

Transmitting deprivation? The media and public attitudes towards poverty

Poverty in the UK does not appear to be a priority issue for the mainstream UK media, and the picture of poverty the media does provide is skewed towards certain issues and representations. Building support for the reforms necessary to reduce poverty significantly in the UK requires understanding the influence of the media in shaping public perceptions. Knowledge of how images and ideas about poverty are presented by the mass media and consumed by the wider public could assist CPAG and other organisations to communicate more effectively with the public, thereby strengthening public support for anti-poverty activity. Stephen Sinclair and John H McKendrick describe their recent research.



Introduction

As part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation research programme on public interest in poverty issues, the Scottish Poverty Information Unit (SPIU) was commissioned to examine the relationship between media coverage of poverty, public perceptions and policy preferences.¹ This project aimed to: compare representations of poverty across UK media; identify the principal factors and considerations influencing those involved in producing media coverage of poverty; understand how UK media representations of poverty relate to the public's understanding of poverty; and identify examples of effective practice in communicating poverty issues to the public and derive lessons from these.

According to the Glasgow University Media Group, the output and influence of the mass media should be understood as a process, which it calls the 'circuit of mass communication'.² This circuit comprises several stages – the production of media messages, its output, and audiences' responses. It is necessary to consider the interaction between each stage to develop a rounded understanding of how the media works and its relationship to public attitudes.

To explore how the content of media is created, interviews were conducted with key informants involved in generating and producing news coverage. These included specialist social affairs correspondents, editors, press officers from campaigning organisations, and people living in poverty whose experiences had been reported in the media.

Media coverage of poverty was examined by three means. Firstly a content analysis of news reporting of poverty was undertaken. Over 150 newspapers, over 100 radio news programmes, over 75 television news programmes, a small sample of news magazines and a range of new media sources were analysed over a study week (30 July to 5 August 2007). Sources were selected to cover national, regional, local and community media, and to collect data from the three devolved nations of the UK and three

regions in England that were identified in the *British Social Attitudes* as having different outlooks towards poverty.³ Secondly, the varying treatment of six poverty-related stories was tracked and compared across different media. For example, one of these stories was Gordon Brown's first official visit as Prime Minister to the USA in July 2007, which he used as an opportunity to outline his vision to tackle global poverty. Fifty-one reports on this story were analysed. Thirdly, a detailed interpretative analysis was undertaken of how poverty featured in selected non-news broadcasts. The images and discourses of poverty were examined in selected documentaries (*Evicted*, *Breaking Up With The Joneses*), comedy dramas and soap operas (*Shameless*, *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders*, *Emmerdale*, *River City*), and reality TV and lifestyle programmes (*The Secret Millionaire*, *60 Minute Makeover*, *Wife Swap*, *The Jeremy Kyle Show*).

To explore audiences' responses, focus groups were undertaken with participants from a range of social and demographic groups in Scotland and England. These focus groups explored participants' attitudes towards different media and their perceptions of the nature and scale of poverty in contemporary UK. Participants' responses to contrasting examples of media coverage of poverty were also examined to see what forms had the greatest impact.

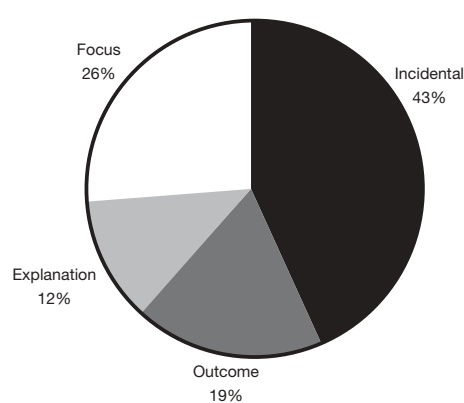
Not making the news: media coverage of poverty

Unsurprisingly, we found that poverty is not a priority issue for the mainstream UK media. In the study week, the output of over 300 media publications was found to contain 640 reports referring to poverty, a synonym of poverty or to conditions or populations synonymous with poverty. While this may seem a lot, it is actually a small proportion of the output of these sources. For example, during the study period, seven sources alone carried over 1,000 stories.⁴

In addition, coverage of poverty was more likely to refer to poverty in the developing world than in the UK: 46 per cent of the stories referred to poverty in the UK, while 54 per cent covered poverty in other countries. The nature of coverage was also subtly different in each case, with an implicit (and sometimes overt) contrast drawn between 'real' poverty in the developing world and the less severe condition that was reported to prevail in the UK.

