

Devils and Angels

The Ideological Construction of Poverty Stories on RTE Television

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Thesis presented for the award of PhD.

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Submitted April 1996.

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the degree of PhD, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my own work.

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis investigates how Radio Telefis Éireann (RTE) constructs television stories about poverty. Using a combination of critical content analysis and an ethnography of the production context of television programmes, the study examines poverty stories on factual, fictional and fund-raising television. The study begins with an account of how existing social science discourse has considered the phenomenon of poverty in the Republic of Ireland. It proceeds to examine the limited amount of debate about media coverage of poverty. The case for a largely qualitative methodological approach is then outlined. The main part of the study is an analysis of how poverty stories are constructed on RTE's *Six-One News*, *Tuesday File*, *Glenroe* and the *People in Need Telethon*. Each of these four chapters consider the respective programmes in terms of their history, production context, the content of their poverty coverage, as well as a consideration of the ideology of that coverage. The study adopts Thompson's (1990) definition of ideology which is concerned with how asymmetrical relations of power and domination are established and sustained in contemporary capitalist societies. The final chapter argues that poverty coverage on RTE television is not only reductive, but also serves to render invisible, significant proportions of the population who are poor. The chapter suggests that Golding and Middleton's (1982) dichotomy of God's and the Devil's poor be recast, to take account of the central role which television coverage offers the agents of the poor. RTE television's coverage of poverty is shown to reproduce the liberalism which predominates in Irish society. The study concludes with a consideration of the theoretical and policy implications of the project's main research findings.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for their help. RTE Television, provided the financial support and access which were crucial for the development and completion of this project. In particular, I would like to thank Tony Fahy of RTE's Audience Research Department for his assistance from the beginning. Those who work in RTE and who were willing to help me with my study in the form of access and interviews deserve credit for their honesty and concern.

My research supervisors at DCU, Professor Farrel Corcoran and Dr. Helena Sheehan, provided immense support and advice through the predictable ups and downs of a project of this nature. If I have learnt anything from both, it is a combination of patience and punctuation skills! Des MacGuinness, Paschal Preston and Pamela Galvin also of DCU helped in a variety of ways. The staff and graduate students of DCU offered invaluable advice at the various research seminars which I presented in the 1990-1995 period.

At University of Limerick, I received much support from my colleagues in the Department of Government and Society. My Head of Department John Stapleton encouraged me in my work and proved flexible in terms of my teaching load. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. John Logan for his chat and charts, and Brian Keary for his usual incisiveness and coffee. Brian's comments on early drafts of my study and useful suggestions are deeply appreciated. Thanks also to Mary Hayes who helped with some data and content analysis and Cathal Kelly who proof-read and corrected the entire text. At various times Anne McCarthy, Anne-Marie O'Donnell and Lorraine Whelan assisted me with several parts of the project and I would like to record my gratitude. Eoin O'Sullivan of the Streetwise Coalition and TCD helped in terms of advice and providing articles of interest. I would also like to record my gratitude to my students at the University of Limerick for allowing me to share my ideas with them throughout various lecture courses.

Many thanks also to the editors of *Media, Culture and Society* (John Corner); *Irish Communications Review* (Ellen Hazelkorn); and the *Irish Journal of Sociology* (Tony Varley) who published earlier versions of parts of the study.

Love and soul to the following: Ger Fitzgerald who always reminds me of my roots and that underneath it all I am still a punk rocker!; Sarah Moore for always putting things in perspective; Niall (Let me introduce you to the family) McGowan for being Niall; Michael O'Flynn for his encouragement, wit and shared interest in Flann O'Brien; Sandra Loftus for her long-standing friendship and pints of plain; my nephew, John Devereux for his questions about 'my book'; and my family for putting up with me!

Most of all, I want to thank my wife Liz for her love, support and encouragement and for making everything right. Joe Devereux (aged 15 months) deserves thanks for being a good baby during the long nights and early mornings of 1995/1996.

Finally, a special word of thanks to my parents Eamon and Anne Devereux who had the foresight to encourage me in my studies and who have taught me the value of common-sense. This study is dedicated to both of them.

Eoin Devereux
April 30 1996

“I’d like to drop my trousers to the Queen

Every sensible child will know

What this means

The poor and the needy

Are selfish and greedy

On her terms ...”

The Smiths, “Nowhere Fast”

From the LP *Meat is Murder*, written by Morrissey and Marr.

© Warner Music (UK) 1984.

Introduction

In recent times Irish society has been characterised by record levels of unemployment, and in comparative European terms, a very high level of relative poverty. This study is concerned with a heretofore unexplored dimension of the Irish poverty question. It examines how the Irish public service broadcaster Radio Telefis Éireann (RTE) ideologically constructs stories about Irish poverty on its two television stations RTE 1 and Network 2. In doing so, it accepts the relative definition of poverty and assumes the media to be a powerful force in society.

The project asks whether there are a set of dominant messages about Irish poverty evident in factual, fictional and fund-raising television. In identifying the dominant themes of RTE's television coverage of poverty, the study opts for a research model which amalgamates a qualitative analysis of poverty texts with an attempt to understand the organisational and production contexts from which those texts emerge. Methodologically, therefore, it adopts an approach which combines a critical content analysis of a range of television programmes and a series of ethnographic accounts of their production.

The genesis of this project lies in my own experiences as a researcher with RTE. In 1990 after graduation from university, I worked for a number of months as a researcher with *The Pat Kenny Show*, a mid-morning current affairs radio programme on the Irish national radio service RTE Radio One. Filled with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, I began my work with this popular radio show, writing and researching programme items. For me, it was to be an important experience in terms of not only working with a prominent radio programme, but also in terms of learning about the factors which influence the production of radio stories.

I had come to the programme with a great deal of experience in working on local radio, but also as a person with a large number of contacts in the world of social research. As a researcher, it was my task to suggest ideas for the programme at production meetings. Given my links with those involved in undertaking research into

poverty, I had occasion to suggest items relating to poverty, the Travelling community, homelessness and unemployment. Although I did have some success in getting coverage for particular poverty stories, such as the alleged ill-treatment of women in a refuge for battered wives, I experienced frustration in gaining the interest of the programme makers in poverty issues. Stories might be turned down because of a perceived lack of interest which the audience might have in such items, or the fact that another current affairs programme might have recently covered a poverty issue.

More often than not, stories would be rejected because it was felt that there was nothing 'new' in them. After working on this programme, I returned to the academic world to teach sociology. The relatively short experience which I had in the world of national broadcasting was, however, to leave an indelible mark on my thinking on how the media works. As part of a series of courses which I began to give at the University of Limerick on the sociology of media, I started to think about the ways in which the media treat of the phenomenon of poverty.

I was intrigued by, as I saw it, two interconnected issues. It was apparent to me that there was quite a gap between the reported extent of poverty and unemployment in Irish society, and the extent to which these issues were visible in the media. In addition, I was curious about the make-up of the small number of stories which did actually make it on to the airwaves. In the context of the general invisibility of poverty, what had influenced their selection by broadcasters and what did the stories tell us, if anything, about the attitudes of those in television about poverty?

As somebody from a working class family who had made the leap into third level education, I was personally aware of the invisibility of the lives of my family, friends and neighbours, not only in school and university text books, but also in the mainstream media. I began to question why the poverty experienced by the people living in the housing estates, with which I was familiar, was not newsworthy or of particular interest to the media, save perhaps when they engaged in moral panics about violence, drug abuse or robberies. The struggle to survive, to make ends meet,

amongst the people with which I was readily familiar, was to my mind all but invisible in the newspapers that I read and the television programmes that I viewed.

It was in this context that I set out to devise this research project. My experience as a researcher within RTE convinced me that I should attempt to combine a critique of the dominant television images of poverty, with an appreciation of the factors which shaped their production. RTE, to their credit, agreed to fund the study as part of their PhD Fellowship Scheme for the period 1991–1995. The decision by RTE to support the project was not only important to me in financial terms, but it also meant that many otherwise closed doors in the organisation were opened, to allow me to probe the production context of the programmes I was interested in investigating. The station's representatives were keen on me exploring poverty coverage on both its television and radio networks. However, after some deliberation and a two-month pilot study, I decided to concentrate on television news, current affairs, drama and telethon programmes.

In doing so, I was interested in three basic though important questions. I wanted to establish whether or not there were dominant messages about Irish poverty across the range of factual, fictional and fund-raising television programmes, which I had selected for analysis. I also wanted to establish if RTE's poverty coverage differentiated between categories of deserving and undeserving poor. In addition, I wanted to explore the extent to which the organisational environment in which the poverty stories were made shaped their actual content. In short, I was concerned about the extent to which RTE's coverage of poverty could be considered to be ideological.

As I discuss in more detail in Chapters Two and Eight, television texts can be considered to be both ideological and hegemonic. In using the term 'ideology' in this project I am following closely on the work of Thompson (1990) who in revising the term argued that ideology meant "meaning in the service of power" (1990:6). Thompson's definition of ideology is concerned with explaining how ideas contribute to the maintenance of a social order based upon inherent inequality. O'Shaughnessy (1990) similarly explained ideology and hegemony by asserting that:

Both of these concepts [ideology and hegemony] are used as a way of understanding how the dominant groups of any society maintain and retain their power over subordinate groups [women, ethnic minorities, the working class and so on]. Whereas earlier Marxist theories stressed the economic and material conditions of life as crucial determining factors, these concepts stress the importance of the way people think and feel - their common-sense consciousness or ideology - for maintaining the power and hegemony of the dominant groups and obtaining the consent of the people in their own subordination. This consciousness can be understood as the ways in which we 'make sense' of the world, giving some kind of coherence to the society around us. (1990:89)

According to Gitlin (1980) the media can be viewed as important forms of cultural reproduction which function to both disseminate ideology (usually though not exclusively of the ruling classes) and allow the continuation of the existing social order. Ideology can also be hegemonic in that it allows the ruling classes to remain powerful through the moulding of popular consent. An examination of media portrayal of poverty is, as this project demonstrates, an important test of the media's ideological role. It allows us to see whether the media contribute to the reproduction of a social order where poverty and unemployment are seen as endemic, or whether it challenges the status quo, even in a limited way.

The remainder of this study is organised as follows. Chapter One sets out the broader social and political context in which this research was undertaken. It traces the contours of the debate about poverty in Irish society and focuses on both the extent of and public attitudes to Irish poverty. Chapter Two examines the limited amount of existing research literature on the media-poverty question. It argues for the retention of an approach which is concerned with examining the ideological make-up of media messages about poverty.

Chapter Three makes the case for a methodological model that is predominantly qualitative, drawing upon a critical content analysis and a series of ethnographic accounts of the production of the four selected programme areas.

Chapters Four to Seven provide the reader with an analysis of current affairs, news, telethon and television drama programmes. Each of these four chapters consider the respective programmes in terms of their history, production context, the content of their poverty coverage, as well as a consideration of the ideology of that coverage.

The study's final chapter deliberates on the invisibility of the Irish poor, the ideology in evidence within RTE's television coverage, as well as cautiously suggesting how the situation might be improved by RTE. In the light of the project's main findings, Chapter Eight also considers their implications in terms of the wider theoretical debate about the usefulness of the concept of ideology within media and communication studies.

Chapter One

Searching For The Irish Poor

Contents

- 1:1 Introduction**
- 1:2 Irish Poverty: (Re) Discovery and Debate**
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1:1 Introduction

Academic discourse about Irish poverty has been dominated by the quantitative survey-based approach, with a smaller number of qualitative ethnographic accounts also attempting to explain Irish poverty. Although these approaches differ in methodological terms, both paradigms have accepted a definition of poverty which is relative. This chapter attempts to sketch out the contours of the recent debate about poverty which has taken place in Irish society. It argues that the debate has to be seen as something, which has in some respects, its own identifiable peaks and valleys. Poverty has been on and off various academic, political and media agendas in recent times.

The two approaches used by Irish social scientists in measuring and explaining poverty are considered in terms of what they say about the extent and nature of the problem in an Irish context. The quantitative analyses are in general agreement that between one-quarter and one-third of the Irish population live in poverty, and the small number of qualitative studies which exist stress the exclusion and marginalisation which are a feature of the lives of the Irish poor. Irish public attitudes to poverty at home and in the Third World are also examined. It is suggested that there is some clear evidence that both the Irish public and the Irish media use constructions of poverty which involve notions of deserving and undeserving poor.

The construction of the poor in this way has as will be argued later in this study important ideological implications. The chapter offers a critique of the existing social science debate about Irish poverty and asserts that a consideration of the role of the media, and especially television, is of critical importance in terms of reaching a fuller understanding of the way in which a society like Ireland deals with inequality and poverty.

1:2 Irish Poverty: (Re) Discovery and Debate

We can identify two separate ‘discoveries’ of Irish poverty, the first in Nineteenth Century post-famine Ireland and a second more recent ‘rediscovery’ in the period 1971–1994.

Historically, the conditions of the Irish poor were the subject of many descriptive accounts by travel writers who visited Ireland (Foster, 1989). The mid Nineteenth Century, however, witnessed the first serious attempt at measuring the extent of poverty in both Ireland and Britain. This discovery was in response to both the legislative changes which had come about in terms of dealing with the poor, and in the growth in the mid Nineteenth Century of a movement which sought a more informed approach to the understanding of poverty.

The Poor Law of 1838 has been accused of being both oppressive and inhumane. Despite this, many authors have stressed the concern and interest of those administrators working under the Poor Law Commission and the Poor Law Boards in their attempts at investigating and reporting on poverty.

In terms of the extent of poverty in Ireland, the work of the Congested Districts Boards, which was carried out in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, also revealed glimpses of the situation of the Irish poor. Kane referred to the work undertaken by the board in Gweedore, County Donegal in 1894, which told of:

Northern Donegal people who had not tasted meat for 10 years, and whose diet in 1894, during the months when the potatoes had run out, were stirabout for dinner, and bread and tea again for the last meal of the day. (1972:417)

In terms of understanding poverty, the value of this approach rests in its historical significance, bridging as it does the gap between descriptive travel accounts of poverty and a more systematic way of measuring and explaining poverty.

It has been noted by many commentators that up until the early 1970s, no major studies were undertaken into the question of Irish poverty by any of the research institutes or university departments. Yet the period between 1971 and 1994 witnessed an upsurge in the debate about poverty with claim and counterclaim being made by researchers about the extent and nature of poverty in Irish society.

The Rediscovery of Poverty

The more recent debate about the extent and nature of poverty in Ireland did not begin until 1971, the year which saw the first Kilkenny Conference on Poverty.¹ Although we can cite examples of small scale poverty research being done in Ireland in the earlier parts of the century,² in the newly founded state it was effectively kept off the agenda in both academic³ and political discourse. At most, poverty related themes such as emigration were investigated but without reference to their structural causes.⁴

¹ See Harrington (1962) for an example of the discovery of poverty in the USA. See Sinfield (1972) for a view on the British rediscovery of poverty.

² See for example McSweeney's *A Study of Poverty in Cork City* (1915) McSweeney surveyed "... 1,000 families, comprising 5,000 persons in a poor part of the city. He found that half of the families had an income of less than 21 shillings a week and were very poor."

³ However, as I have noted elsewhere, the question of poverty (understood in terms of a subsistence definition) did occasionally arise in the debates amongst some intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. Those who were supporters of the Catholic Social Movement, discussed poverty in two often contradictory ways. First, the existence of poverty in rural Ireland was acknowledged and it was suggested that the best way to overcome this was through the vocationalist re-ordering of society. Second, given the movement's anti-urban stance, the harsh living conditions of the urban poor were often cited as reasons why the countryside was better than the city. See Devereux (1991).

⁴ See for example *The Report of The Commission on Emigration* (1956).

Visiting scholars, particularly those working within the tradition of social anthropology who were inspired by a Functionalist paradigm, chose to ignore the poor conditions in which Irish peasants were living.⁵ In de Valera's Ireland, rural poverty was almost the ideal state of being, while in Lemass's Ireland of the 1960s, it was hoped that even the poverty boat would be lifted high and dry by the rising tides of modernisation and promised affluence. The question was also ignored in the universities by the domination of departments by Catholic Social Teaching masquerading as sociology. O'Conneide (1980) noted that:

In a report dated 1973, *An Agenda for Poverty Research* by a working group established by the directors of five research institutes engaged in social science research presented what was intended as an exhaustive list of published material on poverty in Ireland. The only items dating from before 1970 were an article on the distribution of non-agricultural incomes, the report on a manpower survey, and reports on studies done in a poor urban area and in two underdeveloped rural areas, as well as the work by Kaim-Caudle (on social security and housing). 1970 saw the publication of an analysis of non-agricultural employment, an account of Home Assistance, the residual public assistance service, and an attitude survey which referred to low pay. (1980:54)

Significant changes and events which occurred in this society in the 1960s however were to fuel the beginnings of a debate about Irish poverty in the 1970s. The urbanisation and industrialisation of Irish society were to bring with it not only modernisation and social change, but also a growth (for some) in affluence. This switch from what was predominantly a rural peasant culture to the beginnings of a modern urban society was to bring with it a growth in awareness of the existence of both haves and have nots. Other developments at the time are also worthy of consideration.

The 1960s witnessed the emergence of a small but vibrant left-wing critique of Irish society, with the Labour Party proclaiming, for example, that the 1970s would

⁵ Most criticism in this respect has focused on Arensberg and Kimball's (1968) study *Family and Community in Ireland* See in particular Gibbon (1973).

be socialist. The Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland raised the question of the many inequalities in areas such as housing and employment being experienced by Catholics, while in the Republic's Irish speaking districts, the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement pointed to the question of regional inequalities and the poor standard of living being experienced by those who were expected to preserve the nation's heritage and culture. The state itself undertook research into the poor living conditions of the Travelling community, publishing the first comprehensive report in 1963 on the poverty of those it called itinerants.

The arrival of public service television played no small part in bringing about a growth in awareness that poverty and inequality were endemic to this modernising society. A 1964 *Radharc* documentary entitled *Down and Out in Dublin* examined the experience of homeless men in the country's capital city, while a now famous edition of the RTE current affairs programme *Seven Days* tackled the question of alleged illegal money lending to Dublin's poor.⁶

A certain amount of research into the culture and living conditions of a section of the Irish poor had begun by the late 1960s as the Irish Travelling community were the focus of interest for researchers and activists.⁷ The social anthropologist Gmelch began her fieldwork in 1971 into the culture of the Irish Travellers, while McCarthy, following the Lewis notion of the 'culture of poverty' completed her (1971) study *Itinerancy and Poverty: A Study in the Subculture of Poverty*.

The event, however, usually cited as the opening shot in the discussion about Irish poverty was the reading by O'Conneide of a paper at the first *Kilkenny Conference on Poverty* organised by the Catholic Bishops' Council for Social Welfare, in which the author claimed that levels of poverty in Irish society might be as high as 24%. There followed a lively and widespread debate about Irish poverty in

⁶ In his essay 'The Creation of RTE and the Impact of Television' Mac Conghail noted that "A *Seven Days* programme transmitted on 11 November 1969 in which it was alleged among other things that 'illegal money lending' was widespread in certain areas of Dublin. The *Seven Days* team failed before a judicial inquiry to justify its allegations as to the extent of the incidence involved". In Farrell (1984) (ed.).

⁷ See for example Bewley (1971).

religious, academic, political, and media circles. The journal *Social Studies* was to publish O'Connell's and a range of other papers which took Irish poverty as their theme the following year.

The discovery of poverty within academic discourse rippled out to be taken on board by political activists and certain sections of the media. *The Late Late Show* for example, gave over an entire edition of the programme to debate the question of one section of the Irish poor — the Travellers.⁸ On the political front, both the Labour Party and Fine Gael incorporated the poverty question into their manifestos. The Labour Party, still working in the shadow of their confident predictions of the 1960s that “the 1970s will be socialist”, published a report entitled *Poverty in Ireland*.

In 1973 both Labour and Fine Gael recognised the new importance being placed on the poverty question by their explicit references to the issue in their joint programme for government. Fianna Fáil, on the other hand, chose to ignore the issue of poverty and rarely, if ever, referred to the existence of poverty in Irish society.

It was clear that by the mid 1970s that the discovery of Irish poverty had happened. This growth in awareness about poverty was further underpinned by the fact that the promised affluence of the 1960s and the benefits which were said to accrue from Ireland's entry into the EEC did not materialise. The early 1970s witnessed the oil crisis, the growth in unemployment levels and the first of several economic recessions to affect the country.⁹ Commenting on the 1970s, Brown (1981) summarised the decade as follows:

Undoubtedly in the sixties and seventies many experienced living standards higher than any they had known in the past, but poor housing conditions, in bleak, ill-planned areas of the major cities were settings for vandalism, drug abuse, petty crime and the lives of quiet desperation in the way of city life in much of the Developed World.

⁸ This was broadcast in the 1972 season of the programme. See Byrne (1972).

⁹ For perspectives on the 1970s and the 1980s in the print media see for example, Jim Downey, “Whose Kind of Country”, *The Irish Times*, 28 December 1978, p. 2 and Kevin O'Connor, “The Irish in Their New Age”, *The Irish Times*, 7 January 1980, p. 14.

Despite the economic improvements of the last two decades, poverty, particularly in the inflation-dogged seventies, has scarred the lives of many Irishmen and women in years when social progress, the outcome of increased opportunities in a modernising society, was assumed to be a primary contemporary fact. (1981:264)

There were further attempts by researchers in the late 1970s to estimate the extent of poverty in Irish society. O'Conneide published a report in 1980 which sought to update his 1971 material to 1975 figures using a more sophisticated database.

The issue of poverty in Irish society was to be explored in greater depth in the 1980s, with the publication of new studies by Joyce and MacCashin (1982), Fitzgerald (1981), Rottman, Hannan et al. (1981), Roche (1984) and the ESRI (1987). These studies, like their 1970s predecessors, gave rise to further debate about the actual extent of poverty in society.

The 1990s witnessed additional research and debate on the problem of Irish poverty. These discussions took place in the context of a number of key changes which affected the poor. The optimism of the 1960s, and the relatively large scale public spending of the early 1970s, gave way to a more austere state which was following strict monetarist policies by the 1980s. That decade and the early years of the 1990s saw significant cutbacks in public spending, which affected provisions in terms of education, housing, health and public transport.

The first wave of poverty research in the 1970s saw potential for improving the lot of the poor through tinkering with the workings of the social welfare system. By the early 1990s, however, unemployment itself (standing at 21%) had clearly outstripped any attempts at reformist solutions to poverty through changing the social welfare system. Indeed, given the scale of the specific problem of unemployment, attentions focused on it, rather than poverty per se.

It is important to note also at this juncture that the broader political and ideological climate in which poverty was being debated changed also. As I discuss in

more detail in Chapter Eight, with the exception perhaps, of a number of small left-wing political groups such as the Socialist Workers' Movement or the Workers' Party, by the early 1990s, those who were traditionally on the left in Irish politics, and who had once campaigned on behalf of the poor, had reoriented themselves towards the centre and embraced the notion of a mixed economy. Thus, those who had published on behalf of the poor in the 1970s were conspicuous in their silence in the 1990s.

Academic research and debate on the question of poverty was, however, to continue in this period. The ESRI and the Combat Poverty Agency (both state funded) continued to undertake research into Irish poverty. Given that Ireland was a fully fledged member of the European Community, two schemes funded by Europe which sought to combat poverty were in operation during the 1980s and early 1990s and were very important in the commissioning of poverty research. Groups other than research institutes, such as The Conference of Major Religious Superiors, also began to commission research about poverty in attempting to back up their lobbying activities with hard data about the nature and extent of poverty in Irish society.

The recent debate about poverty in an Irish context was added to, by the consideration of poverty by some sections of both the women's movement and the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰ This 'feminisation' of Irish poverty was in line with developments in Britain and the USA.¹¹ Within the Roman Catholic Church, individual priests and nuns have championed the cause of the poor, and religious orders like the Redemptorists and the Jesuits, influenced by their work in the Third World, have adopted a perspective which has been largely influenced by the doctrines of Liberation Theology. This position argued that the future of the Christian tradition lay in the church siding with the poor and dispossessed in society. It must be noted, however, that this perspective went against the grain of the more traditional Irish

¹⁰ See Dorr (1983).

¹¹ See in particular Daly (1989).

Roman Catholic stance which has not been the greatest champion of the poor or critic of the status quo.

In addition to these changes, the 1980s and 1990s also witnessed several agent groups such as Minceir Misli — The Irish Travellers Movement, and The Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed, becoming more involved in lobbying about the poverty which affected their particular poverty group.

In conclusion, the debate about Irish poverty over the last 25 years has been characterised by a number of key features. Although Irish poverty was evidently rediscovered in the early 1970s, the debate about poverty has ebbed and flowed, and in some respects has been overshadowed by the crisis of unemployment. The changing ideological climate in mainstream Irish politics has all but pushed the issue of poverty outside of the frame.

With a number of minor exceptions, research into poverty in the recent past has been undertaken by either state or EC funded agencies. Much of this research, while acknowledging the alarming scale of Irish poverty, has framed its analysis and proposed solutions strictly in the context of reform of the liberal–democratic state. Reformism, and not a radical overhaul of the social and economic system, has dominated the formal discourse about Irish poverty. In reality, very little has been done to either alleviate or eliminate poverty. The expansion of the media, particularly the development of public service television, played a key role in the public debate about poverty especially in the 1970s and early 1980s. As this chapter argues below, it is the media dimension to the discourse about Irish poverty which deserves greater attention. To talk about a rediscovery of poverty is in some respects a misnomer, however, as the visibility of the issue has been subject to the vagaries of academic, media, political and public discourse.

1:3 Meaning and Measurement: The Nature and Extent of Irish Poverty

Although the more recent debate about poverty began somewhat later in Ireland, it followed the orientation of mainstream discussions in the UK and the USA. Irish poverty research has adopted a relative approach in terms of defining poverty, and has by and large followed the poverty line method in attempts to measure the extent of poverty.¹² Within academic discourse, Irish poverty is understood to be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.¹³ There remains a tension however between those who take an ethnographic perspective in attempting to understand poverty (O'Neill, 1992) and those who utilise a large scale quantitative survey based approach (Callan and Nolan, 1986).¹⁴ Either way, the varying estimations of poverty in the main poverty surveys and the more detailed case-study method of the ethnographies, make for grim reading. The findings of both approaches suggest, that Irish society is characterised by a high level of relative poverty (as high as 34%), which affects the lives of amongst others the long-term unemployed, women, children, the elderly and small farmers.

In the following section we turn to examine the main features of social scientific studies which have examined poverty in Ireland. Both quantitative and

¹² There has been some debate about the measurement of poverty, specifically in relation to the use of equivalence scales and the question of undeclared income. See Barrat (1989) and Callan et al. (1989) for a reply.

¹³ Irish rural poverty has been explored by Varley (1988) in the context of his examination of the workings of the rural projects of the Second European Combat Poverty Programme, while the features of poverty in urban Ireland have been explored by many writers (see for example Sheehan and Walsh, 1988). The experience of particular groups of people who are more likely to be in the ranks of the poor in Irish society has received a great deal of attention by researchers. Rottman et al. (1982) examined the question of poverty and inequality in terms of social class. Women's poverty and lone parent families in particular have been described by Daly (1989). Other groups which Irish research into poverty has taken an interest in include the following: the Travellers (see for example, Gmelch, 1989; Daly, 1988), and the long-term unemployed (see for example Evason, 1985).

¹⁴ See Wilson and Ramphel (1989) for analysis of the relationship between these two contrasting approaches.

qualitative approaches are considered in terms of their respective strengths and weaknesses. Between 1971 and 1987 six large-scale studies attempted to estimate the extent of Irish poverty. As Table 1:1 shows, these studies used a variety of data sources, various concepts of income, a range of poverty lines and equivalence scales in their efforts to measure Irish poverty.

Table 1:1

The Main Features of Irish Quantitative Studies of Poverty

Study	Results refer to year	Main data source	Income Concept	Income Recipient Unit	Equivalence Scales	Poverty Lines	Estimated % Poor
O' Cinneide (1972)	1971	Administrative data	Gross income	Individual/family	Ad hoc	Ad hoc (based partly on UK Supp. Benefit Rates)	24% of P.
O' Cinneide (1980)	1975	Administrative data	Gross Income	Individual/Family	Derived From EEC Attitude Survey	1971 line updated +50%	27% of P.
Roche, in Joyce and McCashin (1982)	1973	Household Budget Survey (HBS)	Disposable income (net of some rent)	Household	UA implicit Scales	(A) UA (B) UA +20% (C) UA + 40%	(A) 10% (B) 15% (C) 23%
Fitzgerald (1981)	1973	HBS, administrative statistics	Disposable	Household	Based on UK Studies	Equivalent to contrib. old age pension rate for couple	30% H
Roche (1984)	1980	HBS	Disposable (net of some rent)	Household	UA implicit scales	(A) 1973 UA, adjusted for increase in CPI and GNP, (B) = (A) + 20%, (C) = (A) + 40%	(A) 4% H (B) 7% H (C) 12% H
ESRI (1987)	1987	Survey of income distribution, poverty and usage of state services.	Disposable	Household	Scales A, B, C and D.	(1) 40% of Disposable Income, (2) 50% of Disposable Income, (3) 60% of Disposable Income	(1) 13% H (2) 23% H (3) 34% H

Source: Adapted from Callan and Nolan, 1986 and 1988.

O' Cinneide (1971) brought together a range of administrative sources using data from Farm Management Surveys, the Census of Retail Distribution and the Census of Industrial Production. He used a set of *ad hoc* scales for different types of family from a comparison of Unemployment Assistance (UA) and Unemployment Benefit (UB) rates in the Republic of Ireland and the Supplementary Benefit Rates in Northern Ireland. On the basis of his analysis of this piecemeal data, O' Cinneide

concluded that as many as 24% of the population fell below his suggested poverty line. The major weakness of O'Connell's important paper was that his data did not allow for much analysis of individuals and households, as the data said nothing of how income was distributed within families or households.

O'Connell's attempts at estimating Irish poverty were to continue and his next study attempted to update his findings for the year 1975. In that study, O'Connell (1980) used similar data sources and he adjusted the 1971 poverty line to take account of price increases between that year and 1975. He also increased the poverty line by 50% to take account of the findings of an EEC attitude survey which asked its respondents to estimate the minimum income required to have a 'non poor way of life'. In his second study, O'Connell concluded that 27% of the population were below his reconstituted poverty line.

Roche (1979) used a number of poverty lines to measure the extent of poverty and the composition of the Irish poor. He based them on UA rates from mid 1973. The lines were the UA rate itself, the UA rate plus 20% and the UA rate plus 40%. Roche's sample from the 1973 Household Budget Survey (HBS) indicated that the percentage of households under these poverty lines were 10%, 15% and 23%. These households contained in turn 8%, 10% and 21% of the population respectively.

Fitzgerald (1981) also analysed the results of the 1973 HBS to investigate the income going to households at the bottom of income distribution. She zoned in on the lowest 20% and lowest 30% and adjusted their incomes to accommodate differences in household size and make up. In examining the lowest 30% and by adjusting their incomes to 1980, she concluded that:

The standard of living obtainable on social welfare pensions today corresponds roughly to our current perception of what it is to be poor. By that definition, about 30% of households in 1973 could be regarded as poor. (1981:18)

Fitzgerald's lowest 20% had incomes of three-quarters of this level or less. She also examined the data on those receiving social welfare payments and attempted to identify those who were long-term dependants on these payments and who had no other income source. She concluded that "about one in five" of the population in 1980 were dependent on social welfare as their main long-term source of income and she estimated this figure to be about 700,000 people.¹⁵

Roche's (1984) study made use of the data available from the 1980 HBS and he drew upon a range of poverty lines. He adjusted the three poverty lines which he had previously used in 1973 to take cognisance of the increases in GNP per head of population between 1973 and 1980. Roche argued that the 1980 data indicated that 4% of the population was below the lowest poverty line, 7% below the second and 12% below the third. Roche's findings were at variance with those of O'Connell (1971, 1980) and Fitzgerald (1981) in that they suggested a substantial decrease in poverty levels between the estimates of 1973 and 1980.

The most comprehensive quantitative analysis of Irish poverty to date was undertaken by the ESRI in 1987. The data for the project was drawn from a dedicated household survey of income distribution, poverty and the use of state services. The study used a range of equivalence scales¹⁶ and three different poverty lines. In constructing this project, the ESRI allowed for more detailed analysis of their data in the use of 'subjective' poverty lines (see Callan and Nolan, 1986, 1987, 1988). The

¹⁵ Callan and Nolan (1987:162) noted that "The basis for the 'one million poor' referred to (albeit with a question mark) in the title of the book in which this paper appears is not clear. Kennedy (1981) refers to both the 700,000 people dependent on social welfare long-term given by Fitzgerald, and the '30% of all households in poverty' also estimated by Fitzgerald. The number of people in these households is not calculated, however. Both Kennedy and Fitzgerald also refer to the fact that nearly one million people (including dependants) were in receipt of social welfare payments each week: "of course, not all would be dependent on social welfare for their principle long-term source of income."

¹⁶ The ESRI (1987) household survey used four types of equivalence scales. In Scale (A), the household head was attributed a value of 1, and the remaining adults were given a value of 0.7, and all children a value of 0.5. Scale (B) allowed a smaller amount — relative to the household head — to the remaining adults and children, here the household head was valued at 1 and other adults were 0.6 and children 0.4. Scale (C) allowed relatively more to additional adults and less to children than Scale B did. Extra adults were attributed a value of 0.66 and children a value of 0.33. Scale (D) was viewed by the ESRI as "extreme" in that it attributed a value of 0.7 to additional adults and only 0.3 to children.

authors used poverty lines which were estimated to be 40%, 50% and 60% of disposable income.

When compared with data from the 1980 HBS, the study found that there was an increase in the number of households in poverty in 1987. The study also analysed the data in terms of 'per capita income gap' which took account of the extent to which the poor are said to have fallen below the poverty line. The ESRI study found that there was a definite increase in poverty between 1980 and 1987. Their research found that between 13% and 34% of the Irish population were living in poverty.

The quantitative studies considered above represent an important series of benchmarks from which we can draw a guarded set of conclusions. The lack of an official poverty line¹⁷ in an Irish context has rendered it difficult for researchers to make a set of conclusive statements about the extent of Irish poverty. The range of data sources used, as well as the variation in poverty lines and equivalence scales, would suggest that there remains a problem of arbitrariness in terms of where poverty lines are drawn.

In surveying the main studies on Irish poverty undertaken before the ESRI study in 1987, Callan and Nolan suggested that Irish poverty research of a quantitative kind was characterised by:

A relatively narrow approach ... [which] has been taken in measuring the extent of poverty in Ireland. Attention has been given to the simple head-count measure of the number of households/families falling below the 'official' line chosen. Our knowledge would obviously be improved by applying a range of poverty lines independent of the social security system; but we would also benefit from a more precisely defined role for the official lines. (1986:159)

¹⁷ It has to be said that an official poverty line is not without its problems. As well as taking the crucial decision as to what constitutes the official poverty line, theoretically, a state or government could by simply tinkering with the social welfare system, argue that poverty had been reduced or even abolished. See Callan et al. (1988), Sawhill (1988) and Geary (1989).

It has to be admitted, however, that despite these flaws, the main findings of quantitative poverty research have served poverty lobby groups well.¹⁸ The key findings of the research undertaken in the 1971–1987 period have been influential not only in policy terms, but also in influencing public debate about poverty. Fitzgerald's (1981) work in particular with its claim of 'One Million Poor' temporarily captured the imaginations of the public.

In spite of these successes, the quantitative paradigm was to come under attack from those who favoured a qualitative approach towards understanding poverty. In summary, the main accusation levelled at the quantitative approach was that, despite measuring Irish poverty, very little, if anything, was known about the experiences of being poor. The dependency of the earlier studies on poverty lines based on social welfare payments told nothing about the distribution of income within families and households, and in particular, quantitative poverty studies were accused of being gender and class blind.

Three key qualitative studies attempted to redress this imbalance by exploring the experiential dimensions of poverty. Byrne and Kelleher (1989) in *Pictures of Poverty* argued that:

Much of the current debate about poverty fails to convey the meaning and quality of life for low-income families; the emphasis is more often on quantitative information about the extent of poverty. (1989:7)

Through use of the case study approach, the authors allowed a wide range of representative examples of the Irish poor to speak for themselves. Byrne and Kelleher focused their attention on the survival strategies in which the poor engaged in order to make ends meet. They also stressed that many of the features of contemporary poverty are hidden ones, such as the feelings of guilt, stigmatisation and marginalisation.

¹⁸ See for example the successive pre-budget submissions by the Conference of Major Religious Superiors (1991, 1992) and the Combat Poverty Agency (1989, 1991).

These themes were also explored by Daly (1988, 1989a). In her study *Women Together Against Poverty* (1988), she dealt with the experiences of poverty common to working class and Traveller women. Both groups referred to the feelings of hurt and private anguish, in bearing the double disadvantage of gender and class inequality.

In *Women and Poverty* (1989a), Daly again placed the experiential dimensions of the poverty encountered by Irish women at the centre stage of her research. Through Daly's study, women of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds spoke of the reality of being poor, of living from day to day, of having to wear second hand clothes, and eat low quality food. The lasting image from this text was of women having to endure the stresses and strains which poverty brings. Daly's important text was peopled by women who put their children and partners first, who went to bed hungry and whose lives were full of worry about their futures.

This research theme has recently been added to with the publication of O'Neill's (1992) text *Telling It Like It Is*. Based on fieldwork undertaken in a small working class community in Dublin, O'Neill's study set out to allow a small sample of the poor to have their say in a research process which typically ignored those affected by poverty. Like its predecessors, the book decided to give the poor greater visibility and centrality. O'Neill's subjects spoke of their experiences of being unemployed and poor. Susan told the author:

The hardest job is living on the dole — if an employer had me working this hard, I'd have the law down on him. (1992:25)

Echoing the women in Daly (1988, 1989a) and Byrne and Kelleher (1989), Kathy, one of O'Neill's sample, told her that poverty was:

Living with strain and anxiety every day, doling out food, money and fuel, hot water, saying 'no' to your children so often that you become worried when they stop asking, watching your child turn down a third level place and take a job because he couldn't face another three years of never having a shilling in

his pocket, facing the fact that the children will end up on the dole as well.
(1992:32)

Telling It Like It Is lived up to the promise of its title. The residents of Kilmount painted a depressing picture of the reality of being poor, of dealing with ‘the system’ — which was portrayed as being unfriendly and lacking a true understanding of the lives of the marginalised.

Qualitative research on poverty using the tools of ethnography has some limitations. The studies are a rich source of information about (usually) small communities or a series of case histories. The extent to which we can generalise from their findings and bring about policy change is limited. However, the small amount of poverty research undertaken in an Irish context using qualitative techniques represents a necessary antidote to the sometimes turgid nature of quantitative poverty analyses. The works discussed above allow us to get beyond the data (important in its own right) and hear at first hand what it is like to be poor. By definition, poverty explained in relative terms carries with it the necessity to try and understand the perspectives of those who do not share in the assumed normal lifestyle of a particular society. Qualitative research has attempted with some success to not only to give a voice to the poor, but also to challenge stereotypes which exist about poverty. Prior to exploring the media dimension to the poverty debate in Irish society, we examine public attitudes to the phenomenon of poverty and to specific poverty groups.

1:4 Public Attitudes to Irish and Third World Poverty

An examination of the existing research on Irish public attitudes to poverty reveals a number of distinct features. Public attitudes to indigenous poverty are characterised by a strong sense of fatalism in terms of how poverty is explained. In addition to this, there is an evident tension between those who offer structural as opposed to individualistic explanations for poverty. While the most recent data available would seem to suggest that structural explanations are on the increase, there remains a set of explanations which explicitly lay the blame for poverty at the feet of the poor themselves. Therefore, although the current discourse is dominated by a perspective which sees poverty in structural and fatalistic terms, the spectre of the Devil's poor is not entirely absent from the picture.

The limited amount of research literature available on public perceptions of the poverty and underdevelopment of the Third World would seem to echo the perceptions the Irish hold of indigenous poverty. The public are divided into those who see Third World poverty in structural or societal terms, those who emphasise nature and climate and those who cite individual factors such as overpopulation and lack of expertise as the key reasons for famine and poverty.

Davis et al. (1984) adopted a social psychological perspective in examining public attitudes towards poverty and other related socio-economic issues. The authors drew upon a set of indicators of belief about particular groups of the Irish poor which had been previously developed in Ireland (see MacGreil, 1977). The study used the Behavioural Differential Scale to measure three measures of behavioural intentions, i.e. respect, public social acceptance and intimate social acceptance in the case of two categories of poor person: 'a person on the dole' and 'an itinerant'. The study also used the Personality Differential Scale to measure the evaluative and cognitive (i.e. perceived introversion and extroversion) beliefs about these two groups.

In terms of public attitudes towards the causes of poverty, Davis et al. (1984) found that in the Irish case, poverty was more likely to be attributed to causal factors

which were fatalistic, rather than to individual traits of the poor themselves. Of the sample, 80% saw poverty arising out of fatalistic causes; 60% of the study population asserted that society was the cause of poverty, yet the tendency to blame individuals for their poverty was also evident. They also found that 57% of the sample agreed with the statement that “lack of ambition is the root of poverty” and 53% concurred with the viewpoint that “the majority of people on the dole have no interest in getting a job”. The authors found that these attitudes were common to all of the socio-economic groups in their sample.

In the case of behavioural intentions towards ‘an itinerant’ and ‘a person on the dole’, the study discovered that these two different target groups elicited strikingly different responses on the Behavioural Differential Scale. An itinerant was found to be much less likely to be on the receiving end of respect, public and social acceptance. A total of 70% of the study population said that they would not buy a house next door to an itinerant and 45% stated that they would not employ an itinerant.

In contrast, measured prejudice towards a person on the dole appeared to be less widespread. Davis et al. (1984) found that 78% expressed a positive attitude to persons on the dole, while 16% expressed a negative attitude. In terms of evaluative and cognitive beliefs, itinerants were much more negatively evaluated than the unemployed, and viewed as much more extroverted. Of the sample, 60% believed that itinerants were untrustworthy, careless, excitable and noisy, while 23% of the sample held the view that the unemployed also exhibited those features.¹⁹

Davis et al. (1984) found that more than 50% of their sample attributed poverty to lack of ambition, willpower and a willingness to work. Even though individualistic causal factors ranked somewhat lower than fatalistic and structural causes, they are still relatively high. Perhaps the most striking feature of the findings of this research was the extent to which fatalistic beliefs about poverty were evident

¹⁹ See MacGreil (1977) for an earlier analysis of public attitudes to the unemployed and Travelling community.

in the Irish case. The authors suggested a possible link between the apparent high levels of religiosity and fatalism in Irish society. In addition, the authors found that the public had a negative perception of attempts to improve the workings of the social welfare system. Thus, the public were found to be selective in their attitudes towards the poor and pessimistic in terms of the ability of the state to improve the lot of the poor through reforming the social welfare system.

Irish public attitudes to poverty were also examined by the *Eurobarometer Survey of Perceptions of Poverty in Europe* (1990). The study found that one out of two of the Irish population considered their incomes to be insufficient, in contrast to the European average of one out of three. The poor were also found to be marginally more visible in Ireland, with Ireland registering a visibility rating of 0.58 as opposed to the European average rating of 0.46.²⁰ The study's findings were also in agreement with the fatalism suggested by Davis et al. (1984) in that Ireland, Denmark and the UK were found to be countries where public opinion was more negative regarding the chances of the poor 'making it through their poverty'. (*Eurobarometer* 1990:48)

A number of interesting shifts in Irish public attitudes towards poverty took place between 1976 and 1989. (See Table 1:2) There was an obvious increase in the number of people who held the opinion that poverty was as a result of structural causes. The view that poverty was an outcome of injustice in society increased from 19% in 1976 to 30% in 1989. In addition to this, the idea that poverty was a result of modernisation increased its weighting from 16% to 24%. The Irish public who were surveyed in the *Eurobarometer* study and who cited individual as opposed to structural reasons for poverty decreased significantly by 1989. There was a decrease from 30% to 14% between the two years. However, the fatalism which was evident in Davis et al. (1984) was replicated in the studies undertaken in 1976 and 1989. In each of those years, 25% of the survey population attributed lack of luck as being the underlying reason for poverty.

²⁰ Measured on a scale of 0 to 3.

Table 1:2**Perceived grounds for poverty: 1976 and 1989 compared**

Reason	1976	1989
Injustice in our society	19%	30%
Laziness and Unwillingness	30%	14%
No Luck	25%	25%
Modern World	16%	24%

Source: Adapted from *Eurobarometer: Perceptions of Poverty in Europe* (1990)

The most frequent reasons which the Irish public gave for poverty in 1989 are displayed in Table 1:3. The *Eurobarometer* study found that while in the Irish case, structural reasons for poverty were the most frequently cited (unemployment 64%, an ebbing social welfare system 40%, poor environment 25%), there remained quite a range of opinion which saw poverty arising from the behaviour of the poor themselves. A total of 39% of the sample blamed alcoholism and drugs, 33% cited broken families, 25% saw illness as being a reason for poverty, and 19% suggested that too many children was the causal factor. In addition, other individualistic explanations such as laziness (16%) and indifference (3%) were also cited.

Table 1:3**Most frequent grounds for poverty in Ireland in decreasing order**

Reason	Percentage
Unemployment	64
Ebbing welfare	40
Alcoholism, drugs	39
Broken families	33
Poor environment	25
Illness	25
Too many children	19
Laziness	16
Education system	13
Poor area	13
Loss of solidarity	6
Indifference	3

Source: Adapted from *Eurobarometer: Perceptions of Poverty in Europe* (1990)

To what extent are public attitudes about Irish poverty replicated in terms of how the Irish explain Third World poverty? Regan and Sutton (1985) surveyed the available research material on Irish attitudes to poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World. They examined three studies, namely, the findings of the Advisory Council on Development Co-operation Survey (ACDC:1980), the European Omnibus Survey (EOS: 1983), and a small scale Trocaire survey (1983).

In the ACDC study, 60% of Irish respondents perceived Ireland to be a relatively poor country, yet 52% of the survey population agreed with the viewpoint that the government should give more aid to the Third World. Those surveyed placed a strong emphasis on aid and assistance to the Third World through government and voluntary support for development agencies. The greatest majority of respondents saw skilled experts (32%) as being the best form of assistance. The study also asked its respondents to explain Third World poverty. Twenty-five per cent said it was as a

result of a lack of trained personnel, 19% stated that it was because of overpopulation, 15% asserted that 'natural disasters' were the cause, and just 10% argued that it was due to better off countries taking advantage of the Third World. In addition, 8% of those surveyed blamed the corruption of Third World leaders and just 6% said poverty was as a result of a lack of natural resources.

The findings of the EOS (1983) were in general agreement with those of the ACDC (1980). However, it also suggested that Irish attitudes to Third World poverty were characterised by three important features. Irish respondents appeared to be more aware of the influence of colonialism in terms of First World–Third World relations. The study concluded that the Irish gave a higher priority to the moral argument for aid as opposed to a self-interest one. The Irish respondents expressed a higher than average concern for defending Third World interests against world superpowers.

The Trocaire study (1983) found that there was a strong tendency amongst the Irish to underestimate just how well off Ireland was in world terms. Of the survey, 59% population placed Ireland in the top 60 countries, while just 26% correctly placed Ireland in the top 30 countries. In terms of explanations of Third World poverty and underdevelopment, 39% said that it was as a result of a lack of trained labour, 28% blamed overpopulation, 13% stated that it was because of natural disasters and 11.5% argued that it was because better off countries took advantage of poorer ones.

The extant research on Irish attitudes to the Third World suggested that Irish efforts to assist less developed countries were bound by a number of features. In the first instance, although Irish people overestimated the extent of Irish poverty in world comparative terms, there was an obvious high level of support for the principles of government aid and voluntary assistance. This has been explained by some as being a by-product of post colonialism, although the high levels of religiosity in Ireland and the long tradition of Irish Catholic missionary activity are undoubtedly also important ingredients in the equation.

In parallel with explanations of native poverty, the Irish delineate the causes of Third World poverty into those which are structural, climatic/natural and individualised. Therefore, the mainstream explanations of Third World poverty, like Irish poverty itself, can be divided into those which carve the poor up into the deserving and undeserving. Both are characterised by beliefs and attitudes which are selective and often contradictory. What is clear from the work of Davis et al. (1984) is that there exists in the minds of the public two contrasting constructions of the Irish poor. The attitudinal research suggests that the public mind has a clear image of the deserving poor and attributes largely structural/societal causal factors in explaining their poverty. Their opposite also exist, however, and there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the public have also constructed a notion of the undeserving or Devil's poor. The invisibility, exclusion and stigmatisation which many of the poor report in the qualitative research discussed above would seem to add weight to the Devil's poor thesis. In conclusion, a key weakness of much of the attitudinal research is that it has not measured the strength of feeling amongst the public in terms of varying attitudes to the poor.

1:5 Discussion: A Forgotten Dimension? — Media Coverage of Poverty

The issue of poverty has been the subject of debate, albeit somewhat fragmented, in Irish society over the last two and a half decades. However, an important factor in understanding this question more fully has been generally overlooked in the various attempts to either measure or explain poverty. The main actors involved in this discourse have typically by-passed the media dimension to the question. Granted, many of those involved have been taken up with what they see as the more pressing need to measure the extent of poverty, and to explore the experiential dimensions of deprivation.

Yet the role of the media, and especially television, begs to be explored. Perhaps more than any other type of communications medium, television has had a

crucial role in the modernisation of Irish society. As an agent and reflector of social change, it has opened up a window on a changing consumerist society. Several basic questions need to be addressed. Has Irish television been a window on the world or has it concentrated on the haves as opposed to the have nots in society? If and when it does tell stories about the poor, how are they constructed at an ideological level? More particularly, if we accept the relative definition of poverty, we need to ask ourselves to what is people's poverty relative? Do the media have a role to play in contributing to what people consider to be an acceptable way of life? How do they explain poverty as a phenomenon?

As I will argue in Chapter Two, there have been very few analyses to date of the media-poverty question undertaken in an Irish context. There have, however, been some hopeful rumblings within certain quarters, and a handful of journalists, film makers and poverty researchers have mentioned — in the course of their larger projects — the importance of the media in the poverty equation.

Waters (1995) recalled, with some irony, his visit to an EC seminar in Luxembourg in 1991 entitled *Poverty, Social Exclusion and The Media*. The intention behind this conference was to “encourage thought about media coverage of social exclusion” (1995:234) and to invite some debate as to the reasons why the media neglect poverty. Waters noted that:

A few journalists spoke about the desirability of making poverty more “fashionable”, so as to make the subject more palatable for the readers of upmarket newspapers. (1995:235)

Waters (1995) pointed to the contradictory position of the EC *vis-à-vis* poverty. He asserted that the EC's own economic policies were directly responsible for spiralling unemployment and poverty in Europe and also noted the contradiction between the EC's concern for the poor of Europe and its lack of real concern for the poor of the Third World.²¹

RTE has also come in for some criticism in terms of its coverage of poverty and working class life generally. In 1991 at a symposium organised at the University of Ulster at Coleraine, entitled *Culture, Identity and Broadcasting in Ireland: Local Issues, Global Perspectives*, Bernice O'Donoghue of Irish Co-op Films cast some doubt over RTE's public service status by questioning that:

... all communities of interest — working class communities or whatever — are represented adequately by RTE. (1991:93)

Added to this were further concerns about coverage of the Irish poor in the light of O'Donoghue's experience as an independent film maker. Despite helping to fund the film *Whitefriar Street Serenade*, RTE refused to screen it. O'Donoghue informed the symposium that she was told by an RTE staff member that it was not shown because it was "full of the old clichés about the rich and the poor" (1991:93). O'Donoghue's critique of RTE was both timely and important in that it suggested that within RTE's coverage of Irish affairs, both the social structure and specifically the poor were absent from its coverage.

RTE's negative coverage of the lives of the urban poor was further criticised by Sheehan and Walsh (1988) in their text *The Heart of The City*. Sheehan and Walsh accused RTE of stigmatising the poor of inner city Dublin. According to the authors, RTE's key broadcaster on both radio and television (Gay Byrne):

on his daily radio programme, constantly referred to the dangers which people travelling through the area might encounter and on one occasion advised people to arm themselves with spray cans to blind attackers. (1988:90–91)

RTE television and radio as well as certain sections of the national print media were party to the creation of a moral panic about the poor of Dublin.

²¹ Waters was of course making reference here to the food mountains in Europe in the face of Third World famine and poverty.

The importance of the media dimension has been realised by a small number of those working as researchers and lobbyists for Irish and Third World poverty organisations. O'Conneide (1985) on evaluating the workings of Combat Poverty, was critical of its failure to increase public awareness of poverty. In calling for an information campaign on poverty, O'Conneide (1985) quoted Coughlan (1982) who suggested that:

The cultivation of the media to get these [research findings] disseminated locally and nationally, might, perhaps, have multiplied many times the impact of work to combat poverty. (1985:394)

Daly (1988), similarly, noted the important relationship between the media and poverty, particularly in terms of the negative portrayal of the poor. She suggested that:

The poor should have a greater voice in and control over the media. This could be achieved by forcing the mainstream media to listen to them more and also by providing an alternative media. (1988:39)

The Simon Community in its analyses has also placed great significance on the role of the media in terms of poverty discourse. (Leonard, 1990; Coleman 1990). Harvey (1983) criticised Irish media coverage of poverty in terms of both its extent and orientation. Harvey (1983) asserted that typically the poor are, in media terms, invisible. He argued that of what little coverage exists, the language of the discourse tended to be economic and reliant on negative stereotypes (particularly of the homeless man as vagrant and alcoholic). He also noted that when media coverage of poverty did actually occur, it tended to concentrate on the personalities who headed up some of the poverty groups, rather on the wider issues of the causes and effects of poverty.

Surveys of public attitudes to Third World poverty point to the pivotal role played by the media in the shaping of public perceptions of the location and the scale

of the crises of Third World poverty (see ACDC Survey, 1980). Regan and Sutton (1985) cited the comments of one of the surveyors on the 1983 Trocaire project in Shannon, Co. Clare as saying:

The influence of media attention is demonstrated in the case of Ethiopia and Cambodia/Kampuchea, the former recorded a fairly low level of awareness in 1980, but that figure has increased significantly since then. The latter a subject of considerable media attention in 1980, has obviously lost some of its newsworthiness since ... India and Africa are also noteworthy. India, one would suspect, is the quintessential Third World country springing forth to many minds when poverty is discussed. (1985:29)

1:6 Conclusion

The importance of the media in the Irish poverty debate has not so much been forgotten as marginalised. To date, the question has not appeared in the mainstream public or academic debates about poverty. Despite occasional references by researchers to the media as either a vehicle for information about poverty or in relation to the quality of coverage, there has, with the possible exception of some research by Trocaire on the Third World, been no research work of any depth or significance on Irish poverty from a media/communications perspective.

The above exegesis of materials which have touched upon the media–poverty question is, however, important in a number of respects. This limited amount of evidence provides us with some clues as to how the media generally treat poverty. According to these sources, poverty as such is not seen as newsworthy, and the poor are consequently largely invisible in media terms. There seems to be a disproportionate amount of coverage on the poor who are considered deviant and thus we can conclude that media engages in constructing categories of poor who are either deserving or undeserving. A more detailed analysis of the interests of media researchers on the theme of poverty and the poor is considered in the next chapter.

It is also important to stress that the mainstream debate has accepted the relative definition of poverty and that there is evidence of the existence of notions of both deserving and undeserving poor within public discourse about Irish poverty. Both of these factors have important implications in terms of how the media ideologically construct poverty stories. The main body of research work on poverty would suggest that poverty levels have increased significantly in recent years. Just how the media have responded to such changes and their choices in constructing poverty stories are important issues as we will see in the following chapters.

Chapter Two

Devils, Angels and Ideology

Contents

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2:1 Introduction

In two main parts this chapter reviews the existing research literature on poverty and the media as well as considering the theoretical debate about the concept of ideology.

The paucity of research on media coverage of the poor in an Irish context represents a serious oversight on behalf of researchers interested in the poverty debate. The dearth of information on media coverage of the Irish poor is by no means unique as this chapter demonstrates. The existing research literature concerned largely with the UK and North America, suggests the following:

- (1) The poor are not a priority with either media organisations or media researchers. While researchers may be taken up with the portrayal of minority groups who may also be poor, their poverty and its portrayal does not appear to be of great interest.
- (2) There is primarily a tradition of uses and gratifications research which examines how the poor use the media. A more recent subset of the uses tradition is concerned with how the media may be used to inform the poor of their rights and entitlements.

(3) There is also a tradition of media content studies which reveals an over concentration on analyses of coverage of the poor and poverty issues in the print media. This research focuses on either indigenous poverty issues or the poverty of the Third or Developing World. We may further subdivide this research tradition into studies which are concerned with factual and fictional media accounts of poverty.

(4) Additionally, there is a tradition of research in the poverty/media debate by some of those we may term the 'agents of the poor' such as social workers and community activists.

(5) More recently, researchers have developed an interest in the charitable role played by the media. This limited amount of work deals with the emergence of the telethon and other fund-raising events as a means by which funds are raised by the media for the poor either at home or abroad.

(6) There is an emerging body of work which analyses the question from semiotic, discourse and frame analysis perspectives. This work has focused in the main on Third World poverty and on the marketing of charitable trusts and development agencies to the public.

(7) In terms of the poverty/media question in a specifically Irish context, we can say that there has been a limited amount of discussion on this issue. While hardly constituting a debate, the studies in the main, focus on coverage of the poor in a print media setting. Some work has been carried out on fictional accounts of poverty, as well as an analysis of the Irish media's response to Third World famine. There is also some evidence of a critique of how the Irish media handle poverty coming from activists who work with the homeless, unemployed or Travellers.

2:2 Poverty and Media Studies: A Bad Case of Myopia?

A reading of the research literature on the relationship between poverty and the media reveals a serious anomaly. The poor, it has been argued, are the greatest consumers of television and radio, yet it is also suggested in the literature that they are the least likely to receive media attention. If and when they do actually get coverage, it is usually only in terms of the more colourful and unusual stories about poverty.

Commenting, for example, on American television coverage of the state welfare cuts of the early 1980s, Barnes (1983) stated that:

TV coverage of the cuts, particularly that of CBS, has regularly emphasised the exotic, the unrepresentative, and the emotional. To some extent, this is the standard press procedure; reporters cover airplane crashes, which are rare, not airplane landings, which are commonplace. (1983:60)

Poverty, Barnes (1983) noted, was not deemed to be newsworthy; it only became 'news' arising out of the unusual or the bizarre, or the activities of elite figures working on behalf of the poor. Added to this is the fact that despite the recognition of this problem by some writers in the field of media and communication studies, the notion that the poor remain invisible on our television screens and in our newspapers has not in itself become an area of central concern for researchers.

There has been a strong reluctance on behalf of media researchers to examine the portrayal of the poor by the media. Despite the marker set down by Barthes (1973) in his brief essay *The Poor and the Proletariat*²² the issue of media coverage of poverty has remained near the bottom of the league table of researchers' interests. Despite this, there have been several voices from both the worlds of journalism and social work which have criticised how the media have portrayed poverty.²³

Many researchers have been concerned with examining how minority and other groups are portrayed by the media (Berelson and Salter, 1946; Cohen and Young, 1973; Linksy, 1973; Braham, 1982). The fact that many of these groups may also have been poor, however, did not feature as an area worthy of deeper consideration in its own right.

²² Barthes (1973) examined how the work of Charlie Chaplin was guided by a concern for the poor and underdog.

²³ Lambert (1991) stated that the BBC programme entitled *Framing the Famine* asked "... whether images of starving children and poverty stricken people that are coming out of Africa do not in fact degrade their subjects — victims first of famine and then of the camera lens, thereby doing more harm than good".

Using content analysis, Northcott (1975) presented his findings of how age was portrayed in the world of TV drama. Although he briefly mentioned that poverty was not emphasised in the programmes as a problem facing the old or young, the point was very quickly forgotten about and given no further treatment. Singer (1982) similarly, referred to the work undertaken by Haycock (1971) which surveyed Canadian magazines to bring together the main themes governing the coverage of native Canadian Indians. These images included the notion that the Indians were:

poor doomed savages. (1971:9)

Yet despite this reference to their poverty, the study was concerned with the broader issue of how magazines constructed an image of the Indian and not with their deprivation. Braham (1982) noted that in the reporting of race issues, the British media ignored important structural factors in the overall equation. He stated:

Until social and political considerations were judged to outweigh economic interests, black immigration seemed the easiest means of filling the gaps left by indigenous workers who were increasingly demonstrating their refusal to perform a whole range of jobs characterised by low wages, unsocial hours and poor conditions, whereas, except for occasional mentions of poverty and unemployment in the Third World and the attractions of a steady job and comparatively high wages in Britain, little or nothing of this economic aspect has been presented in the media. (1982:84)

Braham's criticisms of the British media were justified. However, his work was yet another example of how researchers themselves have failed to take on the question of either poverty portrayal or the lack of poverty coverage as an area worthy of consideration in its own right.

Other researchers have been concerned with the role which the media play in the public's perception of social problems, many of which are poverty related. Hill (1985) examined the role which British film has played in constructing a discourse about social problems. Hubbard et al. (1976) examined incidence, public perceptions

and media coverage of issues including unemployment, discrimination and crime. They concluded that media emphasis had little influence in shaping public opinion on the incidence of social problems.

