

Introduction:

Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst natural disasters the world has ever seen. The enormous devastation wrecked by the storm on the Gulf states not only uprooted the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, but also revealed to many Americans the immense amount of poverty and suffering that had existed for decades in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama; a strain of poverty that had managed to remain largely under the radar of mainstream America. For the days and weeks following Hurricane Katrina, the national and international media ran stories on the front pages of their newspapers and broadcast stories on their nightly newscasts that highlighted the abject poverty that so many citizens of New Orleans, in particular, had been living in and experiencing for years prior to the hurricane. But almost three years later that poverty and suffering has once again gone largely unnoticed by the mainstream media and American society as a whole. The question we must ask here, is why? In an article for the Columbia Journalism Review, David K. Shipler, an author and reporter, notes that the shock felt by so many educated Americans about the extreme poverty they saw in the Gulf following Hurricane Katrina should never had occurred given the existence of the media in this country. He says, "The fissures of race and class should be revealed every day by America's free press. Why aren't they?" (Shipler).

The Society of Professional Journalists, one of the most respected professional associations in the journalism field, begins its mission statement by laying out the following as the cornerstones of a free, effective press.

The Society of Professional Journalists is dedicated to the perpetuation of a free press as the cornerstone of our nation and our liberty. To ensure that the concept of self-government outlined by the U.S. Constitution remains a reality into future centuries, the American people must be well informed in order to make decisions

regarding their lives, and their local and national communities. It is the role of journalists to provide this information in an accurate, comprehensive, timely and understandable manner (www.spj.org).

Arguably, one of the most important issues facing society today, that could and will have an extraordinarily important impact on future generations, is the poverty that exists in the United States. But, if the mainstream media refuses to cover these important issues in a meaningful and comprehensive way, how can the press completely fulfill its self-appointed task of educating the U.S. people to the extent needed to govern thoroughly and effectively?

This paper aims out to examine the coverage of poverty by three mid-sized, daily newspapers across the country – The St. Paul (MN) Pioneer Press, The Memphis (TN) Commercial Appeal, and The Louisville (KY) Courier-Journal. In order to look at the coverage, I compiled a list of 30 terms related to poverty and issues facing the impoverished citizens of this country. These search terms were designed and developed in order to reveal several different types of stories, including some of the following:

- Stories about local poverty issues or stories regarding the local impact of national policies aimed at alleviating or reducing poverty.
- General stories about social justice issues.
- Stories that ask why a current issue or problem is the way that it is, and pushes below the surface of the issue.
- Stories aimed at uncovering and explaining the structural or behavioral causes of poverty, in contrast to just ‘superficial’ stories about single actions or programs of charity within the community that don’t get at the more important implications of these policies or acts of charity.
- In-depth stories or series of stories looking at poverty in the community and how it affects not just those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

- Stories that look at the responsibility of the community, local government, and/or the nation as a whole.

I used the search terms and these general requirements to guide my analysis of the stories from the three papers. The most fundamental feature I was looking for in the stories that I analyzed was did any of the newspapers, in general, or specifically offer more than a passing nod to the extremely important and relevant issues of poverty facing this country today?

Research Methods:

In order to focus my research, I limited the period of published stories to be examined from June 1, 2007 through August 31, 2007. I picked this three-month period during the summer months because I felt it was long enough to give an accurate portrait of the type of attention and coverage given to issues of poverty by the three papers. I picked the three papers because they have similarly sized circulations, yet represent three fairly different parts of the country. Memphis is a heavily urban area, with a large, historically poor, African American community. The city has also been plagued by high crime rates and huge amounts of violence in its most poor neighborhoods for many years. Louisville is also a fairly large city but is much less urban than Memphis, and is surrounded by very rural parts of Kentucky. St. Paul is a large mid-western city that could also be characterized as urban, but has a different atmosphere than either Louisville or Memphis because of its geographic location. I held that the major newspapers from these three cities would be similar enough to act as a fair comparison to one another, but different enough that they would provide an accurate contrast of the various types of issues regarding poverty that exist throughout the country.

Following an analysis of the stories uncovered by the search terms used in my research, as well as an overview of some of the existing literature, this paper will conclude by offering some suggestions or remedies for newspapers and the media in general about how they can not only increase the amount of coverage given to issues of poverty, but also how to improve the coverage that they are already giving to the issues in order to make it more meaningful and relevant, and even possibly something that can incite change.

