

Poverty in the media

Findings
Informing change

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This study examines how people with direct experience of poverty in the UK can have a more effective voice in the media. Presentation of their views and experiences through media channels can help to shape and develop public opinion and build support for action to combat poverty.

Key points

- Poverty is generally under-reported in the media. If more people with experience of the everyday realities of poverty were given a voice in the media, this would enhance public understanding of poverty in the UK.
- When journalists write stories about poverty they usually want case studies – people who can talk about their experience of living on a low income. This provides an important opportunity for people living in poverty to tell their stories.
- Journalists often ask third sector (voluntary and community) organisations to help them find people to interview. These organisations need to support people who come forward to work with the media.
- The internet provides new opportunities for self-expression. People can send emails, develop websites, write blogs and upload sound, stills and video clips.
- Third sector organisations can provide people with access to internet technology, train people to use it effectively and host content on their websites.
- An online audience could be developed by setting up a web portal to provide a reliable resource of material from people with experience of poverty. This would also be a focus for debate. A demonstration project with a specific community could test the potential of internet media to develop awareness of poverty issues.

The research

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Introduction

Public understanding of poverty in the UK is limited. The media can help to remedy this by enabling people with experience of poverty to present their views and tell their stories. This study looks at how people with experience of poverty can engage with the traditional media – the press, radio and television. It also explores opportunities for self-expression in the new media centred on the internet.

People who have themselves experienced poverty can talk in concrete terms about what poverty is like and what its consequences are. Their distinctive voice needs to be heard in order to increase public understanding and awareness – and, in turn, generate pressure for change.

Poverty in the traditional media

Although it is a major social and political issue, poverty in the UK is generally under-reported in the press, on radio and television. When it is covered, poverty and its consequences can be presented sensitively and effectively. All too often, however, the media resorts to stereotypes and has a tendency to judge, label and sensationalise. The everyday hardship experienced by millions of people in the UK is rarely reported. According to one journalist, 'poverty is worthy, not newsworthy' – ordinary, banal poverty isn't a story. But it can be: real stories from everyday life can capture the interest and imagination of the audience.

There is a widespread – and justifiable – view in the media that poverty only works as a story if the views and experiences of people living in poverty are presented. It is not enough simply to give statistics and quote comments from charity campaigners, academics and politicians. Personal accounts are accessible, bring a story to life, make it real and relevant. Journalists therefore want case studies – people who will talk about their experiences and give their opinions. The use of case studies offers an important opportunity for people with experience of poverty to engage with the media and have a voice.

Case studies – finding people and supporting them

Journalists often ask third sector (voluntary and community) organisations to help them find suitable people to serve as case studies. Many organisations see this as a good chance to publicise issues they are concerned about, but they are also wary of the media and rightly concerned to protect people from the damage that can result from media exposure.

Third sector organisations need to be clear about their roles and responsibilities when responding to case study requests. They should:

- know the media and, in particular, check out the track record of media outlets and journalists making requests;
- look at what kind of story is proposed and how it is to be presented;
- aim to secure an honest and respectful treatment of people and issues;
- recognise that the emphasis should be on enabling people to have a voice; the opportunity is not just about promoting the organisation.

Above all, if an organisation has provided a contact, it is responsible for supporting and safeguarding the interests of the individual involved. The organisation should help people think about the implications of engaging with the media and be ready to offer support throughout the whole process.

Individuals considering working with the media need to think about:

- whether to take part – weighing up the risks to themselves and others as a result of media exposure, and anticipating how the story may be presented;
- negotiating the involvement – whether the person's identity will be revealed, how an interview will be done, what it will cover and whether there will be opportunities to check material prior to publication or broadcast;
- how to present themselves – what to say, how to say it, even what to wear;
- what support they need – the third sector organisation may be able to offer media training, interview practice and send someone to the interview to give support.

In addition, people should be aware that the interview will be edited – and that it might not even be used at all.

Establishing relationships of trust between journalists, the third sector and case study individuals is the key to good, accurate and sympathetic coverage.

New media, new opportunities

Opportunities for self-expression

The media landscape has changed enormously, notably with the advent of the new media available through the internet. There has been increasing fragmentation of media and audiences, with the proliferation of media outlets and technological developments. Traditional media are also being transformed by new media technologies and are having to respond to serious economic pressures.

