

Coverage of Poverty by a Nonprofit News Outlet: A Comparative Study

Mohammad Yousuf
The University of Oklahoma

and

David Craig
Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication
The University of Oklahoma

Abstract

Using the theoretical framework of communitarian ethics, this study compared poverty coverage by a nonprofit news organization done over a four-year period with coverage the organization did in a cooperative project with a journalism school focused on video interviews in neighborhoods. The qualitative analysis found both commonalities and substantial differences in topics. Both provided social context, but in different ways, and the new project did more to focus on the voices of residents themselves.

Keywords: Poverty, news coverage, nonprofit, qualitative content analysis, community

Coverage of issues connected with poverty is at the core of journalism's role of bringing to light important public problems. Previous scholarship (e.g., Bullock, Wyche & William, 2001; Clawson & Trice, 2000) has shown that news media have devoted widely varying attention to this topic despite the impact on society of poverty and related concerns such as lack of education, unemployment, health care, and crime. This study examines poverty coverage by a nonprofit news organization that has made poverty issues one of its central focuses. The purpose of this study is to examine its coverage done in the past few years and to compare it with coverage this organization did in a cooperative project over several months with a journalism school. The theoretical framework for this study is communitarianism, an ethical theory that places priority on coverage of the marginalized and social concerns in the context of community (Christians, Ferré & Fackler, 1993).

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

The study is significant for journalism scholarship because it complements previous studies that focused on mainstream media coverage of poverty by examining coverage by a nonprofit outlet, some of it focused specifically on bringing to light the voices of low-income residents themselves through mobile video. It sheds light on the nature of concerns that emerged from reporting involving both expert sources and neighborhood residents. From the standpoint of communitarian theory, the coverage is notable for providing social context and for giving a greater voice to residents who often do not have a substantial public voice.

Literature Review

Literature relevant to this study includes research on the amount of media coverage of poverty, how low-income people are framed in media, reasons behind media negligence on poverty issues, and ways to improve the quality of media coverage of poverty.

Amount of Coverage

Research shows that the amount of coverage of poverty and poverty-related issues has varied across media outlets. For instance, Bullock et al. (2001) found 412 articles on poverty in nine metro daily newspapers in a three-month period. This indicates that a metro daily newspaper, on average, published one article in every two days during the study period. Iyengar (1990) examined six-year coverage of three television networks from 1981 to 1986, and found 191 stories focusing explicitly on poverty. In other words, each major television network broadcast 11 pieces on poverty per year, which is less than one a month. Poverty-related stories were identified by their reference to words such as poverty, hunger, the homeless, welfare, food stamps, or similar key words (p. 21). Entman (1995) examined both national and local news programs aired during a 10-day sampling period in 1990. Entman found that only 36 stories aired on 197 news programs explicitly focused on poverty. Clawson and Trice (2000) examined poverty coverage in leading news magazines for six years from January 1993 to December 1998. They found 74 stories in five magazines—*Business Week*, *Newsweek*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report*. On average, each magazine published less than 2.5 stories about poverty a year.

Kim, Carvalho and Davis (2010) examined nine newspapers from eight states (Minnesota, Massachusetts, Virginia, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Alabama, and West Virginia), three broadcasting networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) and one cable news channel (CNN) for poverty coverage from January 1, 1993, to December 31, 2007. They found a total of 659 items, including news articles and transcripts published in 13 news outlets in 15 years. Kim et al. (2010) suggested that some items (they didn't mention how many) out of these 659 were sorted out as unrelated items during coding. They found that the amount of coverage did not correspond to changes in the poverty rate:

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

While the poverty rate was declining between 1995 and 1999, for example, the amount of news coverage was, in fact, increasing during the same time period.

The figures also show that the amount of news coverage declined between 2000 and 2004, during which the poverty rate was indeed on the rise (p. 570).

In sum, media coverage of poverty and poverty-related issues varied across media. But most researchers concluded that the amount of coverage was not sufficient in any type of media given the level of impacts poverty had in society.

Framing Poverty

Several studies examined how poverty and poor people are framed in news stories (e.g., Bullock et al., 2001; Entman, 1995). Entman (1995) found that 39 percent of the stories on poverty aired on local and national news programs depicted it as a behavior posing threats to the wellbeing of the society. Such threats include crime, drugs, and gangs. The remaining 61 percent of the poverty-related stories focused on issues like poor health and racial discrimination that highlight the sufferings of poor people. Entman (1995) suggested that coverage of poverty on television may mislead people about the meaning of poverty. One may think that poverty is caused as “some people choose to live in deteriorated neighborhoods where they frequently either commit or become victims of crime, or have trouble receiving health care or finding adequate schools” (Entman, 1995, p. 144).

