

The media, poverty and public opinion in the UK

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How the media in the UK represents poverty and its effect on wider public understanding.

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The media fulfils an important role in shaping, amplifying and responding to public attitudes toward poverty. This study, part of the 'Public Interest in Poverty Issues' research programme, explores the role of national, local and community media in reflecting and influencing public ideas of poverty and welfare. The research aimed to:

- compare representations of poverty across different contemporary 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 any differences between the responses of different groups;
- identify examples of effective practice in communicating poverty issues to the public and derive transferable lessons from these.

The researchers analysed coverage of poverty in news reporting; looked at how the same poverty news story was reported across different news outlets; reviewed how poverty was presented across different genres of television programme; interviewed key informants involved in the production, placement and presentation of poverty coverage in the mass media and explored public interpretations and responses to media coverage of poverty through focus groups/workshops.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| List of tables and figures | 4 |
| 1 Introduction: poverty and the media | 5 |
| 2 Poverty in the UK | 8 |
| 3 Reporting poverty in the UK news | 13 |
| 4 Tracking ‘poverty news’ across media | 27 |
| 5 On-screen representations of poverty | 33 |
| 6 Reproduction of poverty in the media | 39 |
| 7 Public responses to media poverty | 48 |
| 8 Issues and conclusions | 54 |
| Notes | 58 |
| References | 60 |
| Appendix: Research methods for reporting poverty in the UK media | 63 |
| Acknowledgements | 72 |

List of tables and figures

Tables

| | | | | | |
|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1 | Attitudes to poverty in the UK | 12 | 5 | Mentioning of poverty, wealth and ideas related to poverty in the UK news | 16 |
| 2 | Profile of the people experiencing poverty in the UK where such information is available in the UK news | 25 | 6 | Mentioning poverty in the UK news, by media outlet: average number of 'poverty reports' per genre | 17 |
| A1 | Sampling frame for the SPIU audit of poverty in the UK news | 64 | 7 | Source of the issue that leads to UK poverty being mentioned in the UK news | 18 |
| A2 | Case studies for tracking poverty news reports across media | 66 | 8 | Mode through which the issue is raised that leads to UK poverty being mentioned in the UK news | 19 |
| A3 | Case studies for on-screen representations of poverty | 68 | 9 | The issue (subject matter) that leads to UK and non-UK poverty being mentioned in the UK news | 20 |
| A4 | Focus group profile | 69 | 10 | Prominence of poverty in the UK news: UK and non-UK based stories | 20 |
| A5 | Key informant profile | 70 | 11 | Formats in which UK poverty is mentioned in the UK news | 21 |

Figures

| | | | | | |
|---|--|----|----|--|----|
| 1 | Number of people living in poverty in the UK according to government estimates, 1994–95 to 2005–06 | 9 | 12 | The way in which UK poverty contributes to articles and broadcasts in the UK news | 22 |
| 2 | Changing composition of people living in poverty in the UK, 1994–95 to 2005–06 | 9 | 13 | The number of times a UK poverty report mentions a core concept of poverty in the UK news | 23 |
| 3 | Where is the poverty that is mentioned in the UK news? | 14 | 14 | The sources through which UK poverty is represented when poverty is mentioned in the UK news | 24 |
| 4 | How poverty in the UK is described when mentioned in the UK news | 15 | 15 | Types of information in UK poverty reports that could be used to profile the population experiencing poverty | 24 |

1 Introduction: poverty and the media

More than a quarter of a century has passed since Peter Golding and Sue Middleton published *Images of Welfare: Press and Public Attitudes to Poverty* (Golding and Middleton, 1982). Set against an understanding of the history of social policies for people living in poverty and focused on the late 1970s at a time when economic recession coincided with a welfare backlash, their seminal study investigated media content, the production of welfare news and its relationship to public attitudes to welfare and public understanding of poverty.

The recognition that the media fulfils an important role in shaping, amplifying and responding to public attitudes towards poverty makes the work of Golding and Middleton no less important today. However, times have changed. For almost ten years, the UK Government has pursued its pledge to eradicate child poverty within a generation. There is no longer a pervasive public anxiety over welfare, although welfare fraud and whether claimants are deserving of support remain concerns of the British public, particularly with regard to immigrants and asylum seekers (Irwin, 2006). Furthermore, the media has undergone profound changes in recent years, with a wider range of communication modes being used and more opportunities being afforded for participatory journalism.

Thus, it is an opportune moment to reconsider the role of the media in helping to shape public understanding of poverty in the UK. These issues are of particular concern to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) at the current time. Through the 'Public Interest in Poverty Issues' programme, the JRF seeks to better understand attitudes to UK poverty, with a view to exploring the implications of these attitudes for communication and change. This study builds on previous JRF-supported work that highlighted ambiguity and confusions among public attitudes to UK poverty. It also complements work that is developing a more practical resource

for journalists on reporting poverty. The report starts by considering the significance of the media in furthering our understanding of poverty.

Sources of information about poverty

How we encounter poverty shapes how we understand and respond to it. For example, direct personal experience of poverty, either as a child or as an adult, is more closely associated than any other socio-demographic characteristic with liberal attitudes towards poverty (Park *et al.*, 2007). With over ten million people experiencing poverty in the UK at the current time (DWP, 2008), direct personal experience should have a significant bearing on how poverty is understood in the UK. Indeed, poverty dynamics mean that considerably more than ten million people in the UK will have had direct personal experience of poverty *at some time* in their lives.

Furthermore, contact between the non-poor and people experiencing poverty means that many more than ten million people encounter poverty in the UK at the current time. Contact takes place in many settings (workplace, wider public space, social networks, extended familial networks) and may take the form of fleeting interactions, client-service provider associations or close personal relationships.

However, the extent to which direct personal encounters with and experiences of poverty are recognised as poverty is less certain. Research has demonstrated that people experiencing poverty do not always acknowledge that they live in poverty (McKendrick *et al.*, 2003). Similarly, contact with people experiencing poverty may not always be acknowledged. Unlike earlier historical periods, poverty in the UK today is not synonymous with destitution, starving millions and barefoot children; people experiencing poverty in the UK today tend to be clothed, sheltered (if

not housed) and fed. However, they do not have enough wealth or income to partake of what might be reasonably expected of people living in the UK. Furthermore, the desire to project a dignified appearance in public implies that poverty encountered is not always poverty recognised.

It follows that poverty is more likely to be acknowledged when it is described as such when presented through the mass media. Newspapers, television, films, blogs and radio all present poverty to their respective audiences. The media might focus directly on poverty (such as when the incidence of poverty is reported in the news) or attention might be drawn to poverty as a significant context (such as when commentators speculate on the impact of an economic downturn). In either case, the media has the potential to be an important source of information about poverty and a forum for debate on poverty. It is this potential that suggests that the media might play a key role in shaping people's understanding of poverty.

New media, new times?

The media has changed beyond all recognition in recent years. Many of these changes have been driven by the impact and response to new information and communications technologies. First, changes should be acknowledged in the traditional operational modes of newspapers, television and radio. Although circulation remains high, many national newspapers are experiencing significant reductions in circulation numbers (in hard copy). At the same time, local newspapers continue to fulfil an important role in local debates, although, increasingly, there are free newspaper distributions in many localities, and organisations (such as local authorities) are producing their own service newspapers. Similarly, the number of radio and TV stations to which people have access has increased.

Second, 'new media' is transforming the 'old media'. Newspapers, television and radio stations are embracing new technologies as they present mixed modal media. For example, national newspapers are often accompanied by their own lifestyle magazines and are supported by an internet site that makes key content more readily available to a wider (worldwide) audience.

Third, these new technologies not only are becoming a key source of information for an increasing number of people in the UK, but also have the potential to transform the media by embracing more public participation. For example, text messaging is widely used as a means for the audience to communicate with the media and online forums afford more opportunities for the public to respond to issues raised in the media. Ownership of news media is pluralised through the proliferation of online discussion forums and the blogosphere.

Fourth, new technology has had a significant impact on both news gathering and news reporting. Relatively cheap and portable recording and transmission technologies, the proliferation of broadcasting outlets through digital TV and radio, and the internet, have transformed the news media landscape. This has led to 24-hour rolling news broadcasts and a corresponding demand for information to fill this. One result has been growing demands on broadcast journalists to provide more copy and meet tighter deadlines, while allowing them less time to actually gather the information they need to report (Marr, 2005).

These trends hold out possibilities for far-reaching changes in the relationship between the media and its audiences, with – in principle at least – more opportunities than hitherto for the consumer to be a producer of news and debate. This study explores whether these new circumstances are reflected in changes in media coverage and public attitudes towards poverty.

About this study

Poverty is prevalent in the UK at the current time and, notwithstanding the recent interventions of government, further anti-poverty strategies are required to reduce poverty significantly in the UK.

However, as Sir Michael Partridge, the former Permanent Secretary at the Department of Social Security, has pointed out, such policies must be 'politically deliverable. If policies are hugely unpopular, democratic governments tend not to press ahead with them' (Partridge, 1994, p. 13). The sentiment has been reinforced more recently from New Labour; speaking at the 'Poor Relations' conference in 2005, Ed Balls asserted: 'we need

campaigns to surround the Treasury with bells and buggies, demanding an end to child poverty in the UK. Just like the Jubilee 2000 campaign did for global poverty'. Public support is a precondition for effective anti-poverty measures, but evidence suggests that the British public are only conditionally supportive of anti-poverty policies.

This study explores the role of national, local and community media in reflecting and influencing public ideas of poverty and welfare. Although it would be naive to attribute public attitudes towards poverty and public support for anti-poverty initiatives solely to the mass media, it is important to acknowledge the pivotal role of the mass media in reflecting and influencing public ideas of poverty. The research aimed to:

- compare representations of poverty across different contemporary 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 any differences between the responses of different groups;
- identify examples of effective practice in communicating poverty issues to the public and derive transferable lessons from these.

To achieve these objectives, the research process involved five interlinked investigations:

- systematic content analysis of the coverage of poverty in news reporting (Chapter 3);
- interpretive case study analysis of how the same poverty news story is reported across different news outlets (Chapter 4);
- interpretive case study analysis of how poverty is presented across different genres of television programme (Chapter 5);
- interviews with key informants involved in the production, placement and presentation of poverty coverage in the mass media (Chapter 6);
- focus group/workshops exploring public interpretations and responses to media coverage of poverty (Chapter 7).

The common themes to emerge across these investigations are discussed in Chapter 8, prior to the drawing of conclusions. Research methods are detailed in the Appendix, although a summary is provided at the start of each chapter.

Before reporting on the findings, the next chapter outlines aspects of the nature of poverty in the UK at the current time.

2 Poverty in the UK

Contemporary poverty in the UK

Over ten million people in the UK are currently living in poverty (DWP, 2008). More precisely, in 2006–07, 2.9 million children, 5.3 million working-aged adults and 2.5 million pensioners were living in UK households with an income below 60 per cent of median household income, equivalised using the OECD scale,¹ on a before housing costs² basis. This means that almost one in five people (18 per cent) in the UK are experiencing poverty, as the UK Government identifies it.³

Of course, there are different ways of measuring low income, which will lead to various estimates of the number and proportion of people understood to be experiencing poverty (Howard *et al.*, 2001). For example, the UK Government's absolute measure of poverty – comparing current household income against household income in 1998–99 – suggests that 6.9 million people (12 per cent of the population) are experiencing poverty.⁴ On the other hand, the numbers experiencing poverty may be even higher than the 10.4 million suggested at the outset; the UK Government's relative measure of poverty on an after housing costs basis suggests that as many as 13.2 million people (22 per cent of the population) are experiencing poverty.

Although policy analysts and statisticians might argue about the preferred measure for estimating poverty, and, hence, the actual number of people living in low-income households with poverty, what is certain is that a substantial number and proportion of people living in the UK are experiencing poverty in the early part of the twenty-first century.

Recent trends in the incidence of poverty

Mixed messages arise when considering recent changes in the number of people experiencing poverty (Figure 1). Significant progress in tackling poverty would appear to have been made when

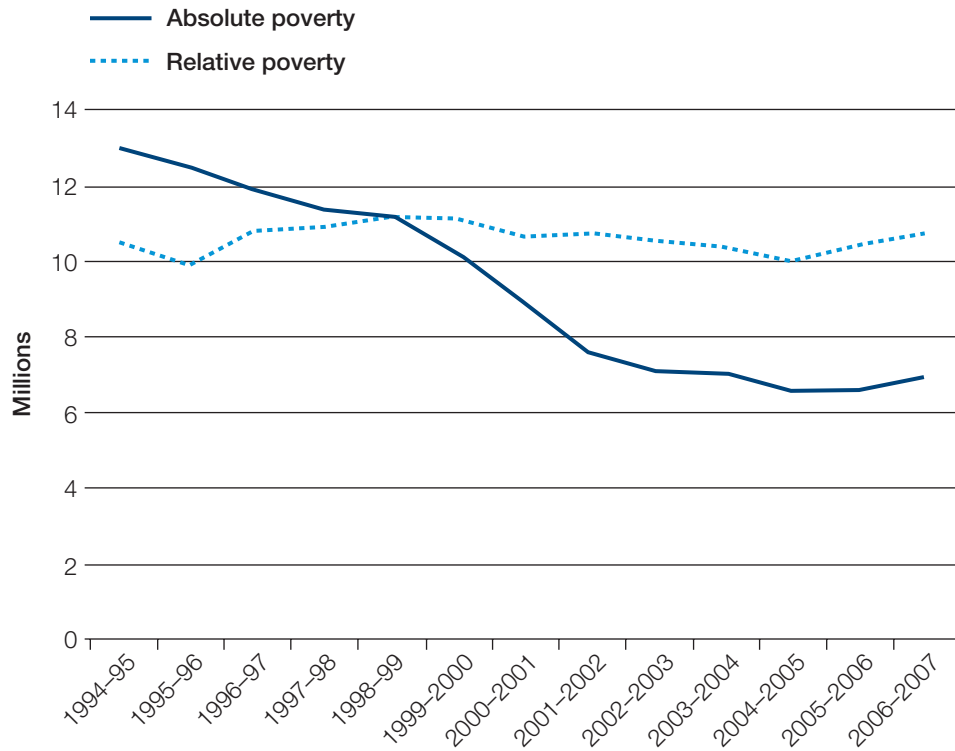
measuring whether incomes have increased in real terms since 1998–99 – that is, the total number of people living in poverty has fallen from 11.2 million in 1998–99 to 6.9 million in 2006–07. However, if we understand poverty to be living on an income that is too far below typical contemporary income levels, then it is found that the total number of people living in poverty has fallen only from 11.2 million in 1998–99 to 10.7 million in 2006–07.

Significantly, the composition of those living in poverty has changed since 1998–99 (Figure 2). Thus, while the number of children experiencing poverty has fallen from 3.4 million to 2.9 million (30 per cent to 27 per cent of all people experiencing poverty) and the number of pensioners experiencing poverty has fallen from 2.8 million to 2.5 million (25 per cent to 23 per cent of all people experiencing poverty), the number of working-aged adults experiencing poverty has risen from 5 million to 5.3 million (45 per cent to 50 per cent of all people experiencing poverty). This is not to suggest that less attention should be directed to tackling child or pensioner poverty; both government and independent analyses have confirmed progress towards achieving the target of eradicating child poverty by 2020, but also have identified concerns that the current pace of change is insufficient to achieve this goal (Hirsch, 2006).

More generally, the risk of experiencing poverty is shared unequally across and within groups (DWP, 2008). A higher than average risk of poverty is experienced by:

- *children* – in particular, children in unemployed lone-parent families, children of couples where the parents are unemployed or work only part-time, and those in families with four or more children;
- *older pensioners* – both couples and singles over 75, with single female pensioners affected most adversely;

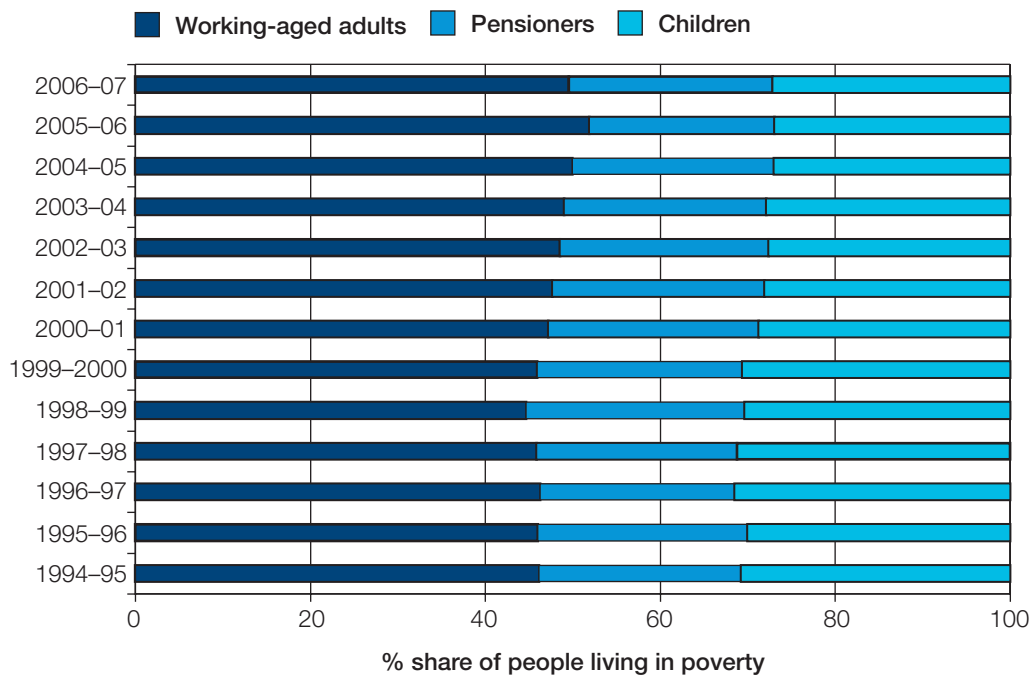
Figure 1: Number of people living in poverty in the UK according to government estimates, 1994–95 to 2006–07



'Poverty' refers to a household income, OECD equivalised and before housing costs, which is 60 per cent below median household income. Refer to text for more details.

Source: DWP (2008, Tables 3.1 and 3.2).

Figure 2: Changing composition of people living in poverty in the UK, 1994–95 to 2005–06



'Poverty' is understood in relative terms. Thus, people are considered to be living in poverty if the household in which they reside has a household income that is 60 per cent below median household income (OECD equivalised and before housing costs). The 'poverty threshold' changes annually (assessment is against contemporary income).

Source: derived from DWP (2008, Tables 4.3, 5.3 and 6.3).

- *minority ethnic groups* – households headed by someone of Pakistani or Bangladeshi ethnic origin;
- *disabled people* – individuals in families containing one or more disabled people and not in receipt of disability benefits;
- *local authority and housing association tenants*;
- *those with no educational qualifications* – working-age adults living in families in which the adults have no educational qualification are more at risk;
- *individuals living in inner London*.

Recent policy to address poverty

Poverty is now firmly established on the UK political agenda. Since 1997, successive UK governments have sustained a multifaceted approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion. Key characteristics of this approach include the following.

- The commitment made in 1999 to eradicate child poverty within a generation (Blair, 1999).
- Investment in a welfare-to-work strategy and the guiding principle of ‘work for those who can and security for those who cannot’ (Lister, 2001). This was exemplified by numerous active labour market and employability policies, such as the various New Deals implemented since 1997 (Millar, 2000; Ritchie, 2000; Walker, 2000).
- The formation of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to tackle particular forms of social exclusion (e.g. teenage pregnancy, rough sleeping) and facilitate a cross-government policy response. The SEU was replaced with the Social Exclusion Taskforce, which published *Reaching Out*, its action plan on social exclusion, in November 2006 (HM Government, 2006).
- The publication since 1999 of an annual *Opportunities for All* report, to describe the

Government's strategy and to monitor progress in addressing poverty and social exclusion.⁵

- The retention as reserved powers in Westminster of two of the main levers of government control over poverty – welfare benefits and taxation policy – following the introduction of devolution in July 1999.⁶
- Complementary anti-poverty work in the devolved administrations, such as the pursuit of the Social Justice Strategy (1999–2004) (Scottish Executive, 1999) and ‘Closing the Opportunity Gap’ (2004–08) in Scotland (McKendrick *et al.*, 2008); the Task Group on Child Poverty and *A Fair Future for Our Children* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005) in Wales; and the Anti-Poverty Forum and *Ending Fuel Poverty: A Strategy for Northern Ireland* (Department for Social Development, 2003) in Northern Ireland.

Attitudes towards poverty and anti-poverty strategies

Numerous studies over a prolonged period have shown that the British public is only conditionally supportive of anti-poverty policies. Characteristic features of attitudes towards poverty and welfare in the UK over the last 30 years include:

- a sustained distinction between support for universal services (e.g. NHS, education) and suspicion towards services targeted at particular groups (e.g. unemployment benefits) (Klein, 1974);
- preference for absolute over relative conceptions of poverty (Taylor-Gooby, 1983);
- moral distinctions of the relative ‘deservingness’ of welfare users (Norris, 1978);
- belief that entitlement should be conditional on a work ethic (Deacon, 1978);
- belief in individual rather than social-structural explanations of poverty (Coughlin, 1980);
- exaggerated concerns about fraud and ‘scrounging’ (Taylor-Gooby, 1985);

- ambivalence towards income redistribution (Taylor-Gooby, 1995).

These features were reaffirmed by Alison Park *et al.* (2007) in their analysis of the questions about poverty that are included in the British Social Attitudes Survey (see Table 1). In their exploration of the meaning, perceived prevalence and causes of poverty, they found that 55 per cent of people considered that there was ‘quite a lot’ of poverty in the UK today and that the proportion who perceived that poverty had increased over the last ten years and was set to increase over the next ten years was considerably more than those who perceived that poverty has decreased. There was more support than hostility towards income redistribution and more than four times as many agreed than disagreed that ‘ordinary working people do not get a fair share of the nation’s wealth’.

Against this evidence of apparent concern about poverty in the UK, 44 per cent perceived that there was ‘very little’ poverty in the UK, more people perceived that poverty was inevitable or that it arose from an individual’s failings rather than from social injustice and more people considered that benefits for unemployed people were too high than those who considered they were too low (Park *et al.*, 2007).

