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# Poor numbers, poor news: the ideology of poverty statistics in the media

Dr Jairo Lugo-Ocando  
School of Media and Communication  
University of Leeds, UK

Brendan Lawson  
School of Media and Communication  
University of Leeds, UK

In 2016, the government of Mexico seemed to have achieved an amazing and completely unexpected task: it managed to dramatically cut poverty levels at a simple stroke. This went against the fact that poverty and social exclusion levels had been rising for the previous 10 years in that country despite increasing average incomes. Could this be the most successful and well-orchestrated government intervention into poverty of all times? Well, not quite so. What the Mexican government, under Enrique Peña Nieto, did was much simpler; they changed the methodology used by their National Statistics Institute to show that Mexico's poor people were better off in terms of income by a third compared with the previous year.<sup>1</sup> The news media did not miss the opportunity to expose the attempt of the already embattled Peña Nieto – often accused of corruption, incompetence and close links with drug cartels – to meddle with numbers to create a misleading positive spin on what by all means has been a very flawed administration (Temkin Yedwab & Salazar-Elena, 2012; Vilchis, 2013).

However, Mexico is not the only country to have done such things. Many others have gone unnoticed when altering the basis of their national statistics and key measures of poverty and social exclusion in order for politicians and bureaucrats to show 'improvements' in poverty reduction, employment and people's life during 'their turn in office'. In Napoleonic France, officials manipulated statistics to highlight the French welfare programs (Desrosières & Naish, 2002; Perrot & Woolf, 1984). In Italy, under Benito Mussolini's rule, the Fascist produced the numbers as to show that they had managed to reduce inequality, creating the now widely used GINI coefficient (Ipsen, 2003; Prévost, 2009). In the 1980s in the United Kingdom, the late Margaret Thatcher started to count people in fractional and fix-termed short contracts as being fully employed (Webster, 2002). More recently, in Venezuela, the then president Hugo Chavez authorised his Office for National Statistics to include the use of public services and other government benefits as part of people's income, although this did not preclude the fact that there was a significant reduction of poverty between 1999 and 2005 (Weisbrot, Sandoval, & Rosnick, 2006: 4). So many others, in the present and in the past, have followed suit to adopt these tactics to give a better picture of poverty in their own countries. However, what is unique in the particular case of Mexico is that the unhealthy play with numbers was caught red-handed and thereafter fiercely exposed by the media. Few have been done so in history.

The question, then, is why the news media have failed consistently to critically report and expose these PR stunts around statistics in many places. Why have mainstream journalists effectively failed to bring into account those who have unscrupulously used statistics on poverty to advance their own political agenda while neglecting to address the structural issues? This chapter attempts to provide a possible answer for this by looking at the political communication of statistics in the context of news coverage of poverty. It does so by examining the relationship between politicians, journalists and statistics in relation to the news coverage

of poverty. The central thesis is that while the dissemination of poverty statistics by government officials, multilateral organisations, NGOs and other actors continues to be highly mediatized and journalists are able to tap upon almost unlimited resources to do so, their ability to critically analyse numbers and counter hegemonic discourses continues to be diminished by decreasing resources in the newsroom and the lack of statistical preparation among newspeople.

To be sure, over the years, officials have allocated a substantial amount of resources and efforts into public relations efforts towards spinning poverty statistics to the audiences, therefore allowing mediatization practices to shape the way these numbers go out into the public. This has happened in parallel to a growing deficit in the ability of journalists to deal properly with numbers, given their lack of knowledge, time and other resources. The consequence of this news deficit is an overreliance upon the explanatory frameworks offered by official sources who not only provide the interpretation of the statistics but also define their meaning in the public imagination. This, as we argue in this piece, is not only fundamentally problematic for the purported role of journalism as a watchdog of democracy but also profoundly detrimental to the process of public policy formulation, allowing politicians to get away with flawed and ideologically driven social policy.

By the mediatization of statistics we should understand not a policy-making process directed by the media but overall a policy-process in which publicity-seeking activities and political decision-making become closely interlinked (Cater, 1965; Cook, 2005), to the point that the production and analysis of statistics become inextricably tied to the active management of its mediated representation. Recognised today as a process concurrent with modernity (Thompson, 1995), in which the logic of the media starts to permeate multiple social subsystems (Schrott, 2009: 42), the process of mediatization of poverty statistics implies tailoring the presentation of these numbers to fit the media requirements, in the search for public support and legitimation of the policies and actions that they aim at underpinning (Esser, 2013; Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014). The enactment of authority in a policymaking process therefore will require to treat statistics as both a communicative achievement as much as a political one (Crozier, 2008; Hajer, 2009).