The research theme which is closest to the issue of media coverage of poverty is the question of unemployment. This issue has attracted some attention from researchers (Hall, 1971; McQuail, 1977; Deacon, 1978; Golding and Middleton, 1979; Barkin and Gurevitch, 1983).

Dedinsky (1977) stressed how media coverage of welfare and poverty in the US tended to be sensationalist, short-lived and with very little in-depth analysis of the issues at stake. She argued that the media have successfully convinced the public that the welfare system was a 'mess', but have not adequately explained why this might be. Dedinsky's important observations on media coverage of poverty have not, however, been translated into a mainstream concern for researchers.

Yet, despite the importance of many of these studies, we are left with the problem that poverty, while endemic to the unemployed, goes much further, reaching up into the working and middle classes, affecting the retired and elderly and has a particular impact on the socially excluded such as the Travelling community or the disabled. The parameters of a project examining media portrayal of poverty have therefore to be cast much wider than a narrow consideration of the portrayal of the unemployed or the vagrant. This position, as I argued in Chapter One, is based upon accepting a definition and measurement of poverty which adopts the relative approach and places a firm emphasis on the concept of social exclusion.

A Problematic Research Area?

I argue in this chapter that the issue of media coverage of poverty has been largely excluded from the mainstream of researchers' concerns. Why has this situation arisen? Outside of the consideration of individual scholars' particular research interests, is the belief that research of this kind is difficult if not impossible to undertake.

First, there is, as I note above, a basic definitional problem in deciding what constitutes poverty, and, second, there is a further problem in identifying the poor, who are not an homogenous group. Added to the belief that research of this kind would be problematic is the notion that the poor do not in fact get much media coverage; thus the gathering of the instances of when the poor are covered by the media would prove to be very difficult from a research point of view. But even if we were to accept the notion that the poor are excluded from media coverage, this issue in itself should surely be of concern to those who have analysed the workings of the media in terms of such issues as social class, hegemony, ideology and power.

The existing studies are taken up with how *some* poor people use the media, how the media may be used in turn to tell the poor of their rights, and how the media portrays a selection of poverty issues in both a factual and fictional setting. I review each of these research traditions in turn before making some comments on the question in an Irish context.

2:3 Media Usage Studies

The earliest tradition of media/poverty research focused on the uses of the media by the poor. This research tradition began in the 1960s (Samuelson et al., 1963; Westley and Severin, 1964). According to Greenberg and Dervin (1970), studies which examined the media behaviour of the poor could be divided into three types:

- (1) Studies which examined poor respondents in general (Donohew and Singh, 1967; Sargent and Stempel, 1968).
- (2) Studies which only focused on black respondents (Allen, 1967; Lyle, 1967).
- (3) Studies which compared black and white respondents (Carey, 1966; McCombs, 1968).

In their 1970 study which examined the use of communication amongst the urban poor in Lansing, Michigan, Greenberg and Dervin stated that previous research revealed the following:

Prior research yielded two working hypotheses. The first was to expect considerable difference between low-income and general population adults in their media behaviour. The classic media use studies and the few studies that specifically compared the poor with the general population have agreed, for example, that the poor use more TV and less print media than the general population. The second hypothesis, less well supported by the literature, was to expect considerable similarity between low-income blacks and low-income whites. (1970:225)

Greenberg and Dervin concluded from their findings that their:

low-income sample was, indeed, considerably different from the general population sample, while low-income whites differed from low-income blacks in terms of communication behaviours. (1970:235)

The authors, however, conceded that the only discernible differences between poor whites and poor blacks was that whites used newspapers more and blacks used phonographs more. Their explanation for this finding, however, seemed implausible and in the case of black respondents was reliant on a racial stereotype.²⁴ They argued that poor whites had more in common with the dominant culture whose views were expressed in newspapers. They suggested that the increased use of phonographs by blacks:

may be a way for them to get more black music, soul and gospel music, than they can find on television or radio. (1970:235)

²⁴ For a more recent example of this research tradition see Bales (1986).

The general findings of the work of Greenberg and Dervin (1970) were confirmed in other studies of the poor (Allen and Bielby, 1979; Poindexter and Stroman, 1981).

Medrich (1979) discovered that households which had their television sets continually switched on were more likely to be those whose inhabitants had lower educational standards and income. Vilanilam (1989) noted the anomaly between the high rate of television viewing amongst the Indian poor with particular reference to their viewing of adverts. He contrasted the projected lifestyles or culture of advertising on Indian television with the real needs of the Indian poor.

Other studies have examined the exclusion of the poor from participation in the information society. Writing in a British context, Murdock (1986) explored how the poor were doubly excluded from a society which was privatising the communications industries, and where money was needed to purchase the equipment necessary (such as telephones, personal computers and satellite dishes) to receive this information. The voluntary community based groups who assisted the poor were also being penalised in this regard and therefore the poor who relied on these groups for assistance were again being affected.²⁵

There was a further development within the poverty/media debate on the uses of the media. These usage studies focused on how the media could be utilised to inform the poor of their rights and entitlements (Howitt, 1982). Block (1970) in a project carried out in St. Louis with 350 inner-city residents concluded that the media did indeed reach the urban poor, and suggested that the media be used to provide the poor with information to assist them.

The London-based Child Poverty Action Group investigated the extent to which the take-up rate of means tested benefits could be increased by organising an advertising campaign.²⁶ This technique can also be used to focus the attentions of the

²⁵ The decision by the Irish government to allow an increase in telephone charges was opposed by many of the groups who work with the Irish poor. They argued that their activities were being curtailed and that poverty groups, especially the elderly, were being affected by these changes.

²⁶ For an account of how the Child Poverty Action Group planned a strategic campaign to attract maximum media attention for the publication of *The Poor and The Poorest* (1965) see Banting (1979).

wider population on the needs of particular groups in need. Coyne's (1978) study *Techniques for Recruiting Foster Homes for Mentally Retarded Children* showed that a media campaign increased levels of awareness of a foster care programme. Her study was based on the activities of the Lancaster Office of Mental Retardation. This agency used feature stories in a local Nebraska weekly freesheet newspaper to raise awareness of the need for foster parents.

In common with the more general shift within media and communication studies, the 1980s witnessed a change in interest from media use patterns to the examination of media portrayal of poverty. Facilitated by theoretical and methodological developments, especially of a qualitative kind, these studies were prompted by the resurgence of African famine, the relatively large amount of media coverage which it received, and in reaction to a series of moral panics about 'scrounging' in the welfare system in Britain, the US and elsewhere. The research examined coverage of the poor in 'factual' settings such as newspaper articles, photographs and editorials and in the coverage offered by television news and current affairs.

2:4 Media Content Studies: Factual Accounts

Studies which have examined media content in terms of the issue of poverty may be subdivided into those which examined 'factual' and 'fictional' accounts of poverty. Factual studies have been concerned in the main with Third World famine and poverty, unemployment and homelessness, the agents of the poor such as voluntary organisations and social workers, and with media images of poverty in the context of changing public opinion. Studies which examined fictional accounts of poverty have considered the portrayal of the poor in television drama and soap operas.

Media Coverage of Third World Poverty

One might be forgiven for believing that media coverage of Third World poverty might be indeed greater than coverage of home-based poverty, given not only the extent of famine and absolute poverty in Third World countries, but also because critical coverage of famine and poverty in other countries, has, on the face of it, fewer implications for the status quo. The existing research on these themes, however, would seem to indicate that the opposite is the case. In general, the Third World does not make the news, and more particularly, a great deal of criticism has justifiably been made of the extent and content of media coverage of Third World poverty (Nohrstedt, 1982).

Much of the existing research on how the Western media portray issues emanating from the Third World has adopted Said's (1978) notion of viewing the Third World as our opposite or 'other'. Dahlgren and Chakrapani (1982), for example, examined how the Third World was portrayed on TV news. They concluded that reporting styles tended to emphasise the violence, flawed development and 'primitivism' of our opposites.

Third World issues including famine and poverty tended as a rule to be low on the priority-lists of the Western media. Galtung and Ruge (1965) suggested that events only became news when they were concerned with elite countries and elite people. Thus media coverage of poverty and other Third World issues tended to be seen only through a First World prism. In the case of media coverage of Third World poverty, the 1980s witnessed researchers devoting greater attention to this issue. Most have, as a rule, been very critical of the Western media organisations (Gill, 1986).

Harrison and Palmer's *News Out of Africa — from Biafra to Band Aid* (1986) traced the history of media coverage of famine and poverty since the 1960s. They stressed the difficulty in getting famine stories onto news agendas, and how when this happened the stories were always from a (white) Western perspective. They also noted that the major famine stories of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were only

discovered by 'chance' by the Western media. However, even when stories were uncovered by either development agencies, journalists or news agencies, they still might not necessarily make the news.

In the case of the early 1980s Ethiopian famine, Harrison noted that he was told by a senior British television producer:

Sorry, Africa isn't really an easy story to tell, the public feel it's too far from them and a famine isn't really a nice news item. (1986:2)

According to Harrison and Palmer, there was a strong resistance amongst television producers to covering Third World stories. Gill (1986) was quoted by the authors as saying:

British television, while alerting people to the African tragedy, while helping to expose it and being responsible for great public generosity, has not done near enough to peck away at the complexities of the Third World — Developed World relationship. And here actually is an area where there are tremendously interesting stories that someone ought to be uncovering. (1986:137)

Harrison and Palmer also stressed how the Western media's coverage of Third World poverty and famine was dominated by Western figures saving Africa from disaster. The British tabloid press in 1984, for example, ran a series of stories about the *Angels of Mercy* — British nurses who were going to work in the famine relief camps of Ethiopia. Similarly, attention focused on the African poor and dying often only when they were visited by a concerned rock-star, actress or politician. Thus, one of the dominant messages of this kind of coverage was that the fate of Africa lay in the hands of Geldof, Hepburn or Robinson.

These findings were confirmed by Philo (1993) in his analysis of British media coverage of the 1984 Ethiopian famine. Philo argued that the Western media had little interest in the question of famine or its structural causes. They were late in

allowing the 'story' onto the news agenda and they offered their audiences a very narrow interpretation of events.

The media's fickle relationship with the complex problem of Third World poverty and famine was further analysed by Cater (1985). He argued that the media's interest in these questions was sporadic and that much of the focus of the Western media was on the role of the pop stars who had temporarily turned into saviours of the Third World. The focus and involvement of the media in projects like *Band Aid* and *Live Aid* were due in no small part to the fact that the popular press and other media were, Cater asserted, competing for a larger slice of a growing youth audience. This kind of media activity created not only a new role for media organisations, but it also allowed for existing charities to reassert themselves.

Simpson, in her 1985 essay *Charity Begins at Home*, saw the charity business as an interesting source of images and ideas about the Third World. She argued that:

charities aren't appealing to the consumer in us, rather the colonial desire to save the unfortunate in distant lands. (1985:21)

Charities, asserted Simpson, used mainstream constructions of poverty to explain their case and therefore contributed in no small way towards preserving the status quo. Simpson argued that there were obvious racist connotations in many of the images which charities used to raise funds. In carrying out media campaigns which used posters, magazines or television, charities exploited the two least powerful groups in the Third World: women and children. There was, however, a growing awareness within the charity industry itself about the problems inherent in using these images. Thus the *War on Want* campaign, for example, deliberately used images which could be read as the icons of Black Struggle rather than representations of passive women and children.

There is therefore, in relative terms, an abundance of literature on media coverage of Third World poverty. The literature strongly suggests that media coverage of that poverty is ideological and framed in a way which stresses the

negative. As a rule, Third World coverage tends to be crisis driven with very little focus on the more constructive activities undertaken by (poor) Africans themselves. In terms of news worthiness, the Third World is a low priority for newsmakers. In addition to this, the charity industry tends (with some exceptions) to reproduce hegemonic interpretations of the causes and effects of Third World poverty.

Unemployment and Homelessness

The issue of the poor being doubly ignored by both the media and those who wish to understand the media has been mentioned previously in this chapter. It is clear that when poverty stories are printed or broadcast, it is often only in the context of other social problems (Hubbard et al., 1976). Poverty or the experience of the poor per se do not in themselves attract a great deal of attention from broadcasters or journalists. The attentions of researchers therefore have tended to concentrate on issues that affect the poor, such as homelessness, unemployment and in particular the 'moral panics' of 'scrounger phobia' which made the headlines in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Campbell and Reeves in their study *Covering the Homeless: The Joyce Brown Story* examined the narratives of news reporting on Joyce Brown, a New York 'bag lady' (an alleged schizophrenic) who refused the attentions and offers of help from New York social workers. They argued that the networks chosen in their study framed and narrated the question of homelessness through four distinct stages of the routine news package. They suggested that:

the major socio-economic problem of homelessness which requires collective participation for resolution often plays out in the news as an isolated personal problem demanding individual attention. (1983:23)

The issue of homelessness was therefore individualised and not seen as a result of poor planning or bad government policy at either local or national level.

The question of unemployment and its portrayal by the media has attracted a great deal more attention from researchers (Hall, 1971; McQuail, 1977; Deacon, 1978; Golding and Middleton, 1979, 1982; Barkin and Gurevitch, 1983). These studies have either focused on how unemployment was a common theme for examination in particular publications or how unemployment related issues such as welfare cuts or alleged 'welfare abuse' have been explained by the media.

Hall (1971) examined the social eye of *Picture Post*.²⁷ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s the journal contained several exploratory articles on unemployment and poverty. Many of these articles were quite hard hitting in apportioning blame for unemployment and its resultant poverty.

Scannell examined how the BBC covered unemployment as an issue between 1930 and 1935. He identified three ways in which the BBC covered the issue of unemployment. These were:

- (1) Talks by experts.
- (2) Investigative reporting.
- (3) Specialised programming which recognised the unemployed as a specialised minority.

In the case of the first category, Scannell stated that:

The construction of this discourse, its mode of address, its positioning of the audience as middle-class like itself, its exclusion of the unemployed, its concealments and evasions, its transformation of the problem into the politics of the parish pump, and an exercise in good neighbourliness should all be noted. (1980:17)

The most significant development within the BBC's radio coverage of unemployment was the combination of eye-witness accounts and investigative reporting. Scannell argued that:

²⁷ Founded in 1938 by Stefan Lorant, a Hungarian refugee, *Picture Post* had George Orwell as one of its contributors.

There had not been heard before on the radio such a spelling out of the facts of living on the dole or in a rat infested slum, in a way which broke through the statistics and abstract debate to the realities of how people lived in these conditions. Nor had working people been heard to tell of the conditions they endured and their feelings about them. (1980:24)

It is clear from Scannell's account of the BBC that there are strong historical precedents in terms of how public service broadcasting organisations have attempted to portray unemployment and poverty.

Barkin and Gurevitch's (1983) study *Out Of Work And On The Air: Television News of Unemployment* examined news coverage of unemployment in the 1980s. They considered both the thematic structure of news stories and the explanations given for unemployment. As such few explanations for unemployment were offered by TV news, and the very diversity of thematic structures revealed the societal frameworks within which TV journalists constructed stories about this issue.

The issue of unemployment and alleged welfare abuse has also attracted a great deal of attention from researchers. Deacon (1978) examined the 'facts' behind what has come to be termed 'scrounger phobia' in the media. He examined the reality of welfare abuse, which was in fact quite low, and the amount of undue attention given at times to this issue by the both the popular press and TV and radio networks.

Golding and Middleton in their studies *Making Claims: News Media and the Welfare State* (1979) and *Images of Welfare* (1982) also examined this question in some depth. According to Golding and Middleton there were three identifiable stages in a media 'moral panic' about 'scrounger phobia'. These were as follows:

- (1) A precipitating event, which sensitises the media so that their surveillance procedures and journalistic categories are sharpened to capture similar subsequent events and give them considerable prominence.
- (2) The ensuing period evokes a steady stream of previously latent mythologies about the 'social problem' thus dramatically uncovered.

(3) The legislative, administrative and possibly judicial responses to this cultural thrust reinforces its potency and provide a real shift in state responses to these definitions provided by moral panics. (1979:12)

During their six-month study, Golding and Middleton found that welfare issues as such did not make the news. Significantly, welfare was only considered worthy of coverage when it was connected with other areas such as crime, fraud or sex. A central theme of media coverage of welfare abuse was that of the deserving and undeserving poor. Within this there are two further sub themes. Golding and Middleton argued that these were:

The fear that the welfare umbrella has been extended over too wide a range of clients, at greater social and economic cost, and related to this is the notion that we no longer can adequately sustain the distinction between, on the one hand, those groups whose poverty is due either to membership of a deprived group, the old or sick, or blameless individual's inadequacy, physical or mental handicap for example, and on the other hand those whose poverty is the result of individual anti-social behaviour; laziness, profligacy, irresponsible family planning and so on. The deserving poor are no longer held to manageable limits. (1979:12)

Golding and Middleton continued with this theme in their work *Images of Welfare*. The study traced the persistence of bipolar attitudes to poverty in 19th and 20th Century Britain. Despite social and political changes, and more particularly in the context of the rise and fall of the welfare state, the belief that the poor may be divided into the categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' or as Golding and Middleton put it, into 'God's poor' and the 'Devil's poor' has persisted.

The authors contended that the media has played no small part in reproducing hegemonic explanations of poverty. Through engaging in a series of moral panics about welfare issues, the media succeeded in victimising certain portions of the poor. In the final analysis, this kind of media activity allowed for an even greater reduction in state welfare activities.

Images of Welfare was therefore a critical survey of British attitudes to poverty through an analysis of media coverage of the theme of social welfare. If it has anything by way of limitation it is that it confined itself to analysing the print media. As our analysis below of the Irish debate on the media–poverty question shows, *Images of Welfare* has been the baseline text from which Irish commentators have begun their own analyses of the print media.

Agents of the Poor

In addition to the above, there is a small, but significant, amount of literature on how the media portray the agents of the poor such as social workers and voluntary groups. This issue is important in that many poverty stories are framed not around the poor themselves, but rather around the activities of those who work for and with the poor.²⁸ It is also clear from the literature that there has been a growth in awareness amongst those who represent the poor of how the media set the poverty agenda (Mawby, Fisher and Parkin, 1979; Whiteley and Winyard, 1990). Thus a key purpose in this research activity has been to inform the agents of how they might improve their chances of setting the media agenda.

Telethons and Marathons: The Charitable Role of the Media

A further development in the poverty/media debate has been the issue of the move of the media, and television in particular, into a fund-raising/helper role (Devereux, 1994a, 1994b). The emergence of this media phenomenon during the mid 1980s has been examined from a number of different perspectives.

Philo (1993) traced the shift in media activity in the face of poverty and famine. Forrest (1987) gave an account of the telethon from the perspective of a TV producer. Cubitt (1993) subjected the telethon to an analysis which examined the

²⁸ Small-scale media like newsletters distributed amongst the agents of the poor such as social workers are of course also an interesting source of stories about the poor. See, for example, Eaton (1989).

modes of address which these television spectacles used to convince the audience to part with their cash.

Golding (1991) noted that the emergence of telethon television in a British context was bound up with paradoxes. In response to the failure of the British state to provide for its poor, this type of television coverage pointed the spotlight on the existence of a variety of deprived people. Despite the hype associated with this programming style, there has in turn been a reduction in the amount given to charity by the general public. Rapping (1983) considered the entry of American public service television into the job-finding market. Leat (1990) was critical of the ways in which telethons were deemed a success in purely quantitative terms:

Alternative measures of success — how well the money was spent, what the money raised enabled to happen, effects on public attitudes and awareness, effects on public involvement in fund-raising — have not been widely discussed in at least allowing, if not encouraging, the scoreboard to become the sole measure of success some organisers of extended broadcast appeals have created a rod for their own backs — each successive appeal must raise more than the last otherwise it will be deemed a failure. (1990:148)

Geldof (1986) provided a useful descriptive account of the difficulties in organising the televising of the *Live Aid* concert — the prototype television fundraiser:

I needed to confirm the TV companies. Channel 4 had been enthusiastic, but when I rang they told me they couldn't afford to do it. It would cost them half a million pounds in cancellation fees to clear their schedules for a whole day. Then it would cost them a similar amount to reschedule the same programmes for a future date. A million pounds. I hadn't considered this. I had thought I was giving them a day's free programming. (1986:336)

Geldof offered his readers an interesting account of the resistance he and his fellow *Band Aid* workers experienced in trying to co-ordinate the world's main media actors. Both the *Band Aid* and *Live Aid* events have been the subject of some debate

amongst researchers (see Cairns, 1985). Regan (1986) assessed the importance of *Live Aid* from a development education perspective. Burnell (1991) criticised the *Band Aid* model of charity with specific reference to its use of negative media imagery.

2:5 Media Content Studies: Fictional Accounts

The preceding discussion indicated that researchers have in the main been concerned with examining how the media attempt to tell stories about poverty within genres which are factual. There are of course a limited number of exceptions to this rule. Thomas and Callanan in their 1982 study *Allocating Happiness: TV Families and Social Class* criticised the role of fictional television in disseminating the myth of the happy poor. By analysing prime time television series on the ABC, NBC, CBS networks, they found that in these fictional programmes such as *The Waltons* and *The Little House on The Prairie*, the dominant messages suggested that:

money clearly does not buy happiness and in fact relative poverty does.
(1982:16)

Thomas and Callanan argued that the poorer characters in these programmes were more likely to be portrayed as 'good' or 'straight' characters and they were more likely to see their problems resolved and to find happiness at the conclusion of a programme. Similarly, Gould et al. (1981) explored how prime time American television programmes distorted poverty. Using Rank's (1977) formula of intensification/downplay,²⁹ the authors argued that:

The depiction of poverty during prime-time broadcasts, television networks present a sentimentalised vision of economic deprivation that omits or

²⁹ Rank (1977) argued that "All people intensify (commonly by repetition, association, composition), and downplay (commonly by omission, diversion, confusion) as they communicate in words, gestures, numbers, etc. But 'professional persuaders' have more training, technology, money and media access than the average citizen."

minimises hardship while idealising the supposed benefits of a spartan way of life. Much happier than the harried members of the middle and upper-income groups, poor and working people on television seldom strive against their economic fates or against the system. (1981:309)

In *Upscaling Downtown — Stalled Gentrification in Washington DC* Williams (1988) explored the hermeneutics of TV serials from a social–anthropological perspective. He explored the ‘prime-time divide’ whereby programmes which aimed at specific social classes often portray members of one social class to another. The poor he argued watched programmes about the wealthy, while the middle-classes were drawn to programmes which featured the inner city and the down and out. In the middle-class Elm Valley, viewers witnessed:

an uneasy and unpredictable city, many crazed and violent people, but very few supportive creative people in charge of their own lives. Thus they may get from television an important sense of how poverty batters and victimises people. (1988:112)

Programmes such as *Hill Street Blues* offered:

powerfully negative views of the poor in the city as exotic, often repellent ‘other’, and these views are filtered through the eyes of the police. (1988:113)

The studies by Thomas and Callanan (1982), Gould et al. (1981) and Williams (1988) were important in that they represented a move into examining media portrayal of poverty in a much wider setting by including considerations of fictional television. They were paradigmatic in that they examined both the ways in which the stories about the poor were told and alternative ways in which they might be told. These studies were also important in that they suggested that mainstream American TV drama played an ideological role in presenting an acceptable version of poverty replete with messages which idealise the experience of being poor. In terms of the multi-genre approach of this dissertation, I feel that Thomas and Callanan (1982),

Gould et al (1981) and Williams (1988) have laid down an important marker, which, in the case of RTE's TV drama programme *Glenroe*, I follow in this study.

2:6 Semiotic, Discourse and Framing Analyses of Media Coverage of Poverty

Three further strands of research on media portrayal of poverty are worthy of some consideration. They adopted what can be termed semiotic, discourse and framing analysis approaches. All three studies are important in their own right as well as collectively representing a fundamental shift in how the question under consideration in this study might be best approached.

With the exception of the framing approach, which has mixed both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, both semiotic and discourse analysis approaches, considered below, are representative of the increasing (and welcome) proclivity of researchers to view this question in qualitative terms.

Sorenson (1991) adopted a discourse analysis approach. In examining both the activities of media organisations and the stories they produced about the Third World, Sorenson argued that taken collectively, these discourses could be read as ideological texts. In his study *Media Discourse on Famine in the Horn of Africa*, Sorenson noted that despite the availability of film footage and details of famine, there was no take up of offers by the media. He quoted an unnamed journalist as saying:

the Third World isn't news and starving Africans in particular are not news.
(1991:224)

Sorenson argued that during the 1980s African famine, the story was largely kept off the agenda as it had a low entertainment value. Coverage was only given when a crisis point was reached in the famine.

A key process, he argued:

in the discursive construction of famine in the Horn (of Africa) is that of aestheticisation, the packaging of famine as a shocking and dramatic crisis. (1991:225)

Thus famine, itself a relatively permanent feature of many African countries, was not in itself deemed to be newsworthy and might only be covered through a discourse of impending or actual crisis.

Another key element of the media's discourse on African famine was the emphasis on Ethiopia as opposed to other stricken areas (owing perhaps in no small measure to the presence of the world media — albeit belatedly — in Ethiopia in 1984). The 'naturalisation' dimension to the coverage was also stressed — coverage tended to stress the notion that famine was as a result of natural causes as opposed to man-made causes. Sorenson's main assertion was that famine coverage by the media represented an ideological parable:

Analysis reveals imposition of a narrative structure through the use of standard rhetorical techniques to construct famine as an ideological parable. This parable demonstrates the abuse of Western charity by treacherous Third World regimes allied with the Soviet Union. Media reports are related to other discursive constructions of Africa which offer a similar narrative structure. (1991:223)

Sorenson's work therefore converged with Benthall's in that both postulated narrative elements which functioned in an ideological way. Sorenson drew upon an analysis of *Newsweek* dated 26 November 1984 to illustrate this point. He argued that the discourse of this edition:

reveals a mythologizing of famine and the imposition of a narrative structure which serves to emphasise the culpability of Africans. (1991:227)

Africans were portrayed as being either incompetent or greedy with the West being portrayed as a kind and generous benefactor. Drawing on the work of Barthes

(1973), Sorenson saw this media activity as a form of inoculation. In engaging in this kind of practice the media admitted the occurrence of 'accidental evil' (poverty and famine) and yet functioned to conceal the wider structural inequalities which have caused Third World poverty and famine. Thus the locus of blame rested with the Africans, especially the peasant farmers who were portrayed as being backward and incompetent. This coverage was in turn loaded with assumptions about the 'primitivism' of our African opposites or others.

Benthall (1992) in his study *Disasters, Relief and The Media* examined media images of disaster and disaster relief. As previously stated by Simpson (1985), relief agencies as well as the print and broadcast media used and abused children as a potent source of imagery.

Benthall divided his analysis of the symbolism of disaster relief into the pre and post 1980s. He argued that in the pre 1980 period, the imagery tended to be of a patronising sort:

Virtually all appeals for charity until the 1980s tended to picture helpless passive victims and heroic saviours. (1992:177)

These campaigns involved using both realistic photographic styles and the flagrant abuse of starving children. In the post 1980s period, Benthall stated that his semiotic reading of the dominant imagery revealed that 'we' portray colonised peoples in the same way as men portray women. This portrayal exhibited an anxiety about our expendability and the fear of forces which are beyond our control. Thus the West views Third World poverty as a threat because of the perceived implications that it may have for British and American society in terms of mass migration. Benthall's semiotic analysis also revealed that we in the West both exaggerate and misunderstand Third World poverty. He found that essential questions in the equation such as colonialism and capitalism were absent from how we explain the Third World at a visual and symbolic level.

This important study went further by drawing on the work of Propp (1928) in attempting to see these images collectively as a form of folk narrative. Thus images and stories about the Third World were seen to function as part of a total narrative convention. Stories and images had heroes (from the First World, usually white and middle class, often already well known in another role as actress, politician or popstar); villains (often portrayed as greedy dictators, or tyrannical Marxists); donors (who were given magical powers); and false heroes (such as fund-raisers who made off with the proceeds of a collection for the poor or starving).

But the practice of framing stories about the poor which serve the interests of the status quo through individualising their stories is not restricted to media coverage of the Third World. Drawing on the work of Gamson and Modigliani (1987), Iyengar (1991) in his work *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* subjected US media coverage of domestic poverty to a frame analysis. The study involved carrying out a series of experiments into how network television framed issues about poverty, unemployment and racial inequality. Iyengar's results demonstrated that framing took place in terms of attributions of responsibility for poverty and inequality. He analysed network news to see did it frame poverty, unemployment and racial inequality in terms of either 'thematic' or 'episodic' frames.³⁰

In general, he found that US network news was not too concerned about poverty or racial inequality as news stories. Of the coverage of poverty and racial inequality that did take place, 66% of stories were deemed to be episodic. Iyengar concluded that audiences were twice as likely to encounter a story that was episodic than they were to encounter one which was thematic. Unemployment coverage was predominantly thematic. He attributed these findings to the fact that while unemployment was recorded on a monthly basis and regularly the subject of

³⁰ According to Iyengar (1991) *episodic* news frames take the form of a case study or event-oriented report and portray public issues in terms of concrete instances. *Thematic* news frames place public issues such as poverty in a more general or abstract context which is aimed at more general outcomes or conditions.

government announcements, poverty received much less attention because governments measure and report on it infrequently.

Iyengar proceeded to carry out a number of experiments using five news reports which used either episodic or thematic frames. His study groups were asked upon viewing the reports to talk about whether poverty was as a result of societal or individual responsibility. The study found that news stories from network television were significant in terms of people's attribution of responsibility for poverty or racial inequality. Framing of an episodic nature increased the chances of audiences locating the responsibility in the hands of the individual, while thematic framing increased the likelihood of audiences viewing the responsibility for the problems in societal terms.

2:7 Media Images of Poverty: The Irish Debate

Despite the high levels of poverty in Irish society, the issue of how the Irish poor are portrayed by the media has remained largely unexamined. The traditions of poverty/media research outlined above in this chapter such as the uses/gratifications approach and analyses of more recent media developments such as the telethon have been ignored in an Irish setting. The extant research deals with the following:

- (1) Research focusing on the agents of the poor.
- (2) Research which deals with Irish print media images of poverty.
- (3) Research concerned with Irish media images of Third World poverty.
- (4) Research which takes account of the portrayal of the poor in a fictional setting.
- (5) A further set of strands of writing that are identifiable and which focus on:
 - (a) journalistic practices in terms of the poor and;
 - (b) a growing awareness amongst groups who lobby with and for the poor of how they might attempt to set the media agenda about poverty.

Agents of the Poor

In an Irish context, the Simon Community have been to the forefront of the debate about how the media portray the poor and their agents (Coleman, 1990; Leonard, 1990). Harvey in his 1983 paper *Simon and the Media* noted that the poor as a rule did not make news:

Homelessness is perhaps exceptional in terms of general media reporting on poverty. At a general level poverty is not news. (1983:14)

Harvey also argued that the language used by the media in reporting poverty tended to be economic in its orientation. He stated that:

What coverage there is of poverty and poverty related issues tends to be economic — explaining issues in economic terms rather than in terms of the actual conditions of the poor. (1983:14)

Harvey further criticised the Irish print media coverage of poverty in that it used stereotypical photographic images of the homeless, which underlined the idea of the vagrant, alcoholic homeless man. He also noted that media coverage of poverty issues tended to favour focusing in on personalities who were working with the poor and not the poor themselves. Thus, for example, most of the media coverage received by both the *Alone* organisation and the *Streetwise Coalition* has focused on the work of the late Willie Bermingham and Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy respectively. The narratives of many of the reports which have dealt with the work of the above can be said to have been stories about the person acting for the poor rather than the poor themselves or on the extent of or causes of poverty.

Images of the Poor

Golding and Middleton's (1982) work in a British context, has served as a starting point for the three brief analyses of the coverage of poverty by Irish newspapers. All three studies — those by Kelly, Gibbons and Ruddy — have taken a simple content analysis approach in exploring this issue. In a more comprehensive study Horgan has examined coverage by the Irish media of the Ethiopian famine of 1984. The aim of the following exposition is to firstly stress the limits of research undertaken in an Irish context and secondly, to underpin the position which I am taking in this project, of the need to take a broader approach, both methodologically and genre-wise in exploring how poverty stories are constructed.

In her 1981 paper *Media Images of the Deprived*, Mary Kelly argued that newspaper editorials tended to present the government as powerless in the face of poverty and poverty related problems. Three years later in her paper *The Poor Aren't News* (1984a) she argued that the poor were either omitted altogether from media coverage or presented as an 'also-ran'. She stated that coverage by newspapers of poverty stories were affected by four general factors concerning:

- (1) The collection of news.
- (2) The ideological orientation of newspapers.
- (3) The source of the story.
- (4) Perceived audience interest in the story.

First, in terms of the way in which news was collected; most newspapers did not have a welfare correspondent, therefore poverty stories were likely to be overlooked in favour of stories from the political or industrial relations sectors which normally had correspondents dedicated to these theme areas. Second, in terms of their ideological orientation, Irish newspapers were and are privately owned and dependent on advertising revenue. She argued that, consequently, challenges to the status quo by printing stories which apportioned blame for poverty were few and far between. Third, in terms of the source of the story, the poor, Kelly argued, were a fragmented

and powerless group, who, in spite of their numbers could not make unified representations to the media with their stories.

Fourth, in terms of audience interest, poverty stories were either omitted or relegated to the back pages, depending on how the newspaper editor perceived audience interest in the story. The language of the reports that made the pages of newspapers tended to be written in economic language. Coverage of the poor was usually negative — reports were more often than not only printed in the context of poverty-related social problems, such as drug abuse, prostitution, and unemployment, etc.

Gibbons' (1984a) study was in general agreement with Kelly (1981, 1984a). He confirmed Kelly's assertion that poverty was more often than not only touched upon in the context of other related questions. The poor themselves, he argued, were rarely given a voice, and stories about poverty were judged against journalistic values about 'news worthiness' and 'good journalism'. He asserted that despite the media's obsession with bad news, the poor did not appear with great regularity:

For unlike crime or violence, poverty to the media is neither dramatic or sensational nor does it lend itself to the world of elite figures and star personalities. (1984b:11)

In Ireland, Gibbons argued, the media's coverage of poverty tended to emphasise the existence of the deserving or 'God's poor' — where the poor were viewed with sympathy. Sympathy, of course, only serves to affirm the status of both the giver and the receiver. The result being, according to Gibbons, that:

poverty is not only tolerated, but may even be idealised, so that it ends up being obscured from view, as much as the smiling peasants replaced the anonymous suffering masses in Catherine the Great's Russia. (1984a:11)

Gibbons' arguments were interesting but did not fully answer the fundamental problem or contradiction that he referred to. On the one hand it was argued that the

poor were excluded from the media, and, on the other hand, whenever coverage of the poor comes to light it tended to be 'sympathetic'. This apparent contradiction was not examined in any way. However, the idea that the 'undeserving' or 'Devil's poor' are excluded from the poverty concerns of the Irish media does not ring through either. Even an unsystematic examination of local provincial and national newspapers will reveal that at least one sub-grouping of the Irish poor are treated in a negative and stereotypical way. Invariably, newspaper coverage of the Travellers tends to be deliberately negative, and serves to perpetuate false assumptions about this ethnic group. Despite the fact that a group of Traveller families might have resided in one location for 15 years, the tendency is to refer to 'X' as having 'no fixed abode'.³¹

Similar criticism can be levelled at Ruddy (1987). Again using Golding and Middleton's (1982) distinction between 'God's poor' and the 'Devil's poor', Ruddy examined newspaper coverage of poverty in an Irish context. She used the content analysis approach to examine Irish national newspapers. The analysis was carried out in the wider context of public, church and state attitudes to poverty.

Ruddy, like Gibbons, argued that unlike Britain there was very little coverage of the 'Devil's poor' in Irish newspapers. This, she argued, was grounded in public, church and state attitudes to poverty which lacked a 'Devil's poor' approach. It was already noted above that newspapers are certainly guilty of demonising particular poverty groups such as the Travellers or the unemployed. However, the notion that public, church and state attitudes to the poor are one-dimensional is misleading. The state has, for example, written into its social welfare legislation provisions which discriminate against the Travelling community. This ethnic minority group must all sign on for social welfare entitlements at the same time each week because of state (ill-founded) fears that this group are more likely to defraud the social welfare system.

³¹ Examples of negative print media coverage of the Travelling community and the homeless may be found in *The Enniscorthy Echo* 5 January 1995 with its lead story on local opposition to Travellers: "Tension is Mounting — Move Out Or We'll Put You Out". The paper interestingly uses the term 'itinerant' in describing the Travellers. The *Sunday World* ran a story entitled "House of Horrors" on 5 October 1975 which, as Coleman (1990:110) recalled, described in a lurid and dramatic fashion an attack on the Dublin Simon Community.

Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church's attitude to the poor cannot be treated as an homogenous entity. In practice, beliefs in God's and the Devil's poor exist. Much of the Irish Roman Catholic thinking on poverty is based around notions of charity and sympathy (for example, the Beatitudes state 'Blessed Are The Poor'). Categorisations of the poor being deserving or undeserving are endemic to this position. There are of course a small minority of priests, brothers, sisters and lay members who are committed to the ideals of Liberation Theology which sees the real challenge of the Gospel to be that of siding with the poor and marginalised (see, for example, Dorr, 1983). Similarly, in terms of the Irish public's attitudes towards the poor, there exists a strong tension between the beliefs that poverty is as a result of social injustice or is a result of laziness or profligacy³² (see Davis et al., 1984).

Third World Famine

To date, the most comprehensive examination of Irish media coverage of poverty has dealt with the portrayal of Third World famine and development issues. John Horgan's (1986, 1987) study, which was commissioned by the Catholic relief agency Trocaire, examined coverage from newspapers, radio and television.³³ Horgan noted the almost unique situation of the Irish media in the Developed World, and attempted to add a new dimension to Galtung and Ruge's (1965) typology of news worthiness.

In their coverage of Third World poverty and famine, the Irish news media were, Horgan argued, extremely dependent on outside news agencies for their news stories. This was due by and large to a scarcity of resources and personnel, and therefore the construction of Third World poverty stories was outside of their control.

Horgan suggested also that we can add another dimension to Galtung and

³² Commission of the European Communities, *Eurobarometer: The Perception of Poverty in Europe*, Brussels, Paper V/467/90 — EN, 1990.

³³ For a response to this research see *Images of Africa: An African Viewpoint* (1988).

Ruge's (1965) criteria of what is considered newsworthy.³⁴ Horgan argued that decision making of an elite media organisation could also be significant in setting the agenda for coverage of poverty and famine stories:

In the case of 1984 and Africa, the decision of the BBC to give major news time to a report by Michael Buerk in October 1984 evidently triggered a whole series of decisions in other media organisations, and increased the amount of coverage in exponential terms in a comparatively short period. (1987:19)

Horgan's study was published as a report, *Images of Africa* (1986), by Trocaire and the findings were discussed in his paper *Africa and Ireland: Aspects of a media agenda* (1987). He made the following points (1987:18):

- (1) There is a relatively poor correlation between the positive response to the phenomenon of famine in Africa in ideological terms, and media commitment to, and manifestation of, this response.
- (2) Manpower commitments by the media were generally low, and the level of analysis of the deeper issues involved was uneven. Coverage as a whole could be described in terms of a graph which both rose and fell steeply: long-term interest in the phenomenon, was with few exceptions, not sustained.
- (3) Irish efforts, both voluntary and governmental, to alleviate famine generally received favourable coverage.
- (4) Aid initiative and strategies by the EEC and by indigenous governments were less favourably commented on, and the media's interpretation of the famine focused primarily on short-term aspects such as drought and crop failure.

In addition to these main findings, Horgan's study examined the underlying media messages about what might be appropriate response to famine stricken

³⁴ They argued that four key factors influenced the making of an event into news. These were:

- (1) The more the event concerns elite nations.
- (2) The more the event concerns elite people.
- (3) The more the event can be seen in personal terms, as due to the actions of specific individuals.
- (4) The more negative the consequences of the event, whether actual or anticipated.

countries, as well as what were suggested by the media to be the causes of famine. Horgan argued that media coverage suggested that there are four causative factors. These were:

- (1) Climatic and natural reasons, such as drought, crop failure, and the associated refugee problem.
- (2) Underdevelopment, with the concomitant views of North–South economic relationships, the diversion of resources into armaments industries, etc.
- (3) A failure of response on the part of the EEC.
- (4) Mismanagement and waste on the part of African governments.

Horgan suggested that media coverage of the famine was dominated by a clear set of messages as well as the implicit assumption that the ‘charity’ response to famine was the appropriate one. The coverage in the main suggested that famine relief was basically a matter of finance and logistics. Coverage of Irish relief work centred on the amounts of money being raised by Irish charities and how the aid to the Third World was to be organised.

Fictional Accounts of Poverty

A small amount of research exists on how poverty is portrayed in a fictional setting. Gibbons (1988) explored the tension between romanticism and realism in Irish cinema and argued that in early films such as *Man of Aran* and *Ryan’s Daughter*, there was a dominance of the pastoral genre. Audiences were offered an idealised portrait of rural poverty. Early Irish film attempted to convey an aestheticised rural poverty through an avoidance of ever coming to terms with the main causes of rural poverty — colonialism, working conditions and land ownership.

In RTE’s first soap opera *Tolka Row* (1964–1968) the main family featured were the Nolans who were industrious and hard working. Their assiduousness was countered by Chas and Queenie Butler who symbolised the lumpen elements in Dublin working class life. The promising start made by Irish soap opera in the 1960s was not to last, however. Carroll (1992) in her analysis on the portrayal of women in

RTE's *Glenroe* and *Fair City* commented on the failure of Irish TV drama to adequately reflect the issue of poverty in relation to women. She argued that in the programmes she viewed over a six-month period that the question of poverty was raised but not examined in any in-depth way. Of *Fair City* she said:

it fails to highlight the plight of families trying to survive on social welfare payments, and in particular the difficulties and stress experienced by mothers of such families trying to feed and clothe themselves and their children. (1992:46)

Of *Glenroe* she noted the middle class orientation of the programme which ignored the increasing levels of rural poverty. Carroll added that *Glenroe*'s portrayal of the Travellers was quite limited. It was, she asserted, generally confined to:

the social injustice of not allowing the Travellers to integrate themselves into our society without conforming to our norms, But the hardship suffered by the Travellers extends beyond prejudice against them. (1992:48)

The programme therefore had failed to deal adequately with poverty generally or the poverty of the Travelling Community.

Other Developments

Finally, two further developments within the Irish poverty/media debate are worthy of note. These concern journalistic practices and the lobbying activities of poverty groups for better and fairer media coverage. O'Gorman's (1994) text *Queuing For A Living* dealt with the story of his radio programme of the same title and represented an interesting vista into how the author's broadcasting style has bucked the trend within RTE's journalistic practices. O'Gorman's programme was based around conversations he has had with the displaced and usually poor Irish at home and abroad. All participants had queues in common. O'Gorman's style has been to

approach his interviewees directly. He avoided as a matter of principle his three pet hates:

Social Workers, Community Activists and Poverty Nuns. (1994:73)

O’Gorman was also critical of many of his colleagues in both print and broadcast journalism who engaged in what he termed ‘in-tray journalism’, being overly reliant on the press releases of social workers and those who constantly interviewed the agents of the poor rather than the poor themselves.

In recent times, Travellers, particularly in the Dublin area, are proving to be an exception to this rule. The Dublin Travellers Education and Development Group have recently begun to provide spokespersons to the national print and broadcast media who argue their case from a Traveller perspective. The Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed are also an example of how some marginalised groups have attempted to present a unified voice to the media.

2:8 Summary of Findings

The review of the research literature pertaining to media and poverty reveals that to date this issue has only been of limited interest to researchers. Despite the concern of researchers to explain over time the questions of media effects, ownership patterns, production processes or audience interpretation, the poor and their coverage (or lack of it) has largely slipped through the net of research foci. Poverty related questions such as homelessness or unemployment have received a certain amount of attention from scholars but the more complex and multi-faceted phenomenon of poverty and its coverage by the media remains largely elusive.

Of the studies that do exist, these may be divided into those of media usage and media content. More recent research indicates a trend towards attempting to understand how the agents of the poor are portrayed. Added to this, is a concern about the move of the media into its recently discovered role as fund-raiser.

This chapter establishes that media content studies are overwhelmingly concerned with the portrayal of poverty in the print media and to a much lesser extent with fictional accounts of poverty on television. It is shown that the media are taken up with the categories of 'devil' and 'angel' when telling stories about poverty, by concentrating on the more exotic forms of poverty and the poor while also engaging in a form of self-congratulation when reporting on Third World poverty. The one exception to this rule seems to come from the limited amount of research on fictional television, where in an American context, it has been found that this type of programmes tend to disseminate the myth of the 'happy poor'. The limited amount of work to date on this question in an Irish context would seem to concur with this.

The recent shift towards analysing media texts about poverty from semiotic, discourse analysis or frame analysis perspectives represents an important breakthrough in terms of not only theory and method, but also because it indicates a widening of the scope of analysis which takes account of television, and in the specific case of frame analysis, allows for some exploration of how audience groups read and interpret the frames of poverty stories. This apparent sea-change is of fundamental importance in that it recognises the necessity of examining how texts are structured ideologically.

2:9 Ideology and Dominant Ideology

Introduction

Earlier in this chapter I welcomed the somewhat smallscale shift towards analysing media presentation of poverty from an ideological perspective. In the following section I look more closely at the concept of ideology. First, I briefly trace the history of the concept noting its key turns within the Marxist tradition. Secondly, while acknowledging that the concept of ideology is not without its difficulties, I call for its retention, and, following Thompson (1990) I opt to use a definition of ideology which is concerned with how ideas are used to sustain relations of power and domination. Thirdly, I examine the arguments both against and for the continued use of the concept

and I comment specifically on the applicability of the concept towards analysing the media.

This discussion will set the scene for a consideration of the methodological model used in this study to identify the dominant ideology evident in RTE's television coverage of poverty which is discussed in the next chapter. In Chapter Eight of this study I will return to assess the theoretical implications which my key findings have in relation to the concept of ideology.

The Career of a Concept

The term ideology has had a long and chequered career ranging from its initial conception as a science of ideas, to being a central concept within classical and contemporary Marxist social theory.³⁵ Notwithstanding the recent attacks on the concept from post-structuralism and specifically the doubts raised by some researchers engaged in reception analysis, this sometimes ambiguous term has been used variously to connote a science of ideas, a pejorative or negative term of abuse, or as a system of ideas which facilitates domination. In some of its guises it has also been taken to imply a type of false consciousness. In using the term ideology I take it to mean the ideas which legitimise the power of a dominant social group or class (See Eagleton, 1991; Sheehan 1987:65-74).

The concept of ideology has been the subject of debate within the Marxist tradition. That heritage may be divided into those who have viewed ideology as being economically determined and who also assumed that the media were automatically on the side of the powerful duping the audience into blind acceptance of capitalism, while later versions of Marxism allowed for the relative autonomy of the media and the existence of a dominant as well as other types of ideology in the media.

The classic and essentially undeveloped materialist conception of ideology argued that the ruling classes in capitalist society controlled not only the means of

³⁵ See Eagleton (1991, 1-2) who listed 16 different aspects to this multifaceted concept as well as offering 6 definitions of the term ideology.

material production but also controlled the production of ideas. Domination and control over the working class was achieved through not only a specific type of ownership and control of wage labour but was also facilitated by ideas which either masked the true exploitative nature of capitalism or presented these kinds of economic relationships as being natural and inevitable.

The concept was developed further by the Frankfurt School, Althusser and Gramsci. The Frankfurt School retained much of the overly deterministic conception of ideology which was to be found within traditional Marxism. In attempting to explain how, in their eyes, history had somehow gone wrong — capitalism had persisted and two world wars had brought about massive destruction of human life — the Frankfurt School turned their attention on the ever growing ‘mass’ media. They argued that capitalist control of the media was the main reason why capitalism had survived and flourished in the post-war period. Marcuse (1964) asserted that the media had helped to:

...indoctrinate and manipulate, they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. (Cited in Dutton 1986: 35)

The Frankfurt School largely replicated the deterministic conception of ideology which had been a feature of Marx’s thinking. Both saw a direct relationship between the economic base and dominant ideas of capitalist society. For obvious historical reasons the Frankfurt School’s conception of ideology was far more mediacentric than the earlier account of ideology as outlined by Marx. Both Marx and the Frankfurt School used an essentially negative conception of ideology which implied that those on the receiving end of capitalist ideology passively accepted the ideas presented to them.

The later projects undertaken by Althusser and Gramsci represented a fundamental shift in thinking within the Marxist tradition about ideology. Althusser wished to explain how the media gave its audience ideological meaning. He asked how the media assisted in the production of an ‘imaginary picture’ of the “real conditions of capitalist production for the subject — i.e. the audience, thus concealing the reality of exploitation.” (Cited in Dutton 1986:35)

In doing so Althusser introduced the notion of Ideological State Apparatus. According to Althusser, institutions such as the educational system, church or the media reproduced ideology in such a way as to represent capitalism as being natural, inevitable and indeed desirable. At an extreme level we can think of how American television presented the state socialism of the former USSR as being backward and incompetent during the Cold War in contrast to the successes of individualism and capitalism in American society. But in other less obvious ways if we follow Althusser's reasoning, we can see how the media present particular lifestyles as being more legitimate than others thus contributing to the reproduction of a particular ideology.

Built into Althusser's conceptualisation of ideological reproduction was the notion of relative autonomy. To facilitate domination on an ongoing basis he argued that the media must be seen by the audience to be relatively autonomous from the direct control of the ruling class in capitalist society. In practical terms this might best be exemplified by the notion of journalistic neutrality or the requirements within current affairs broadcasting to present two sides of an argument. Thus, in the case of current affairs television for example, a programme manages to appear neutral by questioning both those in power and those in opposition, while at the same time legitimising the customs and practices (and ultimately the ideology) of liberal democracies. Althusser's concept of relative autonomy allowed space for occasional dissenting views to be heard, but the dominant ideas which facilitated the continuation of the capitalist order, according to his thinking, held sway.

Gramsci's key contribution to the debate about ideology was in his development of the concept of hegemony. According to Gramsci ideological domination in capitalist society was achieved through the moulding of popular consent. The capitalist system managed to continue through the use of ideologies which facilitated the creation of a consensus between exploiters and exploited. In Gramsci's view the media reproduced a 'common-sense' view of the world which represented capitalism as natural and inevitable. This common-sense viewpoint was essentially an ideological perspective which functioned to maintain an asymmetrical relationship of domination between the

powerful and powerless. According to Boggs (1977) in Gramsci's theory of ideological hegemony the media were the mechanisms that the ruling class used to:

perpetuate their power wealth and status [by popularising] their own philosophy, culture and morality. (1977: 276)

Gramsci however accepted the idea that the media appeared relatively autonomous *vis-à-vis* the owners of capital, yet, they nevertheless were heavily involved in the production and reproduction of ideology which functioned to maintain capitalism. Gramsci saw the production and reproduction of ideology as being ongoing. He held that the dominant class in capitalist society could not be sure of hegemonic order. Hegemony had to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated within the capitalist system to ensure its continuation.

Lull (1995) noted that Gramsci's theory of hegemony connected ideological representation to culture. Hegemony required that ideology translated into 'obvious' cultural assumptions. In Williams' (1976) words, hegemony necessitated the dominated to accept the dominant ideology as "normal reality or common-sense...in active forms of experience and consciousness." (1976: 145)

In the light of these theoretical developments within the Marxist tradition an attempt was made by researchers most notably at the *Centre For Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Birmingham) and by the *Glasgow University Media Group* to operationalise these neo-Marxist understandings of ideology. Taken collectively, their work found that the media reproduced a world view which was profoundly ideological. It argued that media representation managed to mask the social structure. Both research groups accepted the Althusserian notion of relative autonomy but believed that a careful content analysis of media messages could reveal clear ideological patterns.

The work acknowledged that oppositional views could occasionally be heard in the media. But while alternative ideologies existed, they were given less media attention or indeed framed in such a way as to ensure that audiences would not take them seriously. Thus, somebody advocating an alternative vision of society might be

portrayed as a crank or as an eccentric. Ideas which were found to be supportive of the status quo were amplified and emphasised. Hegemony was achieved through constructing preferred meanings for the audience.

This research work represented an important move towards a concern with the concept of a dominant ideology as opposed to ideology per se. As Dutton (1986) pointed out, this shift meant that the use of the term dominant ideology allowed for the acknowledgement of alternative ideologies such as feminism or socialism and indeed allowed for media content which was opposed to the dominant ideology. The notion of relative autonomy from the ruling class interest in capitalist society also threw a question mark over the extent to which the media slavishly reproduced the dominant social order. In the following section I turn to examine Thompson's (1990) arguments for the continued use of the concept of dominant ideology.

Dominant Ideology

In the face of theoretical developments most notably within the field of poststructuralism and in the more general context of the key changes — such as the collapse of communism — which took place on the world's political stage during the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of ideology began to lose favour with many. However many thinkers leapt to its defence (Giddens, 1979; Eagleton, 1991; Dahlgren, 1987, 1992; Zizek 1994) and, as I argue in more detail later on, ideology was prematurely handed its redundancy papers.

Thompson's work (1984, 1990) represented a stout rebuttal of those who were keen to rid the world of theory and politics of the concept of ideology. He was critical of the overly deterministic nature of earlier accounts of ideology as posited by Marx, Marcuse and Althusser. He acknowledged the problematic nature of the concept referring specifically to both its ambiguity and its pejorative uses. In the face of these difficulties Thompson argued that there have been two kinds of responses by theorists to the concept of ideology. In the context of the alleged decline of Marxism many thinkers

have hastily dispensed with the concept altogether.³⁶ Others have preferred to as Thompson (1990) put it 'to try and tame the concept' by using a neutralised definition of ideology where ideology simply refers to a system of ideas or thought. (See for example Lull, 1995: 6-11)

In surveying the career of the concept Thompson (1990) argued that there were essentially two types of conception of ideology which he characterised as neutral and critical. For Thompson (1990) neutral conceptions of ideology:

...are those which purport to characterise phenomena as ideology or ideological without implying that these phenomena are necessarily misleading, illusory or aligned with the interests of any particular group. Ideology, according to the neutral conceptions, is one aspect of social life (or form of social inquiry) among others, and is not more nor any less attractive than any other. (1990:53)

Conversely, critical conceptions of ideology:

...are those which convey a negative, critical or pejorative sense. Unlike neutral conceptions, critical conceptions imply that the phenomena characterised as ideology or ideological are misleading, illusory or one-sided; and the very characterisation of phenomena as ideology carries with it an implicit criticism of them. (1990: 54)

Thompson (1990) called for the retention of the term ideology and more specifically that it should be used in its negative or critical sense. He argued that our thinking about ideology should be refocused on the interrelations of meaning and power and more specifically on how meaning serves to maintain relations of domination. According to Thompson:

...the concept of ideology can be used to refer to the ways in which meaning serves, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical — what I shall call 'relations of

³⁶ See for example Frazer's (1992) study 'Teenage Girls Reading Jackie' who rejected the concept of ideology owing to its determinism and its implied false consciousness.

domination'. Ideology, broadly speaking, *is meaning in the service of power*. Hence the study of ideology requires us to investigate the ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds, from everyday linguistic utterances to complex images and texts; it requires us to investigate the social contexts within which symbolic forms are employed and deployed; it calls upon us to ask whether, and if so how, the meaning constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms serves, in specific contexts, to establish and sustain relations of domination. (1990:6-7)

Thompson's (1990) defence of the concept of ideology was an important one in that it reasserted the relevance of the concept in the examination of how meaning functions to support relations of domination. The interpretation and use of the concept in this sense meant that we should analyse the meaning of symbolic phenomena in a socio-historical context and more specifically in terms of how they function to sustain relations of domination.

Thompson's (1990) version of ideology with its particular focus on dominant ideology carried with it three important inferences which are worth noting. The first is that by implication ideologies other than dominant ideologies exist. There are in existence at any one time oppositional ideologies which are critical of the status quo, feminism and Marxism being just two examples within contemporary capitalist society. Equally, alternative ideologies exist in state socialist societies.

Secondly, Thompson's definition of ideology maintained that not all symbolic phenomena could be adjudged to be ideological. They are only ideological in the sense that they contribute to the maintenance of domination by one class group over another. Thus, if I place an advert selling my dog in a local newspaper it is simply an advert. If, on the other hand, my local newspaper reports in an affirmative way on Princess Diana's visit to the homeless in my city it can be adjudged to be engaging in the production of ideology. The unequal positions of the princess and the homeless are reaffirmed, and the belief that charity is the appropriate response and not radical social change is underscored.

Thirdly, in the face of the debate over whether ideology represented a form of false consciousness or as Marx termed it a 'camera obscura' — Thompson argued that it was not a prerequisite that ideology should somehow falsify the nature of social relations.³⁷ He argued:

It is not essential for symbolic forms to be erroneous or illusory in order for them to be ideological. They *may* be erroneous or illusory, indeed in some cases ideology *may* operate by concealing or masking social relations, by obscuring or misrepresenting situations; but these are contingent possibilities, not necessary characteristics of ideology as such. (1990: 56)

Thompson's useful corrective measure in redefining ideology in this sense removed the necessity of proving that ideological phenomena when characterised as ideological should also be as a matter of course be shown to be false or illusory. It did not however rule out the possibility that falsification took place. Such an activity was deemed to be secondary to the main task in hand which was to show how symbolic forms managed to establish and maintain relations of domination.

Thompson's definition of ideology was derived from Marx's latent conception of the term. He has attempted in his work to offer a revised definition of ideology which maintained one important link with earlier critical or negative accounts of ideology in that it was focused on how relations of domination were established and sustained. In the following section I examine the five ways in which Thompson suggested that ideology can operate.

³⁷ See Eagleton (1991) for an alternative view. He asserted that the concept of ideology has followed two paths, the first stressed the question of truth versus falsity where ideology was seen to distort and mystify social relations, the second has adopted a more neutral stance by focusing on the role of ideas in social life rather than their respective truth or falsity. Eagleton maintained that the Marxist tradition has followed both routes and both approaches remain relevant in the analysis of ideology.

The Operation of Ideology

In attempting to operationalise his revised definition of ideology Thompson (1990) asserted that there were five general ways in which it could function. These he characterised as legitimisation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification.

Following Weber, Thompson believed that asymmetrical relations of domination could be created and maintained through being represented as legitimate. A hierarchical social structure might be presented as being just and worthy of support. He suggested that one way in which legitimisation took place was through the process of universalisation. Through universalisation, a social structure based on inherent inequality of a class kind, was to Thompson's thinking, represented as meeting the interests of everybody and in principle the benefits which might accrue from rising through the ranks of the social structure through social mobility were open to all. A capitalist society like Ireland therefore may reproduce itself through ensuring that its citizens believe that the social and economic system, despite its evident inequalities, is legitimate, is in the interests of all concerned and indeed is open to anybody (assuming ability and interest) who wishes to succeed.

Relations of domination could also be established and sustained through what Thompson (1990) termed dissimulation. By this he meant that relations of domination were hidden, denied or obscured. Alternatively dissimulation could take place through forms of representation which either deflected attention away from relations of inequality or simply glossed over these processes. Through the process of dissimulation the issues of power and inequality are masked. Thus, asymmetrical class relations may be presented in a news report about charity as being simply human relations between the wealthy and the poor. Poverty might for example be explained by reference to the individual failings of the poor without any reference to the structural context in which that poverty is taking place or indeed go without any mention at all.

According to Thompson (1990) a further way in which relations of domination could be achieved was through unification. He argued that asymmetrical relations could

be established and sustained through creating at a symbolic level a unifying ideology which welded individuals together into a collective identity. Such an identity could be used to supersede any individual or class differences that might exist in the collectivity. Perhaps nationalism is the best example of this. A ruling class might mobilise nationalist fervour in order to achieve a specific aim such as 'reclaiming' the Falkland Islands, bombing Russia or engaging in attacks on the Sandinistas. This in turn may unify the various class groups involved and also function to detract attention away from the unequal nature of the relationship between the rulers and ruled.

Conversely, fragmentation may also be used to support a system which is based upon relations of domination. Thompson (1990) held that in certain circumstances asymmetrical relations could be maintained through dividing individuals and groups who might challenge the status quo. Additionally, the powerful may retain their power through redirecting the energies of those who might otherwise challenge the status quo at a real or imaginary enemy. Ideological domination could be achieved and maintained by a colonial power for example by promoting divisiveness amongst different ethnic groups who make up the colonised. Equally, it might be generated by an imperial power at home who foster feelings of enmity between the underclass and immigrants often around questions of work, housing or social welfare. Dominant ideology itself may be of a fragmented nature with various powerful interest groups vying with each other for overall supremacy and thus in turn its composite nature may give rise to the view that because of competing interests that there is in fact no dominant ideology.

Thompson's (1990) final *modus operandi* of ideology was the concept of reification. He argued that relations of domination could be created and sustained through representing these relations as if they were ahistorical and uninfluenced by time and space. The social structure and particular modes of production were portrayed as being 'natural'. He asserted:

Ideology qua reification thus involves the elimination or obfuscation of the social and historical character of social-historical phenomena — or, to borrow a

suggestive phrase from Claude Lefort, it involves the re-establishment of 'the dimension of society "without history" at the very heart of society. (1990: 65)

Thompson (1990) suggested that reification could operate in two principle ways. Through a process of naturalisation a social or historical phenomenon such as the class structure was viewed as a natural event or as the inevitable outcome of natural characteristics. In addition, through the process of eternalisation, social-historical phenomena were defined as being ahistorical and portrayed as permanent features of human experience.

