

Why No One Cares about the Poor: The Mass Media's Role in Poverty and its Perceptions

It is a pleasure and an honour to be giving the David Hopper lecture. When I moved to India in the early 1990s, I learned very quickly what David Hopper's name means, both internationally and to Canada. David was one of the early pioneers of Canada's aid program, especially in South Asia. More importantly, his work reflected much of what Canada represents in this world. At a bilateral level, he brought skills and ideas and offered them subtly to our partners. At the multilateral level, he used good old fashioned Canadian bullying -- quiet diplomacy, we call it -- to bring about changes that a small country like Canada otherwise has no right pushing for.

David Hopper always worked for positive change in this world, but positive change is not what I'm going to address. What I have to share with you is negative -- a sharp criticism of my own industry, my profession and our shared public. Together, I will argue, we have fostered a visible indifference to poverty, despite its awesome presence in a world that is supposed to be getting smaller. This indifference has serious consequences for us all. And as a function of centuries of social change, it is not likely to be easily eradicated. But we have to make the effort because right now we've reached the point at which someone like David Hopper is not a reflection but an aberration.

The Crisis of Public Discourse

The title of my address, *Why No One Cares About the Poor*, is a bit misleading.

Obviously, someone cares about the poor beyond the namesake of this lecture series. Quite a few, in fact. There's the guy, for example, who said: "We fight against poverty because faith requires it and conscience demands it." That was George W. Bush, at the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey, Mexico, in March 2002. The same conference was attended by Jean Chretien, Kofi Annan and Jacques Chirac, who all declared that poverty is one of the greatest concerns of our time. Even if they didn't believe it, they were there in Monterrey saying such things, because they believed a good number of voters believed it.

Indeed, a decade of public opinion polling by the University of Maryland has found Americans largely support foreign aid (Program on International Policy Attitudes, 2001). About 80 per cent of Americans believe the United States should support aid to countries in genuine need. Moreover, two thirds of Canadians fully support or want to strengthen their country's international aid program ("Renewing Canadian Aid", 2001). And they're doing more with their own money. In 2000, the Canadian International Development Agency hired the Earncliffe polling firm to find out how many Canadians give privately to overseas charities. What would you guess? One in ten? One in five? Try one in two. The Earncliffe poll found that 46 per cent of Canadians give to agencies that do work overseas.

So what about my premise? If significant world leaders have identified the poor as a leading global priority, if four out of five Americans see aiding the genuinely poor as an important objective for their government and if one in two Canadians gives to

organizations working overseas with the poor, clearly a lot of people care about the poor.

But why is it we seldom read or hear about the poor in our media coverage?

This is the crisis I want to address: the crisis of public discourse. When so many people care about a single issue, but that issue rarely penetrates our political debate, our newscasts, our front pages or our dinner conversations, we have a crisis. And it is an urgent crisis because the less we talk about poverty, the less inclined we'll be to do anything about poverty.

I'm going to argue that the mass media have ignored the poor. I'm going to outline why this inattention is not the product of corporate ownership or media convergence, but the result of hundreds of years of evolution in the ways that we communicate with each other and the topics that we choose to communicate about. And I'll conclude with some ideas on how this status quo can be changed.

The Selective – and *Subjectifying* -- Power of the Media

In early 1991, I was in south India visiting a friend of a friend in the beautiful coastal state of Kerala, where David Hopper once worked. We went to the house of a young man who eagerly wanted to move to Canada, and there on the family's wall was a framed photograph of Niagara Falls. It was the sum total of his knowledge of Canada. He had seen and heard nothing else about the country (except that it was cold), yet he dearly

wanted to live the rest of his life there. One picture of one cascading waterfall had profoundly *subjectified* his view of the world – or at least one part of it. A specific, isolated image of a faraway country engendered an emotional response in him that supplanted any rational, objective reasoning.

Such is the power of the printed image – and it’s a power that, with the help of globalization and the media, has grown considerably since my first visit to India.

Thanks to the Internet, my friends in south India can now read before I do the Toronto newspaper I write for. Before I wake up in the morning, they can e-mail me a list of mistakes I’ve made in that morning's edition. And I can interview them without seeing their faces or hearing their voices. Or I can watch them in their living room, as I sit in mine, thanks to a web camera.

Our world is no longer a collection of different worlds. It’s no longer about Niagara Falls vs the jungles of Kerala. Now, it's about an entrepreneur in Toronto collaborating with a software designer in Bombay; it’s about two terrorists using the same satellite connection to share ideas; and it’s about a drug-resistant virus spreading from Asia to North America. Globalization brings our lives together, the media has taken notice, and consequently, our lives have been transformed by the common issues that span the world in force and in meaning.

But notice how poverty is seldom included among these common issues. Notice how the

media has not directed its considerable transformative powers to the subject of poverty.

