

# **NUJ Reporting Poverty Campaign: introducing a trade union challenge to journalistic representations of the unemployed and the working poor**

## **Abstract**

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has reporting poverty guidelines for its 25k+ members to use alongside its Code of Conduct. These were introduced following a campaign from trade union activists and are now available to media workers in the industry including, among others, staff at the BBC, the tabloid and broadsheet press. These guidelines were created to challenge the demonising and stereotyping of the working poor and people in receipt of benefits found in British journalism. In this paper they are contextualised, within the ideology of austerity, a British media dominated by the middle and upper class, and the resulting demonising of the poor during economic crises. This article posits that the campaigning work can provide a theoretical and practical challenge to encourage and enable workers to join forces in rejecting the scapegoating of low paid, unemployed and under employed workers as seen in the media. In so doing, it considers that, while the guidelines may have limited influence in some sections of the media, they are nonetheless a significant tool, and position of solidarity, in challenging the depoliticising individualising apparent in reporting poverty, the 'skivers versus strivers' discourse, and in providing a critique of the journalistic use of sources. This paper, written by a contributor to those guidelines and leader of the NUJ campaign, serves as an introduction to this unique British trade union approach, informed and led by collaboration with people who have experienced of poverty.

**Keywords:** poverty, NUJ, journalism, representation, discourse, media, welfare

## **Introduction**

As Britain heads into the euphemistically titled 'cost of living crisis' news reporting is increasingly focused on the experience of poverty. This, of course, is not new. Representation of poverty is a well-researched area in journalism with, in recent years, work discussing the prominence of individualising, the shape of discourse and the use of sources. This paper does not explore the impact of that representation but provides an introduction to the response of the NUJ in its campaign to challenge reporting in this area. As such, this article will first outline the development of the NUJ guidelines and associated campaign. It will then engage with previous scholarly research to reflect on how poverty news reporting was manifesting during the Coalition government's 2010 neoliberal welfare reform. This paper takes the position that the neoliberal project seeks to withdraw from welfare provision and diminish its role in arenas once fundamental to liberalism, including the welfare state, where 'the social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasises personal responsibility' (Harvey, 2007: 76). It will consider how the reporting, in individualising subjects and prioritising sources, is inevitably mediated by a predominantly, and increasingly, middle class industry. It will further consider the necessity for the continuation of the campaign as the DWP launches its 2022 Fighting Fraud in the Welfare System project.

## **National Union of Journalists (NUJ) challenge to reporting poverty**

The NUJ Reporting Poverty campaign is unique in that it is led by trade unionists. It was prompted by my own experience of unemployment in 2014. After working on national newspapers and magazines, I found myself unemployed for the first time since being a teenager and was in receipt of, and entirely dependent on, Jobseekers' Allowance. I was not unaware of the demonisation before this, of course, but an understanding of the industry, and

my knowledge as a trade union activist, gave me a unique insight and opportunity to challenge the reporting. Previous valuable research has been conducted by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Church Action on Poverty, ATD Fourth World and On Road Media, among others, but this was an opportunity to create a direct link to media workers through trade union activism.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has rules for its 25,350 approx. members intended to ensure ethical practice in the journalism industry. These, according to the Union, have ‘set out the main principles of UK and Irish journalism since 1936’ (NUJ). The Code of Conduct outlines that a journalist ‘strives to ensure that information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair’ and ‘does her/his utmost to correct harmful inaccuracies’ and ‘differentiates between fact and opinion’. The Union also states a journalist should ensure he or she ‘produces no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation’ (NUJ).

Working class is missing from this list – perhaps in keeping with the Equality Act 2010– but it was necessary to bring this group of low paid, under-employed and unemployed workers together to provide context for the campaign. As people in receipt of benefits were being discussed in the media amid welfare reform, the decision was taken to use the phrase ‘working poor and benefit recipients’ in the motion to the NUJ delegate meeting in 2014 (NUJ, 2016). This, then, would include the unemployed, under-employed and low-paid, who all might depend on benefits in various forms.

