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The mass media and the question of poverty in Poland

Introduction

Analysis of the mass media approach to the issue of poverty and social exclusion is an important question. Both poverty scholars (Lister, 2004; Tarkowska, 2013) and commentators (Leszczyński, 2010) observe that presenting life in poverty is not an easy task. Indeed, poverty as such is a difficult problem (Górniak, 2015). The poor do not identify themselves with poverty: they tend to talk about living in difficult conditions and about their limited resources; they also often mention that there are people whose life is even harder than their own. Drawing on British and American literature on the subject, Dorota Lepianka notes that media discourse “creates and, on the other hand, reproduces social images of poverty and the poor, thereby increasing their impact” (Lepianka, 2013, p. 92). These images, in turn, are translated into approaches to the sources of poverty and the ways of tackling the problem.

This article offers a discussion of how different mass media (the press, television, the radio, film) present poverty in Poland. Intended to provide an overview of the issue in question,

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it refers to the existing literature on the subject concerning selected types of the media and the genres they use. Considering that social communication is a complex and multi-dimensional process that cannot be fully discussed here for reasons of space, the article presents the perspective of journalists as well as poverty and social exclusion scholars.¹

The perspective of journalists and commentators

Ryszard Kapuściński observes that

The world of the media is a world unto itself. It operates at several different levels. Alongside the 'dustbin media' there are some which are really excellent; there are marvellous television programmes, excellent radio programmes, and remarkable newspapers. (Kapuściński, 1998/2010)

Consequently, poverty, social inequality and exclusion are portrayed in different ways. Depending on their genre, some articles, programmes and documentaries provide a more in-depth analysis of poverty rather than limit themselves to giving sketchy glimpses of such an existence.

Kapuściński cares about the fate of the poor; his writings familiarise the readers with the poverty in the post-Soviet space and the destitution of the Third World countries (Tarkowska, 2012). He shows poverty in a multitude of its aspects, often stressing its subjective dimension, involving the experience of shame, humiliation and contempt. The writer observes that the major television channels manipulate the image of poverty by reducing it to the issue of famine as a local problem of such countries as Sudan and Somalia, and at the same time ignoring the question of world poverty. He also remarks that geography and ethnography programmes present poverty as an exotic phenomenon. His other concerns include the danger of censorship and overlooking or marginalising problematic topics, among them poverty. In addition, Kapuściński (1998/2010) notes that despite globalisation the media mainly focus on local news rather than international issues.

¹ In view of space limitations, this article does not discuss the perspective of media audience. Valuable information about the representation of poverty in the media can be found in a British report considering all actors of the communication process, including the creators and receivers (McKendrick et al., 2008). In the Polish context, Katarzyna Górniak (2013) offers an interesting analysis of comments posted under an article describing a situation when the passengers of a city bus asked a homeless man to get off, published in the online edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza* (The Election Gazette). She treated the 630 comments from the readers as important voices in public discourse on poverty, distinguishing two highly polarised discursive formations: exclusion versus community.

Monica Roth (2014) observes that issues of poverty constitute less than 0.02% of lead media coverage.² While the news usually present sudden crises abroad and immediate relief plans, the systemic causes of the phenomenon remain a rarely discusses subject. In her article, which appeared in *Borgen Magazine* (published by The Borgen Project, an American non-governmental organisation tackling poverty around the world), Roth outlines a number of reasons for limited international media interest in this question. Firstly, journalists prefer to present action and change, which is hardly possible in the case of poverty, since changes in this area are not rapid enough; journalists like happy endings and there is no simple solution to the problem of systemic poverty in the world. Secondly, advertisers do not like it when poverty features next to their promotional materials. Thirdly, there is also the issue of censorship, as governments of the impoverished countries might not be willing to disclose certain information to the public. It seems that most of these observations can apply also to the Polish media.

The portrayal of social problems in the traditional mass media is a result of a compromise between different interest groups: publishers, journalists, receivers, advertisers and sometimes also politicians. What plays an important role in the case of publishers is the commercial function. On the other hand, the audience is mostly interested in attractive content. A considerable proportion of media production work is performed by journalists, whose world is subject to pressures from other fields, particularly economy (Bourdieu, 1998). As a result, the ways of presenting poverty and the experience of those affected by the problem are not easily changed.