On the whole, half of the British public had a more ‘liberal’⁷ attitude towards poverty, while the other half had a more ‘sceptical’ attitude (see Table 1). ‘More ‘liberal’ attitudes were characteristic of younger people, more highly educated people, those with most personal experience of poverty, readers of broadsheets and regional papers (as opposed to tabloids), those supporting centre or left-of-centre political parties, unemployed people, lone parents and those from households whose main source of income was from benefits or were in the lowest income quartile. Geographic variations were also evident, with the majority of those from inner London having ‘liberal’ attitudes, in contrast to a minority of those from the East of England.

Understanding poverty in this report

This research focuses on how the media in the UK represents poverty and how the wider public understands it. The research approach adopted is to critically appraise any reference to poverty in the media and by the public. It would be inappropriate to impose a definition of poverty on the research and to restrict analysis to what the research team understand to be poverty. The preferred approach also permits exploration of the extent to which media representations and public understanding differ from the formal working definitions of poverty used by Government.⁸

Table 1: Attitudes to poverty in the UK

| | % | Cases |
|--|----|-------|
| <i>Definitions of poverty</i> | | |
| Per cent who think that a person is living in poverty if they have enough to buy the things they really need, but not enough to buy the things that most people take for granted | 19 | |
| Per cent who think that a person is living in poverty if they have enough to buy what they need to eat and live, but not enough to buy other things they need | 47 | |
| Per cent who think that a person is living in poverty if they have not got enough to eat and live without getting into debt | 90 | 3,272 |
| <i>Prevalence of poverty in Britain today</i> | | |
| Very little | 41 | |
| Quite a lot | 55 | 3,272 |
| <i>Poverty in Britain over the last ten years</i> | | |
| Increasing | 35 | |
| Staying at the same level | 39 | |
| Decreasing | 19 | 3,272 |
| <i>Poverty in Britain over the next ten years</i> | | |
| Increasing | 46 | |
| Staying at the same level | 33 | |
| Decreasing | 13 | 3,271 |
| <i>Why do people live in need?</i> | | |
| Unlucky | 13 | |
| Laziness or lack of will-power | 28 | |
| Social injustice | 19 | |
| Inevitable part of modern life | 32 | 3,272 |
| <i>Government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well off</i> | | |
| Agree | 42 | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 24 | |
| Disagree | 32 | 3,621 |
| <i>Ordinary working people do not get a fair share of the nation's wealth</i> | | |
| Agree | 61 | |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 23 | |
| Disagree | 13 | 3,621 |
| <i>Levels of benefit for unemployed people</i> | | |
| Too low and cause hardship | 34 | |
| Too high and discourage them from finding jobs | 40 | 3,272 |
| <i>Summary of attitudes towards poverty</i> | | |
| Liberal | 51 | 2,077 |
| Sceptical | 49 | 2,077 |

Source: Park et al. (2007, Tables 1 and 2).

3 Reporting poverty in the UK news

This chapter seeks to describe the way in which poverty is reported in the UK news. The primary concern is to understand how poverty in the UK is reported. However, as will become apparent, the poverty that is reported in the UK news also pertains to poverty experienced outside the UK, particularly those parts of the less economically developed world that are blighted by environmental, economic or political crises. Clearly, the reporting of non-UK poverty is significant as it contributes to the UK public's understanding of poverty. Thus, a further key objective for this chapter is to compare the UK media's reporting of poverty in the UK with its reporting of poverty experienced outside the UK.

Over 150 newspapers, over 100 radio news programmes, over 75 television news programmes, a small sample of news magazines and a range of news coverage in new media were sampled over a study week (from 30 July to 5 August 2007). The sample was stratified to cover national, regional, local and community media, and to collect data from the three devolved national regions of the UK and three government office regions in England in which Park *et al.* (2007) identified significant differences in attitudes toward poverty (inner London, East of England and North West). The content of each news source was systematically reviewed using a comprehensive coding framework developed by the Scottish Poverty Information Unit (SPIU). The content of 'poverty reports' identified in the initial review was cross-checked thrice to verify accuracy. Although limited to a single study week, the systematic nature and wide-ranging scope of the review afforded an opportunity to glean new insight into the nature and variations in the coverage of poverty in UK news.

Our starting position is that limiting the review to the words 'poverty', 'impoverished' or 'poor' would have underestimated the reporting of poverty in the UK news. First, we adopt

a more expansive list of core descriptors of poverty. Although the condition of deprivation is not synonymous with poverty, the reporting of deprivation in the news is used in a manner that is interchangeable with poverty. For example, 'poor areas' or 'deprived areas' are used as general descriptions of localities of a certain ilk, rather than as precise descriptions of a particular condition in a locality. Hence, all variations of deprived and poor are considered to be 'core descriptions' of poverty. Second, we recognise that many words that are used in news reports are direct synonyms of poverty, e.g. 'destitute', 'broke', 'living on less than \$1 a day'. Finally, there are subpopulations and conditions that constitute poverty. That is, in the minds of the reader and the journalist, these words refer to poverty, e.g. peasant, underclass (subpopulations) and homelessness, starving (conditions). Together, reports that use either the core descriptors of poverty or deprivation, or one of the many direct synonyms of poverty, or that make reference to subpopulations or conditions that constitute poverty are analysed as 'poverty reports' in this review.

This is not the first content analysis of poverty in the news. Golding and Middleton's seminal study had the remit of analysing stories that were mainly about 'dealing with all aspects of welfare as defined by the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Social Security' (Golding, 1991, p. 69). Fourteen media were reviewed for 125 days of coverage (excluding Sundays) in 1976. Their concern was broader than poverty, but shed insight into the overall volume of reports, the prominence of reports, the groups reported, the source of reports and variations in reporting across media. More recently, the Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) study reviewed the reporting of poverty in three weeknight newscasts in the USA for 38 months (de Mause and Rendall, 2007). Again, the volume of reports, the source of reports, the groups reported and variations across

media were reported. Additionally, the FAIR study considered political contributions to the reports and the way in which people experiencing poverty are represented. It was concluded that a more positive presentation of poverty was associated with special occasions and deserving groups.

While this study is more limited than its forerunners in that it is focused on a single week's coverage, it is also more comprehensive in that a wider range of themes are analysed and the sampling frame aims to be broadly representative of the UK news media in all of its constituent forms.

Six overarching themes are discussed from this systematic content analysis of UK news media coverage of poverty. We start by considering the geography of poverty in the UK news, before moving on to review how much poverty is reported, how poverty and related ideas are presented, sources of information, the format of stories that refer to poverty and the substance of poverty in news reports.

The geography of poverty in the UK news

Figure 3 describes the places to which poverty reports in the UK news refer. Poverty in the UK and international poverty are reported roughly to the same degree (46 per cent of poverty stories in

UK news refer to the UK and 54 per cent refer to places beyond the UK).

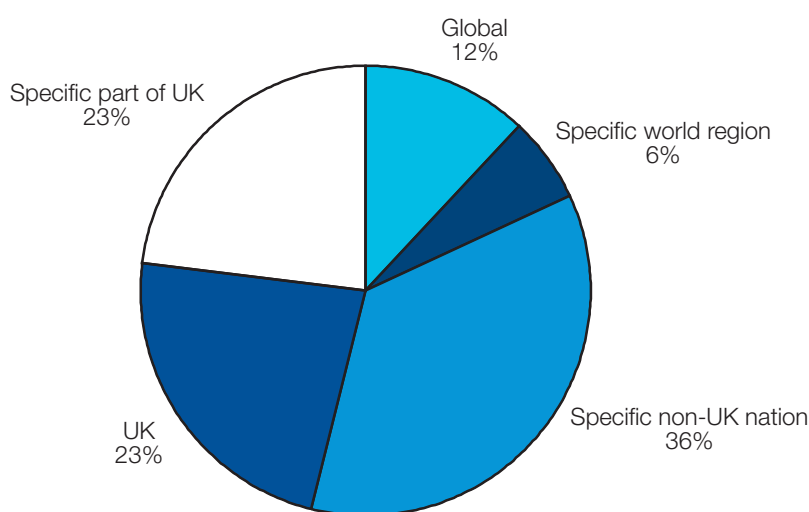
There are similarities in emphasis, with both UK and international reports being inclined to focus at the scale of the nation (50 per cent of UK stories focused on the UK as a whole and 60 per cent of international stories focused on nations or regions). Thus, on the whole, there is a tendency to present poverty as a collective experience (or, at least, as a collective experience for certain groups of people within large areas).

Although the focus of this chapter is to consider how poverty in the UK is reported in the UK news, comparative comment is made where reporting poverty in the UK differs significantly from reporting international poverty.

How much poverty is reported in the UK news?

Over the course of the study week, 297 articles or broadcasts referred directly to poverty in the UK, or to a synonym of poverty, or to conditions or subpopulations in the UK that are wholly synonymous with poverty across the 372 traditional sources of media that were reviewed (radio, television, newspaper and news magazines) and the eleven blog sites studied. A further 343 articles or broadcasts referred to poverty beyond the UK, giving a total of 640 poverty reports.

Figure 3: Where is the poverty that is mentioned in the UK news?



Based on the 640 cases for which a report referred to poverty or one of its synonyms. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

Although 640 is a substantial number, this does not necessarily mean that poverty is well represented in the UK news media. Indeed, 640 is actually a very small proportion of the total articles or broadcasts produced by these media sources. For example, during the study period, *The Observer* (Sunday) carried 340 stories, the *Sunday Mirror* 272 stories, the Wednesday edition of *The Herald* in Scotland carried 144 stories, *The Muslim News* carried 84 stories, the magazine *Maxim* carried 169 stories, the *Six o’Clock News* on BBC Radio 4 carried eight stories on the Monday and *ITV News at Ten* carried ten stories on the Thursday. Thus, these seven sources alone carried over 1,000 stories.

How poverty is described in the UK news

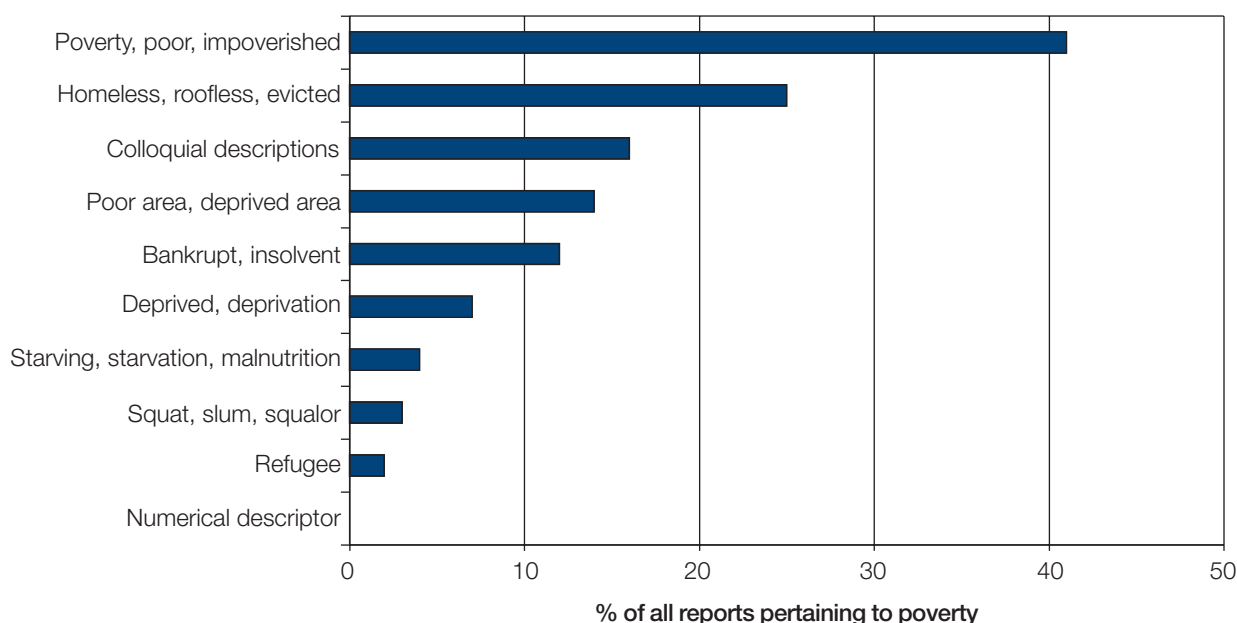
Describing the condition of poverty

As might be expected, ‘poverty’, ‘poor’ and ‘impoverished’ are the most common words used to describe ‘poverty’ in UK news (122 mentions, equivalent to 41 per cent of reports). However, this implies that words other than these are used to describe poverty in more than two-thirds of cases. Figure 4 reports the most common ways in which

the experience of UK poverty is described in news media in the UK. Reference to not having the basic need of shelter is next most prevalent (25 per cent of reports), with a range of colloquial descriptors (16 per cent), area descriptions (14 per cent using the descriptors ‘poor area’ or ‘deprived area’) and reference to financial destitution (12 per cent) being reported in a significant minority of reports.

There are three significant differences between how poverty in the UK and poverty outside the UK are reported in the UK news. First, although ‘poverty’, ‘poor’ and ‘impoverished’ are the most common words used to describe the condition of poverty, these words tend to be used more frequently when referring to poverty outside the UK (56 per cent, compared to 41 per cent of reports in the UK). Second, poverty reports in the UK are more likely to use colloquial descriptions of poverty¹ (16 per cent, compared to 6 per cent outside the UK), whereas reports on poverty outside the UK are more likely to use numerical descriptors of poverty (9 per cent of reports, whereas these were not used in the UK). Finally, the conditions synonymous with poverty differed markedly, i.e. reports in the UK were more likely to refer to financial destitution (12 per cent, compared

Figure 4: How poverty in the UK is described when mentioned in the UK news



Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. Multiple responses are possible, as some reports used more than one concept of poverty.
Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

to 2 per cent outside the UK), whereas reports on poverty outside the UK were more likely to refer to either a lack of food (19 per cent, compared to 4 per cent in the UK) or refugee populations (9 per cent, compared to 2 per cent in the UK).

The condition of poverty and related concepts

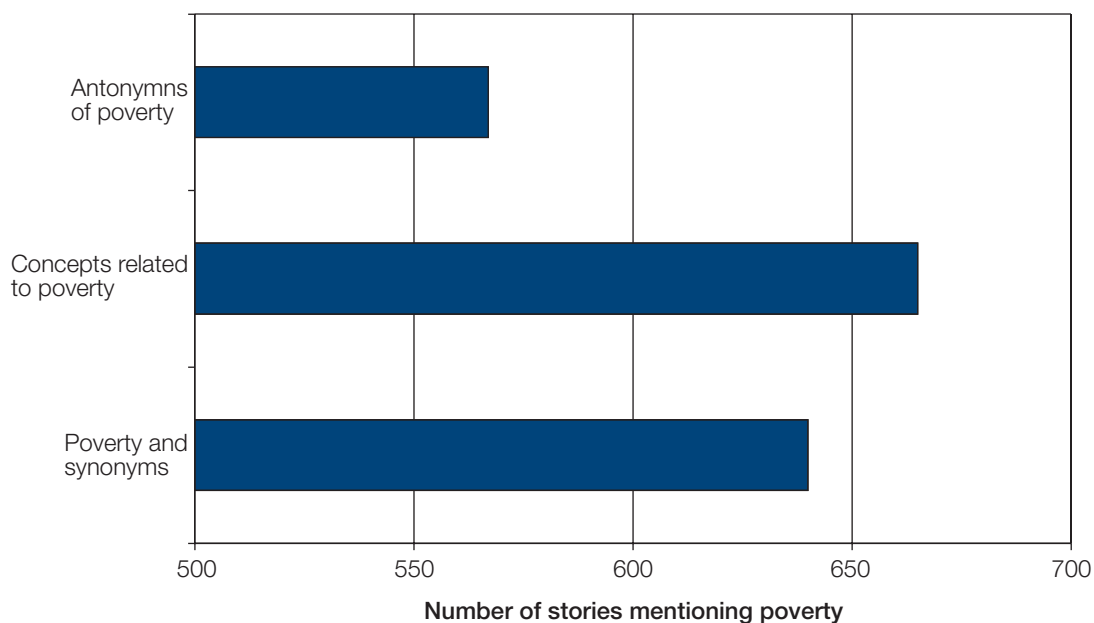
The range of articles or broadcasts that are of interest in an analysis of the representation of poverty in the UK news extends beyond those described above that mention or describe poverty. Three additional types of report are of interest. First, SPIU identified those reports that refer to concepts with which poverty is related, but not synonymous, e.g. unemployment or ‘high school dropouts’. This is indicative of a concern with broader issues of social justice. Second, SPIU identified antonyms of poverty, such as ‘jet-set’, ‘superstars’ or ‘Lottery millionaires’. This is suggestive of whether the UK news is more concerned with affluence than poverty. Finally, and more subjectively, SPIU judged that some reports were significant on account of reporting a story that could – indeed, perhaps should – have carried a poverty angle *but did not*. For example,

in the reporting of a post office closure in a rural village, *it might have been expected* that the report would have highlighted the more severe impact of that closure that would be experienced by those people living in poverty in that locality (who would be less able to access services further afield). In examples such as these, it has been judged that the report could (perhaps should) have carried a poverty angle, although it did not.

In total, 1,688 articles or broadcasts were identified as being of interest in the study (783 referring to the UK and 905 referring to beyond the UK). As already noted, 640 reports referred to poverty. Concepts related to, but not synonymous with poverty were reported in 665 of the 1,688 articles. It is interesting that almost as many articles (567 of the 1,688) referred directly to antonyms of poverty, such as ‘jet-set’, ‘superstars’ or ‘Lottery millionaires’. Finally, and more subjectively, 232 of the 1,688 articles were considered to be significant on account of reporting a story that could – indeed, perhaps should – have carried a poverty angle *but did not*.

Figure 5 highlights that poverty, concepts related to poverty and antonyms of poverty are fairly evenly reported in the UK media. On the

Figure 5: Mentioning of poverty, wealth and ideas related to poverty in the UK news



A record was made for each news report that explicitly referred to: (i) poverty and its synonyms; (ii) concepts related to poverty; (iii) antonyms of poverty, e.g. wealth. This chart describes the percentage share of total records (1,688 cases, including 232 reports in which poverty was ‘missing’). Multiple responses are possible, as some reports included more than one of these types of concept.

Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

whole, these data suggest that the UK media are, at the very least, as concerned with issues of social justice as they are with affluence. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the 297 stories mentioning poverty in the UK (making comparisons where appropriate to the 343 stories mentioning poverty outside the UK).

From where does the poverty reported in the UK news originate?

Variation by news media

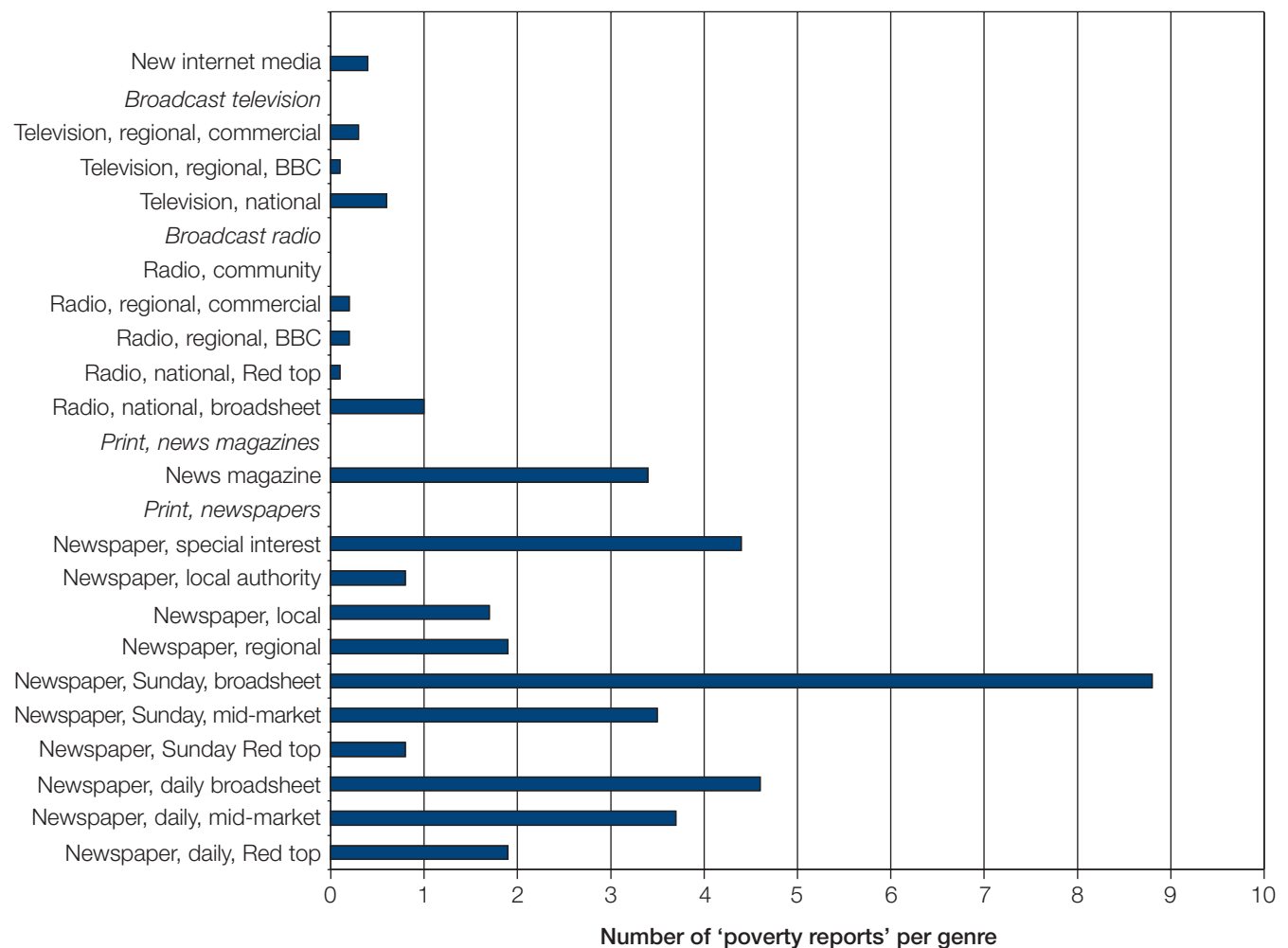
The likelihood of poverty being reported varies by news media. Figure 6 compares the average number of times that poverty was mentioned in different news media. On the whole, newspapers are more likely than news magazines and, in

turn, television and radio to mention poverty. For example, on average, poverty was mentioned 8.8 times in Sunday broadsheet newspapers, 4.6 times in daily broadsheet newspapers, 1.9 times per regional newspaper, 0.3 times in regional commercial television news programmes and 0.2 times in regional commercial radio news programmes.² Reporting poverty is more commonplace in the press than broadcasting.