The NUJ’s collection of reporting guidance includes direction on reporting race stating that the union membership has ‘a responsibility to stop racism being expressed in the media’. There is guidance on reporting on older people and how to avoid ‘ageist and negative stereotypes’. The LGBT+ guidelines assert that ‘gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people have a right to fair, accurate and inclusive reporting of their life stories and concerns’. It was intended that these new guidelines and associated guidance would be added to the NUJ’s current materials encouraging ethical approaches to producing journalism.

The Manchester and Salford branch took a motion to the NUJ delegate meeting in 2015. The motion used the language of ‘working poor and benefit recipients’ to include all those dependent on state help due to being unemployed or under-employed or low paid. The branch Chair, Chris Rea, said at the time, ‘The guidelines provide a working model [...] and a moral framework that sets a larger ethical context. Poverty demands of journalists the same rigour and observation of standards that they are expected to bring to reporting on ethnicity, gender or disability’ (Broady, 2015).

At the Union’s national delegate meeting in 2014 its members agreed, almost unanimously, to a motion stating that the NUJ:

1. believes that the development of discriminatory language and the demonisation of the working poor and benefit recipients, through the use of stereotypes and misinformation, is an insult to workers, trade union organisations and readers
2. believes that its members as trade unionists cannot avoid a measure of responsibility in fighting stereotypes of the working poor and benefit recipients as expressed through the mass media

3. reaffirms its total opposition to censorship, but equally reaffirms its belief that press freedom must be conditioned by responsibility, and a resolution by all media workers not to allow press freedom to be abused to slander a section of the community
4. believes that newspapers and magazines should not originate material which encourages discrimination on grounds of being working poor or a benefit recipient
5. believes that editors should ensure that coverage of social security stories should be placed in a balanced context
6. will continue to monitor the development of media coverage in this area and give support to members seeking to enforce the above aims (Church Action on Poverty).

The first *NUJ Guide to Reporting Poverty* (2016) was produced in collaboration between Manchester and Salford NUJ Branch and Church Action on Poverty (CAP). It was officially launched at Salford's Media City. It was entirely informed by people with direct experience of poverty during interviews conducted at a workshop in the Lake District organised by CAP. Comments shared by these contributors included, 'Don't assume poverty is due to people's choices – recognise the national and global economic situation,' 'judging people who claim benefits as lazy is unfair and inaccurate – full time workers can need financial help too,' 'reporting should emphasise that people who work have to receive benefits to make ends meet – in a wealthy country'. These few quotes revealed that those experiencing poverty told me, as a researcher for the guide, that the experience was framed and understood better than much of the journalism being discussed with contributors themselves considering the experience of poverty to be inadequately represented in the media.

The guidelines and the following Guide, both being trade union initiatives, met with some resistance. When industry websites reported on the guidelines approved by the NUJ (Sharman, 2016) comments included 'This is not appropriate use of Union time ie (sic) money. Represent your staff, if you want to dictate what people write then go and work in China. Some people are poor because are lazy, or the welfare state has made them so.' 'More doublespeak. Have these people got nothing better to do than tell people how to do their jobs? Recipient? FFS.' The industry magazine *Press Gazette* also reported on the guide, acknowledging that it had 'been put together on the back of interviews with men and women who receive benefits, both in and out of work' (Reynolds, 2016).

A short film was released in 2017, made in collaboration between the Manchester and Salford branch of the NUJ and Salford-based Reporters' Academy. It was funded by contributions from individuals and trade unions, including BECTU, Bristol NUJ, Cambridge NUJ, London Freelance Branch, Unison Rochdale, Unite North West Region, and Gordon Taylor of the Professional Footballers' Association. The young people who made the film, intended to publicise the guide, had themselves experienced poverty in the form of low pay and needing benefits. The film was again covered by the industry press, *Hold the Front Page* (Sharman, 2017), alternative press *Salford Star* (NA, 2017) and *The Meteor* (Bower, 2017). CAP media officer Gavin Aitchison is reported as saying: 'Too often, the media narrative around poverty is very damaging, as a result either of crass language and generalisations, or of editorial cuts hindering in-depth coverage. It's important that people in poverty should be given the chance to tell their own powerful stories' (Sharman, 2017). The film shares the experiences from a student seeking asylum, youth and community workers, a student in community development, a community and social worker, a bike mechanic, a chef all of whom have, at some point, experienced poverty. These people are filmed in a bike repair shop, and community café. In it Chef Stuart said of the reporting of poverty, 'They have a view, and they transmit that view rather than the facts.' Student Letitia said, 'It's as if people are only

known because of the poverty. Not about what lives they have actually got and who they are. Their whole identity has been stripped away. Would they write that article the way that they're writing it if it was their grandma, sister, their cousin, their friend?' (Reporters Academy, 2017).