Poverty can be presented in a number of different ways. It can be portrayed as a problem that can happen to anyone as a result of an unfortunate coincidence of external factors. In this approach, impoverished people are similar to other members of society. In another perspective, poverty is attributed to personal causes and the poor are perceived as strangers. Adam Leszczyński (2010) outlines four major reasons why press journalists write about those impoverished as strangers and generally do not propose a systemic diagnosis of the phenomenon or political demands aiming to solve the problem of poverty and social exclusion. The first of them is related to the assessment of transformation of the country: considering that Poland's achievement after 1989 is viewed positively, writing about poverty can result in cognitive dissonance on the part of the reader. Secondly, since the readers may misinterpret putting forward political demands as involvement in party politics, journalists are reluctant to engage in political debate. The third reason is the media market, which is

² This amounts to somewhat of a paradox, considering that the media prefer to present bad rather than good news. Importantly, however, their interest is focused on abrupt events rather than prolonged phenomena, such as poverty.

unfavourable to the coverage of poverty issues. The poor do not often read the papers, and when they do, they are mostly interested in the rich and their problems. The middle class, in turn, is interested mainly in itself, which was apparent in the case of a public debate over lowering the school age to six in 2008–2009. Fourthly, and according to Leszczyński most importantly, there is no adequate language to talk about poverty.

Journalists preparing materials on poverty face a number of pitfalls, including patronising attitude, populism, false compassion and expert distance (Leszczyński, 2010). Patronising attitude is apparent for example in addressing the interviewees using the diminutive forms of their first names (sometimes observed in TV documentaries), which amounts to treating them like children. Populism, in turn, embraces a vision of the world where ordinary people are harmed by the elites. Spiced with emotions, this narrative of poverty is used by tabloids and TV intervention features (*reportaże interwencyjne*). Leszczyński stresses that the expert approach is devoid of empathy as it presents the world of poverty in the light of scholarly argumentation.³ Also, the fact that journalists often work under time pressure is another element that can adversely affect presentation of their materials on poverty.

Summing up the perspective of journalists and commentators, it needs to be observed that as a result of conflicting interests of different actors involved in the information media they perceive the issues of poverty as a problematic topic. Indeed, presenting poverty and the life of the poor involves a number of pitfalls. These conclusions are also shared by scholars studying the media representation of poverty.

The perspective of poverty and media scholars

Marian Golka aptly observes that the issue of poverty is not easily portrayed and analysed:

Although the poor might be living next to us, we do not know their life because we either do not want to or cannot get to know it. They are often socially more distant and socio-logically more difficult to analyse than exotic tribes in the heartland of Africa. In addition, talking or writing about the poor stirs ambivalent emotional attitudes: either excessive, even over-sentimental, leniency, or, quite on the contrary, excessive blame, accusations, etc. It is very difficult to encounter balanced opinions which would distinguish between particular cases and would not stem from stereotypes or even prejudice. (Golka, 2008, p. 224)

³ It is worth noting, however, that qualitative studies of poverty (e.g. those conducted by Elżbieta Tarkowska) adopt the understanding approach.

Information media are prone to presenting stereotypical images of poverty (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Hanyga & Tarkowska, 2013; Harper, 2003; Lepianka, 2015). In one type of such images, poverty is attributed to individual causes and perceived as a threat to the safety of the community (cf. Entman, 1995; Iyengar, 1990). Another stereotypical presentation objectifies the poor and treats them as victims, Others, people deprived of voice, respect and agency (Lister, 2004). Mass information media rarely address the issue of poverty, and even more rarely explore it directly and critically (McKendrick et al., 2008, p. 56). It is often others (e.g. experts) rather than the poor themselves who talk about life in poverty (Bullock et al., 2001). Sometimes media coverage is conducive to the harmful division into those who deserve help and those who do not. In modern society, poverty is regarded with suspicion and “the poor are portrayed as lax, sinful and devoid of moral standards” (Bauman, 2005, p. 116).

