Blaming the Victim

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How Global Journalism Fails Those in Poverty

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Introduction

Back in the early twentieth century, one of America's finest journalists and authors, Upton Sinclair, wrote *The Brass Check*, one of the first comprehensive studies about journalism practices and media ownership. In *The Brass Check*, Sinclair warned that the United States had 'a class-owned press, representing class interests, protecting class-interests with entire unscrupulousness, and having no conception of the meaning of public welfare' (1919: 318). Others such as Hamilton Holt saw journalists as 'tools or vassals of the rich men behind the scenes' (1909: 4). In both cases, it was perhaps a harsh assessment of the overall state of the press at the time but these judgements do reflect some truth that even today resonates in the tone and approaches that still dominate news narratives with regards to poverty. News media today still offer simplistic explanations about why people live in a state of poverty, explanations that reflect dominant discourses that are shaped by class ideology.

Indeed, the two-times Pulitzer Prize winner, Nicholas Kristof, in his 2 November 2011 column in the *New York Times*, suggests that there is a solution to problems such as climate change, poverty and civil wars: 'birth control'. For Kristof, the impact of overpopulation is clear:

> One is that youth bulges in rapidly growing countries like Afghanistan and Yemen makes them more prone to conflict and terrorism. Booming populations also contribute to global poverty and make it impossible to protect virgin forests or fend off climate change. Some studies have suggested that a simple way to reduce carbon emissions in the year 2100 is to curb population growth today. (Kristof 2011a)

Sadly, these simplistic views are still widely held by many in newsrooms around the world, despite the fact that the overwhelming depletion of nature occurs at the hands of the richest individuals, who not only consume the most but also produce and supply the weapons that fuel the wars that have devastated places such as Afghanistan and Yemen.

Regrettably, we have heard similar arguments, albeit from different standpoints, for almost two hundred years. The singularity of Kristof's article is that, in many ways, it reflects the prevalent views among the

most powerful media in the world today. Eric Ross calls it the 'Malthus Factor', an ideological paradigm which tends to blame the poor for environmental degradation (1998: 73). In the case of the so-called 'global media', we could also refer to these views as an Orwellian doublespeak that not only embraces a false paradigm as a discourse of truth, but that also evades reality by transferring responsibilities to the victims. In so doing, the international media seem to obviate, deliberately, the underlying circumstances that foster poverty, while displacing responsibilities to parallel political spheres where the possibility of any real action can be blocked.

Some scholarly literature has concentrated on national media representations of poverty, linking it, for example, with welfare (Franklin 1999: 6). This is perfectly understandable as poverty is mainly a national issue (Townsend 1993), despite its international dimension. In more recent times, academic work has focused on the way in which emotions connect spectators with those who suffer (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013; Höijer 2004). These same works have looked at how those links create a common space between spectators in the West and those who suffer, which is also referred to as 'regimes of pity'. For these authors, this common space enables the mobilisation of the public, who pressure politicians to articulate some sort of response to these types of humanitarian crises (Robinson 2002; Shaw 1996; Zelizer 2001). They argue, nevertheless, that this can also lead to 'compassion fatigue' (Höijer 2004; Moeller 1999) and therefore to the exhaustion in the public's political will to engage with such events. Few scholarly works, however, have looked at the processes of news gathering, production and dissemination in relation to poverty and social exclusion from a global perspective. This global perspective is needed, as these structural elements are not constrained within national levels of political action: they are a direct by-product of historical international structures, which have been exacerbated by the process that we call 'globalisation'. As Pierre Rosanvallon (2012) points out, media globalisation has brought the world closer, while simultaneously deepening the gap between social classes. For him, the divided classes in our time are the equivalent of the separated nations of the nineteenth century and world inequality is no longer different from social inequality.

None of these works have been able to explain fully why journalists concentrate on the manifestation of poverty rather than poverty as a by-product of inequality, despite the fact that in order to fulfil its normative claim of social change, the reporting of poverty should go beyond describing

the manifestations of exclusion. In facts, journalistic practice normatively demands an approach that should expose the structural elements from which poverty derives, such as the uneven distribution of resources and the limitations in accessing the means of production of wealth.

Indeed, poverty as a consequence of inequality has become a news story with a particularly international dimension that requires a distinctive explanatory framework. Reporting on poverty from an international perspective is important, as the 'experiences of the developed countries should be more widely publicised' so as to allow more informed choices (Chang 2002: 140). This book intends to advance precisely this view – one that is more transnationally focused and historically based. In so doing, it will also discuss different interpretations of poverty by deconstructing representations in the context of global media. It examines the way journalists and news editors working in mainstream media outlets understand the causes of poverty and how they view the different manifestations of this phenomenon in the news agenda.

