

## **The journalism of poverty and the poverty of journalism.**

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### **Introduction:**

This paper's title is an echo of a phrase by Marx, who cut some of his many political teeth by writing a book with similar terminology – though he referred to philosophy rather than journalism. However, seeing that Karl himself was a journalist as well as a philosopher, he probably would not object to the application of his poverty dictum to the topic of journalism.

Another relevant reference from Marx concerns his declaration that “philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it.” Again, we can substitute the word “journalists” for “philosophers”, and not do an injustice to the old man's perspectives.

Another salient thing about atheist Karl is that he certainly did not agree with the biblical injunction that “the poor will always be with us”. His activism was precisely to abolish the poverty that he (and Engels) described so vividly during the Industrial Revolution.

Of course, this is not to say Marx had all the answers to poverty, or to defining the role of journalism. But there is some value in these points I have lifted from him, as will be argued in this paper. Another point that one also can usefully take from his writings is the distinction between consumption and production: for Marx, income levels (or lack of income) were not fundamental – underpinning them were relationships to the means of production. Poverty was a symptom of a deeper malady of ownership inequalities. For him, of course, the solution lay in educating and mobilising people to control production in a different way and, above all, in profound political change.

These points sum up some of the challenges facing those of us in media with concerns about journalism's relationship to poverty:

- What are the fundamental causes of poverty?
- If poverty is not God-given and can be fought, the issue is how? .
- How “poor” is our journalism in reflecting the stories of poor people?
- How “poor” is our journalism in communicating the complex causes of, and solutions for, poverty?
- What impact does our journalism have on both the practicalities and the politics of changing poverty?

### **Learning from development journalism:**

Post-colonial journalism in much of Africa and elsewhere was re-fashioned away from serving the purposes of nationalism, and towards reconstruction and developmental ends. In theory, at least. This anti-poverty pitch prescribed a form of journalism that would educate, enlighten, uplift and promote national prosperity. In practice, however, it ended up ineffectually reporting on what government leaders and the international “Development Industry” were (allegedly) doing for a passive citizenry.

Did this "development journalism" understand the causes of poverty? Given its obsequious character, and unwillingness to generate political debate, the answer is probably no. Did it show how to address poverty? The answer here is that apart from buttressing corrupt and thieving governments, it sometimes actively promoted underdevelopment through uncritical parroting inappropriate ideologies of "African Socialism" or "Structural Adjustment" orthodoxies. In short, “development journalism” was a highly impoverished kind of journalism, with minimal effect on changing poverty, but a real role in perpetuating and even exacerbating it. (See Kariithi, 1994).

In the 1990s, things began to change in regard to this discredited form of journalism. There was more emphasis on bottom-up development (eg. participation via community radio), and on a strong political edge that was premised on the view that democracy was a precondition for development. In the process, however, a price was paid. Thus, the role of professional journalists has been marginalised in the first emphasis, and overly-politicised in the second. What journalism, in its more conventional shape could do

concerning the coverage and combatting of poverty, has not enjoyed very much attention. The baby went out with the bathwater (See Berger, 1999). Democracy has not (yet) eradicated poverty, nor has community radio. The mainstream media and its journalists are still challenged to respond to poverty.

To conclude, development journalism was at the expense of an independent and democratic role of media. The backlash democratic role has been at the expense of playing a more narrowly developmental role of educating and uplifting poor people. However, in order for journalism to have a positive developmental effect in Africa, it has to include a democratic and watchdog function – providing debate about, and scrutiny of, poverty and anti-poverty issues. The other side of the coin is that in order to impact positively on democracy, journalism also needs to have a developmental effect – through content that may be educational, cheerleading or empowering. In short, to have developmental significance, the media needs journalism that is both democratic and developmental in content; and to have democratic significance, the media also needs both aspects.

### **Learning from other experiences:**

If the problems around development journalism describes the historical situation in some of the world's poorer countries, what about the richer? Here, ironically, (if understandably) there is a richer volume of data about journalism and poverty than can be found in the less-resourced countries.

A first point to be made is that although there are interesting *studies* about journalism and poverty in a country like the USA, what these tell us is there is in fact not a huge amount of *actual journalism on the topic there*. The reason is not that there is no poverty there, but that as Lieberman (2001) points out, much media in the USA serves prosperous, middle-class audiences. This makes it difficult to engage readers who don't share the problem of poverty, and who may well have "compassion fatigue". McDonnell (2001) reminds us about the aphorism that "journalists should afflict the comfortable and comfort

the afflicted” – but points out in the title of her article that “neither publishers nor readers clamor for stories about the poor”. There is, further, according to McDonnell, an economic reluctance by newspapers to push for circulation in poor neighbourhoods – because these readers repel rather reel in the high-paying, high-end advertisers who seek well-heeled audiences to sell to. On the other hand, she does cite some instances where a highbrow paper like the New York Times has nonetheless done good work on reporting the lives of the poor, indicating that things can still be done within some of the economic and cultural parameters of US journalism.