Poverty is not an attractive subject for the media in consumer society: it does not seem to interest the audience and it is not a desired social phenomenon, hence it relatively rarely appears on TV, in the radio, newspapers and magazines. It is presented in such contexts as individual personal tragedies, the fate of the homeless during severe winter, Christmas celebrations or charity (e.g. presents for children from poor families). Some TV programmes (e.g. intervention features) focus on cases of abject poverty without showing the complex nature of such life. On the other hand, poverty is sometimes aestheticised (e.g. in different TV series) or presented as part of life in exotic locations (e.g. in travel programmes). The voice of the poor is seldom heard and tends to be used to support the assumptions made by journalists. Poverty is not a neutral topic; it frequently stirs strong emotions of pity, compassion, contempt or fear. The emotional dimension of the life of the poor is used by some media to add drama to their stories (e.g. the case of TV intervention features) (Kanasz, 2013). Indeed, it is not often that the image of such experience involves the simple joys of everyday life (Kanasz, 2015).

The Polish literature on the subject includes mainly fragmentary analyses of the media discourse on poverty, social attitudes to poverty and argumentative strategies of the media (Górniak, 2013; Kanasz, 2013; Lepianka, 2013, 2015; Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2013; Miś, 2007; Rek, 2007; Starego, 2012, 2013; Woźniak, 2012). The authors of the works in question use different theories and approaches, including the concepts developed by Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, critical discourse analysis and framework analysis. Studies conducted by Polish poverty and media scholars reveal that poverty is a topic that relatively rarely appears in the Polish mass media. At the same time, the media representation of the poor involves elements of their stereotypisation.

In her interesting analysis of the images of poverty in the Polish daily press,⁴ Dorota Lepianka observes a tendency to objectify the problem and treat it in terms of individual experience. Poverty is presented in the following perspectives (frames): injustice and solidarity, heroic and anti-heroic, instrumental. While the author identifies certain similarities between the representation of poverty in the Polish press on the one hand, and the British and American treatment of this topic on the other, she also stresses some important differences:

The Polish press is strikingly consistent in its avoidance to blame the poor not only for their life situation, but, more importantly, also for their ways of coping with it that are sometimes morally ambiguous. This stands in sharp contrast to the British and American media, which tend to hold the poor responsible for their situation and/or for the inefficiency of their effort to improve it. (Lepianka, 2013, p. 125)

Karolina Starego, in turn, focuses on the image of the poor in the *Polityka* (Politics) weekly and observes that the journalists working for this opinion-making magazine

aim to raise public awareness of social exclusion phenomena and to promote institutional changes in Polish social policy and welfare practice. They also aim to change the social perception of poverty and the poor and, most importantly, to destroy the popular myth of their responsibility for their own social position. (Starego, 2012, p. 41)

However, her analysis of the language used in the material under consideration reveals the reproduction of the stereotypical image of the poor, a fact of which journalists might not be aware. Starego describes the critique of the system of public welfare, the perception of exclusion as a state rather than a process and the division of the poor into those who deserve assistance and those “beyond help” (*niepomagalni*).

Analysing how the non-poor (representatives of the middle class) construct the image of the poor as Others, she identifies dehumanisation and symbolic localisation (association with living in degraded space) as the principal mechanisms involved in the orientalisation of poverty in press discourse (Starego, 2013, p. 231). The everyday reality of the poor is represented as a particular way of life which stems from a particular habitus rather than from the process of social exclusion. Poverty is isolated from its social context and portrayed as a timeless phenomenon. Also, the places inhabited by the poor are constructed as “anon-

⁴ The study analyses articles published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* (The Election Gazette), *Dziennik Zachodni* (The Western Daily) and *Dziennik Wschodni* (The Eastern Daily) in 2005, 2007 and 2010.

ymous, degraded physical space in which the poor, reduced to their bodily dimension, continue their existence" (Starego, 2013, p. 237).