Thus, the social structure of capitalist societies is constructed as being a natural occurrence. The essential reason for its existence namely specific modes of production with a definite history are either conveniently ignored or presented as natural events. Other notions underpin this reification such as the idea that man is naturally competitive or that there always have been winners and losers in human society. Various ideas are mobilised to present an unequal system as being inevitable and natural. Parallels are struck with the hierarchies evident in the animal kingdom, stories are told about the 'fact' that societies based on a more egalitarian or collectivist ethos simply do not work because it is unnatural for them to do so. The idea that 'It has always been so' is stressed in the face of those who dare to suggest alternative possibilities.

Thompson's (1990) attempt to show how ideology functions to secure asymmetrical social relations represented an important development within the contemporary debate about ideology. Prior to dealing with some of the more salient issues which have arisen in terms of the relative usefulness of the concept I wish to make one further remark about his account of ideology.

If we accept Thompson's (1990) corrective measures in explaining ideology then we accept that the production and reproduction of ideology is an active process in which both the ruling class and their subordinates participate. It is not, as earlier and more simplistic accounts of ideology would have it, a one way process whereby ideology just percolates downwards from the ruling class via their media and other state apparatuses. Both the dominant social class and their subordinates participate in the

production and reproduction of ideology. It is not only the ruling class who engage in perpetuating the myth of society's classness. Consider the level of interest amongst the working class in the real life soap opera which is the British Royal Family. Political parties of a conservative nature are re-elected by those who benefit least from their re-election. The dominant ideology which welds an unequal society together may be evident in the beliefs of the subordinated — such as, “if you work hard you get on” — and indeed their acceptance and reproduction of those beliefs may play an important part in the circulation of dominant ideology and the ultimate continuance of an unequal social order. That is not to say that the subordinated do not have the capacity to reject particular ideologies or indeed construct alternative ones.

Defending a Contested Concept

The concept of ideology has been under attack from several fronts in recent times. As noted earlier, theoretical and political developments fuelled speculation that the end of ideology was nigh. The findings emerging from communications research which focused on audience reception of messages also began to raise doubts about the usefulness of the concept. Ironically, at a time of the resurgence of the right, increasing privatisation and in the re-emergence of fundamentalism — both Islamic and Christian — there were those who argued that ideology was a concept bedevilled by many problems and who argued against its continued use. It is my contention that despite the difficulties which may have dogged ideology in the past, it remains an important concept within social theory and within media analysis specifically.

At a theoretical level the concept of ideology has been under siege for a long time.³⁸ Critics of the term argued that typically it was applied in a pejorative way by followers of Marx who were blind to their own ideological position. Ideology, like beauty, according to this viewpoint was in the eye of the beholder. Fortunately, this argument may also be turned around against those who have condemned the concept of

³⁸ See Thompson's (1978) text *The Poverty of Theory*.

ideology to redundancy. It has been accused by some as being an ideological statement in itself which may be shown to assist in the maintenance of a dominant social order. (See Giddens, 1979) Just because it may be argued that earlier theorists adopted a simplistic or short-sighted definition of ideology is no reason to reject the concept outright.

Opponents of the concept have also pointed to what they saw as the ambiguity of ideology arguing that because of its ambiguity and elusiveness that the term should be rejected. The charge that ideology is an ambiguous term or that it has in itself ambiguous qualities should not detract from its importance. Indeed, its ambiguity may in fact be a strengthening feature which helps ensure that it can go undetected. According to Zizek (1994) critics of the concept held that the:

critique of ideology involve a privileged place, somehow exempted from the turmoils of social life, which enables the subject-agent to perceive the very hidden mechanism that regulates social visibility and non-visibility. (1994:3)

Frazer (1992) also an opponent of the concept, put it perhaps more baldly in accusing media theorists of committing the fallacy of simplistically inferring the ideological meaning of media texts and by implication their effect on audiences but not on themselves!

In response to recent criticism of the term ideology Thompson (1990) has accused those who are opposed to the continued use of the concept as being short-sighted. He argued that the critics of ideology had failed to examine closely whether or not there was, despite many problems, anything worth salvaging in the concept. He stated that the typical response of those who were opposed to the concept of ideology was:

to abandon, or more commonly refuse to begin the search. Rather than asking whether the tradition of reflection associated with the concept of ideology has highlighted a range of problems with misleading and untenable assumptions, this

response chooses to drop the question or, more frequently, presumes an answer while avoiding the intellectual labour in trying to determine it. (1990:6)

As is evident from our earlier discussion Thompson (1990) called for the retention of the concept of ideology despite its historical weaknesses.

Eagleton (1991) summarised the grounds upon which the dominant ideology thesis could be questioned. In the first instance opponents of the concept of ideology argued that there was in existence no coherent dominant ideology. What existed were many competing ideologies. A second position held that even if a dominant ideology were shown to exist, that it was not as effective in moulding people's thinking and experience as was thought by proponents of the concept. A third strand in this line of thought argued that in late or advanced capitalism, society's members were kept in place more through economic pressures such as the threat of unemployment or poverty than through ideology. It suggested that the capitalist system maintained itself:

...less through the imposition of meaning than through destroying meaning altogether; and what meanings the masses *do* entertain can be at odds with those of their rulers without any serious disruption ensuing. (1991: 41)

A fifth and final criticism of the concept of ideology according to Eagleton (1991) was that even if a dominant ideology could be shown to exist, it may be that the masses are in fact aware of it and are not foolish enough to be deluded by it. These arguments relegated the importance of ideas in late capitalist society to either the sidelines or indeed questioned their potency in securing hegemony.

Eagleton (1991) however expressed dissatisfaction with those who sought to argue that we were witnessing the end of ideology. Neither post-structuralism nor post-Marxism had, according to his viewpoint, provided us with an alternative concept which could satisfactorily explain the world. At its best, the body of work which opposed the continued use of the concept could be seen as a corrective measure to overcome some of the admittedly simplistic assumptions made about ideology previously. At its worst, this position could be interpreted as being ideological in itself because it functioned to assist

in the maintenance of the dominant social order by arguing against the very idea that there might be a dominant ideology. It has to be noted that much of what was being written against ideology in the late 1980s and early 1990s was being written in a world in which capitalism was being viewed by some as a permanent feature, and where Marxism was seen as being in retreat. It was no accident that the views of the powerful came to be incorporated by some theorists into their thinking and indeed their arguments against ideology only add weight to the classical Marxist position that the ideas of any age are those of the ruling classes.

A second set of criticisms of the concept of ideology emerged from empirical research work undertaken by researchers largely using a reception analysis model. Corner (1995) noted that while ideological analysis of media texts had some success in terms of examining form and content, the dissatisfaction which many had with the ideological model of analysis was exemplified in the shift towards analyses of reception and use of media texts. This resulted in a move away from ideological analysis which had attempted to show connections between television form and social structure, towards a concentration on the various contexts in which media messages were received. Nevertheless, there remained an important body of work within the reception analysis tradition which continued to make use of the concept of ideology.

Dahlgren, (1992) although supportive of the concept of ideology, argued that earlier ideological analysis suffered from overly simplistic interpretation on the part of researchers in terms of how texts functioned ideologically. He saw the crux of this problem as being one of reconciling the polysemic openness of a text with the required narrow parameters of a text which would allow for a preferred meaning to be read. Drawing upon Thompson's (1990) conceptualisation of ideology, Dahlgren (1992) argued that the very openness of the text could assist in the reproduction of ideology through dissimulation. His analysis of viewer discourses on television news led him to conclude that the openness of a text irrespective of whether it contained contradictions or not, helped in obfuscation and the circulation of ideology. Television news was found to present a range of possible meanings none of which assisted the viewer locate herself

politically or socially. Thus, in masking the social structure through using open texts Dahlgren (1992) argued that television news contributed to the production and reproduction of a dominant ideology.

Fiske's (1987) study was an attempt to bring together the polysemic nature of television texts with the fact that they were being read by a variety of class and subcultural groupings. He examined the relationship between the ideological meanings of media texts and how diverse audiences interpreted and possibly resisted these meanings. Although he acknowledged that television texts were essentially dialogic in nature, he maintained that texts had to be understood in the context of the question of ideology. Fiske (1987) argued that:

Texts are the site of conflict between their forces of production and modes of reception...A text is the site of struggles for meaning that reproduce the conflicts of interest between the producers and consumers of the cultural commodity. (1987:14)

Fiske's (1987) contention was that television programmes were produced by the culture industry which structured programmes around a set of meanings which did not challenge the status quo. However, as programmes became texts which were read by the television audience, there emerged a range of readings and interpretations that varied according to one's position in the social structure. This allowed for the possible subversion of the preferred meaning of the text. Fiske (1987) saw the polysemic nature of television texts in essentially political terms. He argued that:

The structure of the text typically tries to limit its meanings to ones that promote the dominant ideology, but polysemy sets up forces that oppose this control. The hegemony of the text is never total, but always has to struggle to impose itself against the diversity of meanings that the diversity of readers will produce. (1987:93)

In a commentary on Fiske's (1987) project, Tester (1994) took issue with his arguments. Arguing for an ideological model of media analysis, Tester (1994) suggested that Fiske

(1987) confused the fact that simply because something could happen, it automatically meant that it did actually happen. Tester (1994) asserted that it may very well be that media audiences can subvert the preferred meanings of media texts but that this did not necessarily prove the contention that they undertake such activities.

It should be remembered however that Fiske (1987) was not rejecting the notion that a dominant ideology existed in a media text and that it could be examined as such through careful research and analysis. As Lull (1995) cogently argued, even where members of the audience either subvert or reject ideas offered to them by the media they engage in such activity only after being introduced to and contemplating the messages as dominant ideologies. Gay men who have appropriated the term 'queer' have done so only after the dominant homophobic ideology defined them as such. Members of Militant Labour in rejecting Tory policy as evidenced in a party political broadcast do so in the full knowledge that such ideas are part of the raft of dominant ideology favouring the British ruling class.

It is also clear however that audiences *do* pick up on the preferred meanings of media texts. The task of infiltrating human consciousness and influencing consumer behaviour is at the core of the advertising industry. Those in the marketplace are clearly convinced of the power of the media to influence and change thinking patterns. Audiences can and do read preferred ideological meanings in media texts in terms of the intentions of their senders.

Ideology and Television

The concepts of ideology and hegemony are of central importance in terms of analysing the media's function in contemporary society. Thompson (1990) argued that with some notable exceptions, such as Horkheimer and Adorno, sufficient attention had not yet been paid to what he termed the mediatization of modern culture in terms of the question of ideology. Others such as Lull (1995) and Corner (1995) have asserted that the media and especially television are well suited to the dissemination of ideology. Corner (1995) argued that:

Television represents the world through visual and aural conventions which work to invoke realist credibility rather than critical engagement...It thus becomes well suited to ideological communication, forms of representation in which there is a mystification of power relationships.(1995:44)

Following Gramsci (1971) Gitlin defined hegemony as the way in which the ruling class maintained their dominant position through the moulding of popular consent. He held that the media have become core systems for the distribution of ideology, whereby:

everyday, directly or indirectly, by statement and omission, in pictures and words, in entertainment and news and advertisement, the mass media produce fields of definition and association, symbol and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete. (1980:2)

This, he argued, functioned to allow the continuation of the established social order. Ideologies, it was suggested, are reproduced through the use of media frames. Gitlin (1980) asserted that media frames may be seen as:

persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol handlers routinely organise discourse, whether visual or verbal. (1980:7)

Media frames not only help journalists to turn events into stories, but also allow for audiences to interpret the world beyond their direct experience. Frames are rarely referred to or acknowledged and function to present the existing social order as natural and inevitable.

Gitlin's work on the ideological and hegemonic functions of the mass media is of central importance to the research theme being explored in this project. Perhaps more than any other subject, media treatment of poverty and inequality bring the questions of media ideology and hegemony to the centre court. Do the media acknowledge the existence of poverty? What do they define as poverty and how is

poverty explained? From whose perspective? And what do they suggest are the solutions (if any) to poverty? Is there a dominant ideological position reproduced in the coverage? How does the coverage function in a hegemonic way? All of these issues underpin this project which is attempting to examine the ideological construction of RTE's poverty stories in terms of both content and production context.

There is evidently an urgent need to examine the ideological construction of television texts about poverty. This project will consider the possible diversity of messages which emanate from four different television genres. This will allow us to compare and contrast the ways in which these genres tell stories about poverty and ask whether there is on Irish television a dominant set of ideological assumptions underlying the coverage of the question of poverty.

The evolution of telethon fund-raising television represents a significant development in terms of the role and function of the media in society. An analysis of televisual coverage of poverty has therefore to be a multi-faceted one taking account of 'factual', 'fictional' and 'fund-raising' programmes. The stories which RTE tells about poverty form the basis of this research project. In summary, I am suggesting an analysis which is largely qualitative and which draws upon a combination of qualitative content analysis and the ethnographic approach in attempting to understand both the production processes and message systems of these three types of television. Just how this question can be best dealt with at a methodological level is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Analysing Content and Production: Methodology Employed

Contents

- 3:1 Introduction**
- 3:2 Content Analysis: The Qualitative Turn**
- 3:3 Production Based Research**
- 3:4 Developing A Research Model: The Antecedents**
- 3:5 Methodological Model Employed**

3:1 Introduction

This chapter proposes a methodological marriage between qualitative content analysis and production based research. It follows Gitlin's (1979) suggestion that the prime concern for media researchers should be an ideological one. Gitlin (1979) asserted that in examining television texts, the initial question for researchers should not be:

the impact of these programmes? but rather a prior one. What do these programmes mean? For only after thinking through their possible meanings as cultural objects and as a sign of cultural interactions among producers and audiences may we begin to intelligibly ask about their "effects". (1979:426)

The methodological schema being adopted in this study is primarily a qualitative content analysis approach which attempts to understand the various messages about Irish poverty on RTE television. Added to this is an ethnographic dimension which draws upon observation, participant observation, formal and informal interviews in order to gain a clear understanding of the processes which govern the production of poverty stories on RTE.

This dual approach is guided by Bruhn-Jensen and Jankowski's (1991) call for the necessity to take a *qualitative turn* in mass communication research. While acknowledging the importance of the issue of how audiences interpret texts (and allowing for differing interpretations), I believe that our prime interest should be with the meanings of texts and their production. Given these concerns, the dominant research paradigm within the media and poverty tradition — quantitative content analysis — was rejected as a possible methodological path. The main reason why quantitative content analysis was deemed to be unacceptable, was, while it might certainly tell us about the number of times a particular poverty issue appeared on a television programme, it would not tell us anything about the deeper elements of meaning within a poverty text.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. Qualitative content analysis and production based research are examined separately in terms of their history and relative strengths and weaknesses. The two key texts which partially informed the construction of the project's research model are then discussed. The chapter's final section outlines the research model used in this project. It describes in detail both the nature of the qualitative content analysis utilised and the ethnographic dimension of the project.

3:2 Content Analysis: The Qualitative Turn

Content analyses of both a quantitative and qualitative kind have proven to be popular research techniques amongst those interested in analysing the media's role in contemporary society. (Baxter et al 1985; Evans et al 1991) Quantitative content analysis emerged from the social science stable which postulated the need for empiricism, while the parentage of qualitative content analysis may be traced to linguistics and discourse analysis. Qualitative content analysis has taken on board the tools used in semiotics or structuralism which explored the meanings of media texts. Thus, while content analysis may be used as an umbrella term for a particular type of

research framework, we are in many respects dealing with two separate research traditions.

The techniques of traditional quantitative content analysis developed primarily by Berelson (1952) relied on the counting of phenomena. Following Berger, (1982) I take this form of content analysis to mean a:

a research technique based upon measuring (counting) the amount of something (violence, percentages of Blacks, women, professional types, or whatever) in a sampling of some form of communication (such as comics, sitcoms, soap operas, news shows). The basic assumption implicit in content analysis is that an investigation of messages and communication gives insights into the people who receive these messages. (1982:107)

Despite the continued use of quantitative content analysis by some researchers,³⁹ the approach came in for a great deal of criticism in the 1970s⁴⁰ and was supplemented by a form of content analysis which emphasised the notion of discourse.

The tension however between those who favoured a qualitative as opposed to a quantitative approach was by no means a new phenomenon. In the wake of the publication of Berelson's (1952) text *Content Analysis in Mass Communication Research*, the German Sociologist Kracauer (1953) offered the research community its first manifesto for qualitative content analysis. Rejecting the notion that quantitative content analysis was as rigorous as was being suggested by its promoters, Kracauer's fundamental argument against this approach was that 'texts' became segmented by splitting them up into atomised units for the purpose of counting and therefore, there was a danger that the possible meanings to be inferred from the entire text would be lost.

39 See for example Baxter et al (1985) and Evans et al (1991).

40 See for example Woolacott (1982) and Bruhn-Jensen (1991).

He argued against a dependency on quantitative means of exploring social phenomena and suggested instead that we consider the qualitative avenue. He asserted that:

The potentialities of communication research can only be developed if, as a result of such a reorientation, the emphasis is shifted from quantitative to qualitative procedures. (1953:631).

Perhaps Kracauer's most salient point was that the approaches referred to as *qualitative* and *quantitative* were not as separate as some commentators would have us believe. He suggested that:

before considering these questions it should be emphasised that the terms 'qualitative analysis' and 'quantitative analysis' do not refer to radically different approaches. Quantitative analysis includes qualitative aspects, for it both originates and culminates in qualitative considerations. On the other hand, qualitative analysis proper often requires quantification in the interest of exhaustive treatment. Far from being strict alternatives, the two approaches actually overlap, and have in fact complemented and interpenetrated each other in several investigations. (1953:637)

Kracauer's important critique of quantitative content analysis, although ignored by most, was to be the first warning shot in the debate between quantitative and qualitative camps. He did not however provide us with an alternative methodological framework with which texts might be analysed in their entirety.⁴¹ The research world had to wait until at least the 1970s when the impact of semiology and structuralism began to be felt within mass communication research.

The displeasure felt by media researchers with the rampant empiricism of quantitative content analysis came to a head in the 1970s. In a succinct account of the shift from empiricism to an emphasis on discourse, Van Der Berg and Van Der Veer

⁴¹ See Larsen (1991) for an appraisal of Kracauer's contribution to the quantitative-qualitative debate.

(1989) traced the move away from enumerative content analysis to an approach of a more qualitative kind. They quoted Galtung (1970) who viewed the methodological options open to researchers as a 'gridlock' choice between:

reliable but irrelevant studies and relevant but unreliable studies. (1989:161)

Van Der Berg and Van Der Veer (1989) summed up the reasons why quantitative content analysis came to be rejected by many scholars. They argued that:

content analysis is not capable of analysing communications as discourses. The result of content analytical research is a more or less refined insight in empirical co-variations between selected elements. But the discursive connection between singular elements (itself being a consequence of the fact that these elements form part of one discourse) is left out of consideration. (1989:161).

They continued with perhaps an even more fundamental point stating that:

content analysis cannot grasp meaning structures of a text and runs the risk of invalid conclusions because meanings are constructed by specific configurations of and relations between elements in a text and not by summing up of isolated comments. (1989:161)

The essential point made by Van Der Berg and Van Der Veer (1989) was that the inability of quantitative content analysis to deal with a text, be it a news programme or documentary or feature film, as a whole, led to its partial demise. Other related weaknesses of the approach were that it ignored the context in which texts were produced and it did not permit paradigmatic analyses of texts. Although these issues in themselves raise further questions such as whether paradigmatic analyses are in fact possible, it was for these reasons that content analysis of a quantitative kind was removed from its position of prominence as *the* methodological tool used by researchers.

Corcoran (1984) summarised the changes in the concerns of researchers and noted that:

The result has been a major shift in interest away from the positivist emphasis of the dominant Anglo-American paradigm, towards a previously ignored set of problems: how mediated messages are structured [both as 'texts' and as products of media organisations] how they function in the circulation and securing of hegemonic social definitions and how communication can be analysed as a process through which a particular world-view can be represented and maintained. (1984: 131)

This change of emphasis by media researchers in terms of how they approached media texts might best be exemplified by the tradition of content analysis research into violence.

Traditionally, quantitative content analysis of this nature was of a behaviouristic bent. Examinations of violent films or violent episodes in films were examined with the view to proving some intrinsic causal link with violent behaviour. With the shift towards examining film as discourse within the newer structuralist framework, the emphasis was now on messages about violence within film and the various ways in which these messages might be interpreted by a heterogeneous audience from different class and cultural backgrounds. (Woolacott , 1982)

McQuail (1983) explored how traditional quantitative content analysis was supplemented with the structuralist or semiotic approach. Semiology,⁴² which has successively examined the importance of signs, subjects and myths was defined by Sebeok (1974) as:

the study of the exchange of any messages whatever and of the systems of signs which underlie them, the key concept of semiotics remaining always the sign. (1974:108)

⁴² For a detailed exploration of semiotics see Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983), and also Sebeok (1974) 'Semiotics : A Survey of the State of the Art' Also illuminating is the account by Eagleton (1983) in his text *Literary Theory*.

For our purposes the most significant event within semiotics itself as a discipline was the shift from its original linguistic basis to a concentration on texts or discourse. As Gottdiener (1985) noted:

For Barthes [and Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida, among others] semiotics after 1969 became the study of the text or discourse, most especially in written form (such an inquiry is sometimes known as 'second generation' or 'philological semiotics'). (1985: 987)

McQuail (1983) explored the development of qualitative content analysis and suggested that it had the following characteristics. It was, he argued, more concerned with the context of media texts rather than the quantity of references which might accrue in using a quantitative framework. Attention was fixed on attempting to find the latent rather than the manifest content of media texts. Notions of 'sampling' and 'representativeness' which were endemic to traditional quantitative content analysis were brushed aside in favour of giving equal consideration to all units of content which were considered to be important or revelatory.

In applying the analytic tools of semiotics to the content of television, McQuail argued that:

media content consists of a large number of 'texts', often of a standardised and repetitive kind, which are composed on the basis of certain stylised conventions and codes, often drawing on familiar or latent myths and images present in the culture of the makers and receivers of texts. The application of semiological analysis opens the possibility of revealing more than the underlying meaning of a text, taken as a whole, than would be possible by simply following the grammatical rules of language or consulting the dictionary meaning of separate words. (1983: 131).

This new approach therefore brought with it the *possibility* of unlocking the codes which were believed to govern the production of media texts.

Semiotic analysis of media texts has however come in for an increasing amount of criticism. Corner (1995) argued that the semiotic project which had come to a position of dominance within media studies in the 1980s has proven itself to be unsatisfactory. In Corner's (1995) words, semiotics had "promised more than it had delivered." (1995:2)

There appeared to be a growing unease amongst researchers — particularly those coming under the influence of post-structuralism — of the validity of semiotic analysis. Post-structuralists began to cast doubts on the extent to which researchers could identify the correct or true meaning of a text. They argued against the sometimes simplistic assumptions made by the structuralists as to the actual meaning of a film or television programme. These reservations have an importance in terms of the project at hand. To merely rely upon an analysis of symbols and to assume their correct ideological meaning would be to take a simplistic view of how television operates at an ideological level. Nevertheless I would hold that a semiotic dimension still has an important ancillary role to play in the analysis of television.

Despite the fact that television purports to represent the social world in a realistic light, such portrayal rests heavily on the use of a symbolic shorthand to convey meaning about specific social phenomena. There remains however the question of audience interpretation and reception of symbolic portrayals. Furthermore the use of the semiotic approach assumes that the researcher fully understands the cultural context of the symbols being used to connote particular meanings about the world.

Many researchers however who although critical of some of the research endeavours undertaken in the name of semiotic analysis have called for the retention of a revised form of semiotics. O'Connor (1990) argued that a more modest semiotic analysis still had a role to play in media research, if it was used in conjunction with other research methods. In my project I draw in part on the semiotic heritage in my broader qualitative content analysis. My analysis however of what particular symbols

about poverty mean is grounded in an understanding of the intentions of those who created the symbols in the first place.

3:3 Production Based Research

In addition to the qualitative turn evident in content analysis research, it is also possible to identify a long tradition of qualitative research into the media, which takes what we will broadly term a production based approach.⁴³ This strategy is in reality a combination of qualitative research methodologies such as participant observation; observation; interviews; case-studies and detailed analyses of public and private documents. The key studies undertaken to date in Western Europe and North America have used these methodologies either in isolation or in combination, in order to understand the production of media messages.⁴⁴

Over time we can identify a key shift in production based research from that of the study of individuals, such as the infamous Mr. Gates, to the more recent analyses of media organisations set in a wider cultural and political context. The main focus of production based research has been on television news, although work of equal importance has been carried out on the production of documentaries and television drama.

Tuchman (1991) traced the history of production based research in terms of news making. Early sociologists, Tuchman claimed, such as Weber and Park were interested in the phenomenological aspects of news and consequently analysed news in terms of *verstehen* and not in quantitative terms.

43 Following Garfinkel, O'Neill (1993:65) noted that "A basic principle of the ethnomethodological perspective, within sociology, for example, is to look at meaning in individual situations of interaction as an on-going accomplishment of the members involved. To look at just what makes broadcast work meaningful, means beginning with participants or actors' own knowledge and common-sense categories of what constitutes distinctness or meaning in the activity."

44 See for example Burns (1977) *The BBC - Public Institution and Private World*; Schlesinger (1978) *Putting Reality Together: BBC News*; Golding and Elliot (1979) *Making The News*; Silverstone (1985) *Framing Science*; Hart (1988) *Making The Real World*; and O'Neill (1993) *Producing The Arts Show: An Ethnographic Study of Radio Producers at Work*.

The phenomenology evident in early sociology, best exemplified by the work of the Chicago School, came to be rejected by the early 1950s. Tuchman (1991) cited Janowitz's (1952) text *The Community Press in an Urban Setting* as being representative of the break with the participant observation tradition being promoted by the Chicago School. Janowitz's work used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies and contained an implicit rejection of the distinctly qualitative orientation of research which had prevailed up until then.

The 1950s and early 1960s saw a proliferation of analyses of the media which were, in methodological terms, heavily quantitative. The more recent period from the late 1960s to the present time, witnessed a resurgence of interest by researchers in both the use of qualitative methodologies to analyse the media in general, and the return of qualitative production based research.

The return of the qualitative was made possible through the use of a range of methodologies such as discourse analysis, semiotics and participant observation. This reorientation of mass communications research has also to be viewed in the context of the interest which researchers increasingly have had in the ideological functions of the media. As Tuchman (1991) noted:

Many of these [studies] emphasised how the processes of making news resulted in embedded ideological meanings. (1991:83)

Tuchman (1991) characterised the 'second wave' of qualitative analyses of media production as follows. Nearly all studies have had participant observation in common. The units of analysis were not individual reporters, producers or directors, but rather, they were news organisations viewed as complex institutions set in a wider cultural and political context. Analyses of news using this paradigm sought to determine both the ideology of news content and what Gans (1979) termed the 'para-ideology' of those who produced the news. This form of production research could also be defined as epistemological in that it sought to answer the question "How do news organisations "know" what they "know" ?" (1991:84).

Tuchman's (1978) own investigations into the production of news followed the Chicago tradition of sociological observation. The activities of news staff were observed both in and outside of the newsroom. Television and newspaper reporters were followed throughout their working day. The data gathered through observation was supplemented through the use of open ended interviews. Gans (1979) also used both of these methods, but in addition, made use of quantitative content analyses of the news reports under study.

Fishman (1980) and Lester (1975) in contrast to either Gans (1979) or Tuchman (1978) drew more on the participant observer model than on mere observership. Fishman (1980) and Lester (1975) both worked as junior reporters, and in doing so, gathered their data on news making. Gitlin (1980) drew upon his past experiences as a participant in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) to construct his analysis of media portrayal of the anti-war movement. He had, over time, collected many invaluable documents which otherwise might have disappeared. His involvement as president and founder of the SDS ensured that he had access to former members, as well as many of those who had reported on the movement. He managed with some success to bring together a range of archival materials from television and newspapers, as well as interview those who created the reports in addition to the report's subjects.

The production based research model has also been put to good use in the analyses of documentaries and television drama. Newcomb (1991) cited the works undertaken by Elliot (1972), Cantor (1988) and Gitlin (1983) as being exemplary models upon which future qualitative researchers might build their research frameworks.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Newcomb (1991) suggested that the following studies might also be helpful in this regard, Alvarado and Buscombe's (1978) *Hazell: The Making of a TV Series*; Tulloch and Alvarado's (1983) *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text* and Newcomb and Alley's (1983) *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with the Creators of American TV*.

Elliot's (1972) *The Making of a Television Series* traced the evolution of an ATV documentary series. Newcomb (1991) asserted that the great strength of the study was its attention to detail:

Perhaps because it was an early example of its kind, drawing as much from analysis of other social phenomena and from the sociology of art as from media theory or film analysis, the book walks us through each step in the production process. By tracing the series from its original conception, through a research and development phase, into production, postproduction and broadcast, Elliot is able to examine the points of decision making. This enables him to identify critical conjectures involving personnel, conceptual, technical and aesthetic choice, division and organisation of labor and levels of authority. The chronology of the production process becomes the organising principle of the book, a strategy common to much production research that follows. (1991:95)

Cantor's (1971) study *The Hollywood Producer: his Work and his Audience* drew upon traditional occupational sociology as well as a series of 59 interviews with television producers. The data gathered from the interviews was augmented by the analysis of public and private documents in addition to field work undertaken in various studios. Newcomb (1991) argued that the strengths of Cantor's (1971) work were threefold. It offered its readers a cogent account of the perspectives of this key group of media personnel. This data was presented in a fully contextualized manner in relation to the wider television industry. The study represented a viable model for future work with other occupational groups within the media industry.

Gitlin's (1983) text *Inside Prime Time* used many of the tools previously utilised by both Cantor and Elliot. His findings however were based upon hundreds of interviews in addition to observation of television production. *Inside Prime Time* provided its readers with vast amounts of data on network ratings and detailed case-study materials on the making of particular television dramas. Newcomb (1991) viewed Gitlin's (1983) study as being much comprehensive than either Cantor or Elliot on a range of fronts. He argued that:

[The result is] a more dynamic and fluctuating picture than that was offered by either Elliot or Cantor. In comparison with Elliot, the difference may be seen to emerge from systematic (Hollywood vs ITA) and generic (dramatic entertainment vs instructional documentary) distinctions. Differences with Cantor emerge from distinctions in method. Gitlin includes detailed case studies, examines and evaluates fictional content from a text-analytical perspective, and speaks with a wider range of individuals. Cantor's emphasis on occupational sociology is replaced by an emphasis on the sociology of art, communication and culture. (1991:97)

As an amalgamation of research methods such as participant observation,⁴⁶ interviewing and case studies, production based research carries with it an array of advantages and disadvantages. For the purposes of brevity, I will restrict my comments to participant observation. Elliot (1972) in a comprehensive addendum to his study of television production offered his readers an important account of the strengths and weaknesses of participant observation. He suggested that while participant observation might provide a researcher with a unique perspective on a media organisation and insight into the thinking of those who work within media organisations, the method nevertheless had certain weaknesses.

Ultimately, the success of participant observation hinged on the degree of access achieved by the researcher. There was a danger, Elliot reasoned, with a researcher either being intrusive or arousing suspicions amongst those she researched. In addition, there was the problem encountered by many participant observers of 'going native'. Participant observation, he argued, presented its users with a further significant problem. Although typically a rich source of data, it could, Elliot asserted, often be difficult for a researcher to decide which pieces of data were the significant ones.

Elliot's (1972) critical appraisal of participant observation in a media setting has been added to with contributions by Newcomb (1991) and Tuchman (1991).

⁴⁶ See for example Filstead (1970) for a critique of participant observation.

Newcomb (1991) asserted that the real strength of the method lay in its ability to gather information on the ground as it happened. It allowed, he argued, for the researcher to get behind the scenes of the making of media messages. It was particularly important, he maintained, where conflicts occurred in media organisations over the production and content of reports or stories, and allowed for the researcher to report on both the conflict as it unfolded and its eventual resolution.

Another important strength of participant observation according to Elliot (1972) was its flexibility. Research questions could be refined as the project developed and as the researcher gained greater insight into the organisation she was studying. Participant observation facilitated a greater responsiveness on the part of the researcher in contrast to the rigidity of largely quantitative methods such as the survey or structured interview.

Tuchman (1991) outlined a number of potential disadvantages with participant observation. In addition to the disadvantages discussed by Elliot (1972), Tuchman suggested that problems might arise using participant observation in production based research for the following reasons. Participant observation, it was asserted, demanded a good deal of a researcher's time and could often involve waiting around for long hours before something of interest happens. A researcher has to learn to fit into the rhythm of the organisation under study. Tuchman also mentioned the problem of the relationship between researcher and researched. Age, professional experience and similarity in views can all affect the ways in which those researched will react to you.

My own personal experience of this problem would concur with Tuchman's findings. As an ex RTE employee and university lecturer I felt that I had much in common with those whom I studied at RTE. However, there was always the danger that I would 'go native' and come to internalise their world-view. In order to avoid this problem, I had to learn to distance myself from those under study on a daily basis and when the fieldwork was completed, I had to undergo a cooling off period prior to writing up my findings.

3:4 Developing A Research Model: The Antecedents

In constructing a model for the analysis of RTE's television portrayal of poverty, in addition to the work of Elliot (1972) and Gitlin (1983), I was influenced in the main by two bodies of work, namely, *Bad News* by the Glasgow Media Group (GMG) (1976) and *Television 'Terrorism' and Popular Culture* by Schlesinger et al (1983). The latter work consisted of a qualitative reading of factual and fictional television accounts of terrorism, while the GMG adopted what McQuail (1983) referred to as a 'hybrid' methodological approach to analysing British television, combining as they did traditional content analysis with a structuralist or semiological reading of television news as text.

Despite some criticism,⁴⁷ the GMG's early work on television news represented a path breaking attempt in terms of not only how television news reports on industrial relations reproduced a particular ideological world view, but also in terms of how future research might approach the analysis of television from a methodological and theoretical viewpoint. The (1976) study *Bad News* began with the assumption that the news was far from being a neutral product. The explicit aim of the GMG was to unpack the coding of television news. The group stated that:

This book is intended as a step along the path to the systematic decoding of one centrally important element of contemporary culture. Contemporary cultural codes allow the often taken for granted generation of specific basic frames of reference. (1976: 10)

In adopting this position, the authors argued that a middle class culture pervaded the BBC, which was reflected in the way stories were told by television news amongst other programmes. The study aimed to be a scientific critique of the way in which television news told stories about industrial relations issues on both

⁴⁷ See for example Goodwin (1990); Bennett (1982) and Skirrow (1980) for a review of the reviews of the GMG's research on industrial relations news.

BBC and ITN. The authors however did not wish to fall into the trap of just checking and producing a large body of 'facts' about how television news explained strikes and industrial unrest, but rather in their own words the aim was to:

attempt to document and map out the codes utilised in the practice of TV news production (1976:16).

The GMG opted therefore for a 'hybrid' approach, locating their methodological framework between quantitative and qualitative poles. Their task therefore was not simply a counting of industrial relations news items, but rather, it was an attempt to also interpret the meaning of those messages by searching beneath the manifest text to reveal latent messages.

Bad News represented a fascinating reading of how British television news constructed stories about industrial relations issues and gave them a particular ideological hue. For our more immediate purposes however, it was an interesting model for the analysis of the bardic and ideological qualities of television. The authors went into great detail in terms of how they constructed their project, overcoming many technical difficulties with early models of VCR's and less than reliable videotape. They also discussed at length how they trained the coding team, devised logging sheets and overcame many technical problems. There was also an ethnographic dimension to their methodological approach which saw them attempting to undertake observation at both the BBC and ITN.

The group met with only limited success in trying to gather material in this way. The BBC were immediately hostile to the project and subsequently went so far as to attempt to counter the group's research findings (Harrison, 1983). ITN, on the other hand, were not overtly hostile to the project, but at the same time did not attempt to co-operate with the group. The GMG were left with only short visits to the newsrooms of both ITN and BBC, and were also reliant on interviews with news editors.

The group however adopted an interesting strategy in response to this hostility and lack of co-operation, by simply 'calling in' on journalists and reporters with whom they were friendly.

Bad News was a path breaking textual analysis of the workings of an important part of the (British) media, namely television news. Its importance however lay not only in its analysis but also in the strong reaction it provoked amongst broadcasting organisations and from those working in the field of media and communication studies. The work was to lead to a further and even more systematic examination of television news and industrial relations coverage in the text *Really Bad News* (1982), as well as leading to the production of a set of course materials on video, on the positioning of stories within a news programme framework. More recently, the GMG have responded to criticisms of their industrial relations news work by developing methodologies to examine how audiences interpret the codes of television news. (Philo, 1993b; Kitzinger, 1993; Williams, 1993)

For my purposes, the GMG approach represented a useful template on which to base the approach of this study in terms of the gathering, organisation and interpretation of television programmes about a single issue such as poverty. This project however opted for a largely qualitative rather than quantitative content analysis of texts. The type of programmes which I was concerned with were also at variance with the strictly news based focus of the GMG. Because I was also concerned with fictional and fund-raising television my net was much wider than that used by the GMG.

In doing so, I was to a certain extent following in the footsteps of Schlesinger et al (1983) who examined factual and fictional accounts of terrorism on British television. In *Television 'Terrorism' Political Violence and Popular Culture* (1983) Schlesinger et al argued for a consideration of both fictional and actuality television, in looking at how stories about 'terrorism' are constructed. They claimed that we should also consider the dimensions which cut across the categories of fictional and actuality television which they referred to as 'open' and 'closed' texts which may also

be 'tight' and 'loose' in their make up. In explaining this position Schlesinger et al (1983) argued that closed texts:

operate mainly or wholly within the terms of reference set by the official perspective. But other forms, such as single-plays and 'authored' documentaries are relatively open in the sense that they provide spaces in which the core assumptions of the official perspective can be interrogated and contested and in which other perspectives can be presented and examined. (1983:32)

Added to the notions of 'open' and 'closed' texts was the suggestion that they may also be either 'loose' or 'tight'. For Schlesinger et al (1983) a tight format:

is one in which the images, arguments and evidence offered by the programme are organised to converge upon a single preferred interpretation and where possible conclusions are marginalised or closed off. A loose format in contrast, is one where the ambiguities, contradictions and loose ends are generated within the programme and never fully resolved, leaving the viewer with a choice of interpretations. (1983:32)

The findings of this study were based on a reading of only 15 television texts, yet the book made for compelling reading given both the depth of analysis and the approach taken. The authors arrived at a set of interesting conclusions rejecting both left and right wing critiques of the mass media. They argued that television was not used as a vehicle to give 'terrorists' widespread publicity, but also they go against the notion that television is used to only carry the official viewpoint on 'terrorism'. They found that coverage varied between those programmes with open and closed formats. Closed format programmes tended to dominate however, while programmes with an open format tended to be ones with fewer viewers.

In developing a research model to examine RTE's portrayal of poverty, I drew upon some of the techniques employed by both the GMG and Schlesinger and his colleagues. My model however aimed to build upon the strengths of both approaches

and to make up for any weaknesses which they may have had. Unlike *Television and Terrorism: Political Violence and Popular Culture* (1983), this study was of a longitudinal nature and was concerned with not only factual and fictional television, but also sought to include a consideration of the recent fund-raising role which television has adopted. The study was also different in that it also employed a basic quantitative approach when considering particular TV genres such as news.

I aimed to improve upon the ethnomethodological weaknesses of the GMG approach by engaging in participant observation and observation at RTE and by holding detailed interviews both formal and informal with the key actors involved in the production of television stories about poverty. My status as an RTE Research Fellow entitled me not only to funding for the project but also allowed access to people and resources within the organisation. This helped me overcome the resistance which the GMG encountered with the BBC and ITN.

A further weakness of the approach which the GMG undertook was a reliance on recording equipment and tape which was not the most trustworthy. There have, of course, been radical improvements in the quality of both VCR's and videotape in the last 19 years and therefore the gathering and editing stages of this project did not witness the same kinds of technical difficulties which the GMG encountered.

One final set of differences between my project and the approach adopted by the GMG deserves to be mentioned here. The GMG were obviously working as a team and responsible for the recording, coding and interpreting of television news from three British TV channels. In constructing this project, I worked alone using two VCR's and recording a range of programmes from RTE's two television channels, RTE 1 and Network 2.

3:5 Methodological Model Employed

The methodological model employed in this project is best viewed as a synthesis of qualitative content analysis and an ethnography of the

production/organisational context of poverty texts. This dual approach was chosen as it allowed us to address the two interrelated research questions which governed this study, namely to ascertain the make up of the dominant themes of RTE's poverty coverage, and to examine the production/organisational contexts from which that coverage emerged.

Following some pilot work undertaken in May 1991, it was decided to focus on the content and production/organisational context of factual, fictional and fund-raising television. In designing the research framework, a number of methodologies were utilised. Firstly, I used both qualitative content analysis of the composition of the chosen television programmes. Secondly, a range of methods, which included observation, participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews was applied to collect the ethnographic evidence. Further data was gathered through the analysis of secondary materials, and in the specific case of television news, a small amount of supplementary quantitative analysis was also undertaken. In the chapter's final section I discuss both the ethnographic and qualitative content analysis dimensions of my research framework.

Ethnography

Although its roots lie within traditional anthropology,⁴⁸ the ethnographic approach has increasingly been used as a methodological tool within the field of communications studies. It has been put to good use in the analysis of audience reception of media messages and, as was observed in a previous section of this chapter, it has also been utilised by researchers who wished to understand more about the influences of the organisational or production context on media message production. Fetterman has argued that :

The ethnographic study allows multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data throughout the study. The ethnographer is

⁴⁸ In terms of its history and method see for example Hammersley and Atkinson (1982) and Fetterman (1993).

interested in describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider's perspective. The ethnographer is both storyteller and scientist; the closer the reader of an ethnography comes to understanding the native's point of view, the better the story and the better the science. (1993:12)

Zaharlik (1991, 1992: 119-21) listed several reasons as to why a researcher might opt for the ethnographic approach. He argued that it allowed for the development of social relationships between the researcher and researched; it facilitated the gathering of first hand information through direct contact with respondents; it required long-term observation and assumed that access was possible to those being researched. In addition, he argued that the ethnographic approach was both eclectic and naturalistic. It allowed for respondents to be investigated in their natural setting and was also characterised by the range of methodological tools used by researchers. Sarantakos (1993) noted that the ethnographic model was characterised by an 'interactive-reactive' approach. He maintained that:

Ethnographic research employs a dynamic form of data collection and analysis that is based on flexibility, reactivity and self-correction. Initial questions that generate response and information act as an instrument of regulation and result in correction and re-direction of the initial design and methods. New knowledge and information are used not only for understanding and explaining the research object but also for adjusting the approach, design and methods so that the research topic can be studied most effectively. (1993-267)

As a collection of research methods the ethnographic approach is marked by its flexibility and reactivity to the subject(s) under scrutiny. However, in order for ethnography not to degenerate into mere description or at best, 'good journalism', the researcher must follow tried and tested rules in the gathering of her data. The ethnographer has to equal the rigour of the researcher who has adopted a quantitative approach such as the survey or structured interview.

As the following account of my fieldwork at RTE shows, the ethnographer has to give due consideration to (a) negotiating access to the organisation or community

under study; (b) which methods are most suitable for the refinement and exploration of her research question; (c) the gathering and analysis of usually large amounts of qualitative data and (d) the identification and checking of consistent patterns of behaviour or thought.

Figure 3:1 outlines the various stages of my fieldwork at RTE and demonstrates that the ethnography used in this project was characterised by the systematic use of a variety of research methods, ongoing analysis of data and a final triangulation of research findings.

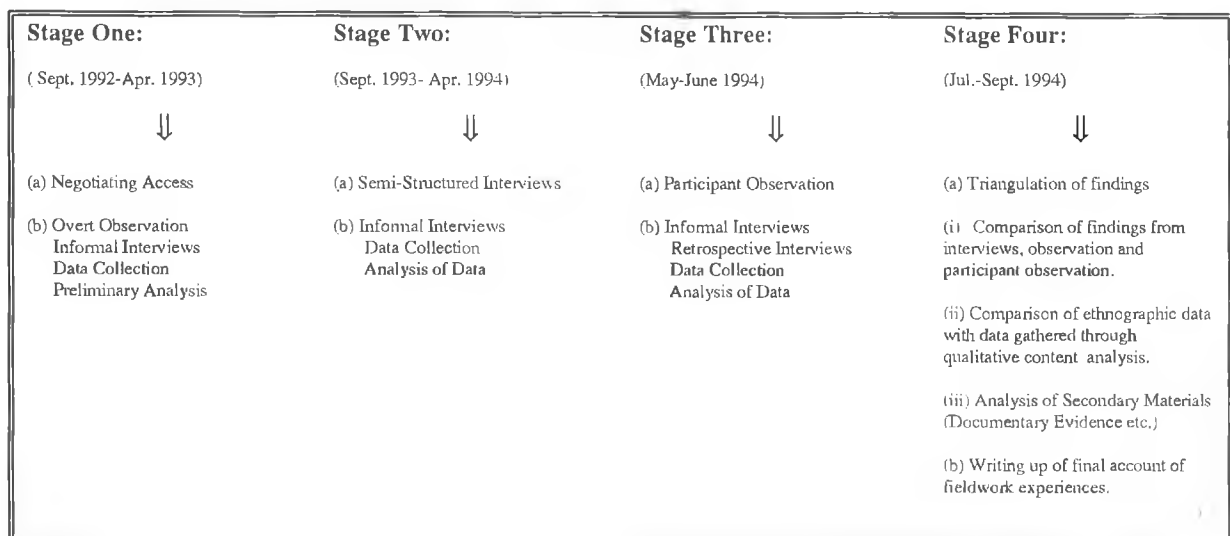


Figure 3:1 Stages of Ethnographic Study of RTE Outlined

Stage One

Access

My fieldwork involved accessing both the organisation itself as well as individual departments within RTE. General access to the organisation had been promised to me when negotiating my fellowship which RTE funded. This permission meant that I could move about the RTE campus with relative freedom, frequenting its library, audience research department and restaurants. This general type of access

meant that I could renew acquaintances and could freely undertake informal observation and interviews throughout the duration of my fieldwork.

Entry to individual departments to observe the production of stories in the areas of news, current affairs, TV drama, and entertainment had to be individually negotiated. Typically, I gained access through writing a letter which explained the project and made a follow up telephone call to answer any queries which arose. In the case of the telethon, where I wished to undertake covert participant observation, access was negotiated through a senior RTE figure who was supportive of my research project.

In the majority of instances, I had to reassure those contacted that I was undertaking this project for a PhD and that I was working independently of RTE management. In asking to be allowed to undertake some initial observation of programme meetings and the production of poverty stories, I also had to promise that I would not get in the way. Thus, permission was given for me to attend meetings in a non-participatory role. It should be stated from the outset that other than the concerns noted above, my prospective subjects welcomed both my project and myself as researcher. Trust was built up over the course of my fieldwork allowing me to gather data both formally and informally. Perhaps the best example of the positive side of the social relationship which I developed with my subjects was evidenced in the fact that I managed to gain access to unpublished reports and other data which were not in the public domain but were important for my study.

Overt Observation

Observation of an overt kind was undertaken from September 1992 to April 1993. I was given permission to observe all of the weekly planning meetings for *Tuesday File* and the daily meetings for *Six-One News*. In addition, I was allowed to be present on a regular basis in the news and current affairs production offices. I was introduced to production teams by programme editors, each of whom briefly outlined my intended project. My decision to be honest with the majority of those under study

from the beginning was based on both ethical and common-sense reasoning. Within current affairs in particular, I was already known to a small number of the production team as an ex-employee, who had moved into the academic world. In addition, the fact that staff numbers in these areas were relatively small meant that a new person who wasn't accounted for in attending programme meetings might very well have raised suspicions and hostilities amongst programme teams.

I recorded my data by writing up notes soon after meetings had finished, or if in the production office, I was usually able to make rough notes as things happened. These notes were then transcribed to a file on my personal computer and stored. I began to build data 'piles' for each of the programme areas under observation. Fieldnotes were reviewed on a weekly basis in order to ascertain specific patterns and to note issues which would form the basis of later questioning in the semi-structured interviewing stage of the fieldwork. The observation stage of my fieldwork allowed an insight into the workings of RTE both at the general organisational level and at the individual departmental level. Such insights allowed me to take informed decisions in the selection of specific programme areas and individual programmes for analysis. I knew, for example, that the *Tuesday File* documentary *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was atypical in terms of the reactions it provoked within RTE and therefore stood out to me as being potentially an important revelatory case study about how current affairs television handles poverty issues.

The initial observation phase of my study also allowed me to identify potential interviewees for both formal and informal interviewing. Stage one of my fieldwork therefore allowed me to adopt what Zaharlik (1991, 1992) has referred to as an 'interactive-reactive' approach. The observation undertaken in the project's first nine months helped me in terms of clarifying my research question, understanding more about the context in which poverty stories were produced and in the identification of potential interviewees. The data gathered from my observation of production meetings was subsequently compared with the other ethnographic data gathered through participant observation and interviews.

My chosen role as observer of production began to shift somewhat as my fieldwork progressed. Near the end of my observation work, I began to conduct informal interviews with my subjects. It is possible that their subsequent behaviour at production meetings was influenced by their increasing knowledge of my research project. This possibility was however countered in my subsequent semi-structured and retrospective interviews where I checked for consistencies in people's views.

Stage Two

Semi-structured and informal interviews

The main stage of the ethnographic study involved using both semi-structured and unstructured interviewing techniques. A total of 35 semi-structured interviews were carried out with those whom I had identified in my observation and content analysis work as being important to my study. Requests for the semi-structured interviews were made both formally and informally and were by and large responded to positively.⁴⁹ Thus, the sampling of interviewees was largely based upon their involvement in my preselected programmes or reports and my observation of their production activities within RTE. The interviews were based on a schedule of questions and prompts but also allowed for some degree of open-endedness. Interviewees were allowed to expand on particular themes which the interviewer felt to be germane for the project.

Typically ninety minutes in length, the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for later analysis. These interviews allowed me to talk to those directly involved in the production of poverty stories as well as facilitating some comparisons between genres and individual production styles. The semi-structured interviews were done after programmes or reports had been broadcast. Questions about the making of poverty stories ranged from the very general, dealing with how the interviewee viewed poverty as an issue, to how individual reports/stories were made. Several of

⁴⁹ There were three refusals for interview which came interestingly from higher up in the organisation.

the questions which I posed were concerned with the production values used in the making of poverty stories.

In my observation and unstructured interviews I had discovered evidence of intra-organisational conflict over the content of particular poverty stories. The semi-structured interviews were used to gain further information on these disputes and to compare the accounts of individual informants. These interviews helped in constructing a deeper understanding of the production processes which surrounded the making of poverty texts. They helped in the validation and clarification of the data gathered through both observation and participant observation.

Informal interviews were used in all three data collection stages of the fieldwork. A total of 60 informants from all four departments under study were spoken to informally. However, these interviews were not simply 'conversations' in that I deliberately used a series of embedded questions on a consistent basis in my discussions with informants. I found that as I developed a rapport with those under observation they were quite willing to speak to me on an 'off the record' basis. Informal interviews allowed me gather first-hand information from my informants — much of which they were unwilling to put on record — and to check out their individual versions of stories.

Fieldnotes were written up immediately after the informal interviews had taken place and subsequently transcribed to the relevant computer file for analysis. As with my research strategy during the observation phase of my fieldwork, these data piles were reviewed on a weekly basis in order to check for both regular patterns and consistencies. In any instance where I was unsure about what an informant had told me, I spoke to them a second time to confirm or clarify my interpretation of their account. These interviews, both formal and informal, assisted me in understanding the production context of poverty stories from an emic perspective. They furthered my understanding of the organisational structure from which the stories emerged and, more specifically, of the journalistic codes and practices which framed their production.

Stage Three

Participant Observation

In the third and final stage of my fieldwork I used covert participant observation in order to understand the background production processes of the 1994 telethon. This was possible, as I was up until then, unknown in the variety department. The telethon involved over one hundred volunteer workers and I found it possible to go unnoticed in this context. Although I had formally and informally interviewed those responsible for the 1992 telethon in my earlier fieldwork, this did not present a problem as there were different production personnel for the 1994 telethon .

I adopted two potentially conflicting roles in my participant observation endeavours. From past knowledge of previous telethons I correctly anticipated that there would be protests from an unemployment action group at the gates of RTE. During a two hour break from my role as a runner on the telethon programme, I managed to join the protesters to hear about their perspective on the event.

As a protester, I witnessed how the police treated those on the picket line as well as gathering first hand information on their views. My main role however was that of runner for the event itself. This task involved the collection and delivery of faxes donating money to the programme's fund. It allowed me direct access to the broadcast and production studios. Even in the context of a busy fourteen hour programme I found that this type of covert observation was useful in terms of furthering my understanding of the making of the telethon programme.

Participant observation both within and without RTE on telethon day gave me a unique insight into the views of those involved in the making of the programme and those who opposed it. In terms of data collection, fieldnotes were taken covertly and as in the earlier overt observation phase of the project, they were transcribed on to a computer file and reviewed when writing up the overall project.

Retrospective Interviews

In addition to the formal and informal interviewing undertaken in earlier stages of my fieldwork, I also carried out a series of retrospective interviews with three news reporters. I selected three stories from the *Six-One News* programme, two dealing with homelessness and one concerned with the Travelling community. In each instance my strategy was to organise a repeated viewing of the report and to get the reporter to talk me through the report's words and images. Given my particular interest in the codes and conventions used by journalists in the symbolisation of poverty, I placed an emphasis on these questions in my interviews. As in the semi-structured interviews in stage two, these interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed on to a computer file.

Stage Four

Triangulation and Analysis of Findings

Following standard triangulation procedures all of the data gathered in the various stages of the fieldwork using different research methods was compared. In the case of specific accounts of disputes over particular reports or storylines, for example, I cross-checked the veracity of accounts from the variety of data sources which I had at my disposal. This allowed me to build a complete picture of particular events which I had deemed to be revelatory in terms of my understanding of production processes. In addition, further triangulation of the ethnographic data was undertaken through the cross-referencing of reported production styles and the actual qualitative content analysis of the four types of television programme. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which broadcasters explained their uses of symbolisation in their attempts to construct stories about poverty.

Qualitative Content Analysis of Poverty Stories Outlined

Introduction

The emergence of qualitative content analysis was discussed earlier in this chapter. Following some further comments on the theoretical and methodological foundations of qualitative content analysis, I outline the type of analysis undertaken on the four selected programme areas which form the basis of this study.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Citing Lamnek (1988), Sarankantakos (1993) asserted that unlike its quantitative relation, qualitative content analysis was defined by methodological and theoretical differences which stressed naturalism; openness; communicativity and interpretativity. Sarankantakos (1993) argued that qualitative content analysis allowed for the objects of research to be studied in their natural setting. This type of research strategy was also characterised by an openness which allowed a researcher to gather data which was required by the study instead of being prescribed by a particular research design of a quantitative kind. Communicativity was also seen to underlie the selection of qualitative content analysis as a research method. Sarankantakos (1993) defined communicativity as:

the way in which qualitative theorists see the structure of social reality, which they perceive as being constructed through interaction and communication. The centre of study here is the communicative act and the meaning assigned to it. Content analysis is therefore expected to study the contents of communication and to explain their meaning. (1993:214)

A further distinguishing feature of qualitative content analysis as outlined by Sarankantakos (1993) was the idea of interpretivity. In short, he meant that social reality only became societal through interpretation and that it was constructed through the assignment of meaning and was not given objectively. Sarankantakos' (1993) notion of interpretivity, however, while it acknowledged the importance of the polysemic nature of texts, did not rule out the possibility of a researcher being able to

identify the preferred meanings of a text. Thus the possibility of identifying dominant ideologies remained.

As a research tool, Sarankantakos (1993) contended that qualitative content analysis should be used as part of a wider research framework. He proposed that the method was best utilised in conjunction with other forms of data analysis such as semi-structured interviews or participant observation.⁵⁰ This revised form of content analysis was heralded as a method which could both deconstruct a text and be revelatory in terms of the thinking of those who produced the text. Taken in conjunction with the ethnographic approach, where those who created texts could be investigated in their own environment, qualitative content analysis of media texts continued to represent an important methodological tool for researchers. Mayring (1983) argued that qualitative content analysis could proceed in one of three ways. Sarankantakos (1993) summarised these three options as summary, explication and structuration.⁵¹ In undertaking a content analysis of the four selected television genres I drew upon various aspects of these research procedures.

Analysis of RTE Programmes

⁵⁰ The process of undertaking qualitative content analysis was summarised as follows:

After the units of analysis have been identified (e.g. texts of books, transcripts of interviews, or other forms of verbal or visual communication), the researcher will identify and evaluate the items that appear to be theoretically important and meaningful and relate to the central question of the study. In some cases, the researcher might study the text semantically and syntactically, employ the rules of logic, relate the meaning of parts of the text to the whole document, and the general thinking of the author, and develop hypotheses. This process obviously includes both data collection and analysis. In other cases, the process of collection and analysis of data are seen as an attempt to identify criteria in the text that refer to the actions, effects of expressions and principles that will allow statements about the emotional and cognitive background as well as the behaviour of the communicators. (1993: 215)

⁵¹ Summary, in which analysis will mean a reduction of the data, as well as integration, generalisation and classification of the data into categories. Explication, in which analysis will aim at explaining the text or parts of it. This can be done in two ways, namely through using information from the same protocol (narrow context analysis); or using sources outside the protocol (wide context analysis). Structuration, which involves development of structures by putting the material in some kind of order, for example by means of already defined criteria (Mayring, 1988:75). Such structuration may be related to formal criteria (formal structuration), content criteria (content structuration), type or dimension criteria (type structuration), or criteria related to dimensions of scales (scaling structuration) (1993:215).

In the light of these procedures four types of RTE television programme were subjected to a qualitative content analysis. The documentary *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was examined as follows. The programme was initially viewed eight times prior to deciding on the means by which it would be analysed. As with all of the other programmes considered, just *who* the documentary considered to be poor and the various statements about poverty and the poor were noted. The text of the programme (both aural and visual) was fully transcribed on a 'frame by frame' basis on to a computer word processing file. This transcript was then further analysed in terms of a range of criteria including — (1) The form and structure of the programme in terms of existing codes and conventions of current affairs programming. (2) The discursive elements of the programme between, for example, verbal and visual messages about poverty. (3) The recurrent themes used in the documentary to articulate a particular set of messages about poverty to its audience members. (4) Particular attention was paid to how the programme functioned at a symbolic level. Lists were constructed of all of the signifiers evident in the programme's text. The semiotic analysis of the text of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was grounded in apriori knowledge of the intentions of the programme's producer. (5) Cognisance was also given in the analysis to the production values used by the programme team in the creation of the documentary. Like the semiotic dimension to the analysis, the examination of the programme's production values in the use for example of incidental music, dramatisation or particular film locations was based upon information received from the programme team during the ethnographic phase of the research.

The fourteen hour long *People in Need Telethon* was originally viewed six times in order to gain a broad appreciation of the genre in question. These repeated viewings allowed me to note the specific features (such as intertextuality) of this hybrid television genre, as well as the make up of its form and structure. The overall analysis of the programme centred on an examination of all of the references to why a telethon was necessary as suggested by the programme's presenters and also on any

particular reference to poverty or the poor. All of these statements were listed and what were deemed to be representative examples were chosen for inclusion in the chapter in question.

The second stage of analysis of the telethon involved a more detailed content analysis of the appeal films used to raise subscriptions from audience members. All nine appeal films were edited from the telethon programme. Like the previous analysis of the documentary, the text of the film appeals (both aural and visual) were fully transcribed on a frame by frame basis on to a computer word processing file. This allowed for an effective comparison between what was said about the selected poverty groups. The contents of the film appeals were in turn summarised noting the length of the appeal and the poverty group(s) in question. The use of and time allotted to agent groups or spokespersons *vis-à-vis* poverty groups was also noted. The content analysis of each film segment focused on examining both the verbal and visual messages of each segment. The frame by frame analysis allowed us to identify the discursive elements of the texts between for example the use of specific images and incidental music. The film segments were repeatedly viewed and lists were created of the signifiers used in each one. Particular attention was also paid to the production values of the appeals, noting for example the use of particular filming styles (real time or slow motion, close-up or wide angle shots) in the construction of the texts.

Six-One News was recorded over the period 1 January 1992 - 31 December 1992. All episodes were viewed and as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five it was decided to concentrate on stories broadcast in the period 1 September - 31 December 1992 given the greater amount of coverage at that end of the calendar year. All stories which specifically referred to poverty or identified particular groups as being poor were singled out for analysis and edited from the master tapes. Each story was then analysed following the schema used in the examination of the telethon appeals. The content of each news report was fully transcribed and considered in terms of its form and structure; and narrative convention. Particular attention was paid

to the production values of each report in relation to how individual poverty groups and their agents were presented and the extent of their visibility.