This data also indicates that geography matters. For newspapers, radio and television, poverty is more likely to be mentioned in the national than in the regional and local media. Poverty would appear to be an issue that is of most concern at the national scale.

However, it should also be acknowledged that there is significant variation within genres. This is

Figure 6: Mentioning poverty in the UK news, by media outlet: average number of 'poverty reports' per genre



Refer to the Appendix, Table A.1 for details of sample frame and sample size. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

most evident for newspapers. First, the greater extent to which the Sunday broadsheets mention poverty is readily apparent; these newspapers are almost more than twice as likely to mention poverty than daily broadsheets, the genre that is ranked second in terms of coverage. Second, there is a consistent step-change in the reporting of poverty for daily titles and Sunday titles across red tops (low), middle-market titles (medium) to broadsheets (high). Third, there are interesting findings for the specialist press, with very low coverage being characteristic of newspapers published by local authorities and higher levels of coverage being characteristic of the special interest press. Self-interest may account for this pattern of response. Respectively, the lower coverage in local authority newspapers may reflect a concern to promote a positive image of the area (and of the work of the council) and the higher coverage in special interest newspapers may reflect a desire to raise awareness of poverty as a means of promoting the interests of their readers.

Catalyst

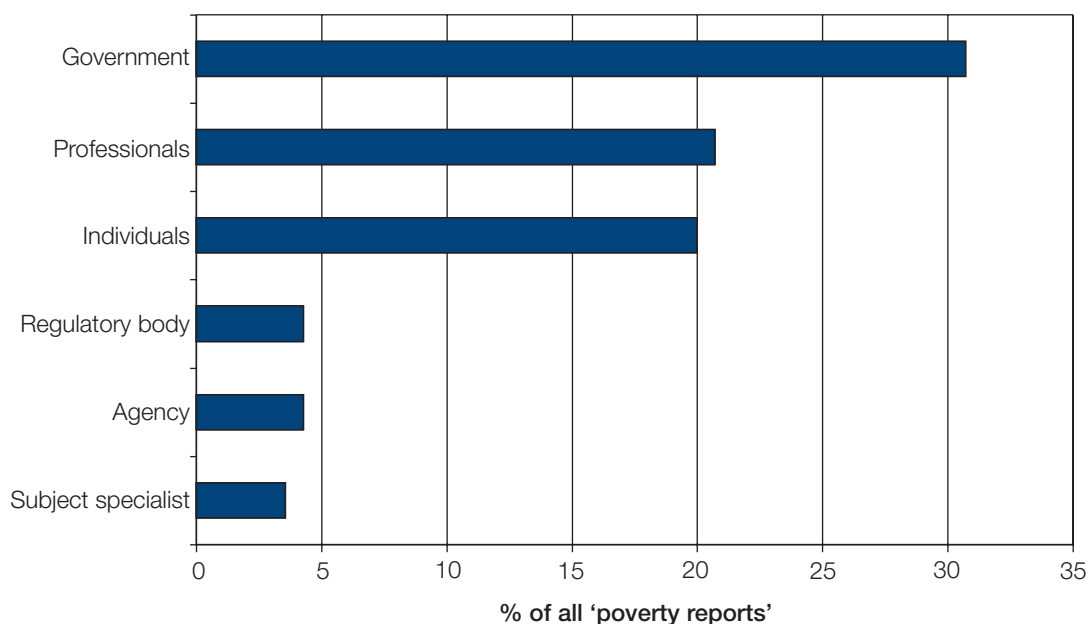
A different approach to describing the source of poverty reports in the UK media is to consider the catalyst for the story that mentions poverty. This

catalyst can be described in terms of who it is that promotes the issue (Figure 7), the mode through which the issue is promoted (Figure 8) and the subject matter (Figure 9). For example, a campaign (mode, reported in Figure 8), led by a member of the public (who, reported in Figure 7), which mentions poverty in the context of housing policy allocation (issue, reported in Figure 9) provides a rich understanding of the drivers of the articles and broadcasts that placed poverty in the news for the study week.

A range of sources are responsible for raising issues that lead to UK poverty being mentioned in the UK news; no single source is overly dominant in discussing poverty. However, Figure 7 suggests that government is a significant catalyst, raising the issue that led to almost one-third of UK poverty reports in the UK media in the study week. Individuals (including people experiencing poverty) and professional experts are also important catalysts. Interestingly, agencies (including the voluntary sector) account for a much smaller proportion of reports.

As for sources, mentions of UK poverty in the UK news arise in a range of ways (Figure 8), of which the most prevalent are specific events (24 per cent of reports) and research or publications

Figure 7: Source of the issue that leads to UK poverty being mentioned in the UK news



Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

(24 per cent of reports). Campaigns, personal experience and think pieces each account for one-tenth of UK poverty reports. There are similarities between the ways in which UK poverty and international poverty are brought to the attention of the media, i.e. specific events are the catalyst for a significant proportion of reports in each. However, differences can also be discerned. First, specific events are the source of more poverty reports outside the UK (32 per cent, compared to 24 per cent of reports in the UK), as are investigative studies (21 per cent, compared to 7 per cent) and specific events based on policy (18 per cent, compared to 3 per cent). On the other hand, research or publications were a more common source of poverty reports in the UK media (24 per cent, compared to 13 per cent outside the UK), as were campaigns (12 per cent, compared to 4 per cent).

Finally, the catalyst for mentions of poverty can also be described in terms of the subject matter of the article or broadcast. Poverty is rarely the primary focus. It is much more common for poverty to be discussed with respect to another issue, e.g. poverty to be mentioned in the context

of an article or broadcast focused on crime.

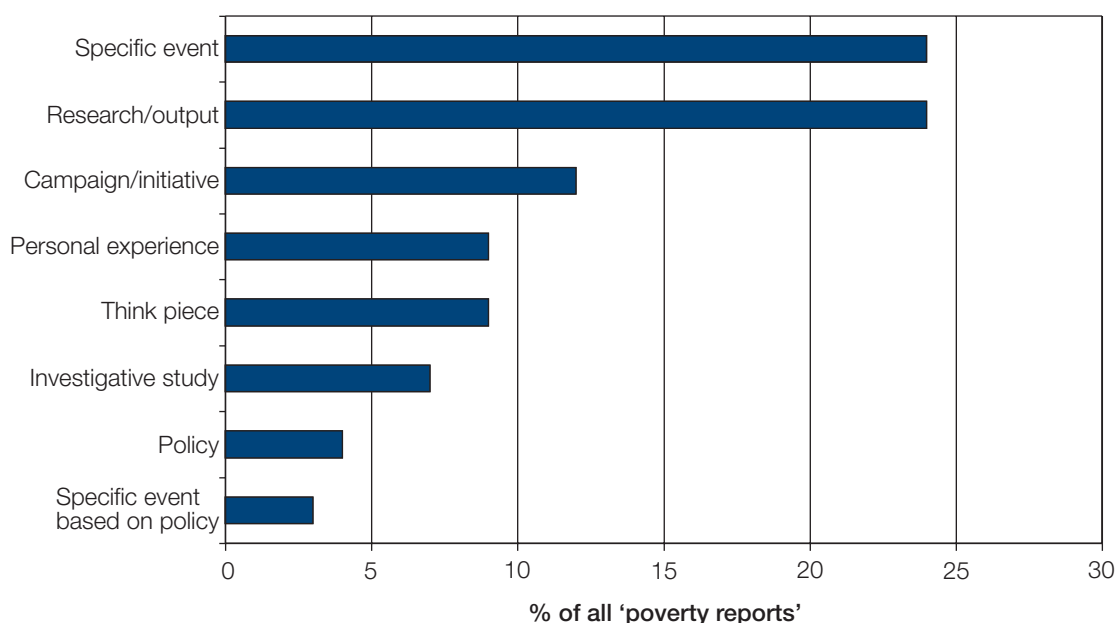
Figure 9 compares the subject matter of reports of poverty in the UK (dark blue bar) with outside the UK (mid-blue bar). There are clear differences over the subject matter of poverty reports. Education, housing and service provision are much more likely to be the context for reporting poverty in the UK, whereas international aid interventions, political conflict, environment and charity are much more likely to be the issues for which poverty is discussed beyond the UK. Economy, politics and to a lesser extent culture are contexts common to both.

Form: how is poverty reported in the news?

Prominence of articles and broadcasts that mention poverty

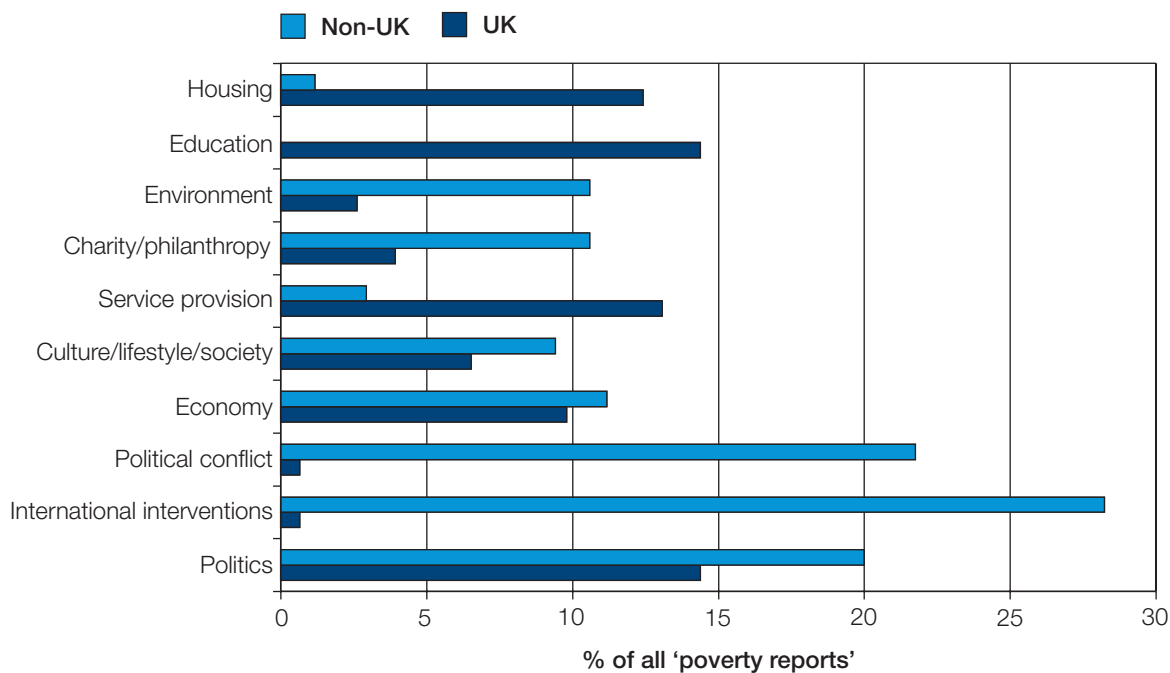
Although a substantial proportion of those articles and broadcasts that referred to poverty were found to be the main or a major article on the page in which it was reported (or lead story in radio and television news) (see Figure 10), poverty outside the UK tended to be mentioned in reports that

Figure 8: Mode through which the issue is raised that leads to UK poverty being mentioned in the UK news



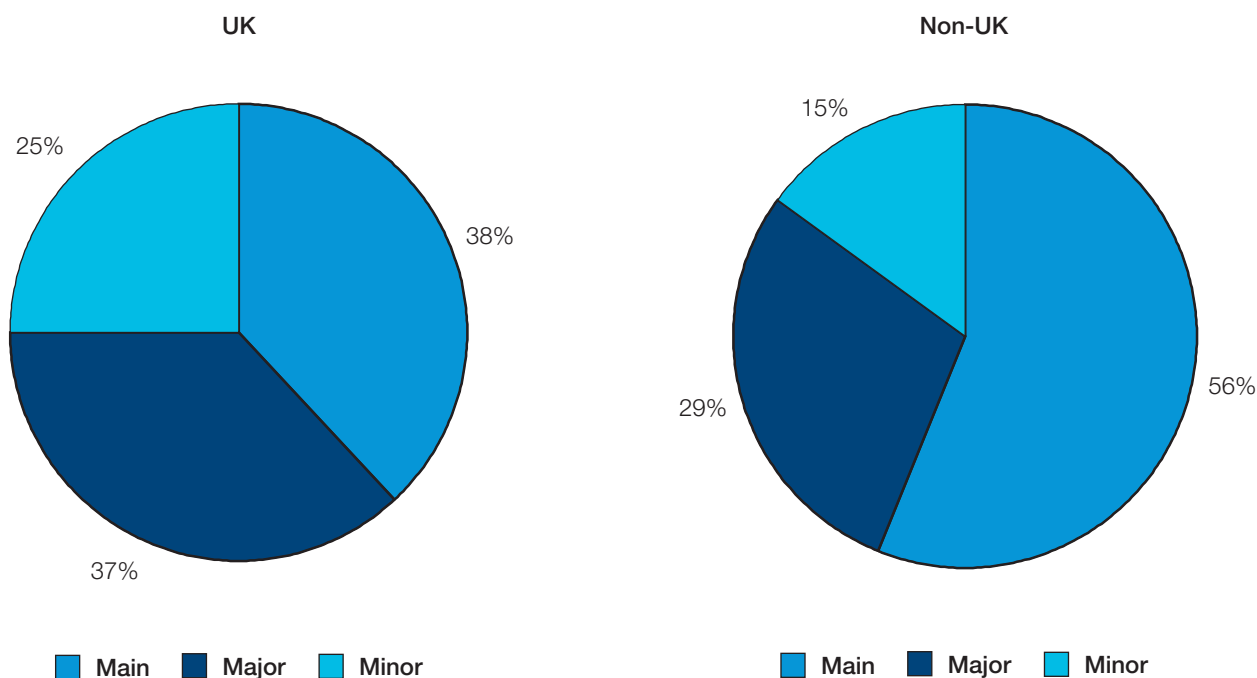
Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. Specific events based on policy refer to the very specific instance when an event is convened to introduce a new policy initiative. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

Figure 9: The issue (subject matter) that leads to UK and non-UK poverty being mentioned in the UK news



Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms and the 343 cases for which a report refers to poverty beyond the UK. The percentage shares of the ten most common issues are reported in this figure. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

Figure 10: Prominence of poverty in the UK news: UK and non-UK based stories



The authors made a subjective judgement on whether each of the 640 reports that referred to poverty or one of its synonyms was the main, major but not main, or minor feature on the page in and beyond the UK. This judgement was based on prominence on page. It should be stressed that these judgements pertain to the news report and not the prominence of poverty or one of its synonyms. For example, a news report would be classified as prominent, even if it made only fleeting reference to poverty. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

were even more prominent on the page. More than half of reports of poverty outside the UK were carried in an article or broadcast that was the main or lead item (56 per cent), compared to ‘only’ 38 per cent for reports of UK poverty. However, caution is required in interpreting this data, as it does not make reference to the relative significance of poverty as an issue within the article (see Figure 12 later in this chapter). For example, the article might be the main item on the page, but it might make only a fleeting reference to poverty, whereas a less prominent article might have a more substantial focus on poverty.

Images of poverty

Imagery is important in shaping understanding of the issue at hand and imagery of poverty and people experiencing poverty can be particularly poignant. Initial figures on the prevalence of imagery in poverty reports are misleading. Thus, although one-half of reports mentioning poverty in the UK are accompanied by an image (51 per cent), in three-quarters of these reports the image that accompanies the report is not an image of poverty (74 per cent). It is more likely that it will be a headshot of an authoritative expert voice such

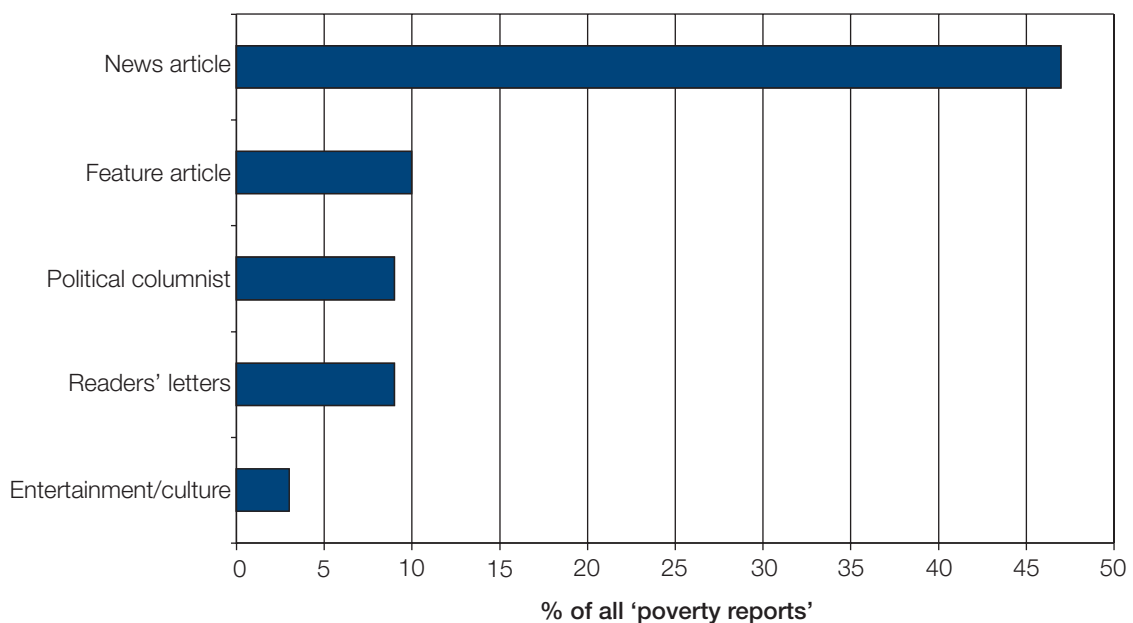
as a politician or a journalist. Images of poverty are evident in only 13 per cent of poverty reports in the UK. Marginally more reports mentioning poverty outside the UK are accompanied by an image (19 per cent) and marginally more of these reports comprise an image of a child experiencing poverty (26 per cent of all poverty images, compared to 16 per cent of all poverty images for reports of UK poverty).

Format of poverty reports

The vast majority of UK poverty reports, as might be expected in news media, refer to news of the day (47 per cent, Figure 11). However, it is the range of formats beyond news articles in which poverty is mentioned that is more significant. For example, significant proportions of those articles that mention poverty are from the audience (9 per cent from readers’ letters) and key opinion formers (9 per cent political columnists and 10 per cent in feature articles).

Poverty outside the UK was more likely than UK poverty to be mentioned in a feature article (21 per cent, compared to 10 per cent in the UK), although otherwise there was much similarity in the modes through which poverty was mentioned.

Figure 11: Formats in which UK poverty is mentioned in the UK news



Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. Over 20 report types were identified; the percentage shares of the five most common formats are reported in this figure. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

Substance: what is the content when poverty is reported in the news?

In this final section, we move beyond straightforward description to reflect more critically on the way in which poverty is presented in the UK news. First, we look beyond simple counts of the number of articles that refer to poverty to consider two supplementary indicators of the prominence of poverty in news reports. Thereafter, we consider two issues that shed insight into the way in which people experiencing poverty are represented in the UK news.

Prominence of poverty

As reported previously, not all of the articles and broadcasts in which poverty is mentioned actually focus on poverty and the prominence of reports that mention poverty (Figure 10 above) should not be assumed to be a measure of the prominence of poverty when reported in the UK media. Indeed, as Figure 12 suggests, poverty was the primary focus of the article or broadcast for only one-quarter of reports in which UK poverty was mentioned (26 per cent). One-tenth of reports mentioned poverty as an explanation for some other phenomenon on which the article or broadcast was focused (12 per cent) and almost one-fifth referred to poverty

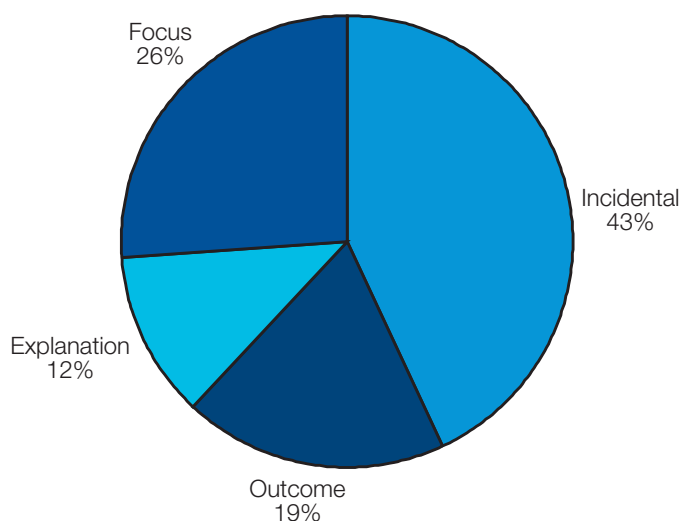
as an outcome of that phenomenon (19 per cent). However, the most common use of poverty in the UK news – in more than two-fifths of reports (43 per cent) – is when references to poverty are incidental to the issue at hand, i.e. a throwaway comment or using a mention of poverty to lend greater weight to the point being conveyed.

Of course, there is no imperative on journalists to always mention poverty in a report, and it could be argued that it is positive if poverty is mentioned at all. However, many of these ‘incidental’ references use poverty to lend emphasis or to sensationalise and do little to further an understanding of poverty in the UK. At the very least, the incidental nature of much poverty reporting would suggest that poverty is not quite as prominent in the media as an initial count of ‘poverty reports’ tended to suggest.

The way in which poverty is reported is similar for UK and non-UK poverty reports, although there are fewer incidental references to poverty in non-UK reports (33 per cent, compared to 43 per cent in the UK), whereas it is more common that non-UK poverty is described as an outcome (27 per cent, compared to 19 per cent in the UK).

Another indicator of the prominence of poverty is the number of times one of the core concepts of poverty (derivations of poverty or deprivation) is

Figure 12: The way in which UK poverty contributes to articles and broadcasts in the UK news



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 is incidental to the report. Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. It should be noted that a small minority of reports referred to poverty both as an explanation and as an outcome. Furthermore, reports that focus on poverty might include presenting poverty as an explanation for other social phenomena or as a result of other social processes. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

used in any single article or broadcast. As Figure 13 shows, less than one in five reports of UK poverty makes more than one reference to poverty or deprivation in any single report. Indeed, the core concepts of poverty and deprivation are not even mentioned in almost one-half of UK stories (49 per cent) that report on the condition of poverty.