A majority of the metro daily newspapers’ articles on poverty were found to be neutral in tone (Bullock et al., 2001). These articles “portrayed the difficulties facing welfare recipients and the poor sympathetically” (p. 229). Bullock et al. (2001) identified some articles with negative tones towards poverty and poverty-related issues. For example, 17 percent of the articles negatively portrayed poor people, welfare recipients in particular.

Research shows that there are two frames commonly used in poverty-related articles—episodic and thematic (Iyengar, 1990). Episodic stories highlight the sufferings of a poor individual or a family, while thematic stories focus on general trends relating to poverty. Iyengar (1990) found that episodic framing is more common than thematic framing when it comes to poverty related issues. Frames affect the way people perceive social problems (e.g., poverty). For instance, people who watch poverty-related stories in the episodic frame believe poverty results from individual factors and it’s the poor people who are responsible for improving their conditions (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson & Tagler, 2001; Iyengar, 1990). People who watch poverty-related stories in the thematic frame believe that the government is responsible for poverty (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Kim et al. (2010) found that a personal reason (e.g., broken family) appeared most often as a single cause of poverty in both newspapers and television. A total of 60 out of 506 items mentioned broken family as a cause of poverty. Bad economy was mentioned most often (55 items) as a societal cause of poverty. Taken together, societal attributions of responsibility appeared much more often than personal causes and solutions in these media. Kim et al. (2010) found 204 mentions of societal causes of poverty (compared to 168 of personal causes) and 375 mentions of societal solutions to poverty (compared to

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

72 mentions of personal solutions). Inadequate pay (45 items) and ineffective government aid programs (44 items) were other major societal causes mentioned in the newspapers and on television. Lack of education (33 items), and physical conditions (25 items) came as second and third major personal causes of poverty.

Some studies found evidence that media coverage of poverty was stereotypical (Clawson & Trice, 2000; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Martindale, 1996). Gans (1995) suggested that media often used behavioral terms (e.g., criminal, alcoholic, and addict) to describe poor people. Parisi (1998), who analyzed a series of poverty-related stories published on *The Washington Post*, found that poor people were described by the newspaper as lazy, promiscuous, irresponsible and criminal.

In a study of news magazines between 1988 and 1992, Gilens (1996) found that poverty was disproportionately portrayed as a “black” problem. Two thirds of media coverage of poverty was about black people. Gilens (1999) also found that black people were “comparatively absent from media coverage of poverty during times of heightened sympathy for the poor” (1999, p. 132). Golding and Middleton (1982) and Martindale (1996) also found evidence of stereotypical representations of poverty. For instance, poor people were often described with behavioral terms such as criminals and addicts.

Coughlin (1989) discussed media emphasis on women receiving welfare (e.g., food voucher). Coughlin suggested that poor women, taking advantage of the state-sponsored welfare, were depicted as living a high life by defrauding. Clawson and Trice (2000) analyzed if magazine photographs between 1993 and 1998 contained stereotypical traits of the poor. Clawson and Trice found that magazine coverage of poor “would lead citizens to believe that blacks are 49 percent of the poor” (p. 54). While white poor made up about 45 percent of the people, magazine coverage depicted the coverage that would lead people to believe that 33 percent of the poor are white. Asian American poor were never mentioned in these magazines.

In brief, the research shows that newspapers, magazines, and television used both positive and negative frames for their stories on the poor and poverty. Some stories were neutral in tone, and highlighted the sufferings of the poor (e.g., health problems, racial discrimination). But a significant portion of the stories have shown the poor in a negative light.

Reasons behind Poor Media Coverage of Poverty and Suggestions for Improvement

Some scholars have investigated the reasons behind poor media coverage of poverty and poverty-related issues (e.g., Carey, 2014; Nielsen, 2008). Carey (2014) examined four community newspapers with circulations under 5,000. These newspapers covered small communities with high poverty rates—ranging from 22 percent to 27 percent—but neglected the economic needs of the people. Through interviews with journalists, Carey found several reasons that lead the newspapers to avoid the issues of the poor. The reasons include reluctance of community members to talk about economic issues, lack of newspaper resources to seek out new voices, and a belief among