Research Findings:

Using an online database of archived articles from the three newspapers, I searched each of the following 30 terms, for each of the three papers, during the period between June 1, 2007 and August 31, 2007. Figure 1 shows the raw results from the searches, with the number of articles retrieved for each term for each respective paper.

Figure 1

Search Term	St. Paul	Memphis	Louisville
poor	323	336	188
poverty	64	135	64
impoverished	20	31	12
economic assistance	0	0	0
welfare	37	57	54
WIC	0	2	1
homeless	38	60	47
housing voucher	0	0	1
housing project	2	3	5
Section 8 housing	0	0	0
housing agency	1	1	0
Legal Aid	1	0	1
Medicaid	26	52	32
Medicare	41	59	36
SCHIP	5	10	3
Unemployment	33	43	12
affordable housing	12	18	18
public health	59	49	70
TANF	0	0	0
job training	10	13	9

Habitat for Humanity	8	25	20
education, poverty	16	42	29
achievement gap	8	5	2
Head Start	14	28	14
earned income tax credit	3	1	0
employment subsidies	0	0	0
food stamps	5	5	4
supplemental security income	1	8	0
community development corporation	0	3	1
community action agencies	0	0	1

As the results show, the terms “poverty” and “poor” retrieved the greatest number of articles for all three papers. Many of the other 28 search terms revealed relatively few articles given the fairly significant time period and the fact that each of the three newspapers publishes seven issues each week. The term that revealed the most articles, “poor”, however, actually retrieved mostly articles with the term poor in them in reference to Standard & Poor’s Index or poor as a synonym for bad and inadequate.

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Analysis of Results:

Without any analysis beyond the basic results of the search terms, it appears that the three papers are doing a fairly strong job of covering poverty and poverty related issues. However, a further analysis reveals that in fact, the opposite is true. Upon additional research, roughly less than 1/3 of the all the articles revealed in the original, unfiltered search of the three newspapers were actually relevant to the discussion of issues surrounding poverty. Of the stories that were somewhat relevant to poverty, most failed to address the issue in a meaningful way.

St. Paul Pioneer Press:

The Pioneer Press search revealed a wide variety of results in terms of content and subject matter. There were several stories about the 2008 presidential race and, in particular, John Edwards' platform surrounding poverty issues. These articles, however, rarely went into any depth, for example, about what the potential outcomes could be for local citizens if Edwards was elected and his plan put into action. Would poor Minnesotans benefit significantly from his plans? Or would it only bring about minimal change? One article in the Pioneer Press about the raise in the minimum wage and Edwards' platform, titled *Minimum Wage To Rise 70-Cents After A Decade - Some Ask If \$5.85 An Hour Reflects 'Fair Day's Pay'* did begin with the story of one waitress.

However, the story was pulled from the Associated Press and the waitress was from a town in North Carolina, not somewhere in the paper's circulation or area of readership. One major myth that exists amongst the general American population is that poverty doesn't affect most people and isn't relevant in most people's communities. If this story had begun with the story of a waitress in a local diner in St. Paul who was struggling to make ends meet with her current salary, it might have made the issue much more personal or relevant for Pioneer Press readers. Perhaps it would have made one or two more people aware of a problem that is in fact very present in their community.

There were also many articles about the bridge collapse in Minnesota that happened over the summer that provided plenty of opportunities for articles; for example, how did the collapse affect people's commute to their jobs? What about the economic effects on the community? Were lower-income individuals affected disproportionately – did they face more problems paying medicals bills because they had less or no insurance to cover

their hospital expenses? The continued coverage of the aftermath of the bridge collapse could have provided a perfect opportunity for the Pioneer Press to do a series of stories following local citizens, looking at how their everyday lives were disrupted by the terrible event, beyond the obvious effects. For example, were certain people unable to make the commute to their jobs and therefore unable to keep these jobs?

Many of the articles about health care, Medicaid, and Medicare were about national discussions on the issues, for example, Congressional and Presidential debates, rather than about how these local issues were affecting St. Paul and the surrounding areas. Also, many of the articles took a politics-based approach to the issues rather than a social justice or social issue-based approach. For example, articles about President Bush and his plans to address the Social Security problem or the issues of nationalized health care focused on the partisan politics of the debate, rather than the implications that they might have for low-income citizens struggling to pay their medical bills. It would have been fairly easy to find a single mother in St. Paul who was struggling to find affordable health care for her sick child and was caught up in the bureaucracy and red tape of Medicaid.