### **The circular logic**

Scholars of poverty and social exclusion know that multilateral organisations and institutions have an intimate and long history of using numbers to establish, maintain and expand their authoritative power over the 'management of poverty' (Fioramonti, 2013, 2014; Masood, 2016; Philipsen, 2016) as these numbers underpin their role of 'expert voices'. This role emerged from a specific process in which relative experiences from the individuals are transformed into objective ones –hence, they are institutionalised, through the singularisation of their definition. Thereafter, these numbers and statistics can be used to measure and determine these seemingly 'objective' experiences, enabling actors and institutions to appear capable of addressing problems by increasing or decreasing relevant measurements. Thus, a circular logic develops: the problem is defined, measured and solved by the same set of people who 'establish' the problem in the first place as an issue in the public imagination. As Arturo Escobar (1995) reminds us, before 1945 we did not have a 'Third World' to develop, it only came into existence when the elites realise that it was possible to 'manage' poverty to underpin power.

Indeed, a collection of literature that can be broadly categorised as the post-Development school of thought provides an interesting theoretical framework to approach the use of statistics in the articulation of poverty. This school emerged in the 1990s with the works of Arturo Escobar (1995), James Ferguson and Larry Lohmann (1994), Gustavo Esteva (1994), Claude

Alvares and Wolfgang Sachs (1992), among others. They challenged and critiqued the relatively modern conception of development - the implementation of so-called objective economic models across a plurality of different cultures, nations and communities. This type of development systematically rejects local knowledge, interest and relativism in favour of modernisation (Rapley, 2004: 352). The economic rules imposed by 'development institutions' and which is often presented as objective, emerged from Western European and Northern America. Its modern origins are placed firmly in the post-WW2 era, encapsulated by Truman's Point IV Programme and central to the Structural Adjustments Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s (Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2017). This specific form of development is the one that the post-Development school so strongly criticizes.

In this sense, the ability for a geographically specific conception of development economics to be legitimised as universal depends on, among other things, statistics. Quantifiable information, such as GDP, has the power to validate the underlying ideology of the imposition of external economic models on a range of different cultures, histories and contexts (Fioramonti, 2013; Masood, 2016). However, in order to use numbers in this way, it is necessary for 'experts' to be involved in a process where the definitions of certain problems are singularised. Poverty is an excellent example of this. If there is a multiplicity of definitions for poverty, then how can statistics lay claim to the idea that they represent the reality of poverty? This is especially prevalent when the definition of poverty is not quantifiable or if it is positioned as relative to specific circumstances or people.

In *Global Poverty: A Pauperising Myth*, Majid Rahnema (2001) explores how the current Western discourse of poverty was constructed. He argues that the current discourse of poverty that has come to dominate the world is a binary one in which poverty is the opposite of rich. He explains, nevertheless, that there exist, and have existed, a plurality of concepts of poverty that conflict with this dominant discourse (Rahnema, 2001: 2). For him, there was a rejection of the old concepts of poverty in favour of a new economic-centric discourse that was forced upon the developing world in the post-WW2 Development era. In addition, Michel Mollat (1986: 3) argues that in the Middle Ages, the words covering the range of conditions under the concept [of poverty] were well over forty. For example, in those times, being poor could mean falling from one's estate, being deprived of one's instrument of labour and the loss of one's status (1986: 5).

Rahnema argues that this plurality of the poverty concept was singularised through a pauperisation process from the Middle Ages to the modern period. This occurred through a changing of 'needs' of the poor. Traditionally, this was defined within the local communal relief system. However, through the relatively recent process of 'economisation' of society - by which it is meant trying to rationalise society's dynamics in economic terms, ascribing economic value to all things - (Kurunmäki, Mennicken, & Miller, 2016; Madra & Adaman, 2014), the poor came to be defined through their inability to acquire the new commodities and services that the new industrial and market society had to offer (2001: 19). Thus came the singular definition of what it is to be 'poor' and what can be called 'poverty'. For Rahnema, this historical process had four themes: universal notions of poverty, creation of objective economic programmes, focus upon a healthy world economy to save the poor and the post-WW2 concept that poverty could be conquered through increased productivity (p. 25-26).

