

Christy Hardin Smith: In Dickens's masterpiece, *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge condenses conservative thought on poverty to a sentence that could pretty much drown it in a bathtub. If they would rather die, said Scrooge, they had better do it and decrease the surplus population. In other words, if you're poor and living under poor circumstances, it is your own fault. And while that may be true in an individual level here and there, the problems of race and poverty in this nation and globally are far more complex than a simple suck it up, get to work, and stop complaining mantra. We hear that far too often.

I've been asked to speak here today about poverty, inequality, race and the media, but I confess up front that I am a cynic on all of these issues in terms of solving them. My cynicism comes from a hard-earned deeply rooted skepticism that I developed during my time as a criminal defense attorney and then as an assistant prosecutor for a number of years and working on child abuse neglect cases, juvenile prosecutions and within the adult criminal system. And, it's especially from the time where I worked as assistant prosecutor because I learned things that people do to each other that none of you really want to know the details about. And having felt for years that I was operating as a band-aid on an enormous gaping wound that just kept growing bigger no matter how much we tried to fix things even within the small community in which I operated.

The fact that Dickens writing from the 1800's details problems that we are still seeing today, that I was seeing as an attorney in the 1990's and in the early 2000's and that we still see in media coverage and in neighborhoods all across this country is enough to make me wonder if we will ever find any real way to make headway on these problems.

That said, there have been fundamental shifts in the media over the last 40 odd years that lend themselves to a lot of significant questions about the purpose and the scope of what we can expect reporters and pundits and media conglomerates to be willing to do or not do on the issues that we talk about today. Any publicly traded media company, and this has been discussed a little bit before, but I want to go into a little bit of detail on it at the moment. Any publicly traded media company is beholden to one thing and that is maximizing shareholder profits. That's what they do. That's what they're required to do by law and that's what shareholders will hold them accountable to by suit if they do not. Period, end of story.

And to be fair, that's true for any publicly traded company, not just for media conglomerates, so this isn't just a media issue. This drives everything including the selection of stories and the focus of the news organization be it print, radio or television or all three in the case of the bigger conglomerates. Thanks to media consolidation and corporate considerations such as maximizing profit share and revenue we are all living in an age where business school graduates are running the media show. Where shows like *Fear Factor* get a lot of great hype, while a valuable show like *Nightline* gets to languish in obscurity because ABC News decides that paying Ted Koppel's salary doesn't fit into their bottom line obligations.

Any and all folks in the media are focused in small and large ways to cater to the middle and occasionally to the lowest common denominator and I think one only need to think back about a week in media coverage here in this country of Britney Spear's panties or the lack thereof to know exactly where I'm going with this. Let's call this the Rupert

Murdoch paradigm. Consolidating a large empire of print, radio, television outlets under one group's control, and in Murdoch's case, a group with a decided political agenda and a penchant for making its own reality through rampant editorializing that they like to disguise as fair and balanced news. You add to that a hefty dose of infotainment, which appeals to the segment of the population that has the lowest attention span, and you maximize revenue and increase market share by any means necessary.

Where does that leave news organizations and reporters who are committed to in-depth journalism? At the moment, especially in print journalism, it leaves a lot of them downsized. Across the country cost cutting measures at newspapers, which are struggling to compete economically mean fewer real reporting jobs thereby increasing the bottom line of the paper by reducing the salaries they have to pay while maximizing their ad revenue which makes the folks on Wall Street happy, but makes all of us as readers and consumers of news media not so happy. It becomes all about the bottom line and that has nothing whatsoever to do with quality. That is a disservice to all of us because a story about poverty or race or all of the multitude of issues that are involved require an exceptional voice to tell that story well.

We have lost far too many of those voices to other beats over the last few years and those who are left to speak on behalf of those who have little to no voice in the public space. A lot of them -- sitting in this room here with us today who've spoken before and will speak after this panel -- often find a story that can take months to research and put together relegated to page A-17 between the latest gift with purchase offer from Estee Lauder at Lord and Taylor and the latest electronic sales from Best Buy. That's not the place where you're going to get a lot of attention. Unfortunately, that's where a lot of these very important stories end up.

In my experience as a defense attorney and then as a prosecutor, the bulk of the cases that I saw day in and day out at the court house were predicated on economic hardship, lack of opportunity, and a whole host of problems associated with poverty and the despair that goes with it. I grew up in Appalachia, I'm from West Virginia, you could probably tell that from my accent. In a mostly blue collar family with folks in it who got food assistance and who had trouble with drugs and spousal abuse and alcohol, well you can pretty much name a problem and somebody in my family has probably lived it at some point or another. My whole family pretty much still lives in West Virginia or nearby and poverty and hardship are issues with which I'm very familiar. Not just in my own family, but in my community and my state as a whole. Racial issues are less prevalent where I live, simply because we have fewer folks of color, but I live, I have lived in an urban neighborhood that was a kaleidoscope of color in west Philly when I was in graduate school and my first roommate in college was a very strong woman from Jamaica Queens, New York who never let me forget that I needed to look at the other side of the block as often as I possibly could. So, I'm not completely oblivious as a white-bread girl from the sticks.