Interesting conclusions are also presented by Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz (2013), who analyses the discourse on poverty and wealth in two tabloid dailies, *Fakt* and *Super Express*. Without specifically defining poverty, they adopt the assumption that all "ordinary" Poles are poor, as opposed to the elites. Poverty is portrayed as a natural and permanent state. Typically, the poor do not have enough money to finance their basic needs, such as food and medication, access to health care, nursery school care and lunches at school. Without providing any deeper analysis of the problem, tabloids attribute the situation to the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest, with the redistribution of wealth seen as the only remedy to poverty. In turn, women's tabloids (gossip and low-quality how-to magazines, supplements to *Fakt* and *Super Express*) present a different image of coping with poverty: they focus on women's resourcefulness in difficult life situations and on support provided particularly by other women. This observation is confirmed by the findings of poverty scholars (Tarkowska, 2002), who notice that women often adopt active strategies of coping with poverty.

Lisowska-Magdziarz compares the tabloid image of poverty with that found in the mainstream media. Although far from a leading issue, poverty is an important topic of their social commentaries and intervention features.⁵ The mainstream media do not portray poverty as a natural state. Unlike tabloids, they assume that only some of their audience are poor. They show poverty from a distance and objectify this social phenomenon. As presented, solutions to the problem of poverty lie in changes in the legal system and people's attitudes, as well as in promoting solidarity, which finds its expression in gifts and donations made to the poor by readers and viewers. At the same time, however, Lisowska-Magdziarz observes the presence of certain elements of the tabloid image of poverty in the Polish mainstream media, evidenced both by the use of language (labels and stereotypes, hyperboles, emotional and melodramatic tone) and visual strategies (personalisation and individualisation of poverty, building the imagery of poverty on oppositions and dichotomies), as well as by axiological simplicity. In different types of media under consideration journalists assume different positions in relation to poverty. While tabloid journalists situate themselves as insiders, "one of us, ordinary people", those working for the mainstream media stand outside, in a position superior to the poor and to the audience:

⁵ For example: a series of features entitled "This is Poland" ("Oto Polska właśnie"), published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*; documentary and intervention features in the local and regional press; socially engaged features in the *Polityka* weekly; TV programmes, such as "Attention" (*Uwaga*, TVN channel) and "After nine" (*Zawsze po 21*, TVP public television).

Descriptions and images of poverty are confined to certain isolated enclaves and constitute relatively limited interpolations in the main narrative featuring a story of prosperous, mediatised, ludic and hedonistic consumer society. Apart from the enclaves of social commentaries and intervention features, this narrative does not include the voice of the poor, who simply do not appear in it at all. Indeed, poverty is absent in the entertainment mainstream of the mass media. (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2013, p. 52)

Lisowska-Magdziarz considers the tabloidisation of the image of poverty in a broader communicative, social and cultural context. In consumer society, a principal role of the media is to meet the needs of their audience, with the search for entertainment and emotional stimulation as the main elements involved.

The study of representation of economic crisis in Polish feature films conducted by Elżbieta Wiącek (2013) leads to a conclusion that the image of poverty they convey is superficial and banal: it is limited to portraying life in poverty here and now, without a more in-depth consideration of the roots of the problem, a broader perspective or bold interpretations. In her analysis of six films – *The Case of Pekosiński* (*Przypadek Pekosińskiego*, 1991), *Hi, Tereska* (*Cześć Tereska*, 2001), *Edi* (2002), *Squint Your Eyes* (*Zmruż oczy*, 2002), *Saviour's Square* (*Plac Zbawiciela*, 2006) and *Ode to Joy* (*Oda do radości*, 2005) – Wiącek is interested in the issue of poverty in the context of post-1989 transformation in Poland and financial problems experienced by the protagonists. Focusing on visual strategies, she identifies both harsh realism and aestheticisation in the productions under consideration.

Lucyna Tataruch (2013), in turn, analyses the representation of women's poverty in eight feature films released between 1993 and 2011: *Spider Women* (*Pajęczarki*, 1993), *Prostitutes* (*Prostytutki*, 1998), *Nothing* (*Nic*, 1998), *Happy Man* (*Szczęśliwy człowiek*, 2000), *Ode to Joy* (*Oda do radości*, 2005), *Saviour's Square* (*Plac Zbawiciela*, 2006), *Ewa* (2010), *Ki* (2011). In all cases, the theme of poverty has a major impact on the plot. The author observes a resemblance between the world of fiction and reality when it comes to a more active role of women under the circumstances of poverty, as opposed to the passive attitude of men. The femininisation of poverty is particularly apparent in the sphere of private life, in the household environment, where women perform the roles of wives and mothers. Tataruch identifies three perspectives of film representation of women's poverty, with a certain degree of overlap between them: a negative image, which features individuals as morally corrupt; a normalising image, where a poor person is not different from anyone else; and

a compassionate image, portraying women as passive and helpless victims of fate. She also notes that film-makers explain the passivity of their characters and do not openly blame them for their situation.

