

The media, poverty and public opinion in the UK

Findings
Informing change

September 2008

This study examines the relationship between the UK media and public ideas of poverty. Although public attitudes cannot be attributed to the influence of mass media, it is important to acknowledge the media's pivotal role in responding to and reinforcing public ideas about poverty.

Key points

- Coverage of poverty is peripheral in mainstream UK media. The causes of poverty and the consequences of poverty were rarely explored.
- Non-news broadcasts rarely mentioned poverty, although they often featured those experiencing deprivation. Coverage tended to focus on extreme cases, highlighting the inherent 'failings' of undeserving people. Some documentaries explored the inequities of poverty and complex circumstances of those experiencing it, but reached limited audiences.
- In news media, poverty in the developing world received as much coverage as poverty in the UK, but was reported differently. Depictions of extreme poverty outside the UK correspond with and may influence how the public perceive and define poverty.
- The campaigning sector contributes to keeping UK poverty in the news and is valued by media professionals as a source of comment and a means to access people experiencing poverty. Campaigners recognise that they could be more proactive in generating and promoting coverage of under-reported aspects of poverty.
- Audiences tend to interpret representations of poverty and its causes in accordance with their beliefs and understandings. A key limitation of media coverage is the tendency to marginalise accounts which confront negative public attitudes.
- The researchers conclude that if media coverage could challenge misperceptions of poverty in the UK, it could prove an effective means of generating public support for anti-poverty initiatives.

The research

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Background

Efforts to engage public support for measures to tackle poverty must consider the media's role in informing and reflecting public opinion. This study used interviews, analysis of media output and focus groups to produce findings on: the volume and nature of media coverage of poverty in the UK; the representation of issues covered; factors shaping the production of poverty reporting; and public responses to media coverage.

How poverty appears in UK media

Poverty in the UK is a marginal issue in mainstream media. In the week's sample of output examined (30 July to 5 August 2007), 640 news reports referred directly to poverty, a synonym of poverty, or conditions or populations synonymous with poverty. This may appear a substantial number, but was a small proportion of the output analysed. Of this coverage, 46 per cent referred to poverty in the UK and 54 per cent outside the UK.

Poverty was rarely mentioned in non-news broadcasts. Discounting documentaries specifically about poverty, in over 40 hours of television analysed between January 2005 and October 2007, the word 'poverty' appeared only twice, both in *Shameless* (once referring to Live Aid and once to Comic Relief).

Poverty was rarely a news report's main focus. It was the main item in 38 per cent of the reports of UK poverty, and 56 per cent outside the UK. Education, housing and service provision were important contexts for reporting UK poverty. Beyond the UK, international aid, charity, political conflict and environmental issues were the important context for coverage of poverty.

Interviews with key informants involved in producing news explained this. Journalists and editors regarded poverty in Britain as possessing little news value. Even journalists interested in poverty acknowledged that they were more likely to secure coverage if they tied it to 'more newsworthy' issues.

"You have to make it eye-catching for the news editor to say, 'Ah, I see why I'm doing this'. The news editor has no moral interest in the subject, has no particular knowledge in depth of any specialism and is just looking at what's brought to him and saying, 'what do I fancy today?' The

specialist correspondent has to make a very good case and so you are always looking for the most dramatic top line you can find." (Political commentator, daily broadsheet)

People experiencing poverty featured in fewer than one in eight of the UK poverty reports (see Figure 1). Often, the only source of information was the journalist or broadcaster.