The entire 1992-1993 season of *Glenroe* was recorded and viewed. All of the programmes were watched in their entirety four times prior to a more detailed analysis of the storylines which were considered to be germane for this project. The general viewing resulted in a decision to examine the only two sets of characters — the Travellers and the unemployed — who were representative of the poor. Any passing references made to poverty, inequality or class structure were noted in the general viewing. All of the storylines directly concerned with either the unemployed or Travelling community were edited from the series and their contents were examined in closer detail.

All of the edited stories were transcribed. The transcripts recorded what each character said, and the use of particular production values was also noted. The data was reorganised to allow for a more coherent examination of the outcome of specific storylines. Storylines were summarised and their contents in terms of the discursive interaction between characters was examined. A close consideration was made of the language used by the various characters who populated the selected stories. What were considered to be revelatory statements in terms of the poor and poverty were listed and representative statements were noted for inclusion in the relevant chapter.

The following four chapters present the key findings in terms of how poverty stories are ideologically constructed in the four selected programme areas.

Chapter Four

Unseating the Audience

Current Affairs Television Coverage of Poverty: The Case of Tuesday File

Contents

- 4:1 Introduction
- 4:2 *Tuesday File*: Background and History
- 4:3 Awareness of Poverty as an Issue Within Current Affairs Television
- 4:4 *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* Views From Within Current Affairs Television
- 4:5 Unseating the Audience: An Analysis of the Content of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*
- 4:6 Symbolising Exclusion: The Codes and Conventions of Current Affairs Television
- 4:7 Discussion

4:1 Introduction

Using the ethnographic approach, some secondary sources and a qualitative analysis of an edition of *Tuesday File*, this chapter is concerned with both the production processes and message systems involved in the current affairs documentary *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*

This particular documentary was subjected to a detailed analysis for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was the only programme within the 1992–1993 series which had Irish poverty and inequality as its sole focus.⁵² Secondly, it was the stated intention of the programme's creator to make a personal essay-style programme in which one man would offer the audience his views on Irish poverty.

There was, as we see in this chapter, a clear intent on behalf of the programme's producer that the documentary would have a 'dangerous' quality about it. The story of this programme brings together many of the issues which frame the

⁵² Other programmes in the *Tuesday File* (1992–1993) series did touch upon poverty and poverty related issues. See for example *Going for Gold* which examined the lack of sports funding for facilities in areas of deprivation. *Tuesday File*'s sister programme *Marketplace* has had a particular focus on the issue of unemployment throughout the 1992–1993 series.

making of current affairs television programmes about poverty. It is a telling example of how a programme idea was accepted as a 'novel' way of examining poverty in the midst of an atmosphere which is often resistant to covering this issue. This is seen to be due to a perceived lack of audience interest and a self-consciousness about well-paid broadcasters covering poverty stories.

The documentary is also of further interest in that it ran into some temporary difficulties in the early stages of its production with a senior member of RTE's management team. The issues involved in this row, which were concerned in the main with competing versions of balance, are teased out and considered.

This discussion, based on in-depth interviewing and observation at RTE, is intended to give the reader some insight into how programmes are shaped by the environment from which they emerge. The production of documentaries which have the expressed intention of being 'dangerous' to some of their potential audience can often fall foul of those wishing to preserve the status quo.

In terms of the specific foci of this project, there are two identifiable sets of messages in this programme, which serve to disturb and challenge the system. There is an obvious layer of meaning which uses verbal warnings and stark photographic imagery to prick the consciences of those audience members who are comfortable and uncaring. But there is also a second layer of meaning which draws upon a wide range of other signifiers to suggest both divisiveness and the imminent break up of Irish society.

In taking *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* as a case study, my initial concern is with how the programme was conceived, researched and developed by its producer. I describe how the programme idea came about; how and why it was selected by the programme team and how it was filmed and edited. A further concern here is with the ethical considerations involved in filming people who are poor.

The fourth section of this chapter is a detailed qualitative analysis of the content of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* This account is followed by a discussion of

the form and structure of the programme with a particular focus on the use of symbols in articulating a set of obvious and hidden messages about poverty.

4:2 *Tuesday File*: Background and History

The *Tuesday File* series began in 1992. Its origins lie in the break up of RTE's flagship current affairs programme *Today Tonight*.⁵³ The birth of *Tuesday File* in these somewhat controversial circumstances must be appreciated prior to addressing the question of how it has covered the issue of poverty.

In 1992 RTE decided to reorganise its current affairs television output into five separate programmes which would deal with social, economic and political issues through an audience-based discussion programme (*Questions and Answers*); single issue documentaries (*Tuesday File*); economic affairs (*Marketplace*); Irish and international political issues (*Prime Time*) and a largely one-to-one interview based programme (*Farrell*).

The official RTE position on this rationalisation of its current affairs programming was that *Today Tonight* had run its course, and by 1992 it became, in the words of one manager, "a jaded programme".

Added to this position was the fact that the *Six-One News* programme had been lengthened, and had begun to feature in-depth interviews with the political elite. Thus, what was traditionally viewed as the subject matter and sole concern of current affairs television was now under threat from developments within the news division of RTE.⁵⁴ In the end, however, declining audience ratings sealed the fate of *Today Tonight*.

⁵³ See for example Dawson (1992). For a more detailed account of the dismantling of *Today Tonight* and the decision of one its former presenters to resign from RTE in protest at the new format of current affairs TV see Foley (1994).

⁵⁴ Technical developments in the form of an improved Dáil studio and the use of video instead of film facilitated these changes.

Divide and Rule?

This restructuring of current affairs television was viewed by many people, both within and without of the organisation, as an attempt at muzzling the investigative powers of the current affairs department of RTE. For a number of years there had been speculation by political parties, and by Fianna Fáil in particular, about the supposed left-wing ideological hue of some of the reports produced by *Today Tonight*.⁵⁵

Rumours of infiltration of RTE current affairs television by Workers' Party activists abounded. Whatever about the merits of these allegations (and they certainly should be questioned) *Today Tonight* did produce some hard hitting investigative reports on the illegal activities of moneylenders, rural poverty, drug dealing and property speculation.⁵⁶

In the final years of the Haughey era, programme makers began to experience increasing difficulties in getting government spokespersons to participate in programmes such as *Questions and Answers* and *Today Tonight*.⁵⁷ RTE responded to these difficulties by reorganising its coverage into five stand-alone programmes.

In practice, the breaking up of the long-standing and the more flexible *Today Tonight* format was to mean that programmes were now in competition with each other for both stories and resources. In adopting this strategy, RTE's management was taking the view that current affairs could be neatly carved up and therefore the social, political and economic spheres were now to be investigated separately. A poverty story, for example, would now run the risk of being relegated to the social end of the spectrum without addressing the economic or political dimensions of the

⁵⁵ There appear to have been particular problems with *Today Tonight*'s detailed and sustained coverage of the cutbacks by Fianna Fáil in health spending in 1989 a factor which many in the Fianna Fáil camp say cost them the 1989 general election.

⁵⁶ See for example the background to RTE's attempts to uncover the illegal activities of Patrick Gallagher in Raftery's (1991) essay *The Irish Family — The Gallaghers and Ireland*.

⁵⁷ It has been suggested in some quarters that the refusal of the ruling party, Fianna Fáil, to cooperate with the makers of *Questions and Answers* in the supply of ministers for the programme's panel led to it being rescheduled.

problem. Added to this was the further obstacle that only two of the five weekly programmes coming from the current affairs stable could by definition have up-to-the-minute reports on events as they unfolded.⁵⁸

This subdivision of current affairs has been criticised by some programme personnel who have described the new format of programming as “limp”. One senior figure within current affairs television felt that the restructuring did not come about as a result of political interference, but the end result of a weaker set of programmes certainly helped to take the heat off the powerful in Irish society.

In an internally circulated document in March of 1994, programme makers criticised the compartmentalisation of current affairs and questioned the judgement of some of their editorial colleagues. Added to this was a concern about the introduction of programmes (for *Tuesday File* in particular) which were made by independent production companies, who, some personnel felt, ran the risk of allowing themselves to be compromised because of their own private sector interests.⁵⁹

The splitting up of the *Today Tonight* programme served to generate some fear and disquiet amongst those staff members committed to placing critical current affairs stories onto the agenda. According to one senior journalist within current affairs, the key issue was that of dividing up resources, which would in turn weaken the programmes efficacy as an investigative medium. He stated:

At a time when this country still faces serious issues of poverty, inequality, fraud, business and political scandals, the public needs investigative current affairs programming with the same resources that existed in the 1980s. People’s jobs are not on the line: this is motivated by journalistic standards and professional independence.

⁵⁸ The problems with the new structure were perhaps best exemplified in 1994 when the Downing Street Declaration — announced on a Wednesday — had to be covered by *Marketplace*, the economic current affairs programme.

⁵⁹ See for example Kerr (1994a, 1994b).

It was not so much the departure of the programme itself — most staff acknowledged that its time had run out — but rather the lack of space for serious investigative reporting which was viewed as the problem. So to what extent did *Tuesday File* address these concerns and what implications did these changes have for the exploration of poverty and other social problem issues?

Constraints on Poverty Coverage

We can identify four main problems which might militate against the inclusion of poverty coverage in a programme like *Tuesday File*.

- (1) The compartmentalisation of the programme itself into separate issues.
- (2) The need to bring in higher audience ratings than its predecessor *Today Tonight*.
- (3) The limited amount of time allowed to produce documentaries.
- (4) The fact that some programmes are produced by the private sector.

As a component part of the new structure, *Tuesday File* was to be a single issue investigative documentary series.⁶⁰ This, by definition, would mean that the likelihood of poverty being considered as an issue for examination would have to fit into the criteria of being ‘interesting’ and even when it was covered as a story, it would be almost certainly be excluded from consideration for the remainder of the series. Added to this was the problem of reducing a multi-dimensional phenomenon like poverty to a single issue to fit within the constraints of the programme’s structure.

Targeted primarily at a young urban audience,⁶¹ the programme sought to maximise overall audience ratings. The fact that the programme was to be ratings

⁶⁰ It was to produce nineteen programmes in the 1992–1993 series. Half would be produced by RTE personnel and the remainder by the independent sector.

⁶¹ In terms of audience interest in the programme, the adult series average viewership was quite high at 22% (696,000). Audience appreciation scores are available for 17 of the 19 programmes broadcast in the 1992–1993 series, and they indicate a high level of satisfaction with *Tuesday File*, averaging a positive 87, ranging from 80 to 90. The programme has more rural than urban viewers. The average rural figure stood at 30%, which is 12% greater than the urban viewing rates of 18%. In terms of social

driven (and relatively successful at this task) and that many programme makers felt that poverty stories were not the most popular with the audience placed a further constraint on the likelihood of coverage of poverty as a current affairs story.

The new format of programme making was to allow six weeks for the making of each programme — two weeks each for research, filming and editing. This time frame was criticised by some programme makers as being far too short to create incisive and critical documentaries about potentially controversial social issues.

In the view of one senior producer, the most critical and influential documentaries often took many months (even years) to make. Programmes which might examine the fraudulent activities of the wealthy or the survival strategies of the homeless, for example, if they were to be made properly, would require time and resources.

A further problem with the new *Tuesday File* format was that some programmes were to be sourced outside of RTE. Thus, it was contended by some insiders that given that these programmes were coming from the independent and private sectors, there was the danger that potentially controversial social issue based programmes would be ignored. In practice, these fears seem to have been realised with the majority of the more critically acclaimed programmes coming from within RTE itself.

Getting Stories onto the *Tuesday File* Agenda

The decision making systems within this area are hierarchical and thus have to be viewed as further ways of controlling the output of current affairs television. In general, there is a high level of support at base level to get contentious social issues

class, there were similar ratings for upper/middle (ABC1) classes (19%) and the working/other classes (C2DE) (21%). The one worrying finding for the programmes team is the lack of younger viewers at whom the programme is specifically aimed. Audience figures for 1992–1993 suggest that those in the 35+ category were more likely to watch the programme with a peak of 40% in the 65+ age category. There seems to be less of an interest amongst the 25–34 and 15–24 age categories, both turning in just 17% and 9% respectively. My source is an internal RTE document, prepared for the Audience Research Department (April 1993).

(including poverty) onto the programme's agenda. But as Figure 4:1 suggests there are gatekeepers⁶² to be got past first.

We can divide those involved in current affairs television into the gatekeepers and the proposers. At the base of this hierarchy are a range of people who attempt to get their ideas accepted as possible programmes. They may be motivated to propose programme ideas for personal professional/career reasons, an interest in the subject itself or through empathy with the cause, individual or group which the programme might be concerned with.

In the middle of the hierarchical structure, the series editor may be seen to act as both proposer and gatekeeper. He will suggest possible programme ideas to producers, researchers or reporters and expect them to develop these ideas as potential programmes. But he also acts as a gatekeeper, in that, standing as he does in the middle of this pyramidal structure, he will often reject programme ideas on the grounds that they will not be acceptable to those in the hierarchy of the organisation or perhaps to the powerful in the outside world.

At the higher levels of the structure, the gatekeepers can block the making of potential programmes or indeed stop the broadcast of completed programmes.⁶³ Those who control the final output of current affairs television may be seen to be concerned with a number of issues in this regard. Their gatekeeping duties may be seen to stem from the following:

- (1) Exercising due care with regard to the powerful in society.
- (2) An awareness of the statutory and legal constraints on broadcasting.
- (3) The parameters of the current affairs agenda as they perceive it.

⁶² The classic study of gatekeeping is White (1950). For a more recent critique of the concept see McQuail (1993).

⁶³ In the 1993–1994 series the gatekeepers prevented the broadcast of a *Tuesday File* documentary about Irish women going to the UK for abortions. *50,000 Journeys* was allegedly stopped from being broadcast because one of the three women in the programme stated that she did not have any remorse for her actions. It was eventually shown to an audience at the *Galway Film Festival* in 1994.

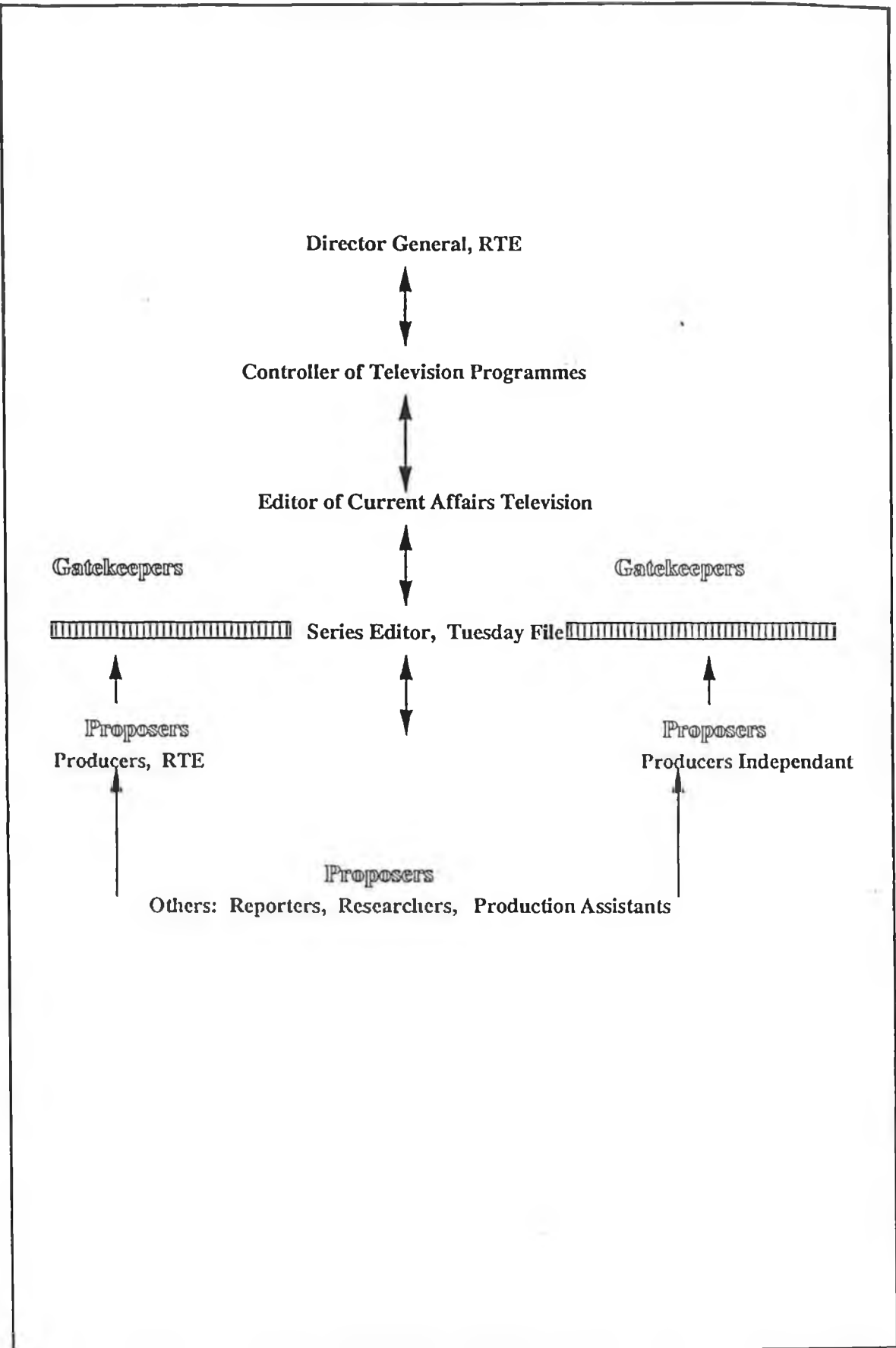


Figure 4:1 The Hierarchical Structure of RTE Current Affairs Television. © Devereux, 1995.

The contention within which *Tuesday File's* predecessor, *Today Tonight*, sometimes found itself, and its ultimate demise are a reminder of the pressures which the powerful who exist outside of the broadcasting environment can (and do) bring to bear on the media. The short-lived difficulties which our case study experienced would confirm this sensitivity to the demands and also possible negative reaction of the powerful in Irish society. The gatekeepers are also conscious of the statutory and legal constraints which frame the production of current affairs TV.⁶⁴ As a public service broadcaster, RTE is bound by statutes which insist that programmes be 'balanced' and 'fair'. Added to this is an awareness of the rise of litigation in the form of libel suits against RTE for alleged damage in the content of current affairs and news programmes in particular.

There is a further constraint in terms of what the gatekeepers see as the appropriate concern of RTE's current affairs agenda. With the resignation of one of its senior presenters in 1994 in protest at the constraints of the new format of programming, at least one media commentator pointed out that RTE's current affairs division was being encouraged to produce 'lifestyle' programmes and added that:

It can make programmes about social problems, but there appears to be little appetite for material that will rock the boat or annoy the government.

4:3 Awareness of Poverty as an Issue Within Current Affairs Television

The issue of how the poor are portrayed by RTE current affairs television has been the subject of some debate amongst programme personnel. From my observation at programme meetings, interviews and more informal chats with producers, reporters

⁶⁴ See Kelly (1984b).

and editors, there appeared to be at least some awareness of the media-poverty question.

A number of programme makers worried about:

- (1) The under-representation and misrepresentation of poverty and poverty related questions.
- (2) The damage that other current affairs, news programmes and print media had done in deprived areas in the past through misrepresentation of issues causing the build up of distrust between communities and RTE.
- (3) The possibility that programmes could in fact be patronising to the poor emanating as they do from a middle-class world removed from the reality of their lives.
- (4) The question of audience (dis)interest in stories about unemployment or deprivation.
- (5) The pressure which production values and constraints bring to bear on the production of realistic stories about the poor.

Is there anything new in it?

From speaking to and observing those involved in the production of current affairs television, one is struck by the extent to which programme personnel are a collection of individuals who are clearly aware of, and committed to, a wide range of political and social issues. At the beginning of my fieldwork I wondered why this did not translate into more coverage of poverty related issues.

The perspective which dominates current affairs thinking on this matter holds the view that the topic is covered every now and again and cannot obviously be given attention all of the time. The current affairs agenda, it is argued, is set by happenings sometimes beyond the control of programme makers and therefore issues such as elections or divorce legislation must be covered by a programme.

There is also a belief, however, amongst some personnel that there is in fact a resistance to covering poverty as an issue because it is believed that either it has been done before or that there is nothing new in the 'story'. In the words of the programme editor:

There is a resistance to going down and looking into someone's groceries and seeing what they have ... in looking at the everyday issues dealing with poverty, because there is a feeling that it has been done before. The motivation is to do something that has not been done before ... but this viewpoint is some way countered by the ground rules which are to accurately reflect and investigate stories of current interest in Ireland and obviously poverty is one of those issues.

Current affairs television is similar to television news in that the value system which governs the selection of 'stories' about poverty differentiates between the permanency of poverty on the one hand and the 'events' surrounding poverty which are sometimes deemed to be newsworthy on the other hand.

Added to this resistance is a self-consciousness within the organisation of being part of a liberal middle class Dublin 4 culture.⁶⁵ On many occasions programme personnel mentioned this issue in either a serious or humorous way. Most of those involved have had no direct experience of poverty or long-term unemployment and the issue of whether a programme feature on poverty or unemployment might seem patronising was a regular topic of conversation at meetings and during coffee breaks.

At one production meeting there was a discussion about the need for current affairs TV to cover the issue of unemployment during *Jobs Week* in February 1994.⁶⁶ The way in which this topic was discussed and turned around by programme personnel give some interesting insights into how poverty and the poor are viewed.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ The RTE campus is physically in the postal district Dublin 4, but the use of the term here suggests that it belongs to a mindset which is urban, liberal and middle class. Fennell (1986: 54), in one of his many critiques of RTE and liberalism, suggested that "... RTE functions, not as a forum and as an expression of our nation, serving our national interests, but as a propaganda agency of Dublin's Anglo-Americanised bourgeoisie, serving the interests of that class, and of the London-New York axis in Ireland".

⁶⁶ A week in which RTE gave over a number of programme slots to the issue of unemployment through the use of discussions, dramatisations, advice as well as current affairs coverage. It is interesting to note that programme teams were responding to a directive from the station's management to cover this issue.

⁶⁷ My presence at this meeting may very well have influenced the content of this discussion.

There were many opinions aired on this question. One producer argued that RTE had in fact not done enough in terms of critical coverage of unemployment. Another argued that the proposed programme might in fact attempt to expose the myth that it is at all possible to do something about unemployment. A programme reporter responded to this by saying that the programme should not focus on unemployment as it is experienced by the unemployed saying that this might be perceived by unemployed members of the audience as:

another example of RTE's patronising attitude to the unemployed.

At this juncture it was added that there was a conflict involved between the comfortable and middle class culture of RTE and the hinterlands of unemployment and poverty outside of the broadcasting organisation. This viewpoint was repeated to me regularly in interviews and conversations. The idea that the audience are not in fact interested in gloomy, depressing coverage of the question of unemployment and deprivation was also stressed. The reporter argued that if this planned programme was "just another unemployment programme", she imagined that many unemployed viewers would:

just switch off and go down to the video shop and take out *Lethal Weapon 4*.

The resolutions reached at the end of this discussion were that the programme could:

- (1) Commission two video-diaries to be made by film makers from the independent sector — thus allowing the unemployed to speak for themselves and to get away from another programme using the same experts.
- (2) Do something different such as produce a drama documentary about unemployment.
- (3) Do a fresh innovative programme which would challenge the myth of full employment.

(4) Attempt to focus on the 'positive' side to unemployment by making a programme which would deal with the responses of communities to this problem through self-help and community action.

In the end, *Tuesday File* made a documentary entitled *Coming To Terms With Redundancy*⁶⁸ which examined the aftermath of the Digital factory closure in Galway. The programme focused on what it termed 'the human story' behind the 300,000 unemployed Irish people by exploring how six of the 780 people made redundant by the Digital Corporation have coped with the reality of being unemployed.

In the context of our earlier comments on how programme makers felt about how an unemployment story might be framed, it is interesting to note that the programme was set in a comfortable upper-middle class housing estate in Galway City and focused on what it saw as examples of the 'new poor', a theme which also occurred within RTE's television news coverage of poverty at that time.

During the second season of *Tuesday File* (1993–1994) the programme's editor attempted to get beyond this perceived problem by suggesting the running a series of video-diaries whereby interested individuals/communities could make their own features having their own editorial control.⁶⁹ This, in his words, was an attempt to:

get away from us spooning out our views on poverty when we have not got a clue what we are talking about.

This move, while in some ways a welcome one, may mean that the future use of video-diaries could see poverty and other social problems being marginalised further by pushing them out of mainstream current affairs coverage.

⁶⁸ Broadcast on *RTE 1* 8 February 1994.

⁶⁹ These video-diaries did not in fact materialise due to what was perceived as the poor standard of applications.

As well as this self-consciousness about seeming patronising to the poor, there is an even stronger awareness amongst programme makers that there is a growing resistance to media misrepresentation of deprivation in some communities. It is a credo of current thinking that good relations should be fostered between RTE and those it films. This thinking has come about because of alleged abuse and misrepresentation of deprived areas in the past. In the words of one producer:

It is the oldest story in the book, and every producer knows it, because we go into places and we pick up the debris from the last producer or journalist who was in there, or newspaper reporter who just came in, grabbed a story and ran it with a headline, and the people just feel appallingly used, so that they are very apprehensive and nervous and I recognise that, and I don't think that it is any of our business to use and abuse people like that, especially if they help you do the job that we have to do.

Perhaps the most tangible evidence of disquiet amongst some programme personnel about these issues may be found in a report which was written by one programme reporter at the end of the first season of *Tuesday File*. In an internally circulated document entitled *Informal Survey of Attitudes to RTE and Current Affairs Programming*, the issues of how RTE was perceived generally, and of responses to current affairs programming in particular, were examined in four communities which have 75–80% unemployment and what were termed serious social problems.

The question of the station's credentials within some deprived areas owing to negative portrayal of poverty related issues in the past was noted at the outset of the report. The researcher encountered co-operation difficulties in one of the four areas because of the way that RTE had previously portrayed the community. The researcher stated:

In Cox's Demesne in particular, where RTE had done a special news report in March, I was told categorically that RTE would neither be welcome or safe in the area at this time. (1993:3)

But it was not just recent negative coverage which had caused problems; later on in the report there was a passing reference to a programme within the *Today Tonight* series which attracted a great deal of negative reaction from locals in the past. The researcher was told that 10 years later:

The *Today Tonight* programme on Finglas is still talked about. People here don't trust RTE. (1993:9)

The survey's respondents were critical of RTE's coverage and argued that programmes were out of touch with the reality of their lives (1993:4). Respondents were also critical of the usually negative imagery used by RTE in covering stories about poverty and unemployment. One unemployed respondent said:

A recent news programme from Cork had seven minutes of negative feedback, showing deprivation and depression. I waited for *Home and Away* to come on instead and feel most unemployed people would do the same. (1993:5)

The station was accused of further ghettoising these areas by focusing solely on the social problems associated with those communities — thus the report stated:

Programmes which focus unremittingly on the negative aspects of unemployment, that feature poverty, social problems and crime in specific areas only add to the problems in those areas. (1993:12)

The report ended with some hard hitting comments about RTE's current affairs coverage of areas which have high levels of unemployment and poverty. It concluded that:

The problem is with us. We either visited them in a patronising way and allowed the wrong spokespeople to speak for them (usually overused experts) or we've compounded the problem by highlighting only the bad in the community, thus making it even harder for them to keep positive initiatives going. (1993:15)

In conclusion the report argued for a series of programmes which might feature more positive accounts of communities fighting back through community based self-help initiatives.

The findings of this report, although based on just a small set of opportunity samples of community activists, were tentative yet interesting. What perhaps was even more telling about this report was the fact that when the reporter in question asked to be allowed to carry out this research she was given the time and resources to do so. This decision by her managers might indicate some concern about the poverty coverage question. But despite this concession there has been to date (April 1996) no formal response within RTE generally, or in its current affairs division particularly, to the findings of the report.

4:4 *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* Views from Within Current Affairs Television

From a broad consideration of how poverty issues are seen within current affairs television, I now examine the production of the documentary *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* This account of the processes involved in the production of TV programmes about poverty will set the scene for a more detailed qualitative analysis of the manifest and latent messages about poverty contained within the documentary.

Message/Intention of the Programme

According to the programme's producer *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was a documentary programme which was:

... designed to do something dangerous ... it was designed to make people uncomfortable.

Based on a phrase used by the programme's subject in which he saw Irish society as being divided between the comfortable and the struggling, the programme's title and content were intended to make audience members sit up and think. He said that:

The intention was to fling it at the audience and say "You, there! Are you sitting comfortably? And if so, should you be thinking about what is going on around you, and why are you sitting comfortably when others aren't?"

The programme was targeted primarily therefore at particular sections of the audience — the rich, the powerful and the comfortable.

Selection

The selection of this potentially controversial programme theme was initially based on a practical consideration. *Tuesday File* was a new series, and at the early stages of its run, producers were under pressure to produce material with relative speed. The programme's producer had initially been working on a programme which would deal with the issue of teenage pregnancy. He changed his mind however believing that the issue would require more time if the programme was to be made properly. Instead, he suggested another idea to the programme's editor whereby a full programme would be given over to Fr. Peter McVerry and his views about Irish society.

The need to meet a deadline and fill a programme slot was to the forefront of the editor's and producer's minds — the idea was presented and accepted at a programme planning meeting. The programme editor was attracted to the idea because of the 'novel' way in which the documentary would deal with the issue of the poor and marginalised allowing as it did a full programme in which one man who has championed the cause of the poor relative free reign to air his views. The editor told me:

That was one of the attractions of the McVerry programme ... I had not heard the idea before It was a new way to cover it. Immediately once the producer had come in and said "Here is what I would like to do", it was supported immediately and it was 'go for it!'

The programme idea was deemed to be acceptable by the programme's editor — yet there were other hurdles to be overcome before the programme was finally broadcast. The way in which the programme's producer was intending to cover the issue of Irish poverty and inequality by making a programme about a man whom some regarded as a maverick figure was to run into some short-lived difficulties in relation to the programme's content and the implications which it was seen by some to raise about 'balance'.

Balance and Control?

Despite the immediate acceptance of the programme idea by the series editor, there have been suggestions made in some quarters that the programme ran into some difficulties with RTE's management.⁷⁰

It was insinuated to me by one source that there was resistance further up in the organisation to the programme on two levels. Firstly, it was felt that the programme should not be broadcast because it was seen to be "too down beat ... too negative". That this viewpoint held little sway is clear from the facts that the programme was not stopped and the Director General of RTE did not request to view it prior to its broadcast.

It has also been hinted that the programme's subject would have been seen by many people in RTE and by the major political parties as being an anti-establishment figure and thus there were fears about the programme's message. There were, however, questions raised amongst management about the implications of giving a half an hour to one man and his views.

⁷⁰ See for example 'Affairs of the Nation' in *The Phoenix* 30 October 1992 and the Joe Jackson interview with the programme's former presenter Emily O'Reilly in *Hot Press* 2 December, 1992.

According to one senior source — who was critical of print media coverage of this ‘controversy’ — what happened was as follows. Having been accepted at a programme planning meeting, the idea for the programme was placed in the advance plans for *Tuesday File*. The Controller of Television Programmes raised a number of questions about the programme. These questions were concerned with the issue of programme balance. He took the view that some consideration should be given to the possible implications of allowing McVerry a whole programme to air his views. Would this mean that others be allowed as much time within the same programme slot to air their opinions? He was concerned about whether or not this programme would in fact be better off in a strand of programming which had personal statements as their focus, rather than an issue based documentary series such as *Tuesday File*.

There followed some editorial discussions amongst management about the implications of making such a programme. In the end it was agreed that the programme could be made and broadcast within the series *Tuesday File*. It has also been suggested to me that as well as the issue of balance there was some further concern expressed about the content of the programme which was felt to be intentionally controversial and thus in the words of one senior person “an eye would be kept on it” as it was being made.

Likening this ‘controversy’ to the Battle of Scarba the programme’s producer did not engage in any rows with management about the content or message of the programme. He indicated to me that while some discussions on the matter took place between his line managers and management on the implications of making such a programme, in the end the concerns raised very quickly petered out. The producer, however, expressed the view that the position of those who questioned the wisdom of making such a programme in light of the requirements of balance involved a very primitive notion of what constituted balance.

The short-lived debate about the questions of balance and content of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* are an interesting insight into the production context of the programme under scrutiny here. Although as I have indicated, the questions raised

about the programme did not prevent it from being broadcast, the issue is a good illustration of the control mechanisms which are brought to bear on the production of television programmes which may be potentially dangerous. Thus while the programme was made and broadcast, we can see that management had laid down clear markers about their concerns.

Researching the programme

The programme producer, having received the go-ahead from the programme editor, set about writing and researching the documentary. His choice of McVerry was based on knowing him and empathising with his work with the homeless and dispossessed.⁷¹ He contacted the programme's subject who agreed to participate.

The producer began by carrying out extensive interviews with McVerry where he went through all of his views. There were several sessions of several hours of interviewing to ensure that the producer understood his thinking. The producer felt that this extensive interviewing would allow McVerry to set the programme's agenda. But it also allowed the producer to check the reliability of his views.

In the course of these discussions the programme's subject indicated the things that both interested and agitated him. From this the producer had to make practical production decisions in terms of what would be feasible from a production point of view. The producer said:

Amongst the many things which agitated him, I had to make the decisions, to say we will do this and this. He [McVerry] set the broad agenda and then I vetted that. I was the one who had to make it into a television production. He was not a great deal of help in that. He was very disappointing. He simply wasn't interested in getting into the business of asking people to go on camera, particularly the dispossessed, the homeless, the poor, whatever. He gave me very little help.

⁷¹ For an autobiographical account of McVerry's life and work, see his essay *The Summerhill Option* in O'Dea (ed.) (1994).

The producer himself had to do all of the contacting of other programme participants.

Filming and Editing

The filming of the programme began with a very long interview with McVerry and other shorter interviews with him at a number of locations. Added to this were shots of McVerry talking to people who were working with the poor and dispossessed. The producer felt that this was the best way to allow McVerry to tell his story. Yet from a production point of view it was to prove both difficult and inflexible at times owing to the necessity to build a programme around the subject's words without using a reporter as intermediary.

In the end only a fraction of the hour and a half filmed interview was used in the programme. The producer felt that from a production point of view there was a danger in allowing McVerry a full programme to articulate his point of view. He told me:

The decision was that McVerry would have the bones of half an hour ... the production would be slave to that ... it was my job to give that force and impact on a television screen ... the danger always was that it would be an illustrated lecture ... that was the challenge to me.... it might just be a sermon from a priest ... so I had to transform it or try to transform it into something more, something that worked on television ... and it was obviously was going to need all the production resources that it could possibly have ... because a lecture for twenty-six and half minutes will not work ... so that was one opposite and the other was an interesting and dramatic television programme and I had somehow to get the two together ... and it was very hard work.

At least two proposed parts of the programme were filmed but eventually dropped by the producer. McVerry was filmed in Croke Park at an All-Ireland Hurling Final with the intention of showing an Ireland united at play in Croke Park but within this, there were deep divisions. In another proposed part of the programme, the producer filmed a district justice speaking about the lack of facilities for young

offenders. In his judgement, however, the pieces did not work and he decided to leave them out of the final edit of the programme.

One way forward for the producer in creating what was felt to be a more interesting programme was to use stylised production techniques such as the use of stills photography by Derek Speirs. The programme producer suggested that in some respects there:

... was a conspiracy between McVerry and the programme makers...

in using these photographic images which were designed to present a picture of a divided people. This was seen as central to McVerry's thesis and one which the producer regarded as a reasonable argument. He also chose to divide up the programme into segments through showing the audience lists of facts about poverty as well as still shots of McVerry making his pronouncements on Ireland, politics, anger and inequality.

Ethical Considerations in Filming the Poor

Given the issues discussed in this chapter about feelings within RTE current affairs television regarding how the poor are often misrepresented, it is interesting to note that the programme producer took a number of important decisions in this regard in making the film.

The documentary included shots of homeless men in hostels and recovering alcoholics and gamblers in another rural location. Everybody who was filmed in each of these locations was asked their permission and anybody who did not want to be filmed was asked to leave the room when the filming was taking place.

In another part of the film which examined community based responses to unemployment and poverty, an interesting arrangement was made between the producer and local residents. The area in question had been given an extensive amount of negative coverage in the national print media in the previous twelve months because of an alleged 'joy-riding' epidemic. Concern about media

misrepresentation was still running high amongst community activists when some of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was shot there. The producer told me:

We did not identify that area. It was virtually completely anonymous, okay a North Dublin suburb was said, but I made an arrangement with the residents who co-operated, they obviously were very apprehensive of being highlighted as an area that was likely to get into a conflagration, because of all the youth disturbance and the absence of facilities, so the arrangement was that I wouldn't identify it. The deal was that they would not be identified by me, and they accepted that and I honoured that commitment.

The producer in question had quite strong views on this issue.⁷² His position stemmed from a belief that:

Programmes that are of any worth get very close to people's lives, and they are likely to have an impact on people's lives, otherwise they tend to be pretty forgettable. I have strayed into tending to give a lot of hostages to fortune, because of concern about people who are appearing in programmes, whose lives have to be lived after we've gone. I tend to regard it as a very high priority their satisfaction or acceptance of the programme, so I offer them the chance to see in some form what is going to be broadcast.

Ultimately the power over the final product rested with the producer, yet he conceded that by allowing the powerless more of a say in how they were filmed and portrayed set up a tension for the producer between the need to produce powerful and controversial television and the need to satisfy the needs of those filmed.

In summary then, *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was intended by its creator to be a 'dangerous' programme which would unnerve a portion of its audience. The account given above shows how he attempted to fashion a programme around McVerry's opinions and viewpoints. He conceded that there was an arrangement

⁷² He was also the producer of the *Tuesday File* (1993) documentary *Victims of the Pushers*, broadcast 9 November 1993. In making this programme, which featured an inner city community dealing with drug pushers working in their area, the producer allowed the programme's participants to view the rough edits of the programme to ascertain their satisfaction with the proposed final product.

between himself and the programme's subject in terms of the images and messages of the programme. More fundamentally, the discussion noted the kinds of ethical considerations which this producer took into account when filming people who are relatively powerless. The difficulties which the programme ran into in its infancy were seen to have been concerned primarily with issues about programme balance although the fact that this was going to be a potentially controversial programme might be a further reason for concern amongst the station's management. In the end the programme, having been checked out, was broadcast.

4:5 Unseating the Audience: An Analysis of the Content of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*

Even before the audience viewed the actual documentary about McVerry there were warning signals from both the station's continuity announcer and the programme's link-person Emily O'Reilly that a portion of the audience were about to be challenged. The continuity announcer stated:

Tuesday File now examines the Ireland of Fr. Peter McVerry.

and then in a much more dramatic tone:

Are *you* [her emphasis] sitting comfortably?

There follows the usual *Tuesday File* theme replete with images taken from U2's *Zoo TV*, the Dáil in session, bishops walking after a conference, war imagery and a computer screen running rapidly through lists of names. On the desk holding the computer there is a government report with the familiar icon of Irish officialdom — the harp.

It is suggested in the programme's introduction that *Tuesday File* is concerned with a post-modern Ireland, mixing the old and the new and being full of tensions and

contradictions. While it has become a technologically sophisticated society — as symbolised by the computer and modern office setting complete with executive toys — the office's TV screen continues to pump images of war, politicians arguing and bishops considering, as well as the government report strategically placed on the desk, which intimates perhaps that there are still many problems which need to be resolved.

The documentary about McVerry's Ireland is prefaced by a brief introduction by the programme's link-person Emily O'Reilly. The post-modern theme from the programme's introduction is continued with the link-person standing in front of a giant TV screen which shows the *Tuesday File* logo in black and red. O'Reilly's introduction serves to put tonight's programme in an immediate context as well as present the programme's subject Peter McVerry. She tells her audience that:

For the last few weeks the airwaves have reverberated to the sound of middle-class panic. The currency crisis and the hike in interest rates have led to new levels of fear amongst the better off in Irish society. People who once gave to the St. Vincent de Paul are now looking to that organisation for help.

Her introduction however makes it very clear that her audience are not an homogenous entity. She continues:

But all misery is relative. While some families consider selling the second car or foregoing the Christmas ski-trip, other people are watching this programme tonight from areas with 70% unemployment, where their young people face death from drug use, where homelessness is an everyday reality.

We are then introduced to McVerry whom we are told is a turbulent priest, whose message tonight is designed to disturb as well as to challenge. O'Reilly's introduction also contains images which pre-empt ones which McVerry will himself use in the course of the documentary. We are told that McVerry is frightened by the divisions which he sees in Irish society and that:

Unless there is change, and fast, we will reap a terrible whirlwind.

In the midst of the programme's post-modern setting we encounter images which are biblical in tone, foretelling an apocalyptic destiny for Irish society if we do not resolve the divisions between rich and poor, or as McVerry would term it, the comfortable and the struggling. The scene is now set for McVerry to tell his story.

Our first glimpse of McVerry is of him travelling alone past the tower blocks of Ballymun at twilight. Rising high into the night sky the tower blocks symbolise both the poverty of urban Ireland of the 1990s and the inadequate responses of the Irish state to a growing urban underclass.⁷³ These images are in contrast to the classical incidental music underpinning the sequence. The programme's theme is set by McVerry in a voice-over which states:

I see our society as divided into the comfortable and the struggling. The challenge of the Gospel is to the comfortable. It is to say, you've got to become less comfortable, so that those who are struggling need struggle less.

The sequence then cuts to a still shot of McVerry against the black and red colours of the *Tuesday File* logo with the programme's subtitle *The Ireland of Peter McVerry* underneath and the programme's title *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* on the right-hand side of the screen.

McVerry then responds to questions which are not heard by the viewer about being Irish, anger, politicians and violence. He firstly tells us that:

A lot of the time I'm ashamed to be Irish.

This statement is made by McVerry in his office. In the background there are black plastic bags containing clothes donated to his hostel for homeless youths. In

⁷³ Ironically, the Ballymun tower blocks are named after the executed leaders of the 1916 Revolution. See Waters (1994).

contrast to the images of expensive clothes which we will see in the shopping centre scene later on in the film, the black plastic bags symbolise the dependence of the poor on the cast offs which some of the more comfortable in society dispose of.

He then speaks of his anger:

A lot of the time I get very angry and indeed I always say that when I loose that anger I will be no use to anyone anymore.

This statement is made by McVerry while being filmed at the window of his office. We again see the tower blocks of Ballymun in the background. These are a physical manifestation of McVerry's reasons for anger. Next, McVerry tells the viewers that he despairs of politicians. This statement is made while we see a shot of the Minister for Finance, the Taoiseach and the Lord Mayor of Dublin sitting together in a spectators box at Croke Park for an All Ireland Final — symbolising both the powerful and the comfortable. The image of togetherness signified by the politicians and the ordinary spectators suggests that the 'nation' is both united and divided. McVerry also talks about violence warning the viewers that:

We are going down the road of the Toxteths, the no-go areas, the rioting is going to occur in our own cities.

His warning is embellished by a short news clip of the Toxteth riots. The following sequence opens with a view of the government buildings at night. The shot is of the gates opening slowly. The suggestion is, that these gates are in fact closed to many, and that we are somehow entering a privileged world.

Through the use of a dramatisation, we now see shots of a middle-class dinner party. The camera zones in on a young woman who is finishing her meal. She is one of the comfortable, wearing expensive looking jewellery. The film now cuts back to a shot of the Oireachtas (parliament) buildings at Leinster House which can only be seen through the railings. There is again a suggestion of exclusion for many of the nation's citizens. We now see a series of black and white stills of some of the nation's

poor. Unlike the colour of the buildings and parties of the rich and powerful these images are shown to us in monochrome. They show Travelling people living in squalor; a child begging on the pavement while a group of five people queue for their money from a cash dispensing machine; and two poor boys on the street.

In the next sequence we see that the last still photograph of the two poor boys on the street is in fact part of a photograph on the wall of the middle-class dining room. We are back again to the dinner party whose participants are oblivious to the photograph of the poor boys on their wall. They are engaged in a post dinner discussion, which we as audience members and as the poor do not hear, because we are excluded.

Ironically, the comfortable middle-classes have turned even images of the poor into items which are bought and sold at inflated prices. These photographs are therefore both symbols of contrast and symbols of the acquisitive society. This portion of film pre-emptes another of the documentary's later messages which stresses the social distance between the rich and the poor.

The exclusion experienced by the poor is further emphasised by more footage of Leinster House which is shot through the Oireachtas's railings. We are again offered more still shots of some of the nation's poor through the use of black and white photographs. Here, we see a social welfare queue outside of a labour exchange; children waiting for their fathers in a labour exchange and a woman and child begging in the streets.

In the last shot we also see two adults and a child walking past the woman and child who are begging — both of the adults are ignoring the woman while their child has a concerned expression on her face. Both sets of stills photographs have queues in common. For the comfortable, queues symbolise their access to money and privilege while the poor must queue for social welfare payments in order to survive. During this sequence of shots the national anthem *A Soldier's Song* is being played as incidental music. It is clearly intended to be ironic as patriotism has been replaced by individualism and acquisitiveness.

McVerry's statements during this section of the programme warn us the viewers that we have created a society which is divided between the comfortable and the struggling and that by allowing this situation to continue we are sowing the seeds of destruction for both the struggling and the comfortable.

At times McVerry's tone is biblical. He tells us that:

We are sowing the seeds even of those who have got into the comfortable land.

The final shots of this section are of McVerry walking alone on a beach. These lone shots serve to underline what many of us already know about this man. He is a lone voice, a critic and regarded by many in power both in the Irish state and in the Catholic Church as a maverick. This completes the first part of the programme.

In the next section of the documentary we see examples of those who work with the struggling. This allows McVerry to show us examples of those who care in society as well as a number of examples of deprivation. This featured McVerry's own work with homeless youths; a hostel for the homeless in Limerick City; a residential treatment centre for alcoholism in County Limerick; and an elderly couple in North Dublin who have to cope with an adult mentally handicapped son. The focus here is very much on the helpers of the deprived although we do see evidence of those struggling in each piece of film.

In McVerry's own hostel — which in fact is a flat in the Ballymun tower blocks — we are shown how as many as 15 youths have to sleep and eat in sparse, inadequate and overcrowded conditions. McVerry notes that not a single politician has ever complained about the inadequacy of the hostel. We see a number of homeless youths in this segment although we do not hear them speak.

The report then shifts to a hostel for the homeless in Limerick City. McVerry interviews the hostel administrator about the absence of facilities for the young homeless in Limerick. We are told that when the hostel is full youths may often be given a blanket and sent to sleep in the adjacent graveyard or in the local railway

station. Again we see but do not hear a number of homeless men in this piece of film. We see the men in the hostel's lounge area sitting around, reading, smoking and playing with a dog. There is also a shot a young man lying in bed in the daytime smoking. There is the suggestion in these images that time hangs heavy for the homeless.

McVerry's next port of call is to a residential treatment centre for alcoholism in County Limerick. Here the audience is told about the work of Sr. Consilio and her team of helpers. For McVerry, she is a symbol of how Ireland should be, and is not. We see the centre itself which is run through voluntary contributions and begging and we are also shown examples of the centre's work in the form of a group therapy session. Unlike the previous segments, we hear briefly from some of the centre's residents. We the audience are eavesdropping into the group therapy session. It is clear that those participating are recovering and have learnt to care for both themselves and their families.

Extending the image of care, McVerry then brings us into the home of an elderly Dublin couple who have to look after a mentally handicapped son. In his interviewer mode McVerry talks to the young man's father about his fears for his son's future, given the lack of state back-up in the form of residential or community based care. The father describes his plight to McVerry in emotional tones and states that the help that his wife and himself have received has come not from the state but from their neighbours.

McVerry returns to the programme's earlier theme of anger and asks the man whether he is angry with the system to which the man tearfully replies:

... no ... not angry ... disappointed.

We also see images of the young handicapped man sitting and talking to his elderly parents. The images are shown in real time unlike the slow motion images of disability which were an intrinsic part of the techniques used in the 1992 *People in Need* Telethon.

These pieces of film show us the work of carers whom McVerry admires as well as three different dimensions of poverty. There is an underlying suggestion in all four pieces of film that Irish society and in particular the state at both local and national level does not care for the struggling. McVerry's makeshift hostel is inadequate, there is no hostel for youth homelessness in Limerick City, the Cuan Mhuire centre which epitomises care for McVerry is dependent on people's goodwill and charity and the failure to provide for the mentally handicapped is the source of great anguish for parents facing old age and death. The programme cuts back to McVerry as interviewee in his office and he states categorically that the:

people who make decisions in our society just don't care.

That those who are in power do not care is emphasised further in the next film sequence. These segments are linked by means of a still shot which tells the audience that the government buildings on Merrion Street, Dublin have recently been refurbished at the cost of £17m. We see McVerry approach the entrance to the complex. He is walking around surveying the scene, the Irish tricolour fluttering in the background symbolising the gap between the patriotism and idealism of the state's founders and the rise of a new elite interested only in grandeur and power.

He comments on the renovation and restoration work that has taken place admitting that it is quite beautiful.⁷⁴ Yet he is scathing in his criticism of government thinking. The renovation work symbolises for him how we have distorted our priorities. He says:

When I think of what £17m could have done. For £17m you would not have a sight or smell of a homeless kid in Ireland for the next five years and of battered women for £17m a lot of battered wives would have been able to take legal action to secure their lives.

⁷⁴ These buildings were renovated during the Haughey era to coincide with Ireland's Presidency of the EC.

He adds that he cannot see the justification:

for spending money on buildings like this when so much suffering goes unabated for lack of money.

The lack of care amongst those in power is manifest from McVerry's assertions. Their wisdom, however, is questioned further in the film shots that contrast McVerry's verbal messages with visual shots of the statues of wise philosophers and dead political leaders in the building's grounds. There may even be an intimation of the vanity of the current political elite situating themselves amongst the wise of earlier times.

McVerry's next tour of duty is to a shopping centre in the middle of Dublin City where the many of the city's comfortable do their buying. The incidental classical music used in the opening scenes of the documentary is again used to signify our entry into the world of 'high' culture. We follow McVerry as he window-shops. The prices are prohibitively expensive — £310 for a watch, a jacket at a reduced sale price of £50. The next shots are of McVerry reading the property pages of an Irish national newspaper. The choice of headlines that we see here add further weight to his thesis about a society divided between rich and poor — *Dalkey house sold for around £1m, Rich Dubliners go North for Holiday Homes* and *To the Manor Born*. McVerry's verbal message in the voice-over bring together the images of a divided society where the poor are excluded, and where the contact that the rich and comfortable have with the poor is often second-hand through media coverage. He says:

If you live in Mount Merrion, and you have an office in Ballsbridge and you do your shopping in Grafton Street, you can live blissfully unaware of what is happening to the poor people and to deprived areas in our city. You read about them. You see them, but it could be the Lebanon that you are reading about and watching.

McVerry's critique of how Irish society is organised is not confined to an attack on the politically powerful or the affluent. He is also critical of the Irish Catholic Church, of which as a priest he is a member. He asks why the Church is not campaigning on behalf of prisoners, the homeless and against the poor conditions that exist in areas of high unemployment and deprivation. We see McVerry saying mass in the church in Ballymun where there are many empty seats. He tells the viewers that the Church has little or no interest in the poor and that the poor themselves do not see the Church as relevant to their lives. What interest in the poor there is appears to be confined to a minority of members of the Church's hierarchy. We see McVerry interviewing Fr. Eamon Walsh who is an auxiliary bishop in the Dublin diocese.

Walsh's perspective is more moderate than McVerry's. He believes that a general consciousness raising about the plight of the poor is the appropriate approach with room also for "a full frontal attack" by McVerry and others on the system. Despite these differences in perspective and approach, it is clear from this segment that McVerry's message is that as a rule the Church is on the side of the rich and powerful who are in turn supportive of the political elite in society.

In the next sequence, McVerry, in perhaps a contradictory statement, tells us of the compassion of the Irish for the downtrodden. He argues that the population is frustrated by the system and therefore can do little or nothing to help. To illustrate the Irish population we are shown a general shot of feet walking. Ironically, this footage was shot on the very street that McVerry mentions in his assertions about the social distance between rich and poor in the shopping centre segment earlier on.

The contradictions in this statement are again evident in the next sequence. Switching again from commentator to interviewee, McVerry returns to a theme mentioned in the opening scenes of the documentary. He tells us of his shame and pain of being Irish in the light of how we treat our fellow human beings.

McVerry then adds further weight to his thesis that Ireland is divided between the rich and the poor by examining the workings of the taxation system. There are a clear set of messages spelt out in this piece. McVerry asserts that the rich and

powerful have had a great deal of influence on the workings of the taxation system. Citing the fact that there is no wealth tax in Ireland and that the Beef Tribunal had unearthed a myriad of tax avoidance schemes, McVerry refers to the “scandal of tax evasion in Ireland”.

He differentiates here between the PAYE worker and those on low incomes and those who do not pay their fair share of tax — multinational corporations, the self-employed and large farmers. The piece also contains a warning to those who are tax avoiders. The civil servant to whom McVerry speaks makes it clear that the attention of the Revenue Commissioners has now switched towards their new audit programme which would allow them to catch an increasing number of tax evaders. He tells McVerry:

The temperature of the water in that pot is beginning to boil up and the evader is going to feel it.

As if to reinforce this point, we now see McVerry talking to another civil servant who is working at a computer telling us that it is now possible to get behind the statistical data and investigate any sector, company or individual who is not paying enough tax. The themes of both warning some sections of the audience and examining the track record of the Catholic Church in relation to poverty are examined in the next sequence. Here we see McVerry attend a conference on power organised by the Conference of Major Religious Superiors at Milltown Park, Dublin. (The Conference of Major Religious Superiors has since changed its name to The Conference of Religious in Ireland.) The priest addressing the conference is talking about Galbraith’s (1992) book *The Culture of Contentment*. He is drawing a parallel between Ireland and the USA in terms of the conditions which gave rise to the Los Angeles riots. We see images of the rioting and looting as he is speaking. McVerry then interviews the speaker about the conditions prevailing in Irish communities where there is long-term unemployment and deprivation.

Like McVerry's use of the civil servants working in the Revenue Commissioners in the previous section, here he draws on the advice of an expert working in the field of social policy formation.

The use of expert opinion is again drawn upon in the documentaries penultimate section. The imminence of societal breakdown if the gap between rich and poor is not breached is again stressed. McVerry interviews a community development worker in an unnamed North Dublin suburb. The development worker speaks of the ghettoisation of the poor as well as the possibility of civil disturbances in the future. We see shots of people walking, mothers pushing prams, children playing in the vicinity of a shopping centre. But in order to warn of the dangers we are facing the camera focuses on an electric pylon which looms large over the houses. This pylon is both unsightly standing as it is between a group of houses, but also signifies danger for those who live there.

The supposed rising level of violence which is said by McVerry to exist in urban Ireland is given further attention as we now can see a newspaper article⁷⁵ which refers to Dublin as being one of the most dangerous capitals in the world. We hear Gay Byrne read out the contents of the article on his morning radio show on *RTE Radio 1*.

In the programme's final section we see McVerry outline what the documentary refers to as 'An Immediate Six Point Plan'. These six points for the resolution of some of the problems referred to in the programme are presented to us in series of six stills. The stills are reminiscent of the billboards which are used by political parties in their election campaigns. They call for a:

- (1) Major increase in local authority house building.
- (2) Increases in social welfare payments.
- (3) New taxes on wealth.
- (4) More money for national schools.

⁷⁵ Written originally for an Australian newspaper and reproduced in *The Irish Press* 4 September 1993.

- (5) New powerful Dáil committees.
- (6) An end to youth homelessness.

The programme finishes with the usual rolling credits which tell us about the personnel involved in making the documentary. But interspersed with these stock images are a repeat of the Derek Speirs photographs of some of the Irish poor. The usual *Tuesday File* dramatic theme music has been replaced by the national anthem. The last sounds we hear on this documentary are of the crowds cheering at an All Ireland Final in Croke Park.

We are left therefore with a final message about a society which despite its republican and egalitarian ideals is in fact increasingly divided. It may be symbolically divided on the playing field but the stark images which we have witnessed tell of deeper and more fundamental divisions, which will ultimately be the cause of its demise.

4:6 Symbolising Exclusion: The Codes and Conventions of Current Affairs Television

Are You Sitting Comfortably? was akin to many other documentaries made in this series in terms of length, use of certain stylised techniques, reliance on ‘expert opinion’ and being introduced to the viewers by the programme’s link-person who was a well-known and trusted journalist.⁷⁶ The documentary began with the usual theme music, used the *Tuesday File* logo as a backdrop for the link-person to introduce the audience to “this turbulent priest”, but there the similarities end.

The programme did not follow the more typical current affairs convention of balancing one set of arguments against another, rather it had the deliberate intention of being one-sided. Despite using a link-person to introduce the documentary, the

⁷⁶ This convention is no longer used by *Tuesday File*.

programme differed from RTE's more usual style of using what Kelly (1984b) referred to as:

... a team of trusted and credible presenters ...

by placing the programme's subject into the role of presenter.

Are You Sitting Comfortably? was unusual in that it was a personal essay style documentary about how *one* man saw the issues of Irish poverty and inequality. The structure of the programme was built on the premise of its presenter that the society in which he lived and worked is divided between the comfortable and the struggling.

The documentary aimed to introduce us to McVerry's perspective on poverty through an exploration of his views, the experiences of people that he admired, the inequity in this society, as well as provide a suggested solution to the problems which he outlined. It chose to build up a set of contrasts between those on the margins (the homeless, the alcoholic, the mentally handicapped, the Travellers and unemployed) and the powerful (politicians, the middle classes and owners of capital). This juxtapositioning was hinged on using examples of people who are either obviously poor or rich.

The programme's main subject played a variety of roles — he was the documentary's commentator, interviewer and interviewee as well as the activist on whom the programme focused. In view of the producer's initial worries that the programme could simply be a sermon from a priest about poverty, these fears were overcome by giving McVerry a variety of roles to play. As interviewee, commentator, and activist we heard McVerry's own views, but by allowing McVerry to slip into the role of interviewer we heard the views of others who added credence to his arguments, or served to moderate his opinions.

The programme was further divided up by the use of still shots of McVerry's opinions and photographs of the marginalised. These were used to reinforce McVerry's arguments about the extent of poverty and exclusion in Ireland. As I discuss below, the black and white still photographs of some of the Irish poor served

to both break up the programme into distinct sections as well as serving as a stark contrast to the images we saw of the powerful and comfortable. The series of still shots at the conclusion of the programme where McVerry outlined his immediate six-point plan to alleviate Irish poverty was of particular importance in that it was an unfamiliar ploy for a programme maker to allow the programme's subject to suggest a set of solutions to a problem such as poverty.

There were further elements of intertextuality in the documentary which used news footage, radio commentary, newspaper headlines and dramatisation as production devices. The news footage served to signal the warning of social breakdown and disorder in the form of rioting, the radio commentary from broadcaster Gay Byrne told of Ireland becoming a more violent place, the headlines on the property pages signalled that some Dubliners were paying £1m for a house, while the dramatisation of a middle-class dinner party signified the disinterest of the comfortable. The images of the comfortable in this fictional piece were meshed with images of the poor whom as I noted above had become transformed into commodities (photographs) which were bought and sold by the comfortable.

Another notable convention used in the making of this documentary was the care taken when filming either people who were poor or the places where they lived. Permission was asked of all those who were filmed in group shots such as in McVerry's hostel or the hostel in Limerick. In the only situation where we actually hear the marginalised speak for themselves — in Bruree, County Limerick — we as the audience were briefly allowed to eavesdrop on a group therapy session. We heard either McVerry himself or those who are caring for the poor.

In addition to the practice of asking permission of those filmed, the producer reached an agreement with the residents of a northside Dublin suburb to film there, but in the light of previous negative print media coverage of the area he would not in fact name the place. The programme chose to personalise the issue of poverty by allowing a priest who is well known amongst the Irish public to air his views. The documentary conformed to a tendency to narrate stories about poverty through the

eyes of the agents of the poor rather than through the poor themselves. Although we saw and occasionally heard some examples of what McVerry viewed as the Irish poor, the programme's emphasis was on his rather than their own views.⁷⁷ The other viewpoints that we heard in the programme were largely from other agents of the poor who added to McVerry's thesis about the state of play in Irish society.

Symbolising Exclusion

Given that the programme's creator accepted the thesis being put forward by McVerry that Irish society was divided between the comfortable and the struggling just how was this notion articulated on a symbolic level?

There were two sets of messages encoded within *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* There were the obvious messages to the audience in the form of words, music and visual images which were used to warn the audience. But as well as this manifest set of messages there were a set of less obvious signifiers at work in the documentary which drew upon amongst others, images of buildings, people, statues, flags, and consumer goods to symbolise wealth/poverty and inclusion/exclusion.

Manifest Messages

This documentary was a parable. It was told as a way of warning the comfortable that unless change came about there was going to be societal breakdown and everybody would suffer. This basic message was repeated throughout the programme by McVerry and others. They gave the audience a set of verbal warnings about what is to come if poverty is not addressed. These warnings were embellished by the use of stills of facts about poverty or the waste in our society. The photographs of the poor were used in contrast to the affluence of the comfortable. The images of those who care for the marginalised (in this case McVerry, Sr. Consilio, The Brothers of Charity, an elderly couple, a bishop and a community worker) were cast against

⁷⁷ Harvey (1983) noted that media coverage of poverty tended to focus on the personalities involved rather than the poor themselves.

those whom McVerry said did not care (local and national politicians, administrators, the comfortable).