However, economics, rather than color, drove a lot of what I saw in my day-to-day life at the courthouse, and that was across every racial line that we ever had.

In an abuse/neglect case, I would see the following pretty frequently: mental health issues that had gone untreated for years because there was no mental health treatment

available because there was no funding for that treatment; parenting skills counseling that we had to set up for parents who had no idea how to actually be parents before they had a child; drug and alcohol rehab; anger management counseling; sex abuse therapy; individual and group for both the perpetrator and the survivor of that abuse and often those were one in the same; foster care, medical intervention, criminal charges, job training needs, government benefits sign-up; medical cards that had to be established for kids who had never had adequate medical care; budgeting skills classes; life skills classes including things like why should you clean your house, why bathing is important and what constitutes proper hygiene; intervention services to assist the mentally challenged, both parents and children; Medicare benefits problems; disability and Workers' Comp benefits problems; social worker rotation through long-term cases because social workers are paid next to nothing to do jobs that are so hard sane people would never choose to do them in a million years if they didn't care about the people they were trying to help; cuts in education benefits for Head Start and valuable early intervention programs, like the birth to three program, which I'm sure some of the folks in the room have probably never heard of, but it's one of the most critical programs that we have in this country today in terms of very early intervention, it can make a huge difference; lack of prenatal care and awareness; even more drug and alcohol rehab -- you have to go through that a lot in abuse and neglect cases; prison time for one or more parents -- and on and on and on.

And that's just in an abuse/neglect case context, and that's what I did day in and day out, every day in the courthouse in a little town in West Virginia. And when you magnify that to what you have to deal with in West Baltimore and what you have to deal with in West Baltimore, what you have to deal with in D.C., what you have to deal with in the major urban environments all over this country, it is huge.

And that does not even touch on folks living below the poverty line who were never in trouble with the law in their lives, folks who are working two and three jobs trying to raise their families with no child care assistance and little to no safety net; folks for whom an illness could mean financial catastrophe for the entire family; folks who are living one paycheck away from homelessness -- and I saw that every single day.

And none of this addresses the questions of race and culture which enter into the mix in so many communities, big and small across this nation of ours. From Hmong refugees, from transplanted Iraqis to inter-city enclaves of African-American and Hispanic groups -- and we're not even going to get into the sub-sets of all of those. All over the map in terms of origin. These are enormous problems that do not translate well in the age of sound-bite journalism. What does translate, though, and this is where I think some progress can be made is the individual stories that are involved. This is something that Colbert King, I think, addressed in the earlier panel.

What does -- the family narrative that grips your heart as much as it grabs your intellect -- that's what translates well. At our root, we are still humans in search of a good story, and I think that may be the key to bringing this issue to the public fore again.

It is something that we frequently do on our blog at Firedoglake.com, present a personal hook on a complex issue. Personal stories can make a world of difference in terms of interest and in terms of being able to tell a wider ranging complex set of facts, while holding the interest of our readers.

Granted, we have a self-selecting pool of liberal readers at our blog, but we also have the luxury of day in, day out immediate contact with our readership, a lot of whom provide those personal stories. We've done that with folks who are still struggling to rebuild in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita -- we have done that with families who have been devastated by losses in Iraq and Afghanistan. I did a long story in the aftermath of the death of miners in West Virginia last January because that was a personal story of loss for me and one that my readers had interest in.

We have found that when people can care about a story on an individual level, it broadens that story's appeal to caring about the bigger issues and working towards solving the problems that are inherent in them.

Whether this is a model that could work in a greater media context, I'm not certain. I remember -- the news stories that I remember most are the ones which were personal -- the great Charles Kuralt pieces like the one that featured Terrance Smith earlier. The 60 Minutes exposes and often the Ed Bradley jazz stories that we saw. The Studs Terkel neighborhood vignettes that he used to do, a lot of what, you know Colbert King and Eugene Robinson get to do on the editorial pages at the Washington Post -- those neighborhood issues are the ones that resonate, I think, for readers across the board, whatever their economic condition. If we can find a way to encourage that and to push those issues to the fore in a political context #NAME? activism -- then I think it can help to drive the National conversation. And I'll stop there.