Only a handful of the articles revealed in the search for “Medicare” and “Medicaid” in the Pioneer Press were actually written by staff writers at the paper. Most of the stories, including almost all of the stories looking at the national debate, were taken from wire services such as McClatchy or the Associated Press, or from other, larger newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post. It is nearly impossible for these stories about the national issue to have any type of a local angle if they are not even written by staff members in the state. For example, an article titled *House Backs Expanding Children's Health Insurance - Senate Vote Viewed As Key To*

Bill's Future published on August 2, 2007, could have begun with a discussion of one local family that was struggling to provide their children with medical care and that relied on the funding provided by the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) to get the medicine that their children needed. However, the story was taken from the wire and therefore lacked a personal face that would have given the article a strong local impact, and could have possibly brought the issue home for readers. Instead, it merely provides an overview of the debate going on in Washington, D.C. without any attempt to make it relevant to readers in St Paul. The only local connection that the story made was to tell how the representatives from Wisconsin and Minnesota voted. The story disappointingly lacked an interview with a local representative about why he or she voted the way that they did, and how important they thought the issue was to their constituents.

There were several interesting and very timely articles about unemployment and the fallout from the subprime mortgage crisis that could have made incredibly interesting and compelling stories, but once again failed to move beyond the surface issue. The authors could have examined, for example, why the poor and working middle classes are so vulnerable with these types of mortgages when they are the ones who, many would argue, need the most financial protection? The major issue over the course of the summer, for all Americans, was the economic downturn. It would have been interesting to investigate what the declining stock market and the overall slump in the economy meant for St. Paul and its working class citizens. In an article from August 2007 titled *Housing Slide Leaves Mortgage Industry With 40,000 Fewer Jobs - Latest Move Has Lehman Bros. Cutting 1,200 In Closure Of Its Subprime Operations*, the author begins with a story of one local mortgage office that is being forced to close its doors and lay off

thousands of employees nationwide. The only problem is that the mortgage office is in North Carolina, not Minnesota. Once again, because the article is pulled from a news wire service, in this case the Associated Press, the story lacks a strong local impact. Regardless of how many stories the paper runs, if readers can't relate to the situations or people they are reading about, they will have a much more difficult time evaluating how the issue is affecting them and or their community.

I also failed to find any longer feature pieces addressing poverty or another relevant social issue during the three-month period. Most of the articles were straightforward news stories that only glazed over the important issues without giving any attention to localizing important national stories or giving stories a human face. The articles that were published failed to delve below the surface and scratch at any of the issues I had laid out at the beginning of my research. Issues such as the structural or behavioral causes of poverty were largely underdeveloped. In the articles regarding the debate in Washington concerning SCHIP funding, an attempt could have been made to look at how the structure of the health care and health insurance systems in the United States have created a situation in which many working class Americans don't have the money to pay for the medical care that they and their children so desperately need. One of the articles could have also examined why many children growing up in low-income neighborhoods suffer from diseases such as asthma and chronic lung problems at a disproportionate rate than children from upper and middle-income families do.

Memphis Commercial Appeal:

Like the St. Paul Pioneer Press, a majority of the articles I found in my search of the Memphis Commercial Appeal failed to cover the issue of poverty at more than a superficial level and fell into some of the same traps. An article titled *Angels at work -- 500 pick up bargain groceries courtesy of Garden of Grace Church* told the story of charity event at which volunteers came and distributed food baskets to needy individuals from the community. Although this story initially may seem to be an example of coverage of poverty issues, at its core it is really nothing more than a “fluff” piece about local do-gooders. The author included short quotes from people who came and received the baskets of food, and who were thankful for the generosity of the volunteers and the organization. However, the article failed to question why these people needed the help putting food on the table or in their children’s mouths in the first place. Were they out of work because of a medical condition that they couldn’t afford treatment for? Or were they working but just not bringing in enough income to cover all the bills, put clothes on their children, and buy the groceries?