Representing people experiencing poverty

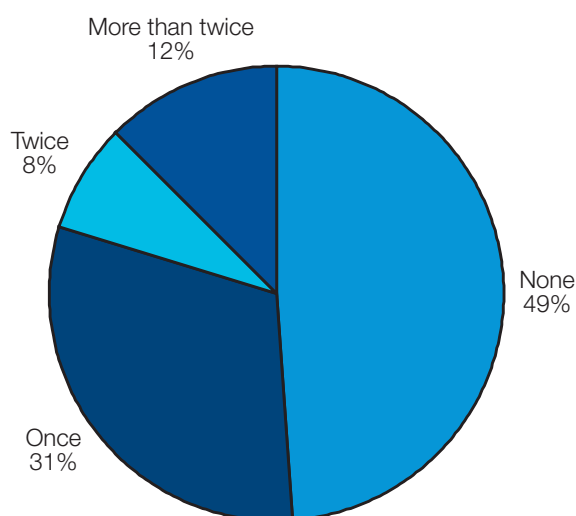
There is growing concern that the voices of people experiencing poverty should be heard in anti-poverty activity. Given that poverty is not always the primary focus of articles and broadcasts in which poverty is mentioned, the possibility is raised that the prominent voices in the ‘poverty reports’ are not concerned directly with poverty. SPIU was concerned with most prominent ‘representation of poverty’ in these reports.

As Figure 14 reports, people experiencing poverty featured in fewer than one in eight UK ‘poverty reports’ in the UK news (13 per cent). It is much more common that the only source of information is the journalist writing the article (or presenting the broadcast) and it is more common for data to be used to describe poverty (20 per cent) than people’s experiences (13 per cent). In contrast, outside the UK, it is more common for people’s experiences of poverty to be conveyed (17 per cent) than for poverty data to be presented (3 per cent).

Figure 15 reports more specifically on data that was available in ‘poverty reports’ to profile the population experiencing poverty. Significantly, statistical evidence (24 per cent) was used no more frequently than general comment by others on people’s experience of poverty (26 per cent, indirect experience) or by direct reference to the experiences of people living in poverty (28 per cent). Pictures of people living in poverty contributed to population profiling in one in ten cases. Imagery was more likely to assist in the profiling of people experiencing poverty outside the UK (18 per cent).

In the majority of cases, stories containing mentions of poverty do not explicitly describe people according to age, gender, ethnic group, work status, disability status and parental status (see Table 2). UK poverty is largely anonymous in the UK media. However, some significant points emerge among those reports that make reference to someone’s socio-economic profile. It is very uncommon for references to be made to disabled people experiencing poverty; it is more likely for mention to be made of men than women; and it is, marginally, more likely for mention to be made of the working poor than the non-working poor. In each of these cases, groups with a higher risk rate of poverty are reported with less frequency than those with a lower risk.

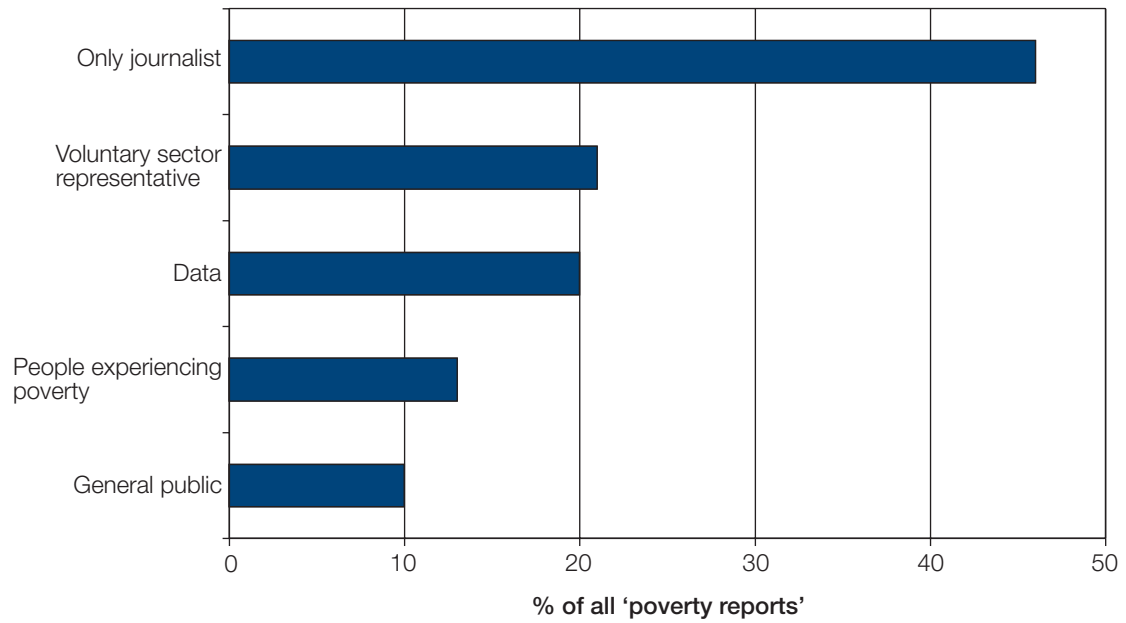
Figure 13: The number of times a UK poverty report mentions a core concept of poverty in the UK news



Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. Core concepts of poverty are defined as derivations of poverty and deprivation.

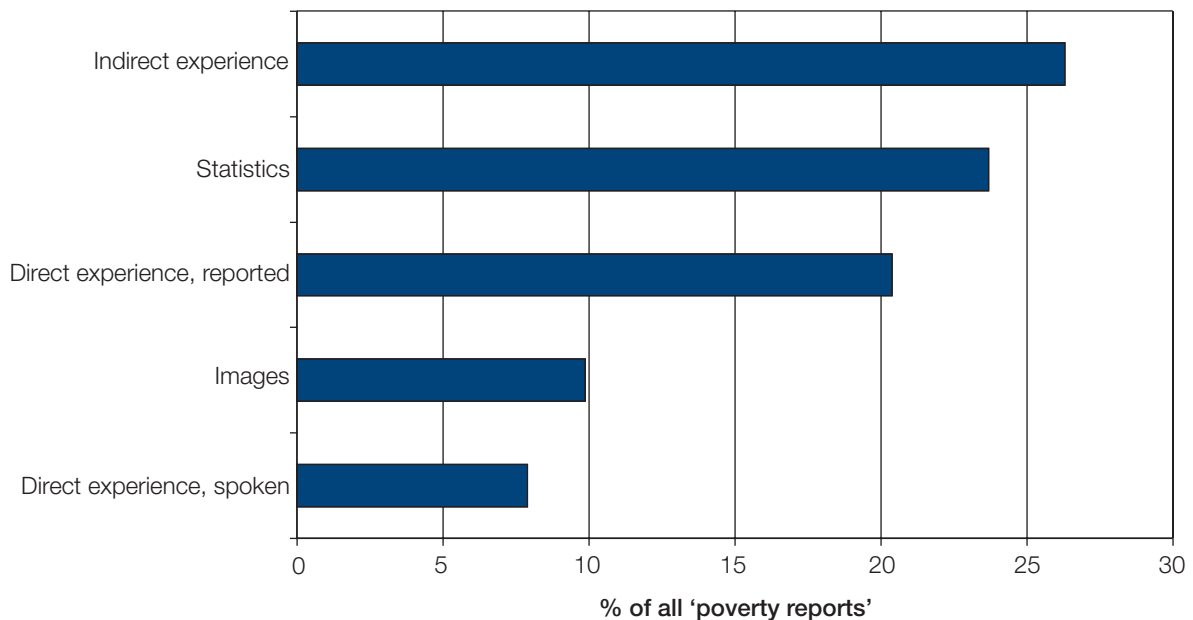
Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

Figure 14: The sources through which UK poverty is represented when poverty is mentioned in the UK news



Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. This figure presents data on the five most prevalent sources of poverty information. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

Figure 15: Types of information in UK poverty reports that could be used to profile the population experiencing poverty



Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms. Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

Table 2: Profile of the people experiencing poverty in the UK where such information is available in the UK news

| | % |
|--|----|
| <i>Age</i> | |
| No explicit mention of age group | 42 |
| Age status when identifiable (sum to 100 per cent) | |
| Adult | 58 |
| Child | 28 |
| Adult and child | 14 |
| <i>Gender</i> | |
| No explicit mention of gender | 67 |
| Gender status when identifiable (sum to 100 per cent) | |
| Men | 55 |
| Women | 37 |
| Mention of both men and women | 8 |
| <i>Ethnic group</i> | |
| No explicit mention of ethnic group | 81 |
| Ethnic status when identifiable (sum to 100 per cent) | |
| White | 76 |
| Non-white | 21 |
| White and Non-white | 3 |
| <i>Work status</i> | |
| No explicit mention of work status | 67 |
| Work status when identifiable (sum to 101 per cent, due to rounding) | |
| Working | 49 |
| Not working | 36 |
| Retired | 16 |
| <i>Disability status</i> | |
| No explicit mention of disability status | 95 |
| <i>Parental and marital status</i> | |
| No explicit mention of parental and marital status | 86 |
| <i>Tenure status</i> | |
| No explicit mention of tenure status | 64 |
| Tenure status when identifiable ^a | |
| Homeless | 38 |
| Home-owner | 35 |
| Social housing | 15 |
| Private rented | 5 |

Based on the 297 cases for which a report refers to UK poverty or one of its synonyms.

a A further 5 per cent described home-owners who had become homeless and 3 per cent described renters (could not specify whether they were renting privately or through social housing).

Source: SPIU UK media content analysis, July–August 2007.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to better understand the extent and the ways in which poverty is reported in the UK media. The existing knowledge base has been extended by focusing on a wider range of issues than hitherto (prominence) and by devising a sampling frame that provided a UK framework and afforded comparative comment across media.

The significance of poverty in society is reflected in its coverage in the UK media. Reports mentioning poverty addressed a wide range of issues, place and people. Content analysis must be handled carefully if it is to be used to critique existing practice. However, the analysis raises significant points for consideration by the media, those campaigning to ensure poverty is represented in the media and researchers.

First, it is evident that the reporting of poverty is lower in local and regional media, compared to national media. Individuals in communities throughout the UK experience poverty. There may be scope for local media to pay more heed to this local issue. Second, it is significant to note that the rise of the celebrity culture has not led to displacement of media concern with matters of social justice. Poverty and issues related to poverty are reported in the UK media. Third, it may be worth considering why there are relatively fewer investigative studies of UK poverty (compared to poverty outside the UK). The reporting of poverty in the UK could move beyond 'response' mode if some of the hidden dimensions, misrepresentations or complexities of poverty were to be aired.

Campaigning groups are far from absent in the reporting of poverty in the UK media. However, it would appear that most of their contributions to the UK media are in 'response' mode, i.e. they are not catalysts generating the reports. There

may be scope for more interventions to shape the complexion of the reporting of poverty in the UK. Similarly, the experiences of people living in poverty are not prevalent in UK poverty reports. Campaigning groups may already be responsible for bringing more direct experience to bear on media reports, but there is scope for more representation of experiences in the UK media. Particular groups may be concerned at the skew in how poverty is presented or the general anonymity surrounding the population experiencing poverty. In particular, the relatively low representation of women (compared to men) is an interesting anomaly.

Of course, this study is based on only one week's worth of analysis and more could be achieved through subsequent studies that used the SPIU framework to replicate the analysis. Furthermore, there is a need to consider the issue of prominence. There is evidence to be found in the UK media of poverty being mentioned in television news, radio news, newspapers, news magazines and new media. However, other SPIU indicators suggest that the prevalence of poverty reporting is less significant than the initial article counts imply. Similarly, the nature of 'incidental' reports of poverty is worthy of further consideration. In both instances, arguments can be posited that what is reported in the UK media is both strength and weakness. The underlying question of what constitutes appropriate, proportionate and effective reporting of poverty can only partly be addressed through this research. Finally, throughout the analysis, attention has been drawn to the differences between the reporting in the UK media of UK poverty and the reporting of poverty that originates outside the UK. How audiences rationalise these very different constructions of poverty is a critical issue in the quest to understand how the UK public respond to UK poverty.

4 Tracking 'poverty news' across media

Introduction

Chapter 3 presented an overview of the coverage of poverty in the UK news media. This chapter complements this overview by presenting detailed case study analysis of how the same poverty story is presented across different news media. This involves asking the following questions.

- What degree of focus is given to the story and the poverty-related aspect(s) of the story (Bell, 1991)?
- What choices (conscious or otherwise) have been made between the various available words or images to describe or represent an issue or event? What 'discourses' (Foucault, 1980) – that is, ways of thinking and speaking about something – do these choices reproduce (Fowler, 1991)? A key objective of this chapter will be to make visible the language and ideas used by those 'writing and reporting poverty'. Identifying and reflecting on the language used in 'writing and reporting poverty' helps us to appreciate commentators' understanding of poverty.
- What relationships or divisions are set up between different individuals or groups and where is responsibility for poverty seen to lie (Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 1998)?

Six case studies are reported in this chapter (refer to Table A2 in the Appendix). These case studies were purposively selected to examine stories that originated from a range of organisations, e.g. international agencies (UNICEF), national government (HM Treasury, Office of Prime Minister and the Department for Work and Pensions), regional government (Welsh Local Government Association) and academia (research supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation). The catalysts

for these case studies were divided evenly between those that were reporting new data (two) and those that were reporting on government initiatives (four). One of these case studies was widely reported in the UK media during the study week of the content analysis (Gordon Brown's pledge to eradicate global poverty).

This is a small-scale exploratory study in which the examples reported are understood to be indicative and suggestive of the ways in which the same poverty story can be reported variously across the UK media, as opposed to a large-scale representative study.

There was significant coverage of all of these stories (albeit less on the local story in Wales than might have been expected). Interestingly, there was considerably more coverage of the academic research report and its scope was wider, in that it gave rise to general debate. The influence of media/external relation officers over the coverage a story gets is considered in Chapter 6.

Case study review

The Government's response to the Farepak review: making history, but whose?

Farepak, a Christmas savings club/hamper firm, collapsed in October 2006 causing thousands of mainly lower-income households to lose their savings. The Government set up the Pomeroy Review to look into Christmas hamper savings schemes in general and make recommendations for the future.

There is a distinct difference between national and local media regarding how the stories are headlined. The majority of the national press focus on (the irony of) Farepak's bank, HBOS, having set up a Christmas savings account. One local title, *thisiswiltshire.co.uk*, focuses on the reasons why Farepak collapsed. All the other local titles focus on future measures and thus the positive actions of government. Indeed, many headlines use

Consumer Minister Ian McCartney's words: 'There will never be another Farepak'. He generalises from the particular (by introducing the notion of 'a Farepak') to give the moment historic weight and constructs the Government as omnipotent 'saviours' in this larger context.

Even without using McCartney's words, the majority of other titles portray the Government in a similar way by using the language of protection: common words are 'control', 'assurance' and 'safeguards', and words like 'protection' and 'shield' that draw on military vocabulary. Despite the fact that something being done about the situation can be read as positive, arguably the way it is constructed disempowers the savers. They are passive victims requiring (a) protagonist(s) to 'protect' them, which is ironic given that a campaign group called 'Unfairpak' was set up very soon after the collapse. This group was given limited newspaper coverage (one example is in *The Northern Echo*), although a few other print titles do give voice to savers in general, and all the broadcast coverage includes interviews with savers. The *Evening Post* (Nottingham) places savers in the headline: 'Notts doubts over hamper cash pledge'. The *Evening Gazette* (Teeside) has an interesting reworking of the historicisation seen in other titles: its headline is simply 'Never again', but, after outlining the Government's plans, it allows savers who have lost money to react and they say that, regardless, they will 'never again' trust such companies. This perspective is also focused on by the BBC Wales broadcast.

There is a relatively equal spread of the savers being constructed as poor people (for example, 'hard-up families', 'low-income households', 'poorer families', 'poorer sections of society', 'low earners', 'needy families'); as purchasers (for example, 'consumers', 'customers'); and as both together (for example, 'cash-strapped shoppers', 'low-income customers'). The general trend is that local titles focus on poverty – the *Evening Post* (Bristol) using the particularly emotive 'our poor families' – and national titles focus on both poverty and consumption.

There are few pictures accompanying the press coverage. In the broadcast coverage, shots of families decorating Christmas trees and interviews with savers are juxtaposed with impersonal shots of the Farepak headquarters, perhaps attaching

positive connotations to one and negative connotations to the other and empathising with the savers.

Even though the stories without exception empathise with the savers, we can observe an 'us and them' pattern (Van Dijk, 1998) that implicitly constructs the savers as 'other' than the readers, thus distancing reader from saver. The manner in which this is done also patronises people experiencing poverty in ways that are condescending. Examples are: 'To *those of us* who keep our money in interest-paying bank accounts, it seems truly bizarre that *anyone* would choose to put *their* money [in Christmas savings clubs]' (*Liverpool Daily Post*); '*These people* [who use Christmas savings clubs] are to be applauded when they save' (Peter Johnson of Park Group in the *Liverpool Daily Post*); 'there are *people out there* who want to save for Christmas' (Brian Pomeroy in the *Evening Post* [Bristol]).

Conviction in Gordon Brown's war on global poverty

Gordon Brown's first official visit as Prime Minister to the United States of America in July 2007 was always likely to receive widespread coverage in the national press. His decision to use the trip as an opportunity to outline his vision to tackle global poverty makes for an interesting example of how non-UK poverty is relevant to, and received in, the UK media. Conviction, urgency and war are the dominant discourses to be conveyed in the UK press.

Press coverage of the event is largely covered in the national press, with reflective commentaries by political columnists and prominent news reports, often accompanied by images. Images are predominantly of a statesmanlike leader, captured at the podium delivering his vision for tackling global poverty. These images dominate, although some of the titles also include images of the people experiencing poverty in Darfur; these images are exclusively of women and children presented as downtrodden and in obvious need of medical assistance.

Powerful language is the preserve not only of the red tops. There is reference to the 'moral alliance' and Brown is quoted as 'want[ing] to summon into existence the greatest coalition of conscience in pursuit of the greatest of causes'

to address what is described as ‘the greatest humanitarian disaster of the present day’. This moral imperative is layered on to the standard fare of journeys (‘we are a million miles away from the goal [of eradicating poverty]’), militarism (‘seeking allies for war on poverty’) and urgency (‘devastating emergency that needs emergency action’).

The crusading tenor of the new reports stands in contrast to the more cynical and reflective thoughts of political commentators. Here, the interest is more diffuse. Attention is paid to the ‘special relationship’ between the USA and the UK, the moral convictions of the PM and the nature of the crisis that has to be solved. Ulterior motives are implied or, at the very least, the inadvertent gains are acknowledged for Gordon Brown’s status of promoting his desire to tackle poverty in this way.

Above all, the paternalistic responsibilities of those with levers of power are explicit. Poverty is a problem that must be solved by those in power for those without.

Child Poverty Unit: actions, battles and journeys

On 29 October 2007, the UK Government’s Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Children, Schools and Families, along with a representative seconded from Barnardo’s, announced the creation of their new Child Poverty Unit (CPU), the aim of which is to develop a joint strategy on child poverty.

The Government is presented as active. General ‘action’ words are ‘effort’ (*Birmingham Post*), ‘tackle hardship/poverty’ (*Times Educational Supplement; Western Morning News*) and ‘break the cycle of deprivation’ (*Times Educational Supplement; Birmingham Post*).

Much of the coverage uses more specific discourses. The following are examples of military discourse that represents the Government fighting the abstract entity ‘poverty’: ‘step up ... battle against’ (*The Birmingham Post*); ‘step up the onslaught on’ (*The Herald [Glasgow]*). However, this military discourse is reworked (consciously or otherwise) to criticise the Government’s failures. The *Western Morning News* says ‘a new unit tasked with tackling child poverty in the UK has come under fire only days after being announced

with a *fanfare* by ministers’. This substitutes government versus poverty with critics versus government, and ‘fanfare’ suggests superficiality. Similar reworking occurs in a comment piece in *The Guardian* that accuses the Government of a ‘cavalier attitude’ and says ‘they did nothing about ... [what] happened on *their watch* [referring to inflated pay]’.

A common media discourse that is used to describe the Government’s desire to eradicate poverty is that of the ‘journey’. Examples are: ‘off course’; ‘the government ... must *accelerate progress* towards its goal’ (*Birmingham Post*); ‘government accused of *falling behind* on child poverty targets’ (*Daily Telegraph*); ‘[target] missed by miles on their *present trajectory*’ (*The Guardian*); ‘the government ... is not *on track* to achieve’ (independent policy adviser Lisa Harker in *The Herald*). This constructs the situation in an even more abstract fashion than the military discourse. Rather than *engaging with* an (albeit abstract) entity, here the Government is simply *travelling towards* one – that is, a *lack* of poverty. It is notable, then, that all the examples of ‘journey’ discourse in the CPU coverage are critical of government. This begs the question why journalists would choose to construct their criticism in such abstract, and thus relatively *uncritical*, terms. The answer is perhaps that it is not a choice on the part of the journalist, but merely a habit of using ‘taken for granted poverty speak’.

Welsh councils’ initiative: caring and building

The Save the Children and Welsh Local Government Association Child Poverty Project is a pilot involving Gwynedd and Rhondda Cynon-Taff Councils that was launched in late August 2007.

Several stories write of the two councils having ‘been selected’, which may suggest that wording was part of the initial press release. Gwynedd Council Director Iwan Trefor Jones says in the *Cambrian News* story that the council will ‘make the best use of this exciting opportunity’. Both examples construct local government as beholden to national government.

The work of the project is described as ‘pioneering’, an interesting example of ‘journey’ discourse (journeying into ‘new’ territories). Indeed, the *Cambrian News* uses the words

'this is a *positive step towards* that all-important goal [eradicating child poverty by 2020]'. The *Shropshire Star* cites Social Justice Minister Edwina Hart saying 'Tackling the issue of child poverty is a *cornerstone* of the Welsh Assembly Government's policy, and I trust that this pilot project will *pave the way* ... to *consolidate and build* on the work they [councils] are already doing'. This is further illustration of the 'journey' discourse, but it also draws on 'building' discourse, and 'pioneering' fits well with this composite discourse. The repetition in most newspapers that the project will 'place child poverty *at the heart* of local authority policy' completes a description of local government, painted for the most part by 'official' voices, as altogether more 'grounded' and 'human' than national government.