Whilst the plurality of definitions has all but disappeared in the English language, there still exist alternative discourses in other areas of the world. Rahnema draws heavily from probably the most well-known African linguist, John Iliffe, whose arguments draw upon wide-spanning ethnographic studies and existing literature. He explains that 'in most African languages, at least three to five words have been identified for poverty' (2001: 6). Furthermore, Iliffe (Iliffe,

1987: 28) draws upon colloquialisms and proverbs from Nigeria and Ethiopia to highlight the pluralistic nature of poverty. The relativity of these concepts is rejected by the modern discourse in place of dominant notions of 'lack' or 'deficiency' (Rahnema, 2001: 8). Consequently, having a singular definition allows statistics to perform their role as the indicators of poverty.

In this sense, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) provides a good example of this. This statistic has been used by multilateral development organisations to evaluate national economic performance and by implication poverty reduction. The assumption for years was that increased GDP leads to a more economically prosperous, and therefore successful, country. This, of course, have been challenged both by economists (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2010) and other academics such as Fioramonti (2013), Jerven (2013) and Philipsen (2016), among others, who have exposed the highly contingent nature of a supposed universal fact. At a fundamental level, there are flaws in its simplicity. For example, this statistic does not account for the depreciation of assets, for the fact that natural resources are not free (as the equation presumes) and does not include the cost of pollution or the informal market (Fioramonti, 2014b: 4). Nevertheless, despite these gaps, it possesses great political power to singularise and define 'advances' in addressing poverty. As Philipsen asks: how did something describing a crisis - pointing to the emergence of GDP during WW2 - subsequently turn into something prescribing what we do, serving as a substitute for democratic deliberation and political ideals (2016: 6)? Indeed, GDP often operates at a macro-level yet is linked to the objective poverty statistics, such as the World Bank's X number of dollars per day as a measurement of individual poverty, explored later in this chapter.

Statistics are also the key feature in defining the so-called symptoms of poverty such as famines. In relation to this, de Waal explains how the medieval discourse of famine was starkly different to the modern discourse. It is hard to tell precisely how the English term 'famine' was used in the Medieval Period, but it seems that until the 18th century 'famine' and 'hunger' were interchangeable (2005: 14). Interestingly, de Waal points to dearth as being the root of the word famine. Dearth did not imply starvation or dying due to starvation. This is most clearly demonstrated by the severe 1315-1317 famine. On the basis of records from Winchester, Kershaw (1973: 11) argued that the famine years saw a crude death rate of near 10% de Waal (2005: 14) explains, however, that in reading the accounts of the famine there was a 'primary focus upon economic or agrarian crisis, and only secondary (if at all) a crisis of starvation and population fall.'

This leads de Waal to conclude that the notion of famine 'was closer to the notion of famine as hunger and dearth than the modern notion of famine as mass starvation and death' (de Waal, 2005: 15). He explains that the modern discourse of famine, centred on death and starvation, emerged in the late 18th century with the works of Malthus. The consequence of which was a rejection of the traditional, pluralist definitions. Malthus's *An Essay on the Principles of Population* (1890), published in six editions between 1798 and 1826, analysed the relationship between demography and resources. He outlined the five checks on populations, the fourth and fifth being famine (Malthus, 1890: 106). According to de Waal (2005: 17), Malthus's work on famine caught the imagination of the nation and led to a re-conceptualisation of famine as mass starvation leading to death. The importance of Malthus's contribution was not the validity of his work, which has been brought into question (de Waal, 2005: 19), but the mortality and starvation-centric framework that the work provided, which has become central to the modern discourses on famine. In doing so, the Malthus Factor (Ross, 1998) introduced the 'mathematisation' of famine where the 'arithmetical' production of resources would never catch up with the 'geometrical' expansion of the population, therefore provoking famine at the end. This conception of famine as mathematical notion created a vital role for statistics and

numbers in the articulation of poverty as a news issue in the works of journalists such as Henry Mayhew (1812-1887), Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and Jack London (1876-1916). Fast forward today, and we find that the United Nations saying that,

A famine can be declared only when certain measures of mortality, malnutrition and hunger are met. They are: at least 20 per cent of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope; acute malnutrition rates exceed 30 per cent; and the death rate exceeds two persons per day per 10,000 persons(UN, 2011).