Interestingly, in some cases both scholars mentioned above consider the issue of poverty in the same film productions. In one of such examples, Wiącek is particularly interested in *Saviour's Square* (*Plac Zbawiciela*, 2006), directed by Krzysztof Krauze and Joanna Kos-Krauze, which tells a dramatic story of a young married couple who lose their savings as a result of bankruptcy fraud committed by the property developer building their flat. As presented, poverty is attributed to an unfortunate coincidence of external factors. Although it is not the principal theme, it has a great impact on the story. "As the plot unfolds, the viewer becomes aware of a difficult financial situation of the couple: they take out a twenty-year loan to buy a flat, lose all their money, and the husband's entire salary is spent on loan instalments" (Tataruch, 2013, p. 74). In her discussion of the feminisation of poverty in contemporary Polish cinema, Tataruch considers the example of the wife, Beata, mother of two, who (together with her husband) has to move in with her mother-in-law, Teresa. The author observes that the film-makers avoid blaming the characters for their situation. The characters put the blame on one another and the burden falls most heavily on Beata, who eventually attempts to kill herself and her children. While she is portrayed as a victim of economic and psychological violence, Teresa is "a self-proclaimed poverty manager" (Tataruch, 2013, p. 80) who takes over control of the household budget:

Their financial relations quickly come to involve economic violence: Teresa rebukes Beata for a high phone bill and blocks the number; the husband rows about the money she spent on back-to-school kits and clothes for children; explaining that they cannot afford spending on anything else than a loan instalment, he takes away her bank card. Teresa initially rations out the shopping money that Beata can spend on children, but soon, together with her son, takes over shopping altogether so that her daughter-in-law does not have any access to cash. Without any resources of her own, Beata finds herself at the mercy of her husband and his mother. (Tataruch, 2013, p. 80)

As a result of economic and psychological violence, Beata begins to suffer from depression. The story of her marriage might have been different if it had not been for the developer's fraud, the loss of all the savings and the fact that the couple did not have their own flat. "What pushes people to the very bottom? Lack of space? Indifference? Loneliness? Film-makers do not give a simple answer" (Wiącek, 2013, p. 182).

The theme of poverty appears not only in feature films but also in a number of social drama TV series, where it is presented as a result of coincidence. As portrayed, the poor are attached to traditional values; their fate can change thanks to help and assistance from others (Łaciak, 2006). Poverty of the elderly people, in turn, is pictured as an extreme situation (e.g. they have nothing to eat) involving a sense of shame; viewed as a negative phenomenon, it is attributed to illness and old age (Zalewska, 2013).⁶ The fate of the poor can be changed by a miraculous occurrence, such as winning the lottery, as in the example of the Solejuk family in *The Ranch (Ranczo)* TV series.

It is worth adding that an interesting case for analysis would be the image of poverty in Polish documentaries. One of such examples is the famous *Arizona* (1997) by Ewa Borzęcka, often compared with *Money Is Not Everything (Pieniądze to nie wszystko)*, 2001), a feature film directed by Juliusz Machulski. In both of them poverty goes hand in hand with pathology, mostly alcoholism. Living in their desolate villages, the former workers of PGR state-owned farms feel frustrated and experience a sense of failure. However, they adopt peculiar adaptation strategies and define the situation in their own ways. In *Money Is Not Everything* they try to improve it by holding a rich entrepreneur for ransom. When their venture fails, they make him start a new business in the area. On the other hand, the documentary *Arizona* presents the villagers who do not have any hope for change.⁷

Interestingly, also the media image of help to those in need, including the poor, involves similar oversimplifications and stereotypical elements. Help is limited to an immediate reaction confined to the “here and now”:

you are good if you put your money in a particular collection box, if you buy a particular product in a particular shop, if you send a text message to a particular number. In fact, what is very much needed is attempts to promote such attitudes as everyday norms, as a standard of behaviour which can assume thousands of different, complex forms that – for no apparent reason – do not have much media appeal. (Dudkiewicz, 2014, p. 45)

⁶ Joanna Zalewska analyses the issue of poverty of elderly people in two TV series: *L for Love*, also known as *The Name of Love (M jak miłość)* and *The Parish (Plebania)*. She observes that the former does not really include the theme of poverty, except the sub-plot concerning the past of the character Zenon Łagoda (when he explains his decision to go to America to earn some money). In the latter, the character of a poor elderly woman receives support from the parish community.