The Commercial Appeal also drew many stories from the wires when covering national issues such as the SCHIP debate in Washington. One article I found, however, did an impressive job of taking a wire story and modifying it so that it was more applicable to the paper’s readers. The article, titled *Spotlight: Congress - Daring veto, House expands children's health program -- Adds 6 million poor; limited version in Senate*, was an Associated Press story pulled from the wire about SCHIP, and was similar to the ones used by the Pioneer Press. This story, in my opinion, did a slightly better job of looking at the issue with a local perspective because it included a section at the end

with quotes from prominent figures in the Memphis community, including priests, CEOs, and health care providers. Although the paper may not have had the money or manpower to send a reporter to Washington to cover the issue exclusively, there was at least noticeable thought given to providing the story with some type of local angle, as small as it might have been. In this example, readers at least had an opportunity to hear how some of the important leaders in their community were reacting to the national issue.

Another article that I came across in the Commercial Appeal that I thought addressed an important issue in a fairly thorough way was titled *Catch-up game -- Language-learner students struggle to avoid being left behind*. This article, written by a Commercial Appeal staff member, looked at the national issue of the reauthorization of President Bush's *No Child Left Behind Act* and connected it to the local community in two important ways. First, it began with a vignette about a Memphis teacher and her students in a summer intervention program for non-English speaking students. Although this narrative is only a few sentences long, it does an effective job of grabbing the reader and making an instant connection by localizing the story. The story goes on to talk about how teachers in the area are struggling to prepare their students who are not native English speakers to take a standardized test that was implemented as a result of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Finally, after making these two local connections, the author explains the national trend for non-native speakers on these tests and then goes back to compare national and Tennessee scores. This constant back and forth between the national issue and how it is relevant locally keeps the reader engaged and reinforces the idea that this countrywide trend is also a local one. Although the story is not directly about poverty, it indirectly deals with the issue through its treatment of non-native

speakers, many of who fall into the category of poor or lower class. Although the story does has several aspects that make it a more comprehensive and meaningful example of poverty coverage, it is still lacking in some areas. Perhaps in this story, or a follow-up one, the author could get directly at issues such as funding for stronger English language programs in schools to help prepare students for these standardized tests or at the idea of an achievement gap, which the author briefly mentions in this first article. What does the achievement gap look like? What can be done to reduce it? Answers to these types of questions could bring the story from an example of good poverty coverage to great poverty coverage.

The Louisville Courier--Journal:

As the other two papers did, The Courier- Journal failed to produce many evocative stories related to poverty during the summer of 2007. The raw data from the search shows that the Courier--Journal had fewer stories than the Commercial Appeal or the Pioneer Press for almost every search term. A majority of the stories that they did produce also fell into the category of being irrelevant and inaccessible for the average reader wanting to connect with the issues on a local level. Stories about the SCHIP debate that was going on in Washington over the summer were non-existent in the pages of the Courier-Journal. Wire stories from the Associated Press even failed to make their way into reader's hands. One story about John Edwards' platform in the presidential campaign did a fairly good job of relating the candidate's ideas to the local agenda. In the story titled *Edwards tours Kentucky*, the author, a writer for the Courier-Journal, goes beyond the basic story that the candidate is touring the state and explains how Kentuckians who

suffer from lack of health care coverage and low wages connected with Edwards' platform and what the situation in Kentucky looks like in comparison with the national Census. This story falls under the first category outlined in my search criteria by taking the national political race and trying to localize it for readers.

Another story, *Heart, hands, help*, begins with a promising anecdotal paragraph that paints a picture of several youth working together to help restore a dilapidated home. The story, however, quickly evolves back into the common "charity event" story that so many papers pass off as meaningful coverage of poverty. This type of anecdote at the beginning of the story could have been the great beginning for a longer feature story about housing conditions for low income individuals in the community that really investigated the current state of public housing and the availability of affordable housing in the area. A story like this could have included a piece about the local community efforts to spruce up the existing housing, but must go beyond just that obvious surface story that comes across the reporter's desk.

One story that I found from the Courier-Journal that does a effective job of informing readers about current poverty issues was titled *Louisville income, poverty both rise*. This story arose out of the release of new Census Bureau data about median incomes and poverty levels for the city and state. The author of this story does a good job of laying out the facts of the report and trying to contextualize it for readers by comparing the city's numbers to other places in the county, state, and nation. He also goes deeper into the story and asks sources about why the employment levels are where they are, trying to offer readers an explanation of why the data says what it does. This story does a strong job of trying to help readers see why the situation exists, an important first step in

allowing individuals to better understand how a change might be brought about to improve the circumstances.