In fact, though the USA may be an extreme case, the same market forces operate with upper-class audiences and media in the Third World. In India, according to the one website, "the print media ... consistently panders to the consumerism and lifestyles of the elite and rarely carries news of the reality of poverty in India. The reading public is better informed about national and international politics and business than the appalling conditions under which most Indians live. A press indifferent to their condition means that the poor are further excluded from the development and decision making process, since they receive little consultation from the bureaucracy and government structures to begin with." (Ashoka, 1994). Indian journalist Palagummi Sainath underlines this, saying: "In the current period of globalisation and structural adjustment, the Indian press has betrayed the working class of India. There has been an almost total abandonment of its commitment to the poor, especially on the part of the owners and editors of newspapers - although there are still some feisty journalists left. What we have is complete consensus on an unbridled free market economy. Most of the press focuses on the middle class, but since 1991 the distress of the poor has increased dramatically." (Roach, 1999)

Coming back to the First World, it is these situational determinants of the market that help to explain the results of a study by Bullock et al (2001) that in the USA, poor people are mainly invisible in television newscasts (2001:232). They argue further that the US media encourages the perception that most people are middle-class, because they cater to the interests of the well-off,

downplay structural economic issues, and stress interclass concerns like safety and crime. (2001:230). The study also shows that, until fairly recently, even in those few instances where poverty is covered, classist stereotypes have abounded. Thus poor people on welfare have been pictured as lazy or failed individuals responsible for their own poverty (Bullock et al, 2001) Low-income people are still caricatured as dysfunctional housing estate “trash” on the Ricki Lake and Jerry Springer shows. (2001:231).

Bullock et al also show that coverage of the poor is also tarnished by other stereotypes. Thus, there are sexist images presented about poor women as promiscuous, single mothers, and inaccurate images that the US poor are predominantly black (and which, conversely, subtly suggest the racism that black also equates to poor). They write: “Although it is true that African Americans comprise a disproportionately large percentage of the poor, the media exaggerates this relationship.” (2001:236). Confirming this, Fitzgerald (1997) notes: “Most poor people in the United States are white – but you’d never know that by reading or watching the news.” For Green (1999), poverty in the USA was first shown in the media as a poor white problem, and fairly sympathetically. Black poverty was ignored completely for a long time. As, bit by bit, it entered the mainstream, so the treatment of poverty stories became more negative in tone, she reports. Sympathetic stories, such as retrenched workers facing poverty, tended to be about white people.

It gets worse, because the representations in this journalism also misrepresent the causes of poverty. According to Bullock et al, poverty has been framed in much US media “as an individual problem rather than a societal issue rooted in economic and political inequality.” (2001:237). It is not surprising therefore that these researchers conclude that even such coverage as tends to treat the poor sympathetically, does little to contextualise poverty or illuminate its causes.

Bullock et al observe that more recent reporting in the USA (1999) has become more neutral in terms of overall tone than that preceding it – which indicates that coverage can and does change. There was even sympathetic

coverage to the extent that a category of “deserving” poor seems to have been identified in the media, particularly in reference to the children and elderly. Thompson (2003) questions whether this is really an improvement, because all it does is set up stereotypes of innocent children (or the elderly) and blameworthy poor adults who are projected as those who ought to be taking care of these other two generations. Taken together with the racialisation of coverage, one can almost feel the stereotypes being perpetuated.

Interestingly, Green (1999) writes that public opinion surveys show that it is not a case of the US public being hostile to aid for the poor per se, but being against hand-outs rather than job training, education and child and elderly care. To what extent media is responsible for this divide is not explored. However, one can venture that media coverage probably does little to promote the notion that these two options are less alternatives to each other (one bad, and the other good), than complementary and equally necessary interventions.

A final critique of First World coverage of poverty is that, according to Bullock et al, whether coverage is sympathetic or not, the actual voices of poor people, especially women, are still rare. Stories are rarely framed from their vantage point. Thus, where poor people are quoted, it is to humanise the story, not to shape the overall perspective. Again, this shortfall is not unique to the USA. Sainath (2001) notes how a food crisis in 2000 was ignored in India until an NGO went to court to highlight the contrast of starvation and bursting granaries. The court instructed six state governments to explain what went wrong. Only because of this did the story get reported on the front pages. “But nobody wrote about the crisis, or went into the field to talk to the poor about their misery. They concentrated only on the fact that the court had asked the states to explain themselves.”

To sum up, there are some rich US studies of journalism and poverty, and what they show is a kind of journalism that does a pretty poor job. It is caused by a combination of the market, prejudice, lack of explanation, selective

sympathy and an absence of voices from the poor – especially on poverty issues. There is little positive impact of such journalism, it would seem.

How do these experiences of journalism and poverty compare to South Africa? Without doing the same detailed level of research, several observations can be suggested, some of which are elaborated in the next section.