Top News Stories: “Poverty Didn’t Make the List”

In September 2002, I surveyed the news sections of four major North American newspapers, three Canadian (the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *National Post*) and one American (the *New York Times*). My goal was to determine how frequently the topic of poverty arose as compared to other categories of news. The results are illustrated below, reflecting every story of more than 200 hundred words printed in the main news sections during that week (with percentages in parentheses) on each subject.

	Politics	War & Terrorism	Crime	Environment	Poverty	Health	Total
<i>Globe & Mail</i>	28 (24%)	36 (31%)	20 (17%)	10 (8%)	9 (8%)	15 (13%)	118
<i>Toronto Star</i>	22 (21%)	41 (38%)	19 (18%)	7 (7%)	6 (6%)	12 (11%)	107
<i>National Post</i>	31 (30%)	37 (36%)	14 (13%)	5 (5%)	2 (2%)	15 (14%)	104
<i>New York Times</i>	29 (18%)	88(55%)	3 (2%)	15 (9%)	14 (8%)	12 (7%)	161
Total	110 (22%)	202 (41%)	56 (11%)	37 (8%)	31 (6%)	12 (7%)	490

Figure 1: Coverage of Major News Topics as surveyed during one week in September 2001

The news emphasis clearly was placed on the war on terror, politics and crime. The limited coverage of poverty issues could be found mostly in the *New York Times*, the

most internationalist of the papers surveyed. It reported on the first rise in poverty in the United States in eight years (the lead story on front page), a free trade zone in North Korea, attacks on human rights workers in Honduras, the super-rich in Mexico, and American companies selling packaged food to Cuba. It was the only paper to report on how a slowing U.S. economy was hurting the developing world.

It's easy to conclude that this general lack of coverage is a characteristic of Western newspapers, so I asked the *Globe and Mail* researchers in Moscow and Beijing to do a similar study. Here's what they found: during the week of September 21, 2002 China's *Beijing Youth Daily*, a populist, state-controlled newspaper, printed two stories on politics, 28 stories on crime and **zero stories on poverty**. China's *People Daily*, the Communist party organ, also printed **zero stories on poverty**. Russia's *Izvestia Review*, one of the biggest-selling papers in Moscow, ran 49 politics stories, 12 crime-related stories and **zero stories on poverty**.

Is the media's apparent indifference to poverty a recent phenomenon? Probably not.

In 1988, the Asia Pacific Foundation studied Canadian media treatment of Asia, as measured in 14 newspapers across the country, and found 51 per cent of news stories were about politics (Canadian International Development Agency, 1994). Economics accounted for another 19 per cent. A big flood in Bangladesh made up much of the remainder.

In France, in 1992, a two-month study of 10 newspapers and journals, as well as the eight o'clock evening news bulletins of the two major television stations, found that coverage of developing countries centred mainly on one subject: conflict (Young, 1997).

Our Primary Information Source: “Unaccountable, Amoral” – and Influential

Whether we like it or not, the media profoundly affect how societies see each other, talk to each other and evaluate each other. And the media are the source we rely most upon for information about poverty. Consider this. In 1990, an Angus Reid poll found that 84 per cent of Canadians got their information about international development from television news; and 67 per cent said they were also informed by newspapers. In contrast, only 33 per cent identified churches as a source of information; twenty-six per cent learned about international development from TV fundraisers, and just 23 per cent from government (Canadian Council for International Cooperation [CCIC], 1991).

(Some traditional sources of information on development have long been in decline in terms of mass influence. In Britain, the Harris Poll for Action Aid, conducted in 1989, found that only three per cent of respondents received their information about poor countries from NGOs and a further three per cent from churches.)

But here's something more interesting still. When Canadians were asked to state which information source they found credible on international development, 37 per cent said television. Only 25 per cent said NGOs, while 30 per cent said religious organizations

were credible. As for newspapers, a scant 21 per cent found us to be credible (CCIC, 1991).

These figures all support Robert Hackett (1991), the communications theorist, who has long argued that the media, which once reflected society's dominant institutions (the church, government, and schools), has now *become* the dominant institution. However, this dominant institution is not perceived as credible by the majority of the population.

For those interested in development, the rise of the media's dominance is revolutionary. Institutions, notably churches, once told people that poverty was important, that the poor deserved their consideration. But today that role of directing the public conscience has been left to the media, an institution that some argue to be unaccountable, directionless and amoral. The other institutions must conform to them.

This institutional re-alignment is not without benefits. The media draw attention to tragedies and disasters that might otherwise go unnoticed. Take the case of acid throwing in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In the 1990s, young men increasingly began to seek revenge in cases of unrequited love by throwing acid at the women who had rejected them. The aim was to deliberately disfigure the women's faces or bodies. Eventually these cases were confronted in the press, internationally and locally. And only then did the government and police take action to stop them. Similarly, the World Bank withdrew support for the Narmada River Dam, in western India, only after media reports around the world portrayed the project as harmful to the poor.