UNICEF report: government versus family, Britain versus 'the continent'

A UNICEF report placed the UK at the bottom of a 'league table' of child well-being in OECD nations. Explicit focus on poverty was only one aspect of this report, so it is interesting to analyse its coverage in news media in terms of how important or central poverty is portrayed by different titles.

The two most definable 'camps' or discourses in the debate around why the UK came bottom in this study are government responsibility and parental responsibility. This is crystallised in two pieces in which members of both camps (from the same political party) use the same metaphor: 'Wake up call to all parents' (Conservative MP Caroline Spelman in the *Sunday Mercury* [Birmingham]); 'a wake-up call to the government' (Conservative Councillor John Blundell in the *Coventry Telegraph*). ITN News's choice of Robert Whelan from Civitas and Martin Narey from Barnardo's as interviewees serves to cement the 'two camp' picture, although they also include, as do most broadcast stories and many print ones, Sir Al Aynsley Green, the Children's Commissioner for England and Wales, who serves as a middle ground with his focus on child-centredness. The *Sunday Mirror*'s headline 'Threadbare family lives' draws on both the parental responsibility and the government responsibility discourses, and the story goes on to develop both.

Scottish coverage is more firmly placed in

the government responsibility camp than other coverage. *The Press and Journal* (Aberdeen), for example, gives us 'Scottish call for radical measures' and the *Evening Express* (Aberdeen) has the editorial 'Our nation's shame'. Some of the local titles choose not to ask *why* the UK came bottom of the table, but to *challenge* the fact that it did. *Thisiswiltshire.co.uk*, for example, has 'It's not all gloom for town's teens', while *The Citizen* (Gloucester) has 'Happy kids buck the trend'.

Some comment pieces do not engage with either of the two main discourses, instead drawing on psychological and cultural discourses, and arguably a national identity discourse that 'others' those nations that came top in the study. *The Observer* tells us '*British kids* are not "miserable" ... they're stropky: *our adolescents* are vile and sarcastic ingrates, which explains exactly why their lives are worth living', while *The Birmingham Post* says:

I think these continental children have rather missed the point of growing up. Isn't it all about considering yourself miserable, misunderstood and shocking adults? How are they going to do a better job than their parents if they've all had such idyllic childhoods?

There was a significant quantity of broadcast coverage of this story. The shots were of young people at school and in the home, and the language focused on young people's relationships with their peers and parents in the Netherlands and the UK, thus taking more of a personal than a structural approach to well-being. That said, *Newsnight* dedicated an entire programme to discussion of the findings that engaged more with structural aspects.

Dorling report: divisions and revisions

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report *Poverty, Wealth and Place in Britain, 1968 to 2005* by Daniel Dorling was published on 17 July 2007.

The key theme picked up by the media is the 'wealth divide', which is variously refocused as an 'urban-rural divide' in some rural titles and a 'north-south divide' in some Scottish and northern English titles. Many local titles contextualise the findings with local examples. Examples of how the divide is labelled are 'Two Britains' (*Liverpool*

Daily Post), 'Rich and poor "in different worlds"' (*Western Morning News*) and 'A tale of two cities in London?' (bbc.co.uk) and BBC (broadcast) news uses a split screen for part of its item. Other common words are 'gap', 'ghettos' and 'apartheid' (social-economic). Photographs accompanying the press coverage are of individuals with money worries (portrayed by a 'head in hands' pose), individual sad children and past images of schools and workplaces. In contrast to this, the broadcast footage is of areas of housing, thus again taking a more structural approach.

Much of the broadcast coverage includes an interview with the author of the report who speaks about the findings in some detail; the press coverage on the other hand tends towards a more general discussion and debate about the overall 'wealth divide'.

A significant minority of titles use the word 'poverty' in their headlines; this is notable, as such explicit reference to poverty is barely seen in the rest of the coverage considered in this report. *Indymedia* gives further detail by pointing out that 'the poor' are 'generally working'.

Scottish businessman Tom Hunter pledged around this time to give £1bn away in his lifetime. *The Sunday Times* comments that the timing of this and the report 'made for a neat juxtaposition', while *The Guardian* is critical with its headline 'Rich donor's hefty cheques will never solve poverty'. *The Guardian* also draws a link between current and past philanthropy with its headline: 'What the new Victorians do for us. With Britain's super-rich dripping charity, it's almost like the 19th century'.

It is not just the philanthropy link but also the topic in general that introduces discussion of history. The Victorian discourse is a site of struggle, with headlines like *The Guardian*'s 'Urban Britain is heading for Victorian levels of inequality' set against critiques of poverty campaigners such as the *Scotland on Sunday*'s 'music hall caricature of proletarian victimhood'. Political discourses that are usually forced to the periphery in the present day are similarly invoked and challenged. Compare the *Express*'s critique of a 'narrow socialist mindset' with *The Guardian* telling us it is 'worth recalling Engels' and *The Herald* lamenting that 'redistribution has been beaten out of the body politic as much as a subversive idea is beaten out of a dissident'. More recent history that is rarely

given voice in current media, such as the closure of the mines during Thatcherism and the continued drop in manufacturing and industry since then (*Wigan Evening Post*), and the decline in the membership of trade unions (*Birmingham Evening Mail*) are similarly invoked as contributing to 'the great divide'. So, although *The Times* has the critical headline 'Let's make money by regurgitating stuff about the poor', the release of this report would appear to have re-energised discourses that are little heard of and thus have encouraged important debate.

Conclusion

There are several striking features of this study of news coverage of poverty. The first is that poverty does not appear as a news item for its own sake, but in relation to other more 'newsworthy' issues, such as politics. A second feature is the conspicuous absence of the voices of those in poverty themselves from much of the reporting (other than in the Farepak example). A third is the repertoire of clichés and standard rhetoric that characterises the reports of non-specialist journalists. Such reporting has the effect of portraying poverty as an abstract occurrence rather than the result of social conditions or the distribution of resources. An effect of this representation, as noted by Scott (1982, p. 57) in another context, is that it becomes difficult to construct an understanding of poverty as a structural outcome of inequalities, and therefore to develop the basis for a collective response to it:

Inequalities are accepted by people in a factual way, not a moral way, just as they accept the weather – there is apparently nothing they can do about it. These inequalities, however, are justified by those who are privileged in terms of particular vocabularies of motive, and those who are less privileged will voice similar justification when required to make some general statement about their perceptions of stratification.

(Scott, 1982, p. 57)

Other themes to emerge across the stories can be summarised as follows.

- Media reporting holds out the possibility for better informing the public about the nature of poverty. However, this is undermined in that poverty is rarely spoken about explicitly. Furthermore, there is a tendency towards conservatism in analysis in that, when it is reported, political and historical discourses are employed to support arguments. Thus, there is scope for the reporting of poverty to be undertaken in such a way as to promote understanding.
- The local press plays an interesting role. Although the SPIU content analysis demonstrated that poverty was reported less frequently in the local media, this analysis has shown that, when poverty is presented in the local press, there is scope for it to be both humanised and politicised – that is, the local press are able to convey what wider issues mean to local people, while maintaining a focus on the policy context.
- Language is important. In all of the examples, attention has been drawn to the way in which poverty is described and reported. At times, there is a tendency to draw on stock phrases and familiar journalistic language. As a result, national government is constructed as (masculine) active military protector and pioneer; local government is constructed as beholden to, and relatively more human (and feminine) than, national government. People experiencing poverty are empathised with, disempowered and ‘othered’. Such language is not always unproblematic. In particular, care must be taken to avoid presenting people experiencing poverty as passive victims and to describe in such a way as to over-emphasise any difference between people experiencing poverty and the readership.
- Images of poverty differ between press and broadcast coverage: press coverage tends towards individualised images, which arguably reduce government responsibility; television coverage tends towards images of areas of housing, which is suggestive of a ‘structural’ approach. A stronger role for service providers is implied, as this structural approach acknowledges that the way in which our society functions makes a difference to the lives that we lead.

5 On-screen representations of poverty

Introduction

Chapter 5 develops the insights of Chapter 4 by exploring the ‘representations’ of poverty that are evident in the non-news media. Once more, the case studies were purposively selected to consider different genres of non-news media and the examples reported are understood to be indicative and suggestive of the ways in which the poverty is reported; the aim of this analysis is to provide a small-scale exploratory analysis, as opposed to a large-scale representative study. Table A3 in the Appendix reports and briefly describes the range of programmes that were reviewed across reality television, soap operas, comedy drama and documentaries.

Discounting the documentaries, in the over 40 hours of television viewed, the word ‘poverty’ appeared only twice, both times in *Shameless*. In the 2005/06 New Year special, Yvonne derided Live Aid and Comic Relief as publicity stunts, declaring that Bono wasn’t ‘making her poverty history’. In episode 6, a brief shot (no longer than one second) of a row of shops following Marty’s unsuccessful attempt to burn down the loan business showed a branch of Poverty Aid. In non-news television, poverty is, to an overwhelming extent, a condition that dares not speak its name.

Spatial representations of poverty

The fact that the word ‘poverty’ is seldom used, of course, does not mean that poverty as a condition is absent. In the soaps in particular, reference to a relative scarcity (rather than complete absence) of economic resources exists as a more or less permanent background murmur. However, the effects of such apparently straitened circumstances are nowhere to be seen. Everyone has a roof over their head, everyone is not only well fed but is also a regular at the pub where he/she is never embarrassed about buying a round, most

people have a mobile phone, unemployment is rare (and only temporary) and, when it does occur, it never triggers a crisis. In fact, such economic crises as do emerge are of a quite different order altogether, as when the Dingles in *Emmerdale* are unable to keep their daughter on at her private school when their local benefactor refuses to continue the payments (more on this later).

In fact, in the soaps – a feature they share with *60 Minute Makeover* – the most obvious manifestation of having a lack of financial resources is having insufficient space.¹ Poverty does not translate into missed meals or a poor diet – in fact, food is never an issue – nor the inability to go on holiday or buying embarrassingly unfashionable clothes for the teenagers, it is expressed primarily through the display of cramped living quarters, often intensified by the accompaniment of claustrophobic wallpaper and at times even further exacerbated by the presence of lodgers. The Dingles’ living room with its ubiquitous clutter and hectic crocheted chair covers is perhaps the archetypal case, but a further striking example could be found in an episode of *River City* broadcast in September 2007. As Jimmy, now in a wheelchair as a result of having been knocked down by a car, tries to negotiate his way around Scarlett’s dauntingly encumbered living room, she announces: ‘Jimmy, I brought up three weans in smaller places than this. I used tae huv tae climb ower wee Bubba’s pram tae answer the door in Easterhouse’.²

With its reference to Easterhouse, one of Glasgow’s most deprived areas, the link between lack of space and lack of income (indeed poverty and deprivation more generally) could not be clearer.

This importance of household space is also much in evidence in *60 Minute Makeover*. Though the mode of address as embodied through and performed by presenter Claire Sweeney (formerly of *Brookside*) and the various tradesmen involved

is clearly working class, the programme itself is uncritically aspirational and addresses those sections of the working-class population who are attempting to achieve at least the outward signs of a more recognisably middle-class lifestyle. This upward mobility is fundamentally signalled – indeed this is the crux of the entire programme – through the mastery of space, ‘mastery’ in this case meaning the eradication of clutter, a move towards greater simplicity of lines and a more generally minimalist approach. Clutter is not to be regarded as a sign of ‘having enough’ (not experiencing poverty); on the contrary, clutter signifies the inability to manage what we have (not having enough skills to manage the lack of household space). In this way, poverty is not only a lack of economic resources but also a lack of cultural capabilities.

Beyond economic resources

If we are to understand contemporary poverty more fully, we need to think beyond economic resources and to also consider different kinds of resources (or capital) – not only economic capital strictly speaking but also, for example, cultural capital (the ability to use certain forms of cultural appreciation as a marker of ‘distinction’); social capital (entry into influential networks); educational capital (the possession of duly recognised qualifications); linguistic capital (the ability to speak the standard form of the national language) and so on.³ Crucially, each of these forms of capital is convertible into the other. A simple example might be where parents with sufficient economic means use these to send their child to a private school, thereby converting their economic capital into educational capital for the child. The child might then later use his or her educational qualifications to secure a well-paid job, thereby converting the educational capital back into economic capital (and simultaneously ensuring the reproduction of privilege).

The link between low economic capital and the difficulties this causes for the accumulation of other forms of capital does at times surface in the soaps. In an episode of *Coronation Street*, Sally berates her daughter Rosie for giving up school at 16, despite achieving nine GCSEs, for a job in the underwear factory (where Sally also works)

by informing her that she (Sally) is fed up with ‘earning five pounds an hour and being talked down to’. Low economic capital also translates into low social capital. Whether by coincidence or not, three of the soaps analysed here – *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders* and *Emmerdale* – all raised the issue of the importance of an education for ‘getting on’. It is not suggested that having aspirations or that using education to broaden career horizons is to be discouraged. The problem is the inferences that are to be drawn from a selective representation in soap operas of how people come to experience poverty. Solutions to poverty are placed only within a discourse of self-improvement through formal education, with the inference that those who do not educate themselves to a ‘better job’ are choosing poverty. Responsibility for low-income living is assumed to rest squarely on the shoulders of those experiencing poverty (i.e. those who choose not to capitalise on the opportunities available to them). In none of the soaps has the raising of this issue as yet coalesced into a full-blooded storyline, though, following a tried-and-tested soap strategy of sporadically flagging up an issue before it graduates to fuller narrative treatment, this may yet prove to be the case. Thus, Sally not only is pressurising daughter Rosie about the latter’s lack of educational ambitions but also is attempting to improve her own educational capital by studying English. She even has a private tutor to help her with Shakespeare. Helping the children with their homework is seen as a sign of ‘proper’ parenting in *EastEnders*, while having to remove Belle from her private school provoked a crisis of unexpected proportions for the Dingles in *Emmerdale*. Ambitions towards upward mobility are not, however, always generally appreciated in the soaps, and can lead to feelings of resentment.

Though the characters in the soaps tend not to have the means to access influential networks that might enable them to capitalise on the wider opportunities that are available to them,⁴ they compensate for this by developing extremely strong community networks of their own. Indeed, British soaps are fundamentally about community (O’Donnell, 1999). The power of belonging to this community is evident through language.⁵ Thus, the most valued linguistic capital (in the English soaps at least) is not the ability to speak Standard English, far less Received Pronunciation, but the

ability to speak the local working-class variety of the language. Indeed, those whose language is viewed as ‘posh’ are often viewed with suspicion. In keeping with this, the most valued form of social capital is not membership of influential networks but membership of a community where help is always at hand in times of need. The characters in British soaps do not live in a welfare state – no one ever seems to be in receipt of unemployment or family benefit, or income support – they live in what Portuguese sociologist and philosopher Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls a ‘welfare society’, and which he describes as:

... networks of relationships of shared acquaintance and recognition and mutual aid based on kinship, neighbourhood and community ties through which small social groups exchange goods and services on a non-commercial basis and following a logic of reciprocity.

(de Sousa Santos, 1994, p. 64)

While *60 Minute Makeover* addresses those who wish to exit from such a society into the more culturally prestigious world of the (lower) middle-class population, the soaps construct an alternative world settled in its own values. There may be less imperative in soap operas to depict an aspirational society in which people experiencing poverty are expected and encouraged to move on to a life beyond poverty. Indeed, the logic of the soap opera may militate against social mobility, instead preferring stable social positions for familiar members of the cast.

The underclass: the world apart of those who are not like us

The underclass⁶ as seen from the soap perspective is a world of violence and illegality. The removal of Belle Dingle from her private school triggered the storyline in *Emmerdale* in which her father Zak attempted to find the money necessary to keep her there by challenging local bruiser the ‘Widow Maker’ to an illegal bare-knuckle fight in a barn. Despite giving his opponent 20 years of an advantage and being both overweight and unfit, the blood-stained Zak was ludicrously on the point of winning when the fight was broken

up by the police and he avoided arrest only by being whisked away in time by other members of his family. The message of this storyline – and indeed of many others – is clear. When financial crises loom, the threshold between working class and underclass becomes paper thin, and one wrong move can mean a catastrophic descent into a realm where even life can be at risk. Here, the underclass (into which the Dingles risk slipping as a result of financial crisis) are presented as sharing aspirations with us (improvement through education), although the means through which this is to be achieved sets them apart,

Shameless sees things very differently. Set in the fictitious Chatsworth Estate in Manchester – described at the beginning of every episode as ‘not the garden of Eden’ – *Shameless* deals with the chaotic lives of the Gallagher family and those related to them through marriage, friendship, enmity or just plain sex. Though no one, except local gangsters the Maguires, has any visible means of financial support and almost all the families depicted are to one degree or another dysfunctional, poverty is nowhere to be seen. Everyone, even the schoolchildren, are well turned out with freshly ironed shirts every day, food never appears to be lacking and there are no other visible signs of want. The answer to this apparent conundrum is simple. In addition to illegal earnings (through, for example, growing cannabis in the loft), everyone is defrauding social security. When Carol announces in the pub in episode 3 that social security is doing a spot check on the estate for fraud, the place empties in a flash as everyone heads off to deal with this crisis. Children are paid to pretend to belong to people other than their parents, neighbours temporarily move in with others pretending to be their spouses and so on. The crisis soon passes.

The riotous world of *Shameless* is presented not as an alternative society within ‘society’ like the soaps but as an alternative, invigorating society outside the ‘civilising process’ (Elias, 1978) where stuffy, bourgeois conventions count for nothing and we can all direct our exertions to what counts (which seems to be mostly sex). *Shameless* can be tragic at times – episode 4 starts with Kev’s mother committing suicide by throwing herself from her sixth-floor flat – and it can on occasions be violent, extremely violent by soap standards.

While the soap world is hermetic and resists absorption whether from above or from below, *Shameless's* irrepressible libido draws everyone into its sphere – the adult literacy teacher, the police, even the social security inspectors.

The makers of *Shameless* would no doubt argue that they are sending up a number of stereotypes relating to the kind of characters they portray and, with their 11pm slot on Channel 4, this joke no doubt works between them and their audience (small when compared with the soaps). But the most refreshing characteristic of the series is its absolute refusal to depict its characters as helpless victims, or to portray them as lacking in resources more generally or to suggest that they are somehow to blame for the situation they find themselves in.

Taking pleasure at people's pain: entertainment through derision of those who are not like us

The Jeremy Kyle Show goes out five days a week between 9.30 and 10.30am on ITV. On the surface, it has no links with poverty, since its focus is solely on what it terms 'family and relationship issues'.

While *The Jeremy Kyle Show* presents itself as a show based on family relationship issues, it could be viewed as a rather brutal form of entertainment that is based on derision of the lower-working-class population. Without information on how participants are chosen, they are, with very few exceptions, strongly coded as working class.⁷ They speak with strong regional accents (occasionally even strong regional dialects), they dress in very non-glamorous ways (at times bordering on the scruffy), they often display an almost total lack of the kind of cultural capital that might moderate the behaviour of others on television, but above all they appear to be entirely bereft of the kind of social capital that might assist them in finding solutions to their problems, which do not involve them airing them publicly in front of both the studio audience and the viewers. In other words, while any economic poverty they might suffer from is never mentioned, their poverty in a range of other forms of capital is an essential element – perhaps even *the* essential element – in their display. As Grindstaff (1997) puts it:

Guests are not cultural dopes, naively complicit in their own degradation. They have agendas of their own, and their seemingly irrational behaviour makes sense when we account for their needs, desires and material circumstances, as well as structural inequalities of access to more socially acceptable media forms.

(Grindstaff, 1997, p. 167)

The show quite explicitly defends a rather conventional, even reified set of family values. Those who appear to uphold them can elicit sympathy, even support from the host (males can be addressed by him as 'mate'). Those who for whatever reason challenge them are hectored and bullied, at times insulted. The audience, better dressed, clap and boo appropriately, and the producers are careful to catch their smirks, raised eyebrows and other signifiers of superiority. This is entertainment at its crudest, where those lacking a range of social resources are put on display in a form of gladiatorial combat for the entertainment of others. The inference to be drawn is that those without (those experiencing poverty) are not like us and are not deserving of what we have. Public support for anti-poverty measures is that bit more difficult to achieve when programmes such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show* continue to present those less fortunate in society as undeserving objects to be used for the purpose of public entertainment.

Progressive constructions of poverty

Thus far, the dominant themes in the portrayal of poverty through entertainment media are largely negative. People experiencing poverty are portrayed as lacking skills, living life according to different value systems and being underproductive in the wider economy, which generates an entertainment value around dismissive distancing of the general public from those living with poverty.

However, more progressive or enlightened presentations of poverty are to be found in serious documentaries and some forms of entertainment reality television. Five themes, each of which lends itself to a less regressive portrayal of poverty in the UK, cut across these programmes.

First, the deservingness of people experiencing poverty tends to be raised in a manner that draws attention to fallibilities. In contrast, the reality television programme *The Secret Millionaire* draws on the inherent worth of people experiencing poverty. The rationale for the programme, which is demonstrated on a weekly basis, is that there are people who are deserving of a helping hand. The cash rewards distributed by the 'secret millionaire' at the end of the programme to the deserving poor aim to redress the balance and to serve as a catalyst to alter life paths. Similarly, the harrowing life stories of the children experiencing homelessness in *Evicted* present an equally compelling account of deservingness, although in this instance without the feel-good, good-news ending required of entertainment television. Through adversity, these girls foster and sustain friendships, seek opportunity for personal development, manage difficult family situations and provide much needed support for those around them. These diverse programmes with their very different objectives demonstrate that there is potential through film to project a much more positive understanding of poverty than is typically projected.

Second, poverty is inadvertently portrayed as underinvestment. Whether it be through the inadequacy of social housing provision (*Evicted*) or the life-changing interventions of investing in people (*The Secret Millionaire*), there is a subtext that prudent financial investment can tackle the problems of poverty. The nature of this investment varies across the programmes. In *Evicted*, more direct social provision is required, whereas, in *The Secret Millionaire*, it is predominately an investing in people subtext that is consistent with the Government's belief in providing help for those who can thereafter help themselves.

Third, poverty is cast as an experience as opposed to a condition. The focus of attention in both *The Secret Millionaire* and *Evicted* is the lives of people experiencing poverty. Poverty is personalised and described richly in terms of everyday experience. This is not wholly inconsistent with presenting information on the abstract condition of poverty. Indeed, *Evicted* intersperses personal experience and critical commentary with hard-hitting statistics that demonstrate that what is reported is far from an

isolated exception to the rule. However, even here, the focus is on poverty as lived experience that afflicts the lives of those deserving of better.

