

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution:	Glasgow Caledonian University
Unit of Assessment:	Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management (UoA 36)
Title of case study:	Changing Public Discourse on Poverty
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)	
<p>The primary beneficiaries of Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) research into media representations of poverty are people experiencing poverty themselves. Mediating beneficiaries are editors and journalists; television drama producers; politicians and political parties and third-sector organisations. The research has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improved the quality of life of those experiencing poverty through a reduction in the stereotyping/stigmatising discourses to which they are often exposed • effected a change in the practice of journalists and television drama producers regarding representations of poverty • led politicians/political parties to commit to eradicating stigmatising language from their discussions of poverty • encouraged third-sector organisations to campaign against the use of such language 	
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)	
<p>Research carried out since 1999 by GCU’s Culture, Consumption and Communication (CCC) Research Group has explored media representations of various disadvantaged groups in both factual and fictional formats. This led to involvement in a successful bid for the 2007-8 project <i>The Media, Poverty and Public Opinion in the UK</i> funded by a £50,000 grant from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). This project was one of five interlocking subprojects within JRF’s larger PIPI (Public Interest in Poverty Issues) programme, one of the most wide-ranging studies of poverty-related issues ever undertaken in the UK. The project was carried out by two members of the CCMS group, Anthea Irwin (GCU employment January 2001-September 2013) and Hugh O’Donnell (January 1977-), and four members of the University’s Scottish Poverty Information Unit: Louise Dobbie (Research Assistant, September 2003-June 2010), John McKendrick (Project Leader, October 1997-), Gill Scott (Emeritus Professor, December 1969-October 2007) and Stephen Sinclair (February 2006-).</p> <p>The project consisted of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a Content Analysis of 640 poverty reports in UK print news media • a detailed Discourse Analysis of six poverty-related reports in a range of UK newspapers. • the first ever Discourse Analysis of representations of poverty in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ television fiction (over forty hours of soap operas), and ○ “reality” formats (ten hours of the <i>Jeremy Kyle Show</i> and the <i>Secret Millionaire</i>). <p>In addition there were nine interviews with key individuals involved in the production of poverty-related news and six focus-groups to gauge public responses to media representations of poverty. The Discourse Analysis sections (primarily Chapters 4 and 5) of the report (Reference 1 below) built on a long-standing research effort by members of the CCMS group into Discourse Analysis of newspaper reporting of a range of social issues, most notably representations of asylum seekers (Reference 3), and analysis of both the dramatisation of social issues in television serials (References 2, 5 and 6) and their narrativisation in television news (Reference 4). The innovative</p>	

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nature of this research – it was the first to mobilise Bourdieu’s concept of differing forms of capital to analyse representations of poverty – led to O’Donnell being invited to participate in a similar project and to produce related publications in Spain (References 2 and 4).

The main findings of the research were:

- a consistent tendency among sections of the press to frame poverty reporting through negative and damaging stereotypes of those experiencing poverty, largely blaming them for their situation and presenting them as entirely lacking in resources
- a likewise strong tendency in television productions to either render poverty invisible by redefining it as a lack of social capital (the case of serials) or to equate it with notions of an “underclass” (reality programming) undeserving of social support
- the existence of only a tiny minority of programmes (among these *The Secret Millionaire*) which attempted to offer an alternative to the dominant representation

Following widespread dissemination and media coverage of the findings (see for example Section 5, Source 10), journalists, television drama producers and politicians undertook to change – and have changed – both their discourse and their practice in relation to representing poverty.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Reports

1. Irwin, A., Dobbie, L., McKendrick, J., O’Donnell, H., Scott, G. and Sinclair, S. (2008) *The Media, Poverty and Public Opinion in the UK*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at <http://www.irf.org.uk/publications/media-poverty-and-public-opinion-uk>, 72 pp. (this page has been viewed 12,908 times, and the report itself downloaded 1445 times)
2. O’Donnell, H. and Castelló, E. (2007) *Societat, identitat i sèries de ficció televisives: un estudi comparatiu entre Catalunya i Escòcia* (Society, Identity and Television Drama Serials: a Comparative Study between Catalonia and Scotland), funded by the Department of Universities, Research and Information Society of the Catalan Parliament and by the Anglo-Catalan Society, 96 pp.
3. Irwin, A. (2006). Asylum and the Media in Scotland. Report Prepared for the Oxfam Asylum Positive Images Network, 83 pp. This report eventually led to the Oxfam publication *Fair Play: Refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland*, available at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/fair-play-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-scotland-a-guide-for-journalists-revis-112346>

Books

4. O’Donnell, H. (2007) *Noticias y ciudadanía. El telespectador, el poder y el debate público* (News and Citizenship: the Viewer, Power and Public Debate), Ediciones de la Torre, Madrid (submitted to RAE 2008).
5. O’Donnell, H. (1999) *Good Times, Bad Times: Soap Operas and Society in Western Europe*, Leicester University Press, London (submitted to RAE 2001).

Articles

6. O’Donnell, H. (2008) “‘Nae Bevvying, Nae Skiving’: Language and Community in the Scottish Soap Opera”, in N. Blain and D. Hutchison (eds.) *The Media in Scotland*, Edinburgh University Press.

