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Citizens or Objects:
A Case Study in News Coverage of Poverty

I began this essay as an examination of how one newspaper in a small Midwestern city -- with a poverty rate above the national average -- covers the poor and working class for the purpose of discovering a fresh ethical or theoretical justification for greater coverage of poverty. I failed. Or, rather, I succeeded in a different way. During my research I found many journalistic narratives in professional journals about improving the coverage of poverty. These were mainly of two types: 1) advice about how to cover poverty,¹ or 2) narratives about what happened when a reporter or newspaper attempted to do more coverage of poverty.² In every case the essays, columns, and articles treated poverty and the poor as objects of coverage. This question stopped me cold: Is any particular group of people served (i.e. a positive social, economic, political outcome) by being an object of reporting? My initial answer following from my previous experience as a journalist: No. If that is so, then my trying to do more of the same is worse than useless. So I looked for something else. I asked instead: What useful, actionable information do people living in poverty need, and how might a newspaper provide it? In other words, how can a newspaper treat the poor as citizens rather than objects?

There exists in the minds of American newspaper journalists a group called the "general audience," and it is this group that journalists believe

¹ Dionne, E. J. (2008, January). Keeping poverty on the page. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 15-18.

² England, D. (2006, April). Exploring connections and tensions. *Nieman Reports*, 10-12.

they serve by covering the news. The general audience ostensibly includes all citizens -- the assumption being that all citizens are politically equal and are, therefore, served by a common understanding of the news -- especially political news -- created by a standardized reporting and writing process.

Journalists assert for themselves a particular position in the American democratic republic -- enablers of the democratic process. This position finds expression in a number of important documents, including college textbooks (Brooks et. al. 2004, Mencher 2003), the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, and prominent critiques of journalistic practise (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2007, 2010). Journalists understand themselves to be a constitutionally-protected group whose job it is to help make democracy work by reporting factually, fairly, and objectively on the processes and personalities of those who govern. Kovach & Rosenstiel assert the first purpose of journalism is "to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing."³ Gans calls this position a journalistic myth aimed at creating "a normative privilege allowed to journalists to give additional social significance to their work."⁴ An historic part of that constructed significance has been that the news media provide its democratic services to all citizens, especially those victimized by the powerful. There's an old saying journalism students learn: Journalism should afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

What journalism actually does is serve the middle and upper classes because newspapers and corporate news chains are in the business of making

³ Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2007). *The Elements of Journalism* (2nd ed.). New York City, NY: Three Rivers Press. p. 5.

⁴ Gans, H. J. (2003). *Democracy and the news*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. p 55.

money, i.e. selling advertising to businesses that wish to influence consumers who have disposable income. Some circulation decline among newspapers in the past 30 years is attributable to cutbacks in serving poor neighborhoods in urban areas.⁵ Journalists themselves are members of the middle and upper classes -- by virtue of education and income -- for whom, according to Russell Baker, the "American political system works exceedingly well."⁶ The result is that journalists, for the most part, have developed a class bias; they have become socially, economically, politically, and culturally separated from the poor and working class.⁷ This separation has profound and negative economic and political effects on poor communities.⁸ Except when calamity strikes -- events that are commonly understood as hard news -- or when they are the objects of feature stories about being poor, the poor are largely invisible in American newspapers.

This essay explores the case of the Springfield News-Leader, a daily newspaper in the Gannett chain, serving Springfield, Missouri -- a small city in the southwest corner of the state -- for the purpose of discovering what opportunities exist as a part of normal news coverage to serve the poor and working class. The demographic profile of Springfield makes it particularly interesting in regard to a study of how a local newspaper could cover the poor and what it could do to better serve that population with actionable information. By actionable I mean information that people can directly use to their own benefit as opposed to information that is merely interesting or entertaining. Actionable information suggests statements of fact about social,

⁵ Cline, A. R. (2009). Bias. In W. F. Eadie (Ed.), *21st century communications* (Vol. 1). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

⁶ Cunningham, B. (2004, May). Across the great divide: Class. *Columbia Journalism Review*, p. 31.