The most recent collaboration between the NUJ and CAP included policy change charity the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and resulted in *Reporting Poverty: A Guide for Media Professionals* (2020). This was launched at Liverpool John Moores University in 2022. This publication again saw contributors who had experienced poverty but, this time, producing content through focus groups with journalists over a period of months. Contributors from the journalism industry included: *BBC News UK* affairs producer, Claire Kendall; *Channel 4 News* social affairs editor, Jackie Long; *Yorkshire Post* social affairs correspondent, Lindsay Pantry; Serina Sandhu, senior reporter at the *i*; Claire Donnelly, senior reporter at *The Mirror*; and Natasha Clark, digital political editor at *The Sun*.

Both guides overall focus on three areas – individualising, discourse, and relationships with sources. Both consider the need for recognising individuals, systems, and statistics. Both recognise the common human interest focus of news stories and the *Guide for Media Professionals* (2020) asserts, 'journalists seek interviewees to humanise a story, and the interviewee needs you to add the structural context, to make clear that their story illustrates a wider problem that society can choose to address.'

Both guides also recognise that – to fulfil this need for human interest stories – contributions from people with lived experience is essential. As Shirley Widdop, disabled lone parent, states in the *Guide for Media Professionals* (2020), 'It needs to be remembered that without participants with experience of the issues folk in poverty face, there is no show, no article, no podcast or opinion piece.'

### **The problem in reporting poverty**

Reporting of poverty in the British media is, of course, a long academic debate. Analysis of the media's 'scroungerphobia' and associated discourse was examined by Goulding and Middleton in 1982. More recently scholars have considered the role of journalists and the industry (Moore, 2020) while others have focused how reporting can influence policy, particularly amid welfare reform (Franklin, 1999; McKendrick et al, 2008; Lens, 2002). Further, scholars have examined 'poverty porn' (Allen, Tyler and De Benedictis, 2014) and the rise of observing poverty, especially in television entertainment. Joseph Rowntree Foundation has provided significant research and guides (2008, 2017), ATD Fourth World has published on the value of participation from people who have experienced poverty (

This paper, in considering the NUJ campaign, examines the key concerns raised, during collaboration, by people with lived experience of poverty which are also discussed in scholarly texts around the subject reporting of poverty: these manifested as individualising, discourse, and journalists' relationship with sources.

#### *Individualising*

Journalism frequently individualises content in seeking to add a human element to a story. This approach is utilised by journalists in search of what is called the human interest angle. Human interest could be considered one of the earliest news values and can allow journalists

to produce ‘compelling stories that lie outside more formal news definitions’ (Parks, 2019: 1228). This approach can be used across all forms of news media and as a way of framing news stories to make them accessible. Semetko and Valkenburg (200) suggest, putting people, individuals, families, groups at the centre of stories can offer ‘a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem’ (95) while Hinnant, Len-Rios and Young (2013) suggest individuals can also be used to humanise complicated copy, such as health news. Human interest can also be used to invoke a desire for change, provide visibility, and authenticate experience. All of this means that those with experience of poverty are valuable in this journalistic context. Further, the human interest approach is standard practice in the industry. As Harcup and O’Neill (2010) found, this is part of journalistic training and professional practice, demanding the reporter seeks out the individual people involved in events and that this can be to provide human interest and that tabloid newspapers generally carry more human interest stories with a great deal of their news personalised (273).