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4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The detailed evidence provided of the widespread use of stigmatising, aggressive or dismissive representations of poverty in the media led to significant changes in the professional practice of journalists, television drama producers, politicians and third-sector workers, resulting in a less damaging representational environment for those experiencing poverty. A spokesman for the Poverty Alliance said of this research in 2013: “There is little doubt that this piece of work for JRF influenced our thinking around influencing public attitudes to poverty ... We continue to use the research in discussion about the media and poverty, so it has a continuing influence on our work” (see Section 5, Source 5).

Between May 2008 and July 2009 there were a total of fifteen public engagement events related to the project. In addition to the official launch of the end-of-project report in London on 10 September 2008 – an event attended by a wide range of journalists, documentary makers, third-sector workers and people experiencing poverty – these included presentations to the All Parliamentary Group on Poverty, Westminster (June 2008); the BBC College of Journalism (September 2008); the Trades Union Congress National Conference (October 2008) and the Association of Journalism Educators (June 2009). In October 2009, as part of preparations for the launch of the EU Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010), PIFI co-ordinator Teresa Hanley presented the key findings of the GCU report at a workshop facilitated by JRF during the European Commission’s *Poverty and Media* Seminar in Brussels (Source 2), leading to an EU-funded project, with JRF on the advisory group, aimed at improving media coverage of people experiencing poverty and including development of a guide for EU journalists, thereby giving the project additional EU-wide reach.

Following a presentation of the results of the project, the Society of Editors commissioned the 88-page *Reporting Poverty in the UK: a Practical Guide for Journalists* (2008, revised 2009, see Source 3 for download figures) offering advice and guidance on how to report poverty without reproducing negative stereotypes uncritically. This booklet was distributed to over 400 newspaper editors in the UK as well as to all journalism courses in UK universities, and also fed into the accompanying *Reporting Poverty Resource Pack* (download figures under Source 4) produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for journalism tutors, trainers and students. Both of these documents specifically acknowledge their debt to, and the inspiration they have drawn from the findings of the GCU project.

These dissemination activities led to focused efforts to change both professional journalism practices regarding reporting poverty and the representation of poverty in television drama. The news editor of a leading Scottish broadsheet (Source 7) reported that while her paper had always taken coverage of poverty-related issues seriously, the research had helped them to become more aware of the potentially negative effects of certain words or the use of certain images. A sub-editor at a leading tabloid (Source 8) commented that “As a journalist who has had to report and edit on a series of differing poverty stories, I am familiar with this relevant guide. The issues surrounding poverty are complex and variable and this guide was useful at helping to clarify and simplify subject matters. It was also used to determine appropriate words and phrases to use correctly and without prejudice”. A Senior Development Officer of BBC Drama (Source 8) indicated that the report had made for interesting reading and was certainly an issue she would bear in mind when developing storylines for upcoming dramas. In addition the report provided material for a 2013 Royal Television Society lecture on Social Class and Television.

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In terms of policy-related impact, the Scottish Government commissioned McKendrick to write Briefing Paper 26, *Writing & Talking about Poverty*, in January 2011 (Source 9). This stresses the need for “careful consideration to be given to how we describe poverty and argues that language is an important tool that should be mobilised in anti-poverty activity”. The Poverty Alliance “Stick Your Labels” campaign, based on the findings of the GCU report and aimed at eradicating the use of stigmatising language in relation to those experiencing poverty (Source 5), was subsequently publicly endorsed by the leaders of all the main Scottish political parties. Further evidence can be found in the impact assessment which JRF commissioned for the PIPI project as a whole (Source 1). A government policy maker on poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland interviewed as part of this assessment pointed out how the project’s focus on the ways in which damaging stereotypes can be reproduced unthinkingly had “alerted her to the danger of using the language of the ‘underclass’” (page 21).

Although the *Reporting Poverty Guide* was not written with third-sector workers in mind, members of this group interviewed as part of the PIPI impact assessment found the GCU subproject extremely useful in many ways. For example “A grassroots discussant in Liverpool said the ‘Reporting Poverty’ guide was “one of the best marketing tools ever to get it out to people how bad journalism can entrench negative attitudes to people stuck in poverty, and the subsequent effect it has on society” (page 20).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. JRF commissioned its own programme evaluation and impact assessment of the PIPI project from Global Partners and Associates, published in November 2009. This qualitative report involved twenty-six semi-structured interviews, an e-survey completed by 83 respondents and two discussion forums in Liverpool and Glasgow. This 33-page report is available on request and contains details of those involved in the interviews quoted above.
2. Programme of European Commission’s Poverty and Media Seminar, Brussels, 28 October 2009: [Poverty and Media Seminar](#)
3. *Reporting Poverty in the UK: a Practical Guide for Journalists*, available at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/reporting-poverty-uk-practical-guide-journalists> (this page has been viewed 8,349 times, and the report downloaded 3,439 times)
4. Briefing guide for journalism educators available at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/reporting-poverty> (this page has been viewed 10,315 times)
5. Director of the Poverty Alliance, for the impact on people living in poverty:
6. News Editor at the *Scotsman*, for the impact of *Reporting Poverty in the UK: a Practical Guide for Journalists*
7. Sub-editor at the *Scottish Sun*, for the impact of *Reporting Poverty in the UK: a Practical Guide for Journalists*
8. Senior Development Officer BBC Drama, for impact on representation of poverty in television drama
9. Scottish Government Briefing Paper 26: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/regeneration/pir/learningnetworks/cr/publications/writingaboutpoverty>
10. *Guardian* website for example of media coverage and contribution to public debate: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/sep/10/thinktanks.socialexclusion>