The book presents a critical assessment of poverty in the newsroom from both the point of view of news-gathering/production/dissemination and through the analysis of the relationship between journalists and their sources. It investigates when and how poverty becomes newsworthy and how it is articulated in media narratives and subsequently represented throughout specific news discourses. It analyses the framing of poverty as a news story from an international perspective, while arguing that far from being considered a homogenous practice, journalists' framing of poverty should instead be seen as an example of the complex dynamics within the ecology of the newsroom.

Complex Definition

Poverty is a recurrent theme in the media, although not as widely reported upon as one might think. Nevertheless, as it is argued in the following chapters, it is mostly presented by journalists by means of its different underlying manifestations, such as overpopulation, famine, exclusion and conflict. Poverty in the news is therefore a true mirror image, as reality is regularly represented as an inverse truth in which poverty is a consequence of these tragedies rather than the other way around.

Another important problem has to do with the core views of news-makers and news-shapers in relation to poverty. Although the news

coverage of some of these issues has changed over the years (Gráda 2009: 1), it is still anchored in certain values that dominate the worldview of poverty in the newsroom. In this worldview, poverty is rarely presented as a rational phenomenon that follows the logic of inequality. There are very few occasions when the public is told that the reason why so many have so little is because so few have accumulated so much. When exceptional journalists tell this side of the story, many accuse them of bias and partisan propaganda. In these cases, as we will explore later, objectivity is used by some as a deterrent for ideological analysis in the name of safeguarding journalism's neutrality. Because of this, most news stories concentrate on the palliative efforts of 'heroes' and the goodwill of donors. As the Indian journalist Palagummi Sainath reminds us:

> Too often covering the poor, for the media, gets reduced to romanticising the role of saintly individuals working among them. Often these heroes are from the same class and urban backgrounds as the journalists covering them. A latter-day version of the noble missionary working among the heathen savages. (1996: 295)

In reality, most journalists and news editors operate within specific ideological categories that define not only the way poverty is constructed in the newsroom but also the narratives that frame it as a news item (Devereux 1998: 21). The fact remains that global coverage of poverty is articulated within the frame of greater ideological discourses, but in such a way that these frameworks do not become explicit enough to challenge the status quo of wealth distribution. Nevertheless, news of poverty manages to present itself as political, mostly by deferring to the notion of objectivity, that is, presenting the political facts but without the much-needed accompanying structural analysis.

This is not to say that all coverage of poverty always takes into account political context. On the contrary, representations of the poor often tend to be based on views with little or no context (Meinhof and Richardson 1994), as they often follow the same type of articulation of other issues – that is, being manufactured and bearing little relation to actual events (Harcup and O'Neill 2001: 277). Indeed, poverty tends to appear on television screens and front pages only when there is a 'crisis'; structural day-to-day issues are largely invisible unless they present a justification for military intervention, or legitimise the colonial past of present intervention in the face of donations and foreign aid. This situation

prevails despite the fact that these crises are by no means new, but merely visible manifestations of structural and more fundamental issues. Hence, poverty is mostly articulated in the news as an isolated issue which seldom challenges prevalent worldviews and ideologies.

Therefore, one of the key themes of this book is to explore how journalists themselves understand the notion of poverty. For news editors and reporters, the fact that the concept of poverty has been instrumentalised in ways which mean something very specific in the context of specific ideological narratives should be a matter of concern. This is because deferring to those promoting these worldviews has the unintentional consequence of framing news on poverty in ways which do not challenge the status quo by not exposing, for example, inequality or social injustice. The question then is what do we really mean when we use these terms in our debates and discussions about the media? This is important not only in terms of how journalists influence public policy but also in relation to the consequences for political action of reproducing prevalent discourses about poverty.

Poverty in itself is by no means a universal concept (Lister 2004: 4), at least not one that can easily be summarised in the news. Even when specialists refer to categories such as 'absolute poverty' (as widely discussed in the prolific debates between Amartya Sen and Peter Townsend), the 'universality' of the concept has been difficult to pinpoint. This is not to say that it is not a tangible phenomenon. Poverty is everywhere we look and, despite some very abstract discussions that are actually not that useful for political action, poverty is nevertheless a category that encapsulates the most pressing and real tragedy of our times.

Poverty, as originally suggested by Adam Smith, is about a lack of respect from others:

> … it is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty … The reason poverty causes pain is not just because it can leave people feeling hungry, cold and sick, but because it is associated with unfavourable regard. (Smith 1776)

Poverty, therefore, is relative not only to what the poor lack, but also to what is available to the rest of society. As such, news stories about poverty should also be about inequality, which until relatively recently was often absent in those mainstream stories. This is one of the key arguments of this book.