- SA news media does indeed cover the poverty story/stories.
- There are fewer negative stereotypes about poor people in the SA media: their situation is recognized as structural, and sympathetically.
- Poverty has a primarily black face in our media, and this is complemented by stereotypes that Africans (here and elsewhere) are either starving pitifuls or spoiled fat-cats.
- Poverty is often conflated with race, as is illustrative here is much coverage around “black empowerment” (see below). Class, and gender, are ignored in favour of racial referencing.
- Much coverage of poverty still is such that poor people are often invisible and unheard – especially on policy matters.
- Their class perspective is typically missing – as evident in the uncritical currency of the phrase “the economic fundamentals are sound” which has the status of conventional wisdom not only among many in government and business, but also amongst too many of our economic journalists.
- Poor people are presented as victims, even though as Graca Machel says: “poor people stay poor despite working long hours day after day – yet poor men and women do not give up hope” (World Bank, nd).
- SA coverage does little to contextualise, and it could do more to encourage present debate around, the causes of, and solutions to, poverty.

### **The journalism of poverty:**

In Western literature, a number of classics have been very powerful in telling the poverty story. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, come to mind. Here in South Africa, we have Zakes Mda's novel *Ways of Dying*. The US classic "Let us now praise famous men" by James Agee is regarded widely as top-rate reportage. But where, one asks, is the South African journalism that has this level of status? The question cries out for an answer because there are no shortages of stories about poverty in our media.

To get an idea of the range, a flick through a copy of the *Sowetan* of 28 February, 2003, is illuminating:

- Stink over bucket, pit systems
- Dry black season for golf caddies
- Government forced to pay grants
- 'Money available for reparations'
- Alliance partners to tackle social, economic issues
- Lonely, exiled death of woman with Aids
- From shacks to riches... that's Rebecca for you (a feature in the entertainment pullout section)
- The "in memorium" section (two pages of small photos of recently deceased people and information about their funeral arrangements. Only a small minority would appear to have died of old age, and one can safely infer that many have died of poverty-linked causes such as AIDS. Note: there are no blank spots to symbolise the passing of those whose families are too poor to even pay for public announcements of death.)

Almost rubbing in the point, the same paper carries an article on a restaurant, titled "Kilimanjaro: the place to be seen," which contains praise for the venue's "sophisticated, elegant and classy standard targeted at its rich patrons from all over the world".



Of course, in a country with so much poverty, and perhaps unlike India, with a government still committed to addressing poverty, it does not come as a surprise that the story does find its way into much of the media. How it does so, varies, of course depending on the outlet concerned. What follows are comments on a random selection of recent articles. The status of these remarks needs to be taken as tentative pending more rigorous research, and the absence of other print media as well as broadcasting leaves a large hole. Nonetheless, some insight can be gained from the limited assessment below.

If Sowetan carries grassroots experiences of poverty, Business Day deals more with the economic and policy ramifications. Although generally one might not necessarily expect a wealthy upper class to take an interest in poverty, this is not quite the case in South Africa. Thus, prominent business leader Kevin Wakeford in Business Day, Thursday 6 February, is given a columnpiece that is titled: "Put poverty at the top of the agenda". In the article, he urges as much attention be given to social stability and employment as is bestowed on macro-economic stability. The next day, labour economist Neva Makgetla discusses how the poor pay far higher percentages of their incomes on services like schooling, water and electricity, than do the rich. She criticises government for not translating its pro-poor principles into affordable levels of payment for low-income households. Such articles are not exceptional and they do not appear to be incompatible with the interests of the readers and advertisers.

Another paper for the relatively well-off, The Star, also sometimes focuses on poverty issues - such as the high cost of schooling (Monday, 24 February 2003), reporting here about government concerns about the effect on poor and even middle-income earning parents. The same paper, however, reveals different thrusts on the front page of the same edition. A story below the fold is headlined "Gauteng getting tough on poverty", and outlines short-term job creation plans by the Premier of the province. The headline of the lead story "Budget: what is in store for you" highlights a clearly middle-class angle that is found quite deep down in the copy - about tax cuts to individuals in the lower- and middle-income brackets. The text above this highlights what readers

have been calling for from the budget, adding that the Minister of Finance has confirmed an emphasis on social spending (including old-age and child support grants). There is not explicit reference to the context of widespread poverty, nor any indication of the probability that the tax cuts and poverty relief are inversely related. And yet in the Business Report supplement to the paper, that section's editor Alide Danois pens a column headlined "Manuel needs to look at real poverty of people".

On the whole, however, and notwithstanding these varying messages being addressed to readers, The Star seems to carry comparatively few stories about life at the bottom of the pile. (Interestingly, Sowetan's front page of Thursday, 27 February, serves as a riposte to the Star's individualistic headline and tax-cuts issue: it carries a Zapiro cartoon of two unemployed men begging next to a newspaper poster reading "Budget: tax burden eased". Says the one man to the other: "I wish I had a tax burden ..."). It may be that the market forces dynamic found elsewhere partly explains why The Star has much less poverty-related coverage than The Sowetan. Yet, South African conditions also mean that the middle class here would be hard-pressed to turn a complete blind-eye to poverty issues. It would be a rare South African who would argue that the country's poor people are authors of their own fate, and thence undeserving of external support.

Like Business Day, and to a more mixed extent The Star, and also showing some middle class South African concern with poverty issues, the Daily Dispatch of 10 February, ran an article "EC failing poorest of the poor – DA". This illustrates not only an elite political party's concern being reported in a paper for the regional East Cape semi-elite, but also party politicisation around poverty as an issue. Similarly, the Sowetan on Friday 28 February, 2003, has a column by Tony Leon, leader of the official opposition. He argues that inequality is growing, and he criticises the budget for not going far enough in addressing job creation and redistribution of income. A basic income grant should have been announced instead of the "slow increases in child grants and the creation of a new welfare bureaucracy", according to him.