⁷ Filip Nałaskowski (2006) analyses the popular image of poverty on a sample of twenty-five Polish and foreign films which appear in two respective top-100 rankings of best-ever productions (based on Internet opinions) and concern the theme of poverty or include episodes featuring this issue. His investigation is focused on the values which are accepted or rejected.

The media image of the poor deprives them of initiative: "Although help to the poor is a duty of the rich, the form in which it is provided only temporarily alleviates the consequences of their suffering without actually addressing its causes (...)" (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2010, p. 363). According to Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, a protective strategy is ambiguous, as it is based on compassion and a sense of guilt. It resembles the consumption of compassion, as an act of sponsorship enables the viewer to achieve a sense of instant self-gratification.

Poverty is not only a social, economic and cultural question, but also a political one. The study of inequality in Polish political discourse authored by Wojciech Woźniak (2012) includes an analysis of comments made by politicians in media discussions devoted to the problem. He investigates 53 issues of the programme called "Polish Radio 1 Debates" (*Debaty jedyunki*) aired between 2004 and 2007, which raised such topics related to social inequality as social welfare and combatting poverty. Woźniak observes: "For politicians, the key issue is often the inefficiency of the system of public welfare rather than the well-being of families who are in a difficult situation" (Woźniak, 2012, p. 169). Politicians point out the question of misplacing public funds by addressing them to people who do not deserve support, and insist on "teaching those in need to fish rather than giving them a fish".

A different stream of studies investigates the media image of suffering and compassion (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Tester, 2001). It is observed that media campaigns which address the issue of poverty often involve "carnivals of pity":

There are, periodically, outbursts of compassion, but there is so much and no more that our moral sentiments can carry on their own; soon placated, they take a nap until the next 'event' when they are once more brutally awakened to the fact that nothing much has changed in the volume and depth of human misery despite the short-lived explosions of pity. (Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 146)

Summing up the critical perspective of researchers, it needs to be noted that there are no simple strategies of portraying life in poverty in different types of media. The dominant groups often present the poor as Others, such language reflecting cultural attitudes, economic divisions and power relations (Lister, 2004). In the case of the poor what is at stake is their right to be respected and treated with dignity; what also counts is a sense of membership in the human community and recognition of their agency.

Addressing the issue of empowerment of the poor in the media

Both the traditional and the new media have different means at their disposal to provide a more complex and multi-dimensional portrayal of poverty (cf. Kanash, 2010, pp. 113–118; Kendall, 2005, p. 224–229; Robinson, Else, Sherlock, & Zass-Ogilvie, 2009, p. 18). The print media can present the experience of poverty and exclusion in more extensive features providing more insight into the problem. Owing to its nature, the radio avoids the complications involved in the visual representation of poverty; television, in turn, is able to reach a greater audience, while the Internet offers a considerable potential to citizen journalism. It is worth noting that although those poor and socially excluded do not have their own media, the Internet (e.g. YouTube) enables them to make their voice heard; they can take advantage of this opportunity themselves or with the assistance of non-governmental organisations (cf. Kanash, 2010). Indeed, the poor are experts on their own lives and can generate their own narrative by means of blogs, videos and articles. On the other hand, however, the Internet also enables their adversaries to stigmatise people suffering from poverty and social exclusion (cf. Górnjak, 2013; Kanasz, 2013).

The Global Investigative Journalism Network provides professional journalists with advice on how to cover poverty (Louis, 2014; Roth, 2014): they should write their articles on behalf of people in poverty, reveal the deeper causes of the problem, work with non-governmental organisations, governments and other groups to learn more about it, and try to convince their editors of the importance of the issue.