Explaining the Current State of Poverty Coverage:

In an article written for the Columbia Journalism Review titled *Monkey See, Monkey Do*, David K. Shipler looked at how the media's coverage of poverty issues has evolved and eventually begun to decline in the United States over the past several decades. Shipler cites a time in the 1960s and 1970s when the city desk staff of the New York Times focused much of its attention on the problem's facing the city's poorest citizens. Shipler attributes this attention to President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society plan and the large amount of money it provided to local governments across the country. Shipler said, "local government could hardly avoid issues of poverty – and neither could we, because then as now, news organizations covered mostly government. From the mayor's office to the city council, the planning commission, and other agencies, poverty and race were woven into the public agenda. Stories were easy to get" (Shipler).

In his article, Shipler also notes an important distinction in the media's coverage of poverty that offers a possible answer for the lack of poverty coverage seen today. He says that although the media almost always report on what the government is doing, planning to do, or discussing, they very seldom report on what the government is not doing or on where it is failing to act. It would seem then that when the government is targeting the issue of poverty on a national scale like it was during the 1960s, the media would follow with increased coverage, but when the majority of the government's attention shifts away from the issue of poverty, so would the media's. In the past several

years there has been much less of a visible focus on Capitol Hill on poverty. The events of September 11th, the invasion of Afghanistan and the current war in Iraq, as well as other events such as talks with North Korea have all taken a much more prominent place in day to day political discussions. Shipler believe that, “Eventually, when American troops leave Iraq, most American correspondents will leave with them, just as most American reporters left the suffering ghettos of America’s inner cities as the War on Poverty subsided during the 1970s into a stalemate of deprivation” (Shipler).

In article written for The Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University titled *Portraying Poverty in the Face of Newsroom Pressures*, Martha Shirk also offers some possible suggestions for why the coverage of poverty is at its currently low level. She notes that many newsrooms push their writers for stories with “happy endings.” Shirk says that this formula often doesn’t gel with stories about poverty.

The path from welfare dependency to self-sufficiency is littered with minefields, and there will be few welfare recipients who are going to be able to step around all of them. People’s lives are constantly evolving...The rub is that newspaper stories have to end (Shirk).

Brent Cunningham offers yet another possible explanation for the current state of reporting on poverty in the U.S. media. In his Columbia Journalism Review article, *Across the Great Divide*, Cunningham looks at the differences in lifestyle and socioeconomic statuses between journalists and the poor and working-class Americans that they are supposed to be covering. He looks to these differences for a possible answer to why there is such a disconnect between what the media is reporting and what is actually happening. He notes that while 89 percent of journalists in 1996 had finished college, only 27 percent of all Americans had completed four or more years of college

(Cunningham). As with most situations, however, the numbers don't tell the whole story, says Cunningham.

Yet numbers alone can't explain the uneven and often subtle contours of this story. The press has the power to shape how people think about what's important, in effect to shape reality. But whose reality is being depicted? This is how the class divide between journalists and a large swath of the populace comes into play" (Cunningham).

Although this difference does exist, Cunningham notes that the press, as an important institution in American society, has the responsibility "to engage everyone, not just those readers and viewers with whom we share cultural and economic touchstones"

(Cunningham). The best and brightest in the industry have begun to find a way to do this, but Cunningham notes that they fail to do so in a meaningful, significant or serious way.

A general reluctance in our society to talk about class, a historically taboo topic, makes it even more difficult to change the way the press views coverage of the issues.

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Cunningham says, "the very idea of class makes American's, including journalists, uncomfortable. It grates against the myth, so firmly ingrained in our national psyche, that ours is a society of self-made men, with bootstraps" (Cunningham). This, along with similar feelings about issues of poverty and race in U.S. society, makes it even harder and less popular for journalists to attack the issues in the pages of their newspapers or on their nightly newscasts. Cunningham and Shipler, in both of their articles, also note that the lack of a meaningful or set definition of terms such as poverty or class makes it exponentially harder to cover these issues. Shipler simply notes that, "You can't solve a problem unless it's defined" (Shipler), while Cunningham says, "Class is problematic, too, because we don't agree on how to define it" (Cunningham).