The programme's link-person and presenter both used terms such as 'whirlwind', 'seeds of destruction', 'the comfortable land', in warning the powerful and comfortable of the apocalyptic fate of Irish society if it remains divided. These warnings were embellished with intertextual references to breakdown in other societies such as Britain and the USA. The possibility of riots in urban Ireland in the near future were repeatedly alluded to by McVerry and many of the experts he interviewed. There also were warnings sent to those who were not paying their fair share of taxation that they would eventually feel the heat from the Revenue Commissioners.

The programme's incidental music also worked to send a set of messages to the audience. The chamber music used at the beginning and again later on in the documentary worked in a number of ways. It symbolised 'high' culture against which the realistic images of McVerry's world were shown. The particular piece of music was a slow air which signified the pathos of McVerry's experience. It was used again to bring us back into the world of the rich and powerful when we go with McVerry to a shopping centre where the rich do their buying and selling.

The programme also made use of the national anthem — *Amhrain na Bfhiann/A Soldier's Song* — to symbolise the failure of the Irish state. We heard this song twice during the documentary. On both occasions the idealism contained within its lyrics were juxtaposed with stark images of some of the Irish poor. It was intended to be both didactic and ironic. The segment of the song chosen for the audience told of those who have fought for the glory of Ireland. Yet we know from the visual images and the verbal messages of this documentary that collectivism and patriotism have been replaced by individualism and greed. There were other messages too which noted the lack of concern for the poor by the Irish Catholic Church and the disinterest of our politicians in the problems outlined.

Latent Messages

As well as the manifest messages of this documentary which were obvious warning signals, there was a second layer of messages concerning poverty and exclusion encoded within the programme. At this level the programme's creator drew upon a range of symbols to signify exclusion and poverty. He used buildings, people, sport, clothes, black plastic bags, food, jewellery, flags, queues, statues and electric pylons to emphasise the notion of the dangers facing this divided society.

Buildings were an important signifier. They symbolised both poverty (the Ballymun tower blocks, the hostels in Limerick and Dublin) and power (government buildings, St. Stephen's Green Shopping Centre, Ballymun church, the homes of the rich which were alluded to and which we see briefly in the dramatisation of the dinner party). In using buildings the theme of exclusion was developed further. The poor were exempt from the places of power and privilege. Many seats in the Ballymun church were empty because the poor did not see the Church as relevant to their lives. They must queue outside social welfare offices and queue again inside. We saw government buildings through the railings. Even when the gates were opened slowly, we know that we were entering a place where the poor were not welcome. The renovation of these buildings at a cost of £17m symbolised for McVerry the lack of care amongst the Irish political elite.

The poor are also excluded from participating in the market. In the shopping centre we were shown shots of clothes prices which were prohibitively expensive. They also served to provide the viewers with another set of messages. The Revenue Commissioners Office at Dublin Castle was shown to be a place where the ever increasing vigilance of the civil servants who work there will eventually track down those (some of the comfortable) who were not paying their fair share of tax.

People were also used as signifiers. McVerry and those whom he admired symbolised those who were fighting for a caring society. We were shown three of our best known politicians watching a match. They represented the politically powerful and comfortable. The programme also used other images of people to symbolise the

Irish general public (a wide shot of people walking in Grafton Street), the comfortable (as symbolised by the dinner party scene and those who shop in the St. Stephen's Green Centre) and the poor (the unemployed, Travellers, and children begging in the street).

Food, clothes, jewellery and sport were also used as symbols of exclusion and poverty. We saw images of the cramped eating conditions in McVerry's hostel — in sharp contrast to the nouvelle cuisine meal which the comfortable were eating at their dinner party. The poor relied on living out of black plastic bags while the rich shopped for their clothes in comfortable surroundings. The images that we see in the shopping centre suggested that the comfortable will pay the equivalent of a weeks social welfare payment for just one item of clothing and at that it was in fact at a reduced price! Jewellery was also used to signify wealth. At the dinner party we saw a shot of a young woman wearing ostentatious rings and earrings, while at the shopping centre, we saw a watch which was priced £310.

4:7 Discussion

Are You Sitting Comfortably? was a well-crafted and critically acclaimed documentary which attempted with some success to tell a story about one man's views on poverty in Irish society. Its success may also be adjudged in audience ratings terms, attracting as it did 30% of all adult viewers, surpassing the programme's average rating of 22%. For our purposes, however, the significance of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* lies in the questions that the programme raises about the issues of media ideology and hegemony. The programme is of further interest in that it is in many ways atypical of the style of existing Irish current affairs television.

Are You Sitting Comfortably? is significant as a case study for a number of important reasons. It is primarily an example of how Irish television mediates the

issue of poverty through the eyes and words of an agent of the poor rather than simply the poor themselves.⁷⁸

McVerry as a helper and an agitator was in Monaco's (1978) terms a television personality.⁷⁹ The latter described two strands of television personality — namely those who worked in and appeared on television with regularity, and as in McVerry's case:

Those individuals who exist outside of television in their own right, but are recruited into television at various strategic junctures as resource material — politicians, celebrities, experts or 'ordinary people' ... made strangely important. (1978:7)

The presenter of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was already familiar to many viewers for his work with the homeless and his other infrequent media appearances over poverty and related issues. The use of this type of television personality went against the grain of what Kelly (1984b) and Kumar (1977) saw as the use of credible and trusted presenters within current affairs television as a means of questioning those in power.

There are evident tensions between the recurring messages of the programme that (a) Irish society is divided; (b) Irish society's breakdown is imminent and the social democratic solutions, outlined at the end of the programme. There is a gap between the obvious radical messages of Peter McVerry working as he is from a Christian, socialist, humanist perspective and the programme's conclusions which suggest that the kinds of changes which McVerry is advocating can be carried out through liberal or social democratic reformism.

⁷⁸ Other attempts at making documentaries about the issue of homelessness have opted for a docu-drama approach using actors to tell the story about the poor. The most celebrated example being Jeremy Sandford's *Cathy Come Home*, broadcast by the BBC in 1966. See the interview with Sandford describing the background to *Cathy Come Home*, in Rosenthal (1971).

⁷⁹ See also Langer (1981).

Kelly (1984b) in describing RTE's current affairs television saw it as being supported by a personality system which articulated a middle ground. The personalities, however, were of the first kind as described by Monaco (1978) in that although many of the presenters drew upon their past and present experiences as academics or journalists for their credibility, they were now primarily individuals who worked regularly on television. She saw current affairs television as being characterised by:

- (a) An ability to question those in power from the position of a middle ground.
- (b) Being able to communicate effectively with the audience.
- (c) The use of experts.
- (d) Being seen to be on the side of 'the people'.
- (e) Driven by a cultural value system which stood for democracy and honest government.

The documentary considered in this chapter is in agreement with Kelly's (1984b) criteria in terms of (b), (c) and (e) but deviates in relation to all other characteristics outlined.

In terms of its ideological positioning, the programme criticises and questions those in power from a left-wing perspective, although this position is somewhat tempered by the adoption, albeit belatedly, of a set of reformist solutions at the programme's conclusion.

In terms of its specific focus on the problems of poverty and inequality in Irish society, the documentary is largely in agreement with Kelly's (1984b) analysis of how social problems are explored by current affairs television. She viewed this as a tendency for programmes to confirm the existence of a problem by devoting most of its attention to it; the outlining of opinions on the problem by experts and community leaders etc. and the proposal of social democratic solutions at the end of a programme. While our case-study sides with the dispossessed of Irish society, it sees 'the people' as being essentially split into the 'haves' and 'have nots' and sets out, as its title suggests, to prick the consciences of those who are comfortable. This

programme therefore does not neatly fit into Kelly's (1984b) model of Irish current affairs television in that it is not made from a middle ground perspective, does not use a regular presenter and sets out to emphasise the divisiveness inherent in 1990s Ireland.

In terms of the wider analysis being undertaken in this study *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* stands out as a programme which takes what some in Irish society might regard as the 'undeserving' or 'Devil's poor' as its subject matter. Thus it focuses on the problems of the homeless, unemployed, alcoholic and Traveller as viewed by an agent of the poor. This programme is of further importance in terms of both how it was made and its content. The producer adopted a specific code of behaviour (albeit personal) in reaching agreement with the individuals and communities filmed and he allowed the programme's subject to set the agenda for the documentary. These practices were, however, countered by the warning signals which management sent out when they realised what kind of film the producer intended to make.

Perhaps the documentary's most interesting feature is its use of symbolism in order to articulate a set of messages about Irish poverty. We can view this in two ways. Firstly, we can say that symbols are used by the programme's creator as obvious production devices in his own words to hook the viewer. Thus certain images (e.g. sport, buildings, queues, consumer goods) are utilised to reinforce the programme's basic message of a divided society.

Secondly, we can say that the programme's symbolic elements are used by the producer to offer a preferred reading of the documentary or text to the viewer. Thus, following Hall (1974) and Hall et al. (1976), the programme has a dominant code which sought to get the audience to interpret both its manifest and latent messages in a particular way. However, given the fact that the programme was intended to challenge both the viewer and the status quo, the programme's dominant code may be seen as not being at one with the suggested hegemonic codes which normally govern current affairs and other types of television programme.

That this is the case, may be evidenced from the fact that the programme ran into difficulties with the station's hierarchy prior to its broadcast and we know from the ethnographic evidence produced in this chapter that the programme's maker intended the programme to go against the grain of accepted beliefs about poverty and inequality in Ireland.

Are You Sitting Comfortably? is a rare example of a programme which sought to challenge the status quo and is in agreement with Altheide's (1984) thesis that those who work in producing news and current affairs television do not as a matter of course reproduce or in fact support the dominant or hegemonic ideology of a society. The fact that the producer was allowed to make and broadcast such a programme with its intended 'dangerous' message places a question mark over traditional accounts of television's ideological role. Hegemony as the content of this programme demonstrates is never complete. Within the tapestry which makes up the vast array of media messages about the world are those which even in a limited way manage to challenge the system. Despite the increasingly narrow focus of current affairs television there are occasions when programmes such as *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* manage even — in a circumscribed way — to challenge a society's dominant ideology.

As this chapter has demonstrated it is sometimes possible for an individual broadcaster to make a programme or report which has a deliberate intention of questioning a society's dominant ideology. In order to do so however the text has often to resort to a range of production techniques such as symbolisation in its attempt to suggest a preferred (and sometimes critical) reading of a media text to its audience.

Chapter Five

“ ‘Tis the Season to Tell Stories About Poverty...”

An Analysis of RTE Television News About Poverty

Contents

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- 5:2 Quantitative Analyses of RTE Television's Poverty Reports on *Six-One News* September–December 1992.
- 5:3 Qualitative Analysis of Poverty Reports on *Six-One News* September–December 1992.
- 5:4 The Production of Poverty Stories on *Six-One News*: Three Case Studies
- 5:5 Discussion: Poverty News as Ideology

5:1 Introduction

The findings of the previous chapter suggest that poverty coverage in a current affairs setting is marked by its scarcity, and by its dependency on the heroic helper as its subject matter. So to what extent is this situation replicated in RTE news about poverty? Mindful of Gans (1979) statement that most news is about 'knowns', this chapter examines the ideology of RTE television news coverage about Irish poverty in the last quarter of 1992.

The tripartite analysis draws upon quantitative and qualitative techniques, but the approach is predominantly qualitative. The discussion begins with an examination of poverty stories through an analysis of the main evening news programme, *Six-One News*.⁸⁰ Attention is also given to the production context of poverty news, by exploring how both poverty stories were made and how they succeeded in making it onto the news agenda. Taking *Six-One News* as a case-study, the chapter also discusses the ideology of RTE's coverage of poverty by focusing on its manifest and latent message systems.

⁸⁰ *Six-One News* is broadcast on RTE 1 Television, weekdays from 6pm to 7pm. Its selection as a case-study for this study was based primarily on the fact that it is both RTE's longest newscast and its most watched.

5:2 Quantitative Analyses of RTE Television's Poverty Stories on *Six One News* 1 Sept. - 31 Dec. 1992

Introduction

Twenty-five stories⁸¹ broadcast by *Six-One News* concerning Irish poverty were analysed in terms of eight questions relating to the poverty group involved: the main focus of the report; the type of report; the part of the programme in which it was broadcast; the rank ordering of the report; the type of correspondent who filed the report; and whether or not the report contained any obvious reference to the cause of the particular problem or whether solutions were suggested by the reporter (see Appendices A and B for tables and coding sheet).

The data gathered from this analysis suggests that the focus is on four main groupings: the unemployed, the homeless, the Travelling community and an assortment of agent groups who work with the poor. Added to these reports are ones which tell of the phenomenon of 'new poverty', as well as a small number of reports which examine poverty in the context of some related social or political problem such as drug abuse or inequality amongst Catholics in Northern Ireland. The focus of these stories therefore is on identifiable poverty groups or their representatives.

Our analysis of the production details of these reports reveals that a large majority of poverty stories warrant the making of a filmed report (19, 76%) and in five cases (20%) poverty stories are placed in the category of Special Report. In terms of the placing of poverty stories in the overall bulletin, most stories appear in the second part of the programme (14, 56%), with just nine cases (36%) managing to make it into the programme's first part. It is interesting to note at this juncture that the poverty stories which did make it into part one of the bulletin were concerned with the activities of elite figures such as President Robinson and the Catholic bishops. These 25 stories were also analysed in terms of their rank ordering within the bulletin.

⁸¹ These stories represent the total number of reports which were taken to be *explicitly* about poverty. There were 84 bulletins of *Six-One News* in the period 1st September 1992 - 31st December 1992.

As Figure 5:1 shows, none of the 25 stories came first or second in the bulletin. Just one report managed to make the third placing and two made the fourth position. A majority of poverty reports found themselves down the league table, ranging from three reports in seventh place to the peak of four reports each for eleventh and twelfth place. All in all, these findings suggest that even when poverty stories make it onto the news agenda, they are not seen as priority news stories.

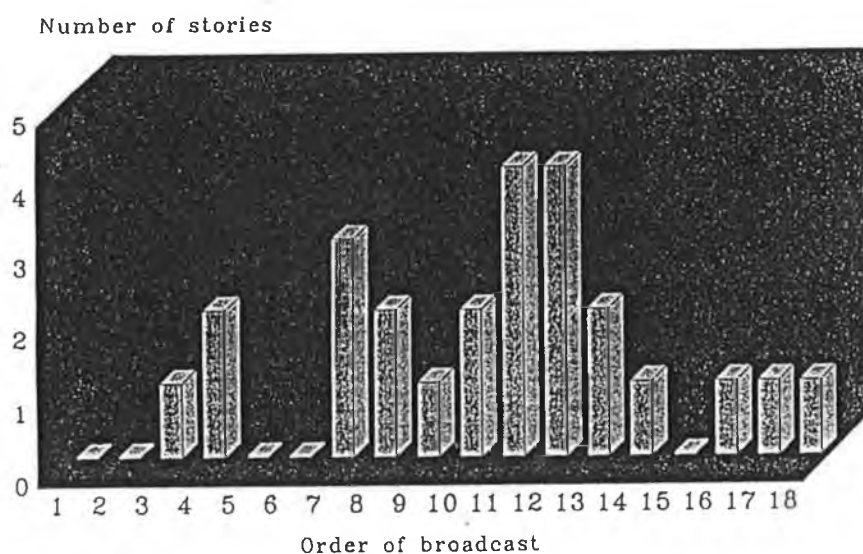


Figure 5:1 Order in which poverty stories were broadcast on Six-One News Sept. 1 1992 - Dec. 31 1992.

In terms of who files poverty reports for *Six-One News*, there appears to be a fairly even division of labour between special correspondents and desk reporters, each being responsible for eleven (44%) reports, with the remaining three reports coming from the programme's regional correspondents. Of the 25 stories analysed, there was a fairly even split between reporters who referred to the underlying cause of the particular poverty problem. However, in terms of a suggested solution to the problem, more reporters omitted a proposed solution (15, 60%) than those who suggested one (10, 40%).

5:3 Qualitative Analysis of Poverty reports on *Six-One News* 1 September– 31 December 1992

Introduction

The make-up of a selection of poverty stories, using the technique of qualitative content analysis is now explored. I again examine stories broadcast on *Six-One News* (SON) during the period 1 September 1992 to 31 December 1992. This study period was selected for two main reasons. Firstly, I was interested in examining how the various themes, such as the 'crisis of homelessness' or the 'arrival of the new poor', as suggested by *Six-One News* developed over several news bulletins during the last quarter of 1992. Secondly, this period coincided with the first phase of my fieldwork at RTE and I succeeded in discussing the content of some of these reports with the journalists who were responsible for their creation.

What follows is an account of the news reports broadcast by *Six-One News* which dealt with those traditionally considered to be poor (Travellers, unemployed, homeless, needy), the new poor (the middle classes experiencing difficulties with mortgage repayments) and those individuals and organisations who act on behalf of the poor, old and new. Following this exegesis I conclude by discussing the codes and conventions of TV news about poverty stories. This is done by examining the background and production processes of four news stories about poverty and through a wide-ranging discussion on the dominant images and messages about the Irish poor on RTE television.

The Old Poor

The Travelling Community

Six-One News carried two reports about the presence of a Traveller encampment on the Irish Army's firing range (SON, 2 September 1992 and 8

September 1992). Ironically, the first of these two reports was given on a day when the main news story was that of Ireland's welcome for some Bosnian refugees. The Traveller story was narrated, not as an issue however about the failure of either national or local government to provide accommodation for Travellers, but rather as a story about a security and safety risk.

The security correspondent reported that the Irish Army had to close its firing range at the Curragh Camp in Co. Kildare, because of the presence of a group of Travellers who were 'illegally' camped next to the firing area. Told as a security story, the audience was informed that the Department of Defence had obtained a High Court injunction ordering the Travellers to leave the area. The story was narrated from the perspective of the army and Department of Defence, with the reporter quoting army and Department sources. There was no counter argument offered or Traveller source quoted.

The audience are told that the Travellers are trespassing on the army's land by placing their caravans⁸² there, as well as using the land as an exercise area for their ponies. The blame for the shut down of the firing range is firmly located at the feet of the Travellers, whose presence, we are told, is disrupting the army's training programme. The Travellers are cast in the role of intruder who are said to be "encroaching" and "trespassing" on the army's lands.

On a visual level we see images associated with both the army and the Travelling community. The images of the Irish Army include the Curragh Camp, the empty firing range, three Department of Defence officials surveying the scene, a soldier standing guard, guns being loaded and soldiers firing these guns. There are no actual Travellers present in the film footage. These images summon up a message about the negative impact of the Travellers' presence in the area and the active response of the army and the Department of Defence to the issue.

⁸² Travellers themselves refer to these as trailers, not caravans.

We see Traveller trailers, a horse box, a sulky,⁸³ a milk churn, and, finally, a horse. The footage of the Travellers trailers has been shot at high speed — presumably from a car. The apparent dangers are signified in a close-up shot of the army's warning sign about gunfire taking place.

The second report on this issue (SON, 8 September 1992) told the audience that the Travellers had moved out and that practice firing had resumed at the Curragh Camp. A shorter report than its predecessor, it drew on library film and used the same high speed footage of Traveller trailers as before. No spokespersons for either side appeared in the report. These events at the Curragh appear to have been considered newsworthy because of the security angle given to the stories, rather than the issue of the lack of suitable accommodation for Travellers. The Travellers are presented as a pariah group who are acting illegally and presenting the Irish Army with a security risk.

The remaining reports on the Travelling community in our study period also emphasise the notion of this group of people as a problem group in terms of the issues of health and accommodation. In December (SON, 8 December 1992) a report which dealt with the health problems of the Travelling community in the west of Ireland was filed by the programme's Western Correspondent. The report is an interesting example of how the focus of poverty related stories is on those who represent the poor rather than on the poor themselves. This report features a socialist and former Minister for Health, one of the authors of a study on the needs of Travellers, as well as a Catholic bishop. It is also of further interest that the issue of intermarriage between first cousin Travellers is singled out as the main feature of the study. The study in question in fact covers a much wider range of issues about the needs of Irish Travellers dealing as it does with the health, education and social issues which affect this marginalised ethnic minority group.⁸⁴

⁸³ A sulky is a lightweight single seated horse-drawn carriage which Travellers use in racing.

⁸⁴ O'Nuallain and Forde (1992).

The story is introduced by the news anchorwoman, who tells us that the former Minister for Health Dr Noel Browne⁸⁵ has made a strong plea for a greater understanding of the problems experienced by the Travelling community. We hear a section of Browne's speech, in which he notes the contradictions inherent in Irish public attitudes and responses to the issue of poverty. He tells us that:

There's widespread discrimination against Travellers. They're needlessly sick, they die young, they have suffered disability. Riddle me this, how is it that we last night raised £1m for Somalia?⁸⁶

The report then cuts to the Western Correspondent, who outlines what he sees as the main features of the study being launched. Next, one of the study's authors speaks about the issue of intermarriage amongst the Travelling community and their subsequent high rates of genetic diseases. The theme of inter-marriage is carried further with the reporter interviewing a local bishop about the problem. Thus the only voices we hear are those of the anchorwoman/reporter, the former minister, the author and the local bishop. The report is concerned with what the latter three have to say and how they say it. Browne makes "a strong plea" and "an impassioned plea", the author suggests a direct link between genetic disorders and consanguinity, the bishop promises to discourage inter-marriage between first cousins.

The absence of a Traveller voice in this report and their physical and cultural distance is further emphasised by many of the visual images used to tell the story. When the report is being introduced by the news anchor woman, we see a superimposed still shot of some Traveller children at play behind her left shoulder on the screen. It is not a clear image, and the characters are not readily identifiable. As the report proper commences, we see a Traveller campsite from a distance. There are

⁸⁵ Browne would be well known to most viewers as a radical socialist who as young doctor pioneered an onslaught against TB in the late 1940s. Following the collapse of the Inter-Party Government as a result of a dispute with the Roman Catholic Church over the Mother and Child Scheme, Browne has ever since remained a marginal figure who has championed the cause of the poor both at home and abroad.

⁸⁶ In reference to RTE's *Light in the Dark Telethon* for Somalia held the previous evening.

a group of Travellers outside the trailer but are again not identifiable. Next, we see a wide shot of some Traveller children playing amongst scrap and waste. There is a tap spilling water into the wind. In the next frame, we see a close up shot of a young Traveller child turning the tap off. The report cuts now to Browne who is shown in a tight close up shot as he is making his speech. The camera pulls back and shows Browne as well as five others who are sitting at a table behind him. They include two of the report's other interviewees. Next, we see a wide shot of the audience which is largely made up of Travellers. When the reporter tells us that:

Traveller children in County Galway are twenty times more likely to suffer from profound deafness and eight times more likely to suffer mental handicap than children of the settled community.

The camera zooms in on a close up shot of three Travellers in the audience. This close up shot is an exception to the norm of showing groups like the Travellers or homeless in either vague or headless shots. It then cuts away to an interview with one of the study's authors — here a close-up head and shoulders shot of the speaker is used and then moves on to a wider shot of the bishop addressing the audience. As he is speaking, the reporter is telling us that the bishop will:

be doing his best to discourage marriages between first cousins in the future but he doesn't believe that a total ban will work.

The camera zooms in on the face of a young Traveller woman to gauge her reaction through her facial expression. It then quickly moves to a wider shot of the assembled audience and finally cuts to an interview using a close up head and shoulders shot with the bishop.

The accommodation problems experienced by Dublin Travellers was the feature of a news report in October (SON, 13 October 1992). The story was prompted by the launch of a study by the Dublin Travellers Education and Development Group entitled *No Place To Go* (1992).

This report was similar to the previous one in that it was prompted by an 'event' — the publication of a new study — but also because of the utterances of an elite figure, namely the Lord Mayor of Dublin. It was different from the former reports, however, in that it included a Traveller activist as one of three interviewees.

The report begins with the news anchorman telling the audience that the Lord Mayor of Dublin has suggested that a representative of the Travelling community be given observer status on Dublin City Council. Next, we hear the reporter tell us about the main findings of the study and he outlines the accommodation crisis which Travellers are experiencing. The report then features an interview with a Traveller and Traveller's rights activist about the issue of Traveller accommodation. Although he does concede that Travellers have to bear some of the responsibility for the problem, he sees the ultimate responsibility as resting with the local authorities given their legal powers and financial resources. We hear from the PRO of Dublin Corporation. He acknowledges the dreadful living conditions of many Travellers, but stresses the problematic nature of dealing with the question. He notes that it is:

a problem with local communities and a problem with Travellers themselves.

The report now cuts back to the reporter who tells us that according to the Lord Mayor, the solution to the problem is to try and find a compromise between the Travellers and the settled community. He interviews the Lord Mayor about his views who, as well as suggesting Traveller representation on Dublin City Council, tells us that he:

doesn't expect the Travelling community to come half-way, because all the cards are in the hands of the settled community.

The report ends with a statement from the reporter who tells his audience that Travellers are seeking immediate action on their accommodation crisis and quotes their report's demand for an end to the building of temporary accommodation.

The verbal messages of this report are interesting in that they not only acknowledge the existence of a problem, but attempt through interviews with a number of spokespersons to try and suggest some possible solutions to the issue. There appears to be some conflict of opinion between the Travellers spokesperson and the Corporation official as to where the responsibility for the problem lies, yet the leading role of the piece is played by the Lord Mayor who is attempting to be conciliatory. The Lord Mayor is cast in an heroic light — he is portrayed as a man of action representing a half way position between the two other conflicting viewpoints we have heard.

Visually, a similar range of techniques is used as before. A superimposed still shot of a Travellers halting site is used to signal the story. Here, we see Traveller trailers in poor surroundings replete with scrap metal and garbage. The report itself begins with this same footage, now shown in real time. Next we see two Traveller children walking past the scrap cars. They are filmed from behind. The report then cuts to a sequence of still shots showing the cover of *No Place to Go* in addition to some black and white photographs from the study.

There follows a series of interviews with both the Traveller activist and the Corporation official. Both are head and shoulder shots filmed outside the official residence of the Lord Mayor — the Mansion House. Next, in a close up shot, we see the Lord Mayor making his speech. This scene cuts to a wide shot of an assembled group of largely female Travellers and moves then to an interview with the Lord Mayor outside the Mansion House. The report ends with a series of shots of the Travellers and their living conditions. We again see some Traveller children walking through a halting site. The images of caravans and scrap are also repeated. The final image is that of a single tap spilling water into the wind. This single image facilitates the conveyancing of a message about the poverty and lack of resources which Travellers experience.

Travellers are portrayed by television news as a problem group. Their newsworthiness seems to hinge on both the occurrence of events such as the launch of

new reports about them by their agents or else on the utterances of elite figures on their behalf. The dominant message coming from news stories about them is that of Travellers as a social problem. We can also say that the visual message is one which emphasises the cultural and economic distance of the Travellers from the dominant culture of Irish society. The poverty of the Irish Travellers is largely mediated through the use of symbolic imagery and through the statements of people who are not Travellers (or poor) themselves.

The Homeless

A similar situation arises with the homeless. Homelessness as an example of extreme subsistence poverty is not deemed to be a newsworthy story per se. The cluster of stories about homelessness in December 1992 arose because something ‘out of the ordinary’ happened. Four homeless people died in quick succession from hypothermia. However, it was, as we see below, the activities of elite figures in responding to the ‘crisis of homelessness’ that ensured that the issue of homelessness would be on the news agendas of print and broadcast media for the month of December. Many of the filming styles used to shoot the reports on the Travellers are replicated here, but in the case of homelessness, there is evidence of the use of pathos and religious imagery to frame the accounts of homelessness.

The first story entitled *On The Streets* was told as a *Six-One News* special report and it dealt with the funeral of one of the two homeless people who had been found dead from hypothermia on waste ground on December 2nd (SON, 8 December 1992). The programme’s anchor-woman tells the audience that there are approximately 500 homeless people in Dublin and refers back to the deaths of Michael O’Meara and Pauline Leonard, which have taken place the week previously. The latter had been buried that day in the *Alone* plot for the poor in Glasnevin cemetery. The focus of this special report is on the funeral mass and burial of Pauline Leonard. It is told as a poignant story with references by the reporter to Leonard’s “lonely death” and the mood of the tea rooms where she often ate as being “mellow

and sombre". There are interviews with two homeless men about her death, one of whom is visibly upset.

The report is structured around the priest's homily and the reactions of both locals and her fellow homeless. The narratives of all three emphasise her saint-like qualities noting her gentleness with animals and birds, her warmth and friendliness and the certainty that she is in heaven. The reporter in turn talks about the fact that the dead woman used to take shelter in the doorway of the church where her funeral mass was being offered

The report draws upon a range of images to tell a story about this woman's death. We see the obvious images of her coffin, the funeral mass, bouquets of funeral flowers and the funeral hearse. Yet other images are used to signify the sadness and reality of her death. We see a shot of penny candles some of which are lighting, more of which are extinguished. This shot cuts to a portrait of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which has the logo *Mother of Perpetual Help*. We view this image when we are hearing the priest speak about the dead woman's caring qualities. Also on view are the rarely seen homeless on whose faces the camera focuses to pick up on their sadness and upset.

The issue of homelessness returned to *Six-One News* just four days after the report on the funeral of Pauline Leonard (SON, 12 December 1992). Another homeless person had died from hypothermia while sleeping rough at Grangegorman, Dublin. The focus of this report is on the details about the removal of the dead body but also on the calls by what the newsreader refers to as "a leading campaigner" on the government to deal with the "housing and homeless crisis."

The reporter tells of the discovery of the young homeless man's body in a derelict building in the grounds of a Dublin hospital. She frames her story in the context of the deaths of three other homeless people in similar circumstances in the previous two weeks. Her report is structured around images from the scene of the death and an interview with an activist who campaigns on behalf of the homeless. We firstly see a policeman patrolling the derelict building and then a wider shot of the

building. Next we see a shot of the interior of the building and a photographer is witnessed in the adjacent room taking pictures. Four men then take the stretcher holding the blanket wrapped body through a window frame. The corpse is then loaded into the bottom portion of the funeral hearse. The film now cuts back to the derelict interior again. Having shown the interview with the homeless activist, the final images are those of the policemen watching over the scene of the death and the undertakers closing the door of the hearse.

Two days after the Grangegorman report *Six-One News* returned again to the question of homelessness (SON, 14 December 1992). This time the programme reports on the fact that a special working party on homelessness is to be set up to investigate the issue in Dublin. The focus of this story is on the response of elite figures to the question and although we see some evidence of the homeless in the film, the report conforms to the norm of not showing the faces of the homeless. We hear of the Lord Mayor's initiative in setting up the working party from the reporter and through interview.

The report's visual message system uses a mixture of old and new footage to tell the story. We firstly see a still shot of a destitute man with the caption "Homeless" underneath. The first three parts of the report use footage from the Grangegorman report of December 12th. We again see the corpse of Patrick Feary being removed through the window frame and two shots of the derelict building in which he died. Next, we see the first meeting of the Mayor's task force on homelessness. Following an interview with the Lord Mayor about the work ahead of the group, we see some footage of a hostel for the homeless. We see a hostel sitting room shot, from a distance through a doorway. There are also two shots of individual homeless men both of whom are shot from behind and therefore faceless.

The approach taken in the making of this report was to be repeated as the story developed over the next few days. (SON, 16 December 1992) The Taoiseach announced that the Irish Army were being drafted in to help alleviate the problem and a temporary emergency shelter was to be opened. *Six-One News'* religious and social

affairs correspondent filed a report which focused on the preparations being made by the army and Civil Defence. Having begun with the fact that several activists and supporters of the rights of the homeless were currently engaged in a vigil outside the Dáil Éireann, the reporter notes that just yards away from the parliament building a homeless woman sleeps on the steps of a house in a cardboard box each night.

Through her interview with an army press office representative and her own narrative, the reporter chose the preparatory work being done at the hostel by the army and others as her main theme. This story is interspersed with images of the homeless. The report begins with the still image of the homeless man used earlier in the working party story. We also see the cardboard home of the woman who sleeps opposite the Dáil. All of the shots of the homeless men at the hostel are filmed from behind. We see the homeless men in a variety of situations (walking, talking, eating, sleeping), yet all are faceless.

The Needy

The practice of doing a story on the 'needy' during December and more particularly on Christmas Day itself is a well-established convention within the RTE newsroom. In the context of the earlier coverage by the media on the question of homelessness in Dublin at this time, the Christmas story on the needy is perhaps an even more telling example than usual on how a poverty story of this kind is told in a sanitised way (SON, 25 December 1992).

The report concerns the annual Christmas lunch at the Dublin Mansion House which is prepared by the Knights of Colombanus⁸⁷ for the "less well off" and "city's needy". It was given as one half of a report on the events of Christmas day.⁸⁸ The reporter tells his audience that:

⁸⁷ The Knights of St. Colombanus is a Roman Catholic organisation. Exclusively male, membership of the knights is not disclosed and the organisation is well known for its conservative views on social issues. A large proportion of its membership comes from the professional and business classes. For an account of their history, see Bolster (1979).

⁸⁸ The other two dimensions to the report were concerned with a 'fun-run' for the Third World agency Goal and the annual swim at the Forty Foot in Dublin Bay.

They were dancing on the aisles of the Mansion House where over 850 of the city's needy received their annual Christmas lunch provided by the Knights of Colombanus.

The focus of his introductory remarks are on the activities of the knights who have been engaged in this activity for 68 years and on the fact that the numbers of needy attending the lunch are increasing. These remarks about the scale of the problem, are, however, tempered by his suggestion that the atmosphere at the lunch was one of gaiety and celebration. The report then cuts to an interview with a needy man. Reinforcing the story's introduction, he tells the reporter:

I had a big gang with me ... a big load of people ... and everyone one of them went away happy. There was a bit of a gift and all given to each and every one of us, it went off beautiful, really beautiful.

The reporter thanks the man and wishes him a merry Christmas, to which the man replies excitedly:

And the same to you and to everybody out there ... Happy Christmas! and many more of them!

Unlike the reports on the Travellers or homeless, where the tendency is to interview those who work with the poor rather than the poor themselves, this story is unusual in that it allows us to hear the voice of one of the poor and not his helper. This is because the knights are a secretive and powerful Catholic organisation, who are rarely, if ever, interviewed in public. But there is also a feeling in viewing this report, that the man was chosen for interview because he helped tell the story as a lightweight Christmas piece, comforting for both the powerful and many audience members.

A range of images are used to tell us this story of Christmas goodwill and cheer. Despite the suggestions in the reporter's introduction that "They were dancing

in the aisles” we in fact see a lone man dancing with his back to the camera. Next we see a wide shot of the tables and the guests which has been filmed from a distance. This then cuts to a ‘chef’ (presumably a knight), who is serving up food to the needy men. We then see a shot of the tops of the men’s heads, filmed from overhead the tables.

The report concludes with an interview with a man whose face is visible to the camera and the audience. This story is an example of the custom and practice of telling a story about the needy on Christmas Day. We can point to two main reasons why a story of this kind will make the news on Christmas Day. Firstly, there is typically very little else happening news wise during the holiday season⁸⁹. Secondly, this type of story fits in with the culture of Christmas given the fact that the original Christmas story is itself a story about poverty and homelessness.⁹⁰ But given the lightweight way in which our example of need on Christmas Day is told, there is also a sense that the story is narrated in this fashion to reassure the more comfortable members of the audience that everything is okay ‘out there’.

Unemployment

Unemployment⁹¹ featured heavily as the subject of television news reports in 1992. Most of this coverage tended to be about unemployment and the responses of government and other powerful groups to the problem as opposed to coverage of the unemployed themselves. I now consider contrasting types of stories about unemployment in our study period.

⁸⁹ It is also the case that the newsroom is working with reduced staff numbers at this time.

⁹⁰ Of course, this is not unique to TV news, the print media for example also draw upon the motifs of Christmas to frame their annual Christmas stories about the poor. *The Irish Times*, for example, on 24 December 1992 had a 12x5 photograph of two homeless men sleeping rough at a city centre arcade in Dublin, with the caption “No Room: homeless sleeping rough in the Creation Arcade, off Grafton Street, Dublin”.

⁹¹ See Harrington (1989) for an analysis of unemployment coverage on American television. He argues that television networks give a greater amount of coverage to economic news when it is bad during non-election years.

The first story is concerned with the perspectives of an unemployment action group on the problem of unemployment and the second deals with the response of the Irish Catholic bishops to the issue. In the first instance the report deals with the views of those who are both unemployed themselves as well as being organised as their own agents. The second report is more typical of news stories about poverty issues in that it is mediated by a powerful group on behalf of the unemployed.

In October, *Six-One News* carried a report that told the audience that the government's decision to set up a £50m fund to help employers to get through the currency crisis had been criticised, on a day when some of the unemployed had taken to the streets of Dublin as part of a European-wide march for jobs (SON, 6 October 1992). The story is framed around the criticisms made by the representative of the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE) of government and big business. The arguments being put forward by the INOUE are that the issues affecting unemployed people are being ignored and that many of the key players in Irish business are behaving immorally, owing to their speculation against the Irish pound. The INOUE representative tells the reporter:

Their [the unemployed] dole payments do not go up much per year, while the majority of speculators get very rich on it, you know, while some people can make 'x' amount on one swift property deal or one swift property market and while they get £57 or £56 per week.

The activists assertions about the behaviour of the wealthy, are, however, countered by both the reporter and his other interviewee, who defends the role of Irish business.

The reporter tells his viewers:

There is the feeling that so-called speculators are being made scapegoats. Many are in fact major Irish based companies employing thousands of Irish people and buying and selling their currencies on the financial markets, in an effort to protect their employees.

He goes on to interview a senator who argues the case on behalf of the business sector. He asserts that the “young men in red braces” are not going out to speculate against the Irish pound; rather, all sorts of Irish companies, banks and charities are attempting to defend their position. Here the reporter interjects:

For the good of companies to preserve jobs.

To which the senator replies:

For the good of companies which will preserve jobs.

These statements are then linked back to the original assertions of the unemployment activist, who again calls for government action to deal with the problem of unemployment. The assertions made initially in the piece have been challenged by the reporter and by his other interviewee. Thus, the dominant verbal message of the piece shifts from one of criticising the wealthy and big business to calling on the government for action on the problems of unemployment. Big business has been defended and the locus of the responsibility for the unemployment problem now rests with the government.

Visually, an interesting style emerges. We see the unemployed through the use of still shots of a dole queue, and black and white photographs of a previous unemployment march. There are shots of the INOU activists at work preparing for the march later that day. The images of women making sandwiches, for the marchers, are used when the reporter is referring to the “bread and butter” issues that affect the unemployed. In contrast to this, those who are being blamed for speculating and endangering the Irish economy are faceless. With the exception of the interviewee who defends the role of Irish capital, we see the economic system symbolised by the stock exchange. Here we view some wide shots in which no one person is recognisable. We do see an example of one Irish company (Bord Baine) which is held to exemplify those Irish companies who, we are told, are attempting to save

themselves and their workers through taking risks at the marketplace. Unlike many of the reports being considered in our discussion, in this instance it is the powerful and not the poor who are faceless.

The second report deals with the issuing of a pastoral letter on unemployment (SON, 8 December 1992). The report tells of the Catholic bishops' latest warnings on the unemployment problem. Filed by the programme's religious and social affairs correspondent, the report attempts to put the bishops' pastoral letter in the context of their individual concerns (emigration, job creation) and the scale of the problem in both Cork and Galway.⁹² The bishops having made consultations on unemployment for almost three years have described the problem as a 'grave evil' in Irish society. We are told that the bishops hold the view that the responsibility for dealing with unemployment lies with ourselves — although they do not claim to have a blueprint for solving the problem. There is also a call by the bishops on the business sector to do something about the problem of unemployment.

Visually, we witness images of both the bishops and the unemployed. The business sector, which the bishops suggest could have an active role to play in sorting out the challenge of unemployment facing Irish society, is nowhere to be seen. We see a range of shots of the bishops which suggest that in face of this problem, they are — despite their lack of a blueprint — men of action. There are images of the bishops in conference, at work, being interviewed and discussing the problem. Through the use of still shots, we see their action plan being outlined to us. The stills concentrate on their pronouncements of the 'grave evil', 'the inevitability of high unemployment' and 'job creation in Irish hands'. Their antidote to these problems lie in 'local initiatives', 'more decentralisation' and 'regional development schemes'.

In contrast to the image of the bishops as actively doing something about the issue of unemployment, we see the unemployed only in terms of their connection with dole queues. Unemployment is signified through the repeated use of images of

⁹² This conforms to her personal reporting style discussed in the section on the process of news making, where it was noted that she likes to include several contextual angles in the story.

dole queues, a faceless unemployed man who is walking alone and the Department of Social Welfare logo. The unemployed are yet again anonymous and portrayed as passive recipients of state handouts. This is in stark contrast to the images and messages used to tell the story of the 'new poor' who are portrayed as deservers of state and voluntary assistance, because of their efforts in less pressurised times.

The New Poor

“These people have made a go of life ...”

Another theme occurring on *Six-One News* at this time is the notion that there was now also a 'new poor' in Ireland. The rise of unemployment into the middle classes and the hike in mortgage interest rates in the autumn of 1992 served to ensure that new poverty would make news. Outside of the novelty considerations of newsmakers, the fact that many of the so called new poor were organised and articulate helped to guarantee the place of the new poor's stories on the news schedules of *Six-One News* (SON, 2 December 1992 and 21 December 1992).

It is interesting that the focus of reports on the new poor centre on the idea that they have become economically poor because of forces outside of their control, while much of the focus of the reports on the old poor such as Travellers, unemployed or homeless locate some of the responsibility at their own feet.

In December, the programme's Western Correspondent reported on the problems facing mortgage holders in Galway City (SON, 2 December 1992). The story suggests that the crisis facing the middle classes of Galway:

will cause bigger problems than the activities of money lenders this Christmas

and according to local welfare and tenant organisations, the problems facing the new poor demand immediate political action. This new poverty is, we are told, different from the traditional poverty of the unemployed and underprivileged. The new poor are:

not the people on council lists ... these are people who have bought their own homes and thought they would be secure and its a very frightening traumatic time for them.

We are told by their agents that they are:

the poor of the PAYE sector and they have no medical cards ... they have never had to go to the St. Vincent De Paul. These people have made a go of life and tried to keep it there ... [and interestingly] they are forced into being the new poor.

By virtue of their previous efforts, we are being told that “immediate political action” in the form of full mortgage interest tax relief is necessary to help these examples of the new and deserving poor. It is also made quite clear to the audience that these people have fallen into poverty through no fault of their own.

The reporter invokes Dickensian imagery to begin his story. We are told that the increase in mortgage interest rates “hangs like a ghost of Christmas yet to come” over many of the comfortable housing estates of Galway. The suffering and hardships experienced by the new poor, as well as the worries of their agents, are emphasised. There is also the suggestion from one of the St. Vincent de Paul interviewees that the task in hand is to save the new poor from losing their houses and to “try and keep their dignity together”.

At a visual level, we see an opening shot of a prosperous housing estate with large semi and detached houses. To extend the reporter’s use of a Dickensian metaphor, we are viewing these houses from above and we see them bathed in a late evening fog. This helps to signify the bleak prospects for the inhabitants of these comfortable houses, but also functions as a means of masking the identity of this housing estate. Next, we see an interview with a representative of the St. Vincent de Paul, who is telling us of their work with the new poor. This interview is interspersed with shots of both the local St. Vincent de Paul conference at a meeting and a shot of

a statue of the organisations founder. Thus as in the Pauline Leonard story (SON, 12 December 1992) religious imagery is invoked to frame this story about poverty. The activities of St. Vincent de Paul helpers have, however, changed from working with the destitute of Paris and elsewhere to also sorting out the problems of the Irish middle class. The remaining images are those of a representative of the Galway Combined Residents' Association, who is telling the reporter about the poverty crisis affecting the middle classes of Galway, while situated outside a large prosperous looking house.

Except for the vague housing estate footage at the beginning of the report, we do not see any representative examples of the new poor. We do, however, hear from their agents in the form of both the St. Vincent de Paul and the residents' association.

The Agents of the Poor

Most stories about the poor are told through the words of those who work on their behalf. It is also the case that poverty as an issue often only becomes newsworthy as a result of the activities or statements by the agents of the poor. These reports focus on the doings of those who are in positions of relative power over those they are deemed to represent or support.

During the period September–December 1992, there was a great deal of coverage on both the activities of organisations like Combat Poverty, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and on the endeavours of President Mary Robinson to assist the poor at home and abroad.

Typically, these stories centre on the activities of the agents rather than on the cause of or solutions to such problems. Thus a story broadcast in September on how the Dublin Taxi Drivers Association brought the "Special Children" (the disabled and mentally handicapped) on a day trip concentrated not on the poverty and disadvantage associated with these children, but rather on the activities of the association and more fundamentally the support given by President Mary Robinson to the day (SON, 8

September 1992). The focus of the story is on the President, noting why she decided to lend her support and the fact that she spent a half an hour with the special children.

The most striking image in this report is of a blind child touching the President's face. She is cast in an heroic Christlike role, turning up to assist these children. In other stories during the month of October, we again see President Robinson on her mercy mission to Somalia to highlight the famine and poverty of that Third World country and thus the image of the President as a saviour is highlighted (SON, 2 October 1992 and 5 October 1992).

In September, *Six-One News* ran a report which told of Mary Robinson's speech given at a social policy conference on the disadvantages of being poor (SON, 22 September 1992). The reporter told of the conference delegates congratulation of the President for her "courageous decision" to go to Somalia. We are told of her speech about the needs of the unemployed and disadvantaged groups and the necessity to include the socially excluded in the decision making process. Added to the report on the President's speech is an interview with a member of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors, who again talks about the exclusion of the poor from the decision making processes. The piece ends with a statement from the reporter, which says that what the President and the other speaker means is:

inviting groups like the unemployed into programmes like the PESP.

The visual messages focus in the main on the President. We see her arriving at the conference, heading for the podium, being applauded by the crowd and addressing the audience. When the reporter is linking the images of her speech together with her interview with the conference organiser, we see some queues in an unemployment office. It is a wide shot and no one person is distinguishable. The report then cuts to the interview with the conference organiser and then concludes with another shot of the unemployed waiting for the dole. It is ironic that given the President's comments on the problems of exclusion faced by the poor, we yet again only hear the voices of the powerful. The poor are again relegated to the shadowy background of the

anonymous dole queue dependent on the voices of the concerned but comfortable to make their case.

The mortgage and unemployment crises of the winter months of 1992 put those working in the voluntary sector under increasing pressure due to the increase in the numbers of people seeking help. The Irish response in terms of donations to Third World charities and for the Somalian crisis in particular, appears to have reduced the amounts of voluntary contributions to indigenous groups working with the Irish poor.⁹³

In December, *Six-One News* broadcast a number of reports about the funding difficulties being faced by the St. Vincent de Paul Society (SON, 12 September 1992 and 21 September 1992). The Irish Government had decided to grant a special once off payment of £1m to the organisation to help fund its activities. The focus of the report of December 21st is on the both the organisations activities and on the Minister for Social Welfare. We are told that the St. Vincent de Paul has helped 200,000 people, but that its fund-raising has been hampered by the demands being made by other “worthy causes”. The story emphasises the fact that their work is not only with the ‘old or traditional poor’ but also with the ‘new poor’. The society works with a wide range of poverty groups and problems; however, visually we are offered a set of images which focus on the homeless. The footage conforms to the style discussed previously, namely that we see a range of homeless men in a hostel. All are either filmed from behind or else are headless. The remainder of the report is concerned with interviewing both the president of the society and the Minister for Social Welfare.

⁹³ The issue of Third World poverty and famine was a much debated one on *Six-One News* during this period. The coverage of the issue focused on the Somalian and Mozambique famines as crises. Told from an Irish perspective, the stories concentrated on the extent of Irish voluntary and governmental donations to the developing world (0.17% of GNP in 1992), the mercy mission of President Mary Robinson to Somalia and to the UN, and the activities of agencies such as Goal and Trocaire. The crisis dimension to the famine is exemplified in the report ‘A Race Against the Clock’ (SON, 6 October 1992). Media interest in Somalia culminated in an RTE Telethon entitled ‘A Light in the Dark’ in December 1992.

5:4 The Production of Poverty Stories on *Six-One News*: Three Case Studies

The process of newsmaking about poverty is now considered. This account is intended to give an understanding of the context in which poverty stories are created. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to try and unlock the codes which RTE news reporters use in their storytelling about poverty. Prior to suggesting what those codes might be, I take a brief look at the production background of three poverty related reports. The following narrative is based upon detailed semi-structured interviews with three different types of reporter who work on the *Six-One News* programme. These were the Religious and Social Affairs Correspondent, who has a particular responsibility for covering poverty stories, the programme's Security Affairs Correspondent, and a desk reporter.⁹⁴

Informal interviews were also held with the programme's editors during my observation in the RTE newsroom. The three examples which follow are enlightening in terms of how the mechanisms of agenda setting about poverty issues take place.⁹⁵ In all instances, my strategy was to organise a viewing of a particular report with the journalist responsible for the story. We then discussed the content of the report in detail, how and why it was accepted by the editor, examined the background to the story; the 'rules' used in filming those who are poor; and finally, how the images were decided upon and selected. Particular emphasis was placed in my questioning of the reporters on the extent to which they consciously chose particular symbols in order to construct their reports.

⁹⁴ In the RTE newsroom a desk reporter does not have a specific brief, but is assigned stories on a day to day basis.

⁹⁵ See for example Shoemaker and Reese (1991); Dearing and Rogers (1992); Iyengar (1993).

Case (A): The Annual Report of the St. Vincent de Paul Society

Background

The reporter in question received advance notice from the St. Vincent de Paul Society that their annual report was to be launched. She held the view that reports of this kind were commonplace and therefore not automatically newsworthy. Her decision to do a story using the report's findings as her template were influenced by the fact that she could link the report to two other factors.⁹⁶

It was exactly one year since the deaths of four homeless people in Dublin and she had also discovered in her research that the temporary emergency hostel set up in December 1992 was to remain open. She therefore felt that she could combine three news angles into one story and be assured of success in selling the story to the programme's editor.

In deciding to do a story on the society's annual report, she did not wish to base the entire piece on an interview with one of their representatives, so she decided to structure the story around one of the society's hostels for the homeless in Dublin.

She chose the particular hostel for filming in because of two factors. Firstly, she had a good working relationship with the hostel, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society, in doing stories about homelessness in the past. She stressed that the society, unlike another unnamed organisation for the homeless, had proven themselves to be co-operative with her when she was doing stories on poverty and homelessness previously. Secondly, her choice of the particular hostel was influenced by the fact that she saw its population as being representative of the homeless in that half of the residents lived there permanently and the remainder were transients. The reporter gave the society and the hostel itself a guarantee that the film crew would not

⁹⁶ For a comparative example of how television news journalists 'peg' stories to news events, see Harrington (1989).

necessarily film any faces of the homeless and they would be guided by the hostels administrator in terms of where they would or would not film.

The reporter and her film crew went to the hostel early in the morning and spent about ninety minutes there. Although they only needed a small amount of footage for the story itself, they also used the opportunity afforded to them in accessing the hostel to gather some library footage for future stories about homelessness.

Filming the Homeless

The crew filmed the men as they got up and went to breakfast. In filming the bedrooms, washing area and breakfast scenes, the reporter stated that the crew were careful about the shots they took. The filming of the hostels residents was driven by a number of concerns. The reporter stated that her concern in filming homelessness, child-abuse or poverty would firstly be to ensure that one is not actually putting people's faces out there on television, who do not want to be there, and not to be seen to be exploiting the situation for the sake of better pictures. She said:

You always approach them [the homeless] from the basis that they will be anonymous shots, hence there is quite a lot of emphasis on hands, feet, all that type of cutaway stuff.

Her work was also guided by the credo that you ask permission before filming those who are poor. In this case, the reporter asked the permission of the hostel's warden and of the homeless men themselves. The crew found some of the men to be co-operative, yet many were nervous of being filmed.⁹⁷ In some instances, it was felt that despite the men granting permission to be filmed, they might not fully understand what was going on, so it was decided not to shoot them at all.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ This was particularly obvious in watching the rough footage of the breakfast scene.

⁹⁸ In viewing the rough footage shot at the hostel, it was possible to hear the camera man call out instructions to the homeless men being filmed and telling them that their faces would not appear on television.

Images of The Homeless

In filming the report, the reporter wanted a set of images that would tell a story about poverty without using what she termed 'head-on shots'. She wished to:

indicate that in lots of ways, life for these people is the same as everybody else. They do the same things as everybody else like wash, shave, whatever, but at the same time you want to capture the pathos of the situation.

Thus the report focused on men eating, walking and shaving before breakfast. In the case of this reporter, she typically discusses the parameters of the story with her crew and suggests the type of shots she wants for the piece. Although she has the ultimate say in terms of what images go into her report, oftentimes and in the case of the above report, the cameraman will also make his contribution in terms of the best images to shoot and include.

This particular case is an interesting example of how a journalist turned a relatively common event (the publishing of a report) into a newsworthy story and therefore stood a greater chance in getting the story onto the news agenda. It is also of further interest in that it shows how, despite the lack of formal procedures in terms of filming the poor, individual journalists carve out their own personal criteria when it comes to filming those on the margins.

We can identify two types of agenda-setting in this case. In the first instance, the agent organisation tried to influence the news agenda by informing the reporter and by sending advance information to the newsroom diary. This information in its own right was adjudged by the reporter to be insufficient and she realised that a combination of related stories would stand a greater chance of being a contender to reach the news agenda.⁹⁹ Tuchman's (1991) thesis that "The statement of an official

⁹⁹ The fact that potential stories about poverty reach the news diary does not necessarily mean that they will be translated into actual reports. During my fieldwork for example a launch of a fast for Third World famine was disallowed from the news agenda because it was judged by both editors and reporters as not being newsworthy enough.

source is an event” has therefore to be qualified in the case of poverty coverage. Many statements about poverty are made and do not make it onto news agendas. The agenda-setting which took place in this instance was influenced by the fact that the reporter had a good working relationship with the organisation in question. Ultimately it was the agreement of the editor or gatekeeper which allowed for the making and broadcasting of this report. (White, 1950)

Case (B): The Funeral of Pauline Leonard

Background

In December 1992, two homeless people were found dead on a plot of waste ground in Dublin City. They had died from hypothermia. The deaths were briefly mentioned in the news on radio and television, but it took six days for the events to be translated into a television news report.¹⁰⁰ The reporter suggested to his editor that he would do a story under the special features section of *Six-One News* on the funeral of one of the two homeless people who had died. He was motivated by a feeling that the news programme had a responsibility to cover the story out of a sense of social accountability.

There is also a sense, however, in his thinking that the story was somehow novel in that while some funerals are common to news agendas, the funeral of a homeless person had not been done before. He received the go ahead from his superiors and set about contacting the homeless organisation responsible for organising the funeral. His intention was to try and tell the story of Pauline Leonard’s life through her death, as well as raise the possibility that more homeless people would die on the streets that winter. The report in his words was “designed to tug at

¹⁰⁰ This is in contrast to the print media. *The Irish Times* reported the deaths on the morning after the discovery of the two bodies. ‘Two Bodies Found in Laneway’ 3 December 1992 (p. 2) and they also reported the post-mortem results on 4 December 1992 (p. 2) in ‘Woman, man died from cold’ by Paul O’Neill.

the heartstrings” of the audience, to make them aware of the issue of homelessness in 1992.

Filming the Funeral

The reporter and his crew were quite deliberate in their choice of images. Some discussion on what was to go into the report took place between the camera man and the reporter. He held the view, however, that, because of the constraints of working to a tight deadline for a television news programme, there is in fact very little time to consider the images used. Filming and the selection of images was attributed to instinct. Thus, for example, there was an attempt in this report to intertwine the story of Pauline Leonard with the story of the Blessed Virgin Mary as well as drawing upon other artefacts, such as candles associated with Catholic belief. The reporter's view was that the use of candles — some lighting, some extinguished — was intended to be provocative, emotive and religious. Similarly, the use of images of the Blessed Virgin Mary were intended to mesh her suffering and humility with those of the dead woman.

He also decided to use the priest's homily about her kindness to animals and birds as a narrative which would sum up her life. Unusually, there are close up shots of the woman's homeless friends who have turned up to grieve. The reporter included these images in the final cut of his report because in his view:

That [a homeless man crying] says everything to you. That's a sad down and out. They showed up. They knew her ... they showed up at 10 o'clock in the morning.

His view was that those who are on the margins of society and normally excluded had made the effort to turn up to the funeral and therefore deserved to be included in the story. The reporter saw his narrative as a powerful human interest story and therefore felt justified in using frontal shots of the homeless. While there are no set groundrules about filming people who are poor, the reporter in question

expressed the view that he took care in terms of not intruding on people's grief and being sensitive to people's sadness. This particular story provoked an amount of reaction from the viewers¹⁰¹ and the reporter in question argued that it was in some way responsible for forcing the national and local government to temporarily act on the matter.

Case (B) is illustrative of three types of agenda-setting. The idea for the story came from an individual journalist, who sought to get the story on air. He was successful in suggesting to the news editor that the story be included under the rubric of special features. As in Case A, the final decision as to whether or not the story be included in the programme rested with the editor. This case is also an example of what Breed (1955) termed inter-media agenda setting, as the report set in a train a series of other reports on the issue of homelessness in both the Irish print and broadcast media.

Case (C): Travellers on the Curragh Firing Range

Background

Prompted by a story printed in a provincial newspaper, the *Six-One News* Security Correspondent decided to do a report on the presence of some Travellers near the Irish Army's firing range in County Kildare. The suggested report was accepted immediately by the programme editor. The reporter considered the news worthiness of the story to stem from the fact that Travellers were alleged to be exercising their trotting ponies on the firing ranges of "... the people who are entrusted with the security of the state". He discovered that there were three parties involved in the dispute: The Irish Army, The Department of Defence, and Travellers and that the matter was now the subject of a High Court injunction against the latter group.

¹⁰¹ The Catholic Archbishop of Dublin rang the reporter to congratulate him for doing such 'a powerful story'.

He researched the story by getting in contact with both the defence forces and the Department of Defence. He did not contact either a Traveller's representative group or indeed any of the Travellers who had taken up residence at the Curragh camp. Interestingly, the reporter held the view that the Travellers in question were not in fact poor, noting that they were in possession of 'expensive' trailers, vans and ponies. He ran into a number of difficulties in producing his story, because of the refusal of the Department of Defence to provide a spokesperson and owing to later accusations by a department official that the film crew and reporter were actually trespassing on the lands in filming their report.¹⁰² Despite the refusals of co-operation at an official level, the reporter managed to gather enough information from unofficial sources to write his story. Initially, he wished to speak to all sides of the dispute when he was filming the report. Yet he was hampered by the fact that army officials would not speak to him on camera, the Department of Defence would not provide an interviewee and the possible legal problems in interviewing a Traveller over a matter that was sub-judice. He was particularly conscious of the possible legal difficulties that might arise if he began to ask the Travellers to explain their situation — a task which he held would be more appropriate for a High Court judge. In any event, he was saved from this difficulty on the day of filming because when he and the crew arrived at the firing range there were no Travellers to be seen as they were all attending a wedding elsewhere.

Filming the report and the use of images

The filming of this story was to be constrained by the lack of co-operation given to the reporter, the possibility of legal problems and his reluctance and inability to interview any of the three parties in the dispute. The reporter in question suggested that he was in control of the images filmed and used in the final report. Much of this control is owed to practical rather than ideological concerns. As a Security

¹⁰² The programme countered these protests from the department official by contacting the Minister for the Defence and telling him that they were going ahead with the story. There were no further difficulties encountered by either the journalist or the programme over the particular report.

Correspondent, he was readily familiar with the location in question, and he argued that, given that you have the film crew for approximately one hour, you have to take some immediate decisions on what you wish to be filmed.

Case C is a further example of the necessity to please the gatekeepers who guard the news agenda and Breed's (1955) concept of inter-media agenda setting. In this instance *Six-One News* was influenced by the appearance of a report in the provincial print-media.

These three cases confirm the assertions by Ericson et al. (1989) that:

News is a product of transactions between journalists and their sources. The primary source of reality for news is not what happens in the real world. The reality of news is embedded in the nature and type of social and cultural relations that develop between journalists and their sources and in the politics of knowledge that emerges on each specific newsbeat. (1989:377)

Tuchman's (1991) argument on how the politics of knowledge affect news agendas is also confirmed. Journalists attempt (with varying degrees of success) to place stories on the news agenda in the knowledge of what news editors will accept or reject.

5:5 Discussion: Poverty News as Ideology

Following the work of Sorenson (1991), this study takes the view that news reports about poverty can be viewed as being ideological in make up. The findings of this chapter would suggest that there is an obvious tension between the permanency of poverty in Irish society and the ebb and flow of poverty news on television. The need of journalists to abridge what is a multi-faceted problem to a single 'story', which will be acceptable as 'news' by a programme editor serves to reduce the likelihood of poverty being explored in any detailed way. Poverty cannot of course be a news item all of the time, but both the quantitative and qualitative examinations

undertaken in this chapter would suggest that there are identifiable trends in how RTE news constructs its coverage of poverty.