⁷ Cline, 2009 and Cunningham, 2004.

⁸ Cunningham, 2004

economic, and political situations and the means to act on those facts. According to the most recent data by the U. S. Census Bureau (American Community Survey 2005 - 2009): 1) 14.2 percent of families in Springfield live below the federal poverty level compared to 9.9 percent nationally, 2) 20.3 percent of individuals in Springfield live below the poverty level compared to 13.5 percent nationally. The majority of workers in Springfield work at hourly-wage jobs that pay below the national average in every job sector -- an average of 17.5 percent lower with a range of 4 percent to 29 percent lower.⁹

I approached this situation with several assumptions springing from my experiences as a critic of journalism. First, I assume that an audience is not necessarily served by being an object of news reporting because news as understood by journalists is often negative. Second, I assume that any resulting advice that comes with a cost will be rejected by journalists. The economic reality of the news business today is that there is very little time, money, space, or personnel to make big changes in coverage or procedure, e.g. adding coverage beats or doing major, time-consuming reporting projects. Third, I assume that a "multiperspectival"¹⁰ approach to reporting that attempts to increase the points of view of news articles will better serve the democratic mythology of journalism. Fourth, I assume as Fairclough does that "there is a dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure."¹¹ The democratic mythology of the press opposes the economic reality of its product as it serves advertisers and middle/upper class readers. Journalistic discourse

⁹ Cline, A. R. (2006). Political culture and moral literacy: Using words to create better workers. *Community Literacy Journal*, 1(1).

¹⁰ Gans, H. J. (2011, March 21). Herbert Gans on multiperspectival journalism. In *Nieman Journalism Lab*. Retrieved April 30, 2011, from <http://www.niemanlab.org/2011/03/news-media-are-targeted-but-audiences-are-not-herbert-gans-on-multiperspectival-journalism/>

¹¹ Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press. p. 64.

-- a dominant discourse in our civic affairs -- is influenced by what journalists choose to see as news. As Fairclough argues: 1) a dominant discourse constructs social identities and subject positions; 2) a dominant discourse constructs social relationships, and 3) a dominant discourse constructs systems of knowledge and belief.¹² The class bias of journalists and their discourse effectively makes the poor and working class invisible except when they are the victims or perpetrators of news situations or the objects of stories about poverty. Finally, I assume poverty is a sad state of affairs worthy of the effort of public intellectuals to expose its problems and mitigate its damage to individuals and society.

With these assumptions, I looked at 60 issues of the News-Leader in April and May 2011. I considered only articles written by local staff members in the news sections of the paper and on the feature fronts. I excluded sports coverage, local and regional wire copy, and national news. I looked specifically for opportunities to broaden the perspective of news articles based on normal coverage rather than looking for opportunities to add or expand coverage (thus potentially becoming costly advice likely to be dismissed). I brought my preliminary findings to the attention of the editor of the News-Leader, David Stoeffler, for his critique. Following from my study and our interview, I contend that the objectification of the poor and working class by journalists makes their citizenship invisible and thus puts them outside the journalistic mythology of serving a general audience of citizens. My examination of News-Leader articles suggests the place to begin making the poor and working classes visible in the news, and, therefore, visible politically and socially as citizens within the larger community, is in the coverage of

¹² Ibid. p. 64.

business and economics issues.

The News-Leader published 619 local articles in 60 issues in April and May of 2011 for an average of 10.3 local bylines per day. I found 12 articles in 60 issues that provided actionable information for the poor. I determined that 36 additional news articles offered reporters the opportunity to provide actionable information by checking with just one or two more sources. To qualify as an opportunity, an article had to have an actionable connection to the poor and working class. Many news situations do not provide such opportunities. For example, an article entitled "Water Level Closely Monitored" -- the lead article in the 16 May edition -- concerned a plan by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to assess additional releases of water from Table Rock Lake following heavy spring rains. Table Rock Lake and dam are public assets. The tourist city of Branson sits below the dam and could potentially be affected by large releases of water. Coverage of this important news situation deserved the prominent play it received on the front page. But there is nothing in the situation that specifically affects the poor any more than the middle class or the rich. Of the 36 articles that did offer an an opportunity to provide actionable coverage for the poor was "Fundraiser Puts Shoes on Local Children's Feet" published on page 3B on 13 May. The article was reported from a middle-class point of view, i.e. how to contribute shoes to a program that provides them to children in need. The article did not mention actionable information how a parent in need might get shoes for her children. Such actionable information could have been added to the article by making one or two more phone calls to appropriate sources.