This approach can mean that the broader experience of poverty can be presented through that of one person or small group and can be problematic. Recent examples of this approach include the issue of rising debt as told through the story of a single mum hiding from bailiffs but using ‘cash saving hacks’ (Padi, 2022), or a single dad reported as able to afford a £275,000 home by slashing childcare costs (Alderson, 2022). This individualising allows poverty to be presented as something to be overcome alone through budgeting or hacks, rather than challenge systemic causes. Chauhan and Foster (2013) found that British media represented poverty as a problem limited to vulnerable groups with a lack of discussion on the wider socio-economic causes and contributing factors, in contrast to vivid and elaborate news reports outside the UK which considered socio-political inefficiency as responsible for poverty (390). Individual stories presented through the framing of human interest can also mean personalising of stories which can veer towards the sentimental and thus risk depoliticising and obscuring the political (Widdowfield, 2017: 53). For Lugo-Ocando (2018) this means a potential for othering, with those in poverty presented as not being part of the ‘mainstream’ society and often excluded from a sense of belonging to the wider community (4).

The focus on individuals and the resulting lack of structural context has also been examined by scholars. Widdowfield (2017) in studying representations of homelessness in the British Press, concluded that the ‘focus on the circumstances of particular individuals, tends to support somewhat simplistic explanations which see homelessness as rooted in personal failings or misfortune [...] rather than a product of structural disadvantages such as poverty, unemployment or a lack of affordable housing’ (53). Skeggs and Wood (2012) in discussing reality television, suggested that individualising of content was manifesting ‘particularly at a time when political rhetoric is diverting the blame for structural inequality onto personal, individualised failure’ (2).

As such, individualising can, and has, been exploited to justify cuts to the welfare state. Perhaps the most striking example of an individual used to apparently represent a problem is from the *Daily Mail* in 2013 in news copy headlined Vile Product of Welfare UK. The front page story was about Mick Philpott, who was accused of killing six of his children in a house fire. Philpott had been a frequent guest on poverty porn series *Jeremy Kyle*. He was described by the *Daily Mail* as having ‘bred 17 babies to 5 women to milk benefits.’ In a comment piece published in the tabloid on the same day, written by A N Wilson, Philpott was described as having ‘lifted the lid on the bleak and often grotesque world of the welfare benefit

scroungers — of whom there are not dozens, not hundreds, but tens of thousands in our country’. Wilson concluded, ‘Those six children, burnt to a cinder for nothing, were, in a way, the children of those benevolent human beings who, all those years ago, created our state benefits system’ (Wilson, 2013). Philpott’s story did not just function as politically-motivated sensationalism in the pages of the tabloid, perhaps as expected from the *Daily Mail*, but was picked up by politicians too. The day after the news story and comment pieces were published, then Chancellor George Osborne, cited in a *BBC* interview said ‘I think there is a question for Government and for society about the welfare state, and the taxpayers who pay for the welfare state, subsidising lifestyles like that. And I think that debate needs to be had’ (BBC, 2013). Philpott as an individual was cynically exploited to demonise anyone in receipt of benefits.

Contributors to the campaign materials recognised the problem of individualising. The *Guide for Media Professionals* (2020) states: ‘We know that dry reports without any real human input are no use to you or your readers and viewers. But stories that focus only on individuals are also incomplete and less effective. By explaining the systems that led to that person’s situation, and making clear how many others are affected, stories become much more powerful. Journalists seek interviewees to humanise a story, and the interviewee needs you to add the structural context, to make clear that their story illustrates a wider problem that society can choose to address.’

Journalists were asked to put the reporting of poverty into context. One contributor in the *NUJ Guide to Reporting Poverty* (2016) said. ‘Don’t assume poverty is due to people’s choices – recognise the national and global economic situation’ another concluded, ‘Reporting should emphasise that people who work have to receive benefits to make ends meet – in a wealthy country.’ The *Guide for Media Professionals* (2020) highlighted the journalistic focus on individuals, systems and statistics, stating, ‘Some stories about poverty focus on statistics. Others focus on individual people. Others focus on the systems. The very best coverage includes and balances all three [...] stories that focus only on individuals are also incomplete and less effective. By explaining the systems that led to that person’s situation, and making clear how many others are affected, stories become much more powerful.’ It concluded that while the human angle is significant in journalism without the other strands of systems and statistics coverage risks being pitying and readers could fail to see the broader change needed.

Individualising, then, while offering emotional content for journalism can create disparaging representations for the poor. This also manifests in discourse.