Papers around this period also carried paid-for colour supplements summarising President Thabo Mbeki's State of the Nation speech, in which he reiterates government goals to "eradicate poverty" and transform South Africa into a just and prosperous society. They mobilise a range of data to try to prove that government is indeed improving the lives of poor people. Echoing this political interest in poverty some months later, the Business Day of Wednesday, March 26, carries the article: "State 'has to correct views about poverty'". The report is of chief government spokesperson Joel Netshitenzhe who says: "While partial data and focus on single points in time may attract shallow claims of 'no delivery' and 'increasing poverty', a contrary conclusion follows from a rounded picture of trends including the 'social wage', tax relief and social grants over and above cash income from employment."

Thus, a significant part of political contestation in South Africa is around poverty as a "football", and this - correctly - gets covered, even if less often commented upon. Where media really falls short is in ensuring that the politics of the players do not eclipse the ball and the issues of the game. There is also, it would seem, not much appetite for bringing civil society players into the arena – for example, in such a way that the coverage of the Basic Income Grant proposal could have become more on ongoing and broadly-based debate.

Furthermore, little reporting, it would seem from impressionistic observation, actually scrutinises the claims made by the various sides. An area where more might be done in this regard is the discussion of statistics. Sowetan of Wednesday, 26 March, carries a report headlined "Unemployment a national crisis". Interestingly, there are no quote marks around these words, although they are in fact taken from a quote within the story from labour leader Zwelinzima Vavi. Presumably, few people who know South Africa would want to claim that the statement is opinion rather than fact. The story tells of a rise in official unemployment figures from 29.4% to 30.5%. It adds that Statistics SA showed that the economy lost 99 000 jobs between March and September 2002. It also later states that the figures of employed people during the (undefined) "surveyed period" dropped by 364 000 from 11,4 million. If this

were not confusing enough, there is worse. The story – having started with the statement that the rise in unemployment figures is “contrary to Government assertions that the dragon of unemployment has been slain”, ends by saying that Stats South Africa concedes an increase in joblessness ... but that it also ascribes the change in the rate to statistical error rather than a real increase.

We are left very little the wiser as to what the real story is – and indeed, without any understanding of what counts as unemployment in the statistics. In a separate story from SAPA in the business pages of the same edition of Sowetan, we get a rather important item of information. Here it is indirectly revealed that figures cited in the first article deal with a very narrow definition of unemployment. There is, we are told, an expanded definition - which includes discouraged jobseekers - and this rate stands at 41.8% (vs 30.5%). The expanded definition includes people between the ages of 15 and 65 who are willing and able to work, but have been so disillusioned that they have not tried to find work four weeks prior to being surveyed. It does not take much knowledge of South Africa to state that the more socially meaningful figure is certainly that based on the expanded and not the narrow definition. The reportage ought to foreground this figure, not the other.

What is also needed is for such figures to be deconstructed. The Sowetan, Wednesday 26 March, notes near the end of its news article “Unemployment a national crisis”, that “Of the total of 4,8 million officially unemployed in September last year, 4.2 million were black, 2.5 million were women.” Such disaggregated figures for poverty stories are not yet commonplace in much journalism, and nor are they given the prominence that they should.

The problems with the Sowetan’s reporting are not unique to South Africa. Arao (2002) draws attention to journalists accepting official statistics at face value. With reference to the Filipino media, he notes that in the year 2000, government figures showed that 39.4% of the country’s people were considered poor. In fact, the government had changed the method of computing poverty, and reduced it by 15% points by excluding items such as

alcohol, tobacco, recreation and furniture, and assuming that a person earning a minimum wage could nonetheless support a family of four on this income.

As noted above, the Sowetan carries extensive coverage of very concrete poverty-related stories, but to its credit it also does justice to more intellectual and policy-related discussions. A column on 24 February 2003 by ANC MP Ben Turok criticises government policies by arguing that stringent fiscal policy is preached by, but not practiced in, the USA and Japan, and this economic strategem is criticised by eminent economists Joseph Stiglitz, Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Krugman. He argues that the discussion of who is responsible for creating poverty – "the development of underdevelopment" – is not happening in South Africa. If we don't know the answer, how can we change it? he asks. In his view, there should not be single-minded pursuit of sound macro-economic policy at the expense of social spending. Finally, he argues that government incapacity to effectively spend budget has to be addressed. Turok is again featured as a columnist on Wednesday, 26 March, in the Sowetan, under the headline "Poverty, inequality two sides of the same coin." He argues here that the social wage (including government-enabled access to cheap housing, water and electricity) is important, but that people still need cash to buy food. In his view, it is unrealistic to hope for economic growth at a scale and speed that will resolve this. Instead, the answer lies in reducing the current extremes of wealth inequality. What we have being presented here in the Sowetan then, are valuable fragments of important debates that the media can and should be facilitating. It is a pity that much other media does little to provide this.