But those are knee-jerk reactions, the result of the media shocking the public, rather than promoting public awareness and understanding. The former can be achieved almost immediately; the latter takes place only over the very long term. And the media has not traditionally shown an interest in taking on this long term role.

A Public “Woefully Uniformed”

Let me demonstrate the above point by referring to the positive numbers cited earlier -- the ones suggesting great interest in the poor. Most of you probably know, even instinctively, how soft they are. Those 46 per cent of Canadians who give to overseas charities do so, for the most part, with pocket change. And many of them support official aid with a qualification: only if it doesn't increase taxes.

“The majority of Canadians are neutral in their opinions on aid,” Ian Smillie (1995), an Ottawa development consultant, wrote in his book, *The Alms Bazaar*. “They do not think of aid very often, do not feel it has an impact on them, and do not consider themselves part of any global community” (p.124).

In terms of development, we're disengaged, which is worse than being detached or neutral. And despite our professed interest in the poor, we are very, very ignorant, largely because so many of us know the poor only through the tint of the media's glasses.

Peter Adamson, founder of the *New Internationalist*, used to ask British school children some general questions about poverty, and was astonished at the answers (Adamson, 1993). I'll try the same here, with three basic questions:

1. What percentage of the world's children do you think are starving, which is defined as "visibly malnourished"?

The most common answer is 50 to 75 per cent. The correct answer is one - two per cent.

2. What percentage of the world's families are living in absolute poverty, such that they cannot meet even their most basic needs?

The most common answer is 75 per cent. The correct answer is 20-25 per cent.

3. What percentage of the world's six to twelve year olds start high school?

The most common answer is 10-20 per cent. The correct answer is almost 90 per cent.

People have come to see the developing world as an ocean of problems -- unsolvable, intractable, perennial -- because that's what is portrayed when the South is portrayed at

all.

In George W. Bush's speech at Monterrey, he said, only a few lines after his faith and conscience remarks, that "pouring money into a failed status quo does little to help the poor, and can actually delay the progress of reform."

This is patently wrong. And yet it's seen as patently right by a public that's woefully misinformed.

The University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) conducted a survey to ask Americans how big they thought their foreign aid budget was (2001). They were asked to state foreign aid as a share of the federal budget.

The median answer: 20%. The mean answer: 24%. The real answer: 1%.

In 1996, the *Washington Post* found that two thirds of Americans thought foreign aid -- this meagre one per cent of the budget -- was hurting the U.S. economy. In 1997, the Pew Research Centre asked Americans which was bigger: Medicare or foreign aid. Sixty three percent said foreign aid (PIPA, 2001).

The same year, a study by the *Washington Post* and Harvard University presented people with five government programs, and asked them to name two that they thought were the biggest (PIPA, 2001). Foreign aid came first at 64%. Defence -- the entire Pentagon, the

biggest military the world has ever known, bigger than the next 14 combined -- came second at 56%, social security was third at 50%, followed by food stamps at 26% and Medicare at 23%.

Seeing the World Through a Subjective Lens

The facts -- the essence of objectivity, of the other -- have become immaterial in our world. But that does not represent a paradigm shift. It's a long evolution that goes back, I think, to the Enlightenment, maybe even to the Great Plague. It is what I call the evolution of subjectivity, and it is absolutely essential to our views of development -- to how we in the West, largely through the media, see development.

Determining what is newsworthy ...

Before giving you my interpretation of this evolution, let me start at the present. The post-modern media -- the subjective media -- see the world as if it were a mirror. And as a result so do we. When we look at the world, we look to see ourselves. In a mirror, the viewer becomes the object. We see poor people, but really we're trying to see ourselves, or something of ourselves. Affluent white kids trapped in a school in Cote d'Ivoire makes news. Local kids, black and poor, caught in the cross-fire do not. The latter is not seen as part of our prosperous developed world.

The bulk of international reporting fell into two categories: “strange” and “change”.

Strange is what we, the subjects, don't understand. Change is the movement of the object in our eyes. We are attracted to the strange not because it is something that we don't know. There is plenty that we don't know that we choose to ignore. But that which is strange or exotic appeals so much because it provides relief to our own self. It is subjective because we, the subject, decide that it highlights part of our own character and existence.

Let me give some examples. For rural Kenyans, there's nothing strange about barbecuing rats for dinner. They don't see the news value in it. But we do. It's strange for us, because in our minds it illustrates our own "civility." Similarly, in 2000, the Western media gave unusually large coverage of a flood in Mozambique because a woman there was forced to give birth in a tree. The same day, 300 Mozambique children died from hunger and sickness, and no one in the media noticed because tomorrow another 300 kids will die. But a baby won't be born in a tree.