Another important possible reason for the lack of serious poverty coverage in the mainstream press is lack of demand. In a Neiman Fellows Report from Spring 2001 in an article titled *Neither Publishers nor Readers Clamor for Stories about the Poor*, Lynda McDonnell looks at how the demand for stories about poverty from both with the corporate media structure, as well from readers and viewers, plays an important role in the amount of coverage given to the topic. McDonnell notes several ways that this demand plays out in terms of coverage. First, she says that, “poverty and poor people don’t have to be covered, as city hall and schools do. A newspaper can do without. Neither advertiser nor reader is likely to demand more coverage” (McDonnell 24). Second, she notes that coverage of poverty issues requires much more enterprise and independent thinking on the part of reporters, something that many are unwilling or unable to do because of lack of money or support from editors. These two factors make it difficult and often not worth the while of reporters to chase, report and write stories having to do with poverty. McDonnell also notes that most journalists are trained to report on action or change and are drawn to these types of stories. Stories about poverty, however, are often about lack of action or inability to change.

With the exception of Christmas features about needy families, few newspapers or television stations attend regularly to the lives of people living on disability checks or raising children on a hotel maid’s or nursing assistant’s wage. As journalists, we are drawn to people who are doing something – building dot-coms, merging companies. That’s where the news and the hot beats are. People living in poverty often struggle just to pay the bills (McDonnell 23).

McDonnell continues on in her article to examine the idea of reader demand and how that does and should affect a newspaper’s coverage. She looks beyond the basic, surface level assumptions that media should limit its coverage of poverty just because most middle and upper class readers have little to no interest in reading about poverty and that

advertisers don't want to market their product along side a story about poverty. She cites Jason DeParle as an example of a reporter who has done some excellent reporting on poverty during his career and his employer, the New York Times, as a paper that has challenged the status quo when it comes to poverty coverage. DeParle did thorough, in-depth coverage from Washington, D.C. during the Clinton era about welfare reform and from Wisconsin following that state's massive overhaul of its own welfare system. McDonnell says that she doubts, "that many Times readers clamored to know how poor families were faring in Milwaukee. DeParle and his editors decided that they needed to know" (McDonnell 24). This idea of the media taking the role of educator and informer is basic to the tenants of journalism laid out by experts and professionals in the industry.

Where do we go from here?:

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In my research, I found that in 1998, the Pioneer Press did a seven part series about poverty in Minnesota, called "Poverty Among Us" (Lieberman). According to the editor, Walker Lundy, the purpose of the weekly series was to show readers that poverty was not an isolated issue far removed from their everyday lives. The series, unlike the stories that I found in my search of the paper during the Summer of 2007, told the story of poverty through the stories of real, working class people who were struggling to make ends meet. The editor said that the series specifically tried to reinforce the concept of the "working poor", and the idea that not everyone in poverty fits the stereotype of lazy, unemployed, and dependent on welfare (Lieberman). This series of stories stood out as a laudable example of how a paper can cover poverty for several reasons. Following along the criteria I laid out for my own research, the series fulfills almost all of requirements.

First, the stories look at a national issue, in this case the inability of many individuals to make ends meet with one or even two full time jobs, through a local lens. Second, it looked beyond superficial charity efforts or other actions to examine the honest effects of the issue within the community, not just for those directly affected but also for the larger community. Third, it looked at some of the structural causes of poverty and tried to offer explanations for the current situation. Finally, the series went as far as to prepare a “community action pack” that gave names of groups, resources and contacts within the community that could offer advice and guidance to people in the community who wanted to get involved in trying to bring about change (Lieberman). This last item is the one that particularly stands out from the articles I found in my research. Not only did this series address the idea that the greater community had a role in helping to address the problem of poverty, but it even gave citizens the tools they needed to begin getting involved. I feel that this aspect of the project really took the series of stories above and beyond.

In his article *Covering Race, Poverty and Class in the New Gilded Age* for the Spring 2001 Nieman Report, Johnathan Kaufman suggests one way for reporters to connect the stories of poverty for readers is to “show places where poverty and wealth and the races intersect – and then cast an honest light on how these forces play out” (Kaufman 26). He believes that journalists must push themselves to think ‘outside the box’ when thinking of story ideas for articles related to poverty, race and class. Journalists, he contends, need to tell the stories in new ways that show readers how they are being affected in their own communities, in a way that isn’t just bleak and doesn’t portray the problems to be totally beyond repair.