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

journalists that poor should be protected from ridicule. The reporters also admitted that they did not have a clear understanding of the nature of poverty because poor people were socially isolated. Some reporters said they believed coverage of poverty shows the community in a bad light. Dionne, a columnist at *The Washington Post*, claimed that the poor faced a structural bias in the media (Dionne, 2008). Journalists and reporters seeking to bring the poor and their issues to light have to fight with this bias rooted in the organizational routines and standardized practices (Devereux et al., 2012; Redden, 2011). Critics argued that media coverage of poverty is influenced by a social structure that is not always in favor of the poor (Devereux et al., 2012; Fraser, 2000). Fraser (2000) indicated that poor people were not recognized as equal partners in mediated communication. Devereux et al. (2012) suggested that news about poverty “serves to reproduce the hegemonic order” (p. 513), not to serve the poor. Traditional media coverage “rarely challenges existing power structures” (Devereux et al., 2012, p. 513).

Researchers have provided recommendations that may improve media coverage and quality of the coverage on poor. Carey (2014) suggested that reporters should seek out multiple perspectives from diverse sources in the community, and become more positive and inclusive in their coverage. Nielsen (2008) stressed engaging poor people in the civic dialogue. The poor should be directly addressed within the article. Dionne said media should cover both individual and systemic reasons of poverty. He suggested that reporters could fight structural bias by engaging community members with issues related to poverty, and developing a sense of responsibility for the poor among the non-poor community members. For instance, articles about financial pressures of the non-poor may be linked to the situation of the poor (Nielsen, 2008). Some critics argued that it would be impossible to fight the larger structure that influences routines and practices of the mainstream media (e.g., Howley, 2003). Howley recommended looking for alternatives (e.g., street papers, public journalism) to the mainstream media that would fundamentally change the relationship between journalists and the public. Howley believed street papers could engage the citizens in ongoing discussions over economic and social justice. Awad (2014) stressed recognizing the needs of poor people by the mainstream media. Both structures (routines, practices) and agency (i.e., poor people make mistakes like everyone else) should be considered as poverty is covered in the media (Awad, 2014).

Taken together, the literature identified some noteworthy reasons behind poor media coverage of poverty. Research has shown that the structure of a society (e.g., social, political, and economic systems), which influences media practices and routines, plays an important role in how the poor and poverty-related issues are discussed in the media. Scholars have also identified some other issues for the ongoing media practices regarding the poor: lack of resources to reach out to more diverse sources, lack of understanding of the reporters about the nature of poverty, and people’s unwillingness to talk about poverty. In view of this, some scholars stressed the need for establishing social justice by making sure that the poor get equal access to mediated communication. Scholars also suggested that the relationship between journalists and the public needed to change.

Theoretical Framework

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

In the early 1990s, several scholars discussed journalistic practices in light of communitarian ideas (Anderson, Dardenne & Killenberg, 1994; Christians et al., 1993; Lambeth, 1992; see overview in Craig, 1996). Taken together, they point to a set of responsibilities for journalists that go beyond the task of merely reporting news. These scholars suggest that the media should help connect different sectors of the society, and work as a catalyst for public discussion on community issues. Christians et al. (1993), who articulated the most-explicitly communitarian view, argued that it is a duty of journalists to intervene in catalyzing discussion to solve problems of the community. Journalists, according to this theory, are morally bound to participate in public discussion on community issues.

Philosophers have long debated what causes suffering of people in society and how to achieve justice. At the core of the debate is whether individual autonomy or collective values ensure justice. Liberal theorists suggest that the individual autonomy and neutrality of the state are two major preconditions for ensuring justice (Rawls, 2009). Communitarians argue that people are socially constituted and therefore injustice would be the result of collective action. Also, it is a collective responsibility to alleviate injustices in society (Sandel, 1998).

Communitarians believe that community is the primary value in society and this value must be taken into consideration while examining the causes or solutions of social problems such as poverty. In terms of poverty, communitarians suggest that individuals should not be blamed primarily for their conditions. Emphasis on individual autonomy and promotion of individualism are rather responsible for many social problems. Sandel (1998) argued that people are losing control over the governing forces of their lives while moral fabric of community is loosening.

Communitarian media ethics (particularly as detailed by Christians et al., 1993) places a priority on several concerns relevant to coverage of poverty including building community, giving voice to marginalized people, and providing discussion of social context for public problems. It is, therefore, an appropriate framework for evaluating coverage of poverty-related issues. As a normative framework for evaluating news coverage, communitarianism has much in common with social responsibility theory, which places a priority on service to society (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004) and emphasizes the need to accurately portray groups in society and foster discussion (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947; Peterson, 1956). However, communitarian ethics places a particular priority on the marginalized and their mutual importance to the rest of society.