What all these examples indicate is that news coverage of poverty stories differ in their level of abstraction and concreteness in dealing with the subject, and that this correlates somewhat with different publications. Sowetan carries – with dignity – voices of the poor, as well as policy issues (though insufficiently linked); Business Day carries policy pieces and The Star perhaps falls somewhere in-between. The most intellectual coverage takes the form of columnpieces - usually by people who are not professional journalists. This

may indicate a lack of capacity amongst the papers' own staffs to produce definitive statements on the topic. If so, the reasons may be insufficient staff and/or untrained staff to take the time to produce heavyweight thinkpieces on a complex topic.

What also emerges from the examples above is that the voices of the poor themselves are seldom heard. For that matter, anyone remember the Poverty Hearings some years ago? Is there any journalist who would consider doing a follow-up and track down some of those poor people who gave verbal testimony, to assess their status some four years on? I guess it is - unfortunately - unlikely. But the result is that we have a dichotomy in coverage between stories about people who are poor, and stories about poverty as a policy issue. The poor are not canvassed on, or for, the latter. To its credit, however, the Sunday Times of March 2, 2003, ran an article titled: "Trevor? Trevor who? Ask poor villagers". This piece profiled some poor people who did not know the name of the Minister of Finance nor follow the news, and who did not believe that the budget would improve their lives. In a sympathetic bit of reportage, the article noted about single mother Polina Moreki who cuts reeds for a pittance: "Increased taxes on luxury items, especially cigarettes, were particularly unwelcome (to her - GB). 'I need to smoke,' she said. 'It takes my worries away.'"

The Sunday Times was also one of the few publications that gave coverage to an alternative, more-socially oriented national budget, presented by a lobby group of civil society organizations. In this, tax cuts are opposed and recommendations made that the money should rather go to "social protection for the poor". Earlier in the year, the paper covered cases of starvation in the country. While it never really got to grips with the reasons for the hunger, vent recommendations about avoiding a recurrence, or hammer the authorities or agencies responsible, it did run a reader-donations campaign for several weeks.

Poverty in South Africa has a major racial dimension to it, and it is not surprising therefore that sometimes the stories blur together to the extent that

the poverty angle gets subsumed and even submerged. One topical example here concerns coverage of black economic empowerment (BEE), where one finds a complex racialisation. Impressionistically, one could say that early reporting after 1994, tended to celebrate any form of black advancement or ownership while ignoring other considerations. Thus, overlooked was the fact that the new owners frequently did not have effective control over the assets and that they, themselves, were "owned" by the banks from whom they had borrowed the money to acquire shares in the first place. In Marx's terms, they were not genuine capitalists - captains of industry, and ... they were not even very widespread. The same individuals, who often became familiar media "darlings" illustrating the "new South Africa", appeared in deal-after-deal-after-deal. Little coverage questioned any of this, and even less coverage raised the issues of what such "empowerment" meant for poverty alleviation – if anything.

The story began to sour when prominent individuals like Mzi Khumalo's dreams of billions crashed with the collapse of the previously over-valued share price of the mining company he took over with Brett Keble. Things got more tarnished when NAIL directors (including one white) paid themselves unwarranted huge bonuses and were compelled to resign. There were ugly disputes between former comrades in the companies Makana and Safika. A major question mark was recently raised over Johnnic in regard to whether the new owners would be able to redeem their loans because the shareprice had failed to appreciate sufficiently. Clearly, the BEE story was proving to be more complex than the colour of faces in a boardroom, and media coverage has been evolving accordingly.

A case study concerns the Telkom share issue, which began by offering its discount "Khulisa" shares to black South Africans only. When challenged by the historically-racist white Mine Workers Union, Telkom agreed to a class-based, rather than race-based, criteria for the discounted shares. Sunday Times editor Mathatha Tsedu took the parastatal to task for compromising its position, but he in turn was panned by some readers for playing into a model of empowerment that would further enrich a black elite that was already doing

well. Almost no media coverage at all, however, interrogated the more basic orthodoxy. From a different paradigm, the story would have been: a "family jewel" state asset – i.e. already owned by the public – was being sold off to a minority (even if that included some lower middle class or working class black South Africans), and this development could see the company becoming even more profit-driven at the expense of servicing the poorest markets at subsidised rates.

As the early BEE model unravelled, there seems to have been growing attention to the issue of extending the benefits of empowerment. A column in the Sowetan, Wednesday 26 March, by William Mervyn Gumede is headlined "This time, BEE must embrace the poor". The paper on Friday, February 28, ran a story "Agency says BEE must benefit all". Labour leader Vavi had a column on Thursday 27 March in Sowetan headlined "BEE needs to be of benefit to majority." On the other hand, while the Government recently was hailed for allowing MTN management to buy the state's stake in the company, there has not been media debate about the extent to which this step constitutes narrow enrichment or broad-scale empowerment.

