The Poverty of Journalism and the Politics of Reporting Poverty Statistics in South Africa[1]

Guy Berger

Abstract

A debate raged in several South African newspapers in November 2007 around whether poverty levels had increased over 13 years of democracy and a black government. The controversy arose after the release of research findings by the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) that the number of poor people had more than doubled between 1996 and 2005. The politicisation of the debate largely reflected the sensitivity of the government at the time, and this permeated the construction of various arguments. In the end, however, the controversy was inconclusive and it was subsequently "eclipsed" by developments outside the media. The experience points to the relations between press and society in transitional society, and especially to poor performance of the press in regard to coverage of a matter that is both complex and of critical social importance.

Keywords: South Africa, journalistic failure, poverty, political transition, reporting statistics, primary definers

Introduction

South African post-apartheid politics have seen much political contestation on the terrain of which political force best addresses poverty. President Thabo Mbeki who resigned in September 2008 had staked much of his reputation on this score, while his chief opponent and former comrade in the ruling African National Congress (ANC), Jacob Zuma, has portrayed himself as a victim of Mbeki's political machinations because of his compassion for the poor (see, for instance, *The Star*, January 2008). The historical and electoral rhetoric of the ANC is pro-poor, and is a reaction to the continuing underdevelopment of the majority population that owes its roots to the apartheid political economy. But both the political left and the right have tried to paint the Mbeki government as falling short on the 'delivery' of 'development', and their critique evoked vehement denials by the authorities who instead pointed to major progress across a range of poverty fronts. This defensive response by those in power was not surprising because the criticism implies that either they act in the interests of 'fat cats' and don't really 'give a damn' about the poor, or that they are inept in trying to uplift the downtrodden. Both views resonate with racist stereotypes of black rulers, thereby giving the issue a super-charge – especially when the criticism of government emanates from sources as-

sociated with white advantage. While racial stereotypes have been researched in terms of representations of the poor (see Bullock et al 2001), here the focus was on the race of those presented as responsible for addressing the plight of the poor (and on the race of their accusers as well – see below). In this general context, the Mbeki government proved especially prickly about the SAIRR research which appeared a month before the watershed annual conference of the ANC in December 2007. The incumbents foresaw (correctly) that they would be vulnerable to challenge by left-leaning groups rallying under a populist banner seeking to replace Mbeki with Zuma as party president.

It was in its annual survey released in November 2007 that the SAIRR claimed there had been increased poverty under Mbeki's watch, highlighting this particular focus in a press release at the time. The Institute is susceptible to being characterised as reflecting white interests because of its own demographic make-up and also because – despite its liberal history – it supported the rightwing Inkatha Freedom Party (then a bellicose force with many murderous members) against the ANC, during the 1980s and early 1990s. The poverty claim from the baggage-laden Institute appeared in the political context outlined above, and it unsurprisingly triggered a controversy of note. Multiple discourses can surround a social issue like poverty (Summers 2006: 13), and this proved to be the case here.

In a nutshell, the Institute's claim was that whereas in 1996, there were 1.9 million South Africans living on less than the equivalent of a dollar-a-day, by 2005 this number had escalated to 4.2 million. The controversy that erupted around this finding might have been predicted. Government had, years earlier, reacted strongly to a 'battering' in the media, when figures released by the UNDP (2003) highlighted poor performance on poverty alleviation. And during 2007 itself, an article in the *Sunday Independe*nt (18 February) signalled the contentiousness of issue. Under the headline "Poverty is difficult to quantify, let alone end", journalist Patrick Laurence reported that the SAIRR was researching the issue and that its dollar-a-day yardstick meant there were 4.3 million people defined as poor in 2004. He also noted the higher benchmark of "relative poverty" which pointed to 23.5 million poor people in the same year. His article did not, however, compare this data to previous years, which was the key provocative dimension of the November SAIRR release. Also prior to the debate proper, but helping to set the stage, letters in June to *Business Day* deliberated on whether the SAIRR was a racist organisation, following an initial missive penned by a pro-government writer that was published under the headline: "Institute stands for doom, gloom". In short, the research did not come into a vacuum, and nor did it hail from a source with an unassailable image of a neutral research agency.

