

## **Influencing Issues of the Consumer Interest: Roles and Opportunities for Researchers, Educators, and Partners in the Media**

The workshop included an example of a social journalism project Poverty Among Us™ with the Saint Paul Pioneer Press Newspaper and researchers at University of Minnesota. The report includes background information on how to become involved and some of the principles to use in working as a partner with the media. Citations for copies of reprints are included.

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### **Introduction**

Dissemination of research-based information for use by consumers is part of the mission of land-grant universities. Conventionally, research-based information is shared at professional meetings such as ACCI and in our professional journals. Also through Cooperative Extension, research findings are shared via multi-media including on-site sessions with learners. Less frequently is the information disseminated through the mass media. Yet, the mass media reaches many more potential users of the findings. Sometimes research findings are announced in a news release and editors may choose or may not choose to print. Other times there may be a personal connection that facilitates the dissemination of the research with the public. Social Journalism, also called Civic Journalism by many is a way to work with the media to disseminate and interpret findings for the consumers of the mass media. Since consumers get much of the information about current issues from the mass media, the connection between researchers and educators and the media has potential for impact. The media is particularly adept at increasing awareness, which is a first step in any issue analysis or response.

Poverty Among Us™ was a social journalism project on which Drs. Bauer and Braun and Ms. Olson worked with the St. Paul Pioneer Press Reader Advocate, Community Outreach Coordinator and Student Intern as framers of the project during the winter and spring of 1998. In order to share the impact of the award-winning project, we will describe what we did and some of the content of the project. The details are shared to understand how our consultancy grew into a much larger role and a connection for long term working relationship with the media. In the beginning, there was no sense of the resulting impact of the working relationship. All that the university team wanted was recognition for help in framing the outcome. The team was already recognized for their work in framing the concept from welfare to well-being. We had something to share with the newspaper to help accomplish a greater goal of assisting families and communities around issues relating to welfare and poverty.

Shortly after the project began, Dr. Braun suggested to the newspaper team that this had the potential to be an award-winning series. It won two national awards in winter of 1999. This was said in one award announcement:

"Poverty Among Us" is an illuminating look at the underclass that combined detailed reporting with strong storytelling and compelling photography. As a distinguished example of civic journalism, it provided some wonderful hooks. "Do the Math," what people have to live on - is a just one example. Civic participation moved to a new level with the concepts of a tool kit, discussion guides and a book club, reinforcing the ideas that an informed citizenry is best equipped to deal with pressing public issues.

Another article "St. Paul, San Francisco and Portland News Organizations Win 1999 Batten Prize for Excellence in Civic Journalism" heralded the project. They said:

In 'Poverty Among Us' the St. Paul Pioneer Press chronicled, once a month for seven months, what it was like to be poor in Minnesota at a time when the official welfare safety net was replaced by welfare-to-work programs. The paper told the story through the eyes of schoolchildren, the working poor, immigrants and others. But the paper didn't stop there. It tried to pull readers into a conversation about poverty by conducting a major public opinion poll on attitudes towards poverty, by forming book clubs on the literature of poverty with the St. Paul

Public Libraries, by publishing interviews with the poor on its web site and by providing discussion guides and tool kits for those wanting to organize discussion groups. (<http://www.pewcenter.org/batten/pr1999.htm>).

### **Development of Relationships between Researchers, Educators, and Media**

Some literature supports the principles that were practical with the cooperative exchange between the researchers, educators, and partners in the media. The media often address issues but do not include what the community can do to understand and be involved with the changing of the fabric of the community. A report by the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families included an analysis of the Welfare Reform's coverage in the media. Past articles included budgets—federal, state and county were 21.6%, the federal to state government control shift 17.4%, levels of employment 15.9%; children's well being 15.5%, adult behaviors (seeking work) 11.6% and welfare caseloads 11.5%. The poverty level of the families involved or the impact of the situation on the communities was not mentioned as results from the journalism (Domiquez-Arms & Prunty, 1998).

Information on civic journalism or social journalism provides some guidelines for the media: it is important to separate rhetoric from reality. To do this, scrutinize data and research thoroughly, and develop a reservoir of sources. Study policy, theories, laws and research that bear on the topic of interest. Make the stories as local as possible. To do that, the staff at the Saint Paul Pioneer Press Newspaper teamed themselves with the team from the University of Minnesota, and local community leaders to make sure that the project was grounded and met their objectives of: greater understanding of changes in welfare policy; increased awareness of realities people face in the transition from welfare to work; identification of changes on individuals, organizations and communities; and the generation and documentation of comments and ideas.