### *Discourse*

The campaign was inspired by a post-2010 Coalition and the Spending Review, with its associated cuts to welfare. The Coalition government promised a ‘particular focus given to reducing welfare costs and wasteful spending’ (HM Treasury, 2010) this meant a focus on those who were ‘scrounging’ and on alleged fraudsters. Harkins and Lugo-Ocando (2018) posit that the welfare state has been framed in a way that builds on moral panics and casts welfare recipients as folk devils (194). This was apparent in the journalism that inspired the campaign. Contributors to the guides recognised the development of language intended to demonise them with one stating, ‘Someone in financial need is not the enemy. People in poverty feel there is a war on the poor.’

Coalition ministers began to use the discourse of ‘shirkers’ used by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at the 1975 Young Conservatives Conference when she said ‘[...] we should back the workers and not the shirkers: that it is not only permissible but praiseworthy to want to benefit your own family by your own efforts’ (Harris, 2013: 115). New Labour ministers used the language too, with Shadow Secretary for Work and Pensions Liam Byrne MP saying, ‘Let’s face the tough truth – that many people on the doorstep at the last election felt that too often we were for shirkers, not workers’ (Hansard, 2013). By 2011 the continuing Coalition government’s Welfare Reform Act promised the ‘biggest changes to the welfare system for over 60 years (DWP, 2011). In the Press, The Beat the Cheat campaign followed in *The Sun* (2012) which claimed benefit fraud cost the taxpayers £1.2 billion a year, a personal cost of £16.64 for workers on an average income. Its findings were challenged by many other publications and interrogated by charity fullfact.org. *The Sun* later published a comment piece from then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg with the headline, ‘We’ll help Alarm Clock Britain heroes keep ticking’ explaining this was reference to those who ‘snub the benefits culture’ (Clegg, 2011). A year later and Osborne told the Tory conference of a ‘shift worker leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning’ describing the ‘closed blinds of their next-door neighbour, sleeping off a life on benefits’ (Osborne, 2012). As Tyler (2013) asserts, these ‘ideological conductors mobilized to do the dirty work of neoliberal governmentality’ and were undermining social security and ostracising those in receipt of all benefits (9).

As the Coalition government launched a campaign saying, ‘no compromise in crackdown on benefit fraud’ (Harper, 2014) the threat of people cheating the benefit system became a regular feature of news stories. As Morrison (2019) found, like the scroungers narrative, ‘tales about benefit cheats feigning sickness or disability often had a strong human zoo/circus dimension that played on readers’ voyeurism’ (145). *The Sun*, in reporting on sickness benefits, pitted ‘shameful scroungers’ against ‘honest taxpayers’ (Newton Dunn, 2012). The *Daily Mail* reported on ‘the most outrageous benefits cheats’ (Chorley, 2013). In 2016 *The Sun* published The Welfies an article on ‘Brits with talent for playing the benefit system’. It referred to ‘the nation’s doss idols’ and ‘graspers’ (The Sun, 2016). A list of people it called ‘convicted fraudsters’ included a man described as a ‘slobbo with no jobbo’ who had appeared in Channel 5 documentary Too Fat To Work, a family under the sub-heading ‘Put A Knot In It Award’, an unemployed couple who had spent £1500 on Christmas presents, and a man serving three life sentences for murder who had been awarded compensation while in prison. The only thing these individuals had in common was being, in some form and at some point, in receipt of benefits. The *Daily Star* ‘REVEALED: How UK’s most notorious benefit scroungers spend OUR cash’ with an investigation claiming to have found ‘an unemployed teenage layabout’ who, it states, ‘claims a hefty £14,000 in benefits’, a ‘mum of eight who claims ‘£26,000 in benefits’, a ‘serial convict’ who ‘rakes in £17,000 in handouts’, a ‘jobless dad of seven’ who ‘blew’ his benefits on a high-end TV (Jolly, 2016).

Further, in linking poverty with crime, the poor are not only undeserving of public sympathy and help, but they also become a source of threat and danger to the rest of the society (Chauhan and Foster, 2013: 398). This allows for the poor to continue to be presented as a threat to society. Philpott, a child murderer, was presented ‘a vile product of welfare UK’ and phrases like ‘unemployed thug’ or ‘jobless thug’ are regularly used to describe violent criminals (Boyle, 2016; Moriarty, 2016; Joseph, 2017, Dewey and Moore, 2019; Duggan, 2019; Christodoulou, 2022).