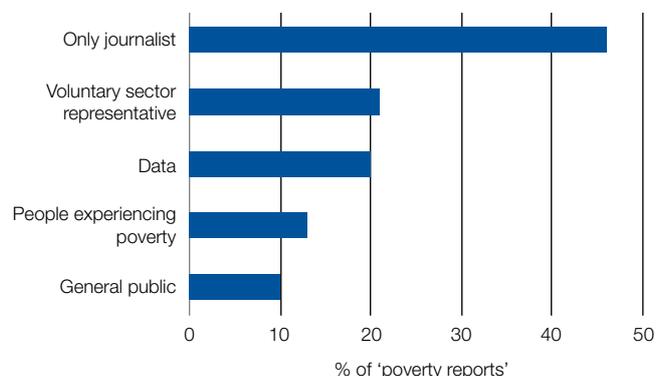
This reflected standard journalistic practices. As one editor explained:

"Journalists don't slam the door in the face of the poor. They just don't go knocking. It's not just the journalistic process: poor people don't make their voices heard so their stories don't get reported." (Editor, regional newspaper)

Groups with a higher risk of poverty were reported less frequently in UK coverage than those with a lower risk. For example, it was less common to make references to disabled than non-disabled people, more likely for men than women to be covered, and more likely for working than non-working poorer people to be mentioned.

Tracking 'poverty news' stories across different UK media demonstrated how the same issue was presented differently. It also showed the importance of the language used to describe poverty. Reports tended to draw on stock phrases and a familiar journalistic repertoire which portrayed government as active, while people experiencing poverty (when not overtly stigmatised) were represented as passive victims. Even when coverage was generally sympathetic, it risked differentiating those experiencing poverty from mainstream society, and portraying them as lacking initiative, unproductive and a burden on 'us'.

Figure 1: Who represents poverty in UK news?



Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July/August 2007
Notes: Based on 297 cases where reports referred to UK poverty or synonyms. Data presented on the five most prevalent sources of poverty information.

Drama programmes presented a largely sanitised image of poverty, in which the effects of low income were not depicted seriously. Even in the most ‘hard-hitting’ or social realist dramas (such as *Shameless*, *East Enders* or *River City*) characters rarely if ever appeared to be deprived of essentials through low income.

Whether intentionally or not, some reality TV and family-relationship-issue programmes, such as the *Jeremy Kyle Show*, used conflict between guests as entertainment. However, audiences’ capacity for independent judgement was shown by some focus group participants in the study objecting to such coverage as voyeuristic.

“There are also programmes where essentially, when you boil it down, people are getting entertainment about people having unruly children they can’t control and living in poor houses.” (White male, middle income, urban Scotland)

Some documentaries and reality TV provided examples of a more sympathetic, progressive representation of people experiencing poverty, but did not necessarily reach a wide audience. The *Secret Millionaire* was distinctive in highlighting the inherent worth of people experiencing poverty. It engaged people experiencing poverty in different ways across the UK, demonstrating the heterogeneity of the population in deprived circumstances.

How the UK media produce coverage of poverty

Key informants involved in producing media coverage of poverty confirmed that – unsurprisingly – news values rather than social values determine coverage. However, the demand for poverty news was perceived to have grown, and the UK Government’s poverty targets have become a ‘hook’ for more stories. The tendency for negative reporting of poorer people, particularly in the tabloid press, was a widely recognised feature of coverage.

Journalists use regular and convenient sources to produce stories about poverty. They depend heavily on government, politicians and officials, particularly for policy and statistics. Campaigning organisations are regarded as becoming more effective in communicating with the media, as a source of specialist comment, and a short-cut to case studies to bring stories alive. However, using individuals experiencing poverty to provide personal insights is problematic for the media and campaigning organisations. Notwithstanding the dangers in individualising poverty through personal stories, some campaigning organisations are apprehensive about the risk of exploiting those experiencing poverty or the

potential negative consequences of their appearing in the media (e.g. local reactions to participants receiving payments or self-promoting).

Campaigners also recognise, however, that they may be missing opportunities to influence coverage. Support is growing among them to act as intermediaries between the media and those experiencing poverty, and to develop new strategies to manage media relations.

How the UK public receive poverty coverage

Focus group participants struggled to recollect examples of media coverage of UK poverty. Most believed that such coverage as existed was mainly negative, focusing on ‘scroungers’ receiving benefits – particularly refugees, asylum seekers and young single mothers.