### **Poverty Among Us™ Project**

This section summarizes the seven months series and gives examples of how the University of Minnesota team worked with the newspaper in shaping the project. The stories over the series were developed by the 7 reporters and several photographers with the editors of the paper. The Reader Advocate, Nancy Conner, Patricia Peterson, and Maia Werner, the two community consultants, met monthly with us to frame and discuss the project from the connection to the community and with the emphasis of making a difference. They viewed us as very knowledgeable about the population and having connections to the community through direct programming. Sometimes the reporters were in the meeting for a short period, when the discussions connected directly to what they were doing. Often the reporters would call us to see if we had resources for them to use. For example, they used extension materials for developing the family budgets in the stories. In addition, a column on the tax credits was requested following of our lengthy discussions.

An outreach intern from the newspaper coordinated community conversations. She prepared a notebook that included a group discussion guide, background information, discussion questions, and book club information where additional information could be found at the public libraries. The notebook included some extension materials developed for other reasons such as the Braun and Bauer (1997) Citizen's Guide for Understanding Welfare-to-Well-Being. It included how to understand the situation (legislation, community values of well-being, need among children and families, capacity to provide assistance, and cost and benefits of alternatives), consider involvement (costs and benefits), and acting on reflective thinking. Also included are five components for understanding the situation: information, issues, impacts, implications, and imperative.

A poll conducted by the Wilder Research Center, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, for the newspaper was used to anchor the stories. In the 7-county metro area around Minneapolis and St. Paul, 1202 adult residents were interviewed from December 13, 1997 to February 18, 1999. The first of the series ran three days after the poll with the topic: The Road Out of Poverty. The story used some of the poll information to share the attitudes of the people and indicate that the attitudes about poverty and its solutions are deeply rooted in a Midwestern work ethic. The paper used the poll to raise questions about the community, the people, the businesses, and schools where everyone is familiar with their own situation. They put forth 6 benchmarks to measure poverty. The traditional items were used: poverty rates, children in poverty, the working poor, urban poverty, poverty of minorities, and welfare caseload. These were presented with the usual type of graphics we are accustomed to seeing in our media. St. Paul, Minneapolis, and suburbs were the areas highlighted for sharing during the seven monthly segments.

Part 1 of the series was "The Road Out of Poverty." The introduction was framed in self-sufficiency language. "New laws have been designed to move Minnesotan off welfare, and, it is hoped, into self-sufficiency. But leaving poverty behind is a complicated process. Pen Em is like many Minnesotans who face new challenges as

they try to make they way out of poverty.” This story told of a Hmong grandmother who is 47 years old and lives with 3 children still at home, and 3 grandchildren. One of her children fits the popular image of a single mother with children and under 18 years old. All seven people live on \$1400 per month. She baby-sits for several other grandchildren that her adult children drop off during the day while they work. The article asked questions for the community conversations that were organized by the intern with the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

Part 2—“Barely Making It” told a story of life above the poverty line—barely. “Lavern Grayer, works long, hard hours with few benefits to keep her family off welfare. Her life of the working poor—the grim interlude between welfare and self-sufficiency, where a single illness or family crisis can wipe out progress.” The 41 year old mother of four works 11 hours a day at a fast food establishment, plus 500 hours of overtime a year. All of this plus tax credits enabled her to take home about \$20,500, just above the poverty line. This article had questions for the stakeholders. The statement asked: “Ninety percent of Minnesotans aren’t poor. Beyond general sympathy, what interest does the majority have in the well-being of the less fortunate 10 percent?” Interests were included for taxpayers, businesses, charities and religious congregations, and neighborhoods. The university team recommended the merits of the discussion using a system approach and allowing for everyone to find space in a discussion that shifted from welfare to well-being, a theme we had been using for over a year.

The examples and pictures for this segment, in addition to the African American 41 year-old working mother, were a single dad with 3 children making \$1110 a month with access to food stamps, and a 38 year old mother from rural Minnesota who was raised in a middle-class home in one of the better off suburbs, but dropped out of high school and married as a teen. Now after fleeing an abusive marriage, she lives in a 25-year old mobile home and drives a school bus for a net monthly income of \$650 to \$850 a month. Another example was a couple living on unemployment and the wife’s part-time job for \$770 a month. They were 27 year old high school graduates from the Iron Range, traditionally an economically depressed part of the state. During the good season (non snow) he is a employee of a roofing construction company, and she cares for their 1,3, 4 year old children. When he is unemployed, she works and they wait out the rough times. The discussion topics for the groups were around working poor and focused on the consequences and solutions for adults, teens, and children.