The poverty row ran throughout November 2007, and newspapers were a key platform for contestation (see Table 1).

The voices heard in the debate were largely those of the SAIRR, government and researchers. Overall, there was a predominance of SAIRR representatives in the jousting, often with the last word. No trade unions or NGOs dealing with welfare issues were presented. Further, that no-one in the press appears to have seen fit to canvass poor people and publish how they perceived the issue, indicates that this was a dispute within the elite about the poor. This omission of poor people is not surprising in the light of research elsewhere (eg. Devereux 1998), and also because the media in this particular case do tend to be fairly elitist – such as *Business Day*, where much of the debate took

place. But the effect was that poor people were rendered voiceless and without agency, and also as lacking in responsibility for their condition. Other research has observed that such voices of the poor are largely absent within South Africa media reportage on general policy issues (see Banda 2007a, Berger 2007, 2008). Echoing findings of one study (Banda 2007b), the coverage in the SAIRR case presented a sanitised, reified picture that was often far removed from actual experiences of poverty.

Significantly, another absent constituency in the whole debate was the business sector, suggesting implicitly that, while the controversy was signalled as relevant to business readers, business itself had no views on, or implication in, poverty trends. A symptomatically myopic paradigm thus seems to have informed both the media and the business community in regard to this debate.

However, journalists were also conspicuously absent from the substantive discussion – entering only in news reports, a few editorial comments, and very rare opinion pieces. Instead, the most 'meaty' arguments were presented unmediated in the form of opinion pieces by outsiders to the press. Additional points were evident in published letters to the editor. Not many newspapers seem to have foreseen that this story would become a rolling issue nor one that deserved more thoughtful journalistic engagement. Thus no articles were found that would count as a round-up of the debate or a meta-analysis of the positions, although such should be legitimately expected to be a contribution to the coverage by journalists themselves. There was therefore no clear or credible resolution for readers who followed the coverage (probably in piecemeal fashion).

Journalists stood accused of subtracting value during the debate. Although the debate became one of government performance on poverty, it also indirectly revealed a lot about press performance in covering the major issue at hand. The basic role of the press being a neutral simple information conduit was evident in, and limited to, early news articles about the SAIRR report and government reaction to it. Even here, the inadequacies of journalism were hammered. As pointed out by analyst Steven Friedman on a newspaper website, the media simply regurgitated the SAIRR's claims without scrutiny or balance. He criticised reporters for not asking "basic questions" of the SAIRR about how the findings were reached, and for not asking other experts for their views. Ken Owen, a former editor, expressed his hope in a letter that "in future the newspapers will be more circumspect in publishing material from the institute without checking it". An official at the quasi-governmental Human Sciences Research Council, Miriam Altman, used her opinion piece to lay into "poorly researched journalism". As often happens in political debates, the media serves as a scapegoat and is partly blamed for the controversy. In this case, however, the critiques of media performance were not unwarranted. There was no acting as a watchdog in terms of independent scrutiny of the claims being made on any side of the debate. Even less did the press act as an educator in its own right, explaining the issues. Instead, the lack of journalistic intervention meant a discourse of incomparable statistics, substantial jargon and more confusion than illumination. The debate remained at the level of "he said, she said" representation.

Thus, most coverage appears to have been in the form of reactions to, and by, elites external to the press who were keen to join the debate, rather than journalists pro-actively soliciting (diverse) participation. To this extent, the press did act as a forum and site of contestation, although in so doing it also did not go beyond reflecting the agenda, viz. that there was a dispute over government's poverty performance. However, inasmuch