Unlike the regular, but sometimes narrow, thematic coverage of the issue of unemployment, news about poverty is largely episodic in nature. Our findings are in general agreement with Iyengar's (1991) analysis of the framing of poverty stories by American television. He found that poverty news is not a priority for American newsmakers. Of the poverty stories which do get on air, they are predominantly of an episodic nature — a trend which is confirmed in our analyses of RTE's stories. Unemployment news on both Irish and American television is largely of a thematic or abstract nature. Despite being covered on a regular basis, the coverage of unemployment is typically structured in such a way as to ignore the true causal factors of unemployment, namely as a result of the dysfunctions of late capitalism.

What is therefore a permanent in the real world comes and goes as a news story. The fact that a news programme treats poverty in this cyclical and seasonal way suggests that RTE news engages in an ideological exercise which firmly locates a consideration of poverty to one end of the news year.

This can in some respects be explained by the complexity of poverty as a phenomenon, but there is also the more basic issue of the relative newsworthiness of poverty to be addressed. When poverty stories get past the news gatekeepers, they are marked by the following features:

- (1) Poverty stories feature elite individuals and groups.
- (2) They are often the result of the prior actions of other media organisations.
- (3) Poverty news is told in terms of a crisis.
- (4) Where actual members of the poor are featured, there is a tendency to focus on the problematic nature of the more exotic or 'deviant' subcultural poverty groups such as the Travelling community or the homeless.

Galtung and Ruge's (1965) and more recently Horgan's (1986, 1987) assertions about the proclivity of the media to focus on elite individuals in terms of the *dramatis personae* of news are confirmed in this chapter. In the main, poverty

news is really news about how those who are in positions of power are responding to aspects of the problem of poverty. This news reaffirms their status and rarely questions their activities in any way. The emphasis on elite figures can in part be explained by their ability to influence the setting of news agendas. Other media organisations can also be shown to set the news agenda in terms of poverty coverage. The large number of reports on the activities of President Robinson in Somalia in 1992 and the crises of both homelessness and the new poor were in part influenced by the fact that the Irish print media had also taken an interest in these themes.

Poverty news is often told in terms of some real or imagined crisis which is about to affect an individual or a group. In terms of the analysis of news stories in this chapter, poverty stories, which were narrated as crisis stories, were ones concerning the new poor and the deaths of the homeless. The fact that poverty exists on a long-term basis for large numbers of people and that homelessness exists permanently in Irish society are in themselves not deemed to be newsworthy. In the few instances, where stories focus on actual members of the poor, RTE news was found to feature less powerful and more exotic groups. Many of these reports reaffirm what some members of the audience might regard as the problematic nature of groups such as the Travelling community. Thus, as Shoemaker et al. (1987) pointed out, the deviant has considerable newsworthiness. Coverage of the deviant poor may arise out the sense of novelty or oddity¹⁰³ in a story, but it in turn plays an important ideological function. The existence of the problem is confirmed, but the locus of responsibility for the problem is individualised and therefore absolves the news programme from viewing the issue in a structural way. Thus the status quo is confirmed and not threatened.

The way in which news stories about poverty are produced adds weight to the thesis that they are ideological. As Golding (1981) pointed out news may be seen to be ideological:

¹⁰³ Shoemaker et al. (1987) suggest 10 criteria by which newsworthiness may be adjudged. They are: timeliness; proximity; importance; impact or consequence; interest; conflict or controversy; sensationalism; prominence; novelty; oddity/unusual.

not by virtue of any intent to deceive or manipulate, but, because of the exigencies of routine production procedures in newsrooms and the beliefs and conventions which support them. (1981:63)

The three cases of how poverty stories were produced by RTE in 1992 show the constraints which journalists work under in getting stories onto the news agenda. The need to convince the editor/gatekeeper of the relevance of the 'story'; the limited amount of time available to film and edit the report; the dependency on what are viewed to be reliable spokespersons; and the use of particular reporting/filming styles all influence the final product which is the news story. In choosing particular images or symbols to communicate their stories, reporters engage in an ideological act, which may determine the way in which audience members will interpret the message systems about the poor. For example, religious symbolism may be used to convey a sense of pathos about the lives of the poor, but this also functions to replace more hard hitting images about the reality of their lives.

Chapter Six

Only God's Poor Need Apply:

Poverty Coverage on Telethon Television

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6:1 Introduction

This chapter considers media coverage of poverty on a hybrid form of programme — the telethon. Viewed perhaps more accurately as a media event, rather than a programme in the strictest sense, the subject of this chapter — the 1992 *People in Need* telethon — was produced by the Variety Department within RTE. The discussion begins with an account of the history of telethon TV in general and the emergence of this new form of broadcasting in Ireland in particular. The analysis of the 1992 telethon is threefold. The production context of the programme is examined, noting the conflict which took place amongst the programme team over the telethon's content. The way in which the telethon's form and structure frames the way in which discourse about need takes place is also investigated, and finally, using qualitative analysis techniques, the contents of some of the appeal films used to raise money from donors are considered.

6:2 The Emergence of Charity Television in Ireland

Although particular examples of charitable activities by RTE television and radio may be found if we sift through the annals of its history,¹⁰⁴ there have been

¹⁰⁴ RTE's pop music channel *2FM*, for example, organises the collection of non perishable goods at Christmas time for the 'poor and needy' in conjunction with *The Lion's Club of Ireland*. Gay Byrne's radio programme has also had a long history of locating and donating household items such as fridges and washing machines to the less well off. Appeals on behalf of the blind and other groups have long been a feature of RTE's radio schedule, whilst sponsored TV appeals are used to raise funds for organisations like the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

radical changes in the activities of RTE and other media organisations since the mid 1980s.¹⁰⁵ The emergence of fund-raising or telethon television represents a significant shift for RTE, not only in terms of a change in programming style, but also in terms of its perceived role and function.

It is perhaps no accident that telethon television has emerged at a time when the Irish state is retreating from its provider role and adopting a strict monetarist stance in relation to spending. For our more immediate purposes however, the telethon is a new television genre to which RTE gives over a great deal of its time and resources¹⁰⁶ on a bi-annual basis, and in doing so, is forced to acknowledge repeatedly over a period of usually 12 to 14 hours that inequality and poverty exist in Irish society.

The telethon is different from other television genres in a number of respects:

- (1) It marks the entry of contemporary television into a fund-raising role.
- (2) It involves the suspension of normal television programming.
- (3) It is particularly lengthy, usually taking on a 'marathon' format.
- (4) It involves the participation of well-known personalities from the worlds of entertainment and sport.
- (5) It relies upon the corporate sector — both native and multinational — to donate goods, services and money to the programme.
- (6) It has a significant amount of audience participation both in terms of the audience as fund-raisers and as subscribers.
- (7) It offers the opportunity (theoretically at any rate) to gain a greater insight into the world of the poor through the use of filmed segments and interviews.
- (8) It does not attempt to challenge the status quo, and proffers the notion that charitable solutions are an answer to social problems such as poverty and unemployment.
- (9) It places great emphasis on the (heroic and sometimes unusual) activities of individuals, groups and communities who have raised money for 'good causes'.

¹⁰⁵ See for example Philo (1993), and for a discussion on production approaches to TV telethons see Forrest (1987).

¹⁰⁶ The 1992 *People in Need Telethon* cost RTE £250,000 to stage. Source: correspondence between the author and the programme's executive producer.

The History of Telethon Television

We can trace the development of telethon television back to the early 1980s. *The Jerry Lewis Telethon* which raises money for muscular dystrophy has long been a feature of American TV and is broadcast annually on Labour Day. Rapping (1983) noted that in excess of sixty television stations around the US, had, by 1983, devoted some of their prime time slots to *Job A Thons*.¹⁰⁷ In Britain, the first ever telethon was organised by Thames Television on its LWT station in 1981 and raised £1.25m for a number of charitable causes.

The 1985 *Live Aid*¹⁰⁸ fund-raising concert, however, represented a major shift in the media's role and relationship towards poverty and inequality. Seen world-wide by millions of viewers, this spectacular televised rock concert raised millions of pounds for the starving and destitute of the Developing World. For a very brief period of time it focused the Developed World's attention on African poverty and inequality, although its critics¹⁰⁹ were quick to point out the contradictory images of millionaire conscience-stricken rock stars telling their audience to give to the African poor, of whom we were given only occasional glimpses, throughout the event. The dominant messages of *Live Aid* were:

- (1) Existing political structures both in the Developed and Developing Worlds have failed the starving and poor of Africa.
- (2) Charity represents a (short-term) solution to these problems.

¹⁰⁷ The emergence of the *Job A Thon* concept is discussed in *Channels* (1983).

¹⁰⁸ Cubitt (1993:101) noted that the *Live Aid* concert used a "combination of direct address ('Give us your money now') and statistical information on the amounts collected" to encourage audience identification with a common cause and the commonality of television. For an account of the importance of *Live Aid* from a development education perspective see Regan (1986). For a critique of the *Band Aid* model see Burnell (1991).

¹⁰⁹ The *Band Aid* record which was the forerunner to the *Live Aid* concert was described by *Black Voice* as being the most racist event of the decade. Quoted in Simpson (1985). Cairns (1985) noted that "... the motto of these videos could well be that guilt delivers the cash and so the message actually becomes 'give and save your own life soul' "

(3) The communications industry, whether it be through the record or music business or through television, radio and newspapers, has a role to play in attempting to alleviate poverty and inequality through fund-raising.

The format adopted by *Live Aid* was to be used as a mechanism by RTE and other media organisations for the new fund-raising role in which they found themselves. In Britain, ITV's *Telethon*, and BBC's *Comic Relief* and *Children in Need* emerged as annual features on television. Even satellite television in the form of SKY TV had entered the telethon business by 1995 with its *Gold Heart Day*. Leaving aside whatever philanthropy and goodwill which some broadcasters may possess, the spectre of inter station competition looms large in the background in the race for ratings and the moral high ground.

These programmes have managed to raise relatively large amounts of money in the short-term, but since the early 1990s they have been the subject of a growing amount of criticism from a number of quarters and from disabled rights activists in particular.¹¹⁰

The future of this type of media activity in Britain, was brought into question in 1993 when ITV decided to abandon its telethon programme owing to a fall off in donations by the public.¹¹¹ ITV's *Telethon* had raised £24m in 1990 but had fallen to £15m in 1992.

In Ireland, *Live Aid* was to be followed up by three home-based telethons; *Self Aid* in 1986 which was directed at solving unemployment; *A Light in the Dark* in 1992 to raise funds for the starving of Somalia, and *People in Need* which had a broader focus on disadvantaged groups in 1989, 1990, 1992, 1994 and 1996.

As in Britain, the telethon idea has not been without its critics. During the broadcast of the programme upon which this chapter is based, a group of unemployed

¹¹⁰ *The Block Telethon Group* protested at ITV in 1992 and *The Rights Not Charity Group* picketed the BBC's headquarters in 1993. For an account of these protests see, for example, Chalmers (1993).

¹¹¹ See Thomas (1993).

people picketed the gates of RTE protesting against the idea that charitable solutions were the answers to serious social problems such as unemployment and poverty.¹¹² They carried placards, parodying the extra large cheques which corporate sponsors use when donating money to the telethon, which claimed to pay one of the better known directors of the project “an easy conscience”.

There were further criticisms of the event from a disabled rights activist. In an interview with RTE presenter Joe Duffy during the 1992 telethon programme, the activist criticised this type of television. Liking the telethon to Christmas, he said that:

... the people who give most at Christmas...are the people who need most. People with disabilities aren't terribly happy with the notion of fund-raising as a mechanism of solving what are political issues ...

and added that we should realise that the telethon:

... is not going to solve the poverty issue in this country.

Similarly, in the aftermath of a national radio debate between the author and the chief executive of *People in Need*, about telethon television, a caller to the programme who worked with the homeless, claimed that in her experience the homeless found this type of television to be patronising.¹¹³

RTE's experience in terms of fund-raising television to date has largely followed the path of its international counterparts. It supported the *Live Aid* telethon of 1985 and proceeded to broadcast a series of telethons which have focused on unemployment, famine and social need. As with the British experience, there has been some criticism of this kind of media activity, although given the population size of the country (3.5m) the Irish response to these appeals has surpassed that of any other Developed country¹¹⁴ and the success in financial terms of the 1994 *People in*

¹¹² See examples of print media coverage of this event in O'Shea (1992) and McDonnell (1992).

¹¹³ Caller to the *Soundbyte* comment line. *RTE Radio 1* 31 May 1994.

Need telethon¹¹⁵ seems to suggest that there is a high level of support amongst some of the public, ironically at a time of record unemployment and poverty.

People in Need Trust

The *People in Need* telethon is organised by RTE in conjunction with The *People in Need Trust* which was established in 1988. According to its chairman Dr. P.J. Moriarty, the trust has the objective of:

raising money on a national scale for the smaller and lesser known charitable organisations which, for one reason or another, were unable to raise sufficient funds for themselves. (*People in Need Grant Allocations Report*, 1992:1)

Between 1989 and 1994 it raised in excess of £11m for voluntary organisations alleviating need. According to one source, the organisation modelled itself closely on the British *Children in Need Trust*, and the similarity in their titles and activities seems to bear this out.

Initially, the driving force behind the organisation was Margaret Heffernan (a director/trustee of the supermarket chain Dunnes Stores) who along with the then Lord Mayor of Dublin, Carmencita Hederman, decided in 1988 to form the *People in Need Trust*. In that year they raised £200,000 for forty organisations working with the homeless, and based most of their fund-raising activities on gala dinners and film premieres. Many of its directors and trustees are some of the most powerful and wealthiest members of Irish society and have previously been involved with other charities.¹¹⁶ The trust shifted its attention to organising its first telethon in 1989¹¹⁷ and

¹¹⁴ In terms of the high level of Irish contributions to *Live Aid* in particular, the phenomenon was explained within popular discourse as resulting from the Irish nation's 'Famine Memory'. Historically, of course, there has been a long tradition of Irish activity in the developing world and this has largely been dependent on voluntary contributions to mainly religious organisations who have acted both as missionaries and developers.

¹¹⁵ It raised over £3m representing an increase of 45% on 1992's totals.

¹¹⁶ The most recent list includes Dermot Desmond of *NCB Stockbrokers*, Norman Kilroy of the *Grafton Group PLC* and Margaret Heffernan, Managing Director of *Dunnes Stores*.

widened its focus in terms what it defined as social need. Interestingly, the trust's spokesperson rejects the idea that *People in Need* has anything to do with attempting to resolve poverty and insists instead that the trust is there to help voluntary groups working in the area of what it terms 'social need'¹¹⁸. To this end, the trust has never used the terms poverty or the poor in any of its literature or activities.

An examination, however, of where the money goes would seem to refute this argument. In 1992 much of the money raised went to organisations who work with those who are the most visibly poor¹¹⁹ — the homeless, Travellers, the elderly, the long-term unemployed as well as to other groups who help those who are less visibly poor but at the same time both materially deprived and socially excluded. In addition to this, the 1992 telethon's promotional literature uses a black and white photograph of a young Traveller girl whose clothes are shabby and who is begging by playing the harmonica on the street. Thus the *People in Need* organisation itself draws upon images of the absolute poor to promote its activities. The trust seems to be adopting a stance which views Irish poverty in absolute terms and emphasises the importance of encouraging voluntarism as a solution to what it insists on terming social need. The fact that a large number of those groups it assists are working with the very obviously poor is glossed over by its spokespersons.

6:3 Producing The Telethon: A View From Behind The Scoreboards

Introduction:

In the following narrative I look at the production context of the 1992 broadcast and argue that there were tensions over the content of the telethon both within and without of RTE. I also examine the making of the film appeal segments

¹¹⁷ Anecdotal evidence suggests that RTE broadcaster Gay Byrne informed Margaret Heffernan about the Jerry Lewis Telethon which he had seen during his working visit to the USA in 1989.

¹¹⁸ Interview with the author 1 November 1993 and debate with the author on *Soundbyte* RTE Radio 1 24 May 1994.

¹¹⁹ Travellers groups (18) received £56,000, groups working with the homeless (24) received £137,000 and unemployed groups (14) received £45,000. Figures derived from data contained within *People in Need Grant Allocations*, 1992.

focusing on how the producers approached the filming of groups who are in poverty or need, dwelling in particular on their use of images and symbolism to convey messages about the Irish poor. This discussion, based on semi-structured interviews, reveals two very different approaches in film making terms and is intended to serve as a backdrop to my own analysis of the images in a later part of this chapter.

The 1992 *People in Need* telethon was a joint venture between RTE and the *People in Need Trust*. Costing RTE £250,000 to stage, it was produced by the Variety Department of the television station. In the words of its executive producer its objective:

was to entertain, but to raise money at the same time

and was intended to catch as wide an audience as possible. Unlike previous RTE telethons, the 1992 programme drew upon the talents of two independent film producers to make the appeal segments used by the programme to raise funds for those in need.

Planning the programme

The telethon was to be a 12-hour programme built around a single anchor presenter (Gay Byrne) and in some respects would be modelled on elements of the *Late Late Show*. Given both the length of the programme and the fact that it would also involve the use of seven outside broadcast units as well as a large number of studio based celebrity participants, the programme required a large amount of preparation. Planning for the programme came about through a series of discussions between the executive producer, other RTE personnel, the independent film producers and the *People in Need Trust*. The trust informed RTE about the events that would be taking place to raise money, the companies which would be sponsoring the programme and also made suggestions about which groups might be filmed for the purposes of making the appeal segments. In the end, the final decision as to which groups were to be filmed was to rest with the film producers, who divided the filming

of groups according to geographical region and whether or not they had been included in the previous telethon.

However, unlike other years in which well-known personalities did the voice-overs for the appeals, the executive producer decided, that where possible, those filmed should be allowed to speak for themselves. The films were to be made by two filmmakers who were not employees of RTE, and in the view of one of these producers, the reason for this was that the executive producer wished for the film inserts to be made by someone with independent editorial control. The planning and creation of the telethon was not, however, without its problems.

Conflict

My interviews and conversations with those involved in making the programme suggest that there is clear evidence of conflict in the making of the 1992 telethon. This conflict may be seen to emerge from:

- (1) The executive producer's own unease with the concept of charity television.
- (2) Debate between the executive producer and the *People in Need Trust* as to how much profile corporate sponsors should be given.
- (3) Friction over the content of one of the appeal films between the executive producer and its maker.

The executive producer of the telethon had a number of personal reservations with the politics of charity television. In response to my questions about the contradictions involved in this type of media activity she argued that, as a producer, she had inherited the programme and therefore a certain amount of the structure of the telethon had already been set. Perhaps more fundamentally, she held the view that the programme had been agreed upon corporately, by RTE and the *People in Need Trust* and therefore she was limited in terms of what she could change.

She did, however, adopt an interesting strategy in terms of articulating her own reservations about the programme. In making the telethon she was approached by a disabled rights activist with whom she was on friendly terms. He outlined his

problem with the idea of the telethon and asked to be given some airtime to vent his views. She considered his viewpoint and agreed to allow him to be interviewed by one of the programme's presenters. Thus, what appears in the telethon as an off the cuff interview was in fact a deliberate attempt by the producer to allow a dissenting voice to be heard. In some respects we can see this strategy as an effort on behalf of the executive producer to overcome the difficulties she was experiencing in the face of the disagreements she was having with the *People in Need* organisation.

There were further conflicts between the executive producer and the *People in Need Trust* as to the amount of airtime which should be given to corporate sponsors. She held the view that companies who donated cheques should simply hand them over and not be given airtime. This concern appears to have been both ideological and practical. She observed that from a producer's point of view there was a great difficulty:

... in balancing people's corporate profile against the amount of money they are giving, and that is hell on wheels.

Her difficulty with corporate sponsorship and her protests to the trust seem to have been countered by the precedents set by previous telethons. Thus, as was mentioned above, she was, despite her own reservations, bound by both precedent and the agreement made corporately by RTE with the trust.

There were also tensions between the executive producer and one of the filmmakers she chose to make the appeal segments. In using these appeals she acknowledged that there was a danger of using 'set images' of those who were in need. One of the film segments dealing with homeless boys in Cork used a series of reconstructions of these boys sniffing glue, breaking into cars and drinking spirits. The executive producer admitted that she had some difficulty with the use of reconstruction in the piece — although she did allow it to be broadcast. Indeed the other filmmaker was even more critical of this appeal segment. He stated:

In any kind of dramatisation stuff, you reduce people to a pat formula, you reduce it to the kind of pat totally wrong images. We had images of young kids sniffing glue, and I think you'd be better having a kid talking about it so then you could connect with it ... it seemed unreal and at a remove from the people.

This discussion indicates a number of important factors which influenced the making of the 1992 programme. While both the executive producer and at least one of her film producers expressed reservations about this type of media activity, both were pragmatic in terms of overcoming their difficulties. It was also the case that the final product — a large scale media event — was the subject of some negotiation and debate between programme personnel and outside agencies. This discussion also indicates the importance of the organisational environment in terms of influencing how programmes are shaped.

Filming the Appeal Segments: Styles and Symbols

Introduction

The two film producers were asked to make a total of nine appeal segments. These nine films were selected by the producers out of a total of forty ideas suggested to the programme's executive producer by the *People in Need Trust*. Both producers agreed that they were given complete editorial freedom in the making of these inserts, although some discussion did take place about the use of reconstruction in one of the films.

I now examine the approaches adopted by the two filmmakers and argue that both men adopted very different styles in the creation of the segments. Having considered their respective approaches, I conclude by examining how each producer consciously used symbols to articulate messages and images about the poor. For the purposes of anonymity, I refer to the producers as A and B.

Film Producer A

Film Producer A maintained that he was chosen to make the segments because of his reputation for his making films that were both:

aggressive and hard-hitting.

He also asserted that the reason that he and the other producer were selected was because, given the executive producer's awareness of the contradictions involved in telethon TV she wanted, in his words, to:

... bring a bit of grit to it ... she wanted the films to touch base with reality in a way the rest of the thing [the telethon] doesn't.

He agreed that there were obvious discrepancies between the contents of the film segments and the telethon programme as a whole. This, however, was a deliberate ploy by the executive producer to:

put a bit of reality into the day ...

reminding the audience of what the programme was about. Producer A claimed that he was himself aware of the contradictory elements of the programme but he felt that it was:

better to be involved than not involved.

Thus, like the executive producer, he saw himself as being somewhat critical of the programme as a whole but adopted a pragmatic stance in terms of his involvement. Interestingly, he suggested that the audience is also aware of the contradictions of a programme like *People in Need* and interpret the images and messages in a variety of ways.

In terms of a filmmaking style Producer A claimed that his approach was:

totally instinctive and the stories wrote themselves.

He did not work to a script and instead he chatted to the participants. Typically, he met the potential participants and spoke to them over coffee, asking general questions. He then met the participants again and filmed a series of interviews with them. There followed a selection process in terms of writing the final piece. In the case of the Dundalk unemployment film, he viewed the many hours of tape shot and decided that the unemployed man who eventually featured in the piece seemed to personify the:

thwarted energy of the unemployed.

Thus, he structured the 90-second piece around his story. Added to his assertion that his filming was based on instinct were his suggestions that the other techniques employed in making these films were also based on instinct. Producer A claimed that his choice of background music for his films were chosen instinctively, but with the very clear intention of adding a further layer of meaning to the films. Dolores Keane's *That Arrogant Mill* told of the impact of de-industrialisation, while *The Stunning's Brewing Up A Storm* alerted the viewer/listener to the harsher side of life.

Despite his and the executive producer's intention that the subjects of the segments be allowed speak for themselves, he admitted having some difficulties in shooting the inner city piece and noted that:

The kids were remarkably inarticulate.

Notwithstanding the problems of communication just noted, Producer A argued that he did not apply different standards in filming people who were either rich or poor. In terms of the ethics of filmmaking, he viewed the process as being one of a

reciprocal relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed, stating that all that really mattered at the end of the day was how the film subjects themselves felt.

Producer A saw his filmmaking in very personal terms, claiming that any work he has produced, was as much about himself as the subjects of his films. In choosing images for his work he saw this process as being a kind of emotional selection. He claimed to see a poignancy and something positive in what many might view as a negative image.

Producer A's Dundalk unemployment appeal film drew upon the images of a post-industrial landscape. He chose this location as he drove to the film shoot. Describing it as being like a gaping sore on the open landscape, he stated that it had:

... all these beautiful colours, and there was all this very strange light coming through it, and it was quite emotional.

The disused factory represented for him the emotional terrain that the local people had once worked in and were now not working in. He was conscious of the problems that he had as a filmmaker about making a statement about unemployment. The broken down factory was for him a potent symbol of what he wanted to say about de-industrialisation. He was struck by the many colours which were daubed on the factory walls and for him:

... the colours of the paint and stuff seemed to represent that once upon a time there were people working there, perhaps were happy working there ... and the ruined building seemed to represent the emotional terrain, the emotional field that all these people were working in.

In this and in the other pieces that he filmed, he tended to use slow motion as a production device. From his perspective, he adopted this technique to focus in on particular images and to capture important moments in time.

Film Producer B

This producer/director opted for a docu-drama approach in making his appeal segments. His belief was that he should keep these 90 second films documentary in style, but also incorporate elements of drama as well. True to his realism, he felt that there were certain things which needed to be shown, and in the case of the Cork homeless boys piece, there was a necessity to act out certain otherwise unseen activities. In filming in Cork he spoke to the centre's founder about what he wanted to do. He maintained that the centre's founder realised that if he wanted to find young boys glue sniffing or drinking spirits he could easily do so out on the streets, so instead he filmed some boys from the centre in a reconstruction of these activities. He maintained that it was essential for the audience to fully understand the implications for these young boys of allowing such a lifestyle to persist. He shot the piece of film in the backyard of the centre using some of its clients — all of whom agreed to appear in the piece.

In describing the film segment he said:

I did it as a straight documentary, but dramatising one element. Why? Because I could talk about it ... they sniff ... and people would say we don't really believe that. So you show it. Then I had to make up my mind about creating it ... If I had to go out and find it, it might take me a week ... So I created it. I didn't put a caption up saying 'This is a reconstruction' because that again enters into the realm of disbelief on the part of the viewer.

In the context of the earlier reference to the unease felt by both the executive producer and the other producer about this reconstruction, Producer B asserted his 'moral right' not to explain his filmmaking processes to the others in the production team, as he claimed that the reconstruction was simply a creation within a documentary form. His intention in making the piece of film was to create a connection between the message at the end of the film:

Our young people must not be allowed to die from drugs ...

and the images of solvent and alcohol abuse contained within the mini-dramatisation at the beginning. He maintained that what the audience was therefore being given was a certain degree of drama in two forms incorporating both the fictional and the factual documentary styles.

Producer B also admitted to the deliberate use of symbols in his filmmaking. One of his appeal segments dealt with the work of the hospice movement and showed images of two women — one middle class, the other a Traveller — both of whom were waiting to die. In filming the Traveller woman's story, Producer B selected a well-known symbol of Traveller culture — the trailer or caravan. He filmed it from a distance showing it to be on its own at the end of a road. He viewed this as a way of illustrating the fact that this Traveller was not only dying of cancer, but also that she was in poverty, living at the side of the road. He very deliberately chose to articulate his messages about the Travellers at this symbolic level rather than using any stated verbal message. What is interesting is that in researching this piece of film, he learnt from the nurse who was caring for the woman, that when she died, true to Traveller culture there was every possibility that the caravan and the woman's bed would be burnt in a funeral pyre.

Producer B intentionally omitted this element of the story because he felt whether it was true or not, it would feed, as he would see it, the distorted views of Traveller culture which many middle class viewers might hold. Thus he consciously used a symbol to give the audience a particular message about the Travelling community (i.e. they are poor) while at the same time avoiding the possibility of invoking a negative reaction towards those who are invariably written off by many as the Devil's poor, by excluding any reference to how their culture might be misinterpreted and blamed for causing some of their hardships.

6:4 *C'mon Everybody ? People in Need 1992: Form and Structure*

The 1992 *People in Need* telethon was broadcast by RTE 1 and Network 2 on May 8th. Lasting over twelve hours it raised £2 million, which was distributed to 644 organisations in the Republic of Ireland, including those providing services for the handicapped, the homeless, the elderly and deprived children. For several weeks beforehand, the programme's advertising campaign was heavily featured in RTE's advertising schedules. Having adopted Eddie Cochran's rock and roll classic *C'mon Everybody* as its anthem, the campaign encouraged 'everybody' to get involved in no matter how small a way in the telethon's events.

The advertising campaign featured familiar faces from RTE's radio and television networks and suggested to the viewers to organise fund-raising events in their localities, workplaces or schools. The telethon was promoted, therefore, by an advertising strategy which gave the impression of being inclusive. The notion of involving 'everybody' is patently at odds with the very reason why the telethon might be deemed to be necessary in the first place, namely that there are groups of people who are poor by being both materially deprived and socially excluded.

Intertextuality

The telethon was intertextual in form and as such represented a type of hybrid television. Part one of the telethon was broadcast live from an open air setting in Cork. Here, the programme was fronted by presenters and characters (puppets) from young people's television. This part of the programme was shaped around a free rock concert and a wide range of games and competitions in which personalities and locals competed. The 'fun' or 'craic' element was stressed repeatedly by the presenters as being the most important part of the day. This section of the programme drew upon programme styles such as the competitive *It's A Knockout* and the humorous *The Den* with which viewers of young people's television would be readily familiar. The programme therefore knitted together parts of familiar TV programmes to build a

much bigger media event. The presenters had a set of simple messages for their audience:

We want to see more money! Send us your money now!

Part two of the programme was modelled around the familiar *Late Late Show* format. But it too incorporated components of other types of television and radio programme. There were quizzes, competitions, games and music as well as star personalities doing strange things. News presenters sang for a bet, and an Irish language current affairs presenter modelled an expensive dress. In addition to this, there was an almost constant stream of information broadcast across the bottom of the viewer's screens to inform them of the unusual things people had done in order to raise money for charity¹²⁰ as well as encouraging audience members to get involved. Given that the programme was framed upon the basic plan of the *Late Late Show*, the anchor presenter Gay Byrne adopted some of his familiar ploys as a commentator, such as making fun of the studio audience and adopting his direct style of address to the viewers in his persona as 'Uncle Gaybo'.

As well as Byrne, the programme's second in command was Joe Duffy — familiar to viewers as Byrne's sparring partner from his morning radio programme. This two-hand act was replicated in the presentation style of the telethon. Part two of the telethon also borrowed from other programme styles such as *Treasure Hunt*. In the case of the telethon, RTE presenter Gerry Ryan flew around the country in a helicopter, while some celebrity guests decoded the clues he found. Unlike the programme upon which this part of the telethon was based, this treasure hunt was sponsored by a large corporation.

¹²⁰ During my participant observation at the telethon I worked as a runner for the team who decided which pieces of information should go on air. There was a strong emphasis on the exotic and unusual such as schoolchildren paying their teachers to keep quiet for a whole day.

“We must beat the £2m target!”

In both parts of the telethon there were strong dramatic components which centred on whether or not the £2m target would be reached. Given the fund-raising function of the programme, there was perhaps understandably a great deal of attention paid to how much money had in fact been pledged by the viewers. Thus the programme was interspersed with accounts of how much the latest tally amounted to, reaching a crescendo when £2 million pounds had finally been reached.¹²¹ The focus on the ever rising tally has parallels with the presentation style of the *National Lottery* which as well as promising individual wealth also claims to assist charities.

As in the advertising strategy used to promote the telethon, the mode of address used by presenters in speaking to viewers treated them as an homogenous mass who were all expected to participate:

Keep sending us the fivers! We need your money now! The £2m must be reached!

As in the first part of the telethon, there was a concentration on the fund-raising activities of the audience which stressed their inventiveness in coming up with fund-raising ideas and their basic generosity. The programme’s main presenter told his audience:

We know you’re going to be very kind and very generous and as decent as you possibly can on the situation tonight.

This theme was further developed through his pleas that the telethon was for a good cause. The reasons for this cause or the possible crises that might arise for the beneficiaries of the fund if the money was not forthcoming were not alluded to.

¹²¹ Leat (1990), in a critique of British telethon television, has noted “Rolling scoreboards emblazoned in lights, cheers at every further thousand pounds, do little to foster public awareness that the amount of money raised is merely a means to and not the end of the exercise”.

Structure

In terms of the structure of the programme itself, the 1992 *People in Need* telethon had three distinct features:

- (1) A major part of the programme was based in the main RTE television studio, where audience members could ring in to a group of celebrity telephonists¹²² and pledge money for the telethon's fund;
- (2) The programme had a series of links with other celebrities at various locations throughout the country who told of the fund-raising activities in the region from which they were reporting;
- (3) The programme also featured a number of filmed segments of people who were in need of our charity.

The studio-based part of the telethon featured an auction of otherwise expensive household goods for which viewers could pledge money. Sponsorship by native and multinational companies played a central role in the make up of the programme, thus offering us the message that the business sector were doing their bit for charity. Throughout the programme we were reminded of three things:

- (1) We [the Irish] are a great nation of givers "I am always amazed at the decency and generosity of the Irish".
- (2) The money pledged was going to 'good causes' "Remember now, the money *is* going to charity!", or in other words only to those who deserve our assistance or charity.
- (3) The donations made were guaranteed to be given to groups at work in the area/region in which the donors live.

The links to the telethon studio from the outside broadcast units throughout the country again underpinned this notion that the Irish are 'great' when it comes to giving to deserving causes. There was a strong accent here on the responses of children to raising money for the telethon. The use of children, both in the appeal

¹²² The telethon offers its viewers a chance to get in contact with stars and personalities in return for making a donation to the fund. In the 1992 telethon, one of the programme's presenters tells the audience: "Keep phoning, you can be straight through to the stars!"

films as objects of our charity and as donors may be seen as a ploy on behalf of the telethon to maximise donations from the public. Within the appeal films it was mainly children who were used as subject-matter while there was also a tendency to concentrate on the relatively small donations of schoolchildren in contrast to the contributions from companies or organisations. Thus, there was a sense in which children were used as examples of need to which the public couldn't refuse and added to this, the concentration on children as donors emphasised the notion that if children were giving up their savings of £5, then we must all make sacrifices and give to the appeal.

The outside broadcast links featured individuals and communities involved in spectacular, heroic and sometimes unusual events. Schoolchildren raised money by paying to be allowed to come to school in casual clothes. In another instance a man bungi jumped from the sky on a bicycle. Invariably, when companies sponsored a particular event or were simply making a donation to the telethon fund, they would present the programme reporter with a cheque (usually £1,000), exaggerated in its physical size, emblazoned with the company logo and thus availing of cheap advertising on the national airwaves. Where the donation or sponsorship was particularly large (ranging from £7,000 to £12,000) the company received more airtime in terms of both their donation and company profile. One company — *Golden Vale* — presented a cheque for £7,000, half of which had been raised by its workforce. In presenting the cheque the viewers saw a company representative as well as a model dressed up as an olive tree. She was advertising the company's new dairyspread product for three minutes on screen.

The *Flora/McDonnell Group* sponsored children £1,000 per level of a pyramid built of their margarine product. The children wearing *Flora* t-shirts built 12 levels of the pyramid and thus the company donated £12,000. Other companies such as *Lyons Tea* and *Lever Brothers* also received airtime for their sponsorship or donations. Within the structure of the telethon it was agreed that companies could buy up slots of time reserved for corporate donors.

Typically, companies received advertising through an interview/feature/presentation of cheque often in total lasting as long as four minutes. Other companies adopted a different strategy in getting public recognition (and advertising) in return for their donations. One Dublin based company promised to pay £1,000 if Gay Byrne mentioned their name on air. He did, and in fact repeated the company's name and its owner in return for the donation.

The third, and for our purposes most interesting, feature of the form and structure of the telethon was the fact that the programme featured nine filmed segments of groups and individuals who needed our help. Given the marathon length of the telethon, the segments themselves, taken together, lasted a mere eleven minutes and four seconds, and even allowing for the fact that a number of them were repeated twice during the telethon, it is clear that the programme's primary function was to focus on the activities of the helpers of the 'deserving' and not on the 'deserving' themselves. Just who the programme makers chose as examples of people in need and how their story was told is perhaps of more fundamental importance.

It is the deserving poor who get most attention in these segments and even where groups who might otherwise be demonised — such as the young homeless, the young unemployed and the long-term unemployed — are given coverage, they are portrayed as the deserving poor because the examples used are those of the homeless and unemployed who are doing something about their situation with the help of the subscribers to *People in Need*.

Those segments fitting neatly into the 'deserving' poor category were ones which dealt with a child abuse programme (1:57); the mentally handicapped (1:57); the physically handicapped (1:28); autism (1:30); and the elderly (1:28). In the remaining four segments which dealt with a youth unemployment project (1:25); the personal experience of unemployment (1:27); cancer care (featuring Travellers) (1:30) and a centre for homeless boys with drug addiction problems (1:57), the stories dealt with groups and individuals who are often rejected as the undeserving poor. Yet

in three of the four cases the segments featured those who were doing something about their situation and thus deserving of our help.

In all but one of the nine appeals shown throughout the telethon, the filmed segments featured what I have referred to earlier on in this study as the agents of the poor. Despite the executive producer's suggestion that the people filmed should be allowed to speak for themselves, a great deal of time was given over to those who are working either on a professional or voluntary basis for the poor or needy. Given the specific fund-raising function of these pieces of film, an identifiable set of production techniques were used by the programme makers, ranging from 'appropriate' background music and songs with relevant lyrics, to different styles of filming. Those who are the agents of the poor are shot speaking to camera in real time, while the poor themselves are shot in real time, in silhouette, and in the particular case of those suffering from a mental or physical handicap in slow motion.

In the following section I examine in greater detail the messages of four of these nine filmed segments. I have chosen to examine the three pieces of film that make appeals on behalf of those who might otherwise be considered to be examples of the 'Devil's poor' and I contrast these pieces with the content of an appeal on behalf of an example of the deserving or 'God's poor'¹²³. Each segment is considered in terms of its visual and verbal messages and the production techniques employed by the filmmakers.

6:5 Good Boys and Slaves: Four Appeal Films Considered

Case (1) The Centre for Homeless Boys

This piece of film, lasting one minute fifty-seven seconds, was an appeal on behalf of a centre in Cork City which works with homeless boys, many of whom have addiction problems or have been imprisoned. In terms of production style, the segment used slow mournful music to emphasis the desperation of their lives. The

¹²³ The typology being used here follows that used by Golding and Middleton (1982).

visual imagery was composed of shots of a hooded male breaking into a car, a male youth sleeping rough, another with empty spirits bottles sleeping rough on a park bench. Later, we were to see a male youth sniffing glue and another shot of a homeless boy sleeping rough. These images were in stark contrast to others used in the film which featured the centre itself, those working with the youths, shots of these youths engaged in activities in carpentry and metal workshops, a bakery and in a residential treatment centre. Other images were of a young man speaking to camera in silhouette of his drug addiction and of the centre's director appealing for funds. The verbal messages of this piece of film are also interesting; mixing as they do the philosophy of the centre, the experiences of these youths in relation to drugs and drug abuse and the appeal for funds. The dominant verbal messages of this piece stressed the Christian ethos of the centre:

We don't regard them as good or bad, because there is no such thing as a good or a bad boy. We are all brothers and sisters of Christ. He will probably never be a professor, but he will be a tradesman. [The centre's founder]

The dangers of drugs:

There was a fellah up in The Glen, he was sniffin' out of a barrel and he fell asleep like and his friends ran away and he never woke up. [Young boy speaking to camera]

The need for funds:

We're desperate for money. We have a very simple vision. Young people should not die because of alcohol and drug addiction. [Centre's director]

This piece of film is of interest in that it shows examples of activities (albeit set up for the purposes of filming) not normally seen on television such as glue sniffing, car stealing, and youths sleeping rough. It is also of interest in that it contains images of those who might be considered to be the 'Devil's poor' engaging

in 'deviant' or 'anti-social' activity. They are, however, later rescued from such a categorisation by being seen to have reformed from problems such as drug abuse and by being busy and industrious in the centre's workshops and bakery. Thus by the end of this short film the 'Devil's poor' have become transformed into 'God's poor' deserving of our charity and sympathy. However, in promising the viewers that these boys have a future care is taken in noting that the status quo will be preserved in the suggestion that while a trade may be possible for these boys anything higher on the social scale is unrealisable. The poor will stay in their place.

Case (2) The Personal Experience of Unemployment

This piece of film was one of two which dealt with the experiences of the unemployed. Lasting just one minute twenty-seven seconds, the segment told the story of the personal experience of one unemployed man who was involved with a resource centre for the unemployed.

The segment used a song by folk singer Dolores Keane *That Arrogant Mill* which is about the impact of de-industrialisation in a small town. Visually, the film consisted of images of dereliction in a post-industrial landscape, showing a disused railway line, broken down factory buildings. They also featured the unemployed man upon whose experience the piece was based, showing him at the unemployment resource centre, looking into shop windows at items he cannot afford to buy. This was in stark contrast to the auction for expensive household and luxury items which was taking place within the main body of the telethon. These images were supplemented by others of the activities of the unemployment resource centre shot in slow motion.

Visually then, the messages of this film segment were those of dereliction as a result of the decline of industry, the exclusion of the poor from being able to participate in a consumer society, but also of the deserving poor who were actively doing something about their plight through self-help activities.

Verbally, the messages of this segment emphasise the notion of the 'dignity of labour', the willingness of this man to engage in 'workfare', the broader threat of

unemployment to others and the important work being done by resource centres such as that featured in the film. The man featured in this piece states at the outset that unemployment is an unhealthy situation to be in and goes on to say that:

It's not about money ... with me. I'm willing to work, even for the money I collect on the dole.

It is, he tells us:

... unhealthy for me not to be working. I'm a healthier happier person when I'm working.

The exclusion which the unemployed experience not being able to fully participate in a consumer based society is also stressed:

Even when I walk down the street, I don't look into shop windows, there is no point. I'm never going to be able to purchase what's in the window.

The important self-help work of this and other centres is also emphasised. These centres help build self-esteem and self-worth in contrast to the dole which takes self-respect away from you.

This filmed segment has, as well as its fund-raising function, a number of other important messages. It uses a clear example of a member of the deserving poor to articulate a story about the experience of unemployment. It stresses the dignity of labour as well as making it very certain that this man is not workshy or scrounging from the system. The fund-raising appeal function of this piece of film is structured around the activities of the unemployed who are seen to be doing something about their situation by attending classes and developing their skills. Thus like the deserving poor of the homeless youths film discussed above, these people are deserving of our charity and help.

Case (3) Youth Unemployment Project

The film sequence, which featured this Dublin-based training project for the young unemployed, was one minute twenty-five seconds in length. In attempting to get a set of messages across to the telethon audience, it used a soundtrack which featured the music of Galway rock band The Stunning singing *Brewing Up A Storm*. The song's lyrics replete with social realism —

Honey if the truth hurts, don't look away, it's easy to pretend that life is a rosy bouquet

— were used to underpin the messages of this film segment. Visually, the film contained scenes of dereliction, boarded up flats, graffitied doors and walls suggesting perhaps that this community has been both abandoned by some of its own members and by the state. The images, however, quickly shift to show the viewers, unemployed youths who are busy and productive in a workshop setting. These shots then lead to some action footage where a hovercraft and a windsurfer built by these youths are being driven along a beach at high speed. The final image is of a young boy appealing to the audience for funds for their project.

Verbally, the segment sends out three messages, the need for funding, the lack of resources in communities, where there is a high dependency on social welfare and the importance of projects like the one featured in the face of problems such as drug addiction and despair. The project's organiser alerts us to these issues in his interview. He says:

... in an area like this, where there is nearly 80% unemployment ... the bulk of families live on social welfare as their main source of income. The kind of resources wouldn't be available in the community to allow the kids to experience these kinds of things. Young people drift into the drugs scene through a sense of hopelessness, and again, projects like this can offer some chance that life isn't just a drab.

This piece exemplifies the tendency to depend on the agents of the poor rather than the poor themselves in making these appeals. While it is conceded that it may not always be possible to hear the voices of those who are in need (because of a handicap for example) the appeal films tend to mediate the experience of those who are poor through the voices of those who are working with and for them.

Case (4) A Centre for Autism

This film segment lasting one minute thirty seconds was one of three segments which dealt with mental and physical handicap. All three invoked similar production techniques and images, using appropriate music, showing those with mental and physical handicap in heroic poses, but always shot in slow motion while their agents were filmed in 'real time', explaining their work and appealing for money.

The appeal used a soundtrack consisting of Mary Black's song *No Frontiers*, suggesting perhaps the unlimited possibilities for these young autistics if funding (charity?) was made available. Visually, the piece consisted of a series of images: of the centre's director explaining autism to a collection of images of the centre's clients. All of the ten shots of the autistic youths were shot in slow motion showing them in a variety of poses from working in the centre's garden, to feeding animals, and active in the centre's workshops.

The technique of using slow motion shots in this segment as well as the other segments which dealt with the physically and mentally handicapped is an attempt at creating a sense of pathos, appealing to the audience on an emotional level. In line with the arguments made earlier about the portrayal of the unemployed and homeless youths as 'doers', deserving of our charity and sympathy, a similar set of techniques were adopted in portraying the autistic youths shown in this film. The audience were therefore offered images of these youths engaged in a variety of activities against all the odds stacked against them.

Verbally, the piece contained a more hard hitting series of messages. The centre's director in speaking to camera asserted that:

... the more handicapped people in Ireland are, the more deprived they are of rights ...

adding that:

... young people with autism are the slaves of the twentieth century — they are forced to comply, they have no rights of their own. They are stripped of their dignity. They have no funds of their own. They are disenfranchised, and unless we start giving them that dignity back, we are doing nothing for our people.

6:6 Discussion

The 1992 *People in Need* telethon may be judged to have been successful in terms of both the amount of money it raised (£2m) and in its audience ratings.¹²⁴ But just what does this type of media activity tell us about the issue of poverty in Irish society?

In some respects, this type of television can be viewed as a form of spectator sport, where the focus is on society's elite figures, who act vicariously on behalf of the audience. Credit card donations are made with the greatest of ease, while even where ordinary donors raise money through fun-filled events the focus is on the novelty of those events, rather than the ends to which these events are organised. At best, there are veiled ambiguous references to 'good causes' and charity. But even where audience members participate in the programme as either donors or participants in fund-raising events, their activities are removed from the ultimate beneficiaries of their donations. Thus, we can say that the telethon allows for a form

¹²⁴ *The People in Need Telethon* was fourth in the TAM Top 20 ratings during the week it was broadcast. It scored a maximum 16% of all viewers (520,000). It is interesting to note that on the evening of its broadcast RTE's *Winning Streak* lottery programme attracted 27% of all viewers.

of passive detached giving whereby the donor (corporate or individual) is absolved from any questioning as to why need and poverty exists.

As a media activity, we can also regard the telethon as a drama, whereby the issue of whether or not the programme can raise the targeted amount is played out for fourteen hours. The programme is driven by a crisis which needs to be resolved on or before its completion. The underlying reasons for the potential and real crises are never referred to. Within this drama those involved both directly and indirectly engage in a form of self-congratulation about their activities and this form of television suggests that society is able to contain problems of a social and economic nature through the generosity of some of its members. There are further elements of drama within the appeal films, such as the Cork homeless boys piece. Here, the producer used the device of ending the film with a 'cliff-hanger' statement, familiar within television drama, to emphasise that young homeless boys were dying from drug abuse.

Telethon television is a hybrid form of programming, which is intertextual in make up combining as it does many different types of television programme, such as the game show, quiz, and popular music programme. The location of this type of media activity within the entertainment's division of television serves to ensure that the focus of telethon TV is of a lightweight nature and thus the possibility of examining, even in passing, the causes of such problems is not allowed.

From a semiotician's point of view there exists a wide range of often contradictory symbols and messages about those who are poor and in need.¹²⁵ Taken as a whole, the particular programme which I have discussed here is replete with contrary images and messages. Poverty and need are juxtaposed against the glamour of the elite star personalities and the consumer goods which many people will never be able to afford. We see images of de-industrialisation and the retreat of capital, mixed with images of companies offering cheques to alleviate need. We witness the

¹²⁵ For another example of this approach see Benthall (1993).

stars and personalities — many of whom are rich and comfortable — doing their bit for the largely invisible recipients of this charity. The focus therefore is on those who are helping the needy either as helpers/representatives or as donors to the collection.

To vary somewhat Golding and Middleton's (1982) delineation between God's and the Devil's poor — what in practice we see are the angels, who help those who are deemed to be needy and very little of the Devil's or undeserving poor. As I mention above even those who might in the mind of the general public be a 'threat' undergo a quick catharsis and become examples of those who are worthy of our charity. Added to this is the editorialising which takes place as to the content of the appeal segments. The homeless boys become 'good boys', no reference is made to crucial aspects of Traveller culture so as to placate the perceived viewpoint of the middle-class members of the audience.

Those who consider themselves to be pragmatists or those of a consensus oriented political persuasion might suggest that I have read too much into the meaning of telethon television. They might argue for instance that:

- (a) The telethon is after all better than nothing.
- (b) The filmed segments only serve to convince the audience to put their hands into their pockets to give to people who are deserving of our assistance.

I do not doubt the good will of (most) audience members for a second, but I believe firmly that there are a number of serious issues to be addressed in relation to this form of television programming. First of all there is the question of the entry of a public service television station into the field of fund-raising and charitable activities. One might question the appropriateness of the media mopping up the poverty mess which the failure of other state agencies has caused. One might also ask whose interests this kind of activity serves — the public in general including poor people or does it serve more particularly the interests of the status quo? Would it not be better for television to spend an equivalent amount of time in looking at the real causes of

such poverty problems? The answers to the latter part of the first question and to the second question are of course resounding yeses.

Telethon television may be seen as contributing to the media's hegemonic process in a twofold way. It offers the powerful a role to play as benign figures who help those who are relatively powerless. This serves to ensure that the status's of those who help out are reaffirmed and not questioned in any way. It in turn re-emphasises the ideology of voluntarism which views the responsibility of solving problems such as poverty and need as being within the bailiwick of individuals, organisations or communities. The politically powerful, the comfortable and the rich are vindicated in terms of their responsibilities. The seriousness of social problems and their implications for people's lives are in turn trivialised by framing the media's response to such problems within the realms of entertainment events which occur on a biannual basis. There is of course the more insidious (and admittedly harder to quantify) problem of this type of television programme creating the illusion that something is being done about poverty and need, when in reality the amounts of money raised are relatively tiny.

At best, telethon television offers a mere twelve to fourteen hours of attention every two years to only some poor people. In another context Katz (1980) wrote of the sense of occasion during media coverage of events. This is particularly true of the telethon where audience members are encouraged to participate directly in the making of the programme. But while 'everybody', as the programme's slogan suggests, is encouraged to be involved, the reality is that those who can't afford to give are excluded.

There are also specific ideological issues to be addressed. In this chapter I argue that there are dominant sets of messages emanating from the telethon. These are:

- (1) Television has a role to play in helping to solve social problems. The causes of such problems, such as the nature of the economic system or class inequalities, are, however, ignored.

(2) Voluntarism and charity are seen as desirable and feasible in terms of the solution of poverty problems.

(3) Capitalism is okay and individual companies and multi-national corporations have a role to play in either offering sponsorship or donations. No reference is made to poor pay, working conditions or tax avoidance for example, all of which either directly or indirectly can be responsible for inequality and poverty.

(4) As a rule we only ever see God's or the deserving poor — in only one instance out of nine do we observe the Devil's or undeserving poor. But as I have argued above, these poor people whom we might otherwise dismiss become quickly transformed into those deserving of our help and charity.

This form of television therefore perpetuates the notion that there are two types of poor. The audience are served the myth that charity is the correct answer to poverty and that the deserving poor are the ones to whom we should direct our attention. The opposite is also true in that by defining who the 'real needy' are the remaining poor are not only ignored but also further demonised and excluded. These myths,¹²⁶ therefore, serve to underpin the status quo and are comforting for both the social and political systems and some audience members.

In a brief, but very useful critique, of the emergence of telethon television in a British context, Golding noted the paradox which is involved in this type of television programming:

The paradox for the government is that in unleashing the charitable tiger it has barely held on to its tail. The land is alight with stark and forceful images of homelessness, child abuse, the old, the sick and the lonely as the iconographers of plenty have been let loose on the underside of Thatcherite Britain. (1991:51).

Paradoxically, Golding noted that, despite all the coverage given to the poor on these television spectacles, the actual amount which the public are giving to

¹²⁶ For a full discussion on the functions of myth see Breen and Corcoran (1982).

charity has in fact decreased from £1.97 per month in 1990 to £1.28 per month in 1991.

With the exception of Ruddle and O'Connor's (1993) study, there is very little in fact known about charity trends in Ireland.¹²⁷ A pertinent question for future research to ask might be whether existing charities have been affected by new fund-raising of the telethon kind. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that the rise of large scale entertainment based fund-raising such as telethon television has contributed to charity fatigue amongst potential subscribers. In 1992 for example the St. Vincent de Paul Society received a special once off payment of £1m from the Irish government because they were in competition with other charities such as telethons which were raising money for the poor at home and abroad. By far the most disturbing dimension to this form of television is the collective sense of denial that both the audience and the programme presenters, reporters and participants enter into by holding onto the comforting notion that charity is the answer to poverty.

Writing in an American context, Rapping (1983) has correctly described this type of television as a form of black comedy, where despite the seriousness of the problems lurking 'out there' in the real worlds of poverty and unemployment, broadcasters and audience members collude with each other to believe that charitable solutions are both feasible and desirable. This is particularly true in an Irish context. Marathon television programmes have in reality little to offer by way of solutions to the 300,000 unemployed or the one million poor. Having considered how poverty and need is treated by this hybrid form of television, this study now explores whether fictional television — in the form of television drama — offers any better possibilities in the consideration of the issue.

¹²⁷ Ruddle and O'Connor (1993) suggest that the mode amount given per month to charity in Ireland is £2.

Chapter Seven

Never Mind the Issues ... Where's the Drama?: Irish Television Drama and Poverty: An examination of the 1992– 1993 series of *Glenroe*

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7:1 Introduction

The three preceding chapters stressed the limitations of the extent and depth of poverty coverage on factual and fund-raising television. This seventh and final analysis chapter considers the nature of coverage of poverty issues on Irish fictional television. It asks whether television of a fictional nature provides more or less space for the coverage of social problems. The chapter considers the 1992–1993 series of *Glenroe*, beginning with an account of its history and a deliberation on the features of the programme which might constrain its coverage of poverty stories. In addition to this, an ethnographic description details the background processes that frame the making of poverty stories in *Glenroe*. The third and main part of this chapter is an examination how *Glenroe* explored some issues pertaining to the Travelling community and the unemployed. Our discussion concludes with a consideration of the limitations of fictional television in dealing with social problem issues.

7:2 *Glenroe*: Background and History

Glenroe is an RTE-produced weekly TV drama serial.¹²⁸ First broadcast in 1983, the programme had just completed its tenth series of 34 episodes in May 1993, which forms the basis of the discussion in this chapter. The programme's lineage may be traced to the RTE mini-series *Bracken*, which bridged the gap between the long running serial *The Riordans* and *Glenroe*.¹²⁹ Set in County Wicklow, supposedly about 30 miles from Dublin, the programme is concerned with the inhabitants of the village of Glenroe, in which a mixture of rural and urban people live.

All three programmes have had the same creator in Wesley Burrowes and both *The Riordans* and *Glenroe* have dealt with aspects of the problems experienced by the Irish Travelling community.¹³⁰ The programme has been a phenomenal success in terms of its level of viewership. It regularly attracts 1.5 million viewers to its 8.30pm Sunday evening slot, and, for example, in its eight series, it pushed *The Late Late Show* into second place as the top rating programme on RTE. The average viewership of *Glenroe* during its 1992–1993 season was 1,234,000 (39%) for the Sunday broadcast (8.30pm to 9.00pm).¹³¹

Given its positioning in RTE's programming schedule, and in terms of the types of issues explored in the series, the programme is clearly intended for what its makers describe as 'family' viewing. Controversial issues of a political nature such as

¹²⁸ For a series of critical journalistic investigations into this programme see Waters and Lynch (1984), and Kerrigan (1991). The major survey text of Irish television drama is of course Sheehan (1987), but see also her (1993) paper for an updated view.

¹²⁹ In *The Riordans* Pat Barry is a sheep farmer from Bracken who temporarily replaces Benjy Riordan. He returns to Bracken and acquaints himself with Miley and Dinny Byrne. The Byrne's move to Glenroe to buy a new farm.

¹³⁰ It is interesting to note at this juncture that during his days as the creator of *The Riordans*, Wesley Burrowes held the view that "The main reason for not providing solutions to problems is that really serious problems *have* no solutions. If the Itinerant question, or the problem of mixed marriages had a simple solution, they would still not be national problems. It is unfair to expect *The Riordans* to answer questions which the State and the Churches have not answered in sixty years." (1977:91)

¹³¹ The repeat of this programme on RTE's *Network 2* on Thursdays at 19.30 attracts an average viewership of 342,000 (11%). (Source: RTE TAM Survey).

Northern Ireland or even political corruption at local or national political level are never mentioned. Likewise, there is no debate on sexuality, even though there is a strong melodramatic emphasis in the series, which takes relationships between the (usually married) sexes as their theme.

Most of the action of the programme takes place in a number of communal locations such as the local pub, The Molly Malone, the local Roman Catholic church, the Byrne's farm, Stephen Brennan's golf-course, and in the homesteads of the Byrnes, Brennans, and Morans.¹³² Other scenes are shot on the streets of Glenroe or in places of business such as Byrne's vegetable shop or Moran's auctioneers.

In common with other TV drama serials,¹³³ the series is dominated by the rural middle class of farmers and professionals (farmers, shopkeepers, auctioneers, publicans, chemist) but the other ends of the social spectrum are also represented (the ascendancy and the Travelling community). As is discussed below, class divisions, however, are not seen as barriers to interaction between the characters. The programme places a strong emphasis on the possibility of good relations between different social groupings based on a shared membership of the Glenroe community. With the exception of Stephen Brennan and Mynah Timlin who are cast in the role of being anti-Traveller, Blackie Connors (the programme's main Traveller character) moves with ease between the programme's characters who respect Blackie for his wit and his involvement with community affairs.

At the other end of the social ladder, George Manning who is of ascendancy stock and lives in the village's Big House, is portrayed as a friendly eccentric with an interest in wildlife and gardening. He is regularly the butt of the other villager's jokes — the locals for example make great fun out of his annual stint as 'landlord' of The Molly Malone when he replaces Teasy who is on holidays, because of his inability to pull a proper pint of beer. Yet despite his class position, wealth and membership of a

¹³² See Appendix C for a list of relevant characters

¹³³ For a discussion on the class composition of soap operas see for example Rose (1979). Rose argued that the soaps which she examined had an emphasis on professional and not family life. Blue Collar occupations were found to be virtually non-existent in the series considered.

different religious tradition he is liked by the inhabitants of Glenroe. The programme concentrates on the lives of two families, the Byrnes (Dinny, Miley and Bidy) and the Morans (Dick and Mary) with other families and individuals getting coverage as a result of their interactions with the Byrnes and Morans and in terms of storylines of less interest. In common with other TV drama serials, there is a strong 'human interest' dimension to the programme with a great deal of emphasis on marital infidelity, failed love affairs and personal crises.

Critics of this television genre have dismissed the capability of TV drama or soap opera to effectively deal with issues of either a social or personal nature. The depth to which problems are plumbed is held to be superficial. Indeed it might be argued that given the concentration of such programmes on the experiences of particular families and individuals it is hardly believable that so many things could happen to the characters portrayed in any one person's lifetime. Leaving aside the ability of the TV drama audience to suspend its disbelief when viewing such programmes, there remains the issue of the extent to which problems are explored. Issues may be raised, touched upon and very quickly dropped again by the programme's producers. What we term the 'hot-potato effect' certainly has its bearing on how *Glenroe* raises issues in the social sphere. Questions such as the racism experienced by Travellers are raised and very quickly forgotten. Greater attention seems to be paid to the melodramatic events in the programme, which are, more often than not, stories written about the central characters. These are the politically safe issues of marital infidelity or personal crises. Stories about the break up or formation of new relationships are given more attention, more space to develop as stories and usually re-emerge after a particular time period has lapsed.¹³⁴

The formula of the programme is based on a series of contrasts, strong characterisation and humour. As Fahy and O'Connor observed:

⁷ In a British context, for example, the rivalry between Mike Baldwin and Ken Barlow in Granada Television's *Coronation Street* has resurfaced time and time again as the basis of numerous story lines.

The plot and characters revolve around the axis of the traditional versus the modern, the rural versus the urban. (1988:94)

There is consequently a great deal of sending up of both the ways of tradition and modernity in the series. The mixed rural and urban population of the series allow for these contrasts to be brought to a head and in many ways the storylines of the programme represent an interesting cultural mirror, reflecting *some* of what is actually happening in a rapidly changing society like Ireland. Predictably, some of the debate about old and new ways of doing things are based on conflicts between young and old. Miley, Dinny and Biddy Byrne are bewildered by their cousin Fidelma's behaviour, flitting as she does from one boyfriend to the next; similarly Stephen Brennan, while somewhat dependent on his son and daughter-in-law, cannot understand their lifestyle.