By terming famine in numerical terms, those who do not experience the famine could then nevertheless quantify it, declare its severity and seem to provide solutions. More importantly, it conferred power to construct social reality around famine in ways it could be politically 'managed'. This because the phenomenon then passed from being an individual and collective experience into a set of statistic that determined who and who did not receive aid and support. Moreover, through the process of developing a single definition for both poverty and famine, certain statistical models can be used by development or humanitarian agencies to measure the phenomena and allocate resources to address it. Then, in the same statistical sense, the solutions provided by these organisations can be judged against a certain set of numbers to determine its success. It is within this context that journalists covering famine and poverty are positioned. They, of course, find them useful because it offers the 'objective' assessment that allows them to provide 'detached' reporting of these events. More important, it facilitates a definition of poverty that otherwise would be far too problematic for 'objective reporting' within commercial journalism practice.

### **Who is poor: a definitional morass**

When covering any news story, journalists have to approach the issue in three phases. Firstly, they conceptualise the issue as a news item, which means creating broad conventions around particular topics so they fit a relevant news beat. For example, the break of cholera in Haiti can be conceptualised as a foreign affair issue, which means the foreign desk will deal with the story, or as a health issue, which means that the health editor will look after that particular piece. This process of 'thematic allocation of a particular issue or subject also known as the 'news beat' has, in addition, the function of setting the network of 'expert voices' who are considered to have enough legitimacy and authority to speak about that topic. Secondly, journalists have to define the issues in terms of common codes that their audiences can understand and relate to. Hence, a journalist covering general elections in Tanzania speaks about the party in power and the party in opposition as well as about the 'centre-right party', the 'centre-left opposition' and the 'far left', to cite some examples. This frames the story within specific boundaries of understanding, allowing journalists to perform a 'interpretative' function (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Zelizer, 1993). Thirdly, journalists have to operationalise the issue; that is to make it tangible and measurable in order to present it in 'objective terms'. This process of making things 'measurable' is not only limited to assigning it a number – e.g. the number of doctors sent by the UK to Sierra Leona to help the locals to deal with the outbreak of Ebola – but is also about offering evidence that can be corroborated – e.g. making reference to the Panama Papers to show how the then Prime Minister of the UK, David Cameron, had benefited from tax avoidance schemes set by his late father. All in all, taking a news item from conceptualisation to some measurement is always an intrinsic part of journalism work and it is far from being detached or neutral.

Hence, among the challenges that journalists face in attempting to cover statistics on poverty is to find broad agreement around what it actually means and how can it be observed. Indeed, journalists find it hard to deal with poverty because of the difficulties they find in conceptualising, defining and measuring poverty in objective terms (Harkins & Jairo, 2016; Lugo-Ocando, 2014). This problem is present in both the coverage of national levels of poverty as well as in the international terrain. Poverty is in fact an elusive term that is highly contested, problematised and politicalised in public discourse in general and in media representations in particular. This is not, of course, only a problem of journalism as the output of journalists' work reflects in part much broader disagreements from experts and officials. To be sure, journalists working collaboratively in Europe and the US would find it almost impossible to make effective and credible comparisons in relation to poverty at both sides of the Atlantic. This is because, while the US Bureau of National Statistics establishes a threshold for poverty in absolute terms (a minimum income per family) across of the whole of that country, the equivalent offices in Europe has set that threshold instead in relative terms to the average income of each nation (Olson & Lanjouw, 2001; Ravallion, 2003). This is not to say that journalists do not carry out these comparisons all the time. On the contrary, stories about poverty are full of cross-national statistical comparisons. However, statistically speaking, most of them are flawed in terms of validity and reliability and, consequently they tend to present a distorted picture, which does not take into account significant differences among countries in the way poverty is measured.

It is important to highlight that this is not just an abstract discussion. Instead, the definition of poverty plays a pivotal role not only in the selection of the type of statistics on poverty that journalists use but it also reflects the ideological stance of journalists in relation to issues such as globalisation. As Martin Ravallion (2003) points out:

The measurement choice does matter. *Roughly speaking, the more 'relative' your poverty measure, the less impact economic growth will have on its value. Those who say globalization is good for the world's poor tend to be undisguised 'absolutists'. By contrast many critics of globalization appear to think of poverty in more relative terms. At one extreme, if the poverty line is proportional to mean income, then it behaves a lot like a measurement of inequality. Fixing poverty line relative to mean income has actually been popular in poverty measurement in Western Europe. This method can show rising poverty even when the standards of living of the poor has in fact risen. While we can agree that relative deprivation matters, it appears to be very unlikely that individual welfare depends only on one's relative position, and not at all on absolute levels of living, as determined incomes (2003: 741).*

