

by Guy Berger

Press vs. public enemy



Our journalism about poverty is pitiful. It's a story about the poverty of our journalism. But let's start with the not-so-bad news: unlike many other countries, we do report poverty. Also, unlike many other places, we don't blame the victims – rather, we tend to be sympathetic.

In the US, researchers say, poor people are invisible in the news. India's press, according to one observer, "consistently panders to the consumerism and lifestyles of the elite and rarely carries news of the reality of poverty".

And in both countries, even when there is some coverage, it's said that the tone often elicits sympathy for the stressed-out journalist – rather than for the poor themselves.

Yet international journalism also has a history, encompassing fiction, that includes Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. The US classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee is top-rate documentary.

Measured in this context, how fares South African coverage? **We do report poverty, but a lot is missing**, and not only Steinbeck-style stories.

Our race history affects the way we communicate, and conceal, poverty. **We often miss the class angle because we see the news through racial spectacles only.** Only recently has coverage of black economic empowerment noticed that not all black people benefit. On the other hand, when we do cover poverty (and wealth) issues, we sometimes forget the race differentials – not to mention the variations in how poverty affects men and women, urban and rural. How many stories about child support grants are linked to African rural households being women-headed and the impact of a grant on their lives?

How conscientised are we about poverty? Too often, we middle class journalists don't see things from **the vantage point of the poor.** Most evident is the uncritical parroting of the cliché that "the economic fundamentals are sound". Many reports lack compassionate consideration of life at the

bottom of the heap. Yet such stories could well have included – and indeed ought to have – a poverty angle. The obvious one is reporting on cold weather and leaving out what it means for homeless people. Then, there is trotting out tourism figures sans any scrutiny of trickle down effects.

Paradoxically, therefore, though the South African news media – perhaps uniquely – do report poverty, there are glaring gaps as well. Going further, even as regards the existing coverage, all is not well.

We are often guilty of ghetto-ised coverage. According to the World Bank: **"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..."**

Yet, our reporting of this inte-grated reality is frequently fragmented. We cover crime without considering the poverty context (or lack thereof). We cover unemployment and hunger as separate stories. Stories on strikes are done as self-contained and insulated units – such as describing a wage dispute in isolation of how many dependents a worker has to support.

There is poor analysis of poverty's causes and solutions. We report starvation in the Eastern Cape as if it were a calamity from the blue. Hunger is presented as a human interest story, without political or policy angles (in contrast to land and housing coverage. **Why?**)

Poverty's solution is sometimes presented as civil society charity. Accordingly, agency on the part of the poor is under-played; they are projected as **objects to be pitied and uplifted.**

Many stories put the agency on government. The resulting and simplistic stereotype is of a callous and/or incompetent government failing in its duty to "deliver". Alternatively, it is one of caring authorities doing their best against anti-transformation forces. Let off the hook are business, employers, civil society and

Poverty reporting think list

By Sarita Ranchod

★ Think class – of your sources and subjects. How does your class position impact on your perspective? Are there realities that you ignore, or are blinded to? ★ Think gender: Does this issue impact on women and men differently? How does your gendered experience inform your view? Are you using stereotypes or challenging them?

★ Think race: who is privileged in the story? How does your racial experience inform your storytelling ability? If your subjects have a different cultural or religious background from yours, are you making value judgements based on stereotypical notions of 'others'? (eg the oppressed Muslim woman) ★ Ask: whose agenda? Who benefits? Poverty is big business. Every stakeholder has a vested interest in having you tell the story from their point of view.

★ Ask who will benefit. Even bilateral aid agreements can be structured to benefit the donor country in the sourcing of expertise, and granting of contracts. ★ Whose voices are privileged in stories – do you give more space to certain kinds of interest groups, genders, political persuasions – without necessarily meaning to? ★ Do poor people have voices in your stories, or do experts speak on their behalf? Who knows what the poor need and want? ★ Make sense of the whole. Don't just cover the launch of a project (with a newsmaker present). ★ Follow up: Did the project get off the ground? How many jobs were created vs. the envisaged number? What kinds of jobs? What was the overall developmental impact? What have been the cultural and environmental impacts? What were unintended consequences and benefits?

★ Build relationships. Monitor and track your story.

★ Poverty is not a circus act or a photo opportunity. More than half of the people living in the SADC region live in poverty. And yet, we/they survive. Communities sustain themselves with dignity and ingenuity – where are the stories of the wealth of the poor?



poor people themselves. Solving poverty is seldom presented as something where all stakeholders play a part.

Of course, our poverty coverage is partly related to **the markets in which the various media play**, our owners and advertisers, as well as the class character, outlook and poverty sensitisation of ourselves, the journalists. These are constraints, but we can do a lot better. And we can go further too, because there are also deeper problems whose resolution **requires changes to journalism as we know it**: we are hamstrung by our tendency to reduce things to singular stories. We don't treat poverty and its manifestations as all-round experience that adds up to a general condition and which is directly linked to policies and practices.

Our reductionism also blinds us to poverty angles present in a range of stories, such as human rights, justice, criminality and corruption, finance and banking, party politics and civil protests, refugees, children and the elderly, gender, disability.

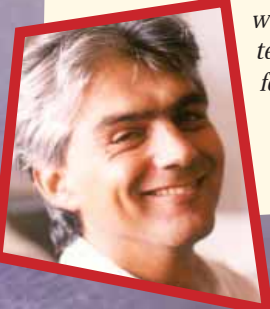
We struggle to cover the subject because poverty is a process. Traditionally, we're geared to covering events rather than unfolding trends or states-of-being. "Process" also means history, and our news is over-focused on what's new and recent. **We also don't follow up**. Has any mainstream medium ever updated the Poverty Hearings? Such **short term-ism in our journalism seriously impoverishes coverage** of poverty and much else.

Most of all, our journalism is reactive – we are suckers for materials fed to us by media manipulators. In contrast, there aren't (m)any faxes or emails pouring in from poor people. Occasionally we (correctly) carry a success story about an individual who has come to our attention. But absent are accounts based on enterprise journalism, proactively gathered from the people who succeed, somehow, in surviving.

Poverty is public enemy number one. Our media trainers must take the topic on board. **Editors should develop an active agenda for systematic and strategised coverage**. If leadership lags, reporters need to follow the advice of a US journalist: "Demand more time, agitate for more space, and revisit the subject frequently."

We chronicle race, politics, even gender issues to an extent. Now **the agenda needs to expand**. It is time to tackle, seriously, the journalism of poverty. It is also time to transform the poverty of journalism. In fact, it is time to enrich our role.

Since 1994, Prof Guy Berger has headed the Department of Journalism & Media Studies at Rhodes University. He has worked in newspapers, magazines and television. This article is based on research found at: <http://journ.ru.ac.za/staff/guy>



Klaus Bias, a fifth-generation South African, can trace his roots back several centuries in the old country. He has perfected the technique of appearing invisible but when he does join a conversation his subtle influence immediately has an effect on the participants' minds and they find themselves agreeing that the poor have only themselves to blame. He can be overcome by wearing the brain-embalming turban which imparts clarity of thought to the wearer.