... And what isn't ...

Consider these stories:

- The slow emergence of peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Ethiopia, Mozambique, Bangladesh, Angola and Chad growing economically at more than four per cent a year for an entire decade.
- The president of Senegal accepting defeat at the ballot box, becoming only the third

African leader to do so.

Those all represent change -- pretty big change -- so why didn't they get attention in the mainstream press? Because it's too much change. The media have an in-built bias against complexity, subtlety, history, context and -- this is important -- time. Growth of four per cent a year over a decade just takes too long. So is a three-month troop withdrawal, as was just completed in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We'll let history deal with those.

But there's more to it than complexity. The media also prefer death over life, ends over beginnings, charisma over thought, and conflict over settlement. "Change", all by itself, they don't want. It's *emotive, dramatic* change that they need. And it's not just something "strange" that they seek. After all, a democratic transition in Senegal is strange. It has to be *evocative* strangeness -- something that will play on guilt, fear and excitement and sensibilities over rationality.

Only then is it news.

These notions of "strange" and "change" are crucial to understanding how the mass media see development -- or to be more precise, how they don't see development. News has to be stark, dramatic, or emotive. Yet development is diffuse. It unfolds slowly and undramatically, and it often meanders rather than following the linear lines of an election or sporting match.

If this seems like an awful portrait of my industry, that is not my intention. I want to make it clear that the subjective media simply reflects our subjective society.

The Evolution of Subjectivity

So how did we get here? How did we get to this place of subjective development, whereby we see the poor only if they hold a mirror up to our own lives or if they hold us enthralled with their very lack of familiarity?

The Old Testament is not a bad start. It's full of writings about poverty, in the most objective form. There is no sentimentality, only instructions to do things like tithe land to the poor every seventh year. The Greeks added a philosophical component to the issue in the fourth century B.C., when the Cynics chose, as a matter of principle, to discard all worldly possessions and become poor. But even then, poverty was seen as perpetual, unchanging and, most importantly, distant. It was the Other. It was objective.

The Great Plague

If I had to put a date on when this changed, it would be 1348, the year of the Great Plague. It was a big news year: one third of the European population died because of the Plague; and the ensuing labour shortages caused wage rates to skyrocket. Most people remained poor because they were unable to work. But those who could work demanded

such high wages that the condition of their underclass, for the first time, grabbed the attention of the dominant class. Suddenly, poverty was no longer a spiritual or philosophical issue. It was a social, political and economic reality.

British Poor Laws

Through the 15th and 16th centuries, British poor laws, the start of what we now call public policy, were created. The laws responded to the labour shortages by forcing the poor to work, eventually in workhouses. The Enlightenment led to more public policies concerning the poverty. And the printing press led to the promotion and criticism of those policies. Poverty was no longer “over there”, some distant, objective notion. It was part of us, a visible reality that needed to be addressed.

Critiques of public policy

Indeed, by the 17th century, thinkers like John Locke argued that addressing poverty through social policies (what we call “development”) was not just as a good idea but an absolute necessity to which the poor were entitled (Wooton, 1993).

There were, however, other points of view. Perhaps the first serious journalistic track on poverty to be written in English was published in 1704 by Daniel Defoe in a pamphlet entitled "Giving Alms No Charity." It was a screed rather than an investigation, but popular no less. Defoe argued for clearing the streets of vagrants -- "the vermin called

shoe shiners," in his words. "Truly," Dafoe wrote, "the scandal lies in our charity; and people have such a notion in England of being pitiful and charitable, that they encourage vagrants, and by a mistaken goal do more harm than good" (as cited by Nimmo, 1869).

His view reflected Puritan middle class values rather than *noblesse oblige*. More importantly, his pamphlet reflected the emergence of a bourgeois press and mass produced opinion. The important issue was no longer whether the reader agreed with Locke or Dafoe. It was that the educated reader, regardless of rank or class, finally had the chance to receive an opinion and offer one.

The media as a mouthpiece for other institutions

By the mid nineteenth century, a commercial media industry emerged for a very different reason than the thirst for information or free speech. It was driven by the growth of retailing. People in Europe and North America had become more mobile. They began to shop at chain stores, rather than local markets, and those chains needed some medium to get their message to consumers. Enter the newspaper.

In those early days, the media conformed to other institutions -- governments, armies, churches and charities. Newspaper writers reported only the information that those institutions chose to disseminate. That's why the first newspapers were mostly political party rags and organs. They made for good mouthpieces.

A glimpse of what was to come

As this new age of journalism was emerging, cash-rich and imperialistic European monarchs were establishing colonies throughout Africa and Asia in their bids to become richer still. And along with the newly established colonies came the early development agencies: missions, citizen groups and state administrations. The idea of international development -- of supporting human progress in other lands -- was born.