Coverage of hard news -- fires, accidents, mayhem of all kinds -- often included comments or information from citizens from a wide socio-economic range. It seems implausible that there might be a point of view, for example,

about a house fire that is uniquely identified with people living in poverty. There may be potential coverage regarding such issues as fire safety and response times that are partly determined by socio-economic status, but such issues would not be included in typical hard-news coverage, which attempts merely to relay what happened during the immediate news event.

Political coverage, on the other hand, could bring to bear the points of view of a wider range of citizens. But news coverage of politics as it stands now is more about political maneuver than governance. Kovach and Rosenstiel claim journalists "help us define our communities as well as help us create a common language and common knowledge rooted in reality. Journalism also helps identify a community's goals, heroes, and villains."¹³ I would counter that what Kovach and Rosentiel identify is the language of middle-class values that creates the sound of common sense in a medium of middle-class discourse. The first purpose of journalism -- to provide the information people need to be free and self-governing -- is stated in political terms befitting the operating mythology of the craft. What if the poor and working class need journalism to focus on some other "first purpose" -- one that gives them the information they need to survive socially and economically? How difficult is it for the poor and working class to relate to political coverage when the middle-class lens of the press sees poverty as an object of reporting? Gans argues that to "whatever extent journalists view themselves as reporting for the democratic citizenry, they cover the news from a citizen's perspective only in a limited fashion."¹⁴ Schudson agrees, claiming that news is "to a degree designed for insiders and is written almost in code."¹⁵ Further, Schudson argues that actively engaging

¹³ Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007 p. 12.

¹⁴ Gans, 2003 p. 48.

¹⁵ Schudson, M. (2003). *The sociology of news*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton &

citizens in civic debate is not among the virtues of the press because the news media do not normally publish "mobilizing information" -- what I am calling actionable information in this essay.¹⁶ My conclusion: There is too much that needs fixing in political coverage before we can even begin discovering how such coverage might serve the poor and working class.

Gans suggests that "multiperspectival" reporting might best be demonstrated in the coverage of business and economics, claiming that poor audiences need business news, too, just not the focus on investing or corporate maneuvering. "They need to know about the businesses in which they can afford to shop and the ones that will hire them, as well as the charitable and public agencies that can help them when they are jobless."¹⁷ The poor and working class, however, are usually treated as a "production factor" called labor "that is relevant mainly in estimating costs of production rather than as members of the firms for which they work."¹⁸ Gans' suggestion, however, may be reasonably interpreted by journalists as asserting a need for a labor or poverty beat for news coverage. Adding a beat means adding costs in personnel, time, space, and money, so such a suggestion, while certainly within the values of the journalistic mythology, is unlikely to be accepted by news organizations at this time.

The 36 articles I identified present journalists the opportunity to practice multiperspectival reporting by adding enough sourcing to an article in order to include actionable information, i.e. one or two more phone calls that

Company, p. 174,

¹⁶ Schudson, M. (1995). *The power of news*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 197.

¹⁷ Gans, 2011.

¹⁸ Gans, H. J. (2003). *Democracy and the news*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 64.

should not burden journalistic resources. The range of opportunities among the 36 articles included stories about job creation, government benefits, college tuition, charities, public school programs, city and county employment, effects of falling property values, avoiding high gas prices, and city utility rate hikes. For example, an article on 1 April 2011 about a John Deere plant expanding its workforce by 55 could have included information about what skills are necessary to get these jobs and how to train and apply for them -- perhaps two extra paragraphs. The newspaper published several articles of this type in April and May. The point of view of these articles is accurately described by Gans as far more news about management than labor.¹⁹ Further, the approach of such articles was decidedly about the creation of jobs as economic benefits to the community rather than as economic opportunities for individuals.