According to a study of audience response to *Glenroe*, the programme's strengths were seen to be its humour and characterisation. O'Connor found that:

This humour was regarded as peculiarly Irish and was distinguished from other kinds of humour in a number of ways. It was perceived as being both subtle and clever. (1990:9)

An example from previous episodes might be when Dinny decided to go into the free-range egg business. He in fact was buying the eggs secretly from a supermarket and covering them in chicken dung and fooling his buyers. Similarly, in the series considered in this chapter, George Manning who was having problems with supposed impotence got around his embarrassment by describing his sperm as salmon swimming up the river towards their breeding ground. O'Connor's (1990) research indicated that the viewership of *Glenroe* also were attracted to the series because of its strong characterisation. Dinny, Miley and Biddy were the most popular figures with the audience and particular mention was given to the humorous exchanges

between these characters. Other characters in this series were dismissed because of their lack of humour. As one of O'Connor's sample group told her:

Dick Moran and the rest you forget because they are too serious ... where you are only watching for ... the amusing parts ... you dismiss them really when they come in ... they are just the many people to keep it going. (1990:10)

These findings are of importance in terms of our interest in how *Glenroe* either ignores or covers aspects of social problems. The audience research carried out by Fahy and O'Connor suggested that *Glenroe's* emphasis on humour is to the detriment of its coverage of social problems. They argued that:

... it is no coincidence that our audience research has shown that the age groups with which this serial is least popular are the younger ones. Young people criticise the stress on humour, feeling that in the end this produces a lightweight programme, inferior to British serials, particularly *Brookside*, which is regarded as far more attentive to social problems. (1988:103–104)

This is an interesting comment, in that two British serials, *Emmerdale* which is very similar in structure to *Glenroe*, and the urban based *Brookside*, have both dealt with contentious social problems. At the time of writing, in *Emmerdale* the local publican Alan Turner has developed a concern for the homeless. We see Turner not only fund-raising for the homeless but actually spending some time 'skipping out' with the homeless men and women of the area. The text of this programme has spent a great deal of time challenging notions of middle-class philanthropy and has in turn allowed us to view a set of often unseen images of the poor. In *Brookside*, the programme has explored in some detail the problems of an illegal female Polish immigrant who, not being legally allowed to work, is facing destitution and ends up working as an escort girl. Neither *Brookside* nor *Emmerdale* are short of humour but still contain the capacity to deal with social problem stories.

If we are to consider how *Glenroe* deals with the issues of unemployment and the problems of the Travelling community, it might be useful at this juncture to

summarise what the constraints of the form and structure of the programme on this coverage might be.

- (1) *Glenroe* is a popular TV drama programme, its actual content and concerns are evidently popular with its audience.
- (2) The programme's formula is driven by a strong emphasis on humour and characterisation.
- (3) The programme's makers see their role as the production of good drama and not as the Irish society's trouble-shooters. (As one of them recently remarked to the author "Never mind the issues ... Where's the drama?")
- (4) Its focus is on a limited number of central characters, with coverage of other characters usually in the context of the experience of the central characters.
- (5) The scarcity of social problems as the material for stories is influenced by the fact that, despite the existence of examples of an underclass and upper class in the series, the programme is taken up predominantly with the affairs of the rural middle class.
- (6) There is a tendency to concentrate on 'human interest' stories, and if social issues are raised they are usually touched upon in only a superficial manner.
- (7) There is evidently a 'hot-potato' strategy used in the coverage of certain issues. Aspects of potentially controversial issues are touched upon and then very quickly forgotten.
- (8) There may be technical limitations, which place a brake on the extent to which a programme may look at issues realistically and in depth. In *Glenroe* for example, most of the action is shot around a limited number settings.

Prior to considering *Glenroe*'s capacity to deal with either the Travellers or unemployed, I examine the creation of *Glenroe*, drawing on both observation and conversations with some of the programme's directors, scriptwriters and actors. In particular, I discuss the programme's perceived remit; its concentration on characters rather than issues; the processes (and pressures) which shape the creation of stories; and the attitudes of programme personnel to the specific issues of the Travelling community and the unemployed. This exploration is seen as an essential adjunct to our more detailed qualitative analysis of the storylines themselves.

7:3 A View From Inside *Glenroe*

From the perspective of those who are involved in the creation of *Glenroe*, the programme is seen as having the core function of entertaining its audience. Character development is central to this process and social issues are included *only* if they have a dramatic potential. This point of view represents an interesting shift in the making of RTE's TV drama in that *Glenroe*'s parent programme *The Riordans* had a remit which was to educate the rural population in terms of modern agricultural techniques, but also more importantly, it was conceded to me by the creator of both *Glenroe* and *The Riordans* that the latter programme deliberately sought out social issues to investigate.

Thus the evident change of heart by the programme's creator has led to a significant alteration in the ways in which the role of TV drama is seen within the *Glenroe* camp. The formula for *Glenroe* is seen as being character driven rather than story or issue centred. One senior member of the production team told me that as a rule the stories or social issues always come from the characters. If and when some social issue emerges from the character development which the writer is attempting to create then it is dealt with, but only in terms of the character's development and not vice versa. According to another member of the production team, social issues only ever get on to the programme's agenda out of a story which is concerned with the interaction of the programme's characters. Indeed, the programme's creator held the view that those few characters who were evidently poor were to be defined by the programme's writers and producers as characters first who in turn happen to be Travellers or unemployed. In addition to this belief that characters and not issues come first is a clear antipathy towards being seen as a programme which is preaching to its audience. In the words of one of the programme's writers, *Glenroe*:

must not ever appear as if we are trying to preach a gospel that will reflect one or other situation.

There is widespread agreement amongst the makers of *Glenroe* as to the programme's remit. The dominant view is that *Glenroe* is a realistic serialised drama and not a soap opera. Such an assertion is based on the programme's quality in terms of both its production values and the dramatic content of the series. However, the extent to which the programme reflects reality is constrained by the premise that the programme should primarily be entertaining and only reflect reality in the words of one scriptwriter:

at a safe distance.

Another person involved in the making of the series saw their relationship with the audience as one of collusion in that the programme makers believed that they had to:

look after their audience

by entertaining them and not attempting to be didactic. There are two potential problem areas here in that *Glenroe's* makers assume that (a) the audience is a monolith; and (b) they know what the audience wants.

The Theatre of Reassurance

Built into this set of assumptions about what 'the audience' want is the view that audience expectations centre on being entertained in a comforting way. Indeed in terms of those audience members who are poor, the programme's creator held the view that he did not have the right to pontificate to them. He added that:

entertaining them [the poor] has its own value. To be able to escape into this world once a week where everything is predictable and controlled in the hands of a writer and a production team is important in its own right.

He saw the programme as being allowed to be as experimental or as socially conscientious as it liked, but it must never:

preach a gospel that will reflect one or other situation.

This notion that the programme is free from having an ideological position is a stance which cannot be accepted as our analysis of the programme's content below shows. The certainty with which those involved in making the programme speak about the tastes of their audience must also be questioned. One of the programme's scriptwriters told me:

people don't expect it to be a gritty realistic programme — when we have done realistic stories, we wonder how far you can go with a story on a Sunday night?

The siting of the programme in what is seen as 'family' viewing time (8.30pm Sunday) is seen by its makers as being a constraint on the parameters of *Glenroe*. Added to this is the issue of programme ratings. There is an evident pressure on the makers of *Glenroe* to keep the programme at the top of the TAM ratings list. In the words of one of the production team the most important issue for the makers of *Glenroe* is "getting re-elected". Thus the dominant view is that given the programme's success (in ratings terms) to date there is no need to change what is already a tremendously successful programme.

Production Processes

In terms of the making of *Glenroe*, my fieldwork revealed a number of interesting features. While formal procedures are observed there are also a number of informal practices which govern the production of the series. The formal production process is overseen by four meetings each year which review the development of the programme's characters. Some discussion takes place on the storylines which are about to be written, but attention is also given to the views of the audience panels who

scrutinise programme content over a series. They may be asked to examine specific storylines to assess whether or not they are realistic or to evaluate the performance of a character recently introduced to the series.¹³⁵

In addition to these considerations some thought is given to the various appeals which come from charities and voluntary organisations who want *Glenroe* to build in their particular cause into the programme's storylines. The groups which are successful will find either mention of their cause in the drama's dialogue or at the very least their poster situated on the wall of the local pub.

It was admitted to me by one of *Glenroe*'s scriptwriters that arguments over the portrayal of particular characters took place at some of these meetings. The person in question wished to portray the Travelling community in, as he saw it, a more realistic light, but was disallowed from doing so because the programme's creator wanted the series to be comforting for the audience. The programme has in his view:

political correctness hanging around its neck

and therefore cannot explore issues in a realistic way. In the case of another storyline concerning the paternity of Carmel O'Hagan's son, the storyline was changed at one of these meetings because of a worry of antagonising the audience who hold Miley Byrne's character in high regard. Another storyline on the exclusion of both Travellers and the disabled again saw division amongst the production team over the inclusion of this story. The debate centred on whether this was just an issue based story or whether it would in fact help with the development of the two characters concerned. The programme's creator was opposed to covering this issue because in his words:

everything with me is the story and the relationship of the characters.

¹³⁵ In 1993, for example, the audience panels indicated some disquiet about the absence of young people from the programme and the subsequent introduction of several younger characters in the 1994–1995 series would seem to indicate that their views held sway.

In his estimation there was nowhere you could bring the story afterwards and it contributed little if anything to character development. Although the issue was included in the programme, it in fact quickly disappeared from the programme's storyboards which allow us to conclude that the dissenting views of the programme's creator eventually held sway.

But it is the more informal practices which are perhaps of greater interest. One source told me that in the making of the series if ever there arose in scripts elements which were anti-Traveller or which were 'politically incorrect', the actors would change either the script or characterisation in a subtle way as they did not wish to be associated with the viewpoint being expressed.¹³⁶ Despite the later objections which might arise from a scriptwriter, the producer would allow these changes to be made because of the pressures of production and the possible delays in shooting the next episode if a rewrite were required.

In terms of portrayal of the Travelling community a further informal practice has evolved. One of *Glenroe*'s secondary characters is in real life a member of the Travelling community and is to the forefront of a public campaign to establish the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority. In the making of *Glenroe* scripts which concern the Travellers are referred to the actor to check for their reliability in terms of both cultural practices and the language patterns which Travellers might use.

This practice of checking with this particular actor as to the authenticity of the script is in turn replicated by many of the other cast members. He has attempted (with limited success) to influence the programme's agenda in terms of Travellers issues. At the beginning of the 1992–1993 series, the actor got in contact with the writers and producers of *Glenroe* to see if they would include more Traveller issues. He wanted his character's child to die because of the poor conditions which Travellers in the real world must endure. According to him this story was rejected by the programme's

¹³⁶ The actors who play the main characters in *Glenroe* have in real life a high public visibility in terms of specific causes. It is fair to assume that at least some members of the viewing public do not distinguish between the fictional characters and the actors themselves.

creator because “He couldn’t inflict it on the nation”. In this instance what is perceived by the programme makers as good entertainment and character development won the day.

In its portrayal of the Travelling community, *Glenroe* is constrained by a number of factors. The limitations faced by the programme in resource terms (and in its prioritisation of existing resources) meant that in the 1992–1993 series there was no set built to show Travellers in either a halting site or in permanent housing. Likewise the audience did not see where the unemployed couple Carmel and Damian live. Thus, in the opinion of one of the programme’s actors both the Travelling community and the unemployed were being deliberately kept at a distance from the programme’s audience.

The programme’s makers, however, have to deal with other problems if they in fact attempt to be more realistic in their portrayal of the Travelling community. One senior person involved in the series told me:

We ought to show Travellers as they are — warts and all. It is difficult to do so because of the instant reaction you get from them. But if you make them too cosy — the public say they are not like that at all.

That the programme is on the receiving end of scrutiny from Traveller activists was evidenced during my fieldwork at RTE. In the 1993–1994 series of the programme *Glenroe* had a mistaken identity storyline which saw Blackie Connors being wrongly accused of housebreaking in *Glenroe*. After much accusation by the other inhabitants of *Glenroe*, the question was solved with the arrest of another man who looked like Blackie. But as soon as the story began, Traveller’s rights organisations complained to RTE about both the negative portrayal of Travellers and *Glenroe*’s choice of Blackie as the subject of a burglary storyline.

Losers and Primitives

Despite these difficulties, it has to be said that the programme has a degree of commitment to covering *some* Travellers issues.¹³⁷ The perspective which the creator of the programme has on this and the issue of unemployment reveals an ideological viewpoint which is worth commenting upon. He admitted to me that the programme is interested:

... in exposing the continuing social prejudices towards the Travellers. But the Travellers themselves we will try to show as an ordinary kind of working class people of an innocent primitive kind.

This is a position which sees the Travellers as having an exotic curiosity value and may partially explain why they are the only examples of the poor who have continually featured in the series. There is, however, a crux with this perspective in that all of the other characters in the programme whether middle or working class do not see the Travellers as being working class but rather as standing outside of the division of labour. They are closer to what Marx (1958) referred to as the lumpenproletariat.

The creator of *Glenroe* accepted that the programme has not sufficiently acknowledged the effects of unemployment on a community like Glenroe. This position was defended somewhat weakly by the assertion that *Glenroe* has been more concerned with character development rather than the effects of unemployment. A hint of where the programme's creator stands ideologically may be found in his viewpoint expressed to me that "life's like that" and "the innocent suffer" in terms of how the storylines about Carmel and Damian were written.

¹³⁷ Ironically, during the filming of a previous series of *Glenroe* which dealt with the lack of facilities for Travellers to hold a wedding celebration, the programme team came face to face with the prejudices experienced by Travellers in the real world. After filming the programme at a County Wicklow hotel about the racist attitudes of many hoteliers, the programme's extras who were in fact members of the Travelling community were refused service in the hotel used by RTE in shooting the scenes for *Glenroe*. Life therefore does imitate fiction.

He saw *Glenroe*'s task in writing their story as allowing the programme team to comment on how the Irish public view those unemployed who are outsiders or "blow-ins" to use a colloquial term. But in doing so *Glenroe* was not attempting to solve the issue but merely present it. The notion that the interaction of the programme's characters is more important than the issue itself was again put forward as the reason why the programme dealt with this question in a superficial way.

7:4 Outsiders and Travellers

Glenroe's treatment of the issues of unemployment and the Travelling community in its 1992–1993 season are now examined. I begin by summarising the background to the storylines and then in turn examine in detail the messages of this programme about the Travellers and the unemployed.

Outsiders: Carmel and Damian's Story

In the first seven episodes of *Glenroe* the programme deals with the experiences of an unemployed couple named Carmel and Damian. They are familiar to viewers from the series *Bracken* in which there was a storyline which hinted at the notion that Miley Byrne was the father of Carmel's son. This was meant to have happened when Miley was in exile in London. It transpires that the child's father is in fact Carmel's husband Damian. Both were Irish emigrants and have now decided to return to *Glenroe* in search of work. Damian is portrayed as having a 'difficult' character while his wife Carmel is generally viewed with a mixture of distrust and sympathy. The couple's attempts to get work are thwarted by everybody in the village (with the exception of Miley). Both Carmel and Damian, however, persevere in their search for employment. Carmel temporarily replaces Biddy in the vegetable shop while Damian does a number of odd jobs in the village. When Damian eventually gets an evening's work in the local pub, it ends with him having an argument with the proprietor's son. He leaves the pub in anger and is later found dead, having being

killed in a hit and run car accident. This leaves Carmel a widow and sets the scene for a major storyline concerning infidelity¹³⁸ between Carmel and Miley in the later episodes of the series.

The Carmel and Damian story represents an interesting narrative about unemployment and the unemployed. They are outsiders in the community that is *Glenroe* and are treated with distrust by the locals. Their story is one of pain and hardship while other couples beset by hard times are saved by magic wand solutions. Carmel and Damian, however, are viewed with suspicion and hostility. Their right to assistance is questioned by many of the programme's characters and particular reference is made to the notion that they are 'sponging' off the state's social welfare system.¹³⁹

From the first episode in the series Damian is treated with suspicion. His wife Carmel has asked the parish priest Fr. Devereux to help in finding Damian work but to no avail. She offers his electrical expertise to Michelle Haughey. When it turns out that the job undertaken by Damian was not a success the following exchange takes place between Michelle and her mother:

- Michelle: I knew that fellah could not be trusted!
Mother: What fellah?
Michelle: Damian. I'll gut him when I see him, he was supposed to fix that fuse box, you know...chancer...he took 25 quid off us as well.
Mother: I wonder was that all he took?

Damian is viewed with distrust. When it transpires that a box of silver cutlery is missing he is immediately blamed. Michelle's own husband who is also

¹³⁸ However, as one Irish TV critic recently noted, the supposed infidelity of Miley and Carmel is in fact based on a single kiss.

¹³⁹ For an account of coverage so-called 'sponging' in the news media see Golding and Middleton (1979).

unemployed, however, pawned the cutlery to pay for his gambling activities. Yet the community readily believes the story that it is Damian who is responsible for the act.

In episode three of *Glenroe* Damian is still looking for work. He asks Fr. Devereux for help in this regard. The priest who is organising a 'Clean Up Glenroe Campaign' passes Damian on to his housekeeper She very quickly tells Damian that the work is of a voluntary nature and that he would get his reward in heaven. When Damian is helping out with the loading of a skip with rubbish, he is also selecting items which might be useful for himself or which might be sold. One of the locals, seeing Damian hiding some of the rubbish behind a tree, humorously refers to Damian as a "squirrel". There then emerges a conflict between the Traveller Blackie Connors and Damian. Blackie who deals in scrap, is likewise interested in the contents of the skip.

The ensuing scuffle is sorted out by Fr. Devereux, Kevin Haughey and Stephen Brennan. This is an interesting scenario in that it portrays the two most visible groups of poor in the village pitted against each other. Damian ironically casts himself as the protector of community property, working voluntarily for a community that has turned its back on him. The scene portrays both Damian and the Travellers as being in a parasitic relationship with the rest of the community and being in competition with each other. It also serves to confirm the suspicions which the locals have of Damian as unreliable and impetuous.

In episode four of *Glenroe*, Michelle Haughey and Teasy McDaid discuss Carmel and Damian. Michelle sees them as scroungers and undeserving of help. Teasy responds to Michelle's observations by stating that Carmel and Damian have had a rough time. The following conversation takes place:

Michelle: Teasy, we have all had a rough time, but we don't go sponging off the state.

Teasy: Who's sponging off the state?

Michelle: Well ... they come back here because they can't make it in England and they expect to be supported as though we owe them a living or something.

Teasy then hands the heavily pregnant Michelle her maternity leave form to which Michelle very quickly says:

and that's not sponging off the state ... I've earned every penny of that.

In Michelle's eyes Carmel and Damian are spongers undeserving of the help of either the state or the community. Michelle's husband Kevin is unemployed and she is about to go on maternity leave thus rendering her dependent on the state for a while but she sees herself as entitled to assistance believing she (unlike Carmel and Damian) has earned it. Thus she falls into the category of those deserving assistance. By episode five Damian has still not found work of a permanent or long-term nature. Miley suggests that Damian work in the vegetable shop replacing his wife Carmel who is about to start work in the fast food take away. Bidy rejects Miley's suggestions and again adds fuel to the notion that Damian ought not to be trusted. She states:

I'm not having that fellah working for us. I don't trust him. Imagine giving him a job and the pub just across the road.

Thus the distrust of Damian continues and is now added to by reference to the idea that he is fond of drinking.

In the following episode, Damian finds work (of a black economy sort) in the local pub. This, however, sees Damian getting drunk and engaging in a row with proprietor's son. Damian leaves the pub in an angry and excited state criticising the key figures of the community for their smugness. He is later found dead on the roadside, having being the victim of a hit and run accident. His demise sets up a crisis for Miley Byrne who blames himself for Damian's death. He was singularly the only character in the programme to show real concern for the welfare of Damian and Carmel. In episode seven Miley tells his wife Bidy of his sense of responsibility for

Damian's death. He attempts to rehabilitate the image of Damian rejecting the community's perception of him being one of the undeserving or immoral poor.

The death of Damian allows the community off the hook in terms of their responsibilities towards the poor and unemployed. His widow Carmel is given work by the local publican to expunge herself and the community of their guilt. Miley Byrne is the only character to suffer remorse on Damian's death.

Damian conformed to the notion of the unemployed as being unreliable, lazy, untrustworthy, given to drinking alcohol excessively, willing to engage in the black economy and as a sponger on both the state and the community. This view of him is expressed by many of the series central characters with the exception of Miley Byrne. Damian's wife Carmel is viewed in a somewhat more sympathetic light, but is just about tolerated by the community's members. She is grudgingly given work by Bidy in the Byrne's vegetable shop, although as we later see in the series, some of Bidy's negative feelings towards Carmel are due to Miley's supposed involvement with her in his London days. She tries very hard to get work for her husband but is rejected by those she asks including Fr. Devereux and Miley Byrne. But Carmel, despite some people's sympathies, does not escape either. She too, as Michelle and Teasy's exchange above shows, is treated as an outsider and a sponger on the system and is thus undeserving of help.

Carmel and Damian's story has to be seen as a story about unemployment. The programme presents both of them (but particularly Damian) as examples of the Devil's poor. They are treated with indifference, hostility and suspicion. They are branded scroungers without question. Damian's character is of particular interest in that despite his obvious desire to work (he asks nearly every person in the village for employment), he is treated with distrust and references are made to whether he is light fingered or prone to drinking too much. There are echoes of the notion of the immoral poor in terms of the attitudes of *Glenroe's* citizens (with the exception of Miley) to Damian and Carmel.

In terms of the constraints of the programme's shape, the story is told quite quickly, receiving attention in only the first six episodes of the series. There is no real character development for Damian which disallows for audience sympathy or empathy. As the person on the receiving end of the hostility and disinterest of the *Glenroe* community, we learn little or nothing about Damian's feelings in the face of rejection. Unlike the treatment meted out to the fraudulent auctioneer, Dick Moran — we see him for example buckling under pressure and contemplating suicide — Damian is very much a one-dimensional character. The demands of the programme to entertain are even seen in Damian's portrayal with references to him as a "squirrel" in the confrontation over the skip, despite the fact that Damian may have been saving the items being discarded by the rest of the *Glenroe* community in order to make a living.

There are of course other limitations with how *Glenroe* told this story about the unemployed. Despite seeing the desperation of both Carmel and Damian in their search for work of any kind, we get no insight into how and where they live their lives. The conditions they are forced to live in because of their unemployment and their struggle to make ends meet remain invisible. This lack of realism in their portrayal points to the constraints of dealing with social problems in the setting of fictional TV. How these problems might be overcome and how these same issues might be narrated differently are discussed below.

In its treatment of the unemployed, *Glenroe* presents its viewers with two contrasting sets of messages about the poor. The narrative about unemployment draws upon a collection of negative images of the unemployed. The community's reaction to Damian's character is based on an accumulation of negative attributes sometimes given to the unemployed. Damian is an example of the undeserving poor owing to his status as an outsider as well as possessing a difficult character. It is readily believed by some of the community's members that he is dishonest, a welfare scrounger and fond of alcohol. We also see Damian as being ready to work in the 'black economy'. The lack of character development in Damian and the kind of

portrayal he receives allows the programme to draw upon a stereotypical notion of the unemployed.

The programme treated another unemployed man (Kevin Haughey) much differently. The fate of Kevin Haughey is an interesting contrast to Damian's story. Kevin loses his job and is under financial pressure. He is willing to work as a drugs courier and is also fond of betting on horses. He is saved by a major betting coup and by Dick Moran's decision to employ him. Neither Kevin's gambling or his willingness to smuggle drugs are given detailed treatment by the programme with both stories given the hot-potato treatment. It is clear that a programme like *Glenroe* has a number of choices in how it might deal with covering the issue of unemployment. It could have told Carmel and Damian's story much differently by attempting to dispel stereotypical ideas about the unemployed. It might have chosen to tell a story about unemployment with a positive outcome — for example how *Glenroe* as a community responded in an enlightened way to solving unemployment — or it might have allowed greater character development in Damian to allow the audience to empathise with his plight. Those in charge of producing and writing this series may argue that they are primarily interested in 'good drama' and not in solving the social problems of modern Ireland. This may very well be the case, but this position does not excuse or explain why mainly negative images of the unemployed have to be used in a programme which in fact has potentially a greater range of possibilities than stories emanating from a factual setting.

Travellers: Blackie Connors' Story

Unlike Carmel and Damian, the Traveller Blackie Connors is a firmly established character in the series *Glenroe*. Having overcome the hostility of some of the locals in an earlier series, he is now broadly accepted by the community at large. We see Blackie moving with ease in the community being on friendly terms with Miley Byrne the farmer, George Manning the representative of the ascendancy and Dick Moran the auctioneer. Blackie is a member of the Neighbourhood Watch

committee which in real life and in the fictional world of *Glenroe* is a community crime alert network. He is similarly a regular in the local pub — The Molly Malone. Such a portrayal is of particular interest in that Travellers in the real world of Irish society are regularly refused entry to pubs and are also mistakenly and unjustly branded by many as being petty thieves. Unlike the awkward and sometimes hostile character of Damian, Blackie Connors is an easy going, friendly and sometimes humorous man which has helped in his integration into the community. Blackie has been to the forefront of the campaign to get better conditions for the local Travellers (whom we only ever see fleetingly) in the form of permanent accommodation in houses.

In the 1992–1993 series of *Glenroe* the storylines which affect Blackie dealt with the issues of Traveller integration, Traveller patriarchy, and the hostilities and prejudices experienced by Travellers in their attempts to socialise or find work.

Episode one of the series sees Blackie falling foul of his Traveller friend Johnny. Blackie and Johnny are replacing a punctured tyre on Johnny's Hiace van. The exchange between the two Travellers highlight the tension between Blackie and the rest of the Travelling community because of Blackie's acceptance by *Glenroe's* settled community. It also serves to hint at the patriarchal side of Traveller culture in Johnny's reference to Blackie as being "worse than the woman" in his complaining.

Fr. Devereux arrives at the scene and confirms the basis of Johnny's complaints by asking Blackie to get involved in the 'Clean Up Glenroe Campaign'. Later that evening in The Molly Malone pub Miley and Blackie are talking about the clean up. Miley asks Blackie whether he will be involved in the campaign and Blackie, aware of Johnny's presence, says that he is not certain. Johnny suggests to Blackie:

Maybe you should give them a hand, there might be a decent bit of scrap in it ... you could pass it on to your friends ... if they let you.

Blackie does get involved in the campaign. In doing so he conflicts with Damian and conforms to the public perception of Travellers as being more violent than their settled counterparts. But Blackie's involvement in the campaign also shows him to be an astute scrap dealer. He takes the parts of an old threshing engine from Byrne's farm and later that day drives a hard bargain with George Manning. There are humorous touches to this story in that Dinny Byrne who offered Blackie the scrap for free is put out by the fact that Blackie has made money in selling the scrap. Similarly, we see Blackie engaging in behaviour typical of horse and scrap dealers. When George Manning gives him his payment for the scrap, Blackie spits on a £5 note and gives it back to George telling him that it is his luck money.

By episode fourteen, however, George Manning has become as astute a dealer as Blackie. George is in a dilemma. Having bought a large live turkey for Christmas, his son (Coriolan) has made a pet of the turkey and does not want him to be slaughtered. George sells the turkey to Blackie and in doing so shows that he has learnt a thing or two about dealing from the Traveller. The tone of the exchange between George and Blackie is friendly. They finish their deal by saying "Thank you Blackie", "Thank you George" in contrast to their earlier dealings when their relationship was on a more formal footing. Blackie's position as a Traveller again comes up for mention in this exchange. Earlier George had been showing Blackie the threshing machine which he was restoring:

- George: I hope to have it ready for the Summer Fair so that you can see for yourself.
- Blackie: I don't think that the Summer Fair would be my scene at all ... all them shooting sticks and flowery dresses.
- George: Ahh, you must come as my guest and I promise you won't have to wear a flowery dress!

Thus the issue of the exclusion of the Travelling community is reduced to a humorous level. This approach to what is a most serious issue for Travellers is used again in the series. In the same episode a discussion takes place between Blackie

Connors and David Brennan in *The Molly Malone*. David Brennan is wheelchair bound since he had a car accident. Blackie and David's discussion centres on whether Travellers or the disabled have greater problems with access to public houses. They agree to test out a number of local pubs over the question of access. The scene concludes with Blackie suggesting to David that he (Blackie Connors) should write a reference for David who is in search of a flat.

The debate over access for Travellers and the disabled is taken up in the following episode. The result of the competition between Blackie and David was a draw. In the first pub, there was no wheelchair access to the toilets. In the second pub both Blackie and David were thrown out of the pub because the barman thought that David and Blackie were both Travellers. There the story of access for both the Travelling community and the disabled finishes, with no further treatment of the story in the remaining episodes of the series.

The story of relations between the Travelling and settled communities is again taken up in episode sixteen. Teasy McDaid has opened a fast food take away and is short staffed as Carmel has returned temporarily to England after Damian's death. Nuala Brennan suggests to Blackie Connor's wife Peggy that she work in the take away. Peggy is willing to work there but is worried about what both the owner Teasy McDaid and her husband Blackie will think. She tells Nuala of her fears:

Peggy: I don't think Teasy really wants me here.
Nuala: Sure, why wouldn't she?
Peggy: Ahh, I don't know. Its the way she was looking at me. There's not many that'd give work to a Traveller.

Peggy's husband Blackie who is doing a favour for Teasy by carrying two bags of potatoes to the take away sees his wife behind the counter. He is surprised and annoyed:

Blackie: Husht Peggy, C'mon.
Peggy: Ahh, Blackie, I'm only helping out.

Blackie: You're a Buffers Lucky.¹⁴⁰ I don't want you doing it ... C'mon.

Exit Peggy and Blackie

Nuala: Ahh, wouldn't it make you sick!

Teasy: Don't worry yourself love, they have their ways ... we have ours.

Later in this episode, we see Blackie and Peggy in the local pub. Blackie is drinking and angrily throwing darts. He is still clearly annoyed with Peggy:

Blackie: Worried about what people would think? I notice that they had you working in the back as well.

Peggy: I was peeling spuds.

Blackie: And that's where you would be kept, you wouldn't be let out behind the counter, that's for sure.

Peggy: And why wouldn't I be?

Blackie: What would people be saying, hah, having their food served to them by Travellers.

Peggy: Nuala doesn't think like that.

Blackie: Well maybe she doesn't, but business is business.

This is an interesting scene in that it attempts to portray Traveller culture as being patriarchal, exemplified in Peggy's willingness to obey her husband's wishes. Unlike earlier scenes which looked upon the exclusion of Travellers in a more humorous light, these scenes are marked by a tone which is much more serious. The difficulties experienced by this marginalised group are given some further attention in this series. In episode thirty we see Sergeant Roche harassing Blackie about alleged 'illegal' trading. When Blackie manages to outwit Sergeant Roche on the trading issue, Roche is quick to find fault with Blackie's tax disc on his van. In the same

¹⁴⁰ From the Traveller's own language *shelta* or *cant* meaning a servant or slave for settled people.

episode we hear Blackie tell his wife Peggy about his schooldays and the ill treatment of Travellers.

Glenroe's decision to focus on *some* of the affairs of the Travelling community is an interesting one. In terms of the coverage of social problems generally, and of poverty in particular, the inclusion of the Travelling community raises a number of important questions. It does not present the Travellers as being destitute, rather it explores the Traveller's poverty in terms of social exclusion. These statements, however, should be qualified in that the programme does not focus on the Travelling community per se, rather it includes a single Traveller character — Blackie Connors — with just two other satellite characters of minor importance.¹⁴¹

One reading of the decision to include the Travelling community might be that the programme is only interested in the more 'exotic' forms of poverty and its dramatic possibilities in terms of humour and contrast, rather than an interest in poverty issues generally. A second reading of this coverage is that the programme is attempting to be didactic. Its decision to include some Travellers may be based on the desire to show the audience that integration between the settled community and the Travellers is both possible and desirable. That these stories are being told in a fictional rural setting adds further strength to the argument that *Glenroe* has a deeper ideological agenda in presenting rural Ireland as either a place of harmony where conflict based on differences of identity can be played out and resolved or perhaps with the exception of one or two individuals, no such conflicts exist. Ethnic or class identities are therefore subsumed by a shared membership of the symbolic community¹⁴² of *Glenroe*, where membership is based on common values and beliefs.

There are, however, constraints in terms of the overall structure of this programme which place a brake on the coverage of the issues which affect Travellers. These issues involve the centrality of the Travellers as programme characters; the

¹⁴¹ Occasionally, Blackie is seen with a number of other male Travellers who simply serve as extras in particular scenes.

¹⁴² See my discussion of the theme of symbolic communities in Curtin et al. (1993B).

dependence on humour when exploring what are in reality very serious issues; the lack of realism in portraying the Travellers and the tendency of the programme to shy away from plumbing any of the issues raised in an in depth fashion.

With the exception of Blackie Connors, the Travelling community portrayed in *Glenroe* are minor characters of incidental importance. Blackie Connors himself has a well developed character, yet we generally only see in him in the context of stories which affect the better known characters. In the latter part of the 1992–1993 season of *Glenroe*, we saw Blackie advising Miley Byrne on his marital problems, telling him that:

The woman is just like a horse. You've got to treat her easy, but show her who is boss!

Despite the attempts by earlier episodes of *Glenroe* to suggest a tension between Blackie and his fellow Travellers based on Blackie's supposed over integration into the *Glenroe* community, we are never offered stories about the programme's secondary characters which deal with crises of an economic or existential nature. This is in contrast to the coverage offered to the programme's central characters such as Biddy, Mary, Miley and Dick all of whom have faced into the long dark night of their respective souls.

Much of the coverage which Blackie Connors receives serves as a humorous device for the programme. In the real world, Irish Travellers experience racism on a daily basis of the most irrational kind such as being refused service in shops and public houses. Yet Blackie's identity as a Traveller is often the source of joking and humorous exchange. The scenes discussed above between George and Blackie on the Summer Fair and between David and Blackie over discrimination of the disabled and Travellers see both David, George and Blackie himself making light of Traveller identity.

From viewing the entire 1992–1993 season of *Glenroe*, there is a strong sense that the programme lacks realism in its handling of particular issues. In terms of the

Travellers specifically, we have never seen their harsh living conditions in either their caravans or in the often low standard of housing provided for them by the local authorities. The Travellers in *Glenroe* do not appear to be living at a subsistence poverty level, seem to be well dressed and are not wanting for food. Inter- and intra-family interaction is similarly absent from this coverage despite the importance of family and kin networks in Traveller culture. Despite two rare exceptions in this series of *Glenroe*, the fact that the Travelling community have their own language called Shelta or Cant is neither referred to nor used by the Traveller characters.¹⁴³

There is a further aspect to the overall structure of *Glenroe* in its narration of stories about the Travelling community. I refer above to the 'hot-potato effect' by which I mean the tendency of the programme to raise a potentially controversial issue, begin to give it coverage and then very quickly drop the story out of sight never to be seen again.

Two important stories which featured Blackie Connors and have a direct bearing on the marginalisation of Travellers seemed to adopt this approach. In the early episodes of *Glenroe* we saw Blackie being taunted by Johnny as to the extent of his acceptance by the settled middle class of *Glenroe*. The story then simply disappeared from our screens without being resolved in a satisfactory way. The issue of whether Travellers or the disabled are more likely to be excluded was the next story to be considered. This story had great potential as an eye-opener for the audience. Yet when the competition between David and Blackie took place to see who was more likely to be excluded, the result was a draw. We only saw them being excluded from two pubs and then the story simply died never being referred to again.

One reading of this phenomenon might be that the issues are explored only briefly to allow further development of the characters and to provide the possibility of greater coverage later in further episodes of the series or in the following series. My own view is that the tendency of programmes like *Glenroe* to short change stories

¹⁴³ Blackie tells his wife Peggy in one scene that it is great to be "back on the tobar", *tobar* meaning road is a derivative of the Gaelic word *bothar*.

about the unemployed and Travellers is based on a shyness of concentrating on potentially controversial social issues. It is interesting that this programme does at least attempt to raise questions about our attitudes to the unemployed, the disabled or the Travelling community, yet somewhere along the line it falls short of giving these stories the full and thorough coverage which they deserve.

In terms of a message system, *Glenroe* presents us with a largely positive image of the Travelling community. Through the character of Blackie Connors we see the Travellers as a group of people who although different in terms of their ethnic identity, have the same feelings and desires as their settled counterparts. Even though the friendly interaction between Blackie and the inhabitants of *Glenroe* rings a little hollow in terms of what actually happens in the real world, the fact that the programme presents with us a fictional possibility is important.

The response (of most) of the *Glenroe* community to the Travellers is that they are examples of God's or the deserving poor. They have been provided with housing through a combined Traveller/settled community effort. There are, however, some shortcomings with its approach to the issue. The two most dominant messages in the series considered about the Travellers were that of prejudice and patriarchy.¹⁴⁴ The prejudices experienced by the Travellers remain a constant theme in the series. Yet prejudice and exclusion are not the only aspects to the poverty experienced by the Travellers. The poverty experienced by the Travellers also includes severe hardship in terms of harsh living conditions, health problems and low life expectancy.¹⁴⁵ Yet none of these problems are examined by this programme. There is similarly a strong message of patriarchy in the current series, with both Johnny and Blackie conforming to the notion of male Travellers as being dominant in terms of family decision making processes. While I concede that patriarchy exists in both the worlds of the settled

¹⁴⁴ For a much broader perspective on Traveller issues see McCann (eds.) (1994)

¹⁴⁵ This point has also been made by O'Carroll (1992). She also notes that *Glenroe* shies away from rural poverty, particularly the poverty of small farmers and women. The failure of its urban counterpart *Fair City* to deal with poverty problems contributes to what O'Carroll terms *Fair City's* "identity crisis".

community and Traveller, the very strong role played by Traveller women in demanding that their culture be acknowledged and respected in Irish society is ignored by the programme. The Traveller's story therefore has the possibility of being told much differently. There exists the possibility of offering a central role to a Traveller woman allowing her to give the audience her side of the story, dealing perhaps with her views on Traveller identity, and the specific problems encountered by female Travellers in relation to housing conditions and education of a culturally sensitive kind for their children. There is a need too for greater visibility of the harsh conditions that Travellers have to deal with on a daily basis.

Glenroe is an interesting projection, however, of how both its creators and some of its audience either see or would like to see Irish society. In the main the poor are invisible, but where examples of the poor do surface in the series, an interesting treatment takes place. The programme's main characters display a varying set of attitudes to the unemployed — acceptance of the deserving unemployed or poor hinges on membership of the *Glenroe* community. The Travellers of *Glenroe* are also presented as the deserving poor — a status that has been earned by their apparent willingness to accept many of the norms and values of their middle-class counterparts.

7:5 Discussion: Irish Fictional Television and Social Problems — Limitations and Possibilities

In comparison with the production values of other soap operas and more specifically in terms of its audience ratings, *Glenroe* is evidently a quality serialised drama which is popular with a large proportion of the viewing audience. There are, however, a number of limitations within the programme's formula which militate against the coverage of social problem issues in any in-depth way. In the following discussion I wish to outline *Glenroe's* limitations in this regard and conclude by comparing the programme's track record on the coverage of social issues with other soap operas. The chapter's main conclusion is that *Glenroe* does not provide enough

room for the examination of social problems but that there are possibilities within this genre for such activity. If *Glenroe* were to cover social problems such as unemployment or poverty in an in-depth and realistic way in the future, this would involve the programme taking risks in terms of not only the storylines themselves but also in terms of challenging *some* of its audience. There are precedents which the programme might follow in the future, most notably in the form of Channel 4's *Brookside*.

Limitations

The reductive way in which *Glenroe* treats poverty related issues is determined by the programme's formula which emphasises characterisation, entertainment, familism and communitarianism. The programme's over-emphasis on the lives and experiences of the rural middle class as its choice of central characters ensures that *Glenroe*'s plots and storylines only occasionally touch upon the fact there are problems of a social kind to be dealt with. Invariably these problems are (temporarily) resolved by the actions of the community, individuals or families. Kindness, philanthropy and good deeds are stressed over and above causes or lasting solutions.

The makers of *Glenroe*, as our ethnography suggests, defend their failure to deal with social problems by stressing that their interests lie in developing characters and not issues. An obvious and fundamental problem with this perspective, as this chapter's analysis suggests, is that the programme *does* have some characters who are poor but who are relegated to the sidelines. The programme concentrates on developing its middle class and relatively comfortable characters to the detriment of any other character development. Is this because this type of character development is of a safer kind? The evidence from *Glenroe* and other soaps would seem to confirm this to be the case.¹⁴⁶ Buerkel-Rothfuss and Mayes (1981) suggested that soap operas

¹⁴⁶ See Rose (1979) who argues that American soaps shy away from examining the lives of blue-collar workers.

are not taken up with the contentious issues of poverty and inequality because their main concern is with the middle class.¹⁴⁷ The defence of the programme offered by its makers fails to address the question as to why characters who are poor are not given more space to develop. The answer to this question may be partially found in the prominence the programme gives to humour and entertainment as part of its formula. This concentration is based on a perception of what the audience want from *Glenroe*.¹⁴⁸ During my conversations with those who make the programme I was struck by two things in this regard. In the first instance, the programme makers talk about the audience as if it were a monolith unaffected by either class divisions or poverty; and secondly, their attitude to their audience betrays a position which assumes they know what their audience want or should get. In any event, the notion that the programme should entertain above all else automatically precludes or constrains the coverage of issues such as unemployment or the exclusion of the Travellers. As our earlier analysis suggests Blackie Connors is a Traveller of a safe kind. He is settled, involved in community affairs and can hold his own in the humour stakes. These characteristics are the ones that are stressed repeatedly by the programme which only occasionally acknowledges the difficulties which Blackie and other Travellers experience.¹⁴⁹

The programme is dominated by the twin ideologies of familism and communitarianism.¹⁵⁰ Problems, whether individual or collective, when they arise are never seen as social problems. They are not solved by social or structural solutions.

¹⁴⁷ Greenberg et al. (1982) see soap opera's treatment of social problems as being limited to issues of a job-related nature.

¹⁴⁸ As I note in this chapter, O'Connor and Fahy (1990) found that in their audience based study of *Glenroe* younger viewers were critical of *Glenroe*'s failure to deal with social issues in a realistic fashion.

¹⁴⁹ It should be noted that during the 1994–1995 series of *Glenroe*, a number of Traveller activists made representations to RTE and appeared on the media review programme *Feedback* (RTE 1 Television, 18 November 1994) to complain about the one-dimensional and negative portrayal of Travellers in *Glenroe*. Audience reaction of this kind from this minority group within the wider audience will have to be responded to.

¹⁵⁰ My assertions here are in agreement with Gibbons (1984b).

Thus, all problems which are to be resolved in this fictional setting are sorted out by individuals, families or the community of *Glenroe*. Typically, these problems, whether individual or collective, are ones which affect the Byrnes or the Morans thus allowing for a concentration on how the rural middle class experience and deal with personal, business or community difficulties. Their problems are given prominence above all others. The dominant message of the programme is that certain families and the community have the capacity to deal with problems whose causes often lie beyond the confines of *Glenroe*. Those who exist outside of the community, such as Carmel and Damian, who are representative of the undeserving poor are left to their own devices. The Travellers (or more accurately a single Traveller) are deemed to be part of *Glenroe* and thus some of their problems of exclusion and poverty have been dealt with through community effort.

A crucial part of *Glenroe*'s ideology of familism and communitarianism is the way in which the programme treats the issue of social class. As I mentioned above, the programme is dominated by the rural middle class, but the other extremes of the class structure of rural Ireland are also represented. In her analysis of British and American soap opera, Geraghty (1991) suggested that there are two separate ways in which soaps use the concept of class. Class, can as in the case of *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*, be what defines the community within which the dramatised interaction takes place — in both instances here a working class community — or else as in the case of *Brookside*, class divisions within the close itself formed the basis of numerous storylines.¹⁵¹ *Glenroe* is of the former and more traditional type of soap opera. Its community is defined by a middle-class culture and value system with other class groups who exist above and below the dominant class and who function to define through difference and not opposition what the community is.

The programme adopts an interesting stance in this regard, which has a bearing on how it treats social problems. The class identities of the characters are

¹⁵¹ From the very beginning *Brookside* has attempted to challenge the more traditional soap strategy of insisting that communities exist.

obvious enough, but potential divisions between the characters are underplayed, thus allowing for an interaction between characters which is unrealistic. The programme's use of this unrealistic dramatised interaction between the social classes serves to feed the notion that if class divisions exist they are not important and should not form the basis for any conflict over resources or power. The dependency of the programme on this type of interaction between the social classes allows little if any space for conflict over inequality or poverty.

Glenroe does not yet use what Longhurst (1987) referred to as 'indicative' or 'subjunctive' forms of realism. Within indicative realism the working class are the main focus of attention but the possibilities for change are still outside of the frame. Subjunctive realism on the other hand offers the audience the possibility of change and goes as far as suggesting possible alternatives to the existing social order. Drawing on Williams' (1977) work, Longhurst suggested that the growth of realism involved three processes:

First, there is a 'social extension' as drama moves away from considering 'people of rank' to include more social types in a conscious fashion. Second, events begin to be set in the present: action is contemporary. Third, the action becomes inspired by and concerned with secular issues. This contrasts with earlier plays where a metaphysical or a religious order directly or indirectly frame, or in the stronger cases determine, the human actions. (Williams, 1977:64)

Glenroe exhibits aspects of all of these three features, yet is more accurately described as a naturalist, as opposed to a realist, drama. The programme is shot in natural or real time but is limited in its realism. It does occasionally acknowledge the existence of some social problems but is on the whole more concerned with melodrama and entertainment than social issues in their own right. Charitable events taking place 'out there' in the real world such as the *People in Need Telethon* will be referred to in the script as a way of promoting the telethon and confirming the programme's naturalistic dimension but it will never be questioned or criticised.

The extent to which *Glenroe* can seriously deal with social issues is also constrained by the ideology of those who make the programme. In some respects this ideology is best typified by the attitude amongst many in the production team that the programme has in fact no ideology. The makers of *Glenroe* talk of creating “good drama” as if this aim was in direct contrast to dealing with social problems. In adopting this stance, the producers of the programme are making two assumptions which we should question: firstly, that the *Glenroe* attitude is an accurate reflection of the dominant Irish attitude; and secondly that “good drama” is incompatible with going against the grain of the dominant ideology for fear of losing viewers.

An interesting shift has taken place in the thinking of the programme’s creator who, in his days of making *Glenroe*’s parent programme *The Riordans*, deliberately sought out social issues for examination, such as the poor working conditions of farm labourers and the problems encountered by the Travelling community. As our ethnographic account suggests, his change of heart in regard to the function of TV drama has been influential in shaping *Glenroe*’s agenda which has been to the detriment of social problem issues.

The production values of the programme place further limitations on how *Glenroe* explores issues relating to the Travellers or unemployed. In the series under consideration in this chapter there were no dedicated sets for either the Travellers or unemployed, thus placing a constraint on the extent to which their stories could be told in a realistic and detailed way. Our earlier ethnographic evidence would suggest that other informal processes are at work in the making of the series. It has been suggested to me that in the case of the Travellers specifically, actors refused to say lines which some might find offensive and instead replaced “politically incorrect” lines with words or phrases which might be more acceptable to a liberal, middle-class audience.

Possibilities?

As I have stated elsewhere¹⁵² there is very little middle-ground amongst researchers when it comes to the question of the relative importance of soap opera. At a general level there are many who have dismissed the genre as being nothing more than populist and trivial entertainment for the masses. There are others, however, who have recognised the importance of soaps in terms of how they cope with the portrayal of women (Geraghty, 1991); the portrayal of minorities (Seggar et al., 1985); its melodramatic qualities (Ang, 1982) and its ideological basis (Sheehan, 1985, 1987). More specifically, when it comes to examining how soaps explore social, as opposed to strictly personal problems, the field is again split between those who are critical of the capacity of soaps to deal with social problems at all (Mayet, 1984), and those who feel that it is well within the capability of this type of television programme to educate, inform as well as challenge its audience. Livingstone (1988) argued that British soaps were responsible, realistic and educative. She asserted that:

... those who make soap operas appear to have specific social awareness — raising aims with respect to contemporary social, moral and political issues. For example, Jack Barton, former producer of *Crossroads*, says that “With some of the more serious social comments we’ve made and issues we have dealt with, in each case they were very carefully thought out and researched, and they have positive results to the community.” (1988:56)

For its part, *Glenroe* is naturalistic in style and educative in terms of certain issues. Typically, the programme has devoted its energies with some success to exploring problems which are non-threatening to the status quo. Thus in the 1992–1993 series, *Glenroe* dealt with the issue of the scarcity of corneas in the Irish eye-bank. There was overwhelming public reaction to the problem and within the series itself the fictional character who was affected by difficulties with his sight underwent

¹⁵² Devereux (1993a). See also Hobson (1982) for a summary of this theme.

a successful operation. What are viewed by the programme as being problems of a personal kind are explored and usually given a satisfactory treatment. That is to say the experience of the individual, the cause of the particular problem and its resolution by the community or other agent takes place. Problems of a social or structural kind are less likely to be explored and if they are, less emphasis is given to their resolution.

In terms of the possibilities which exist within this genre for the exploration of problems which go beyond the personal or the individual, there are pointers which *Glenroe* might take from other soaps in this regard. *Glenroe* belongs to the more traditional school of soap which places entertainment and drama at the top of its priority list. A possible shift in emphasis in the programme's formula would be interesting, but not without some risk. *Coronation Street*, also a soap of the old school, attempted with little success to do this in the 1970s. Glaessner (1990) noted that *Coronation Street*'s shift to doing tougher and more contemporary storylines was a provocative move by the programme. However, audience figures dropped significantly and the appointment of a new producer saw a return to the more traditional diet of lighter stories and humour. The reconstituted *Coronation Street* saw its role as being:

in the business of entertaining, not offending. (Temple, 1985)

A more recent lesson could be learnt from the makers of *Brookside*.¹⁵³ Realistic in style, with an emphasis on social class, the programme deals with issues which are social as well as personal. The decline and fall of the trade union movement, inequality of employment opportunity in regional terms, the personal and social havoc caused by unemployment (most notably in the Corkhill family) and the activities of illegal moneylenders are just some of the many themes which this programme has examined over its 11-year history. Significantly, the programme has rejected the more usual soap style of dropping in on three or four stories in any one

¹⁵³ For a critical view of *Brookside* see Geraghty (1983, 1991).

programme and instead tends to concentrate on just one story. It is quite clear in watching the serial that there are greater forces at work outside of Brookside Close such as the declining British capitalist economic system or a political philosophy such as Thatcherism, which is the ultimate cause of the problems which the programmes characters experience at a personal level. The series appears to be issue- as well as character-driven and indeed the reappearance¹⁵⁴ of certain issues such as the increasing difficulties encountered by trade union activists would suggest that the programme's stories mainly come from the issues and not just the characters as in *Glenroe*. In addition to this, there is evidence that the programme has consciously taken on specific issues with which it will deal in a much deeper fashion over a long period of time. The latest addition to the Farnham family is a baby with Down's Syndrome and it is clear that *Brookside* intends to deal with public as well as personal attitudes to mental handicap over a sustained period. Thus the issue can be dealt with in a more comprehensive manner than is usual in soap opera. Yet in spite of the fact that *Brookside* is more engaged in dealing with issues of a social or personal nature, it does not ignore the more usual soap opera ingredients of humour and entertainment. In terms of its linguistic style specifically, the programme draws upon Liverpudlian or Scouse patterns of working class speech which is characterised in the main by the use of irony, puns and nicknames.¹⁵⁵ It is therefore possible to balance the perceived audience demands to entertain as well as deal with social issues which affect the lives of audience members.

In conclusion, the limitations and possibilities of *Glenroe* all boil down to the kinds of decisions made amongst the programme's makers. There is no real reason other than perhaps an ideological one which is preventing the series from placing either a Traveller or unemployed character at the centre of the programme. My

¹⁵⁴ The 1994 series of *Brookside* has focused on the experiences of the trade union activist Eddie Banks. His experiences on the factory floor and at the negotiating table mirror those of Bobby Grant from the programme's early years.

¹⁵⁵ The dole office in *Brookside* is "The Soc", unemployed people are "Dolies", poor people are "Povs". Male characters will refer to other male characters as a "soft lad" (i.e. mad).

fieldwork experience indicates to me, however, that there is very little commitment amongst the programme team towards developing these types of characters. The extent to which the programme will in the future engage in taking risks with the programme's form and content depends on the personnel involved and perhaps on the activities of *Glenroe*'s rival soap on RTE *Fair City*. Although *Fair City* is equally culpable as *Glenroe* in failing to examine social problems,¹⁵⁶ a shift in the former programme's style might very well be the catalyst which could compel *Glenroe* to adopt a more realistic approach.¹⁵⁷ In many respects *Glenroe* is a victim of its own success in that given its constant placing at the summit of the TAM ratings, it is tied into a formula which offers little by way of space for the consideration of a wider scope of individual and social problems. In the very long-term the programme's makers will have to entertain the idea of getting beyond the humour/characterisation formula in order to make the programme more relevant to the rapidly changing society in which it is being made. As this chapter has suggested, the fact that the programme does not attract younger more socially aware viewers is a factor which will have to be addressed.

¹⁵⁶ Carroll (1992) notes that *Glenroe* shies away from rural poverty, particularly the poverty of small farmers and women.

¹⁵⁷ There is evidence to suggest this may already be happening in the competition between *Glenroe* and *Fair City* during the 1994–1995 series. See Power (1995).

Chapter Eight

The Invisible Poor:

RTE Television and the Marginalisation of the Irish Poor

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8:1 Introduction

The central point which I wish to make in this final chapter is that RTE's television coverage of Irish poverty is not only of a reductive kind, but in practice serves to render a significant proportion of its public invisible.¹⁵⁸ The discussion begins with a consideration of the key explanations offered for the range of material analysed in this study, as well as an assessment of the theoretical implications of the project's main findings. The chapter suggests that Golding and Middleton's (1982) dichotomy of God's and the Devil's poor be recast, to take account of the central role which television stories offer the angels or agents of the poor. The dominant themes of RTE's poverty coverage are discussed, and prior to making some concluding comments, the policy implications of the findings of this study are addressed. The chapter contends that the concept of ideology is still relevant to the analysis of the media and also cautiously suggests how RTE might improve upon its coverage of poverty.

¹⁵⁸ The theme of invisibility has been developed in particular within the field of feminist history, where historians have sought to revise patriarchal accounts of history. See for example Bridenthal and Koonz (1977).

8:2 Consideration of Explanations and Assessment of Theoretical Implications

The main argument of this study is that given the true extent of Irish poverty, RTE's television coverage is of a reductive kind. The poor themselves remain largely voiceless and invisible across the range of programme types considered in this analysis. They are replaced by spokespersons and other angel figures who communicate with the television audience on their behalf. The study concludes that RTE's presentation of Irish poverty can be considered to be ideological.

It is ideological because it facilitates the continued domination of the powerful over the powerless. This is achieved through the lack of visibility of poverty, television's dependency on poverty spokespersons and because of the narrow parameters of actual poverty coverage. Such coverage helps to reproduce relations of power which are asymmetrical in character. RTE television's portrayal of poverty may be considered to be ideological in the sense that the dominant themes evident in the coverage uphold unequal power positions and only in a few rare situations, is the hegemony challenged. Ultimately, the shortcomings in RTE's presentation of Irish poverty are as a result of the fact that the television station reproduces a predominantly liberal¹⁵⁹ ideological framework in its coverage of poverty and other issues.

The ideological domination achieved by the powerful in this context is helped through television's ability to decontextualise poverty and inequality through abstracting it from its structural causes. Television coverage achieves this through individualising and personalising what is a structural problem and by drawing upon a

¹⁵⁹ Following Sheehan (1987) I take liberalism in this context to mean '... the political philosophy occupying the middle-ground between conservatism and socialism' supporters of which, she maintains, see 'whatever reforms may be necessary in isolation' and do '... not call into question the nature of the system. In this sense, liberals are distinguished from both conservatives and radicals, as those who support social reform, but tackle such issues as arise one by one by piecemeal social engineering, which can be accommodated within the capitalist system.' (1987:275).

range of constructions of the poor which exist outside of television itself. RTE's portrayal of the Irish poor reinforces the existence of God's and Devil's poor as well as managing to construct an important role for the powerful in the overall relationship. There are echoes of past ideological constructions of the Irish poor as deserving and undeserving in the overall make-up of RTE's coverage.

Explanations

A range of explanations for the nature of the material presented in this study were offered in earlier chapters. The key explanations were ones which were economic, biographical, organisational, production-value oriented and ideological. It is my contention that while the first four criteria are clearly important in our consideration, the greatest weight must be given to the ideological character of the material analysed.

Economic shifts in Irish society and specifically the retreat of the Irish state in terms of public spending were shown to underlie the emergence of the telethon programme *People in Need*. An important aspect of the special time relations within the make up of the telethon has been to allow the corporate sector a pivotal role in terms of sponsorship opportunities. This move has served to delimit the programme's possibilities in terms of actual poverty coverage. Economic changes in the form of state cutbacks have had a direct bearing on the activities of RTE itself with a decreasing amount being spent on such programme areas as television drama, thus resulting in less space for the consideration of poverty and other social issues.

In addition to the recent rationalisation of programming, increasingly scarce resources within RTE's current affairs division have resulted in fewer programmes being made which might be critical of the status quo. Economic factors of a commercial kind are also important in setting limits upon how RTE television covers the issue of poverty. A recurring explanation offered by many within RTE in terms of its lack of a critical coverage of poverty is that programmes operate in a commercial sphere and cannot run the risk of alienating viewers and ultimately advertisers.

Biographical reasons were also cited as being partially responsible for the kinds of television coverage of poverty on RTE. The extent to which an individual producer or director may be committed to a particular poverty issue and ultimately her ability to get around any barriers which the broadcasting organisation may place in her way was shown to be crucial. There exist sharp contrasts between the maker of the *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* documentary and the creator of *Glenroe* in terms of their commitment to covering poverty themes. Indeed the apparent change of heart by the latter over his long career in television drama in the coverage of social issues serves as a reminder of the relative importance of the role of the individual producer or director.

In terms of our consideration of RTE's poverty coverage the importance of biographical factors perhaps rest in the ability of an individual broadcaster to place his or her stamp on a particular story or report. Following as it did a model which combined a production-based approach with a critical content analysis, this study found that as a first step towards appreciating a particular television text, some cognisance had to be given to the intentions of an individual producer or reporter in the making of a story or report. This approach helped to go some way in explaining why individual producers or reporters resorted to particular filming styles which drew heavily upon symbolisation techniques in order to convey a preferred reading to their viewers about a specific poverty issue.

It is important to note however that individuals working in television operate in organisational and ideological contexts. Thus while some of the material presented in this study can be attributed to biographical factors, these should not be overstated. The ability of an individual working in broadcasting to get a story on air may in the end depend upon the acceptance of the story by others in the broadcasting organisation. Their acceptance of the story and its ultimate broadcast may very well hinge on the ideological mood of the time both within and without the broadcasting organisation.

In comparison to economic and biographical factors, the organisational context in which RTE's poverty stories are produced is of even greater importance. This study has attempted to trace the organisational pressures which may be brought to bear on the production of stories about poverty. Although the documentary *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* was eventually broadcast by RTE, our analysis of its history and content would suggest that any attempt to understand the implications of its content in terms of poverty coverage must begin with an appreciation of the organisational context in which it was created.

The range of perspectives of those who work within a broadcasting organisation like RTE and indeed the occasional conflicts which occur amongst these personnel point to the fact that ideological clashes do happen between broadcasters over the content of particular stories or reports. This study documented significant differences of opinion amongst those involved in current affairs, telethon and fictional television. Media organisations like RTE may be seen to be the sites of ideological struggles in which particular versions of reality win out over others.

The importance of the organisational context of the material analysed in this study cannot be overstated. Those who work in the four programme areas examined in this study are part of an organisational culture which to varying degrees is resistant to examining poverty in a critical light. The ethnographic data presented in this study would suggest that the individuals who work within RTE are well aware of what is acceptable within particular programme areas. The culture of the organisation and its routines of production exist outside of the individuals involved. A broadcaster will often consciously or otherwise reproduce production practices such as seeing poverty stories as seasonal or using an agent of the poor in the creation of a story or report. All programme areas within the organisation have their norms and values when it comes to creating stories or reports, and ones concerning poverty do not prove to be the exception to the rule.

The production context of the material presented in this study is also an important explanatory variable. The invisibility of poverty can to a certain extent be

explained with reference to the production values of specific programmes. At least two of the programmes analysed in this study saw poverty as being outside of their perceived remit. *Glenroe* saw its function as entertainment while the *People in Need Telethon* argued that fund-raising and not unveiling actual poverty was its core task. The remaining programme areas of news and current affairs saw poverty as but one of many social issues which deserved coverage.

The routines of production engaged in by programme makers, especially in the area of television news, also help to explain why on one level poverty stories are largely populated by the agents of the poor. Reporters may 'tag' a poverty report on the activity of some elite figure in the expectation that she is newsworthy and may therefore help to ensure editorial acceptance and ultimately the broadcast of a story. The pressures of production, the limited amount of time for research, filming and editing ensure that reporters resort to using what they see as 'reliable' spokespersons for the poor. It has to be conceded that the problem is compounded by the fact that the poor are in themselves a disparate group and largely underresourced which might allow them to speak for themselves. To a certain extent their invisibility may be explained through their lack of resources and the fact that many of their underresourced agents are in competition with other more powerful interest groups in the competition for airtime.

