction of ordinary legitimacies based on the recognition of ordinary practices (Didier and Philifert 2019) and on the recognition of a “right to memory” and a “right to the city” (Lefebvre 2009) that would help preserve buildings and places that may not have exceptional architectural features but that encapsulate the immaterial culture and memory of a social group (Didier 2018). In these various ways, the “I am Denver” storytelling project, much like other independent or alternative media studied in this volume (see M-P Vincent contribution for example) can trigger anti-gentrification resistance. Its implicit critique of displacement has revived the debates on gentrification and has started to change (locally) the dominant narrative that tends to evict a critical class perspective (Tolfo and Doucet 2021). Also, by tackling the “gentrification of memory” issue, it could prevent the disappearance of places that are the milestones of local communities and, as a consequence, it could prevent more displacement.

## Evaluating the democratizing effects of this participatory storytelling project

To end this chapter, I wish to address one last issue. If participatory storytelling as it is utilized by the Denver CSO can have positive, democratizing effects on media narratives, this supposed democratization must be questioned and assessed. Is the CSO an effective discursive and political space able to tackle the issues related to gentrification? Or is it just another depoliticizing public relations tool?

Critiques of both storytelling and the participation of ordinary citizens have flourished in recent years. In a context that some authors call the “biographical society”, various studies show the growing significance of telling personal stories and shed light on the paradoxical injunction of this practice, caught between subjection and subjectivation, and being both an act of resistance and an act of allegiance (Delory-Momberger 2012)[[9]](#footnote-10). Indeed, on the one hand, storytelling has been considered as a narrative power that adds to the disciplinary techniques of government (Salmon 2008; Godin 2014) and that carries in itself the suspicion of lies (Bonnet, Camille-Delahaye, et Sebbah 2021). On the other, scholars assert that storytelling can help bring mutual recognition or even reconciliation between communities in conflict (Neile 2015; Maiangwa and Byrne 2015), or that it can facilitate individual empowerment and stimulate a community participation and sense of place (Costera Meijer 2013). Digital storytelling workshops have been utilized, with varying but often positive effects, in many different fields, from planning and evaluation in health and education services to dealing with experiences of migration, poverty, gender and youth violence (Spurgeon and Burgess, in Atton (ed.) 2015)

As an answer to similar critiques expressed in the media (Lundgren 2019; Vyse 2019; Bloomberg Cities 2019), Denver’s Mayor Michael Hancock confesses that a project like this will not “solve any major economic issue that is challenging Denver today”, and then he adds: “this is not about hiding anything. In fact, let's reveal it”. The statement, and thus the “I am Denver” project, can be interpreted at least in two ways. On the one hand, it can be viewed as an example of depoliticization, which “involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its *historical* emergence and from a recognition of the *powers* that produce and contour it” (Brown 2006, cited in Clarke 2010, 646), since it will not grasp the main economic issues. On the other, it can be seen as the creation of a public space open to criticizing and revealing the power mechanisms that causes gentrification or other sociopolitical issues.

This is an old debate in the participatory politics field and among the practitioners, activists and researchers who implement and study various projects and apparatus which aim at “giving voice to the voiceless” (see Ferron, Née and Oger 2022). The enrollment of ordinary citizens in participatory political processes sometimes moves towards new forms of populism and a depoliticization of related issues (Clarke 2010.). In the same way, there is no easy correlation between the participation of ordinary people in the media and cultural democratization. The growing participation of ordinary people in the media could lead to a populist and “demotic turn” (which means “of or for the common people”) rather than bring actual democratic changes in the structure of power, in the distribution of wealth or in the enforcement of individual rights and freedoms (Turner 2009).

Interestingly, this relates to another old debate between the cultural studies and the political economy of communication, that is to determine whether or not we should prioritize economic relations over cultural (and discursive) relations (see Garnham 1995). Without re-enacting this debate – and because I believe, following Maurice Godelier (2010) that the human and social construct of reality always combines symbolic and material elements – we must agree with Nicholas Garnham when he asserts that “no empowerment will mean much unless it is accompanied by a massive shift in control of economic resources” (Garnham 1995, 65, 70).

This being said, I nonetheless think the CSO could have a positive effect on empowerment and social justice, depending on its audience and visibility. Fundamentally, the CSO is a media and institutional mechanism which intends to give a voice to the “voiceless” which means to give their speeches the visibility, or even better, the authority they lack (see Ferron, Née and Oger 2022) Thus, one of the crucial criteria to evaluate the CSO’s action has to be the circulation, visibility and legitimacy of the contents it produces. So far, the CSO shows good, above the City of Denver’s average, but contrasted performance on different indicators and metrics. On social media, the overwhelmingly majority of “I Am Denver” posts outperform the average city posts in terms of Facebook distribution score, reach, and impressions[[10]](#footnote-11). Over the last three years, the posts have averaged over 450K impressions on Facebook and over 300K on Twitter, with an engagement rate around 1.8% on Twitter (over their initial target, fixed at 0.6%). The number of video views on YouTube and Instagram is not impressive, with around 10 to 15K views in total per year, but the average number of views per video is growing. Recently, the documentary “Chicanas: Nurturers and Warriors” has won an award at the 2022 Xicanindie Film Festival (a Denver-based film festival focused on Latino and Chicano films), four “I Am Denver” films were nominated for Heartland Emmy Awards and the CSO received three Awards of Excellence (in 2020 and 2021) from the National Association of Telecommunications Officers and Advisors.