In the 1990s, communitarianism found common ground with the public or civic journalism movement. Rosen (1994) wrote that a duty of the press is “occasionally to intervene in public life in the interest of strengthening civic culture” (pp. 9, 13). Media participating in this movement sought to foster a new relationship with the public, spur discussion over community problems and solutions, and encourage citizens to participate. Lambeth and Craig (1995) noted three strands of public journalism initiatives—(1)

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

listening to community members, (2) initiating dialogue with the public on community problems and solutions, and (3) participation in developing solutions to public problems. This can be done by launching programs such as community conversation and public forums. Christians et al. (1993) argued that such leadership roles of media are profoundly a moral duty.

Scholars also identified several ethical challenges of communitarian and public journalism (Craig, 1996). Lambeth and Craig (1995) suggest that public journalism faces challenges to ethical standards such as independence and objectivity. “The more deeply a newsroom becomes involved in civic activism, the more likely it is to lose its critical editorial stance—though it may underestimate the discernment of journalists to declare this result inevitable” (Craig, 1996, p. 116). A second challenge comes from the task of connecting multiple sectors of the community in a pluralistic society (Anderson et al., 1994; Christians et al., 1993). A third challenge is that there will still be people left out despite efforts to engage everybody in the discussion. This challenge can be addressed by paying attention to marginalized people (Anderson et al., 1994; Christians et al., 1993). Despite these challenges, scholars suggest that a communitarian framework of journalism would still give voices to more non-officials and people sitting at the lower echelon in the social hierarchy. These unheard voices will not only play the role of sources of news, but also active participants in discussion of community issues (Craig, 1996). Public discussion on community issues, spurred by media, would also bring forward issues that may not be discussed in non-communitarian media.

With communitarianism as a framework for analysis, this study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: What issues relating to poverty appeared in the nonprofit journalism organization’s coverage before the cooperative project?

RQ2: What issues relating to poverty appeared in the cooperative project?

RQ3: What were the differences in coverage of poverty-related issues between the two?

Method

The method for this study was qualitative content analysis. This approach is appropriate because of the emphasis of qualitative reading on "listening to the words of the text, and understanding better the perspective(s) of the producer of these words" (Berg, 2001, p. 242). This kind of reading, while allowing for assignment of broad categories, also places a priority on understanding the details of emphasis and approach in news coverage.

The nonprofit news organization whose stories were analyzed, Oklahoma Watch, has a mission that includes a particular interest in poverty and the disadvantaged, making it especially appropriate for the study. The news organization is housed at the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma near Oklahoma City metropolitan area that includes a number of low-income neighborhoods. In addition, Oklahoma Watch, cooperating with Gaylord College, took on a focused

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

emphasis on poverty in coverage developed over several months in 2014 and early 2015. The coverage took a different approach than the news organization's previous stories, which were mostly text articles with expert and non-official sources. The new approach involved interviewing residents of low-income neighborhoods using mobile video and asking them for their concerns. Accompanying responses were obtained from community and area leaders, also using mobile video. The strongest videos were paired and presented on a website. Journalism students in three courses, as well as student interns and Oklahoma Watch staffers, did the video interviews with mobile devices. Students of two urban high schools also participated.

The online-only publication (<http://oklahomawatch.org/>) posted its first report as a news organization on December 4, 2010. Every story the organization produced from then until July 20, 2014, when the new project was being developed, was reviewed for this study. Of the total 538 stories, 79 stories were found to be related to poverty. A story was considered related to poverty if: (1) it contained certain words indicating poverty or (2) the first five sentences of the story contained words, in addition to those used to search, indicating poverty. The terms used to search for poverty-related stories were: poor, poverty, low pay, low-income, unemployment, minimum wage, financial difficulty and financial pressure. If none of the search words was found in a story, one of the researchers read the first five sentences of the story.

The study examined 70 videos produced for the new project, Talk With Us, on mobile devices. All of the videos were related to poverty concerns in that the entire focus of the project (<http://talkwithus.net/>) was on concerns of residents in these low-income neighborhoods. Thirty-five of the videos were of neighborhood residents, and 35 of leaders in response. Because the neighborhood residents set the agenda for the discussion, the focus in the analysis below is the videos from them.

The stories from the earlier reporting were read closely to identify broad categories of coverage and more specific topics. The videos were transcribed, and the transcripts were likewise reviewed closely. This close reading of themes and details is in line with the approach of qualitative content analysis and enabled examination of similarities and differences in both topics and how they were addressed.

