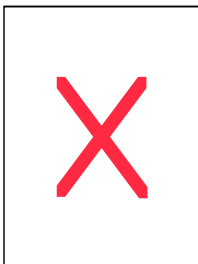


**Report on Poverty Filmmaking Project conducted in partnership  
between BBC Children in Need and The Joseph Rowntree  
Foundation**

Date: 11 January 2008

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1. Introduction

BBC Children in Need and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation entered into a partnership to create a series of 4 short (five minute) films depicting individual cases of poverty drawn from children and young people who have been helped by the BBC Children in Need Appeal.

The aim was to show four different ways of editorially filming a poverty story. These films would go on to be the basis for discussion at conferences/seminars run by the JRF or the BBC on ways in which the media could tell the story of poverty better. In addition these films (where appropriate permission had been gained) would also be able to be hosted on the JRF website.

## 2. Background

There is a constant debate between those people directly involved in dealing with poverty (Youth workers, Citizens Advice Bureau, Social Workers, Charities etc.) and the media – both print and broadcast – about how journalists and programme makers cover stories relating to poverty.

There is general criticism from those involved in working with poverty that the media do not spend enough time and effort in reporting cases and stories and fail to understand the complex nature of what constitutes poverty. In addition sometimes assumptions are made about how an individual may have come to find themselves in a certain set of circumstances. These criticisms tend to be specifically laid at the feet of news journalists/reporters.

From the media's point of view, while the public demand their news bulletins on the hour and want their newspapers to be fresh and topical each morning and websites to be updated constantly, there will always be rushed deadlines. In many cases there is physically not time to spend 48 hours getting to know the background and circumstances of individual cases.

The purpose of this report, and the associated films, is to show possible ways of addressing these two views, and to share the learnings so that filmmakers and those involved in working with poverty can understand the difficulties, challenges and opportunities from both sides.

## 3. Researching the case studies

Initially we approached Regional Officers at BBC Children in Need to discuss which projects in their areas would be most relevant. We also did extensive trawls through BBC Children in Need's internal database. We met with leading figures in the field but it quickly became apparent that there are no hard and fast rules on how to cover these stories.

Our initial question was how we should approach potential contributors for the films. Owing to the nature of the subject we knew that finding and accessing case studies wasn't going to be easy, and therefore the terminology and language we used was important. We decided from the outset that using the word 'poverty' wasn't going to be appropriate.

*"Hello Miss x, can we come and film you telling us your story of how you came to be poor?"*

It can be offensive and it's vague. Instead we favoured terms such as 'low income' or 'disadvantaged' and made sure we didn't make people feel undervalued or different in any way.

Initially, our principle contacts were Youth Workers from projects, who would then put us in touch with parents and children. Although obvious it's particularly relevant when dealing with emotive topics: every story and every contributor are different.

What might be deemed as an open and honest question to one contributor could be deemed offensive to another. For that reason, we felt it best to have a relatively brief discussion with any potential contributors on the phone beforehand. Generally we would outline the aims of the filmmaking project, ask basic background information and leave any more intimate, probing questions until we were better able to gage the situation in person.

When dealing with children under 18 we would obviously seek guidance from youth workers and/or parents about how comfortable any child would be to talk to us in the first instance, and we would follow the BBC Editorial Guidelines before proceeding.

#### 4. Deciding on the case studies

After speaking to many individuals and project groups we decided on the following four:

**Ewan** – a case of rural poverty told by a young man who “was out the other side” and therefore could look back at his experiences with more objectivity, and we were able to ask more searching questions.

**Lyn** – the story of poverty in Norris Green told primarily by the project worker rather than the children involved. Again got over the constant difficulty of getting children living in poverty to articulate their story, and gave us more flexibility in what we could ask.

**Kelly** - a classic complicated poverty case where there are many things in this young girl's life which have brought her to where she is now. We concentrated on trying to examine her history, which included the death of her father and her pregnancy

**Sarah** - we decided to film this story anonymously. It gave us the opportunity to cover the story of an asylum seeker, where anonymity is virtually the only way you would get a contributor to agree to take part. Children who are disadvantaged often feel marginalised and therefore filming may exacerbate the problem. Anonymity prevents this happening. Anonymity also prevents any adverse reactions against the child after a broadcast as it saves the child from being identified.

## 5. The Recce

The recce provided an opportunity to spend time with the contributor: adult or child. We were able to build up a sense of what they would and wouldn't feel happy talking about, and if they were suitable for the project. We were also able to ascertain if they truly understood what it was we are asking of them.

Can they articulate 'poverty'? This is quite interesting, as generally you would be looking for someone who's very articulate! But by very virtue of the topic you are researching, very often (but not always) there hasn't been a strong accent on education and the contributor may not be the most articulate. And although most youth workers were very keen for us to speak to the most articulate child in the group—we were mindful that they weren't necessarily representative.

Young children don't have any real concept of poverty. And this is something we came up against time and time again and why we don't have any young children in the films. Young children, mainly under 10's, may be able to flag up some differences between themselves and others but not have any sense of what that means. Because of this we chose to interview people also privy to the situation, like the Youth Workers, that were able to provide us with a more informed view.

## 6. The Filming

One of the biggest problems we faced as film makers was how to visualise poverty. It can sometimes be very obvious – run down estates/boarded up houses etc. However, in other situations it can be very difficult to detect.

This was particular apparent when making the film about **Ewan**, a teenager who found himself homeless and living in rural poverty. Our first problem was how to convey rural poverty – we were filming in particularly picturesque Cornish town and all our shots were very beautiful! I think the use of Ewan's voiceover here was critical: by using his voice about the violence and unemployment that exists in the town over the picturesque shots, we were immediately able to change the tone of the piece to reveal a very different story that would challenge the perception of the idyllic Cornish village.