The codes and conventions used by RTE television in the making of reports and stories about poverty also function to delimit coverage of poverty in a particular way. As I discuss in more detail later on, RTE's presentation of Irish poverty is not only selective and narrow, but also resorts to using a set of dominant codes in the production of poverty reports and stories. The poor remain largely faceless and voiceless, stories are mediated ones and the social distance between the assumed comfortable viewer is emphasised. There are parallels across all of the four programme areas considered in this study in terms of construction of poverty stories.

Ideological Dimension

The way in which poverty stories are ideologically constructed is their most significant feature. Taken collectively, the programmes examined in this study are reflective of the changing ideological mood in Irish society *vis-à-vis* poverty and other social problems. With the possible exception of our current affairs case-study, the programmes considered in this project reproduce a liberal ideological framework which views poverty as a containable problem and which further divides the poor into the deserving and undeserving. The latter functions to set clear limits as to who society should feel responsible for in terms of relieving poverty and inequality.

There is a long history of differentiating between God's and Devil's poor in Irish society. Within the make-up of RTE's coverage of poverty there are echoes of late Nineteenth Century thinking which both divided the poor into deserving and undeserving and also fashioned a special benign role for those engaged in philanthropy and charity. RTE's coverage also offers significant and often benign roles to the powerful. But because it draws upon the dominant liberal ideology which is in circulation in Irish society, television coverage of poverty is defined by limits which disallow any reference to the unequal social structure (itself a key cause of poverty) and never challenges those who occupy positions of power and domination.

That television programmes play an ideological role is a central contention in this study. But to what extent are programme makers aware of their roles in this regard? There was some variation in the views of those engaged in the production of television programmes as to whether they were being consciously ideological or not. Both the maker of the *Tuesday File* documentary and one of the telethon's producers saw their creations as flying deliberately in the face of the dominant ideology in RTE and Irish society more generally. Both men wished to produce reports which went against the hegemonic grain.

But there were other programme makers who protested at the suggestion that their work contained and reproduced dominant ideology. The notion however that a programme such as *Glenroe* or the telethon can tell stories about the Travellers or the

unemployed without being ideological is not something which I accept. In either the refusal to acknowledge the existence of the unequal social structure or in the often circumscribed ways in which the above programmes tell poverty stories, they are patently ideological. They are ideological because they help to maintain unequal power relationships through either a refusal to challenge the basis of such relationships or indeed to suggest possible alternatives. They are also ideological because they treat inequality in a 'taken for granted' fashion and thus contribute to the reification of poverty and inequality.

If we apply the range of criteria as suggested by Thompson (1990) to RTE's poverty coverage we can see how it operates at an ideological level. As I discussed in Chapter Two, ideology may be seen to function through legitimisation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation and reification.

In its presentation of poverty RTE's coverage manages to legitimise the existing social structure. It does so by either not acknowledging that such a structure exists in the first place or through presenting the social structure as being obvious or inevitable. The powerful in Irish society (individuals, the state, class groups, multi-nationals, the Church) are further legitimised in the types of role which they are offered by the media in their 'good works' for the poor.

There is a strong message across the range of poverty coverage considered in this study that the answers to poverty and inequality are not to be found in structural change but rather in the piecemeal activities of individuals or groups. By giving the powerful greater legitimacy as a result of their activities for the poor, a media organisation like RTE sets up limits for its presentation of poverty. Coverage which might seek to explain poverty in broader structural terms could very well create a crisis of legitimacy for the powerful. It is interesting to note that in the one rare example in this study where a programme attempted to raise some critical questions about Irish poverty the powerful refused to participate and as Chapter Four showed, there was some insecurity within RTE as to the content of the programme.

RTE's poverty coverage may also be seen to be ideological through its use of dissimulation. By dissimulation Thompson (1990) meant that relations of domination were hidden, denied or obscured. This is achieved through forms of media representation which deflect attention away from asymmetrical relations of power and domination. Thus the economic relations between the poor and the powerful become human relations. In fictional television class relations become community relations. While selective examples of poverty and inequality are alluded to in *Glenroe* the focus is on how the more powerful groups in the community can respond to the individual needs of the poor. The status quo is not interfered with and no reference is made to either the class structure or the probable causes of poverty.

The *People in Need Telethon* is another important example of how RTE's poverty coverage resorts to dissimulation. This type of programming not only affords a special role for the powerful and wealthy in their activities to alleviate poverty, but does so in such a way as to ignore the relations of domination which exist between the needy and the powerful. In its portrayal of the powerful the telethon successfully manages to obscure the dominant power positions which these individuals and companies hold *vis-à-vis* the poor or needy. This is achieved through situating a programme about poverty and inequality within the realm of entertainment.

In addition to the dissimulation which is a feature of the dominant styles of RTE's presentation of poverty, further dissimulation takes place through RTE's failure to report on the true extent and diversity of Irish poverty. The invisibility or narrow portrayal of poverty is in itself an important feature of how television engages in the reproduction of ideology through dissimulation.

Thompson (1990) further suggested that ideology operated through the use of unification and fragmentation. There are elements of unification in the telethon programme whereby it is asserted that 'everybody' can and should get involved to alleviate need. The supposed commonality of aims and objectives of ordinary people and the more powerful interests such as multi-national companies and the individual wealthy, works to weld individuals into a collective identity in the face of poverty.

The unification of those involved even for a short period of time serves to deflect attention away from unequal power relations or the causes of poverty.

The fragmentation evident in RTE's coverage takes on a variety of forms. RTE's presentation of poverty tends to break up the poor into various sub-groups and not view them as being part of a greater collective entity. Poverty stories become personalised and individualised and indeed in certain instances groups who represent the poor may end up competing with one another for airtime. The Irish poor are presented as being members of specific groups such as the homeless, the unemployed or Travelling community. They are never presented as members of either the underclass or working class. The coverage further divides the poor into categories of deserving and undeserving by constructing them as either God's or Devil's poor.

Further fragmentation is apparent in the dominant ideology which governs the coverage of poverty on RTE. This ideology draws upon liberal economics, Catholicism and voluntarism. Although each set of ideas are distinctive in their own right, all are used to serve the interests of the powerful. While some broadcasters might defend their coverage of poverty through reference to the composite and diverse nature of that coverage, the fact that each of the above sets of ideas help maintain unequal power relations cannot be refuted.

Thompson (1990) also argued that dominant ideology was reproduced through the process of reification. He asserted that asymmetrical relations of domination were created and reproduced through the representation of these unequal relations as being unrelated to social structure or history. In short, he meant that unequal relations of power were represented as being natural and inevitable. The way in which poverty stories are framed within RTE's coverage would suggest that the process of reification is at work. The coverage starts from a position that takes poverty for granted. The contradictory relationships evident in the coverage between the powerful and the poor goes largely unquestioned. Consciously or otherwise the routines of production which govern the creation of poverty stories turn poverty into a story or

report which reoccurs on a seasonal basis or when the powerful see fit to engage in good works or social engineering.

Theoretical Implications of Main Findings

The project's main findings have a number of important theoretical implications. These concern the continued use of the concept of dominant ideology, the media's role in reproducing ideological hegemony and the future direction which research into the media's ideological role might take. The project has attempted to prove that television is an important source of ideology in the late twentieth century. It has reflected upon how RTE's television output about poverty in the period 1992-1993 is indicative of bigger ideological shifts in Irish society.

This study would support the viewpoint that the concept of ideology within social theory generally and within media analyses specifically should be retained. As I argued in Chapter Two the continued use of the concept of ideology should rest upon accepting Thompson's (1990) revised definition of ideology which emphasises the notion of dominant ideology. The findings of this study underline the necessity to reject a simplistic materialist conception of ideology and by implication such a rejection involves its replacement by a more critical version of the concept. It is the contention of this study that the media does indeed have a central role in the reproduction of dominant ideology.

The task facing those who wish to theorise about the media's ideological role in late capitalist society is one which involves recognising that not all media messages are ideological in the sense of reproducing asymmetrical relations of power. The job which those interested in analysing the media's ideological role are faced with then is one which involves determining which media messages are in fact supportive of the status quo and the reproduction of unequal power relations. This position involves accepting the fact that within the multiplicity of media messages are competing sets of ideas some of which are ideological and some which are not.

Nevertheless it is possible to identify the existence of hegemonic ideology within television texts. Through combining content analysis with an understanding of the production context of a range of television programmes it is feasible to identify the ideological positioning of media messages. This research strategy is based upon a critical understanding of the make-up of media texts themselves and an appreciation of the ideological world view held by their creators.

The evidence put forward in this study would support the view that the media are potent sources of ideological hegemony. But there is also room for a limited amount of dissension within the overall make up of media messages. Such space for views and opinions which go against the grain of a society's dominant ideology may in fact contribute to the continued existence of a dominant social order. This may be achieved through creating the illusion that the media in fact represent all viewpoints in society. The existence of ideas which challenge the status quo however means that those who wish to theorise about the media's ideological role cannot readily assume that the media simply reproduces dominant ideology all of the time. There are occasions when such ideology is challenged in either a moderate or radical way.

If television's reproduction of ideology is to be effective it hinges ultimately upon the acceptance of its ideology by significant numbers of the audience. Future research into the area under scrutiny in this study might opt to include a hermeneutic dimension to its research model. Specifically, in addition to production and content analyses it might ask how audiences make sense of television ideology. This approach would not only help counter some of the doubts raised about ideological analysis of the media but also provide some further insights into how ideological messages are variously read by their audiences.

8:3 The Poor Must Wait...The Limits of Liberalism

The society in which RTE television operates is characterised by rising unemployment, growing levels of dependency and increasing levels of poverty. The class divide has been accentuated in recent times, with the benefits of the so-called

economic recovery reaching only the powerful. Ireland's wooing of multi-national capital has brought some employment, but at a cost. Multi-nationals have come and gone, paid little or no tax, and have paid poor wages to non-unionised labour.¹⁶⁰ State policy has ensured both rural decline, and an increasing urban population where many of the social problems, such as poor housing, crime and drug problems, common to cities in other parts of the world, persist.¹⁶¹

In economic terms, the dominant ideology at work in Irish society is that of liberalism. Even those on the left who once favoured state enterprise and publicly owned industry have succumbed to the lure of the mixed economy. The watchwords of the economically and politically powerful are those of 'enterprise culture', 'tax incentives', 'market forces' and 'slimming down the state'. Meanwhile, the poor are being told to wait, and unemployment has been accepted as an inevitable feature of the economy for the foreseeable future.

Guided by a watered down version of monetarism, the Irish state has retreated from its provider role. Both privately and publicly owned media have accepted this turn of events as a *fait accompli*. Economistic interpretations of a liberal or right-wing hue dominate media coverage of economic issues. There is a decided lack of connectivity in how the media analyse the various aspects of the crisis in which we find ourselves. The media ignore the links between the various parts of the poverty/inequality chain, and treat unemployment, poverty, educational disadvantage or health cuts as separate and distinct problems. The bigger picture of these problems as part of a process of capitalism in crisis is hidden from view. Thus, in the case of RTE, poverty and economic crisis are cleanly divided between programmes such as *The Late Late Show*, which annually devotes an entire programme to resolving economic problems through 'entrepreneurship', and the bi-annual *People in Need Telethon*, which locates poverty and need within the realm of entertainment.

¹⁶⁰ For a critical account of the performance of multi-nationals in Ireland see the various essays in Foley and McAleese (eds.) 1991.

¹⁶¹ For a development of these themes see Waters (1995).

Although the political elite do occasionally acknowledge that there are pressing problems for society, in terms of poverty and unemployment, their failure to respond to these issues, in an imaginative or radical way, indicates that they are taken up with the containment of these problems rather than eliminating their root cause. The pain is being massaged while in fact radical surgery is necessary.

Ireland is an example of a late capitalist society, which is lurching from crisis to crisis. Although the much-heralded success of government policy in relation to inflation and spending is frequently referred to by politicians and the media alike, the inequality in terms of who benefits from these policies is ignored. Within mainstream politics, there is a noticeable absence of a critique of the capitalist system, with the main left- and right-wing political parties all scrambling for the centre and the support of the middle class.

In addition to these ideological shifts, the state has increasingly supported the notion that much of its own activities can be replaced by the voluntary activities of individuals and community groups. Thus the long tradition of voluntarism, most associated with the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, has been incorporated by the state in terms of its own liberal economic agenda.¹⁶² So to what extent are these ideologies evident in RTE's coverage of poverty?

With very few exceptions, the ideology which governs RTE's coverage of social and economic affairs is in line with the liberalism which pervades Irish society. More specifically, the dominant ideological position identifiable in RTE's coverage of Irish poverty is that it is a containable problem which is to be left in the hands of the relatively comfortable. RTE's reproduction of a decidedly hegemonic interpretation of poverty is to be explained through reference to the dominant images and messages of the coverage and also through an appreciation of the codes of practice which govern the production of poverty stories.

¹⁶² See for example O'Carroll (1985) and Devereux (1992).

Poverty is individualised, personalised and poverty problems are not as a rule portrayed as having structural causes. What are occasionally portrayed as crises for individual members of the poor are seen as being resolvable through the actions of the comfortable. In tandem with poverty coverage in the Irish print media (Gibbons, 1984a), television legitimises the ideology of voluntarism and charity. Telethon television places the onus on the audience to respond; fictional television suggests that solutions lie in the actions of family and community; news coverage relies on the interventions made by the powerful and even the more critical current affairs documentary suggests moderate social reform as the answer to poverty.

Economy and society are largely invisible in this form of coverage, which sees poverty as an individualised problem with largely individualised solutions. The relative invisibility of poverty coverage itself is in turn complicated by the fact that Irish television is quite selective in whom it chooses to represent as the poor. This functions to randomise the problem of poverty and again serves to avoid any real examination of poverty as a societal or structural problem.

An important set of threads running through this coverage is that of religious imagery and ideology. McVerry is portrayed as a Christ-like figure, who is cast as a lone saviour of the poor. This theme which is replicated in the news coverage of President Mary Robinson in the Third World. It is the Christian ethos of the centre for homeless boys, which is seen in the telethon as their redemption. News coverage of the deaths of the homeless in 1992 also drew on Catholic iconography to narrate their stories. Pathos replaces cause, and functions to absolve the more powerful in the audience of their real responsibility.

There are strong parallels here between how RTE treats Irish poverty and the way in which television in general has dealt with the poverty of the Third or Developing World. While he does indicate some reservations with their position, Ignatieff (1985:62) notes that Marxist analysis of media images of Ethiopia suggest that:

... the shame of the Ethiopian images ... lie not in what they show, but in what they suppress.

Economic and political relations become human relations, which serve to produce images without either a cause or a history. This position can without doubt be applied to poverty coverage in both telethon and TV drama. Both types of programme are examples of how poverty coverage takes place in a setting which abstracts the individual examples of poverty problems from having either an historical or social context. Indeed, in the case of the telethon, the medium itself has, as Tester (1994) points out, begun to outweigh the messages of the genre. Thus the focus is as much, if not more, on the technological possibilities which make the telethon feasible than the very reason why the media need to repeatedly intervene to resolve problems of need and poverty.

While I am prepared to concede that news coverage in particular may be somewhat more ambiguous in that it occasionally points to *some* causal factors of poverty, the evidence to support the Marxist position holds firm (Ignatieff, 1985). The occasional unveiling by television of the contributory factors which help to create poverty is, however, easily outweighed by the roles which television offers the powerful and comfortable in ritualised alleviation of some people's poverty.

Across all of the four genres considered in this study, the ideology of charity and voluntarism dominates. This must be seen in the context of both Irish Catholicism, and the more recent conversion which the Irish state has undergone in terms of encouraging community and voluntary activity. The emphasis on this type of response to structural problems serves to decontextualise poverty in terms of its causes. It also, as Gibbons (1984a) points out, serves to reaffirm the status of those who give and those who must wait. Taken collectively, there is an unambiguous message in all of this coverage, which says that poverty problems can be resolved through minor adjustments, social engineering and good deeds. Change of a radical nature in societal terms or for those who decide to give is deemed to be outside of the

frame. The poor are thus left waiting until the next telethon or next documentary which touches upon aspects of their lives in a superficial manner.

8:4 The Hidden Ireland

At the outset of this project, the scope and limitations of Irish social science discourse on the theme of poverty were stressed. Despite an identifiable growth in the amount of research on poverty, the experiences of the poor themselves remain largely hidden. This study has sought to look at another form of cultural reproduction in Irish society to see whether or not something more could be gleaned about the issue of poverty and the experiences of the poor. Our investigation has led us to conclude that, although there is some value in analysing television coverage of poverty, the coverage itself has serious limitations and shortcomings.

For the 12-month time frame considered in this study, only one current affairs documentary took poverty as its theme. The 14-hour telethon allotted just 11 minutes and 4 seconds to selected examples of the needy. Fictional television was shown to give meagre attention to poverty problems and what coverage existed was of a shallow kind. Although television news out-performed all other genres in terms of the extent of poverty coverage, there remains the problem that news about poverty is subject to seasonal fluctuations, and lacks any concrete policy in terms of how the poor should be filmed or interviewed.

The Irish poor, despite their numbers, remain largely invisible on our television screens. RTE's coverage of Irish poverty is narrow and does not take account of the complexity of the many facets of this social problem. The Irish poor, as Chapter One noted, include the working class, the long-term unemployed, women, children, small landholders, the elderly, the disabled, the homeless and the Travelling community. Such variation and complexity is rarely visible in the sum of RTE's television coverage of poverty.

Hiding The Poor

The process of rendering the poor hidden is a result of a number of factors.

They are as follows.

(1) There is a tendency for TV programmes either to ignore the issue altogether or to atomise the problem by breaking poverty down into separate issues.

(2) The fact that the dominant codes used in producing television images of the poor render them faceless or else as being at a distance from the assumed middle-class audience.

(3) While there are of course individual broadcasters who are concerned with poverty and inequality, the irreconcilable twin problems of RTE's position in the power structure in Irish society, and the pervasive middle-class culture which dominates in the organisation result in a situation where the extent to which the problem can be investigated and reported on is restricted.

(4) The viewing and portrayal of unemployment — arguably the greatest cause of contemporary Irish poverty — as essentially being a policy issue rather than a lived experience for large numbers of Irish people has led to a separation of unemployment and its attendant poverty.

(5) The individualisation and personalisation of poverty problems allows for the effective construction of television stories but reduces the likelihood of poverty being viewed as a structural problem.

(6) TV stories about poverty are largely mediated stories whereby the accent is placed on the agents of the poor.

(7) The coverage of poverty is quite selective with a strong emphasis on the deserving or God's poor.

(8) The Devil's poor are subjected to an interesting treatment in that they are either ignored altogether, aestheticised, or else transformed from being the Devil's to God's poor.

I deal with points 3–8 in some detail in the remaining sections of this chapter, but prior to doing so, I wish to make some comments on points 1 and 2.

Poverty may be ignored by programme makers who choose to see it as being outside the perceived remit of their programme area. This was clearly the case in terms of the makers of the fictional series *Glenroe*, who saw their prime function as

being entertainment. The creators of telethon similarly stress the entertainment and fund-raising dimensions of the programme at the expense of critical coverage of poverty, which becomes translated into stories about 'need' as opposed to poverty *per se*. Both the makers of news and current affairs programmes may be seen to ignore poverty issues, because of the competitive arena in which they operate, where poverty is reduced to being 'just another issue', to quote one newsman. Their reluctance to suggest a poverty related theme may also hinge on their expectations in terms of what they believe will be accepted as a plausible and interesting story by the programme editor.

The ethnography of media production offered in this study would confirm that RTE like other media organisations has its gatekeepers who, in this instance, both allow and disallow poverty issues onto the agendas of television programmes.¹⁶³

There is also a sense, however, of poverty being disregarded because of fears of alienating the television audience. My fieldwork within RTE television would suggest that the reticence of programme makers takes two main forms. In the analysis in Chapter Four of the *Tuesday File* documentary, it is suggested that programme makers within this area are concerned about alienating the poorer sections of their audience by reminding them of their poverty.

There is also, nevertheless, evidence that programme makers in other parts of RTE television are shy of examining poverty issues in an in-depth way, for fear of alienating their middle-class viewership. The attempts by the maker of *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* to unnerve RTE's middle class audience stand in sharp contrast to the cosy and comforting images produced in fictional and telethon television which unveil only the safer aspects of poverty. With the exception of our current affairs case study, the ideological positioning of RTE's television coverage of poverty identify with the views of middle Ireland.

¹⁶³ See for example Tuchman (1978), Gans (1979) and Gitlin (1983).

The poor, when they are visible, are constructed as the 'other' of the middle class audience. This type of coverage is constructed in such a way as to allow for the re-affirmation of the comfortable, showing them to be actively doing something about the weaker members of society. In Propp's (1928) terms, they are the heroes of this narrative convention, cast in the role of saviours of the victimised poor.

There are parallels between Scannell's (1980) account of BBC's radio coverage of unemployment and the way in which RTE television approaches the issue of poverty. Both position their coverage in terms of a middle-class audience and draw upon narratives, which effectively conceal the true nature of the problem, while also managing to legitimise voluntarist solutions.

Television coverage of poverty is constrained further by the fact that programme makers are driven by the need to produce fictional and factual stories, not about poverty as a phenomenon in its own right, with its many causes and effects, but largely about singular aspects of poverty. The net result of this atomisation of poverty is a collection of disjointed texts which, taken together, show how media coverage of poverty works to frame poverty as a problem without either causes or long-term solutions.

Following Sorenson (1991) and Barthes (1973), we can say that RTE's coverage of Irish poverty occasionally admits to the occurrence of 'accidental evil', but also manages to construct these stories as being cause-less.

A further dimension to the marginalisation and shrouding of the poor comes about through the use of particular codes in the production of poverty texts. The dominant codes used by RTE television work in four main ways. These are:

- (1) The portrayal of the poor as faceless and voiceless.
- (2) The representation of the poor as being socially distant.
- (3) The replacement of the poor through the use of spokespersons.
- (4) The use of symbols to connote meaning about poverty, rather than focusing on individuals who are poor.

The codes used by broadcasters to render the poor both faceless and voiceless were shown to take on a number of forms in this study. Although it lacks a set of formal rules, television news repeatedly portrays the poor as being faceless. It draws largely on a style of filming, which shows headless shots, vague/distorted images of the poor or else welfare queues filmed from behind. In the telethon, although the needy are clearly identifiable in the appeal films, the sole examples of the Devil's poor — the homeless boys, are hooded, while engaged in 'deviant' behaviour.

The separateness of the poor from the assumed middle-class audience is also emphasised through the use of filming styles, which indicate social distance and exclusion. This approach structured the making of the *Tuesday File* documentary, which stressed the gulf between the comfortable and the struggling. Although numerically scarce within fictional television, the minimal existence and visibility of the Irish poor is countered by the fact that while some of the poor are visible as characters, their material living conditions are almost entirely absent from the screen. Within television news, the portrayal of the Travelling community in particular re-affirms the social exclusion experienced by Travellers in Irish society.¹⁶⁴ Chapter Five noted that news coverage of the Travellers emphasises the problematic nature of their poverty. Their separateness is reinforced through the use of images which are ambiguous, shot from a distance or where Travellers are entirely absent.

A constant, which exists in all four genres analysed in this study, is the proclivity of television programmes to depend on spokespersons rather than the poor themselves to articulate the nature and extent of their difficulties. This finding would seem to confirm the arguments put forward by O'Gorman (1994), who criticised Irish journalists for depending too heavily on those who act as spokespersons for the poor.

For broadcasters, this may seem like the only practicable way of constructing stories which will be reliable and which stand a chance of being accepted by programme editors. I am willing to concede that there are some broadcasters who feel

¹⁶⁴ See McLoughlin (1994).

that there are dangers involved in using some of society's more vulnerable members as interviewees. This was clearly the case with the maker of the *Tuesday File* documentary, as well as with at least one of the news journalists to whom I spoke.

The problem could be partially resolved by widening the scope of what those in television see as representative examples of the Irish poor. While acknowledging that there may very well be a reluctance by some people to appear on the national airwaves as the poor, the over-dependency on middle men and women creates its own difficulties. The greatest problem with this practice is that it serves to reaffirm the positions of those who are already relatively powerful.

At the extreme end of the scale, in the telethon, the owners of capital are projected as being the benign benefactors of the poor. Within news and current affairs television the politically powerful, the professionals and the volunteers are the focus of poverty stories. The ideology of voluntarism is carried forward into fictional television where the community is seen to have the capacity to cope with poverty problems. The dependency by broadcasters on spokespersons creates difficulties for lobbyists themselves in that those who see themselves as being representative of the poor have to compete with one another for airtime.

A fourth code used by the makers of poverty stories is that of the use of symbols to connote meanings about poverty. Symbols are used not only to make a story more interesting visually, but also to replace the harsher aspects of poverty. Following Hall (1974) and Hall et al. (1976), who suggested that media texts have dominant codes which suggest a preferred reading to viewers, we can say that the use of symbols within poverty texts functions to propound a preferred reading, which can also conform to the dominant views within a society. This allows for the occasional acknowledgement of a problem — what Barthes (1973) referred to as inoculation.

The use of symbols can also function to abstract problems from their root cause. Thus, a starving African child may be used by the media to tell a story about the poverty crises in the Developing World. Yet despite the fact that using the image of a child may be effective in communicative terms, and in provoking a temporary

audience response, the use of the child as symbol also serves to mask the causal factors of poverty. Missing from the frame are the exploitative nature of the world economic order, specifically in terms of the role of the First World banks and the unequal relationship between the First and Third Worlds.

While economic policy issues dominate TV news coverage about unemployment, the unemployed themselves when referred to in the visual text are replaced by logos and queues. The harsh poverty experienced by the Travellers is also articulated symbolically through the use of images which serve to replace that poverty. In a number of the news reports considered in this study, the image of a single tap spilling its water into the wind was substituted for the actual poverty experienced by the Travellers.

It is also possible to identify the use of images and symbols of deprivation which function to narrow the horizons of poverty coverage. Buildings were identified in this study as an important signifier of both poverty and wealth. But in supplanting the poor through the use of delapidated buildings or housing schemes, the resultant coverage locates poverty in a frame which excludes many. Following Baudrillard (1983), we can say that the use of images in this way exhibits the:

... perversity of the relation between the image and its referent, the supposed real. (1983:13)

Images which purport to make texts more realistic in fact serve to mask the true nature of the problem. Irish poverty, as Chapter One argues, affects more than just the destitute, homeless or unemployed. There are also large numbers of working-class people who are poor and socially excluded. Although they may have homes of their own and be in (usually poorly paid) employment, they are poor in the sense of having fewer life-chances, most noticeably perhaps in terms of access to education, but also in terms of general health/well being and life expectancy.¹⁶⁵ These aspects of

¹⁶⁵ For an account of this phenomena, see Nolan (1993).

Irish poverty are generally ignored by the media at the expense of what seem to be more pressing poverty issues. Television's concentration on the dramatic, exotic and immediate, facilitated through the use of set images of poverty, serve therefore to conceal more than they reveal. Chapter Five's analysis of news about poverty showed how selective television can be in its reporting of poverty. The ignoring of working class poverty stands in sharp contrast to the focus by television news on the threat of poverty on the middle classes or the new poor.

Indeed, absent from all of this coverage is any reference to the make-up of the social order which is responsible for much of the deprivation and poverty experienced by large numbers of Irish people. When we talk therefore about the invisibility of poverty in the media, it is important to note that social class is also hidden. The myth of Ireland being a classless society, evident in popular belief, is reinforced by Irish television's portrayal of social problems.

8:5 Devils, Angels and God's Poor: The Construction of Poverty Stories on RTE Television

The analysis undertaken in this study would indicate that a re-casting of the dichotomy of God's and the Devil's poor, as suggested by Golding and Middleton (1982), is necessary to understand fully the way in which television constructs narratives about poverty.

The greatest emphasis is still by far on what RTE television determines to be the deserving poor, but cognisance also needs to be given to the dependency of television on the agents of the poor, many of whom it casts in the role of angel or saviour of those on the margins. In the context of the apparent reticence of Irish television to confront the harsher side of Irish poverty, the way in which the Devil's poor are treated is of particular interest.

The Devil's Poor

With the exception of *Six-One News*, all programmes considered in this study gave scant attention to the plight of those poor whom some in Irish society would see

as undeserving of assistance. The news programme was shown to have dwelt on the perceived problematic nature of two poverty groups — the homeless and the Travelling community.

Although the documentary *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* gave space to the cause of some of those on the margins, their story was a mediated one with the emphasis being placed on the narrator of the programme as being the saviour of the Irish poor. In the telethon, the homeless boys who were also solvent abusers underwent a catharsis to become God's poor. Our analysis of the production context of the telethon also noted that one of the filmmakers involved deliberately edited out a reference to the fact that the home of the Traveller would probably be burnt down in a funeral pyre. A self-consciousness about alienating middle-class viewers ensured that the story was sanitised.

But perhaps the most interesting construction of examples of the Devil's poor take place in fictional television. *Glenroe's* treatment of poverty stories, despite their relative scarcity, manage both to differentiate between the deserving and undeserving unemployed, as well as to aestheticise the poverty of the Travelling community. *Glenroe's* inhabitants, with the exception of one, base their decision to assist the unemployed on the criteria of their membership of a spatial and symbolic community. Those who are outsiders are defined as welfare scroungers and parasites.

There are, interestingly, some connections between the portrayal of some of the unemployed as undeserving in this fictional setting, and in the measured public opinion of Irish society towards the problem of poverty. The *Eurobarometer* survey (1990) demonstrated that in Ireland, while 30% of the sample explained poverty as a result of social injustice, there was also a residual 14% which saw poverty as a result of laziness and lack of will-power. When asked to explain why people are poor, the respondents blamed long-term unemployment (64%), alcoholism/drugs (39%), sickness (25%) and laziness (16%). *Glenroe's* treatment of unemployment mirrors this duality. The programme managed to show how some of the Irish public construct two separate categories of unemployment related poverty.

Glenroe's treatment of the Travelling community is an example of how Irish fictional television chooses to aestheticise the poverty of a group of people demonised by most settled people. A 1984 paper by the ESRI argued that a majority of the settled population exhibited negative attitudes towards the Travelling community: 62% said they were untrustworthy, 75% said they were careless, 68% claimed that they were noisy. The research was in agreement with MacGreil's (1977) study of Irish prejudice and intolerance. In that work, 70% of the sample interviewed said that they would not marry a Traveller, with the majority (62%) saying that Travellers were not socially acceptable.

Glenroe has in fact converted the Travelling community into the deserving or God's poor. Through the main Traveller character Blackie Connors, the programme has managed to balance some instruction of its audience about Traveller ways, with an acute shyness in showing the harsher side of the Traveller experience. This is achieved by locating the Traveller character outside of the main action of the series, and by constructing Blackie Connors as one of what Thomas and Callanan (1982) referred to as the happy poor. This abstraction of the Travellers from their cultural and material context works to placate audience members, as well as render significant aspects of people's lives invisible.

God's Poor

There is evidently a blurring of distinctions taking place between the Devil's and God's poor. In both the telethon and in fictional television, the demarcation between both categories is becoming less certain. God's poor, however, remain the dominant group who are given coverage. All of the segments, with the temporary exception of one, conform to the criteria of being deserving. Thus the focus is on children, the handicapped, the elderly and the unemployed who are willing to work. The documentary analysed in this study is a further example of the growing complexity of poverty coverage in that it manages to give attention to both God's and the Devil's poor within the confines of one programme. The McVerry documentary

ties together the experiences of both the homeless and the handicapped, whom it sees as being unified through their marginalisation. Television news also exhibits the tendency to cover both the deserving and undeserving poor. News, like the telethon and TV drama, exhibits the tendency to be able to temporarily transform the poor from being Devil's to God's poor. Thus the annual story of checking out how the homeless or needy have fared on Christmas Day sees television news temporarily adopting the position that these down-and-outs are, for one day at least, to be treated with sympathy. This practice of portraying the homeless as God's poor on Christmas Day functions to reassure and absolve the audience.

Agents and Angels

A third and most significant theme in RTE's construction of poverty stories is its reliance on those who act on behalf of the poor. While the assertions of Whiteley and Winyard (1990) and Mawby et al. (1979) are confirmed in terms of how the media set the poverty agenda, none more evident perhaps than in how television news determines the seasonality of poverty as a story, the relationship between the media and those who purport to represent the poor is an important part of the equation. It is this relationship above all others which determines the final outcome of television coverage of poverty.

These intermediaries may be divided into the 'agents' and the 'angels'. The agents of the poor are typically either formal statutory or voluntary organisations which seek to represent either the poor in general or a specific social group who may be poor. The angels, on the other hand, include individuals who are already well known to the public in another role or ordinary people, who have, to quote Monaco (1978), been made strangely important. The use of these agents by television can be explained in terms of established relationships, which agent groups may have with individual journalists or producers or, as in the case of telethon television, through their connections with the organisation responsible for the bi-annual event.

The tendency to use spokespersons, rather than actual members of the poor, may be driven not only by a concern for those affected by poverty but may also simply be determined by the practical exigencies of producing television stories under pressure of time. It is interesting to note that, in three of the programme areas examined in this study, producers and reporters commented on the inarticulacy of the poor and noted the difficulties which this presented them with in the production of television reports or features.

The use by the media of agent groups brings with it a further set of problems. Groups which represent the poverty lobby in either general or specific terms are in competition with one another to gain access to the airwaves. Their success or failure in getting their cause on to programme agendas may be determined by the following features:

- (1) The extent to which journalists may view their research findings or charity appeal as being sufficiently newsworthy or novel.
- (2) The fact that they may be in competition with each other and other more powerful lobby groups for airtime.
- (3) The nature of their working relationship with the journalist or producer concerned.

My fieldwork would indicate that poverty is not treated any differently from a range of other topics by programme makers. The urgency which many outside of the media might feel about the problem is (with some exceptions) not that evident within the world of Irish television. In addition to this, there is evidence to suggest that journalists and producers adopt what they see as a pragmatic stance in relation to poverty stories. In the case of news and current affairs, they will only suggest a story of this kind if they see it as a 'safe bet', which is likely to be accepted by the programme editor.

The likelihood of the demands of those who seek to represent the poor being met by programme makers is qualified further by both the activities of more powerful groups with greater resources at their disposal and the nature of the relationship

between agents and journalists. In at least three instances during my fieldwork, I encountered poverty stories being rejected because of a poor relationship between the journalist and relevant organisations. Common to all three rejections was the fact that the poverty groups wished to determine the agenda of the reports. In one of these three cases, the journalist opted to do a similar story with another 'more co-operative' poverty group.

But perhaps the second category of intermediary used in television stories about poverty is of even greater significance. The evidence from news, current affairs and telethon television would suggest that a significant role is offered to individuals whom the media construct as the saviours of the poor. Harrison and Palmer's (1986) references to the angels of mercy stories constructed by the British tabloid media can equally be applied to Irish television. The analysis offered in this study would confirm Harvey's (1984) assertions that the media focus on the personalities involved in helping the poor rather than the poor themselves.

Poverty issues seem more likely to become newsworthy when elite figures are involved. As Chapter Five noted, disability, unemployment and Third World hunger became news stories owing to the actions of President Mary Robinson. Like Fr. McVerry in the *Tuesday File* documentary and Fr. Rock in the homeless boys segment in the telethon, she is cast as an heroic Christlike figure who is shown to be the saviour of the poor. This focus on the elite is replicated in both telethon and fictional television. The rural middle class are the ones who solve *Glenroe's* social problems. In the telethon, the broadcasters and other personalities are projected as those who can save the day. But, as is evidenced in the telethon, there is room also for ordinary people to become heroes, albeit temporarily. Through their involvement in the unusual and the bizarre, ordinary folk become fund-raisers, and by extension heroes, who help what the telethon safely refers to as the needy. Following Propp (1928) and Sorenson (1991), we can say that the elite, who are shown to help the poor, are mythologized into heroic characters who become synonymous with assisting the poor.

These angels appear to be immune from any form of questioning themselves as to their status or actual culpability for social inequality. On the rare occasions that television texts go against the hegemonic grain to question the roles of the powerful, it is done, as in the *Tuesday File* documentary, in such a way as to question the powerful without running the risk of censure. Thus in our case study in Chapter Four, while blame is apportioned to the rich and powerful for the poverty of a large proportion of Irish society, the rich and powerful remain safe in their anonymity, facilitated through the use of symbolic imagery of wealth and power.

Television stories about poverty are therefore mediated stories, which are framed in such a way as to focus on the good works of the relatively comfortable. All of the programme areas considered in this project gave a primacy to the agents and angels of the poor. This type of coverage serves to legitimise solutions to poverty problems, which are the result of actions by heroic individuals or statutory/voluntary organisations. The prospect of structural changes of a more permanent nature to the problems of poverty and inequality are conspicuous through their absence from television texts.

8:6 Policy Implications of Research Findings

Introduction

The arguments thus far in this study make the prospect of a critical and comprehensive coverage of poverty on television seem quite bleak. It is, therefore, with an amount of caution that I suggest a number of policy changes for RTE television which might contribute towards improving the situation.

Policy changes within RTE television, or a shift in the behaviour of poverty lobby groups, can only be expected to bring about minimal change. The problem of poverty can, I hold, only be addressed, through a radical restructuring of society. To suggest changes in how the media approach the problem, can at best, be expected to

facilitate a better and more effective exchange of ideas on the issue of poverty. The task of removing poverty permanently is not within the gift of the media.

Within its remit, however, of being a public service broadcaster, RTE television has a duty to its public, in terms of both reflecting its public's diversity, as well as stimulating debate amongst that public.¹⁶⁶ Tempering Habermas's (1989) notion of the public sphere with some cautious realism, the most we can hope for are programmes that will challenge the public and, more importantly perhaps, influence the powerful. RTE television, however, should accept that it need not be a passive actor in terms of this question. It has to consider carefully its role as a public service broadcaster and within this consideration, it can choose to make programmes that will, at the very least, challenge its public. There are plenty of precedents for this in RTE television's own history across the spectrum of factual and fictional programmes.

RTE's main radio network *Radio One* has an impressive track record in terms of coverage of poverty at home and abroad. There has, however, been some criticism of the positioning of this type of coverage outside of the mainstream schedule. Nevertheless, given that poverty issues are treated with regularity, in some depth, and significantly involving the poor themselves, the programmes are, on the whole, more critical and informative.

Paddy O'Gorman's *Queueing for a Living* has since 1984 inverted the way in which the media approach poverty issues.¹⁶⁷ His programme features queues of the dispossessed who speak without intermediaries. Other programmes such as *On The Tobar* and *Not So Different* deal exclusively with the needs and interests of specific poverty groups, such as the Travelling community or the disabled. More recently, *The Live Register* has examined the problem of unemployment with a very definite

¹⁶⁶ See Scannell (1990) for a discussion of the concept of public service broadcasting in a British context.

¹⁶⁷ O'Gorman's programme, currently broadcast on Saturday mornings from 11:00 to 11:30am, attracts 185,000 people aged 15 years plus or 7% of the adult population. Source: *JNLR/MRBI Quarter Hour Listenership Figures*.

emphasis on the experiences of the unemployed themselves, particularly in the face of state bureaucracy. Third World poverty has also received coverage, that is both sustained and critical, in the shape of programmes such as *Worlds Apart*.

One could speculate at this juncture why radio coverage of poverty seems to be more comprehensive than its television counterpart. RTE's radio coverage of poverty and other social issues can be explained in terms of a number of factors. Its main radio service has retained its public service ethos in the face of competition from the privatised local radio sector. Given its position as the dominant force in Irish broadcasting, *RTE Radio One* has successfully used a policy of making programmes which are critical and informative as its hallmark. Part of the answer may also lie in the nature of the medium, which is non-visual, and allows the poor to be heard and not seen. The issues of visibility, and therefore identification do not arise in this context. The differences between RTE television and radio must also be seen in terms of divergences in the overall emphases of the stations.

Radio One is closer to the public service ideal, whereby informing the audience and catering for minority viewpoints is held up as the station's *raison d'être*. RTE television has, and even more noticeably in recent times, a stronger emphasis on entertainment than information giving. There is, as this study argues, less scope on RTE television in its present state for coverage of social issues which is comprehensive. RTE television has had to face increasing competition from international stations. This factor combined with escalating production costs and stiff competition for viewers has seen the station buy-in an increasing number of independently made lifestyle type programmes. Thus, in television terms, the public sphere has contracted in shape and size.

Policy Changes

In terms of changes which may make some difference in RTE's television coverage of poverty, several recommendations can be made which concern RTE

television and poverty lobby groups generally, and the four programme areas in this study specifically.

At the macro-level, RTE television could improve its coverage of poverty issues by adopting the following as station policy:

(1) There is an urgent need for the station to devise a code of practice for its journalists and producers which deals specifically with how the poor should be filmed and interviewed. The evidence in this study would suggest that too much depends on the decision making of individual journalists and producers.

(2) There is a necessity for the station to recognise the special needs and interests of a significant proportion of its public. The station might consider the setting up of a study group which, drawing upon the expertise of the various poverty lobby groups and media experts, would address the apparent uneven and narrow nature of poverty coverage. Such a study group would also need to address the basic question of what Irish poverty is and how existing poverty research identifies the poor.

(3) In terms of improving the effectiveness of its coverage, the station should adopt a two-pronged approach which would facilitate a more comprehensive analysis of poverty issues. Clearly the extent and nature of coverage within news and current affairs needs to be addressed. In addition to the necessary changes within mainstream television, there are also possibilities within more specialised programme slots. In the past RTE television has had some success with its *Access* series and more recently it has commissioned a series of video-diaries. Admittedly, the placement of poverty issues on programmes which are off-peak, in viewing terms, raises questions about further marginalisation of the poor. But if this proposed development were to take place in conjunction with changes in mainstream programming, a more rounded form of coverage could emerge.

(4) In the course of my research I found that many broadcasters assumed that they knew what the audience wanted from their programmes. They may very well be confusing success in TAM ratings terms with audience satisfaction with their programmes. In the specific context of the concerns raised about the quality of RTE television's news and current affairs coverage of poverty (see Fisher, 1993), it is essential that RTE commission a large-scale piece of research on audience satisfaction with coverage of this issue.¹⁶⁸ This research

¹⁶⁸ The creators of *Glenroe* already use a similar strategy. Representative samples of audience members meet and discuss the effectiveness of the programme's storylines. Meeting a number of times during the *Glenroe* season, they discuss the pros and cons of particular storylines. There is a strong

might address two important aspects of this question. Firstly, it should examine general audience interest in poverty questions as programme subject matter. Secondly, it should attempt to address how specific poverty groups feel about the kind of coverage of poverty which is already on offer on RTE. Such a research project would give RTE personnel a clearer understanding of the needs of at least one-quarter of their audience and also perhaps contribute to better working relations between RTE and some of its public. This work would in turn complement the findings of this study which RTE had the foresight to support.

(5) RTE television needs to recognise that many of the agent groups which represent the poor are working in a voluntary capacity and on budgets which are already overstretched or practically non-existent. In an environment where the production of information is increasingly in the hands of communications and public relations specialists, the competition and disadvantage faced by poverty organisations in accessing airtime is increasing. RTE television could offer some assistance in offering a short communications skills training course to poverty lobby groups. As well as providing lobbyists with more skills, the project could assist RTE personnel in broadening both their definition of Irish poverty and their network of contacts for future programmes. The sometimes problematic relationship between RTE television and those it films in making poverty stories could therefore be improved.

Changes in the four Programme Areas

In addition to suggesting the above policy changes, I wish also to address how specifically the four programme areas considered in this study might be improved. My suggestions range from the moderate to the radical. All are intended to improve the overall flow of information on Irish television about what is the most serious issue facing contemporary Irish society. In making these suggestions, I am taking the view that it is indeed possible for RTE television to introduce changes in the programme areas which most affect its coverage of poverty. Given that two of the four programme areas considered in this study are as a result of recent policy decisions

emphasis in these focus group discussions on character development. Audience members are asked whether the actions of the characters they have viewed are in keeping with their previous behaviour. The statements made by these panels were referred to frequently by the makers of *Glenroe* when they were asked about the tastes their audience have *vis-à-vis* entertainment and social issues.

taken by RTE in relation to current affairs and telethon television, it is possible that decisions could either be reversed or at the very least modified as a result of critical evaluation.

Recommendations

The People in Need Telethon

RTE should consider the abolition of this programme stream. Telethon television is responsible for reproducing an ideological perspective which promotes charity as the solution to structural inequalities. The station would need to consider carefully its long-term commitment to programming of this type, and whether or not RTE would wish to be associated with a programme which emphasises temporary, quick-fix solutions to poverty and need.

There is also evidence from the experiences of other broadcasting networks that the television audience is growing tired of this form of programming and therefore its shelf-life may be in question. In addition to this, RTE would need to contemplate the effectiveness of expending a relatively large volume of resources on this type of television event. If diverted away from programming of this type, the money could be better spent on producing more critical coverage in either the current affairs or proposed revamped access television spheres.

At the very least, the formula which has governed the production of previous telethons should be examined. Chapter Seven indicated that there is a critical imbalance between the high visibility of the corporate sector and those on the receiving end of donations. It is essential that the differences between 'ordinary people' volunteering money to the appeals and the motives of the corporate sector be recognised. If this media event is to be allowed to continue, the scope of whom the programme considers to be poor needs to be widened. Coverage of those on the margins need not necessarily be either of a sanitised or gloomy nature. A refocussing on the way in which many of the marginalised have taken control of their own

destinies, through community development, would be both interesting in televisual terms, as well as educative for others who wish to follow this path.

Current Affairs Television

By far the most critical coverage of Irish poverty came from RTE television's current affairs division. Despite apparent interest in covering poverty related issues, Chapter Four indicated that programme personnel face increasing difficulty in getting programmes of this kind onto the agenda. The recent rationalisation and subdivision of current affairs television has had a demonstrably negative impact on the production of critical and efficient television. By critical and efficient, I mean programmes which will challenge the public and the powerful, as well as being both responsive and reflective.

There is, evidently, an amount of support within current affairs television for a return to a more flexible programme structure. Such a structure should be able to respond to issues as they arise, and also allow for the making of programmes which require more time and resources.

If, hypothetically speaking, a producer wished to investigate the activities of the rich and powerful, the present state of current affairs television would dictate that the programme fit within one of three narrowly defined programme slots. Such a programme would almost inevitably demand that the producer be given time and resources to carry out her investigation and at present the pressures of meeting tight deadlines would militate against this. The likelihood of those in the private sector, who increasingly supply current affairs documentaries to RTE, investigating the rich and powerful is doubtful, for both ideological and legal reasons.

It is proposed, therefore, to improve current affairs coverage through using a programme structure which would be more flexible and allow greater space for the investigation of critical social, economic and political issues. In addition to this, current affairs television rather than the variety/entertainment division of RTE should be responsible for the commissioning of a series of video-diaries. An attempt should

be made to ensure that the video-diaries include the poor who otherwise have been ignored by mainstream television programmes.¹⁶⁹

Television News

Although problematic in certain respects, RTE television news, like its current affairs counterpart, has definite prospects in terms of improvement. Despite a tendency to focus on the supposed problematic nature of some poverty groups, there is no evidence to suggest that the news has engaged in moral panics about the poor such as the scroungerphobia apparent in the print media (Golding and Middleton, 1979, 1982; Deacon, 1978; Barkin and Gurevitch, 1983).

The makers of television news will, however, have to address poverty news in terms of its seasonality, overdependency on agents, overuse of stereotypical imagery, and in the way in which the gathering of news is organised.

Those involved in the creation of television news have to accept the dangers inherent in falling into the trap of reproducing poverty news simply in terms of custom and practice. Above all of the other genres considered in this study, television news is the one in which the public place greatest trust. Newsmakers if they wish to stimulate debate and challenge their public, need to break away from the formulas which have traditionally governed news making.

Admittedly, there has in the last 18 months been some attempt to address the overuse of spokespersons and agent groups in the making of unemployment stories. But television news needs to go much further than that. It would be possible to implement basic changes which would go some way to redress the imbalance in the news year. The poor are still poor in the spring and summer months and have to deal with other crises in their lives which could form the basis of a series of special reports.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ The six video-diary programmes to be broadcast by RTE television in 1996 are not overtly concerned with poverty issues.

¹⁷⁰ Two examples of crises which affect large numbers of the poor at other times of the year are the cost of the Catholic First Communion ceremony during May and the costs involved in returning

The introduction of a code of practice for journalists, camera operators and editors to guide the production of poverty stories would be of particular benefit to newsmakers. Amongst other things, it should set out firm guidelines on what is permissible in the making of reports of this kind. The overuse of stereotypical imagery of specific poverty groups should also be addressed. Part of the problem here lies in the repeated use of library material which results in stock images of the poor.

Finally, some consideration should be given to the way in which poverty news is gathered. As it stands, poverty stories are filed by either desk reporters or the station's Religious and Social Affairs Correspondent. The placing of social affairs in a joint portfolio tells us something about the priorities of newsmakers. Industry, education and legal affairs all have separate briefs. It is essential that social affairs be given a brief of its own.

Television Drama

Chapter Seven discussed at length the limitations and possibilities of fictional television in terms of the coverage of social issues. RTE's failure to deal with working class life generally, and the trials and tribulations of the poorer members of the public specifically needs to be addressed immediately.

Television drama can be entertaining, educative and controversial at the same time. Expressly, there is a need for TV drama programmes such as *Glenroe* and *Fair City* to engage in more risk taking and reflect more in terms of the realities of rural and urban life. It is possible for soap opera to portray working class life in terms of all of its joys and sorrows. It is equally possible to produce television which is both controversial and interesting and which can provoke the audience into re-examining a particular social problem. Without going down the pathway of voyeurism or tokenism, soap opera, perhaps more than any other genre, has the possibility of exploring social issues in an imaginative way. As I argue in Chapter Seven, there are

children to school in September. For a treatment of the latter theme in one Limerick community affected by poverty see O'Donoghue (1991).

lessons to be learned from Channel 4's *Brookside*, which has managed to combine entertainment with the exploration of social issues in a credible and sustained way.

8:6 Outside The Palace ...

This research was undertaken at a time of great change in Irish broadcasting. The publication in 1995 of the *Green Paper on Broadcasting* acknowledges the challenges facing Irish broadcasters in the public and private sectors. The environment in which RTE operates as a public service broadcaster has been changed in a radical way in recent years. At home, it faces increasing competition from the private radio sector and an even more serious challenge from external terrestrial and satellite television stations. Technological and ideological developments on the whole have raised serious questions about the viability and sustainability of relatively large publicly owned broadcasting companies.

RTE has responded to these shifts in two contrasting ways. Its main radio station, *RTE Radio One*, has reaffirmed its public service credentials in the face of a private local radio sector which has largely chosen a programming style which is heavily formatted, relying on a middle of the road music style, with little or no current affairs programming. RTE's two television channels have, however, shifted to a programming form which emphasises 'family entertainment' and 'lifestyle' programmes. This observable change in the orientation of RTE's television programming does not bode well for coverage of poverty or indeed many other social and political issues.

It is interesting to note at this juncture that the two key Irish political scandals,¹⁷¹ one of which led to the fall of the government and the other which showed clear evidence of corruption amongst the politically and economically powerful, were brought to light by UTV in Northern Ireland and Granada TV in the UK. RTE's reticence to produce programmes which are critical of the status quo may

¹⁷¹ The Fr. Brendan Smyth affair and the abuse of EC intervention schemes in the beef industry.

be partially explained by reference to its chosen path of producing entertainment and lifestyle programmes, but the threat of privatisation and a reduction in its resource base also looms large in the background.

A key variable in all of the programmes analysed in this study has been the assumption that broadcasters know what audiences want. Future research on the media–poverty question might address this issue in a number of ways. An investigation is needed into audience interpretations of existing poverty texts as well as audience expectations about television coverage of social issues. More specifically, some critical analysis of how poorer audience members interpret and react to coverage of their poverty would be an interesting addition to the analyses undertaken in this work. Are they comforted by their invisibility on television drama? Do they find telethons to be patronising? How do God’s Poor react to coverage of the Devil’s Poor? I would suggest that RTE needs to know much more about the tastes of its audience in terms of programmes which cover issues which some might like to see kept under wraps.

The assumptions that the lives of the poor are neither of interest to the audience nor the most suitable subject matter of factual or fictional television should be seriously questioned. The success and ensuing debate about the BBC/RTE co-production of Roddy Doyle’s *Family* in May of 1994 is proof that audiences are interested in the lives of the marginalised. Essentially a BBC production, *Family* attracted record numbers of viewers when broadcast on RTE television.¹⁷² The series managed to stimulate a debate amongst the public about — among other things — media representation of poverty and working class life, and violence against women and children.

The public debate which followed the broadcast of the series demonstrated that the Irish television audience was divided into those who were supportive and those who were critical of the series in terms of its realism, ‘bad language’ and vivid

¹⁷² The second episode of *Family* attracted 1.2 million viewers to RTE 1.

portrayals of the underclass. This position was best exemplified perhaps by a middle-class female caller to a phone-in radio programme who said "Yes, these things [violence, poverty] do happen, but I don't want to see them on my television screen". The opposing camp, made up of an amalgamation of women's and community groups, argued that RTE needed to show much more of these things so that proper debate could be stimulated in Irish society. Audience reaction to *Family*, whether positive or negative, gave a clear signal to RTE that there is a hunger amongst many audience members for realistic drama which examines the harsher side of Irish life.

In conclusion, the invisibility of poverty and the poor on RTE television is symptomatic of a greater invisibility, namely the lack of transparency of the social structure. On the few occasions when inequality and deprivation are alluded to on factual, fictional or fund-raising television, this is done in a way which abstracts the poverty 'story' from its root cause. Much of the coverage represents poverty as being classless and portrays the relatively powerful as being the benign helpers of the less fortunate. In this sense, the coverage offered by RTE may be said to be ideological, facilitating as it does the continuation of capitalism.

This study is also illustrative of the inadequacies of television as a cultural form. It is not only engaged in the production and reproduction of ideology, but as it is presently organised, is limited in the way in which it can reflect on social problems such as poverty.¹⁷³ The constructions which television place on poverty serve to decontextualise and atomise what is a complex phenomenon. In attempting to encapsulate how RTE treat of the question of poverty, I am reminded of one of the *Lutheran Letters* written by Passilini (1983). In his essay entitled *Outside The Palace*, Passilini considered the workings of the contemporary newspaper industry. He

¹⁷³ Television is not on its own in this regard. Hill (1985: 37) in his evaluation of the British 'social problem' film suggested that "It is possible to show how the poor live on the screen. It is rather more difficult [remaining within the conventions of realism] to demonstrate how such poverty is the effect of a particular economic system or socially structured pattern of inequality. It also helps throw light on Russell Campbell's complaint that social consciousness movies repress 'social and political dimensions' in favour of 'private, personal dramas' For not only is individualisation implicit in the conventions of narrative whereby it is individual characters (and very often one central character] whose desires and ambitions structure the story's forward flow, but also a consequence of the conventions of realism with their dependence on the 'empirically' observable and hence the interpersonal rather than the structural."

viewed the newspaper world as a palace, which has as its inhabitants, those who write for the paper and those the paper writes about. According to Passilini the palace was made up of

the lives of the most powerful people there, those who occupy the peaks of power. To be “serious” means, apparently, to be concerned with these people, their intrigues, their alliances, their conspiracies, their strokes of luck, and finally, *also*, with the way in which they interpret the reality that exists *outside the Palace* — the boring reality which, in the last analysis everything depends on, even if it is unsmart and unsmart to bother with. (1993:8)

Save for the occasional action by one of the inhabitants of the palace *vis-à-vis* those beyond the palace’s walls, those who exist on the outside are characterised by their invisibility. Their stories are either ignored or seldom told. Passilini’s metaphor can be usefully be applied to RTE and, indeed, other forms of mainstream media.

There is growing evidence to suggest that certain sections of the poor are responding to this media marginalisation through using platforms of their own such as *The Big Issues* newspaper. Poverty lobby groups are likewise seeking alternative avenues for the dissemination of information about poverty. In 1994 the Combat Poverty Agency took the unusual step of publishing a full colour supplement with *The Sunday Tribune* newspaper entitled *Against The Odds*. This allowed them to set the agenda and have greater control over how poverty was explained as well as inform the public of their work.

Finally, this study was not intended to be an exercise in what some might term political correctness. Nowhere do I suggest that the poor should never ever be portrayed in a negative light. What this study has achieved however is to identify the narrow and clearly ideological way in which RTE tells stories about the Irish poor. That construction is much more complex than has been imagined heretofore in that there are clear examples of God’s and Devil’s Poor as well as their saviours evident in television coverage of poverty.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Analysis of 25 Poverty Stories *Six-One News*:

1 September 1992 – 31 December 1992

- Table A1** **Number of stories by poverty group**
- Table A2** **Number of stories by focus**
- Table A3** **Type of report**
- Table A4** **Where in the bulletin the stories were placed**
- Table A5** **Stories in which the reporter referred to the cause of poverty**
- Table A6** **Were solutions suggested by the reporter?**

Table A1**Number of stories by poverty group**

Poverty group	Total	%
Unemployed	5	20
Travellers	4	16
Homeless	4	16
Agents	3	12
Others	3	12
The Poor	2	8
The New Poor	2	8
Lone Parents	2	8
Drug Users	1	4
Total	(25)	(100%)

Table A2**Number of stories by focus**

Focus of story	Total	%
Group (Homeless, Travellers, Lone Parents)	14	56
Agents	8	32
Individual	2	8
Community	1	4
Total	(25)	(100%)

Table A3**Type of report**

Type of report	Total	%
Newsreader to camera	1	4
Newsreader/ filmed report	19	76
Newsreader/ special report	5	20
Total	(25)	(100%)

Table A4**Where in the bulletin the stories were placed**

Part of programme	Total	%
Part One	9	36
Part Two	14	56
Part Three	2	8
Total	(25)	(100%)

Table A5**Stories in which the reporter referred to the cause of poverty**

Was it referred to by reporter?	Total	%
Yes	12	48%
No	13	52%
Total	(25)	(100%)

Table A6

Were solutions suggested by the reporter?

Were solutions suggested by reporter?	Total	%
Yes	10	40%
No	15	60%
Total	(25)	(100%)

Appendix B

Coding sheet used for analysis of RTE News

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF NEWS TAPES SEPTEMBER 1 TO DEC 31

TAPE NO _____

1 DAY AND DATE

Day _____

Date _____

**1(B) POVERTY GROUP WHICH ARE THE SUBJECT OF THE STORY
(CIRCLE ONE*)**

- The Unemployed *
- The Homeless *
- The Travelling Community *
- The Disabled *
- The 'New Poor' *
- Lone Parents *
- Drug Users *
- Other (Please State) _____

1 (C) IS THIS STORY BEING TOLD ABOUT (PLEASE CIRCLE ONE *)

- An Individual *
- A Family/Couple *
- A Community *
- A Group *
- A Representative Organisation *

1 (D) IF DEALS WITH A REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATION PLEASE STATE WHICH ONE-

2. STORY THEME (PLEASE SUMMARISE)

2 (B) IF THE STORY DEALS WITH AN OBVIOUS 'EVENT' (EG THE LAUNCH OF A REPORT/ A STATEMENT BY AN INDIVIDUAL/ORGANISATION) PLEASE NOTE THIS-

3. TYPE OF REPORT PLEASE CIRCLE ONE *

- 1. Newsreader to Camera *
- 2. Newsreader to Camera with backdrop *
- 3. Newsreader/Filmed Report *
- 4. Newsreader/Special Report *

3 (B) IF 2 ABOVE - GIVE A DESCRIPTION OF BACKDROP USED -

4.C If a picture of an Individual/Group is used in the Backdrop - is/are the person(s) readily identifiable?

Yes

No

5. Where applicable state reporters name: _____

Named Special Correspondant	Yes	No
Regional Correspondant	Yes	No
Desk Reporter	Yes	No

6. Story ranking in overall bulletin (Please Circle)

- 1st
- 2nd
- 3rd
- 4th
- 5th
- 6th
- 7th
- 8th
- 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th
- 13th
- 14th
- 15th

Appendix C

Glenroe characters referred to in Chapter 7

Character	Role
Miley Byrne	Farmer; shopkeeper
Biddy Byrne	Farmer; shopkeeper
Dinny Byrne	Semi-retired farmer
Dick Moran	Auctioneer
Mary Moran	Housewife
Stephen Brennan	Golf course owner
David Brennan	Stephen's son; disabled
Blackie Connors	Settled Traveller
Peggy Connors	Blackie's wife
Johnny	Traveller; Blackie's brother-in-law
George Manning	Anglo-Irish gentry
Teasy McDaid	Publican
Fidelma Kelly	Biddy Byrne's cousin
Mynah Timlin	Priest's housekeeper
Carmel O'Hagan	Unemployed; returned emigrant
Damian O'Hagan	Unemployed; returned emigrant
Fr. Devereux	Catholic parish priest
Michelle Haughey	Barmaid
Kevin Haughey	Michelle's husband; unemployed
Sergeant Roche	Local policeman
Nuala Brennan	Stephen Brennan's daughter-in-law