A reference to poverty or one of its synonyms does not mean that the story is actually about poverty. In fact, as Figure 1 shows, poverty was

Figure 1: **The way in which UK poverty contributes to articles and broadcasts in the UK news**



Source: SPIU UK Media Content Analysis, July/August 2007

Notes: Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. The authors made a subjective judgement on whether poverty was the main focus of the report, whether poverty was significant as an explanation, whether poverty was significant as an outcome, or whether the mention of poverty was incidental to the report. It should be noted that a small minority of reports referred both to poverty as an explanation and to poverty as outcome. Furthermore, reports that focus on poverty may include presenting poverty as an explanation for other social phenomena or as a result of other social processes.

the primary focus of only one-quarter of the reports in which UK poverty was mentioned (that is, 76 stories out of 640). It was much more common for any reference to poverty in the UK to be incidental (43 per cent of references).

In one respect, this acknowledges the relevance of poverty to a wide range of social issues. However, in practice, poverty was often raised in relation to these issues in an inconsequential manner. It was common for poverty to be used in an incidental, offhand way than for it to be explored as an explanation for, or an outcome of, these wider social issues.

The reasons for this slight and selective coverage became apparent from the interviews with key informants. It comes as no surprise that news values rather than social considerations shape media content and coverage. Journalists and editors do not believe that poverty in the UK has much news value. Competitive pressures mean that poverty will rarely feature for its own sake, as it is regarded as of little interest to mass audiences. If poverty is covered at all, it is more likely to be in relation to other 'more interesting' issues, such as politics, crime or anti-social behaviour. Even specialist correspondents with a professional interest in poverty realise that they are more likely to secure coverage if they tie poverty 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

Even when poverty is covered, only certain voices are included. People actually experiencing poverty featured in fewer than one in eight of the UK poverty reports (see Figure 2). Often, the only source of information was the journalist or broadcaster. This reflected standard journalistic practices:

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

While the results of any content analysis must be interpreted carefully, it does appear that poverty in the UK is not a priority issue for the mainstream UK media, and the picture of poverty the media provide is skewed towards certain issues and representations. This selective portrayal was also apparent from the analysis of examples of poverty coverage. This identified a standard rhetoric and repertoire of clichés, which characterises the reports of non-specialist journalists when they cover poverty

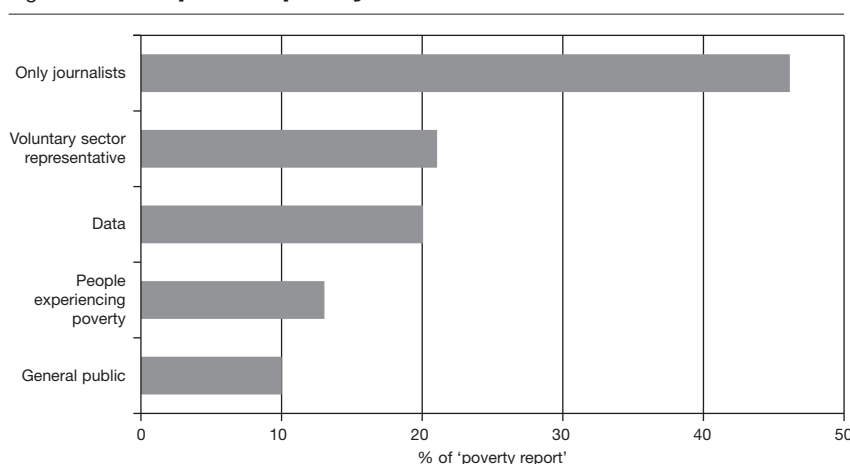
issues. For example, the terminology of war and journeys appear often. Mainstream journalists also tend to depict groups and individuals experiencing poverty as passive, while attributing a more active role to government in responding to poverty. The overall effect of such coverage to represent poverty as an abstract occurrence or misfortune, rather than the result of structural conditions or the distribution of resources, and imply that those experiencing poverty are distinct from 'us' – taxpayers, workers and savers.