In fact, there are numerous examples to be found in the daily beat of news media outlets that corroborate this alignment between the selection of statistics and the ideological framework of a particular news item. Take, for example, a story from the Guardian produced in October 2016, titled 'World Bank renews drive against inequality.' The piece relays the fundamental message in the World Bank's annual publication – Poverty and Shared Prosperity – through the voice of its then president, Jim Yong Kim:

It's remarkable that countries have continued to reduce poverty and boost shared prosperity at a time when the global economy is underperforming - but still far too many people live with far too little," said Kim. "Unless we can resume faster global growth and reduce inequality, we risk missing our World Bank target of ending extreme poverty by 2030. The message is clear: to end poverty, we must make growth work for the poorest, and one of the

surest ways to do that is to reduce high inequality, especially in those countries where many poor people live.<sup>ii</sup>

The alignment here is clear: the poverty statistics are used to support the humanitarian-neoliberal ideology of a global financial institution that predicates solving poverty by pushing for constant economic growth. The basis of Kim's commentary is the measure of global poverty by those who are living on less than \$1.90 a day – a rather arbitrary threshold produced by the World Bank itself (Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2017). This validates the claim that poverty has been declining since 1990 due to increased globalisation and also that certain remedies need to be adopted to arrest a potential future decline. Given this backdrop, the author ends the article by outlining six of the bank's aims, ranging from universal health coverage to better roads and electrification. As displayed in this news piece, these 'objective' poverty statistics are not only used to 'demonstrate' -deliberately or inadvertently- that globalisation is reducing global inequality but also then to suggest that yet inequality may increase if the World Bank's 'objective' remedies are not adopted.

There have been some attempts to produce a critique to prevalent statistics on poverty used by the media. In an article in the Independent titled 'Can we solve UK poverty', Felicity Hannah explores the recent work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), a think tank that aims to have a poverty-free UK, on defining and solving poverty. Hannah begins with an explanation of the objective poverty statistics used by the government to define poverty.

The government typically uses median income as its definition of poverty; a household with an income below 60 per cent of the median income is considered to be in poverty. Under this measure, there are 13 million people in the UK living in poverty, of which 3.7 million are children. That's a quarter of all the children in the country.<sup>iii</sup>

This approach is then contrasted with the suggested adoption of the 'standard of living' statistical model by the JRF,

The JRF annually calculates the Minimum Income Standard, the amount the public believe is essential for an adequate standard of living, including essentials but also transport, cultural and social costs. It measures poverty as having 75 per cent or less than that standard. In 2016, a couple with two children (one pre-school and one primary school age) would need £422 per week to achieve the Minimum Income Standard, while a single working-age person would need £178 per week.<sup>iv</sup>

In her comparison, it is highlighted the inadequacy of the state to tackle poverty. This is reinforced by references to the scrapping of the Child Poverty Act, the lack of headway on the policy to end child poverty by 2020 and the alternative remedy to poverty as suggested by JRF.<sup>v</sup> However, these types of comprehensive and critical discussions in the news media around the meaning of numbers and what they tell us about poverty are far and in between.

### **Over-reliance on 'official sources'**

Another very important problem that journalists face in reporting poverty statistics is the overreliance upon the use of official sources, which remain unchallenged and unquestioned at large and as such, what they say tend to be reported uncritically. Indeed, journalists' overdependence on official sources is a long-standing issue that has been well established by a variety of scholars (Brown, Bybee, Wearden, & Straughan, 1987; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008; Manning, 2001). This problem is not only limited to the predominant and systematic

selection of sources among the elites (i.e. government officials, bankers and other members of the establishment) but also refers to the disproportionate airtime and space these sources receive against other voices. In the case of statistics, the issue is further problematised by the way these numbers are used by policy makers and journalists as factual and objective evidence to underpin 'truth'.

More importantly, as many journalists have neither the ability nor training to conduct statistical work of their own, they have to rely almost entirely upon the public relations departments of the institutions dealing with poverty. Their statistics are not dissected and journalists do not produce alternative statistical models or research themselves. Thus, this circularity is never interrogated nor contested. The frameworks within which the current statistics on poverty have developed are crucial in understanding how poverty statistics are used to articulate and frame news on statistics. Moreover, journalists' overreliance and uncritical acceptance of official statistics explains in great part their central role in producing public knowledge regarding poverty in our times.