Table 1. Contributions to the Debate

	Author	Year	Title	SAIRR authors	Govt authors	Pro govt	Pro SAIRR	Crit SAIRR	Mixed/ Neutral	News	Edit-orial	Opinion	Letter	Blog	Date	Medium
1	Cilliers, S	2007	Al meer mense leef onder broodlyn				1			1					13-Nov	Beeld
2	Editorial	2007	Armoede				1				1				14-Nov	Burger
3	Friedman, S	2007	Numbers, numbers everywhere and not a truth in sight?					1						1	15-Nov	Thoughtleader
4	Sapa	2007	Mbeki attacks Institute of Race Relations			1			1	1					17-Nov	Weekender
5	City Press Reporter	2007	President in war with race body over poverty						1	1					18-Nov	City Press
6	Duodu, C	2007	Economic train should not leave the poor behind				1					1			18-Nov	City Press
7	Editorial	2007	Don't forget the poor				1				1				20-Nov	Witness
8	Kenny, A	2007	Is poverty increasing in SA?				1					1			20-Nov	Citizen
9	Cronje, F	2007a	Ignoring poverty	1			1						1		20-Nov	Business Day
10	Kane-Berman, J	2007a	Analysing the poverty of the president's at-tack	1			1					1			22-Nov	Business Day
11	Editorial	2007	The President has a point in the debate about poverty					1				1			24-Nov	Weekender
12	Kane-Berman, J	2007b	State should do more for unskilled	1			1						1		01-Dec	Weekender?
13	Seepe, S	2007	Our poverty survey stands the test, Mr President	1			1					1			25-Nov	Sunday Times

Table 1. Contributions to the Debate (cont.)

	Author	Year	Title	SAIRR authors	Govt authors	Pro govt	Pro SAIRR	Crit SAIRR	Mixed/ Neutral	News	Edit-orial	Opinion	Letter	Blog	Date	Medium
14	Netshitenzhe, J	2007a	Telling neglect in race institute's poverty study		1	1		1				1			27-Nov	Business Day
15	Altman, M	2007	Poverty shock! (Never mind the facts)					1				1			29-Nov	Mail & Guardian
16	Owen, K	2007a	Phony findings				1						1		27-Nov	Business Day
17	Turok, B	2007	Stop nitpicking						1				1		29-Nov	Business Day
18	Owen, K	2007b	Shoddy research					1					1		29-Nov	Business Day
19	Bester, T	2007	The pitfalls of poverty measures						1				1		29-Nov	Business Day
20	Cronje, F	2007b	Jobless in SA and the poverty 'consensus'	1			1					1			28-Nov	Business Day
21	Netshitenzhe, J	2007b	Poverty of statistics		1	1						1			30-Nov	Financial Mail
22	Makgetla, N	2007	Finding perspective in debate on poverty trends						1			1			05-Dec	Business Day
23	Simkins, C	2007	Getting the measure of what it means to be poor						1			1			05-Dec	Business Day
24	MacFarlane, M	2007	So who was 'sloppy'?	1			1						1		06-Dec	Mail & Guardian
25	Kane-Berman, J	2007c	Status depends on money	1			1						1		14-Dec	Financial Mail
	TOTALS			7	2	3	13	5	6	3	2	11	8	1		

as SAIRR voices were predominant, it can also be postulated that the press also played a role as a fairly passive vehicle for institutional public relations.

Many participants were long-standing and predictable institutional commentators, and private individuals' voices only appeared (although did not predominate) in the letters. It has been suggested in a different context that in poverty reportage the opinions of expert sources are considered both authoritative and morally legitimate (Bessant 1997; Kelly 1996, cited by Kitchener and Vandermensbrugghe, 2008). Interestingly in this SAIRR controversy, the "experts" could not all be presented in this way – given their differences, racial colouring and political loading of the controversy. However, overall there was an uncritical legitimation of elite institutional voices as the primary stakeholders in the debate – something that clashed visibly with extra-media developments (see below).

In short, as will be seen below, within the elite 'bubble' of debate, rather than journalists being "primary definers" of the issues (Hall et al 1978: 58-9), that role fell to participants with specific axes to grind.

Research Findings

The data for this article consist of 25 items published in the mainstream media. A total of 13 appeared in *Business Day* and its Saturday edition – *The Weekender*. Three articles were editorial comments by publications, and only three items were actually news stories. Eight were letters and eleven were opinion pieces. Three of the opinion pieces were by government representatives, and three from the SAIRR, but a total of seven of the 25 items were direct from the SAIRR (four being letters). Of the remaining five opinion pieces, two took the SAIRR figures for granted, two challenged them, and one tried to rise above the debate.