The issue of people in receipt of benefits presented as fraudsters was also a concern for contributors to the *NUJ Guide to Reporting Poverty* (2016), stating, ‘Media coverage suggests

that benefit fraud is a much larger problem than it really is, due both to the number of stories covering the issue and the way it is presented in those stories. News reports should not exaggerate the scale of benefit fraud or present cases of fraud as typical or representative.'

This myth of the scrounger has been confronted by both academics and media workers (Garthwaite, 2012; Mayo, 2012; Mulheirn, 2013; Macdonald, Shildrick, Furlong, 2014; Wynne-Jones, 2015; Morrison, 2019, 2021). The *New Statesman* recently reported that 'you're 23 times more likely to be prosecuted for benefit fraud than tax fraud in the UK' despite the latter costing the economy much more (Chakelian, 2021).

It is perhaps worth acknowledging that there has, according to Morrison (2019), been a shift in the rhetoric. His research found that words like 'scrounger' 'shirker' and 'skiver' fell between 2013 and 2016 but with what is described as 'an upswing in the occurrence of 'workshy'/'work shy' between 2015 and 2016 (132). It continues in recent reports. 'Work-shy Britain is in the throes of an existential crisis', 'sleepwalking into a doom-spiral of decline,' and 'for the work-shy, Covid is the gift that keeps on giving' according to the *Daily Telegraph* (Daley and Heath and Pearson, 2022). *The Sun*, meanwhile, condemned 'work-shy university lecturers' during the pandemic (Clark, 2021). A subtle shift, perhaps, to include people working from home among the demonised unemployed and under-employed. Time will tell if it is persistent.

As we head into what is euphemistically called 'a cost of living crisis', news stories which focus on the poor continue to be published. Regional title *The Manchester Evening News* continued the us and them approach when it reported on 'benefits cheats who defrauded taxpayers with their lies' (Slater, 2021). National titles such as the *Daily Express* ensured it calculated the benefits payments for 'single mum of eight on £500-a-week benefits admits she's 'addicted' to pregnancy' (Kindred and Jolly, 2021). Court reporting still focuses on 'shameless benefits cheats who were caught out after stealing thousands' with the methods of DWP investigators described as 'cunning' (Bona, 2021).

Further, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) launched its Fighting Fraud in the Welfare System plan in May 2022. In 2012, the government introduced what has been described as 'the harshest regime of conditionality and sanctions in the history of the benefits system' which was 'disproportionately affecting vulnerable people' (Reeve, 2017). A decade on, this new plan to tackle apparent fraud includes thousands of trained specialists, new powers of arrest and to carry out searches, increased access to bank data with more than two million Universal Credit claims being investigated over the next five years. In launching the campaign, Work and Pensions Secretary, Thérèse Coffey said: 'The welfare system is there to help the most vulnerable. It is not a cash machine for callous criminals and it's vital that the government ensures money is well spent.' (DWP, 2022).

This neoliberal narrative is already informing the language used in news reports. The plan was, for example, repeatedly described in headlines as a 'crackdown' in a news story syndicated by Reach which shares its copy in its titles *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star*, and numerous regional titles (Howard, 2022). This quickly positions the government as introducing measures intended to stop illegal or undesirable behaviour. The *Daily Mail* reported that 'fraud and error' was the reason the DWP 'deploy 'hit squad' to 'claw back cash' claiming that '£6.5bn was overpaid in benefits due to fraud' and it would 'save taxpayers £2 billion' (Heffer, 2022).



This continued emphasis on us and them, portraying claimants as potential fraudsters and cheats, contributes to a general 'lack of knowledge around the social security system and its rules'. (Baillie, 2011). This lack of knowledge was also recognised by contributors who understood their stories being utilised but their involvement potentially devalued and sections providing what journalists need to know about being poor were provided for journalists in the *NUJ Guide to Reporting Poverty* (2016). This included, among other things, information on sanctions, social housing, the difficulties of moving for work, and the extra cost of poverty due to unfair prices and systems under what it refers to as the Poverty Premium. The contributors are considered 'the voice of experience' and this is relevant when examining journalistic use of sources on the subject of poverty.