This problem is made more acute as journalists covering poverty see and treat statistics as both a news source, awarding these numbers the same level of authority and credibility than the one they confer to elites, and – at the same time - as 'objective facts' upon which interpretative claims can be made (Lugo-Ocando & Faria Brandão, 2015: 716). This duality in the consideration of the nature of the 'object' to be reported -the statistics on poverty- problematises further the issue as it renders these numbers unquestionable to external scrutiny. Journalists report the numbers as a 'objective fact' in spite of being a mathematical representation that summarises and interprets a given phenomenon. So, when reporters write that the per-capita income of a country is improving and assume that people are better off because of that, their readers assume that this is a matter of fact, even though it is simply an estimation followed by an interpretation.

Take the example of an article published in *The Telegraph* by Matthew Lynn in which he explains how the World Bank has decided to get rid of the term 'developing countries.' The evidence used to support this claim is from the World Bank's official statistics on poverty,

The World Bank cites the example of Mexico, which now has a gross national income (GNI) per capita of \$9,860. It is ridiculous to bundle it in with a genuinely poor country such as Malawi, with a GNI of \$250.<sup>vi</sup>

The collapse of this difference ends up underpinning certain views on global poverty that reflect more neo-liberal and pro-globalisation approaches. This is further corroborated by the use in the same news item of supporting evidence from the CATO Institute (2016), a US-based think tank 'dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace'. The author explains that:

It is about time that the Left, and indeed a lot of mainstream liberal opinion, caught up to the way that the global economy has changed - instead of constantly ramping up the rhetoric about how evil the West is.<sup>vii</sup>

In the article, the author fails to recognise that the same logic of objective poverty statistics initially used by the World Bank to delineate developing and developed countries to assert that this distinction, no longer exists. Instead of identifying the potential inadequacy of these measures to understand poverty, the author uses this spurious evidence to validate a particular ideological position.

This issue is not confined to objective poverty statistics. In a June 2016, Gabriella Bennett in article for *The Times*, relies almost entirely on quotes or references to official sources to create

the content. For statistical validation, she uses a report from the Scottish Government. The report states,

The proportion of people in poverty in working households increased in the latest year. The move into employment was largely into part-time work, especially for women, meaning that while people were in employment, they remained in poverty. In 2014-15 income inequality increased. The top 10 per cent of households saw the largest increases in income while the bottom 10 per cent saw no real change.<sup>viii</sup>

The subsequent commentary is provided entirely from two sources. The director of Poverty Alliance calls on the readers to work together for social justice whilst the Scottish social security secretary critiques the Conservative government's welfare cuts. Bennett does not provide either a critical perspective on the statistics used or an individual commentary on the report itself. In a similar case, The Daily Mirror published an article titled 'Ireland poverty crisis; 1.3 million struggle without basics.' Trevor Quinn, the author, relies entirely upon Social Justice Ireland (SJI) for the evidence and commentary to back up the claim in the headline.

ALMOST a third of the population - 1.3 million people - are in poverty and going without the basics, Social Justice Ireland said yesterday. The advocacy body released the figures as it called on the Government to address the inequality and deprivation in our society in next week's Budget. Director Dr Sean Healy said hundreds of thousands are "going without basic necessities such as heating their home or replacing worn-out furniture". He added: "Why are these people not a priority for Government as it prepares for Budget 2017?"<sup>ix</sup>

Regardless of the intentions of these organisations, these extracts exemplify journalist's overreliance on the sources who provide the statistics when telling the story of poverty. Indeed, even though Quinn acknowledges that the release of the statistics was a tactical move by the SJI to pressure the Government, the link between these 'facts' and the ideology it looked to serve was treated uncritically. In fact, connection between the statistic and the ideology formed the very basis of the article itself.

Overall, most journalists lack the resources, time, training or ability to either challenge official statistics or produce their own numbers to explain poverty. This results in a lack of critical engagement with the ideology that underpin the use of certain measurements elements of poverty. This has developed a specific phenomenon within the production of news articles: statistics are used a facade of objectivity that hide the highly contingent and relative ideologies that either created them or that they serve. This is not to say that journalists do this wittingly. While some journalists do use certain measurements of poverty to push their own conceptions of globalisation or anti-free trade movements, many, if not most, others just operate as a statistical mouthpiece for governments, the third sector or corporations.