Switching off: poverty in drama and documentaries

Poverty is virtually absent from mainstream non-news TV in the UK. In over forty hours of broadcasting from the nine non-documentary programmes that were analysed between January 2005 and October 2007, the word 'poverty' appeared only twice, both times in the comedy drama *Shameless* – once referring to Live Aid and once to Comic Relief. Although some documentaries do explore the inequities of poverty and the complex circumstances of those experiencing it (for example, *Evicted*), these reach limited audiences. Furthermore, some of this coverage risks being a form of 'poverty tourism'. For example, while the *Secret Millionaire* has the virtue of demonstrating that poverty exists in diverse communities throughout the UK, and is not attributable to the fecklessness of deprived groups, it is explicitly intended to distinguish the 'deserving' poor who receive the charitable benefaction from generous individuals, rather than exploring sustained social responses to the root causes of deprivation.

When poverty is depicted in drama and non-news programmes, the image is largely sanitized and the harsh negative effects of deprivation are not conveyed. The genuine consequences of a lack of economic resources are never seriously depicted in even the most 'hard-hitting' and allegedly social realist popular dramas. For example, no one in soap operas appeared deprived of essentials, there was no homelessness, no hunger and no problem in going to the pub and buying a round of drinks. Poverty exists only obliquely: the resources that characters are shown to lack are mainly cultural rather than economic. The solutions to poverty implied in soap operas and popular drama are almost exclusively measures of individual self-improvement, usually through education. Responsibility for low-income living is assumed to rest squarely on the shoulders of those experiencing poverty.

Figure 2: **Who represents poverty in the UK news?**



Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July/August 2007

Notes: Based on the 297 cases for which a report referred to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. This Figure presents data on the five most prevalent sources of poverty information. Figures sum to greater than 100% as more than one source of information on poverty is possible per report – ie, 11% of reports drew upon more than one source.

Making sense of the show: audience responses and public perceptions

Evidence from focus group research was used to explore how audiences interpreted UK media coverage of poverty. Three related themes emerged: the level of trust in media; attitudes towards different types of coverage; and whether the mass media influence audiences' perceptions of the nature or causes of poverty.

Focus group participants placed more trust in what they regarded as 'quality' media. For example, they placed more faith in the reliability of broadcast media than newspapers and in broadsheet newspapers than what were described as 'trashy tabloids':

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.

Female, urban area, Scotland

However, trust in all media sources was limited by the widespread sentiment that the media were motivated to attract an audience and that this 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, aged 18–34, North West England

Interestingly, new media (such as the internet) did not appear to be significant sources of news information for many focus group participants, and none mentioned using such media to convey their opinions on social issues: users remained consumers rather than producers of content. Furthermore, even the most avid internet users (not surprisingly, these were mainly younger people) placed little faith in the reliability of its content, as one such young person said:

You can put what you like on the internet, there's nothing to stop you writing whatever you like.

White male, aged 18–34, East England

Focus group participants mistrusted what they regarded as a sensationalist and deliberately confrontational presentation of poverty. However, they also believed that such coverage would leave a more memorable impression on viewers and readers. Merely presenting statistics and facts about poverty in a story has little impact. As one participant said about an example of a more reliable but less colourful news item on poverty:

... 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, fig-

ures, 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.

Low-income white female, rural Scotland

Participants frequently referred to their personal experiences in making statements and judgements about poverty, particularly to challenge media representations. Researchers at the Glasgow University Media Group have suggested that those with least personal knowledge of an issue are most likely to be influenced by media coverage.⁵ Young people with no direct experience of poverty might be an example of this, as they may be more likely to draw upon secondary information to inform their opinions and therefore show the greatest media influence. No conclusive evidence was found for this. Some younger focus group participants *did* say that the media extracts presented confirmed what they already thought about poverty, but they were just as sceptical as others about the reliability of media reports, and referred to their existing beliefs to make judgements and offer opinions. While this does not prove that audiences are immune to the influence of media portrayals of poverty, it does suggest that viewers, listeners and readers are able to challenge the reliability of media messages, and actively filter and interpret output in the light of their own experiences and existing beliefs. The relationship between media coverage and public perceptions of poverty is not a simple one of external stimulus and effect; people are not easily manipulated 'cultural dopes'.