Further, in the *NUJ Guide to Reporting Poverty* (2016), one contributor succinctly captured the issue of demonising discourse, saying, 'Words hurt. Reports can exacerbate problems and increase hate crimes.' Stereotypes were recognised as a problem. One contributor said, 'You can't stereotype. People with university degrees, PhDs and years of work experience can be in receipt of benefits.' The *Guide for Media Professionals* (2020) asked journalists to, 'take care to avoid talking about 'Dickensian' levels of poverty or making comparisons to the past' and to 'try to avoid language or images that evoke these ideas – for example, images of begging bowls or slums. These make it difficult for audiences to recognise the problem as one really happening in our society.'

### *Sources*

Journalists will interview people with direct, lived experience of poverty, offering insight and, in some cases, a chance to contribute to discussion, but, as outlined above, how these stories manifest is not always in the best interests of the subject. There are several organisations who train people with lived experience in how to deal with the media and who attempt to protect against exploitation, including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Church Action on Poverty who contributed to both guides.

The news media has long been criticized for relying on 'official' sources, supposedly reliable experts, and members of the political or social elite to provide content. These sources can be government officials, academics, police, corporations, celebrities and so on. Stuart Hall produced a classic study examining the portrayal of mugging in the UK and the relationship between news sources and resulting press coverage, concluding that these official sources functioned as 'primary definers' and were able to both gain access to the media and to succeed in shaping the news agenda (Hall, 1978).

More recent research has considered the influence of advocacy groups and of technology in including otherwise neglected voices. In 2012 research concluded that experts dominate as sources on homelessness, with homeless people themselves while not completely deprived of a voice, limited to the devalued voice of experience and that 'by quoting homeless people as legitimate speakers about the problem of homelessness, as experts on the topic of homelessness, not just victims of homelessness, journalists can have a vitally important role in changing representations' but that interviewees were used as a 'source of emotional or moral reaction to an event or situation' and this was limited to their expression of 'personal opinions or talk only about how they feel' (Schneider, 2012: 71-73). Research into the *Manchester Evening News* coverage of a homeless protest revealed that, while homeless

people were interviewed and quoted, the last word of copy was often given to authority figures who undermined the position of the strike and the homeless strikers (Broady, 2020).

It was recognised in the *NUJ Guide to Reporting Poverty* (2016) that journalists rely on data provided by the government when discussing welfare spending. It was highlighted in interviews that the use of statistics could be inaccurate or even misleading. It suggested three areas where sources in the form of statistics could be used. Firstly that 'case studies are not necessarily representative of wider issues and shouldn't be presented as if they are'. Secondly, 'news reports should make every effort to report statistics accurately so it is clear that benefit payments are not the country's biggest spending outlay.' Finally, as discussed above, 'news reports should not exaggerate the scale of benefit fraud or present cases of fraud as typical and representative.' A section was provided to inform and educate journalists on the benefit system in terms of the arbitrary use of sanctions, what weekly benefits are expected to cover (rent, bills, food, travel, internet access, etc), the mental stress of unemployment and how moving home, for work or smaller accommodation, means money for removal costs, job interview expenses, rent up front, which is not available to people dependent on benefits. This was information provided by reliable, alternative, and knowledgeable sources. The *Guide for Media Professionals* (2020) provided similar material and described its contributors as 'first-hand experts who can contribute to the debate.'

Journalists will often approach charities for case studies of individuals as exemplars of experience on any range of subjects, including poverty. This advice, then, is significant in creating a shift towards recognising interviewees with experience of poverty as experts. *The Guide for Media Professionals* (2020) states: 'Remember too, the individual is well-placed to talk about what would make a difference and they are not defined by their poverty – they will want to talk about their abilities, hopes and aspirations as well as the challenges they are facing.'

### **A middle class industry observing the poor**

The ideological framework of the British press in writing about poverty and welfare is the focus here to contextualise the development of the NUJ campaign. This also means considering the shape of the industry as discussed by academics and practitioners. The contributors to the *Guide for Media Professionals* (2020), as outlined above included guidance on best practice from people with experience of poverty alongside industry professionals. Good practice, as well as best practice, is recognised by consumers and producers of journalism within both guides.