Fourth, people experiencing poverty are portrayed as having untapped potential and in need of support to help them help themselves. Not here are they cast as welfare recipients or passive victims of social processes. Neither, however, are they portrayed as engineers of their own destiny ... yet. The hidden message is that people experiencing poverty could achieve more if only they were provided with the necessary leverage to support them through the process of change.

Finally, *The Secret Millionaire* engages a range of people experiencing poverty in different ways in many different places across the UK. The heterogeneity of the population living in poverty is demonstrated on a weekly basis; indeed, even within a single episode, a range of experiences are presented. This diversity is a challenge to the stereotypical presentation of people experiencing poverty, which tends to be characteristic of the press. There is no room in *The Secret Millionaire* for the comfortable portrayal of poverty in the UK as belonging to a familiar set of groups, such as lone parents and those unable or unwilling to engage in work.

This is not to suggest that *The Secret Millionaire* and *Evicted* are not open to alternative and less progressive interpretations of poverty. It could be argued that *The Secret Millionaire* is but a form of poverty tourism and that it reinforces the control and influence of economically powerful groups over those experiencing poverty. Undoubtedly, these criticisms are valid to some extent. However, the contribution these programmes make in engendering a more positive portrayal of poverty in the UK should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

As far as British non-news television is concerned, poverty in its traditional sense – i.e. as a lack of economic resources – exists in what Swedish analysts Nord and Nygren call 'media shadow', a situation that arises when, as a result of 'systematic and structural biases' (Nord and Nygren, 2002, p. 29) rather than merely conjunctural trends, the media cast little or no

meaningful light on a particular aspect of social life. Wealth, for that matter – at least in the sense of significant wealth as opposed to mere affluence – likewise exists in media shadow, though wealthy people enjoy a range of resources (capitals) denied to those living in economic poverty. In fact the entire focus is on what Hargreaves (1986) identified 20 years ago as the central ideological fault line in British political life. He argued that the splitting of the working class in two, aligning the ‘respectable’ working class with the (lower) middle class on the one hand, and setting aside the ‘rough’ working class on the other, has been undertaken in the UK for well over 100 years. This process is visible in all of the productions analysed here. As a result, poverty is never dealt with in its own terms. In this media shadow, an alternative form of shadow theatre has emerged where poverty is recoded as an absence of other forms of social capital, and is thereby identified with membership of the underclass.

Indeed, new programmes tend to reinforce this ideological fault line, focusing on the extremes at either side of the divide to identify the

deservingness of the respectable working class (*60 Minute Makeover*, *The Secret Millionaire*) or the inherent failings of the lower-working-class population (*The Jeremy Kyle Show*, *Shameless*). It is left to the more limited audiences of documentaries such as *Evicted* to explore the complexities and inequities of the circumstances facing those experiencing the most severest poverty in our contemporary society.

What is entirely missing, then, is working-class (or even lower-middle-class) poverty in any meaningful sense, i.e. people struggling to make ends meet who do not descend into petty (or larger-scale) criminality, or resort to violence, or defraud the State, or are hopelessly lacking in resources of other kinds, or deliver themselves up voluntarily as the objects of condescending display. The recoding of economic poverty as other kinds of poverty at least allows the issue to be raised indirectly, but the cost is a continuing demonising of poverty and those living in it, and its association with deficiencies that are all too often presented as personal rather than structural.

6 Reproduction of poverty in the media

Introduction

This chapter is based on a small sample of eight interviews with key informants involved in the production of copy that pertains to poverty in the media. The sample is stratified to include those presented as experiencing poverty, those whose aim is to place poverty in the news and those who are responsible for producing the news. Interviews were conducted in all national regions of the UK. The study sheds insight into the changing context in which key informants function; the frameworks that they feel are drawn on in developing stories; the role of NGOs, government and press in sourcing material for poverty coverage; and the steps that are seen to be valuable to achieve a more balanced coverage.

The changing world of news production

Key players in the formation of media portrayals of people experiencing poverty are not simply journalists and editors but also comprise a range of organisations from both civil society and government with greater or lesser power to affect the content and nature of the portrayal of issues around poverty.

Informants accepted that the media play a significant role in the production of images of poverty, and that it can be a positive as well as negative role:

There's a long tradition of good journalism about poverty and that is not just historic, it goes on to this day and it can be very powerful. The media's role is in bringing that to people's attention. So I think it's worth having a caveat that it's not all bleak ... however, there is very little coverage of social issues in the tabloids at all. It's all kind of celebrity-driven news, entertainment news and when

it's in the broadsheets it is often ghettoised to supplements.

(Editor, Sunday broadsheet supplement)

Government also has a role in setting the agenda. Although the right-wing tendencies of much press ownership suggest that traditionally the print media is, for the most part, unlikely to reflect the anti-poverty leanings of Gordon Brown's years at the Treasury, the robust nature of Britain's press coverage of politics will inevitably put poverty policy on the agenda at some point, even if just as a way of holding the Government to account.

Furthermore, as one respondent put it, since poverty moved onto the UK political agenda, after 1997 the media has tended to follow:

I do think the political debate has changed The media have gone along with that. I think it's been a bit of a battle against the media to do that, to be honest. I think it's been in spite of media opinion, public opinion – it's one of the areas in which the political debate has managed to shift public opinion.

(Scottish government adviser)

Also significant in examining the context of media production is the increasingly professional and politically and media sophisticated campaigning sector that Golding identified as early as 1990, which could affect the dynamics of media production and widen the range of frameworks used for analysis. Press officers are becoming a feature of the larger anti-poverty organisations, but even the smaller ones that were interviewed for the research had developed a communications strategy to some extent:

There's an interesting thing about how politicians and the media interrelate and our relationships with those two groups work, because it kind of works both ways in that,

if you can get the media to pay attention to something, it's easier to get politicians to pay attention to it. And it works a bit the other way as well. If you can get politicians to pay attention, then the media will. I think it works stronger in the direction of getting the media to pay attention ... then politicians will.

(Press officer, national voluntary sector organisation)

Such views suggest the potential for both a positive and negative context for coverage of poverty. However, an added coda in the analysis, which was provided by journalists in particular, was that they identified competition in the print sector as tending to lead to different media for different audiences, and a growing divide between the specialist in-depth sections of broadsheets and the often more superficial, individualised coverage of poverty in the popular press:

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, and these days there aren't loyal readers. Only something like 25 per cent of newspaper readers read the same paper every day. The others do a picking and mixing off the rack, which is why you get louder and louder things across the top about all the exciting stuff inside.

(Political commentator, daily broadsheet)

Comment was also made about a silence that has come to exist in relation to poverty in the media. Journalist respondents explained this in part as a reflection of the increasing fragmentation of society and relative isolation of journalists from the lives of those living in poverty, as well as different demands from a changing public: 'Journalists simply don't know what it is like to live with poverty' (editor, regional Sunday newspaper).

Themes/framework used to report poverty

The changes in the context of media production reported by interviewees might suggest the possibility of more rounded and consensual

coverage. This, however, was not seen to be the case by any of the respondents. News about poverty was seen by respondents to be characterised by several features. These included:

- criticism of government inefficiencies in relation to their own targets;
- largely negative reporting of people experiencing poverty;
- a lack of interest in analysis;
- differences between broadsheet and tabloid national and regional frameworks of interest.

These features correspond with findings reported in Chapters 3 and 4.

Criticism of government inefficiencies

The failure of government measures to reduce poverty and achieve targets was identified as one strand of stories. This was seen to be different from the 1970s when bureaucratic inefficiencies in welfare were a major theme. Targets are seen to have become the hook for stories. Journalists identified this as an often used method of putting politicians on the spot, but also as an easy option for much of the media because, as soon as targets are set, there is a possibility of using them as the basis for a story. The government adviser saw this as an area where the Government had a significant role as the originator of a story but was limited by its tendency to examine political reactions rather than provide full coverage. NGOs saw coverage of the failure to meet targets as a valuable aspect of coverage they could contribute to, as it raised the profile of anti-poverty work. However, they were aware they were often unwilling partners in the perpetuation of a view that the problem of poverty could not be solved:

At times you may get a flurry of activity at the time of a government report but otherwise newspapers are not really interested.

(Editor, regional Sunday newspaper)

The media like that, it gives a good bit of conflict. Ministers are questioned on what they

have been doing and all the rest of it ... But the problem is, when you are dealing with the media, you can never seem to get past that particular argument.

(Scottish government adviser)

I think that a lot of the time journalists are not particularly aware of the fact that what they are doing may have quite a negative impact on what campaigning groups like ours are trying to achieve.

(Press officer, national voluntary sector organisation)

Largely negative reporting of people living in poverty

The tendency for negative reporting of ‘the poor’, particularly in the tabloid press, was seen to be a clear element of coverage. Drama, notions of individual responsibility and connections between poverty and anti-social behaviour are never far from the centre of debate and were seen by all as reflecting issues of newsworthiness in the selection of stories, as well as a reflection of public attitudes towards poverty as a whole:

I think there's a tendency and an incentive there, to report negatively. I don't think that that applies exclusively to reporting on poverty. I think that that's a general feature of the media, I think it's a characteristic that has increased more and more over the years. I think the media market has become more and more competitive, so publications and broadcast media as well, want to stand out, and the things that stand out now are when you make something controversial, shocking, when you've got those kinds of angles on it.

(Press officer, national voluntary sector organisation)

For stories to get reported there has to be an element of drama. If the story has drama and is good enough it will be picked up. Even in documentaries, the tendency is to report on people and their deficiencies rather than social causes.

(Editor, regional Sunday newspaper)

There is very little sympathetic portrayal of poor people. And people are looking for reassuring images, that things are OK, things are fair, and that people at the bottom are there because it's their fault, and therefore we've all earned and merit our position.

(Political commentator, daily broadsheet)

Of course, these political controversies are potential ‘points of entry’ for poverty campaigners to exploit. However, a balance needs to be struck to avoid becoming perceived – by the Government among others – as partisan and overly critical, which could jeopardise effective working relationships over time.

A different tack was characteristic of middle-market titles, which are characterised as leaning to the right of the political spectrum. There was explicit recognition of negative reporting of people experiencing poverty. However, it was considered that it was appropriate for the newspapers to question the foundations on which reports and research were premised, particularly in leader articles and political commentaries:

I write leader articles with a certain attitude that our readers would be sympathetic with ... We always shall suspect that a report on poverty might come from a standpoint that suggests that it is not the fault of the person in poverty.

(Political commentator, middle-market broadsheet)

Although upholding the value of commentary and opinion, there was some acknowledgement that the inclinations of the readership might also reflect the character of commentary:

... we have to reflect our readers who believe that there are too many people on benefits, too many people playing the system. They could actually be doing a hard day's work.

(Political commentator, middle-market broadsheet)

A lack of coverage

The reported lack of interest in covering poverty reinforces previous analyses that welfare is not big news – that, unsurprisingly, news values rather

than social policy values are important in the process of news production:¹

I think media coverage is quite low in terms of explicit coverage of poverty, as an issue that should be a political priority.

(Press officer, national voluntary sector organisation)

Fuel poverty is not a story, people living in poorer areas fiddling their gas meters is.

(Editor, regional Sunday newspaper)

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)

The key informant from the middle-market press was concerned with the level of coverage. On the whole, coverage was described as being 'largely sympathetic, quite extensive, covered with a range of points of view, given the type of publication'. Furthermore, the newspaper was described as not being averse to reporting poverty in a manner that would please the authors of research reports:

I wouldn't say we look out to report it [poverty], but we would if a good academic report from the JRF or academic research was presented to us ... we'd report it straightforward, actually.

(Political commentator, middle-market newspaper)

This sentiment stands in contrast to the writing of leader articles referred to previously.

However, particular groups were identified by other key informants as simply not appearing on the media radar. The Welsh Refugee Council, for example, commented that, despite a concerted UK campaign about destitution and asylum seekers, there had been very little media interest in the issue and, when it had occurred, it had tended

to be based on inaccurate data and stereotype. It was not just a lack of coverage that respondents identified, lack of interest in analysis was also seen to be a feature of press coverage:

When government comes out with uninformed comments, about, for example, lone-parent employment figures without considering the context of the lack of childcare availability, of the lack of employment opportunities for lone parents, then we would come out with agencies like Gingerbread and put a context on it and provide the background information so that people can understand that many lone parents do work, do live with low pay and do want to work but can't access childcare to do so, or whatever the other complications might be. Getting the media to pick it up though is harder.

(Director, regional anti-poverty organisation)

Differences

While there was agreement on the scope and limitations that newspapers, government and NGOs faced, some clear differences were also identified across different parts of the country and between different types of newspapers. Specialist editors in broadsheet newspapers, for example, were identified as engaged in deeper analysis for a largely public sector readership, while tabloids were more likely to individualise stories:

We are geared generally to representing the interests of, and being of interest to, our readers who work in the public sector. So it's aimed at anyone and everyone who works for local authorities or in the voluntary sector. You've got to a stage where there is very little coverage of social issues in the tabloids at all. It's all kind of celebrity-driven news, entertainment news. And so you end up with poverty issues ghettoised into sections like my own.

(Editor, Sunday broadsheet supplement)

Papers in the devolved parts of the UK were reported by those working in the media and by NGOs as more likely to pick up positively on poverty stories than UK national papers.² Possible reasons proposed by respondents included

fewer stories available to editors and closer connections between anti-poverty organisations, politicians and the media, leading to a general tendency for a consensus of criticism of UK national government action. In Wales, for example, the Refugee Council reported the local media and members of the Welsh Assembly as strong allies in a campaign to reduce stereotyping of refugees and asylum seekers. In Northern Ireland, comment was made by both press and NGOs that a 'window of opportunity' for poverty coverage has developed with devolution. Growing national interest in Scotland's devolution settlement since the May 2007 elections was felt to have led to a greater likelihood that the ills as well as progress in Scotland would be covered:

The thing about journalism and journalists is that they respond to general moods. Everyone you are talking to in the voluntary sector or politics are enthused because there is a new parliament. The voters are kind of fed up because, for decades, Scotland has voted and got a different government but has not really been able to influence London's centric political structure, which doesn't really understand the problems here, or that is the perception. So, when all of that was overturned, I think there was a kind of change in the national mood, which newspapers picked up on.

(Editor, Sunday broadsheet supplement)

The role of NGOs, government and press in sourcing material for poverty coverage

In addition to exploring circumstances that respondents felt conditioned their respective contributions to news coverage of poverty, we explored what role different agencies took in sourcing material for poverty coverage. Three issues emerged:

- the ways in which government, NGOs and academics or policy researchers are consulted by the press;
- the demand for case studies from NGOs by the press;
- empowerment responses from NGOs.

The ways in which government, NGOs and academics or policy researchers are consulted by the press

Press releases, reports (government, NGO or academic), personal contacts were all seen to play a part in the sources that journalists use in constructing and prioritising coverage:

Well, they go to the organisations, they go to CPAG [Child Poverty Action Group], they go to families, they would go to perhaps the Institute of Fiscal Studies for some background, statistics, they might go to some of the children's charities, any of them would have figures and stories, they would also come up with case histories that they might want, then visit a particular project or programmes of one kind or another.

(Political commentator, daily broadsheet)

The part played by these different sources, though, was seen to differ. A heavy dependence on government, politicians and officials was identified, particularly for policy and statistics. NGOs are generally seen as a source of specialist comment as well as a short cut to case studies and the relationship tends to be non-combative on the part of the press. Academics and research centres are seen as sources that can give weight to a story. Sometimes there are regular sources used for their convenience. One respondent who had experience as a press contact for a children's charity and for government identified what he saw as distinct stages to press sourcing:

They have a databank. They'll get a press release or a report. First, they'll go to the Scottish Executive, they'll go to the devolved government, find out from them. They will ask to speak to a minister, or a deputy minister, a spokesperson – they will start at a minister and then go down the way. They will then ask for somebody from one of the main opposition parties, a spokesperson. They will then speak to campaigners that they already have on the database, who they know can do it for them. And then they will ask them if they have an individual who is willing to come forward. And then they will have the press releases and the information from the report, perhaps, and

things like that. And they build a story out of that. They always use the same campaigners because, again, it's about doing it quickly. What I learned in [charity] was, you got yourself in there and you never said no, because if you said no they moved on to somebody else, and then that person was top of the list. So I always said yes, and you do become a bit of a 'rentaquote', but it's the only way you can keep yourself at the top of their database.

(Scottish government adviser)

This corresponds in part to Manning's (1998) conclusions about the attributes of the most influential and successful trade union press officers. These had three attributes that were valuable to journalists. First, they were accessible to them and readily contactable. Second, they shared with journalists a set of 'news values' and ideas of what was a 'good story'. Third, they had access to the highest levels of their organisations and knew the latest political intelligence within it (Manning, 1998).

One press-based respondent commented that, as well as the different role and status of sources, there had to be an awareness of restrictions on information imposed by those sources and the friction that imposed on relationships – for example, local authority press officers tended to be inflexible in their response to journalists:

You're never going to have a press officer have a straightforward ride because it will always be your job to put the best possible slant. But, tell people [journalists] what they want to know, and your coverage will generally turn out to be better. But the mentality at most councils ... is just 'bunker down' and they don't tell you anything.

(Editor, Sunday broadsheet supplement)

Much of this suggests that anti-poverty organisations are largely reactive, responding to government figures (but not always allowed to rebut false figures) and giving their views on reports or events as they happen. In fact this is not the full story. All the NGOs interviewed had recent examples of press campaigns that they had instigated. The CPAG respondent identified, for example, the 'Make Child Benefit Count' campaign

to increase child benefit for younger children. The campaign has involved a postcard campaign, lobbying of MPs and a strategy for press coverage. The Northern Ireland Anti-poverty Network provided examples of campaigning tools that had focused on media coverage at a time when older conflicts were not filling media inches.

The demand for case studies from NGOs by the press

No source was seen by those in the press to be without problems, but that which appeared to be particularly problematic, for both press and NGOs, was the use of individuals living in poverty to give a personal insight into an issue that the press wanted to be covered. Notwithstanding the dangers in individualising poverty through case study presentation, the perspective from the press seemed to be that cases and life examples make a story much more digestible:

You need a story, you need a person.

(Political commentator, daily broadsheet)

If you actually have cases and life examples, it's very much easier to explain the impact of incapacity benefit on a family or the problems of what direct payments mean for disabled people in terms of commissioning their own services. An article on that, a feature on that, whether it's an important issue in social policy or not at the moment, is going to be pretty indigestible unless you actually get a disabled person in there telling how they actually hired their own home help.

(Editor, Sunday broadsheet supplement)

These professional judgements are confirmed by the audience responses reported in Chapter 7.

Press respondents criticised NGOs' reluctance to provide contact details of people who were experiencing poverty. They felt that NGOs were overprotective and commented that, in a more fragmented society, media coverage is one of the few ways for the public to understand what poverty means. Television coverage is also one of the few ways through which those experiencing poverty can make their voices heard and can counter the 'dramatics' of reality television. There was some recognition of the potential

for exploitation, particularly in the tabloid press, but one respondent commented that a lack of knowledge and understanding of the media among anti-poverty organisations was counterproductive:

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 Sunday newspaper)

Experiences of working with the media were variable. One person experiencing poverty, who had worked with the media for over 15 years, reported positive and negative experiences, although she was clear that the media often knew exactly what they wanted *before* they arrived:

Somebody came to the house. We had just had prawns. I had got them cheap. They [television crew] said that we needed to see us eat something and could we boil an egg. I just boiled the egg to keep them happy.

(Person experiencing poverty)

The implications of working with the media extend beyond the interactions with the media to impact on relationships with friends and family. The above informant also described the negative reaction of friends and family to her initial involvement. This reflected their concern that she had not turned to her family for support, but had instead attempted to manage her affairs independently. Among the wider community, reactions were more sceptical. It was reported that rumours circulated of payments for participation (which were untrue), which led to her being less keen to use neighbourhood services (such as hairdressers) to avoid accusations of spending money that had been gained through media work.

Regret was expressed at the failure of journalists to deliver on promises made at the time of interviews: 'All I asked for was a nice photograph' (person experiencing poverty).

Clearly, there is a danger of taking for granted the people whose experiences are being reported. One concrete suggestion was that newspapers should always state the person had not been paid for their participation, to avoid any negative

reaction to their involvement among their community.

Empowerment responses from NGOs

The NGOs' response to the issue was a mixed one. On the one hand, there was a feeling that not everybody has experience of handling the media or confidence about how to say things or keep control of an interview. Exploitation of the individual and the potential for 'off message' responses from members were both identified as problems. On the other hand, there was a feeling that opportunities were being lost and there was a willingness to engage with the media by members in order to depict what they saw as the real situation. New strategies were felt to be needed to understand and work with the changing nature of media production:

We were missing opportunities – reactive opportunities and proactive opportunities as well, because the welfare rights advisers will pick up on problems through clients that people aren't aware of. It might be, say, unintended consequences, perhaps, in how a particular bit of welfare and benefits legislation is working in practice. And in those kind of situations journalists are not going to be aware of that probably going on. Basically, we tell them. If it's a situation like that we may sometimes feel that it's a good opportunity, and appropriate for the kind of problem it is, to give it some exposure through a journalist.

(Press officer, national voluntary sector organisation)

... previously we would have said, 'no, we won't do it, because we are not providing you with a sensationalist type of report', but, to be honest, circumstances are so difficult for so many groups, and there are so many individuals here who are very prepared to speak out, that it's ... we almost feel that the pressure is there from our members, to enable them to do it.

(Director, regional anti-poverty organisation)

The result appears to be growing support among anti-poverty organisations to act as intermediaries between the media and their members, and to

provide support and media training for members. All three organisations interviewed were either in the process or had developed some element of media training for members in the previous two years. One particularly interesting example of good practice that was identified during the research was the Asylum Seekers and Refugee Media Group that had been developed with Oxfam and Comic Relief funding in South Wales. The initiative was a joint one between the Cardiff School of Journalism and the Welsh Refugee Council, and involved supporting and training a small group of asylum seekers to give them the confidence to speak to journalists in a way that they felt was appropriate. At the same time, the project worked with a small group of journalists to assist them in understanding poverty in South Wales and the particular issues affecting asylum seekers – developing trust all round was the key to the project. Significant positive effects were identified, although it has to be admitted that short-term funding means the project no longer exists and the possibility of being overstretched in order to sustain the work was raised. A short-term funding problem for improving media impact was a factor that was seen to have led to a decline in successful media impact by one other organisation.