## **Towards a conclusion**

The fact remains that poverty is not a natural phenomenon and there is nothing unavoidable or unsolvable about it. However, by 'economising' poverty as a news subject, journalists tend to reduce the issue to a phenomenon that seemingly 'just happens' and that inevitably 'will continue to happen'. In this sense, issues such as inequality are rarely brought into news stories and for a long time explanatory frameworks that take into consideration structural causes for poverty are ignored or dismissed altogether. The problem is made more acute by the way statistics on poverty are used as they are often awarded the same level of authority as those

used in natural sciences. In so doing, journalists ‘naturalise’ these numbers and, consequently, articulate poverty as a seemingly natural phenomenon. This is partly to do with the ‘special status’ that statistics as a discipline has acquired in news reporting, where it is seen as a natural science very close to mathematics, therefore considered to be infallible in its premises. Indeed, statistics over the years establish itself as a reliable scientific discipline (Desrosières & Naish, 2002: 2) even when they are produced by ideological conventions like any other thing in social science. To be sure, the social facts that are encapsulated in poverty statistics have become somehow ‘objective things’ for everyone who uses statistical techniques, and “these techniques are intended to back political arguments in ‘scientific’ terms. Thus, once the necessity of being recognised an objective discipline – as outlined previously – was conceived to the discipline of statistics, it meant that “we can begin to decree famine, judge schools and allocate foreign aid resources. In this context, is important to remind ourselves that all mathematical language facilitates and reinforces the myths of transparency, neutrality and independence and that this fits very well with the journalistic discourse, primarily because “mathematics is a system of statements that are accepted as truth” (Zuberi, 2001: xvi).

To be sure, the journalistic discourse seeks a mythical objectivity that is professionally ideological and impossible to achieve fully (Koch, 1990; Maras, 2013; Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Given their aim to appear objective and unbiased, media outlets tend to exclude opinions in their hard news reporting or ascribe those opinions to ‘others’ (Gans, 2014; Tuchman, 1978). In reality, however, news items are gathered, selected and constructed on the basis of journalists’ individual and collective preconceptions, values and worldviews. Journalists themselves are the vehicles for these opinions and as subjective actors are not neutral. Nevertheless, given the deontological requirements of their profession they need to be neutral and try constantly to make a clear cut distinction between facts and opinions. In this sense, statistical on poverty help them construct a narrative that ensures creditability and that reinforces current worldviews on why ‘it happens’. After all, these numbers are seen as neutral entities that underpin journalistic ‘truth’ and not as contested tools that help to construct social reality in specific ideological terms.

However, the quantification of reality in the media has alienated many individuals on the ground, who had come to trust almost blindly these mathematical discourses but who now seem to distrust them. This is because in many cases, when they hear some statistics in the news that crime, unemployment and poverty are down, their personal experience tells them a distinctively different story. Despite the barrage of statistics confirming that globalisation has improved the life of many, the benefits seem to have been felt only by the very few. The use of statistics seems instead to further de-humanise the experience of poverty by turning it into an abstract numerical notion. One that not only defines who and who is not in a state of poverty, but also that determines the allocation of resources while defining policy and action.

Does this all mean that the use of statistics to report poverty should be avoided? Not at all, statistics brings about a sense of dimension and perspective that very few news items can convey. As Krisztina Kis-Katos (2014) from the Universität Freiburg puts it, “it is important to take statistics seriously in order to come to meaningful conclusions”. For Kis-Katos, one of the key elements that statistics allow us to understand is how difficult and complex is to try to disentangle the different effects that processes such as globalisation have on those living in poverty. They help us to step back and provide more rational action towards addressing poverty through policy. As such, statistics should serve as a very important source of information, one that allows journalists to contextualise and evaluate poverty in societal dimension. The key issue is that journalists should recognise that there is an ideological aspect to statistics and, as such, that problems could arise when statistics are used to define reality. Poverty is a distinctive human phenomenon that no statistic can encapsulate or explain. As most sociologists and

economists would recognise, to live in poverty is far more than just dealing with low income or the lack of access to basic services and goods. Charles Dickens made his best depictions of poverty not when he worked as a journalist but when as a writer – and there is a reason for that. Sometimes it is our imagination that allows us to connect to our fellow human beings rather than the facts summarised in numbers. That is the true balance that journalism needs to achieve when reporting poverty.

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