An article about a company expansion on 10 May 2011 ran on page one. The article began with a short narrative about two men looking for work at a travel industry call center following a ribbon cutting announcing the addition of 140 jobs. But the article quickly changes point of view to the role of the company expansion in the economic development of the area. The article does give information about pay and a general description of the jobs. There is no information in the article about what skills workers need or how to apply for these jobs. The article treats the job expansion as an object of news -- interesting in and of itself as part of on-going coverage of the economic climate of the city. The article does not offer people in need of jobs actionable information about participating in such economic development. The two men mentioned, who were seeking work, merely become objects of reporting, in this case narrative elements to move the plot forward to the real story of

¹⁹ Ibid Gans, 2003.

economic development.

David Stoeffler, editor of the News-Leader, began thinking about how the paper covers poverty and working class before I approached him with this case study. He had recently been attending editors' meetings at Gannett in which the company promoted a new initiative to increase circulation among minorities. Stoeffler began thinking about expanding the notion of this new program to include the poor and working class because this population outnumbers the minority population in Springfield, where only 5.5 percent of people are not Caucasian. He had begun thinking along the same line as I had been thinking:

A couple months ago, the city and the chamber had a big news conference where they were announcing some new jobs out at the airport. Expedia was expanding, or somebody was expanding. It was like a hundred or two hundred jobs...basically office jobs. Some tax credits were involved, and everybody is all excited about it because the company is going to expand their offices, and we put the story on the front page of the paper. Then, about a month ago, another announcement came out on a Friday, which could have influenced the reaction, but it involved about a hundred-and-some new jobs at a place that remanufactures engines and transmissions. And up until the news meeting that day, late in the afternoon, nobody really thought this was a big story. Because it involved labor jobs. The jobs actually pay quite well, but they don't require the same suit and tie that we're used to now wearing. There's going to be a training program set up through OTC for people to get these jobs, etc. So, it was one of those, until somebody asked a question about the story, the assumption was it was a brief that was going to run inside.

Stoeffler acknowledged that many newspapers today reach mostly the middle/upper class with a middle/upper class product with a middle/upper class point of view. Poverty is invisible from this point of view except when it plays a role in hard news or as an object of journalistic attention. Stoeffler says "there has to be a reason for [the poor] to read it; they have to see themselves in the coverage somehow."²⁰ Visibility is more than objectification.

Life is tough in the news media today. Journalism is expected to juggle a

²⁰ Stoeffler, D. (2011). Personal interview. 19 July 2011.

number of conflicting goals, including providing "diverse and pluralistic content," mobilizing the public to "participate in and carry out their responsibilities in society," and serving and representing the interests of "widely differing social groups." Journalism must do all this while serving its own "economic self-interests to produce profits, to grow, and to contribute to national economics."²¹ Thus the problem with academics and media critics suggesting costly changes that also have the effect of forcing a defensive posture among journalists who are already sensitive to issues of ethical practice springing from their socialization in the journalistic democratic mythology. What I am suggesting here is rather simple: Reporters and editors should look for opportunities to add actionable information for the poor and working class to regular news coverage. These should initially be opportunities to make one or two more phone calls to sources that can speak to the interests of the poor in a given news situation. Business and economic news appears to be a good place to start.

I do not suppose that such coverage will suddenly entice those living in poverty to begin reading, and spending money on, the daily newspaper. Expanding coverage in the way I'm suggesting is not about increasing circulation or corporate profit. It is, instead, about journalists living up to their ethics codes, their training, and their agreed-upon goal to fulfill the primary purpose of journalism -- to give people the information they need to be free and self-governing. It is about seeing the poor as citizens rather than objects.

²¹ Picard, R. G. (2005). Money, media, and the public interest. In G. Overholser & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *The press* (pp. 337-350). New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p. 338.

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