At the same time as identifying what organisations themselves could do in terms of new strategies, there remained a concern that the current Press Complaints Commission process provides few opportunities to redress the worst of inaccurate or insensitive reporting:

I think that regulation in the media is quite weak. The press is self-regulating, the Complaints Commission, and the way in which it works is that you can only really have complaints considered about individuals and from the individual who is affected. So, for example, the Child Poverty Action Group could not make a complaint to the Press Complaints Commission if there was a story in the newspaper about a benefit recipient whereby we thought it was inaccurate or unfair reporting. And, when complaints do happen, the typical outcome is not any kind of disciplinary action or anything to the paper. It's

typically resolved through the paper making an apology, which may be a printed apology, but if it is a printed apology then it won't have nearly the same prominence.³

(Press officer, national voluntary sector organisation)

Conclusion and proposals for next steps

A complex picture of the process involved in producing copy for print media has been depicted here. The potential for inaccurate and somewhat limited reporting of poverty was identified. This was largely seen to be due to the exigencies of production in the print media, the relative isolation of journalists from poorer communities in contemporary society, the demands of a reading public and what some felt was an underdeveloped strategy among anti-poverty organisations in relation to the media. Few respondents felt that the media could be a major agent of change, although the possibility of contributing towards and supporting change was acknowledged. Respondents presented suggestions for improving the coverage of poverty. These included the following.

For poverty organisations

- Increasing media capacity – to prepare better copy for the media, follow up contacts and develop campaigns.
- Recognition that imaginative media campaigns can work to change public perceptions of poverty.
- Development of initiatives to build up trust between anti-poverty organisations, members and reporters.
- A cross-sector poverty media office that reacts to any government initiative or any breaking news by asking what the poverty issue is in each case, i.e. poverty proof stories and to encourage the media to cover things from that angle.

For the media

- Increased willingness to challenge existing perceptions of poverty and realise that good copy can be gathered by doing so.
- A willingness to report on and gather evidence of circumstances of poverty and capacity for change.
- Stronger and more independent control over inaccurate reporting than currently provided by the Press Complaints Commission.

For public bodies

- There were few specific suggestions for government strategies in relation to the issues raised but this did not mean that respondents felt government did not have a role to play in how the public perceived poverty. More openness in relation to issues surrounding poverty policy and the presentation of poverty reduction as of benefit to all were both mentioned.

7 Public responses to media poverty

Introduction

Potentially, the mass media could play a crucial role in conveying ideas about poverty to the general public. Media coverage of poverty does not impact on a blank slate audience, but neither is it the case that public perceptions are unaffected by the media. In simple terms, Philo (2001) outlines two alternative interpretations of the relationship between mass media output and public opinion. The 'hypodermic' model suggests that media coverage has an external impact on the audience, which accepts and reproduces the portrayal it receives. Alternatively, the 'active audience' model argues that the public select and interpret media output to reflect existing beliefs about issues.

This chapter uses data from focus group research to explore public responses to media coverage of poverty. Examples of media coverage were used to address several questions.

- How much trust does the public place in the various media sources they use?
- What does the public mean when they refer to 'poverty' in the contemporary UK?
- Does the public believe that genuine poverty exists in the UK today?
- What does the public perceive as the main causes of poverty in the UK?
- How does the public respond to and interpret different media portrayals of the circumstances and causes of poverty in the UK?
- Are there any significant differences in the opinions of different social and demographic groups or those from different geographic areas in relation to these questions?

- How might it be possible to convey poverty issues more effectively to a mass audience through the mainstream media?

Methods

Although not issues on which many people are expert, nevertheless poverty and welfare provision evoke deeply held moral judgements about relative deservingness, social justice and entitlements. Focus groups involve participants responding to stimulus material and interacting with each other to develop a more considered response to issues than is possible using conventional survey questionnaires. The aim in these focus groups was to explore what participants' statements and arguments revealed about their interpretative frameworks and underlying beliefs about poverty.

Focus group participants were recruited to reflect the most significant differences in outlooks identified in a recent analysis of the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey (Park *et al.*, 2007). This distinguished a 'liberal' outlook, which is more likely to identify social factors rather than individual failings to explain poverty, believes there is a lot of poverty in Britain and takes a broad definition of what counts as poverty. In contrast, the 'sceptical' perspective is more likely to attribute poverty to individuals' lack of will-power, believes that little real poverty exists in Britain and takes a narrower view of what counts as poverty. Liberal opinions are more common among younger respondents, those of white and black rather than Asian ethnicity, and those living in inner London. A sceptical outlook is more common among older age groups and those living in the East of England. To reflect these differences, eleven focus groups were held involving a range of groups in different locations.

Participants were asked a number of questions about their main media sources and how reliable they felt these were. Participants' understandings

and views of the nature, scale and causes of poverty were explored. They were also provided with two contrasting examples of media coverage to respond to, one print and one broadcast extract. The examples presented contrasting accounts of poverty and differed in their journalistic treatment: one promoted a broadly liberal image in a fairly restrained manner, while the other presented a sceptical account in a more sensationalist style.¹

Attitudes towards the media

Focus group participants were diverse in the volume and range of media they read and viewed. Some described themselves as avid media consumers while others were more detached and casual users. The press and broadcast titles referred to covered a wide range of mainstream national sources. The importance attached to local newspapers as a source of information about the community was marked, even in London and large urban areas where such interests might have been thought to have weakened.

A sizeable minority of participants (particularly those with caring responsibilities or long working hours) commented that most days they caught only brief updates of broadcast news, with several specifically tuning into rolling news programmes – such as BBC News 24 or Sky News – to do so. It is unlikely that such people would encounter a story specifically about poverty in the UK in their everyday viewing. This heightens the potential influence of ‘reality’ TV shows, which were mentioned in several groups, in broadcast coverage of poverty.

Participants from the Asian community made particular use of foreign language media sources (both broadcast and print). Those in urban areas referred to free newspapers as a common source of information. Otherwise there were no significant systematic differences between groups in the sources used. One partial exception to this was internet access and use. Older people emphasised the infrequency of their internet use. They were essentially purposive in their approach to the internet, using it to search for specific information rather than general surfing. The majority of younger participants used social networking facilities (e.g.

MySpace) and some also used the internet to access news services. More intensive internet users argued that it provided a more active relationship to a broader range of information than passive television viewing. However, no participants mentioned using these media to convey their opinions on social issues; their use remained consumption rather than production of information. There was also no indication that use of new media related to different outlooks regarding poverty.

Most participants distinguished between broadsheets and tabloid newspapers in terms of trustworthiness and reliability. Those who read what were described as ‘trashy tabloids’ made a point of stating that they did not trust these sources: ‘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). Participants mistrusted newspapers, which they suspected were attempting to generate an emotional response in readers. Broadsheet newspapers were regarded as more serious, less sensational and therefore more believable. Local newspapers were trusted more than other print media, as participants felt they were able to use their own knowledge to judge their reliability.

Participants were generally more trusting of broadcast media than newspapers, but this was limited by the widespread sentiment that all 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). Several participants said they had no faith in any particular source and used several sources to ‘get the overall picture’ of issues. Two participants argued that they believed that there had to be a fundamental factual basis to media coverage: ‘You can twist it, say a political story, a little bit and put a little spin on it, but you can’t really make something up’ (white male, aged 18–34, East England). Young people did not trust the reliability of much internet content: ‘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).

Attitudes towards poverty

According to data from the BSA survey, 55 per cent of people in 2006 thought there was ‘quite a lot’ of poverty in Britain (Orton and Rowlingson, 2007, p. 1). In contrast, Castell and Thompson’s focus group research identified ‘resistance and reluctance’ to acknowledge the existence of genuine poverty in the UK (Castell and Thompson, 2006, p. 10). The majority of participants in our focus groups readily agreed that poverty was widespread in the UK. This was despite the fact that several groups advocated a narrow definition of poverty: ‘As long as they can feed the children, clothe them and they’ve got a warm house, they can just take them on the occasional day treat – I don’t think they’re in poverty’ (white female, aged 55+, East England). This perhaps reflects the prevalent coverage of poverty in the British media as a problem in less economically developed countries rather than in the UK – an association possibly reinforced by the prominence of the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign. However, it also expresses the long-standing attachment among a large proportion of the British population to a minimalist, subsistence idea of poverty: ‘The British do like their poor to look the part’ (Golding, 1991, p. 41).

Older Asian people tended to compare contemporary UK conditions to their experiences of growing up in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and concluded that poverty in the UK was not serious: ‘there is no poverty. You’ve got all the facilities no matter anyhow you look at it – housing, food, clothing. There’s so much grants, there’s so much allowances’ (Asian male, aged 45+, London). This scepticism reflected generational rather than ethnic differences – none of the younger Asian (nor black) participants held this view.

Only two participants proposed what could be described as structural explanations of the causes of poverty, i.e. accounts that identified social factors restricting opportunities. High living costs, especially unaffordable housing, were mentioned by participants in all areas apart from urban Scotland as a contributing factor to poverty. Aside from this, most participants focused on individual behavioural factors, such as perceived mismanagement of income rather than its paucity,

to explain poverty. This was the case even among low-income participants: ‘some people are not used to budgeting’ (male, not employed, urban Scotland). Another recurrent explanation was that some people failed to claim welfare benefits to which they were entitled. Cultural factors and family socialisation were referred to frequently. Participants across all groups believed strongly that families were failing to teach children appropriate values:

You see an awful lot of people who don’t have a lot of know-how. It comes from parents, grandparents and they are treading water – they just don’t know what to do ... Unfortunately it’s an education thing.

(White female, aged 55+, East England)

A sizeable minority of participants believed that benefit entitlement should be time-limited and given only to claimants who made efforts to help themselves: ‘I think some people need a boot behind them’; ‘Some people need to be forced’ (black female, aged 45+, North West England). Young Asian British participants identified *Big Issue* sellers as examples of those ‘making an effort’ and deserving support:

If you can see that somebody’s trying to help themselves, then there should be help for them. But people who clearly have no intention of helping themselves, then they have to be made to help themselves.

(Asian female, aged 18–34, North West England)

A strong and recurrent theme was the belief that low-income groups in employment were treated worse and had lower incomes than benefit recipients without jobs. This was perceived to undermine work incentives and was regarded as fundamentally unfair: ‘there’s people working and claiming benefits and this is where a lot of the money ... money that should be going to people who need it, isn’t going where it should be’ (female, low income, rural Scotland). A related view expressed by a smaller number of participants was that those with a small amount of savings were penalised by the benefit system:

I think in this country today, at the moment, we're getting penalised for having saved for a rainy day. Once you've got money, you can't get this and that.

(White male, aged 55+, East England)

Responses to media coverage

Participants struggled to recollect examples of media coverage of UK poverty. As one participant commented:

To me it is ... not an issue that is a big thing that is covered on the TV or the papers. It is quite hidden, which is why, when you originally asked, 'Do you think poverty exists in this country?', that is why I said, 'I am not sure' ... There is always something else that takes the headline in the paper rather than child poverty.

(Asian female, aged 18–34, North West England)

The majority of participants believed that such coverage as existed was mainly negative, focusing on 'scroungers and wasters' receiving benefits, particularly refugees, asylum seekers and young single mothers. Middle-high-income participants argued that people in poverty were unlikely to read media sources that might provide more sympathetic coverage, such as *The Guardian* or *The Observer*.

The majority of respondents felt that the programme *Ann Widdecombe versus the Benefit Culture* was an exaggerated, one-sided and sensationalist portrayal. Many regarded it as entertainment rather than a reliable account of the issues, and dismissed its overstated treatment. However, although they did not believe it themselves, many suspected that it might influence other viewers: 'If you didn't know anything about the benefit system you would look at that and think, 'oh you're right, I should maybe go and get benefits' (female, middle income, rural Scotland). Despite regarding the programme as a caricature, a small number of participants felt it confirmed their suspicions that some benefit recipients were abusing welfare support.

The *Children of the Tower Block* podcast provided a more complex portrayal of poverty and received a more positive reception. Participants

who viewed it did not question its accuracy and some were pleased that people in deprived circumstances (particularly children) were given the opportunity to voice their opinions. However, most participants regarded it as depressing.

The newspaper extracts provoked less intense responses than the broadcast examples. A small number of participants, particularly those on lower income from East England, were sceptical about the poverty statistics provided in *The Mirror* article. As Castell and Thompson (2006, p. 11) found, some lower-income participants were surprised to learn what was defined as average income and poverty, and were reluctant to recognise their own circumstances as deprived. Although the majority of other participants were surprised to learn that 3.4 million UK children were in poverty and did not deny these figures, they were generally unmoved by this – principally because of the presentation of this information. This story was regarded as much less memorable than either of the broadcast extracts:

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.

(Female, low income, rural Scotland)

The *Daily Mail* extract with its case study was evidently more memorable than *The Mirror* example, which was based on hard facts, but fewer participants accepted it as fair or balanced. The consensus across all groups was that the statistics-oriented article from *The Mirror* was more reliable, but was also least effective in terms of leaving an impression on the reader: 'no one's going to be able to read this article and repeat any of the statistics afterwards, but the impression of the programme will stick' (male, low income, rural Scotland). Participants agreed that both broadcast and print coverage was more engaging when it included stories about people with whom the audience could identify, which brought the issue alive. However, it was also generally agreed that it would be difficult to persuade 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)

There were no noticeable differences in either general opinions or responses to media coverage in relation to ethnicity. The regional differences identified in the BSA data did appear to be evident. Both groups held in Eastern England included a greater number of participants who favoured a restricted definition of poverty, were sceptical about the poverty statistics in *The Mirror* article and were more critical of particular aspects of welfare provision.

Park *et al.* (2007, p. 11) noted that: 'The most pronounced differences [in opinion] relate to whether or not a respondent feels that they themselves have experienced poverty'. Evidence from focus groups confirms this. Participants frequently referred to personal experiences in making statements and judgements about poverty, particularly to challenge media representations:

I learnt about poverty the hard way ... and it made life a lot more difficult than the media made it out to be. And, you know, that's why I don't like these stories you get, 'Mrs Somebody or other gets £1,500 a week in benefits' and you're thinking 'yeah'. To get benefit you have to battle. You have got to really struggle and, you know, just to get your basic requirements, you've got to struggle. But the media, you know, publicises that it's so easy, there's so much money floating around, you just go in and ask them for it.

(Male, low income, rural Scotland)

Other participants with experience of working with disadvantaged groups (e.g. in housing or regeneration) also commented that 'as soon as you read the media you will pick holes in any story that is going in' (female, urban area Scotland).

Philo (2001) argues that those with least personal knowledge of an issue are most likely to be influenced by media coverage. Young people with no direct experience of poverty might

be considered a critical case in this regard, i.e. they might be more likely to draw on secondary information to inform their opinions and therefore show the greatest media influence. There was no conclusive evidence of this. Some younger participants from the East of England group did say that the media extracts presented confirmed what they already thought about poverty, but it is not possible to conclude that this demonstrated the influence of the media. This group were just as sceptical as others about the reliability of media reports and referred to their existing beliefs to make judgements and offer opinions.

Of course, a low level of trust in the media does not mean that people are not influenced by it. They might perhaps unknowingly be expressing beliefs that reflect cumulative exposure to certain representations and ideas. It is difficult to disprove this, not least because selective exposure to and consumption of different media is an intrinsic part of personal development and everyday life. However, it is interesting to note that participants did not frequently draw on the standard lexicon or rhetoric of media coverage of poverty in expressing their opinions – for example, there were few spontaneous references to 'scroungers', 'benefit cheats', 'deserving poor', etc. in participants' discourses, despite the fact that not all held liberal attitudes towards poverty.

Conclusion

It is important not to overstate the extent to which focus group participants might be said to be discerning in their responses to media coverage of poverty, as this in part reflects the nature of the research process and material presented to them. Nevertheless, it is clear that the relationship between media coverage and public perceptions of poverty is not a simple one of external stimulus and effect. As Howitt (1982, p. 177) observes, 'the media only furnish ... images which the public then decode'. There is an evident congruence between people's beliefs and their responses to media coverage, but this is best regarded as an elective affinity in which the choice of media and responses to messages reflect and reaffirm an individual's experiences and associated outlook, rather than the persuasive impact of the media itself. With regards to lessons for those seeking

to communicate anti-poverty messages more effectively, for example, it is unrealistic to expect that those to the far right of the political spectrum will be sympathetic towards the plight of asylum seekers experiencing poverty (unjustly), but they might be prepared to recognise that those without work experience poverty (of which group asylum seekers are part).

8 Issues and conclusions

This report has reviewed how the media in the UK report poverty at the current time. It complements and extends previous studies, at a time of considerable flux in the UK media. The media landscape has been transformed since Golding and Middleton's (1982) *Images of Welfare* study. Technological developments have revolutionised media formats, content and output, and also increased the potential for audience feedback and user-generated media. Significantly, these changes are taking shape at a time when anti-poverty policy has attained greater prominence in government than in more recent years.

The research set out to address four objectives.

- Compare representations of poverty across different contemporary 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 any differences between the responses of different groups.
- Identify examples of effective practice in communicating poverty issues to the public and derive transferable lessons from these.

First, it is clear that there is scope for different representations of poverty. This is evident in various ways – for example, the differences in how the same story is reported across the media and in how poverty in the UK is reported from poverty outside the UK. Then there are differences in the extent to which poverty is reported across UK media, with poverty being more likely to be encountered by the reader of Sunday broadsheets than any other media. Also, the complexion of

poverty in the UK is not always reflected accurately in the poverty in the UK that is reported in the media. Taken together, these observations need not be a cause for despair. Rather, they alert us to the possibility that the media representation of poverty has the flexibility to be whatever journalists make of it, and therein lies the challenge.

Second, the positions from which journalists, campaigners and people experiencing poverty engage poverty are self-evident – that is, respectively, the primary need to generate newsworthy copy, the concern to further the interests of a client group and the desire to be treated with respect. What has been shown in the research that is less well rehearsed is that there is much to be gained by promoting understanding of everyone's respective interests and by instigating initiatives to develop trust among all interest groups. Progressive reporting can make for good copy.

Third, there is little evidence that the UK public glibly consumes information on poverty from the UK media. However, there is not yet a two-way flow of information that new media affords. The public tend to adapt information in a way that is consistent with current understanding. However, it is possible to shape understanding through imaginative reporting that does not overtly challenge established viewpoints.

Before turning to consider the evidence of good practice in the media and lessons that should be learned by the sector, it is worthwhile to reflect on lessons that could be learned by the campaigning sector and on future directions for research.

The research has demonstrated that the campaigning sector already plays an important part in keeping UK poverty in the UK news. In particular, the media value the sector as a reliable source of comment and as a conduit through which they can access people experiencing poverty to add life to their reports. However,

the research suggests that there are ways in which the campaigning sector could be even more effective. First, there would appear to be scope for the sector to be more proactive in generating coverage. Although there are many examples of successful proactive activity, on the whole the sector is more responsive. There might be a need to build capacity within the sector or for the sector to work more closely with researchers to disseminate research evidence more widely. Second, there is a need to redress the discrepancy between the nature of poverty problems in the UK and the poverty that is reported in the media. The dearth of coverage of disabled people experiencing poverty is striking. The greater prevalence of coverage of men (rather than women) and of the working poor (rather than the non-working poor) is perhaps indicative of the concern with welfare to work in contemporary poverty debates, as opposed to the 'scroungerphobia' of previous times (in which the non-working poor were the primary focus of attention). Both of these reflect the centrality of a work ethic to underlying attitudes towards poverty and welfare in the UK (Ignatieff, 1989). Equally, the coverage of the working poor reminds us that work is not necessarily always a means to escape poverty. The campaigning sector has a role to play in redressing these imbalances. For example, thought might be given to the people who are presented to the media to share their experiences of poverty. Third, focus group deliberations and discussions with key informants suggest that imaginative work can help challenge misperceptions of poverty. In this respect, the presentation of anti-poverty activity as a social investment – emphasising the wider and direct benefits for all anti-poverty activity – might be received more positively by more of the public. Finally, as reported in conclusion to the key informant interviews, there is a need to build trust among all stakeholders and there is support for the establishment of cross-sectoral measures to poverty proof news coverage and government initiatives.

Issues for further investigation

Although the objectives of this report were primarily to appraise the UK media with a view to

informing working practices for communication about poverty and in the media, the analysis has identified five issues that are worthy of further investigation. First, it would appear that new media has not yet transformed the way people receive and engage with the news. No focus group participants described how they actively produced news and few used the new media as a news source. New media was used to complement, rather than replace, the information that was available through traditional sources. There is a need for investigation into how the potential of new media can be harnessed to communicate poverty more effectively. Second, the extent to which coverage of poverty is 'prominent' and 'incidental' has been discussed throughout the report. There is a need for further critical reflection on what lessons should be drawn from these observations. It should not be assumed, for example, that a fleeting reference to poverty in a news report that is primarily focused on a related issue is always bad. Similarly, there is a need to review what should be considered an appropriate representation of poverty in the media, before any inferences can be drawn on level of coverage. Third, the differences between the coverage of UK and non-UK poverty in the news raise the question of how the general public negotiate and rationalise these very different representations of poverty. For example, it might be that the tendency for the UK public to favour a more austere, subsistence definition of poverty reflects, at least in part, the way in which non-UK poverty is presented in the news. Fourth, it would be helpful to consider whether the distancing of those experiencing severest poverty from the majority (identified in the discourse analysis) is related to a tendency for people to seek individualised, rather than structural explanations for poverty (identified in the focus groups and poverty-tracking studies). Finally, throughout the report, a need was expressed for more direct and personal representation of poverty as a lived experience. Although some suggestions have been made as to how this could be achieved, there is a need for a much more systematic and extensive review of how poverty can be presented as an experience, as opposed to a condition.

Good practice in the media

Finally, there is evidence of good practice in the media and lessons that should be learned by the sector. The probing investigations of documentaries indicate that poverty can provide the journalist with material that makes for original and challenging copy. Care must be taken not to use language that offends (avoiding, for example, describing people experiencing poverty as ‘the poor’). Personalising poverty or complementing statistics with a life experience is found to make for more effective copy. Most significantly, the acknowledgement among focus group participants that the most memorable copy is that which is most sensational should not be a justification for tabloid exclusives; rather, it is a challenge for broadcasters and all journalists that copy that works best is that which challenges the reader or viewer. As noted above, progressive reporting can make for good copy.

