

Steve Rendall: I'd like to begin by thanking the organizers and the Eisenhower foundation for pulling together this great conference.

Since I've been a media critic, for most of the last twenty years, there have been two periods when mainstream journalists made promises about dedicating themselves to greater coverage of poverty, racism and inequality. The first was after the Los Angeles riots; the second, of course, was after the Katrina catastrophe.

In both cases the promises went largely unfulfilled.

Following Katrina, national news coverage did spike for the month of September 2005, before quickly returning to a normal, almost undetectable baseline. According to the Tyndall Report--Andrew Tyndall, is a former media insider who graphs what gets covered on the nightly news--coverage of poverty increased on nightly network newscasts in the eight months following Katrina from two-and-a-half seconds per night...to four seconds per night. In other words, poverty coverage in the period following the catastrophe increased from .2 percent of the average 22 minute nightly news cast, to .3 percent.

Why so little coverage of poverty?

For one, journalists like stories that have a resolution, preferably a happy one. But too often journalists see poverty as a sad, intractable fact of life-- a story that never gets better and is of little interest to viewers and readers.

Of course, this thinking is just a copout for ignoring the most vulnerable and powerless among us. And besides, death and taxes never get better and they cover them all the time.

But seriously, more than that, the attitude that "the poor will always be with us" is one that reinforces reactionary views of poverty. It does this by playing into assumptions that government is neither responsible for causing nor capable of alleviating poverty, because its causes after all, lie only in the poor themselves.

Coincidentally, advertisers don't like sad stories either. They don't like to see their commercials airing in stories they consider downers. And sad stories that have no end are by definition, downers.

One of the best illustrations of this happened during the first gulf war, in 1991, when there was a threatened revolt by sponsors. As the war coverage ground on, sponsors complained that they didn't like their ads set within negative stories of violence and death. So CBS came up with an idea to run a series of upbeat segments within which they would envelope the ads into happy stories. The news segments were called, "Messages from the Home Front."

Business decisions and conglomeration also affect coverage of poverty.

Wall Street pressures are enormous on publicly traded media and outlets that belong to conglomerates that are publicly traded. The pressures that resulted in the recent sale and breakup of the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain for, instance.

As Ben Bagdikian, the great media critic tells us, Wall Street doesn't like newspapers. The number crunchers want newspapers to earn the kind of profits that television does, forty or fifty percent a year; whereas newspapers usually earn more like

twenty percent or less. Thirty years ago twenty percent would have been considered a large profit, but no more.

And though broadcast profits are higher, that doesn't mean broadcasts newsrooms don't still feel the pressure.

What happens when you're a news executive facing these Wall Street pressures? You cut costs, you cut journalists' jobs and you try to more precisely target your demographics. That is you carefully tailor your 'news' to appeal to the most affluent and most free spending readers and viewers.

And so it comes as little surprise that news, which is increasingly produced by the powerful, is also increasingly produced for the powerful; especially for those in the government, professional and corporate worlds.

And what happens when powerful people get to tell the stories? Well it's a cinch that they aren't assigning blame upwards. With few exceptions, they tend to locate the source of societal ills by looking downward. That is, they assign responsibility for societal ills by pointing at the poor, people of color, immigrants, they tend to blame the powerless.

With the limited time at hand, these are just a few of the reasons we at FAIR have discovered about why poverty, inequality and racism get such scant media coverage.

Recommendations:

\* There have been a number of recommendations here. I would certainly underline other calls for the need for more vigilance over the ASNE numbers and the general need for more newsroom diversity.

Two journalists, John Doig and Bill Dedman, took the ASNE numbers a step farther and put together a website in which citizens can put in the name of their local paper and find out how ethnically diverse its staff is. This information is invaluable to activists who wish pressure their local papers for more diversity.

\* But the ASNE approach only deals with race or ethnicity, so I would also recommend a complimentary discussion on class background and newsroom diversity.

\* It would also be helpful to see more white people included in discussions of racism. Discussions about racism, in the rare instances they occur, generally include African Americans or Latinos or Asians, but often fail to include representatives of those who benefit most from institutional racism.

A couple of people who come to mind are Jonathan Kozol, a brilliant observer of racism and particularly on how it impacts education; and Tim Wise, an academic who studies racism. I don't want to slight anyone, there are many others, but people like them have a hard time getting coverage, getting on the national news.

\* I think public broadcasting is also key. We have to take back public broadcasting. We need to make more public space on the broadcasting spectrum. The Broadcast Act of 1934 says that the people own the airwaves. So we have the right to determine just

what portion of those we want to be commercial and what portion should be non-commercial. We think at FAIR that we should be able to take back some of those airwaves and make them truly non commercial. Also, existing public broadcasting needs to be shielded from pressures. It needs to be made truly independent. It is currently under right-wing pressure from the Congress and the CPB. In addition, corporations are enormously important in funding the shows that make it on to PBS. If we had a fully funded and independent public broadcasting, free of political and corporate influence, the prospects putting the public back in public broadcasting—including coverage of the nearly 40 million Americans who live in poverty—would improve.

\* Instead of being 'news consumers,' we need to make better use of independent and academic sources. The thing about truly public broadcasting and independent sources is that they don't have these pressures; those Wall Street pressures that say "cut your costs, cut your newsroom, and more narrowly focus on a rich demographic.

I want to close on this point, to hear a lot of Bigfoot journalists talk about Katrina in the wake of that crises, you would have thought that they just discovered that we had poverty, racism and inequality in America. If that was true for news anchors and reporters, it was not true of the American people.

According to statistics cited in a Stanford University study (Grusky and Ryo) which referenced data from Syracuse University public opinion polls, Americans are not uninterested in poverty but on the contrary, have an abiding concern about poverty. One poll cited in the study showed a full year before Katrina, that 58 percent said they knew about poverty, knew it was a problem, were interested in it, and wanted to see something done about it.

So, if the news media didn't know there was a problem beforehand, the American people did. And they were interested. This would seem to mean they would be interested in more coverage, which compliments the point that Jay Rosen and Terrance Smith were making about media lore. That is, it refutes the media lore that people just aren't interested in poverty.

I think I'll leave it there for now and hope to address other issues in the Q&A.