The coverage began with news items and a few editorial comments, followed by opinion pieces, a flurry of letters, more opinion pieces and then more letters. Battle was enjoined early on when Mbeki strongly criticised the SAIRR in his (then) weekly online newsletter as (then) head of the ANC. His arguments were political, conceptual (the measurement of poverty) and about research method (statistical sourcing and data interpretation). Various contributors, through opinion pieces and letters, then came out in support of him or criticised the SAIRR. The Institute itself was quick to retaliate in kind. Three contributions relatively late in the debate (a letter and two opinion pieces) tried to switch the agenda by arguing that the controversy was irrelevant. The status and significant demographics of the contributors, relevant to their standing and social credibility in South Africa, is as follows: white men 21, white women 1, black men 3.

That the SAIRR findings constituted a political 'hot potato' was noted by *The Weekender* (24 November) which observed that "the argument is highly politically charged" and not the kind of information the government would want to hear on the eve of a tightly-fought leadership contest. The paper also charged that the SAIRR was ideologically against the government's policy of social welfare grants (a claim that was later rebutted by the SAIRR). However, the coverage itself also helped to heighten the politicisation of the debate through headlines which framed it as a conflict story, and indeed one that was also a personalised one. Examples are: "Mbeki attacks Institute of Race Relations" (*Weekender*, 17 November) and "President in war with race body over poverty" (*City Press*, 18 November).

Political rhetoric flowed amongst the participants, and without any balancing by less impassioned journalistic discourse. Mbeki said the Institute had positioned itself "as the liberal alternative to our movement", and that its claims were a "canard" needing to be "chained". He referred to "the pernicious tendency… to advance the particular agendas of forces that are opposed to our movement and the national democratic revolution". The SAIRR, he continued, had chosen "to discover statistics that serve the political purpose of discrediting our movement and government…". The Institute's president Sipho Seepe wrote that Mbeki's "tirade" was "fatally flawed". He argued that the SAIRR "was in the business of doing research" rather than playing politics, and he accused Mbeki of reading only fragments of the Institute's study. SAIRR official Frans Cronje also hit back at Mbeki's criticism that the Institute was undermining the "national democratic revolution" by saying that the "revolution" could possibly even topple the Mbeki leadership before the year's end. In a published letter, Cronje wrote: "If SA's recent history was one of simple 'success', Mbeki might not be staring an ANC branch-level revolt in the face next month."

If the debate was a wrestling match sans referee, what was particularly left unadjudicated was a dispute about the central matter of how to define poverty. This enabled the SAIRR's Cronje to conclude: "If anything, the debate that followed the release of our figures suggests that South Africans cannot even agree on what poverty is, let alone whether it is going up or down." The issue at stake was the Institute's one dollar-a-day income definition which constituted the basis for its claims. The SAIRR said this was "the globally accepted measure of poverty", and its president Sipho Seepe wrote that the dollar-a-day definition was "widely used by the United Nations and the World Bank", and was also used for the UN's Millenium Development Goals (MDGs).

By implication, Mbeki and others who questioned this measure were out of line with global orthodoxy. This accusation resonated with other representations of Mbeki as a denialist in international terms about HIV-Aids and the crisis in Zimbabwe. In addition, the Institute said that government could not eschew the dollar-a-day measure when it, itself, utilised the formula in its commitments on the MDGs.

On the other hand, resort to 'majoritarianism' as an argument was also present on the government side in its own bid to discredit the SAIRR. Three contributors – government's Netshitenzhe, semi-official Altman and ex-editor Owen – said that the Institute's findings were at odds with other poverty research results in South Africa. Responding directly to this was SAIRR official Cronje in an article headlined "Joblessness in SA and the poverty 'consensus'". In this, he volunteered the view that the difference between the Institute's data and that published by others was "part of the reason that we published it". He added: "On the charge that we are outside the consensus position, the institute is innately suspicious of such positions and, in any case, doubts that such consensus exists when it comes to poverty in SA." In all these claims, there was no verification of the points of either the 'majoritarians' or Cronje.