The two trends, international development and mass media, came together for the first time in 1867 when James Gordon Bennett, Jr., the flamboyant publisher of the *New York Herald* dispatched an aggressive and adventuresome young journalist to Africa. The young man was an orphan, drifter and product of workhouses who had taken his adult name from a kind cotton broker, Henry Stanley.

The younger Stanley was sent off to cover a British expedition in the Empire of Abyssinia. He enjoyed a string of “scoops”, those newly minted stories that no other reporter has uncovered, and these successes led him to pursue the biggest story of them all: in 1871 he arrived in the Congo basin, with orders from Mr. Bennett to find Dr. Livingston, a physician whom today we would call an aid worker. This was the first convergence between media and development. In fact, it was media getting ahead of development, a glimpse of what was to come.

For the most part, though, the media was a follower well into the twentieth century. The

media followed armies into two world wars. They followed the United Nations into peacekeeping missions. And after that, they followed the new bilateral aid organizations and new international financial institutions like the World Bank into a decolonized developing world.

The Rise of an Independent Media

What I call *Big Media*, those media operations that are owned by large corporations, and *Big Development*, the agencies that are far bigger than the groups they serve, simply became products of larger economic and political forces. And when it came to poverty, they largely remained objective, as the poor remained objects.

This role – and the objectivity it fostered -- was about to change. Newspapers and broadcasters were becoming fabulously rich through advertising, and consequently began to finance their own journalism. This financial independence meant that they could pursue their own ideas and information.

Moreover, the post-war Baby Boom had produced a generational change that brought with it anti-establishment feelings. This was the age of Watergate, Pentagon Papers and 60 Minutes. The media's role was no longer to objectively convey the information they had been fed, but, instead, to uncover and publicize discrepancies, inaccuracies and outright lies within that information. And the media's new role coincided with rise of professional, non-sectarian NGOs. No longer was development to be left solely in the

hands of church and state, just as journalism was not to be left in the hands of corporate owners. Once again, media and development were moving together, only now they were moving away from the objective. For example, it was NGOs that brought to light the atrocities in Biafra, and the media that followed.

George Harrison, Bangladesh, and “the subjectification of aid”

In 1972, George Harrison furthered this movement away from the objective with Bangladesh Aid, a concert to raise money for the people of East Pakistan. This event marked not only the start of celebrity aid, but also the real *subjectification of aid* because it meant this: someone who had nothing to do with the dominant institutions that addressed poverty was able to draw far more attention to the issue than the institutions themselves could. As one of their members once famously speculated, the Beatles may or may not have been bigger than Jesus Christ, but George Harrison’s Bangladesh Aid was definitely bigger than Christian Aid.

And that was the turning point. George Harrison was neither a Bangladeshi nor a member of the institutions seeking to help Bangladesh. He was, very loosely, a member of the media. And he was powerful enough to turn millions of eyes toward Bangladesh, as opposed to any other troubled spot on the globe. Soon, development would be following the media.

All that was needed to complete the media’s dominance was technology.

Third World poverty as a media event

The media's dominance became abundantly clear when famine struck Ethiopia in 1984. New broadcast technology had allowed direct satellite feeds. And far bigger news budgets -- financed by the growing commercial value of television news -- had allowed for the wide use of that technology. Major news departments were now mega-million dollar operations. And in Ethiopia, they were determining the story. On any given day, what the media chose to see and do became the famine. All else was as if it didn't exist. Aid agencies had to respond, not just with aid, but with their own new norms that would conform to the media's. If the poverty in Sudan was more dire, that didn't matter. If the central issue was sanitation, too bad. There was money only for food, which had to be distributed only in Ethiopia.

After the first days of televised coverage of the Ethiopian famine, Britons alone donated sixty million pounds-sterling to relief efforts. Buoyed by the huge response across Europe, a French charity, Trucks for Hope, loaded up with medicines and food and drove across North Africa to Ethiopia, feeding nightly news reports back to France via satellite transmission. The satellite feeds cost almost as much as the relief aid in the trucks. And when the trucks got to the famine zone most of the medical equipment on board was broken. Here's what one of the organizers had to say: "We chose the marathon format in order to keep the public in suspense" (Hancock, 1991, p. 16). And so we had the subjectification of news and aid -- in one. The relief convoy and its coverage had less to

do with Ethiopia and more to do with the media flexing its technologically enhanced power.

The “Anti-Development” Nature of Media Technology

Of course, this was the age of television and increasingly the computer -- electronic communications that are, arguably, anti-development. Or, at the very least, indifferent to the poor.