Results

The analysis of coverage showed both commonalities and substantial differences between the earlier coverage by Oklahoma Watch and the later coverage done along with the University of Oklahoma journalism school. As Table 1 shows, several broad categories of topics surfaced in both: socioeconomic issues, governance and policy problems, decreasing social cohesion, and personal behavior. Immigration was addressed only in the first body of coverage, and issues of lack of safety were addressed only in the second. In addition, the particular subjects related to these categories differed substantially, though again with some common ground. The following sections summarize the issues that appeared in one or both sets of coverage and illustrate some details of how they were addressed.

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

Socioeconomic Issues

Both the earlier and later coverage addressed issues of unemployment. The first coverage also examined low pay and problems with the financial system in predominantly minority and rural areas, focusing on lack of banks. The issue of high taxes surfaced in the newer project. Although the situations of individuals were included, much of the earlier coverage looked at data and discussed the issues broadly. For example, one story included this:

According to Census data, 283,329 uninsured adults fell below the federal poverty line. But many of those people were not employed during the previous 12 months.

In contrast, because the second body of coverage was intentionally aimed at focusing on the voices of people in low-income neighborhoods themselves, their words were present in abundance. For example, one said this in a video:

I mean a lot of the concerns over here on the Southwest side is they don't have the bigger jobs, the big corporations for more solid jobs as far as careers...being in careers or whatever. They've got just a little fast food here and there. None of the major corporations are over on this side for people to get into career-based jobs.

Although the speaker was raising a broader point about the situation in part of the city, not focusing on his own, the problem came to light through his own voice.

Immigration

Immigration was one topic that wasn't addressed at all by neighborhood residents in the later interviews.

Table 1: Issues Relating to Poverty

Issues	Nonprofit news organization	Cooperative project
Socioeconomic issues	Unemployment; Low-pay; Poor financial system in rural areas	Unemployment; High taxes
Immigration	Undocumented immigration	

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

Governance and policy problems	Failure to support children; Loopholes in government programs; War; Poor healthcare system; Poor education statewide	Lack of civic amenities; Poor maintenance of infrastructure (roads, streets, sidewalks, signs and streetlights); Inadequate public transportation; Poor education; Less opportunity for extra-curricular activities
Lack of security/safety		Low police presence in neighborhoods; Police harassment; Lack of accurate weather information; Decreasing street watchers
Decreasing social cohesion	Poor family ties	Lack of interaction among community members
Personal behavior	Substance use; Poverty taken as a way of life; Crime; Teen pregnancy	Substance use

In contrast, it was a focus of in-depth reporting in the earlier work by the organization. The nonprofit journalism organization published several stories focusing on the sufferings of undocumented immigrants, a growing population. News stories suggested that their sufferings are worse than the other poor people who are legal residents. Undocumented immigrants work harder for lower wages. One story said:

Undocumented immigrants... subsist on the edge, not only in terms of finding jobs and places to live, but also in gaining access to basic, continuing medical care.

The story cited a 2013 report that suggested that income of undocumented immigrants is lower than that of legal residents. What makes their condition different from other poor people is that they are not eligible for any federal benefits or healthcare.

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

They don't even turn to places where they may get basic care in fear of being deported. These issues came to light in the coverage through the news organization's earlier reporting.

Governance and Policy Problems

This is a broad grouping in this analysis encompassing issues including loopholes in government programs, healthcare and education problems, and infrastructure issues such as maintenance and public transportation. Both the earlier and later coverage devoted a good deal of attention to topics related to governance. However, the earlier coverage focused more on broad system issues such as healthcare while the second focused on more nuts and bolts concerns such as problems with roads and street lights and lack of community centers. Even where there was overlap in one topic, the focus on the voices of people in the neighborhoods in the second coverage brought a more specific emphasis to details of human needs.

The earlier coverage looked broadly at issues such as budget cuts creating a reduction in nursing homes and mental health problems for many people who do not have insurance. The later coverage raised specific concerns such as this one about community centers:

We've got community centers that used to be about every mile or so in any direction – at least a little park and they had a building with somebody... Now these kids do not have those places to go to keep their mind occupied in a positive way.

This and other comments provided direct perspective from life in a low-income neighborhood and impacts that may not have been obvious on the surface.

In the one area addressed in both groups of coverage, education, the first coverage addressed the issue statewide; the second was more narrowly targeted and again in the voice of neighborhood residents. For example, one resident said this concerning a neighborhood school:

There are not as many full-time stable teachers, especially for elementary school. That's their foundation. Edwards had more substitutes and full-time students. You know, any time there is a need for funding, we lose. It impacts greatly because without knowledge, without any type of education, what do you have?