The SAIRR's dollar-a-day benchmark was also contested for other reasons. On the government side, it was presented as being a false and simplistic "money-metric" concept. Mbeki pushed instead for consideration of the "social wage" such as education, electricity, water supply, health, and housing services. In addition to this unresolved narrow vs multidimensional view of poverty, another controversial matter was what monies were taken into account even with the narrow definition. There was no resound-

ing authoritative clarification of whether or not the SAIRR's conclusions looked only at earned income under one dollar-a-day, and thereby left out other income (social grants and pensions) in regard to measuring "poverty". This is a significant issue because, as stated by *The Weekender,* 12 million South Africans receive grants. Even the SAIRR's Seepe noted that 25% of South African households "now get their greatest single source of income from the state" (*Sunday Times*, 25 November). But instead of the press producing any independent or convincing assessment of how these welfare monies compared to other income, and thence to the SAIRR figures, there was only a letter (late in the day) from the Institute's Marco MacFarlane saying that this source of income was indeed included in the research.

While the participants were weak on defining poverty, many did not hesitate to expand their comments to remarks on the sustainability of social welfare in general as a poverty-reduction strategy. This was not pursued in any depth however, and it was also never untangled as to the role of extra-governmental cash income within the mix of resources (cash and kind) available to poor people.

There was 'journalistic failure' not only on this issue, but also in regard to a part of the debate concerning what level of cash income defined people as poor. Government's own figures cited by Mbeki and others defined poverty as people living on less than R3000 a year. Nowhere in the coverage was this recalculated at a daily rate so that it would be directly comparable to the $1 (R6.80) standard (it works out at R8.22 a day). On this measure, a very large number (some 19.5m) of South Africans count as poor. Another set of statistics marshalled in the contestation by government's Joel Netshitenzhe, was sourced to the UNDP, with the measure of R354 a month. Again, there was no evening out of the apples and oranges. (The figure translates to R11.64 a day). By this measure, Netshitenzhe gave a figure of even more (circa 21 million) poor people over the period 1995-2002.

Not directly addressed in the debate was the question of why government contested the SAIRR's 'mere' 4.2 million figures, when its own alternative systems yielded five times more people as being poor. A close reading, however, shows that government preferred to rely on these higher figures of poverty because with this particular data it could also claim a reduction in poverty trends. The implicit position here was that even if the poorest section of the poor had increased (as per SAIRR claims), the statistics also showed that the general poor were nevertheless diminishing as a proportion of the population. On the government's figures, this was a fall from 50.1% to 43.2% of population, and the UNDP ones the decline was from 51.1% to 48.5%. Again, apples and oranges persisted in the commentary, with no newspaper stepping forward with a common standard that would show the comparable percentage of population in the SAIRR figures.

What further remained unresolved in this were the differences between proportions of the population, and absolute numbers. The SAIRR argued that even if, in government's own terms, the percentage of the poor had dropped, the actual numbers of people in the below R3000 bracket had increased from 18.9 million to 20.5 million. It argued that this increase corresponded to a similar rise in unemployment figures during the period of their research. Missing in this aspect of the debate was any elaboration around the comparative significance of concentrating on percentages of population versus absolute numbers. Again, absent was any journalistic intervention that could have been helpful in progressing the debate.

In terms of the status of the statistics at the heart of the furore, it was unclear as to what could be relied upon. Para-governmental researcher Altman's article implied that accurate data existed through its headline: "Poverty shock! (Never mind the facts)". *The Citizen's* Andrew Kenny, one of the rare journalists engaging in the debate, assumed the same in saying: "The SAIRR has an impeccable record of presenting accurate, unbiased information."

On the other hand, *The Weekender* (24 November) – another once-off journalistic participant – proposed that the figures did not prove either side right, but rather illustrated the poverty of the data. The paper supposed nonetheless that "it would be extremely surprising if the financial state of SA's poorest 20% had increased, never mind doubled, over the past decade". Further credibility was taken out of the whole scrap by five participants late in the debate (Altman, Netshitenzhe, Owen, and Neva Makgetla on the government side; Charles Simkins on the SAIRR side) who argued that none of the statistics and/or year comparisons could be sustained. A complete lack of confidence in the figures was also manifested in headlines such as: "Numbers, numbers everywhere and not a truth in sight?"; "Phony findings"; "Shoddy research"; "The pitfalls of poverty measures"; "Poverty of statistics". Altman acknowledged that "South Africa's poverty statistics are hotly debated partly because no single official source provides reliable and regular trend data."