Television and computers affect the poor and disenfranchised in the ways common institutions can't. They can instantly enfranchise. They disseminate power by spreading information and ideas on a mass level, and creating the image of access. Lech Walesa was once asked what caused the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. He pointed to a nearby television and said, "It all started there." ([Reference?](#))

But oddly, for all the feelings of intimacy it creates, Television is a non-human technology, as technologically distant as communications have ever been. It is not at all like the written word, which relies on an ancient tradition of logic. The *printed* word, after all, is only a variation of how people throughout the world have communicated for millennia.

“Television is a form of forgetting”

Television and computers, on the other hand, seek to repeat life, events and ideas as they

never occur in our own lives. They are faster than we know, telescoped and disjointed. You cannot live your life like a television show, nor can the world live like a newscast. In his book *The Warrior's Honour*, Michael Ignatieff argues that television is a form of forgetting, because it allows audiences to see a problem, deal with it and move on, all very quickly, without ever actually encountering the problem. The Ethiopian famine is solved as soon as the airlift touches down. This distortion is not a function of television, however. Television is only the conduit. It's a function of more base human emotions, of human subjectiveness -- guilt, pity, charity -- which television, the emotional medium, exploits so well.

The new buzzwords: "live" and "breaking news"

In 1991, the Persian Gulf War changed everything again. Thanks to the American network CNN, the war became "all war, all the time" -- as if we, the viewers, were part of the conflict. People could sit in their living rooms and watch the bombing of Baghdad -- live. Nothing like this had ever happened. Beyond the new standard of immediacy, the Gulf War set a new expectation that anything of importance had to be broadcast with the new buzzwords, "Live" and "Breaking News," to maintain that importance.

This immediacy is what made O.J. Simpson such a media sensation. After the Gulf War, news ratings plunged. O.J. brought them back with the Ford Bronco chase on an Los Angeles expressway, shown "Live" around the world. This was the new news.

During the O.J. trial, a *New York Times* columnist wrote that it was the closest most Americans would come to having someone they know on trial for murder. The absurdity of the remark is obvious. The vast majority of viewers, Americans or otherwise, do not know O.J. and never did. But he becomes newsworthy because the viewers thought they knew him -- again, the subjectification of the strange, or in his case, the stranger. But it was media, rather than the courts or police, that had set the norm.

“The poor were merely actors”

Let me share my own experiences from Somalia. In 1992, while covering the famine and war in that country, I spent some time in the desert town of Baidoa, which was known as the City of Death because of the number of poverty-related deaths. A person could stand on the roadside and watch people die. One day, an American TV crew arrived at the local hospital and announced they would shoot their story around midnight in order to be broadcast “live” on the supertime news back home on the East Coast.

It wasn’t newsworthy enough to report that people were starving. Their struggle with death had to be live. The crew set up all their lights and gadgets, hooked to generators that consumed more fuel than the rest of the town, and began work.

The first filming sequence went well, but during a commercial break -- I’ve always wondered how you take a commercial break during a famine -- the crew had to rush to another part of the hospital. As they raced out one door, a technician carrying a boom

stick, part of the paraphernalia of filming, knocked over a row of emaciated local people who had been watching in awe.

It's not the insensitivity of one crew member that I'm trying to point out, but the subjectiveness of the event. It was run according to New York time, and designed around the crew's and New York's needs. The poor were merely actors.

A “genuine media celebrity” covers the famine

Several months later, I was back in Somalia, in a different town, Berdere, where I had gone to meet the great warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid at his headquarters in the southwestern desert. Aidid's men had just looted a good deal of Canadian-supplied food and fuel from the town, in order to help their own cause at a nearby front. But the good general seemed to be scarcely ashamed. Instead, he made his sales pitch to Canada, through me, for more aid to help the starving children I had seen all over town and in its many feeding camps. Even way out there, Aidid knew the importance of good press to anyone's war effort. He knew donations were my responsibility, not his.

I soon realized, however, that I was just a warm-up act. A genuine media celebrity was circling over the desert town in a Lear jet, furnished by World Vision. It was the former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, who was producing a documentary on the famine for Australian television and being escorted around by the charity for obvious reasons. They were conforming to the media, as was he. The famine had become an event. This

was the ultimate convergence -- a politician turned journalist being followed by a charity as he wandered through a war zone.

The Media's Use of Subjective Fundraising Strategies

The way in which development agencies raise funds does more than illustrate the truism "the media are the message"; it also illustrates the prominence of subjective development assistance as an effective fundraising tool.

For example, as I was preparing this lecture, I came across a World Vision ad in *Macleans*, the Canadian news magazine, from several years ago. Under the heading "How helping a poor child will make you feel rich," the ad referred to the potential donor (the reader) throughout, by using a second person reference ("you", "your", "yours") twenty eight times. The child was referred to only thirteen times. In another World Vision ad, the American television host Alex Tribeck speaks of "your" child. The strategy is based on the assumption that potential donors connect with people better than they do with circumstances or issues. The suggestion also is that development is about the reader or the viewer. He or she is a player. Both are examples of subjective development pitches.