Though the other coverage included a personal voice, it was not the dominant element.

Lack of Safety

An area of great difference was safety, which did not appear in the earlier coverage at all but showed up in several ways in the coverage involving neighborhood residents – include low police presence and concern about harassment. One resident talked in detail about a big concern of hers:

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

Security. There were a spate of couple of robberies around here. Our ATM here as well...prostitution down a couple of streets, maybe we need some more patrols around here...anything like that. There is a school around here. There has been a couple of robberies reported ...here. You know it's a Hispanic community. There is a lot of children around. Yeah, that's a big concern definitely anytime when there are children involved. I would tell them just to be, I guess, more conscious of this area to have more patrols around. Maybe, just, you know, just patrol around a little bit more. Make it a little bit more safe here.

The lack of police patrols thus emerged as another problem with a daily impact on the community. Another resident talked about harassment worries, describing interaction with a police officer:

I had what I have got on now. But he had stopped me and he'd told me, "Are you a gangbanger?" I said, "No sir, I am not." He said, "Well, we heard that you were selling drugs." (Unclear) because about the way you dress. We've got a phone call...you know... and I said, "No sir, I am not." I had respect. I am a respectful person.

This comment also points to a concern closely tied to safety. Another concern that might not be as expected on the surface, lack of accurate weather information, also emerged in relation to the Hispanic community – again pointing to a potentially significant issue in daily life.

Decreasing Social Cohesion

This category of issues appeared in both sets of coverage but with different topical focuses. In the earlier coverage the emphasis was on poor family ties; in the latter it was on interaction among neighbors.

One story in the earlier coverage, focused on the effectiveness of efforts to strengthen marriage through a state initiative, quoted a legislator: "We must change the conversation on poverty to focus on stronger families, which in turn will not only produce a more stable and healthy economy, but also improve overall well-being for all..." Coverage of family problems did also include low-income people, quoting a homeless person who reconnected with his family after receiving housing assistance.

The neighborhood residents interviewed in the later coverage brought up concerns about lack of interaction among community members. One of the concerns involved neighborhood associations: a resident said she was concerned not enough younger people are involved in the neighborhood association to keep it active. "No one knows who your neighbors are," she said. Another voiced frustration about absentee landlords who don't keep up property. "They draw rent or they leave it for tax purposes... They really don't care who lives in the neighborhood because they don't live there." Another resident voiced frustration about lack of connection with local representatives.

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

We need more communication from our representatives. We need more direct contact. There need to be maybe more town hall meetings in which people can air their concerns, get to know their representatives more. We need to get back to a working relationship.

All of these comments pointed to concerns that affect the community, not just a few individuals, and the community's ability to develop and prosper.

Personal Behavior

The final broad category was also reflected in both earlier and later coverage, but more topics were addressed in the earlier coverage.

The plight of individual substance abusers was portrayed in both sets of coverage. A story in the earlier coverage used this in talking about prescription drug abuse and gaps in public funding of programs:

Of the 10 people who supply Justin with the prescription pills, at least seven are elderly. The women are aunts or grandmothers of friends who sell their medications, usually covered by Medicare.

An example in more evocative language appeared in these words on a video in the later coverage:

I think his desperation of having to go nowhere else and having nothing to do – nowhere to go beside prison. He's just never been sober. He believes he can't do it. I am sure. In 42 years old, he never had it. I am sure he never will... I love the boy.

Several other issues related to personal behavior emerged only in earlier coverage: poverty chosen as a way of life, crime (personal impact of crime on those who commit it and their families), and teen pregnancy. For example, talking about the problem of chronic homelessness, one story said:

Milner...has seen the faces of those men in his bright, modern shelter. They froze to death, drowned, were hit by cars, or died from drinking. They were among those who have made homelessness a way of life – the chronically homeless, who lose themselves on the streets for years, sometimes decades.

This portrayal of the topic brought to light the fact that the problem is more than that of a few individuals.

Discussion

This qualitative content analysis has examined coverage of poverty-related issues by Oklahoma Watch, a nonprofit news organization with a mission of covering public problems, particularly those of disadvantaged people. The first set of coverage

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

constituted the body of stories written on poverty from the organization's founding until the start of a cooperative project. The second set of coverage was the video interviews the organization did in cooperation with the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma to focus on this topic in neighborhoods in nearby Oklahoma City.