With all these assertions, ranging from *The Weekender*'s simple speculation through to some commentators' sheer scepticism, it was possible for additional politicisation of the debate to stand unchallenged. Thus, government's Joel Netshitenzhe wrote: "That the findings of a single statistical report could tell a sharply contrasting story to those of many similar studies is a precise indication of how contestable statistics can be. Simply put, this means that, while often presented as science, statistics can be manipulated for multifarious purposes." The overall picture is one of many commentators using some statistics to make their own case but simultaneously discrediting opponents on other statistical grounds. The message this sends is highly confusing.

Where journalists did get involved in the debate, it was not to deal with the key concerns or to set aside smoke and mirrors. Instead, the quality of their interventions was notably weak. *The Weekender* thumb-sucked: "Even if it were true that the poorest 10% or 20% of the population had got poorer, it can't be ignored that the overall picture is very positive. … The gloriously rising tide … will ultimately improve the position of the poor, even if it has not already". *The Witness* wandered off target to condemn low wages paid to construction workers building stadia for the 2010 world cup ("Don't forget the poor"). *The Citizen's* Kenny used the report to crudely argue that "(t)o get rid of poverty we must get rid of labour laws". Columnist Cameron Duodu took the SAIRR claims as correct and proposed that more Keynesian policies were needed.

Three non-media participants attempted to switch the terms of the debate altogether, rather than confront the challenges of resolving the SAIRR's claims. In a populist mode, ANC MP Ben Turok expressed this in a letter published under the headline of "Stop nitpicking". In his view, the debate was about marginal changes in poverty, when either way levels remained massive and still needed addressing, along with the issue of inequality. Absent from his intervention was the salient issue as to whether the poverty trends were going up or down. On her part, Makgetla argued: "We may never agree on whether the glass is half full or half empty. Maybe it would be more fruitful to replace

debates about the past with discussion on how to deal with poverty and social alienation more effectively, by finding ways to give poor communities a voice and generating mass economic opportunities." Simkins raised the issue of inequality as distinct from poverty, and called for a "less ideologically fraught and more empirical poverty programme". Avoidance of the debate's key issues, and journalistic silence on them, meant that any clear settlement was not reached. Instead, the contestation ended indecisively.

Another noteworthy feature of the debate was the participants' shared assumption that it was correct to lay responsibility for poverty at the door of government. Only one intervention (an editorial in *Die Burger*) made the point that government alone could not solve poverty – other sectors had to take it on board. Although *The Citizen's* Kenny simplistically blamed "our wicked labour laws", he also said that these were drawn up by the "Fat Three" of government, big business and trade union bosses. Government's Netshitenzhe said that it was population growth that accounted for an increase in absolute figures "instead of governance failures as the SAIRR would have us believe". The extent to which poor people themselves, and other social sectors including the business sector, shared serious responsibility or acknowledgement for steps to alleviate poverty, was conspicuous by omission.

Analysis, Conclusion and Recommendations

Although the debate as a whole was in most respects unresolved, from a purely textual and rhetorical point, the SAIRR can perhaps be said to have ultimately emerged victorious over its critics. For example, it mobilised more firepower than did government, and its response to critics were seldom rebutted. But this victory is not necessarily the case when pitted against what can be labelled as a masterframe of "ethno-nationalist" discourse (cf. Greenfeld, 1999: 39; Diani 1996: 1057; Entman, 1993: 53) espoused by Mbeki in particular. Thus, it is not at all clear in social readership terms if the SAIRR would have automatically prevailed over the characterisation of its members as (mainly white) political reactionaries with an ulterior motive. While poverty was at the centre of the debate, in some senses it played as a political football in a wider and even rowdier game. In this respect, the media was far from constituting a public sphere for reasoned debate that generating rational truth. It is thus unlikely that many readers would have ended up any the wiser in the face of such a complex statistical debate and its politicisation. On the other hand, independent and intelligible value-add by journalists could have produced a different outcome. Yet press coverage of this critical issue fell far short of what could have been delivered.