Secondly, Ewan's story was retrospective and therefore there were no visible signs of 'poverty' apparent now. We therefore looked to enhance his piece by using quite stylised images of Ewan which helped to convey the feelings of desperation and isolation he'd experienced

In **Kelly's** story; we were concerned about the snap judgements and blame an audience may apportion. Kelly, who is now 18, was addicted to crack and heroin at 16 and is now expecting a baby. We tried to increase levels of understanding by letting her tell as much of her back story as possible. With the use of statistics we also tried to make her story representative. We also filmed a rough "soundbite" version of Kelly as well as a second longer crafted film – to give the contrast between the "rushing in and out approach" and what can be achieved by allowing a bit more space and time, and how that can change the viewer's perception.

We sometimes found it helpful to include another person's perspective. This was the case with the project worker from Norris Green, **Lyn**, who was able to give us an overview of the issues and social disadvantage

facing young people in the area. This added a valuable dimension to the story which we wouldn't have otherwise obtained from the children themselves.

Our recce was quite exhaustive and we were pretty clear afterwards about what we were going to get from our contributors. Although I appreciate this may not always be possible, when time permitted we arrived earlier at the location in order to spend a little time with the contributors to put them at ease. We gave them an overall sense of what we were going to ask them but never specific questions, as we wanted to get the most honest response rather than something they had rehearsed.

Although our recce with **Kelly** revealed she had gone off the rails when her dad died, it wasn't until we actually filmed her for the second time that we learnt about her dad's suicide. I think that largely came out as she felt more comfortable with us and more able to share sensitive information. We fortunately had the luxury of time which I appreciate many news journalists don't have. 'Time' to build up trust and also 'Time' to do a more exhaustive interview. We have therefore included two version of Kelly on the film compilation: the first is probably more representative of a news piece; the second a documentary.

We hoped that using a 2 man crew and a small digital Z1 camera led to a more intimate situation where the contributors felt most comfortable and at ease. That said, a digibeta camera and cameraman was employed on the anonymous **Sarah** film. As we were using an actor and filming anonymously it made sense to have a cameraman who could not only deliver a collection of well lit shots needed to cover the length of the story, but would also allow us time to concentrate on getting the correct sound from Sarah and corresponding actress shots.

## 7. The Editing

Having written quite a detailed script of our questions beforehand and the structure we were aiming for, this was quite straightforward. Everything was graded in the edit – this was a matter of choice and perhaps made the rushes look a little less raw.

The one thing that became quite apparent in the edit was the use of statistics, but more importantly, where to place them. We had discussed using these throughout the films to give the stories a background, or context. The positioning of these was quite important: in the first cut of

the Norris Green film, the project worker Lyn Wakefield, says, “In this area there is low education, low employment and a tremendous amount of single mothers”. We then use a board that reads: 53% of children living in this area are on benefits, twice the national average. It was felt that leaving the stress on the single parents at the end of the sentence followed by the board over emphasised the link between single mothers and benefits. In the final version Lyn Wakefield says, “There is a tremendous amount of single mothers in this area, low employment and low education”. We were also able to use a very powerful end board in the Norris Green film which reflected the fact that shortly after filming, 11 year old Rhys Jones was shot nearby. It gave the whole film a sense of reality and focus to what was trying to be achieved.

## 8. Pilot Usage

We gathered together 25 producers from BBC English Regions and showed them three of the four films we had made in September 2007 at a training session in Bristol. We illustrated rural poverty (with Ewan), the difference it can make if you tell the back-story (with Kelly) and the technique of using an adult worker (with Norris Green). We then invited Gerri McAndrew, Chief Executive of The Frank Buttle Trust to offer her insight into poverty in the UK. A discussion on the way we covered poverty then took place. There was general agreement that stories were better when given room to expand them, but that was balanced with the realisation of the deadlines required by filmmakers –

There was consensus that if the opportunities from a poverty filming/recording project were to be maximised it should have a 5 month lead in time

## 9. Follow up usage

After the course each radio station was encouraged to put their own interpretation on poverty. Detailed below are examples some of the treatments – This is not an exhaustive list, but samples of the style of programming:

1 recorded feature per day (during a week) looking at a local poverty story in their area, in the high profile breakfast programme slot (eg. Radio Cornwall)

1 day’s worth of poverty related features and programming right across a radio station’s schedule (eg. Radio London, Radio Devon)

Child poverty stories – but told through adults (parents, care workers etc.) One a day for a week (eg. Radio Cumbria, Radio Cambridgeshire)

24 different radio stations interviewed poverty experts from a range of organisations (eg. Frank Buttle Trust, Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

Young people featured telling their story of poverty in retrospective (eg. 17 year old homeless girl on Three Counties Radio)

Charity experts discussing poverty in a “Question Time” format (eg. Radio Nottingham)

## 10. Conclusion

Hopefully these films will have provided four workable techniques that a wide range of filmmakers can use when covering a poverty story featuring a child or young person. In summary these are:

**Retrospective** – find an individual who has been through the situation being reported, and allow them to tell the story from their own experience.

**Back story** - ensure that questioning focuses on getting the detailed history of the child or young person on film, it can have a huge influence on how viewers perceive the film.

**Adult worker** – use an adult worker connected with the situation to tell the story for the child, this tends to enable the story to be explored in greater depth.

**Anonymous** - for the cases where it is impossible to guarantee protection for the child or young person, or where it may be the only way to get the story told, use an actor and/or disguised filming.

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