Over time, as class consolidates and becomes more distinct from race, it may be that media will better distinguish the poverty angle in the empowerment story, and the empowerment angle in poverty stories. There is still a way to go, as evident in the way that racialisation and poverty also came to the fore in a flurry of recent coverage about white economist Sampie Terreblanche publishing a book that criticised government policy for inadequate action on poverty. "Government under fire about poverty" was one of the headlines (Business Day, 7 February). Public responses, attacking the author on grounds of his race and history rather than dealing with his arguments, followed. Sadly, much media simply relayed, without questioning, this kind of limited reasoning.

To sum up then, one can suggest that SA media does not do too well at dealing with the causes of poverty. We probably take for granted the historical legacy here, which is all too real – yet we also ignore current contributing



factors that might include employer and government policies and practices (perhaps too easily so, because we do not see beyond the way that these benefit us - the SA middle class of all races). What we find in our coverage is conflation of poverty and race, too little on the gender of being poor, and insufficient debate about what is working and what needs work. There is little presented in the way of solutions other than charity and "own-bootstraps" case-studies. The extent of the problem is missed in the parading of problematic statistics. As in the US, there is an absence of linkage between poor voices and perspectives and policy matters. Unlike the US case, however, SA media cannot be accused of letting the issue fall off the public agenda. The impact of coverage on actual policy and practice, however, is another matter.

### **The poverty of journalism:**

In assessing how poverty is covered, what becomes evident is that the problem lies not only in the approach journalists take to the subject. Journalism itself, as a very specific genre and practice we have taken over from Western experience, is also a factor.

For example, one of the difficulties in reporting poverty is that the term is, in fact, a general description that covers a range of more specific ones. This is well spelt-out by the World Bank (nd): "Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time...".

Summing up, and drawing on testimonies from poor people, the Bank says that poverty is about powerlessness and ill-being. This condition is experienced specifically as precarious livelihood, vulnerable bodies, troubled gender relations and subjection to disempowering, alienating institutions.

Clearly, journalism by its reductionistic nature is often unable to deal with these integrated aspects. Poverty therefore is presented either as singular concrete stories, or as the concept of poverty in regard to policy issues, rather than as all-rounded empirical experience that is directly connected to policy (and practice). Sometimes poverty is not represented at all. Thus, stories on crime are framed as simple law-and-order issues; stories on strikes are self-contained and insulated units of narrow meaning – reduced to the events in an industrial relations dispute about wages. Unemployment is mainly a (misleading) statistic, somewhere between concrete hardship stories and attributable policy and practice.

Poverty is not just specific news items, but a big-picture phenomenon, and a corresponding complication for journalism is that poverty is not an event, but a process. The significance of this is that it is less easily accommodated in conventional journalism, let alone researched and constructed. However, Indian journalist Sainath can still say of his reportage: "The idea was to look at those conditions in terms of processes. Too often, poverty and deprivation get covered as events. That is, when some disaster strikes, when people die. Yet, poverty is about much more than starvation deaths or near famine. It is the sum total of a multiplicity of factors. That makes covering the process more challenging and more important. ... " (Ashoka, 1994). The challenge here is partly a challenge to journalism as we know and do it.

In many ways, journalism is not well set-up or adequately resourced to report on poverty. Leiberman (2001) notes that "poverty is almost entirely an enterprise topic... a quiet story." The point is that there are not many faxes or emails pouring in on the topic, unlike the information coming from quarters with resources. (South African journalists should, however, visit the information resources at the HSRC's regional poverty information initiative at [www.sarpn.org.za](http://www.sarpn.org.za)). Journalists are sometimes trained to remember to get women witnesses or sources into their stories, but the same does not often happen as regards poor people. Class is not as "politically-correct" as gender, not even despite their extensive overlaps.

McDonnell (2001) draws attention to the “achievement” ethos in topics chosen by US journalists. “As journalists, we are drawn to people who are doing something – building dot.coms, merging companies. That’s where the news and the hot beats are. People living in poverty often struggle just to pay bills.” She continues that “poverty and poor people don’t have to be covered, as city halls and schools do. A newspaper can do without. Neither advertiser nor reader is likely to demand more coverage.” She is right in that poverty is, in the eyes of many journalists, a depressing story – a turn-off for readers. At best, it is a charity-inspiring story. It is very seldom a story of admirable survival, and of small strategies, tactics and networks that speak of small triumphs. Where they are told, they are not presented in the same league as the newsmakers to be found amongst the elite.

Another issue affecting the poverty of journalism about poverty is the superficiality of much journalism with its focus on the new and the recent. This applies particularly to understanding what causes the problem, and what kinds of solutions are required.

The World Bank argues for three solutions to poverty: higher growth, better income distribution, and accelerated health and education services. Holding onto these three historical facets is already asking a lot from a profession that deals in isolated facts. That one can go even deeper is even more demanding. For example, occasional coverage may highlight (though not very often these days) the outrage of our country’s income differentials. So far so good, but even less discussion or reportage investigates Marx’s point about the really deeper causes of poverty. Simply, he argued, ownership of capital does enable wealth, while ownership of nothing but labour-power is a recipe for poverty. This needs to be qualified, however. Capitalists for Marx are not defined by high levels of personal consumption: they do not have to be rich to be capitalists, in his view. Instead, they are defined by their ability to control production and to commandeer labour for the never-ending purpose of profit-making. Class, in Marx’s view was not about primarily rich and poor, therefore, but about underlying social position in relation to production and

exploitation. And it drew attention to a system bigger than both. Capitalist class structure, in his analysis, also entails a competitive system structurally driven to produce commodities in order only to make money to reinvest in a cycle of yet more production, exploitation and sale. In this view, poverty in a capitalist system is a function of inequality in access to productive power. It is a symptom, which today operates on a global scale.