The proposals of such authors as Michal Krumer-Nevo and Orly Benjamin (2010) can provide some inspiration to both news journalists and social commentators. The two scholars discuss the main discursive approaches to poverty: the conservative narrative (focused on the psychological and moral characteristics of the individual and involving elements stigmatising people in poverty), and, on the other hand, three counter-narratives of structure/context, agency/resistance and voice/action. It follows that the media image of the poor can show them as active people who try to cope with their situation under extremely difficult social and economic conditions. Discussing various argumentative strategies, Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska (2010) stresses the empowerment potential of the argumentative strategy of assimilation, which makes it possible to break stereotypes and portray the Other as an active and resourceful person (it is used in e.g. social campaigns).

The media representation of poverty has to respect the dignity of the poor. Important ethical guidelines for journalists covering this issue are to be found in The Code of Conduct on Images and Messages (Gadzinowska, Lipska, & Wojtalik, 2009, pp. 6–8).⁸ The document stresses the values of human dignity, respect, equality, truthfulness, solidarity and justice. As specified, journalists need to ensure that the poor have the opportunity to tell their stories themselves; they also have to check whether their subjects consent to the publication of their image. Importantly, sensationalist or potentially discriminating and stereotyping images and messages should be avoided.

Interviewed about how to talk about poverty, the renowned Polish poverty scholar Elżbieta Tarkowska stresses the need to present the complexity and diversity of the problem, to avoid negative stereotypes and to refrain from generalisations based on individual cases. She also adds that since poverty and exclusion can be stigmatising, it is exceedingly difficult to find appropriate language to talk about it.

Conclusion

The mass media provide their audience with different interpretations of reality, including the reality of people suffering from poverty and exclusion. The media representation of poverty can be easily distorted or simplified, for example as a result of missing out a broader context or the lack of reflection on the causes and consequences of the problem. Other factors at play are various interests of media producers. Since some of them display a distinctly profit-oriented attitude, it is difficult to expect them to avoid stereotypical images of poverty.

This article has presented a number of issues involved in the media representation of poverty and social exclusion discussed in the literature on the subject: journalists' dilemmas, pitfalls resulting in a distorted image, and potential for more comprehensive and adequate representation. The discussion focused mainly on television, press and film coverage, and, to some extent, also on the radio. It also mentioned the use of the Internet, without, however, analysing it in more detail. Different media genres have different potential and face different problems concerning the image of poverty. For example, news bulletins are most prone to presenting a very limited fragment of reality, and press features – to dramatising certain situations.

⁸ In Poland, The Code of Conduct on Images and Messages is known as "The Code of Conduct on Images and Messages Concerning the Countries of the South" (Kodeks w sprawie obrazów i wiadomości dotyczących krajów Południa) (translator's note).

In fact, there is no ready-made universal formula for preparing journalist materials concerning the life of the poor. The guidelines which most often feature in the literature on the subject stress that it is essential to respect the dignity of those suffering from poverty and social exclusion and point out the importance of their empowerment. This requires giving them voice and presenting their own perspective. Cooperation between the media, scholars and practitioners providing help and assistance to the poor and socially excluded is also an important aspect. In conclusion, it should be observed that the question of the representation of poverty, social exclusion and inequality in the mass media merits further extensive study.

Translated by Piotr Styk

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The mass media and the question of poverty in Poland

The main aim of this article is to present the image of poverty in the Polish mass media (the press, television, radio, film) and the ways of describing problems faced by people living in poverty which have an empowering character. Providing an overview of the subject, the article takes into account the perspectives of journalists as well as poverty and media scholars.

Keywords:

poverty, discourse, mass media, the poor, stereotypes, empowerment

Media masowe wobec biedy w Polsce

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie, jak jest pokazywana bieda w różnych środkach masowego przekazu (w prasie, telewizji, radiu, filmie) w Polsce oraz jakie są sposoby upodmiotawiającego opisu problemów ludzi żyjących w ubóstwie. Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy i uwzględnia zarówno perspektywę dziennikarzy, jak i badaczy ubóstwa oraz mediów.

Słowa kluczowe:

ubóstwo, dyskurs, media masowe, biedni, stereotypy, upodmiotowienie

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