There are many examples in the UK media of good practice, evidence of commitment to engage poverty in a way that instigates progressive debate and recognition of the value of the campaigning sector. The forthcoming guide to reporting poverty by the Society of Editors also demonstrates media commitment to address poverty in a sensitive and effective way.¹ Notwithstanding these points, the report raises issues on which the media are encouraged to reflect. First, the public express higher levels of trust in the reporting of poverty in broadcasts than, in turn, broadsheets, then red tops. Trust is also high in local newspapers. Second, there is clearly scope for more of the local press to engage more frequently with poverty. Although, as the key informant who was experiencing poverty reports, local coverage must be sensitive to the way in which it engages with and presents (local) people experiencing poverty, there is ready access to local sources of information. Third, care must be taken over the language used to convey poverty. It is strongly advised to refer to the experience of poverty, rather than refer to poor people, to avoid the inadvertent risk of apportioning blame through labelling. Fourth, the media must honour commitments after the fieldwork has been concluded. People experiencing poverty reported that journalists often did not honour their commitment to send

photographs or copy following publication. Finally, relative to non-UK coverage, there are fewer examples of poverty being reported through investigative studies in the UK. The appetite for investigative studies outside the UK might also be suggestive of an appetite for more in-depth reporting of the ways in which poverty blights the lives of individuals, families and communities in the UK.

Conclusions

To conclude, the evidence reviewed tends to suggest that, on the whole, coverage of poverty is a peripheral item in newspapers, news magazines, radio and TV news, and entertainment television. It is not so much the case that poverty *per se* is absent from the UK mass media, rather that it is rarely explored directly and critically. Poverty tends to be a tool that is used to lend weight to a wider argument that is being pursued. Such coverage as exists tends neither to explore the causes of poverty nor to demonstrate its consequences. This reinforces the earlier conclusion that the coverage is incidental, at times superficial, rather than driven to understand poverty and its problems. Not surprisingly, therefore, structural accounts of the origin and distribution of poverty are especially lacking. This is perhaps to be expected, as news coverage is likely to favour simple rather than complex accounts of issues (partly because of the need for brevity). However, it also reflects a recurrent element in audiences’ understanding of the nature and causes of poverty (Taylor-Gooby, 1988) – although, to be expected, the research has shown that this is avoidable.

The way in which poverty is handled also increases the likelihood of less ‘progressive’ understandings being promoted. Thus, the focus on responses to poverty in news reporting (giving the impression that much is being done) and on feckless behaviour among the poor (e.g. of the cast of *Shameless*), rather than on cause risks portraying these responses as either inexplicable/irrational or themselves the causes of poverty, i.e. ‘blaming the victim’. Similarly, reality TV shows were criticised by the third Glasgow focus group (i.e. the ‘succeeding’, middle-income group) as voyeuristic and expressions of class superiority: ‘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'.

If audiences do not often encounter coverage of poverty or are not exposed to structural explanations of it, then they will draw on their existing frameworks of understanding to make sense of this issue when it arises (as found in our focus groups). These will reflect and

express experiences and socialised background assumptions. The key problem of contemporary media is their tendency to marginalise accounts of poverty that challenge existing suppositions. Were the media to find ways to challenge people's selective misperceptions of poverty in the UK, then this could yet be the most effective means to gather public support for anti-poverty initiatives.

Notes

Chapter 2

- 1 The Households Below Average Income (HBAI) series also recognises that income levels must be adjusted if they are to be used as a measure of living standards. For example, a couple with four children will require a higher level of income, or will require to spend a higher amount, to maintain the same standard of living as one adult living alone. This adjustment is known as equivalisation. Equivalisation is essential to ensure sensible income and expenditure comparisons between different types of household. The OECD scale is now the preferred equivalisation scale of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
- 2 Those in favour of discounting housing costs would argue that housing expenditure is an unavoidable fixed cost that varies widely across the country (reflecting regional variation in the cost of living) and across different life stages. Those who have high housing costs will have less disposable income than their income (with housing costs) would otherwise suggest. Those in favour of including housing costs would argue that housing expenditure might not be as unavoidable and fixed as their critics suggest.
- 3 The figures used in this chapter are drawn from the UK Government's measures of (child) poverty. Most commentators now use these figures to report the incidence of poverty in the UK, although it must be acknowledged that disagreement persists over the most accurate measure of poverty in the UK.
- 4 The distinction between absolute poverty and relative poverty is perhaps the most critical issue to grasp in understanding the measurement of poverty. It is a deceptively simple distinction. *Absolute* poverty implies that there is a once-and-for-all fixed measure of poverty; *relative* poverty implies that the measure of poverty might change through time as society's

standards change. Both measures are useful and together they present a comprehensive understanding of income poverty.

- 5 See the DWP *Opportunities for All* website: www.dwp.gov.uk/ofa/.
- 6 Notwithstanding the supplementary tax-varying powers accorded to the Scottish Executive.
- 7 The summary of whether people have a liberal or sceptical attitude towards poverty (last few rows of Table 1) is based on the pattern of response to other attitudinal questions. For example, those with more liberal attitudes would be more likely to consider that benefit levels were too low and would cause hardship, whereas sceptics would be more likely to consider that benefit levels were too high and would discourage people from finding jobs.
- 8 The UK Government considers people to be living in poverty if they reside within a household whose total income – equivalised for household composition and before housing costs have been deducted – is below 60 per cent of the GB median household income.

Chapter 3

- 1 For example, 'broke', 'wolf at the door' and 'hand-to-mouth existence'.
- 2 Of course, broadcasting presents fewer opportunities than newspapers for reporting poverty, so that this 'raw' numerical comparison must not be taken as an indication of proportionate coverage. It is not feasible to directly compare the proportionate coverage of newspapers and broadcasting.

Chapter 5

- 1 We might understand this as a 'symbolic economy of space'.
- 2 Weans (children), tae (to), huv (have), ower (over), wee (small) and Easterhouse (Easterhouse).

- 3 These ideas in this paragraph are drawn from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1993). Bourdieu distanced himself from a more traditionally Marxist view where class is understood primarily in economic terms – more precisely, in terms of relationship to the means of production, circulation and exchange.
- 4 That is, to develop social capital in the Bourdieusian sense of entry into influential networks.
- 5 Language is an example of how a number of Bourdieu's capitals are resignified within a local framework of meaning.
- 6 The concept of underclass is highly problematic. However, it is valid to use it in its current context, as it refers to the depiction of a group who are perceived to be so far removed from the prevailing norms and life worlds of the majority that they are considered to be a class apart. The classification is grounded in morals, i.e. the 'underclass' are people not like us and not as virtuous as us.
- 7 That is, mostly through the obvious lack of any of the forms of capital as identified by Bourdieu (1993).

Chapter 6

- 1 'News values' refers to the primary concern to generate newsworthy copy (as opposed to 'social policy values', which refers to the primary concern to effect social change).

- 2 This perception was not evidenced through SPIU's systematic content review of news reporting in the UK.
- 3 It should be acknowledged that the majority of complaints to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) are about accuracy, then privacy. Only 2 per cent of complaints of all kinds are actually upheld and 74 per cent of apologies and corrections appear on the same page as the offending article or further forward.

Chapter 7

- 1 The examples presented were as follows.
 - Sceptical broadcast: *Ann Widdecombe versus the Benefit Culture*, ITV1, 22 August 2007.
 - Liberal broadcast: *Children of the Tower Block*, Sunday Herald Films, www.sundayherald.com/films/povertyfilm.
 - Sceptical newspaper extract: M. Mowafi and P. Markham, 'Mother-of-eight handed keys to £130,000 house', *Daily Mail*, 16 May 2001.
 - Liberal newspaper extract: B. Roberts, 'UK child poverty – the facts: no heating, no birthdays, no hope', *The Mirror*, 17 October 2006.

Chapter 8

- 1 *Reporting Poverty in the UK: A Practical Guide for Journalists* by the Society of Editors and Media Trust.

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Appendix

Research methods for reporting poverty in the UK media

Reporting poverty in the news

The news content of 372 publications or programmes and 11 web blogs was reviewed over a one-week study period at the end of July to the start of August 2007.

The sampling frame was stratified to encompass the full breadth of news media. Table A1 describes the structure of the sample in more detail. Stratifications embraced the following:

- news media formats (newspapers, television news, radio news, news magazines and new media);
- publisher (e.g. BBC, commercial enterprise, interest groups and local government);
- cost (paid and free newspaper titles);
- regularity of production (daily, weekly and less regular titles);
- geographical scale (e.g. national, regional, and local media);
- regions (i.e. samples were drawn from inner London, East of England, North West England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland).

Table A1: Sampling frame for the SPIU audit of poverty in the UK news

| Type | Titles | Audits | Target | Actual |
|---|-----------|--------|------------|------------|
| <i>Print, newspapers</i> | | | | |
| National, daily | 15 | 6 | 90 | 85 |
| National, Sunday | 15 | 1 | 15 | 13 |
| Region/city in 6 regions, daily | 1 × 6 | 6 | 36 | 21 |
| Local in 6 regions, weekly | 6 × 6 | 1 | 36 | 31 |
| Local authority in 6 regions (monthly/quarterly/bi-annual) | 2 × 6 | 1 | 12 | 12 |
| Community, i.e. age, faith/culture, political, (weekly/monthly/quarterly) | 2 + 3 + 2 | 1 | 7 | 7 |
| Total | | | 196 | 169 |
| <i>Print, news magazines</i> | | | | |
| UK–international News, UK news, UK general interest (weekly/monthly) | 3 + 4 + 3 | 1 | 10 | 8 |
| <i>Broadcast, radio</i> | | | | |
| National, daily | 4 | 7 | 28 | 28 |
| Regional, BBC, daily | 1 × 6 | 7 | 42 | 39 |
| Regional, commercial, daily | 1 × 6 | 7 | 42 | 38 |
| Community, daily | 2 | 7 | 14 | 14 |
| Total | | | 126 | 119 |
| <i>Broadcast, television</i> | | | | |
| National, daily | 4 | 7 | 28 | 21 |
| Regional, BBC, daily | 1 × 6 | 7 | 42 | 28 |
| Regional, commercial, daily | 1 × 6 | 7 | 42 | 27 |
| Total | | | 112 | 76 |
| <i>New internet media^a</i> | | | | |
| Official blog | 10 | 7 | 70 | 35 |
| Unofficial hosted blog | 5 | 7 | 35 | 7 |
| Independent blog | 10 | 7 | 70 | 28 |
| Independent media online | 5 | 7 | 35 | 7 |
| Total | | | 210 | 77 |

a The actual number of new internet media sources that were reviewed is estimated, as not all sources provided a date for every new entry to the blog. Rather, SPIU reviewed five journalists' blogs hosted on their employers' official sites (official blog), one blog to which non-journalists contribute hosted on an official site (unofficial hosted blog), four independent blogs hosted on the authors' own sites (independent blog) and one blog hosted by independent media (independent media online) were reviewed. This is equivalent to 77 days of blog review.

The selection of titles within each category was undertaken with the aim of achieving breadth of coverage within each genre. For example, the six local newspapers selected for each of the six government office regions sought coverage from a range of publishing houses and a geographical spread within the region. Similarly, the breadth of coverage of national daily titles sought coverage across the political spectrum and broadsheet, middle-market and red top newspapers.

The objective was to achieve a sufficient sample to allow SPIU to comment with confidence on the representation of poverty in the UK news media and to explore the nature of the way in which poverty is presented. Although it was not possible to source every newspaper or programme that was targeted, the sample size and complexion is sufficient to attend to the research objectives.

The study was labour intensive, with each source being read or watched by John McKendrick and Louise Dobbie as it was analysed systematically using a coding framework devised by them. The unit of analysis is either the news report or the poverty content within the news report. More precisely, in addition to identifiers, eight key issues were addressed through the systematic recording of content across 26 variables.

- Keywords:
 - specific word for poverty or synonym used to represent poverty;
 - or specific concept related to poverty used;
 - or antonym of poverty used;
 - (and a count of stories that had none of the above, but for which a ‘poverty angle’ might have been anticipated).
- Presentation:
 - page number (if print media);
 - prominence of the article or programme carrying a poverty report;
 - content of image, if used.
- Information sources:
 - poverty information in the article or programme carrying a poverty report;
 - people experiencing poverty in the article or programme carrying a poverty report.

- Nature of coverage of poverty:
 - substantive focus of the article or programme carrying a poverty report;
 - specific story carrying a poverty report;
 - contribution of poverty to the article or programme.
- Origin of article:
 - person who is the stimulus for the report;
 - mode through which the issue is raised.
- Geography:
 - scale of analysis;
 - specific case studies.
- Contributors:
 - most prominent contributor to article or programme carrying a poverty report;
 - all other contributors to article or programme carrying a poverty report;
 - contributor of poverty information in article or programme carrying a poverty report.
- Profile of people experiencing poverty:
 - age;
 - gender;
 - ethnic group;
 - work status;
 - disability status;
 - tenure status;
 - marital/parental status.

Data was analysed using descriptive quantitative data-analysis techniques (summary counts and means). The restricted time-frame means that caution is required in generalising from the findings.

Tracking ‘poverty news’ across media

This work programme involved a detailed analysis of the ways in which the same poverty ‘story’ is covered across a range of UK media. Seven stories were reviewed (see Table A2 for details of the six stories that are included in this report).

Table A2: Case studies for tracking poverty news reports across media

| Organisation | Date | Details |
|---|----------|--|
| <i>International agencies</i> UNICEF | 14.02.07 | In rich countries, children's basic needs have been generally met but there is scope for further progress in child well-being http://www.unicef-irc.org/cgi-bin/unicef/presscentre/pressrelease_top.sql |
| <i>Government, national</i> HM Treasury | 28.03.07 | Farepak review/Government response to the Farepak review http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/newsroom_and_speeches/press/2007/press_38_07.cfm |
| DWP Press Office | 29.10.07 | New Child Poverty Unit (DWP) http://www.gnn.gov.uk/Content/Detail.asp?ReleaseID=326332&NewsAreaID=2 |
| Office of the Prime Minister | 31.07.07 | PM Gordon Brown's speech to the United Nations http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page12755.asp |
| <i>Government, local/regional</i> Welsh Local Government Association | 09.07.07 | Welsh councils leading the way on tackling child poverty http://www.wlga.gov.uk/content.php?nID=23;ID=110;IID=1 |
| <i>Issues or independent research</i> JRF project press release | 17.07.07 | 'Poverty, wealth and place in Britain 1968 to 2005', by Danny Dorling, Jan Rigby, Ben Wheeler, Dimitris Ballas, Bethan Thomas, Eldin Fahmy, Dave Gordon and Ruth Lupton http://www.jrf.org.uk/KNOWLEDGE/findings/housing/2077.asp |

Case studies were selected to ensure a breadth of coverage across:

- authors of source information (international agency, national government, local government and research-led);
- UK regions;
- substantive focus of article;
- articles focused on data and those focused on initiatives.

The analytical framework for poverty 'tracking' is similar to that used to review the on-screen representations of poverty. Thus, the objectives were to appraise the material to explore:

- issues of structure, e.g. relationship of the headline to the rest of the piece, the implications of story structure for understanding cause and effect of poverty;
- linguistic representation, including connotations of lexical items and active/passive syntactic portrayals;
- extent to which the pieces produce an 'us and them' pattern, and where those experiencing poverty are situated within this;
- identification of competing discourses and the extent to which these (re)produce categories of 'deviants'.

This work programme was led by Anthea Irwin, with support from John McKendrick.

On-screen representations of poverty

Led by Hugh O'Donnell, with the support of John McKendrick and using the same analytical principles noted above, this work programme involved the appraisal of different genres of non-news presentation of poverty in television and

radio. The analysis focused on these different levels and dimensions of narrative, including the *metanarrative*, whereby fiction formats absorb issues from the broader media and rework them in the form of narrative; and the *macronarrative*, whereby narrative strategies developed within the drama create a particular narrative universe. A small selection of key case studies were appraised (see Table A3).

Table A3: Case studies for on-screen representations of poverty

| Programme | Channel | Details |
|---|--------------|--|
| <i>Reality television and lifestyle</i> 60 Minute Makeover | ITV | First shown in 2004, the show purports to redecorate four rooms in a house in one hour, drawing on the expertise of a range of celebrity design professionals http://www.itv.com/60mm/ |
| The Jeremy Kyle Show | ITV | First shown in 2005, this daytime television show is described as a show that deals with families and relationships. Jeremy Kyle is forthright with an uncompromising style of resolving relationship problems between guests on the show http://www.itv.com/Lifestyle/jeremykyle/default.htm |
| Wife Swap | C4 | First shown in 2003 and now in its fourth season, Wife Swap is a reality television programme, produced by UK independent TV production company RDF Media. Two families, usually from different backgrounds or with different personalities and interests, swap wives for two weeks http://www.channel4.com/life/microsites/W/wifewap/index.html |
| The Secret Millionaire | C4 | First shown in 2006 and due to enter its third season, the show features wealthy benefactors who each week go undercover in a deprived neighbourhood. The millionaires mingle within the community and live on a very low-cost budget. At the end of the show, the millionaire reveals her/his real identity to the community and gives £50,000 of her/his own money to at least one deserving person http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/S/secret_millionaire/index.html |
| <i>Soap operas</i> Coronation Street | ITV | Long-running soap opera set in a fictitious working-class neighbourhood of tenement buildings in Manchester. First broadcast in 1960 http://www.itv.com/coronationstreet/ |
| EastEnders | BBC | Soap opera set in a fictitious square of Victorian terraced houses in the East End of London. First broadcast in 1985 http://www.bbc.co.uk/eastenders/ |
| Emmerdale | ITV | Soap opera set in a fictional village in the Yorkshire Dales. First broadcast as Emmerdale Farm in 1972 http://www.itv.com/emmerdale/ |
| River City | BBC Scotland | Soap opera set in a fictional Glasgow suburb. First broadcast in 2002 http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/tv/rivercity/ |
| <i>Documentary</i> Evicted | | Produced for the BBC, this documentary charts the experiences of three young girls and their families as they negotiate homelessness in modern Britain. Screened by the BBC in 2007. Directed by Brian Woods http://www.truevisiontv.com/evicted/index.htm |
| Breaking up with the Joneses | | Screened on Channel 4, this documentary charts the experiences of members of a family over one year as they separate and start new lives apart http://www.channel4.com/health/microsites/B/breaking_up_joneses/index.html |
| <i>Comedy drama</i> Shameless | C4 | Comedy drama set in a fictitious estate in Manchester. First shown in 2004, the show is now in its fifth series http://www.channel4.com/entertainment/tv/microsites/S/shameless/ |

Focus groups

Eleven 90-minute group workshops were undertaken, comprising two elements:

- focus group discussions of general ideas about poverty and related issues;
- a deliberative element exploring responses to particular examples of poverty coverage.

The focus group element entailed structured group discussions uncovering existing understandings of poverty and related issues. These outlooks form the basis on which media outputs are judged. The discussions were structured to explore ideas about:

- experience of media;
- the meaning of ‘poverty’ and ‘deprivation’;

- the perceived causes of poverty;
- bases of entitlement to welfare and anti-poverty measures, e.g. deservingness, contribution, citizenship, fairness, etc.

The deliberative element involves presenting participants with selected examples of poverty coverage and exploring each group’s response to these. Examples of coverage with particular resonance or the potential to elicit changes in opinion were important in informing recommendations for effective portrayals of poverty issues.

Participants were recruited from a range of locations and population groups (see Table A4). Leftfield was sub-contracted to recruit participants for the focus groups in England and SPIU recruited focus group participants in Scotland.

Table A4: Focus group profile

| Location | Social profile | Source | Number |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|--------|
| England, inner London | Black or black British, aged 18–34 | Leftfield | 6 |
| England, inner London | Asian or Asian British, aged 45+ | Leftfield | 6 |
| England, North West (Manchester) | Black or black British, aged 45+ | Leftfield | 6 |
| England, North West (Manchester) | Asian or Asian British, aged 18–34 | Leftfield | 7 |
| England, East (Ipswich) | White, aged 55+ | Leftfield | 7 |
| England, East (Ipswich) | White, aged 18–35 | Leftfield | 6 |
| Scotland, city (Glasgow) | Not employed | SPIU | 7 |
| Scotland, city (Glasgow) | Employed, low income | SPIU | 6 |
| Scotland, city (Glasgow) | Employed, middle-high income | SPIU | 5 |
| Scotland, rural (Campbeltown) | Low income | SPIU | 8 |
| Scotland, rural (Campbeltown) | Mixed income | SPIU | 7 |

The classification of ethnic groups used National Statistics 2001 census categories: www.statistics.gov.uk/about/Classifications/ns_ethnic_classification.asp. Income groups were classified using the 2001 National Statistics Socio-economic Classification: see www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/.

Two team members were present at each interview, one facilitating the interview, the other acting as scribe/technical support. Participants were reimbursed for their involvement in the research. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Supported by the scribes within the research team, Stephen Sinclair appraised the transcripts to identify key themes, associations, recurrences and contrasts in opinion. Post-interview debriefings provided opportunities to cross-check interpretations, discuss emergent themes and compare results.

Analysis of group deliberations identified and explored examples of what information appeared resonant and was accepted by participants; what was renegotiated and what was opposed or rejected. These responses guided exploration of participants' interpretative frameworks and underlying predispositions in relation to poverty and anti-poverty strategy.

Key informant interviews

Nine key informant interviews were undertaken (see Table A5), the majority of which were conducted in person at the home/workplace of the

interviewee. Although each interview was tailored to reflect the expertise and experience of each key informant, a regular pattern was followed, which comprised examination of the following:

- career history;
- views of the nature of poverty coverage;
- understanding of the factors affecting poverty coverage;
- perceived impact of poverty coverage;
- recommendations for change.

Face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full, while telephone interviews were written up in keynote form. Gill Scott appraised the transcripts to identify key themes, associations, recurrences and contrasts in opinion. John McKendrick also reviewed each transcript, providing a source of confirmatory support. Louise Dobbie and John McKendrick conducted one interview, with the majority of interviews being conducted by Gill Scott.

Table A5: Key informant profile

| Specialist experience | Base |
|--|----------------|
| Policy adviser to first minister | Edinburgh |
| Specialist journalist | London |
| Non-specialist journalist, regional | Belfast/Dublin |
| Non-specialist journalist, broadsheet | Glasgow |
| Non-specialist journalist, middle market (leaning to the right of the political spectrum) | Glasgow |
| Organisation without press officer | Belfast |
| Organisation with press officer | London |
| Organisation with press officer | Cardiff |
| Voice of person experiencing poverty | Glasgow |

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