It is also important to define what is meant in this book by the term 'global news media'. These are the news media outlets that are based in those countries with sufficient wealth and power to influence the most powerful elites and to mobilise people inside those countries; this group of nations is often called the West, but also includes countries such as Australia and Japan. There should be no doubt that in this book the term 'the West' is also a euphemism for wealthy and 'global' an indirect reference for 'powerful' and 'influential'. This is because the media systems that we talk about here are all part of the post-Second World War arrangement often referred to as the 'international community'. This 'community' is composed of the group of nations that after the Second World War went on to dominate the United Nations system and its institutions such as the Security Council, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and Bretton Woods (which includes the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, IMF) and major military forces such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

In this context, we recognise the problematic nature of such generalisations; within this group of media outlets, there are important exceptions. However, what we have done in this book is to use these generalisations in order to make our analysis more accessible. Overall, what we want to highlight with this exercise is how the coverage of poverty by the global news media relies heavily on the conceptual frameworks developed over the years by undemocratic and unrepresentative organisations and institutions.

In one respect, the global news media nearly reflect reality: poverty in the international news coverage is as much about 'the others', as it is about power. Indeed, those who are excluded from the patterns of consumerism and wealth enjoyed in the West, and who have little or no opportunity to shape the editorial policy of those media outlets, exist in the news narratives only in relation to those who have access to the media and the resources to shape their agenda. Hence, the following chapters also examine the position of those in power in relation to the phenomenon of poverty.

Overall, this book is about the invisible society that surrounds us; the slums in the cities, the destitute farmers, the beggars in the streets and the places and people, who, metaphorically speaking, only show up on our screens when destiny and tragedy make them visible and useful in perpetuating and reproducing power structures. Therefore, it is a book about how we, the privileged ones, view our destitute fellows through the

lenses of a small group of reporters, journalists and media owners. The media are not the only party culpable of this distortion; it is no secret that we in the West are more than willing to listen to those who act as a Praetorian Guard for the ideas, preconceptions and worldviews that allow us to continue to live in the comfort of our homes without having to face up to the moral dilemmas posed by our chosen lifestyles.

It would be naïve not to expect that in an unequal world, news reporting would also be anything but unequal, despite the fact that there has been widespread awareness of the problems of media representation of the developing world, well expressed in the 1980s UNESCO report, *Many Voices, One World*. Nevertheless, since its publication, very little has been done – in the context of traditional mainstream media – to improve the way people around the world perceive and understand poverty. The promised dialogues between the North and South have rarely materialised and many media representations remain as problematic as ever.

What this book suggests is that the news coverage of poverty needs to evolve and that in order for this to happen, journalists ought to take a step back and review their own role in enabling the prevalent discourses. Part of this reassessment will mean re-engaging with the imagination of the wider public and re-establishing real commitments towards structural transformations and challenging existing injustices. As Chandran Nair, founder of the Hong Kong-based think tank Global Institute For Tomorrow (GIFT) said recently, 'The extreme form of capitalism which has permeated the world, particularly in the last 30–40 years, is in deep trouble and we are [all] in denial' (BBC 23 September 2011).

Finding a Meaning

The inspiration for this book was born of frustration – with both reading the news media and with having to confront my own past as a journalist and news editor. Indeed, this book is in part a reflection of my own failures at reporting poverty and the type of experiences I and many of my colleagues share in this field. Therefore, I make no excuse for what was by any standards an appalling level of news coverage of poverty on my part. This book is not a patronising attempt to tell journalists what many of them already know. Instead, I wish it to become a reflective account that could help move things forward.

I understand all too well the unbearable pressures under which most journalists work. But journalism is what it is: a practice modelled by the pressing circumstances and demanding dynamics that surround events and facts that are covered on a daily basis. As very imperfect historians, journalists go about seeking truth with worn-out tools in a challenging and changing environment that is transforming the nature of what they do and who they are. However, rephrasing John Maynard Keynes, it is equally true that if we are intellectually honest people we should therefore change our minds when facts tell us to do so.

Journalistic practice and the environment in which journalists operate have changed in the past decades in ways which make this area almost unrecognisable; its unprecedented transformation is ubiquitous (Waisbord 2013: 174), but nevertheless still aspires to uphold some of its more cherished values. This dichotomy of context and practices, together with the aspiration to maintain the ethical framework that has defined journalism as a profession, challenges particularly the way news media attempt to cover poverty as a global phenomenon.