The analysis of coverage showed that in a very broad sense the coverage was similar in that it, in both cases, addressed socioeconomic issues, poor governance, decreasing social cohesion, and various issues connected with personal behavior. However, as Table 1 showed, the specific topics of coverage differed substantially within these categories while showing some commonalities. For example, coverage that generally related to issues of governance or policy focused more on deep systemic issues such as health care in the earlier coverage. The concerns that emerged from the interviews with residents in the later project were centered more on basic daily concerns such as problems with roads and street lights. Concerns about education were evident in both sets of coverage.

Two categories did not appear in both groups of coverage. One, immigration, was addressed only in the earlier coverage. The other, lack of safety, appeared only in the later interviews. Those interviews related to safety brought to light several diverse issues including lack of police presence, concerns about police harassment, and lack of accurate weather information.

Although the research questions did not specifically focus on sourcing, it was evident that the cooperative project included a greater proportion of sources who were low-income residents themselves. This was part of the design of the project but is worth noting because of its impact on what issues came to light and how they were discussed. Interviews with residents in the second project and the follow-up response interviews were aimed at giving residents a voice to state what their own concerns were, mostly based on open-ended questioning rather than the prompting of the interviewees. Given that the group of residents interviewed was relatively small, it is important not to read too much into the topics chosen as signals of what the whole community might have stated, but the greater focus on neighborhood voices clearly led to a difference in emphases – both in topics and in the predominance of voices from the neighborhoods themselves. Informal discussion with Oklahoma Watch's editor also suggested that neighborhood residents might have raised additional topics if discussion had continued – and, conversely, they might not be willing to discuss some sensitive topics on their minds. Immigration issues, which did not come up in those interviews, might have been among them.

Relation to Previous Literature

In relation to previous literature, the study adds perspective from examination of the work of a noncommercial news outlet with a mission that includes poverty coverage. In that sense, it is not surprising that poverty-related topics have received more attention than some studies of mainstream news organizations found (e.g., Clawson & Trice,

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

2000). In relation to the literature on poverty as a threatening behavior to society (Entman, 1995), both groups of coverage seem to portray these topics as more issues of threat to impoverished people themselves and their communities than to broader society. Suffering, which also surfaced in that research as a focus, was certainly evident across the coverage.

Other previous research on episodic versus thematic treatment of poverty-related issues (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Iyengar, 1990) relates to differences in the coverage in this study. The first coverage was predominantly thematic with supporting anecdotes in service of broader themes. The community coverage in the neighborhoods was more episodic because it focused on the experiences of individuals, but their experiences also implied broader themes connecting to their broader place in the community. Stereotyping (e.g. Gilens, 1996) did not seem to be a problem in the framing of the stories or, by implication, in the overall choice of sources. A look at the neighborhood coverage showed that 43 percent of the residents interviewed were African-American, 37 percent white and 20 percent Latino. The numbers were, broadly speaking, in keeping with the diverse demographics of the neighborhoods.

The literature about reasons for weak media coverage of poverty and ways to address it is highly relevant to the current study. Carey (2014) found that the reasons newspapers avoided issues of the poor included reluctance of members to talk about economic issues and lack of newspaper resources to seek out new voices. Residents approached in their own neighborhoods were not all eager to talk, but the videos show a number of them were willing to discuss economic issues. This approach also reflected a way to use relatively inexpensive technology to go out and find new voices. In addition, Carey suggested reporters seek out multiple perspectives from diverse sources in the community and become more positive and inclusive in their coverage. The project did exactly those things. Although sometimes residents were reluctant to speak, especially on sensitive topics, the 35 videos brought forward multiple perspectives on numerous topics in a positive manner. By engaging area leaders in response, the project at least began to foster civic dialogue, as Nielsen (2008) stressed the need to pursue.

Relation to Theoretical Framework

In relation to the theoretical framework for this study of communitarianism (Christians et al., 1993), it can be argued that both sets of coverage do more to embody the ideals of this theory than typical mainstream media coverage of poverty-related issues, whose weakness has been documented in the previous literature. As noted earlier, communitarian media ethics places a priority on building community, giving voice to marginalized people, and providing discussion of social context for public problems. Both sets of coverage, broadly speaking, have the potential to help build community by bringing to light serious problems in low-income communities. They also both give some voice to individuals who typically do not have a substantial public voice, and they point to ways in which problems go beyond a few individuals.

The earlier coverage is perhaps stronger in providing social context by its use of

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

expert sources (though, it should be noted, data elements that accompanied the videos in the later project did provide some context as well). But the interviews with neighbors also provided social context as many were thoughtful in talking broadly about problems that affect many of those around them. On the criterion of giving voice to marginalized people, the cooperative project in the neighborhoods is stronger because the stated emphasis was to bring these voices to light directly rather than as explained or described by others.