In the end, even though stories and discourses alone cannot stop gentrification, they have their performativity, and if they continue to gain visibility and authority, they might be an important first step to engage the conversation, reveal the problems and thereafter influence urban policies. Taking note of the relative inability of existing democratic mechanisms and institutions – may they be traditional ones or more recent deliberative-participative ones – to solve major economic issues (such as poverty, growing inequalities and gentrification) and to deal with a political crisis of representation, the CSO belongs to a newer movement that seeks to encourage, or even force, the diversification of expressions and representations in the public debate and spaces (Ferron, Née and Oger 2022).

# Conclusion

To conclude, the Denver Chief Storytelling Office is a hybrid media project, halfway between a co-creative media, an alternative media and a public service media, that utilizes participatory storytelling in order to create new representations of the city, that differ from the mainstream media narrative of gentrification. By giving a voice to the “voiceless”, it advocates for a more inclusive vision of urban change and for a more democratic society. Nevertheless, one needs to be careful and not correlate too quickly a participatory storytelling design with democratizing effects since storytelling as a marketing technique and the call to ordinary citizens’ participation as a political process have been widely used with the opposite effect of reinforcing the power of the dominant institutions. However, when put together and when they serve a purpose of inclusiveness, I believe participation and storytelling can lead to positive results. The polyphonic and ascending dimension brought by the multiple participants alleviate the descending and insidious aspects of political storytelling. As Christian Salmon (2008) thinks, the narratives of power associated with storytelling techniques can become narratives of resistance.

The media play an important role in gentrification as they shape and publicize positive or negative representations of gentrification (and/or gentrifiers, gentrified neighborhoods) and of its effects. In recent years, as gentrification seemed to become a worldwide and inevitable phenomenon (especially in every major U. S. city), the critiques and discourses have shifted towards the cultural representations and effects of gentrification, pointing more and more a cultural gentrification and a gentrification of memory. Although they are not new, these problems are associated more specifically with the third wave of gentrification and they need to be tackled thanks to new sets of policies and mechanisms. The Denver CSO is one of them. The answer it provides is interesting to study further also because it goes beyond the problem of gentrification. Its ambition to include sociocultural subaltern groups in the written history of our societies and to build a more inclusive collective memory is in line with broader past and present debates about the construction of (post)modern multicultural representations and identities. Perhaps it is one more reason why we should pay attention to the relation of gentrification to the media.

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1. Author’s interview with Aaron Foley, Detroit, 29/09/2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Humans of New York (HONY) is an artistic project, started in 2010 by American photographer Brandon Stanton. The initial goal was to photograph a large number of New Yorkers in the streets and create a catalogue of the city’s inhabitants. Quotes and short stories from the lives of the people go alongside their portraits. From a blog, the project has grown to reach 20 million followers on social media and has expanded to feature stories from twenty countries, and two books were edited. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The metrics have been provided by Rowena Alegria and Roxana Soto from the Denver CSO. I express my thanks and my gratitude to them for sharing it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See: [https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/denvercitycolorado,denvercountycolorado/PST045221](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/denvercitycolorado%2Cdenvercountycolorado/PST045221) ; and [https://datausa.io/profile/geo/denver-co/#demographics](https://datausa.io/profile/geo/denver-co/%22%20%5Cl%20%22demographics). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See: <https://www.denvergov.org/Community/Neighborhoods/Office-of-Storytelling> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. All subsequent quotes in this section (unless otherwise mentioned) come from the author’s semi-structured interview with Rowena Alegria and Roxana Soto, videoconference Lille/Denver, 07/08/2021, length: 1h43min. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. According to the CSO team, the “I am Denver” catchphrase has served branding purposes and is no longer used in the most recent labs. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The home theme appears in many stories (see for example Tibby Miller, posted on youtube on 09/29/2019; Charlotte Vitak, Suzi Q Smith, 10/16/2019; Karen Van Haaften, Karen Pellegrin, 08/09/2019). Sometimes, the “storytelling labs” focus on one specific theme, like one about “Social Injustice”, and another titled “Health Equity Collaborative Goes Home Again” that is described this way: “Home plays a vital role to our health and well-being. […] Our ability to thrive depend[s] upon the stability of our living situation, and our sense of home, our memories, help determine who we are and where we fit in the world”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. This also refers to Michel Foucault’s governmentality theory and the development of the modern subject (Foucault 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Impressions refer to how many times a post appears on a people’s feed. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)