Journalism has long-been, and is increasingly, a middle class industry. Research by the charity Sutton Trust in 2016 found about half of the country's leading journalists were educated privately, less than one in five went to comprehensives, and that this was similar 20 years earlier (Kirby, 2016: 26). More recently, research from the National Council for the Training of Journalists, found that 80% of all journalists come from professional and upper class backgrounds and suggested there is no real sign of an increase in the proportion of journalists coming from middle and lower social groups' and, further, 75 per cent of journalists had a parent in one of the three highest occupational groups, compared to 45 per cent all UK workers (Spilsbury, 2022: 6). The NUJ magazine *The Journalist* reported on the 'class ceiling' and the need to break barriers faced in the industry, with a focus on

broadcasting, and, in 2018, ran a ‘diversity matters’ campaign to foster recruitment, promotion and retention of people from all backgrounds.

This is not to say that all journalists are wealthy. Indeed, the NUJ permanently campaigns on the need for improved wages for its members. Research conducted in 2015 revealed that one in five journalists in the UK earned less than £20,000 (Jackson, 2015). The NUJ’s original Code of Conduct, published in 1936, offered ‘a special obligation of honour to help an unemployed member to obtain work’. It currently has rules which excuse its unemployed members from paying subs.

There is, nevertheless, a dominance of middle class management and increased barriers to accessing the profession. As the NUJ noted in 2014 in its submission to the Low Wages Commission, journalism is now a profession that, in most cases, calls for a post-graduate qualification which, while not resulting in high salaries, needs to be paid for to gain a job. Journalism increasingly demands professional qualifications: 89 per cent have a degree-level, compared to 48 per cent of the wider workforce, according to research by the National Council for the Training of Journalists, and only four per cent have low level, or no, qualifications compared to 34 per cent of all UK workers (Spilsbury, 2021).

This combination of barriers means poverty can still be observed and witnessed in reporting with journalists, particularly those in managerial positions, less likely to have lived, direct experience. As a result, copy is mediated by the middle classes with readers, viewers, and listeners, told about poverty as if they too, like the journalists producing content, have not experienced it.

In an effort to challenge this, the *Guide for Media Professionals* (2020) invites further collaboration with people with lived experience of poverty and states: ‘There is rightly a growing focus on increasing the diversity of UK newsrooms. Providing opportunities for people with direct experience of poverty to work in and with the media industry is an important dimension of this work.’

## **What next?**

In response to a trade press report on the campaign, one comment on the *Hold the Front Page* website, asked, ‘Is any journalist who has stooped so low as to use the phrase “dole dossers” really going to pay any attention to these guidelines?’ (Sharman, 2016). This is, perhaps, a fair question.

The campaign intends to start a discussion among media workers, and among readers, viewers, and listeners, to develop best practice in the areas outlined above. An engagement with the campaign and resources can begin a new challenge as the Government turns its focus to people in receipt of benefits in the shape of continued welfare reform and its declared ‘fight’ on fraud. It is hoped that the resources can be used in newsrooms across the country with a recognition of their significant contribution from people who have experienced poverty and so are the voices of experts. The resources can be utilised in print journalism, magazines, press offices, in broadcasting, and by alternative media. Further, they can be used in trade unions – including their press offices – and in conjunction with campaigns around, for example, the Right to Food (Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union and Unite). They can inform education, in journalism training for example. They can also inform politics. The

NUJ membership at its Delegate Meeting 2021 agreed to seek to table an Early Day Motion and Ian Byrne, MP for Liverpool West Derby, launched EDM 248 *Media reporting of poverty*, 2022-2023 (House of Commons, 2022). They could also inform grassroots activism (such as Fans Supporting Foodbanks in Liverpool or the Right to Food campaign).

The information provided in the materials is unique, relevant, timely and, importantly, is from those experts with direct, lived experience of poverty. The contributors have knowledge that is shared by few journalists or politicians. Both the reporting guides, published by and with the NUI, show that, for those living in poverty, engagement with news media need not be a passive experience.

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