Raising these points is not to suggest that only a fundamental change in relations of production will address redress poverty and inequality. There are more and less “human” faces to capitalism. The point here is not to get into ideological debates about what kind of systems work best, but simply to plea for journalism to analyse poverty in the context of something deeper than income inequality. Journalism must stretch itself to take cognisance of history and wider political and economic systems, of particular policy decisions and directions and of specific implementation regimes. This holistic approach may go against the grain of much journalism that is so typically caught up in daily, fragmented, piecemeal chunks, all with little interconnection. But it is needed if we are to really get insight into the foundations of poverty.

Sainath (2001) writes that: “There are occasional bleeding-heart stories on the sorrows of the poor, but the newspapers fail to make the connection between poverty and the policies driving it – what I call ‘market fundamentalism’ and its attendant structural adjustment programmes.” Others may subscribe to a different theoretical interpretation – even attributing major aspects of poverty to a lack of capitalism and a largesse of pre-capitalist relations and mind-sets. The key thing is to at least try and make connections in order to better explain some of the factors underpinning poverty.

To properly cover poverty then may well require some re-thinking of conventional journalistic forms and practices. There is another area where this point holds. This is with respect to the way that, just as journalism can all too easily conflate the poverty story with racial one and entirely miss the class angle in doing so, so the practice can easily forget to check out the gender aspect in a poverty story. Perhaps the biggest difficulty, however, is ensuring

that poverty-related stories do not take on the identity of ghetto-ised special interest topics suitable not for mainstream treatment, but to be hidden in a "Reconstruct"-style supplement deep within the paper and easily extracted and thrown away. Poverty stories can be extremely interesting to anyone - even to middle-class audiences, but they do not automatically present themselves as such.

Where the shape of our journalism also merits revision is in the way that much of it does a disservice to reporting poverty by being stuck in a rut where the topic is interpreted only in its classic and obvious features. Where Marx needs some updating, as do many journalists, is in recognising a new kind of poverty that has critical import: viz, informational poverty. The "information-rich and information-poor", which nowadays is also linked to the "digital divide". Simply put, in the Information Age, where knowledge capital is more than a rhetorical slogan, and where information technology and the commoditisation of information resources proceeds apace, the relative as well as the absolute gap between rich and poor is expanding. At the same time, the recognition that there are "indigenous knowledge" resources amongst the poor, does highlight a form of information poverty amongst the supposed-rich. And yet, it is also evident that inasmuch as these riches may have commercial potential, it is likely that it will be the information-rich that exploits their value, leaving the information poor with inadequate monetary or other recompense and with the only increase in knowledge being the experience of being ripped off. Once again, it is valuable to look at informational imbalances and valuation in the wider context of production, commoditisation and the profit-imperative. The complexity and novelty of this development makes it a hard story for journalists to track.

### **Conclusion:**

Moving from Marx to Lenin, we find another useful title that can be applied to the topic of this paper: the classic revolutionary text: "What's to be done?". What follows below is an attempt to answer this with regard to the relationship between journalism and poverty.

McDonnell (2001) says that in the USA, very few journalism students know anyone who is poor. Yet, "as journalists, we need to keep reporting on lives that are alternately feared, pitied and ignored." This imperative might win support from many journalists, and from journalism teachers who wish to see graduates emerge with a social conscience. The real question, though, is how - against the odds noted above - can poverty best be reported and covered consistently and with impact?

Typically, systematic coverage entails the allocation of a special beat to a topic, and journalistic resources to accompany this. Thus, for example a crime beat for a media outlet will cover a range of bases: government and other statistics, drugs issues, juveniles, victims, sentencing, prison policies and activity. There may be police, court and general reporters assigned to these areas. Sainath (2001) points the number of beats that exist for elite topics (eg. business, finance, property, marketing, entertainment, travel), but says that no Indian paper has a full-time poverty or unemployment beat. I agree with Leiberman (2001) that a "poverty *beat*" as such be overwhelming. But an overarching *strategy* to cover the field more systematically through several beats and themes is not at all impractical.

Such a strategy is necessary because in southern Africa, the poverty story is present in HIV/Aids, Land, Agriculture, Migration, Children, Gender, Water, Social Welfare issues, Government general policies and implementation performance, the Budget, Nepad, Trade (incl farm subsidies and tariff barriers), and much more. Most of these are covered in a reactive way, without any coherent perspective that identifies their interconnections and particularly inasmuch as the topics often intersect powerfully with poverty. A strategy to cover the story, and all its stories, could lead to pro-active, knowledge-generating and practically empowering coverage.