Part 3—“The Undertow: The Legacy of Family Poverty” was on teen pregnancy and family history of poverty and efforts to rise to self-sufficiency. This part addressed-- How can we interrupt these forces? “Among the myriad obstacles people in poverty face are hidden forces like a family heritage that passes on the poverty from one generation to the next.” One story was of a 17 year old, who shares her bedroom with her 13 month old son in her mother’s home. She balances parenting, alternative school, work, and her limited social life as she plans a means to get to college so that she can provide for herself and son with marketable skills. The article asked questions about kids having kids and tells stories of an African American, 28 year old mom of 6 children who maintains a 3.6 GPA at a community college as a means out. She moved to Minnesota from Cabrini-Green in Chicago, IL because she needed a better situation. The focus for the community groups was on teen pregnancy and poverty for adults, teens, and children. Information of places where volunteers are matched with welfare families was part of the story.

Part 4—“When Poverty Comes to School” discussed how education is supposed to be the great social equalizer, but poverty taxes poor students in ways that affects their lives and the community. Schools have learned that poverty and problems are not left at the school door. The research about children and school achievement was included and facts about children receiving free/reduced-priced school lunches and dropping out of school as examples of hidden poverty. The article talked about children in school whose families lack cars and computers, so low-income children are isolated in schools with both affluent and low-income children. The children are quiet and not assertive when they don’t pal around after school with other children report the teachers. One-parent families are stretched with working to make ends meet, and so the socialization of children get pushed lower. Constant moving is a problem for the children in school as well as for others. The article talked about the citizen participation in the political process for adequate schools and the opportunities for volunteerism with children. The discussion was around , “why should we care if there is poverty in schools?” Ideas and statements were for educators, parents, students, businesses, and homeowners. Again the systems approach was very evident and the discussion of the interaction of taxes and school quality and property values of neighborhoods. In this segment a story was included on the University of Minnesota Extension Service, Family Nutrition Program and its contributions.

Part 5—“A Foot in the Door”—The welfare-to-work transition, along with a tight labor market, has employers willing to train people they might otherwise ignore. Such programs raise the stakes for both would-be workers and potential employers. The story was of Pao Vang’s experience with a manufacturing complex that is training and hiring immigrants. Manufacturing, hospitals, and high-tech firms are competing for immigrants, welfare participants, and other job applicants once considered too much trouble to hire. Instead, these companies know that this is smart business to eliminate the formal barriers like tests and replacing them with pre-training for

applicants in basic job skills. Some offer English on the job. The story tells about Pao's 16 year old daughter that works as a part-time cashier. It outlines the differences of a parent's perspective for school and young people's desire for fun. Finding low-cost housing near the jobs in the suburbs is a major barrier for participants on welfare. One story was about a class action suit to move families from public housing, without places for them to go with their families. A mother of 3 teenage sons found housing outside of the concentrated poverty areas and she shares how the community helped her to have a new safety net. She had looked at 80 different places in last 3 years trying to find housing for her family. Housing is one of the major issues for the community and the poverty among us.

Part 6—"Lacking Support" segment was about child-support collections and how the government vowed to ease the burden. Little progress has been made, even in Minnesota, which leads the nation in aggressive collection. Stories included the struggle to get child support payments in arrears, current concerns when the parents are trying, but the person owing child support does not make enough money to pay the support. The poll included information about divorce rates and child support in the Twin Cities. Stories were about children who want to have Dad to talk with and share. The information for the community included where to get help with child support collection.

Part 7—"Antidotes to Poverty." This was a community report of the response to poverty, the consensus on a myriad of solutions to poverty. The community group discussions occurred over the six months. A Visions for Community Forum was held for all the groups. Dr. Bauer was a participant along with other community leaders and the director of Minnesota Family Investment Program (our welfare reform program). Brainstorming had occurred as to what could be accomplished with the community vision. The theme "It's in our Hands," a suggestion from our team, became the call for action. A mission statement including where we want our community to go was developed at the forum and printed as part of the last of the series. The university team was involved in the final editing and made sure some futuristic ideas, such as Individual Development Accounts, were included in solutions.

A Community Action Pack for groups to use was developed following the series. The university team (Braun, Bauer, and Olson) were listed at the top of the acknowledgments. It was extremely rewarding to know that we were part of the team to change the face of the poverty discussion for St. Paul, Minnesota. Working with the media in a role of framer rather than asking them to print something from our research or educational program has gained us long-term working relationships. As the awards were given this Spring, Dr. Bauer participated at the invitation of the Saint Paul Pioneer Press.

#### References

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#### Endnotes

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