A controversy amongst sources ought to be a prime occasion for journalists to act as "primary definers" of the issues, but here they barely even played a part as "secondary definers". This notion of "definitional power", as originally articulated by Hall et al (1978) and even as nuanced by Schlesinger (1990) and Schlesinger and Tumber (1994), has been used elsewhere to assess how the media, by virtue of a structured relationship to power, reproduce elite perspectives. While this character was evident in this case, it was not the case here that the result of such perspectives was the representation of a supposedly consensual position. Instead, contrasting alternatives were readily present, reflecting a transitional democracy in which general hegemonic views had not had time to crystallise. Only the perception of poverty as being a salient issue (and in terms of

which government should be judged) was shared amongst the participants. This recognition is often the case in media coverage in several other countries (see Summers, 2006). However, even in this regard, and as discussed further below, there were voices proposing that inequality was more important than poverty. In brief, consensual discourse was not part of this debate.

It is relevant to note that despite the governmental attempts at spirited defence during the row, soon after there followed the unceremonious ousting of Mbeki and most of his cabinet from senior positions in the ANC (and nine months later, from government as well). This throw of the dice was in part a function of disgruntled ANC members left out of the government's policy of "Black Economic Empowerment", and to that extent, a function of poor(er) people having their political say. This development took place outside the discourse of the SAIRR debate, and indeed most of its actors were probably unaware that the controversy had even taken place. It was an outcome that did not necessarily vindicate the Institute's findings, as much as send a signal that the arguments about poverty that had been generated in the elite press took place in a somewhat elevated atmosphere.

Extra-media developments, however, in a society where class issues are arguably becoming more important than race in terms of social cleavage, suggest that participants, and especially journalists, should be aware that much as Mbeki's 'race-card' view may have 'trumped' the SAIRR's statistical claims, class in turn may 'trump' race. An additional point is that it was not just a case of the press being less than a rational public sphere, but also that it was of a public sphere that seems to have little impact on public opinion.

In the light of all this, it can be proposed that this coverage does not ultimately tell us much directly about power in South Africa, except by way of negative significance that political power resides outside of the press debate on poverty levels. Future studies may therefore want to assess poverty in relation to other issues – and in other media as well. Primary here might be a focus on representations (explicit and implicit) of class inequality and thence relative poverty, and not only absolute poverty, as a 'political-driving element'. Of course, various elites (including many journalists) may have less interest in organically coming up with media consideration of inequality. In addition, however, one might profitably look at that media which more expressly claims to reflect the voices of the poor, and which eschews coverage of abstract, policy-related concepts like "poverty" in favour of empirical tales of actual people at the 'bottom of the pile'. In particular, this would point to the burgeoning tabloid newspapers in South Africa.

This is all the more important given yet another development that occurred subsequent to the debate – namely, xenophobic attacks where poor people (mainly young and male) turned on other poor people (although also on people with property – like shopkeepers) on the basis of nationality. The media coverage of the SAIRR debate missed many things – and in particular it was blind to the nationality dimensions of poverty. Reality subsequently intruded onto this perspective, but future coverage could do well to pay attention to it in advance – and likewise to be sensitive to age, gender and HIV-status aspects of poverty.

Further research would be appropriate to investigate in more depth the "grammars of poverty" (Kress 1994) in terms of ascriptions of responsibility in the media, and in news as well as other editorial genres (see also Iyengar 1991). Going further, research

could also be done into the sense of responsibility amongst journalists themselves about representing poverty, and researching why there was such evident failure in this particular case. At present, the SAIRR debate in the press leaves a clear conclusion: it is hard to see how the media can play a role in regard to poverty if journalism remains as poor as it was during this incident. Summers (2006:37) writes of coverage as "a site of ways of knowing poverty". In this instance, confusion rather than knowledge was an inevitable consequence of journalism's inadequacy.

Note

1. This article has its roots in the 2008 theme of the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies, viz: media, poverty and social justice. It is a revised version of a paper presented on Friday July 25, 2008, panel on "Challenges for African media and communication research", 26th conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, "Media and Global Divides", at Stockholm University. The original paper includes a theoretical section attempting to fuse concepts from Framing Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, which has been dropped for reasons of length and focus in this article.

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