Most participants distinguished between broadsheets and tabloid newspapers in terms of trustworthiness. Those who read what were described as ‘trashy tabloids’ stressed that they did not trust them:

“I read the News of the World but I don’t believe a single word that is in it. Not even the times of the TV programmes.” (White female, urban Scotland).

Participants were generally more trusting of broadcast media than newspapers. However, this was qualified by the widespread sentiment that all media were motivated to attract an audience, which shaped their output: “the media as a whole is always going to try and grab whatever attention that they have as a goal” (Asian female, 18-34, north-west England). Even avid internet users did not trust its reliability: “you can put what you like on the internet, there’s nothing to stop you writing whatever you like” (White male, 18-34, east England). No participants mentioned using new media to convey their opinions on social issues; they remained consumers rather than producers of information.

Although the majority of focus group participants were surprised to learn that 3.4 million UK children were living in poverty, they were generally unmoved by this. In part, this reflected how this news was presented to them.

“It’s too boring and it’s not personalised, it’s the sort of thing that people would just turn over because it’s just text, text, text, figures, figures, figures, and it’s boring. It’s the sort of thing that should be personalised, there should be comments from people who are in some of these categories.” (White female, low income, rural Scotland).

Media professionals would not be surprised that how information is presented appears more important than content in creating a memorable impression.

While it is important not to overstate how far focus group participants were discerning in their responses to media coverage of poverty, the relationship between media output and public perceptions of poverty is clearly not a simple one of stimulus and response. The public assess media output critically and are not 'cultural dopes' manipulated into believing what they read and see. However, if audiences do not encounter much coverage of poverty, nor accounts which explain its structural causes (i.e. identify social factors restricting opportunities), they will draw on their existing understandings when it does arise. The media influence public opinions about poverty not through indoctrination or propaganda, but by marginalising accounts which challenge existing images and beliefs.

Conclusions

This study shows that there is scope for different representations of poverty in the UK media, and therein lies the challenge. The media have the capacity to inform the public about the nature of poverty; there is scope to humanise and politicise poverty. However, this possibility is undermined, as poverty is rarely explicitly described or explained.

The evidence from focus groups about which coverage is most memorable does not justify sensationalism. Rather, it indicates that coverage which challenges audiences can be effective. There are examples of media output which show that probing investigations of poverty can provide material for original, memorable copy. This is not to underestimate the journalistic challenge, as one focus group participant acknowledged:

"It [poverty] needs to be communicated in a way that people aren't going to switch off, because ... you know, you come home at the end of the day, and maybe you've had a bad day or whatever, and you put the TV on maybe for a bit of diversion..." (Black female, 45+, north-west England).

There is little evidence that the UK public glibly consume information on poverty from the media. Audiences interpret and adapt information in a way that is consistent with their existing understanding. However, imaginative reporting may prompt people to reflect on their views and begin to build public support for anti-poverty initiatives.

About the project

The project analysed aspects of UK media production, output and consumption. Interviews were conducted with nine key informants involved in producing media coverage of poverty – journalists, editors and press officers. Three aspects of media output were examined. Firstly, a systematic content analysis of news content over a study week (30 July to 5 August 2007) sampled over 150 newspapers, 100 radio news programmes, 75 television news programmes, a selection of news magazines and a range of new media. Secondly, the varying treatment of six poverty-related news reports was examined across a range of media. Thirdly, interpretive analysis was undertaken of the portrayal of poverty in selected drama, documentary and 'reality TV' broadcasts. To explore audience responses to media coverage, eleven focus groups were conducted with different socio-demographic groups across a range of geographic areas in Britain.

For further information

The full report, **The media, poverty and public opinion in the UK** by John H McKendrick, Stephen Sinclair, Anthea Irwin, Hugh O'Donnell, Gill Scott and Louise Dobbie, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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