The new media have opened up new opportunities for self-expression, enabling people to send and receive material easily and relatively cheaply. If they have access to the internet and the requisite skills, individuals and groups can send emails, develop websites, write blogs and record and upload sound, stills and video clips. Social networking sites, such as YouTube and MySpace, have been particularly important in stimulating the production of user-generated content.

The traditional media are characterised by centralised control, which decides what is to be presented and whose voices are to be heard. In the new media, by contrast, there is little control and much more open access. People whose voices are scarcely heard in the traditional media can express themselves freely in the new media. The downside is that it can be very difficult to reach an audience. It is easy enough to get material on the web, but who will find it and look at it?

Third sector organisations and access to new media

Third sector organisations can play a very important role in supporting people with experience of poverty to access the new media – and use it effectively to reach and communicate with people on the other side of the poverty line. These organisations can help by:

- providing access to technology, particularly the internet;
- supporting people who lack literacy or language skills, or lack confidence;
- providing training – ranging from using email to video editing;
- providing internet space to host/publish material.

Producing material can be a liberating and empowering experience in its own right. But in order to influence public understanding of poverty, it is essential to engage with an audience. To stand a chance of doing this, there are two basic, mutually supportive requirements. Whether it is a video, blog, podcast or email, it needs to be:

- interesting, attractive, concise, informative and well produced;
- so good that people will want to pass it on to others.

Effective use of new media

Digital storytelling has proved to be an effective approach, involving the production of carefully crafted visual and sound content, with people talking about aspects of their life stories. For discussion of techniques, and examples, go to www.digistories.co.uk and www.photobus.co.uk.

Many third sector organisations recognise the value of personal accounts, especially to support campaigns. An increasing number of organisations are involved in producing videos and putting them online. The website for the Katine project in Uganda, for instance, supported by The Guardian and Barclays bank, hosts compelling videos of villagers talking about their lives, activities, hopes and fears (www.guardian.co.uk/katine). The Church Action on Poverty website brings together written material, podcasts and videos made with people experiencing poverty in the UK (www.church-poverty.org.uk/resources/voicebox). Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme has a blog, UK Poverty Post, where journalists, politicians, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and – most importantly – ordinary people can share information and opinions about poverty in the UK (www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty).

Getting seen and being heard

Individuals and groups have many options for disseminating their material. They can create their own site or submit material to others' sites, and can take part in online discussion and debate. However, with so much material on the web, visibility is difficult to achieve.

Also, getting an audience for material reflecting the experience of poverty is likely to be far harder than getting an audience for entertainment material – celebrity gossip, for example. But it can be done, notably by linking in to web-based communities.

By posting material on existing sites it is possible to connect with established audiences. Relevant websites may include those run by third sector organisations or by newspapers and other traditional media. There are numerous online communities based around particular interests, including social justice issues. Examples include the Christian webzine The Ship of Fools (www.ship-of-fools.com) and the US-based Alternet (www.alternet.org). As the 2008 US presidential elections demonstrated, big online communities can be developed and can deliver an influential audience.

Conclusion

Traditional media channels provide little coverage of the experience of real-life, everyday poverty. When they do run stories on poverty issues, third sector organisations can play an important role in finding case study contacts and supporting these individuals through the media interview process.

The continually changing new media landscape offers new opportunities for people with experience of poverty to participate, have a voice and be heard. To help ensure that these opportunities are fully exploited, the third sector could take the initiative and be proactive and innovative. For example, a good way of disseminating material could be to create a web portal that gives access to material such as digital stories and provides a focus for debate. This could be run by a partnership of third sector organisations and would provide a reliable, trusted resource aimed at creating dialogue and enhancing public understanding of social issues, especially poverty.

There would also be merit in setting up a demonstration project to explore the potential of the new media. It is envisaged that media and communications experts would work closely and intensively with a community experiencing poverty, enabling people to produce and disseminate material about their everyday lives and views. Again, this could make a substantial contribution to developing better awareness and understanding of poverty issues across social and economic divides.

About the project

The study was carried out by a team based at St Chad's College, Durham University. It draws on interviews with people from third sector organisations and from the traditional and new media, and interviews with people with experience of poverty who have worked with the media.

Accompanying the report is a set of three short films, which offer some examples of different approaches to reporting poverty and presenting people's stories. They provide accessible, visual material which may be used to inform and develop practice.

For further information

The full report, **Poverty in the media: Being seen and getting heard** by Fred Robinson, Richard Else, Maeve Sherlock and Ian Zass-Ogilvie, are published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The report and a set of short films relating to this project are available to download from www.jrf.org.uk

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