Despite this, it would be mistaken to dismiss the influence of the mass media. The mainstream UK media present a kaleidoscope – a colourful and distorted image – rather than an 'objective' picture of the world. While audiences have the capacity for independent judgement and resist coverage which is contrary to their experiences and existing beliefs, they are not exposed to structural explanations of poverty. It is therefore not surprising that survey data shows considerable public scepticism about whether poverty really exists in the UK, ambivalence about its causes and doubts over whether those experience poverty really deserve support.⁶

Getting the message across

An important lesson from this project for those aiming to generate support for anti-poverty measures is that it pays to understand what appeals to the media and to the public. For example, it is unrealistic to expect the mainstream media to cover issues and stories which they judge to be unappealing:

.....
**No one in soap
 operas appeared
 deprived of
 essentials**

The media is not a moral entity, it sells newspapers... in the end we are selling a product that people have got to read, and it's got to be eye-catching.

Political commentator, daily broadsheet

Focus group participants themselves testified to the difficulty media professionals face in persuading an audience to watch TV programmes about poverty:

It 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, aged 45+, North West England

Media professionals know that how information is presented is more important than its content in determining whether it reaches an audience and leaves an impression. Poverty campaigners interviewed for this project were aware that to shape public debate they had to become more media savvy to get their important message across.

In terms of the most effective images of poverty and welfare to convey, it appears there is little to be gained in the short term from attempting to prove that public opinion about poverty in the UK is 'wrong' or trying to change it directly. A more effective strategy is to appeal to those aspects of public opinion which are favourable to particular reforms.⁷ For example, portraying welfare support as an investment which contributes to collective wellbeing rather than subsidising 'idleness' is more likely to win over a public which is suspicious of perceived 'hand-outs'. Indeed, the TUC recently proposed that campaigns against child poverty should emphasise the social and economic costs of this problem and highlight society's collective self-interest in tackling it.⁸

In the age of rolling 24-hour news, a huge increase in media sources (including online and digital media) and an insatiable demand for copy, there are more opportunities than ever before to put across the case for effective strategies to tackle poverty. Imaginative campaigns can attract media attention and work to change public perceptions of poverty. But in the marketplace of voices that is the contemporary media, poverty campaigners need to sell their story effectively. ■

John H McKendrick and **Stephen Sinclair** are Director and Deputy Director of the Scottish Poverty Information Unit, Glasgow Caledonian University

- 1 JH McKendrick, S Sinclair, A Irwin, H O'Donnell, G Scott and L Dobbie, *Media, Poverty and Public Opinion in the UK*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008
- 2 G Philo and D Miller, 'The Circuit of Mass Communication' in M Holborn (ed), *Developments in Sociology*, Causeway Press, 2002
- 3 A Park, M Phillips and C Robinson, *Attitudes to Poverty: findings from the British Social Attitudes Survey*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007
- 4 These seven sources are: the *Observer*, *Sunday Mirror*, the *Herald* (Wednesday edition), the *Muslim News*, *Maxim*, BBC Radio 4 *Six o'Clock News* (Monday broadcast) and *ITV News at Ten* (Thursday broadcast)
- 5 G Philo, 'Media Effects and the Active Audience', *Sociology Review* 10(3), 2001, available at www.gla.ac.uk/centres/mediagroup/effects.htm
- 6 P Taylor-Gooby and R Martin, 'Trends in Sympathy for the Poor', in A Park and others (eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 24th report*, Sage, 2008
- 7 L Bamfield, 'Making the Public Case for Tackling Poverty and Inequality', *Poverty* 121, CPAG, 2005 pp5-8
- 8 'TUC Exposes the Cost of In-work Poverty,' *Labour Research*, January 2008, pp20-21, available at www.lrdpublications.org.uk/publications.php?pub=LR&iss=1401