In a way, we could be forgiven for feeling a certain nostalgia for the former Soviet Union. It is not that we should somehow forget the brutal excesses of that regime or the ruthless and inhumane character of the totalitarian dictatorships behind the Iron Curtain. Having said that, the end of the socialist experiment meant that many in the West stopped talking about poverty in a serious way; many journalists and editors who used to place inequality at the centre of the news agenda started to disregard it in favour of the New World Order. Indeed, inequality was a central argument in the propaganda efforts during the Cold War; hence it was widely reflected in the debates and narratives of the news media. However, after the 1980s, inequality became almost invisible in the news agenda with few exceptions.

Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union, which also meant the end of assistance to many places in Africa, Asia and Latin America, occurred almost in parallel to the debt crises in the developing world and the subsequent implementation of the IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). This meant that these Washington Consensus-inspired type of policies were implemented in fragile societies in the developing world when they were at their most vulnerable and had no political alternative to use as a bargaining chip. Until then, the West had implemented a series of assistance programmes for developing countries that fostered industrialisation and even encouraged land reform in some

countries, such as John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress aid programme in the 1960s; these were created as a propagandistic counterbalance to Soviet initiatives such as the purchasing of Cuban sugar at a premium price and similar subsidies to other countries. If that era could hardly be categorised as a 'golden age' for the world's poor, at least the Cold War put them at the centre stage of the propaganda drama between capitalism and socialism, which meant that inequality was present as a recurrent theme in the news narratives.

The end of that era introduced a predominant paradigm in which many argued for the end of utopias, best summarised in Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay 'The End of History?'. Soon after, many journalists fell for the illusion that merely by means of economic growth, market deregulation and by modifying certain aspects of our current system of production, we would achieve the eradication of poverty. By then development had become, as Gilbert Rist (1997) argues, a 'global faith' and 'economic growth' the ritual that should be performed if we aimed for salvation.

Many of us working in the newsrooms across the developing world at that time enabled these types of policies to be implemented by insufficiently scrutinising these ideas and experiments in social engineering. To many of us, privatisation and open markets seemed at that time a logical and rational solution to the chronic lack of public services, waste and state inefficiency. For example, many in the developing world will still remember how one had to wait almost ten years for a phone landline or face chronic shortages of water or electricity cuts at the mercy of state-owned companies. Many of my own generation still remember how many resources were poured into state-owned airlines, hotels and manufacturing industries, while hospitals and schools were running on huge deficits and scarce resources.

However, in the end, the medicine was worse than the illness. We know now that the neoliberal promises of a better future never materialised in the Third World. In hindsight, it is easy to see how naïve many of us were to expect that these policies would actually work. But knowing this now is of little comfort for those in a state of poverty who have had to carry the heaviest burden of these policies and who have never received a proper apology from those of us who should have known better. If anything, this book is my own personal apology to them.

Poverty cannot, of course, be blamed solely on the spread of neoliberal ideology into policy-making during the 1980s and 1990s. World poverty existed before structural adjustment programmes were ever devised, before the arrival of what we now call 'modernity'. However, indiscriminate

liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation, adopted as dogmatic ideologies in the past few decades, have certainly made things worse.

The inequality gap is today far wider than it has been: 1.5 billion people in the world are medically obese, while another 1 billion go to bed starving every day (EFE 2011). Furthermore, most experts will nowadays recognise that despite improvement in countries such as China, many other countries have experienced a deterioration in living standards.

Despite this, if one were to believe the reporting in the news media before 2008, things were only getting better. The general discourse and its associated narratives in the news overwhelmingly embraced the free market model in which consumerism, maximum productivity and economic growth were leading the world towards an era of prosperity never seen before. It was a series of discourses in which limiting state intervention and pursuing absolute efficiency were at the core of any solution for poverty. These discourses are of course connected by the same goal: maximising profits by allowing the concentration of ownership of industry and services, while discouraging governments from taxing the very rich.

From the 1990s onward, any attempt to address inequality was frequently attacked by the media, under the pretext of incentivising investment. In Britain, Gordon Brown's attempts to increase taxes on inheritance, first as chancellor and then as prime minister, were met with fierce opposition by the mainstream media. Later, in the United States, President Barack Obama's plans for an equality tax that would make a hedge-fund manager pay the same tax rate as a plumber or a teacher was labelled 'class warfare' by Republicans, and the president was called a 'communist' by several segments of the media.

The situation became so obscene that on 15 August 2011, the financial investor Warren Buffett, one of the three richest men in the world, expressed his disgust at the fact that he paid less taxes than many of his most junior employees, by publishing an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* with the title 'Stop Coddling the Super-Rich'. He called for an increase in taxes on those reporting more than US$1 million of taxable income a year in the US. President Obama reacted in his 2012 State of the Union address by announcing the introduction of legislation that would make people earning over US$1 million pay the same tax rate as the rest of the population.

The majority of Washington's mainstream journalists were caught out by this sudden change in the news agenda. As with the character of Brooks Hatlen in the film *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), they were