Limitations and Future Research

As noted earlier, it is important not to try to infer too much from the differences in coverage in terms of what it says about issues of importance to low-income residents themselves because of the relatively small number of people involved and natural reluctance to raise sensitive topics that might lie below the surface. Future studies could continue to monitor the organization's coverage longitudinally, given that poverty is a priority focus for it. It would also be worthwhile to compare coverage of these issues by other nonprofits with similar missions and with coverage by those news outlets that may have continued to make these a priority. Interviews with journalists about their priorities and choices could shed light on the process behind the content that was produced.

References

- Anderson, R., Dardenne, R. W., & Killenberg, G. M. (1994). *The conversation of journalism: Communication, community, and news*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Awad, I. (2014). Journalism, poverty, and the marketing of misery: News from Chile's "Largest Ghetto". *Journal of Communication*, 64, 1066-1087.
doi:10.1111/jcom.12124
- Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (4th edition). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bullock, H. E., Wyche, K. F., & Williams, W. R. (2001). Media images of the poor. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 229-246.
- Carey, M. C. (2014). Telling us what we already know: A case study analysis of poverty coverage in rural Appalachian community news outlets (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio University).
- Christians, C. G., Ferré, J. P., & Fackler, M. (1993). *Good news: Social ethics and the press*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Christians, C., & Nordenstreng, K. (2004). Social responsibility worldwide. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 19, 3-28.
- Clawson, R. A., & Trice, R. (2000). Poverty as we know it: Media portrayals of the poor.

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

- Public Opinion Quarterly*, 64, 53-64.
- Commission on Freedom of the Press. (1947). *A free and responsible press; A general report on mass communication: Newspapers, radio, motion pictures, magazines, and books*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Coughlin, R. M. (1989). Welfare myths and stereotypes. In R. M. Coughlin (Ed.), *Reforming welfare: Lessons, limits, and choices* (pp. 79-106). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico.
- Cozzarelli, C., Wilkinson, A. V., & Tagler, M. J. (2001). Attitudes toward the poor and attributions for poverty. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 207-227.
- Craig, D. A. (1996). Communitarian journalism (s): Clearing conceptual landscapes. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 11, 107-118.
- Devereux, E., Haynes, A., & Power, M. J. (2012). Tarring everyone with the same shorthand? Journalists, stigmatization and social exclusion. *Journalism*, 13, 500–517.
- Dionne, J. (2008, January). Keeping poverty on the page: Covering an old problem in new ways. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 46, 15-18. Available from: Communication Source, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 31, 2016.
- Entman, R. M. (1995). Television, democratic theory and the visual construction of poverty. *Research in Political Sociology*, 7, 139-160.
- Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking recognition. *New Left Review*, 3, 107–120.
- Gans, H. (1995). *The war against the poor*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gilens, M. (1996). Race and poverty in America: Public misperceptions and the American news media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60, 515-541.
- Golding, P. & Middleton, S. (1982). *Images of welfare*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
- Howley, K. (2003). A poverty of voices: Street papers as communicative democracy. *Journalism*, 4, 273.
- Iyengar, S. (1990). Framing responsibility for political issues: The case of poverty. *Political Behavior*, 12, 19-40.
- Kim, S. H., Carvalho, J. P., & Davis, A. C. (2010). Talking about poverty: News framing of who is responsible for causing and fixing the problem. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87, 563-581.
- Lambeth, E. (1992). *Committed journalism: An ethic for the profession* (2nd ed.).

COVERAGE OF POVERTY

Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Lambeth, E., & Craig, D. (1995). Civic journalism as research. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 16, 148-60.

Martindale, C. (1996). Newspaper stereotypes of African Americans. In P. M. Lester (Ed.), *Images that injure* (pp. 21-26). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Nielsen, G. M. (2008). Conditional hospitality: Framing dialogue on poverty in Montréal newspapers. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 33, 605-619.

Parisi, P. (1998). A sort of compassion: The Washington Post explains the 'Crisis in Urban America. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 9, 187-203.

Peterson, T. (1956). The social responsibility theory of the press. In F. S. Siebert (Ed.), *four theories of the press: The authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist concepts of what the press should be and do* (pp. 73-103). University of Illinois Press.

Rawls, J. (2009). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Redden, J. (2011). Poverty in the news. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14, 820-849.

Rosen, J. (1994). Public journalism: First principles. In J. Rosen & D. Merritt (Eds.), *Public journalism: Theory and practice* (pp. 6-18). Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation.

Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.