In another article from the Spring 2001 Neiman Report, Nick Kotz examines how journalists can and must adjust their coverage of poverty in his article, *Reporting About Poverty and Race Needs to Change*. He begins by pointing out that issues of race and poverty are “rarely assigned a news priority that calls for sustained, penetrating coverage...Throughout most of our nation’s history, these marginal groups have remained as invisible to journalists as to other Americans” (Kotz 27). Given the persistence of these important issues throughout the history of this country, Kotz believes that the media must play an important role in bringing to light the problems plaguing many people across the country. He contends that the first step in establishing an agenda for covering poverty in every newsroom should include the staff sitting down and developing a list of core concepts and problems that are prevalent in their community that, over time, they want to address in their coverage. He also thinks that the stories papers do write need to move beyond simply rediscovering or reiterating the problem, and provide a context for readers to understand the problem so they can become engaged with the story. This requires reporters to themselves have a more comprehensive understanding of not only the problem or issue, but also the potential ramifications of efforts seeking to alleviate or solve the problem (Kotz 28-29).

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Overall, I was disappointed by the lack of articles in the Pioneer Press, Commercial Appeal and Courier-Journal addressing major poverty issues, or probing anywhere below the surface of these issues. There were plenty of opportunities to take an issue on the national agenda and localize it so that it was relevant for the paper’s readers, or to look

deeper and examine the structural or societal causes of some issues. In general, the reporting was not particularly impressive. But, it is promising to see how there are opportunities there for more in-depth stories to be written. There were numerous chances every week for more comprehensive stories, and it seems that the barriers to writing these stories are motivation, time, and actual reporters to write the stories, not lack of material. The real issue seems to be convincing publishers, editors and reporters that these are important issues for their readers of all socioeconomic classes, and also showing readers that they should care about these issues even if they don't see how they directly impact them.

I think the important question here that has to be answered before we can really expect newspaper's to change their coverage of poverty is, how do we convince readers that these are issues they should care about and encourage their papers to print? Or should newspapers have to show their readers that they should care? Particularly today when newspapers are losing more and more advertising revenue to online news sites and are having to cut the size of their papers, how do we make it 'worth publishers while' to focus on poverty issues in their newspapers? It seems as though this might be a 'Catch-22' situation. If we start providing more coverage of poverty issues, people might begin to understand how important they are, but if people now don't think they should care about poverty issues, how do we get them to read these stories and encourage publishers to print more? Is there a way we can present poverty-related articles so that they address the important, pertinent issues while also including something that reaches out to the more average reader? From an analysis of articles already being written as well as an examination of some of the literature on the topic, it seems that perhaps the situation

doesn't have to be an 'either-or'. As Johnathan Kaufman suggests, perhaps there is a place where problems of poverty, race and class intersect with more 'mainstream' stories like those about the presidential election or a national health care debate. And perhaps the media doesn't and shouldn't have to base their coverage completely on reader demand. As an institution, journalism is meant to educate and inform the populace. If a paper or other news outlet deems an issue important to its readers, they should feel compelled to tell the story and present the issue to the public.

The majority of the articles that do exist, particularly in the pages of local, midsized papers, are for the most part about things changing or happening right in the moment, and not about endemic or institutional poverty, or lack of government intervention. The big projects that do exist are an exception not the standard. This is where the change must begin. I agree with Kotz in his belief that this first step must be for an individual paper to establish its own agenda and list of priorities. With that in place, editors must encourage their reporters to be more enterprising in their search for stories. Get out of the office and go down to the local unemployment office. Find a person or people who tell your story. Be unwilling to settle for simply reporting on press releases about charitable events that come across your desk. Encourage discussion within the newsroom about the best possible way to tell a story so that it has the greatest impact for readers. Like with any other story or topic, the goal of the reporter and editor should be to make every word and sentence have the greatest impact possible. Although it isn't always feasible for a paper to send a reporter to cover a national issue, greater care must be given to localizing wire stories and modifying them to incorporate a local impact. As with any other beat, or area of focus for a reporter, poverty is a complex issue that is best covered by a reporter who

is well-informed and educated about the issue in his or her community. Whenever possible, one or two reporters should be dedicated to covering poverty just as would be to City Hall or the courthouse and jail.

As the Society of Professional Journalists lays out in its mission statement, “the American people must be well informed in order to make decisions regarding their lives, and their local and national communities. It is the role of journalists to provide this information in an accurate, comprehensive, timely and understandable manner” (SPJ).

With poverty being such an endemic and widespread issue for so many Americans, it is impossible for journalists to fulfill their self-appointed task of educating the citizenry of the country without addressing the problem in a significant, meaningful and effective manner that can only come with increased and improved coverage.

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