Similarly, when the American television celebrity Sally Struthers was featured in the "rescue a child from hell" ads for Christian Children's Fund many years ago, she gave a direct order to viewers. Don't just give. Rescue. And rescue they did. According to one

former director of the agency, Struthers "unlocked a gold mine" of aid (*Chicago Tribune*, 1998, March 15). The charity saw its donations rise from \$29 million (US) in 1976 to \$103 million in 1991, mainly on the backs of infomercials showing Struthers surrounded by runny-nosed children in a slum.

Fundraising ads like these have been vilified as “pornography of the poor”, based on the criticism that they exploit the very people they’re intended to help. However, this characterization is misleading because pornography objectifies a person. These ads do the very opposite: by creating a false relationship in the potential donor’s mind with a child, they subjectify the poor.

And from a financial perspective, the approach works. The sponsorship ads shown on late-night television are known as “remote control ads” because they’re designed to stop people from switching channels and to create the impression of remote control charity. Viewers can help that child shown on the screen from the comfort of their easy chairs. Quite simply, the ads work. World Vision's donations reached \$120 million in 2000, more than double its donations in 1990, which were more than quadruple what it received in 1980. The increases were largely because of significant investment in television advertising.

The primary task: “As much media coverage as possible”

In order to determine what sort of impact this emphasis has on the ground, consider the

earthquake that hit western India in 2001. When I was assigned to the disaster, and flew to the town of Bhuj, near the epicentre, an American woman sitting beside me on an airplane said she was from the relief agency CARE International and had come straight from head office in Atlanta. Her job: media coordinator. One of the agency's first people on the ground was a media coordinator. The woman's task was to get as much media coverage as possible, particularly TV, for CARE staff on the ground, which was why she wore a green CARE t-shirt wherever she went, just like the ABC News World tonight producers. In other words, the charity not only conformed to the media but actually behaved like a news organization.

Understanding the Implications

So what do we conclude from all of this?

First, a new paradigm has emerged: the media is the institution that others must conform to. Second, a new question has been raised: what factors shape the media and therefore determine how – or even whether – it notes the poor?

One major factor is the extraordinary concentration of corporate ownership, but not in ways that might be expected. Many of the world's biggest companies have bought into the media business, not because they want to control the news but because the media have become a profitable business investment. There is no clear evidence that an increased concentration of corporate-owned media has led to less international reporting,

or less development reporting. Long before the most recent concentration of corporate-owned media in Canada and the United States (for there have been many cycles of ownership trends), the general investment in international coverage had begun to decline. The Southam newspaper chain significantly withdrew from dedicated international reporting before financier Conrad Black bought the company. The *Globe and Mail* closed a string of international bureaus while still under family ownership. International reporting, which includes development issues, is seen as too expensive. But more importantly, it's seen as non-essential to readers. They're interested in the poor, but not *that* interested.

Many papers have instead opted to spend tactically on foreign affairs, covering certain international stories, issues and projects rather than providing ongoing news coverage. This approach has merits but it also means many papers take international news copy from wire services, just as broadcasters often take their film from agencies, even when their own reporter is on the scene.

Consequently, much of what the viewer sees is foreign filming of a developing country, which tends to focus on capital cities, disasters and protests. Agencies like Associated Press and Reuters, which supply text, photographs and video film, must follow the principles of common denominators, because they have so many clients to satisfy. They need to stick with the familiar, with what is known both in Spain and Saskatchewan. That way, they can sell the film (or the printed text) to more customers. By contrast, following the more unusual stories of the development process – yet not so unusual as to be

categorized as exotic – would risk alienating large sections of the potential viewership. In other words, there is a search for a common denominator, even if it is the lowest common denominator.

But there is also something in institutional behaviour that drives competing organizations to a median, that encourages them to forgo the superlative in favour of the standardized. This is true in the news business, just as it is in the fast food business. Burger King and McDonald's are forever opening next to each other, and offering menus that mimic the other. They fear that being overly different will cost them customers.

The same is true in news. Look at the percentage breakdown on news stories that I referred to earlier.

	Politics	War & Terrorism	Crime	Environment	Poverty	Health
<i>Globe & Mail</i>	24%	31%	17%	8%	8%	13%
<i>Toronto Star</i>	21%	38%	18%	7%	6%	11%
<i>National Post</i>	30%	36%	13%	5%	2%	14%
<i>New York Times</i>	18%	55%	2%	9%	8%	7%
Average	22%	41%	11%	8%	6%	11%

Figure 2: Coverage of major news topics broken down by percentage, as surveyed during one week in September.

The breakdown of coverage is astonishingly similar. With the exception of the *New York Times* and its coverage of the war on terror, which consumes three clear pages¹ a day, each paper is within a few percentage points of the others. The marketplace pressures to differentiate a product have not led to a breakaway from the norms, which are shared in Canada by the leftist *Toronto Star*, rightist *National Post* and centrist *Globe and Mail*.