As noted above, one of the difficulties is fitting poverty into an event-oriented medium. But this is not unique to this topic. "Justice" is after all an ongoing process issue, and yet it is broken down into coherent and manageable

journalistic units. Journalists can follow the lead of Sainath who expressly welcomes the reporting challenge posed by poverty: "I try to focus not on the 'events' but on the 'processes' of poverty." (Roach 1999) The point is that not all stories should have to be shoe-horned into the time-worn formats that we are so familiar with. Some may fit, others should be motivated for in their very difference. Again, a strategy for covering poverty could be devised to allow for, and indeed embrace, this diversity.

It is also possible through a pro-active and living strategy to cover topics that do not get tip-offs and press releases - all it takes is passion and leadership. A strategy can exploit news pegs to concretely remind the comfortable about the struggling – like the effects of a cold spell or petrol price rise. And a strategy can highlight that there are sources in all too much abundance. For example, although a government department may not keep track on welfare grantees and those refused grants, there are hundreds of alternative ways to get gripping detail on this. (McDonnell, 2001). In our country, however, I have yet to see a story of a child-headed household of AIDS orphans that cannot get a state-grant because the phasing in of age categories is set to take so long.

The real question therefore is whether editors are giving adequate leadership in ensuring that coverage is not neglecting the poverty angle, and further that such coverage functions according to some thought-out principles – like seeking out and publicising solutions, and like ensuring that the voices of poor people are included.

A further possible guideline for a strategy concerns the conflation of race and poverty. Helpful advice from Shirk (1999) on this is: "we need to show our readers that poverty crosses racial lines. But we can't continue to dance around the disproportionate impact this situation is having on blacks and Hispanics." Race and gender are factors, but not the entirety of poverty, and journalists need training in how to their relevance in each particular case and how to represent these in non-offensive, non-stereotyped ways.

What this amounts to is a challenge to both editors and journalists. They need to take to heart the advice of US journalist Shirk (1999), who urges: "When you write about poor people, the best you can do is demand more time, agitate for more space, and revisit the subject frequently enough to help your readers understand that poverty has multiple causes, multiple manifestations and multiple solutions." From the other side of the world, Sainath declares: "In my reporting, I am engaged in a battle for minds and hearts. Why should I concede the readers of the press to the big press barons?". (Roach, 1999).

According to Sainath (2001), journalists ought to place poor people and their needs at the centre of their stories. "Quite a few journalists hold back from this territory, fearing, perhaps justifiably, being branded as 'political' (read leftist). Yet evading reality (the largest number of absolute poor live in India) helps no one. A society that does not know itself cannot cope." If the commitment is there, then the action follows. And the perspective of the reporter does much to affect how the story is framed. Says Sainath: "What I try to do is look at the survival strategies of the poor, which is a much more interesting journalism." Perpetuating the victim syndrome (and its counterpart of do-gooder) does not develop a deep understanding of poverty.

Besides for keeping pro-active sight on the poverty wood that is constituted by its many trees, a media strategy needs to have a central focus covering poverty as a generalised condition and especially as an issue of policy and practice for stakeholder constituencies like government, business, civil society and poor people themselves (including at local, provincial, national and global levels). Here, there needs to be explicit tracking of the discourse and policy debates, as well as their relation to actual practice. For example, many SADC countries have been drawing up Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which are preconditions for certain World Bank and IMF debt relief and concessional lending. Do South Africans know about these? One study has shown that in a country like Zambia, where 73% of the citizens are classified poor, and a PRSP has been published by the government, the public don't know about this because the press don't report it – let alone investigate, question, contextualise and measure government performance against the



document (Kantumoya and Makungu, 2002). Of 13 Zambian journalists randomly interviewed on this matter, ten claimed to have seen copies of the PRSP, but only one had read (some of) the document. According to the study, what coverage there was of poverty reduction consisted of “‘the so and so said’ kind of articles, initiated by the newsmakers, rather than the reporters’ enterprise” and none of it making frontpage or headline news (2002:10).

Poverty, it needs to be remembered, is also a profoundly political story. “... it is essential that there exist in each country capacity to monitor poverty and analyze the impact of policies and projects,” argues the World Bank (nd). Journalists can play this watchdog role just as they do with corruption and human rights abuses. At least in South Africa, we have middle class audiences that retain some openness to the matter of poverty, and who welcome the kind of expose the Sunday Times did about the criminal lack of distribution of Lottery funds. Exposing how middle-class lifestyles (and exploitative roles as is often the case in the employment of domestic labour) are part of a complex chain that links to poverty is another challenge for the watchdogs. And encouraging debate about what it takes to change the situation is an important part of this.

Covering poverty is not a democratic exercise at the expense of a developmental function for journalism. Or vice versa (as happened under Africa’s experiment with “development journalism”). Contributing to both democracy and development, and the connection between them, needs to be part of a journalism that hopes to be relevant to southern Africa. This is so, even if the two thrusts are, of course, not present in each and every story. However, it is in these terms that the impact of poverty-related journalism should be assessed. Taking account of the recommendations outlined here, enriched, credible journalism - in the context of a clear editorial strategy about covering poverty – can have enormous consequences. These may be debates on government policies, exposes of poor implementation, heartbreaking reports of the voices on the frontline, or inspiring and educational stories of successes. Then, and only then, can we begin to speak of journalism as a full part of the rich resources in our society.



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