This conformity is true the world over. Although more media outlets than ever are available in just about every region, they follow a convergent pattern. Whether it's Zee-TV, the all-news channel in India, or Globo TV in Brazil, or MSNBC, the range of subjects and issues does not vary greatly.

Working Toward Solutions

The problems outlined above have been addressed in different ways, with varying levels of success.

One solution that's been tried is development education. In the 1980s, the Canadian government invested millions of dollars in raising public awareness on development through schools and community centres. From the outset, though, the effort failed to reach a mass audience. A second problem arose when many development agencies equated development education with self-promotion, and used taxpayers' money to market the agencies' merits rather than promote awareness of the issues.

¹ A page without any advertising

Another hope was supposed to lie in digital and satellite technology. The World Wide Web was supposed to relegate the traditional mass media to the margins of relevance, allowing people in Canada to hear news, unfiltered, from whatever place interested them. So far, this technotopia remains a myth. First, only six per cent of the population has access to the Web. It remains an elitist form of communication. Second, the ostensible dinosaurs of the new media -- newspapers and magazines -- have remained surprisingly vibrant. People still turn to the mainstream media because in the information age they don't need more information; they need less, or at least better information. They need a filter, and they're willing to turn to one they trust. Consequently, the dominance -- and the self-imposed limitations -- of the traditional media remain.

A blueprint for successfully including the poor

If we assume the mainstream media remains the mainstream, there are concrete measures that can promote a more global approach to news coverage, one that might encompass the poor:

1. Regulation. The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission has played a positive role in persuading major Canadian broadcasters to expand their international coverage as part of their licensing agreement. For example, CTV opened several bureaus last year, including New Delhi, Kampala and Mexico City, because of regulatory pressure. We need to maintain this pressure, not least of all because other media -- namely print -- will also feel pressured to conform.

2. Public ownership. The CBC remains the leader in international news coverage in Canada, largely because it is funded by taxpayers. It would not be able to operate bureaus around the world or carry out important journalistic projects without public money. Again, where the CBC goes, others will follow.

3. Public pressure. Broadcasters use public airwaves, and therefore should be regulated by a public body. However, the same argument can't be applied to newspapers. They are private publications, conveying and sometimes exchanging information and ideas on paper at a commercial price. It would be inappropriate and dangerously bordering on censorship to try to regulate this. What would then stop a regulator from trying to impose its values on the publication? Apart from important and essential laws addressing issues of libel, privacy and hate, there is no role for the state in private communications. However, there is an important role for public pressure. Canadians have failed utterly to persuade newspaper readers that coverage of the poor is one of the reasons they buy newspapers. When the *Globe and Mail* closed its bureau in Jerusalem in the 1990s, there was a groundswell of opposition made known to our publisher. When it closed bureaus in Harare, New Delhi and Rio de Janeiro, major centres in the developing world, barely a peep was heard.

4. Prominent advocates. Every developed nation desperately needs a strong, single voice for the poor -- someone, ideally, who holds a senior position in the federal government. Most European nations have long enjoyed a senior cabinet minister as

their official voice on development, for example, Claire Short in Britain or Jan Pronk in the 1990s in the Netherlands. They became visible, articulate and powerful advocates for the poor, and the media took notice. Canada can look to Craig Keilberger's work in exposing child labour practices in the developing world or Stephen Lewis's advocacy for HIV/AIDS victims in Africa. If we live in a subjective world, at least give the media a subject worthy of focus.

5. Promotion. Canada's international development community must actively create a collective, coherent program to promote development. Agencies have to put aside their ideological differences and find ways to put poverty back in the public eye. Consider this: the entire development community spends less money enlightening Canadians about poverty than Labatt spends advertising beer. Can anyone be surprised that poverty gets so little attention?

6. Positive images. If the development community comes together to promote development awareness at a mass level -- and not do it as a technique of self-promotion -- it must find a positive approach. All the lessons of social marketing show this: that people need more than information; they need to see clear paths of action, and see a meaningful and understandable role for themselves. This is why child sponsorship works -- it shows a role for people to play. In our subjective society, development agencies must do the same without degrading the object of their communications efforts. But they cannot ignore the subjective norm of communications in our society, or the role of a dominant subjective media. The evolution of that model, no matter how flawed it may be, has come too far to

be wished away.

It may be too much to expect, that hundreds of years of evolution can be reversed so easily or quickly, or that the juggernaut of the mass media can be turned around. But if George W. Bush can say that "We fight against poverty because faith requires it and conscience demands it," there must be a broader lesson for all of us. We must write about poverty because faith requires it and conscience demands it, but also because ultimately readers and viewers and listeners insist on it.

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