

Class and Inequality: Why the Media Fails the Poor and Why This Matters*

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Abstract

The news media is a critical source of information for the public. However, it neglects the interests of the poor. In this paper, we explore why this happens, why it matters, and what might be done about it. As to why this happens, we identify two main reasons: because of the way that media is funded and because of the composition of its journalists and its sources. As to why this matters, we argue that this neglect is problematic for three main reasons: it deprives the poor of vital information; it contributes to public support for or acceptance of policies that harm the interests of the poor; and it undermines political equality. And as to what might be done about it, we suggest two proposals: proposals that change the composition of who makes the news and proposals that change how the media is funded.

1 Introduction

In their report on the media, poverty, and public opinion in the UK, McKendrick et al. (2008) found that coverage of poverty is “peripheral” in the mainstream news media. Although poverty in the UK has risen over the last decade, the causes and consequences of poverty are “rarely explored” in the news or in non-news broadcasts. Moreover, when issues of poverty are addressed, coverage tends to focus on the failings of the poor rather than the structural conditions that generate and sustain poverty. The report concludes that the UK news media reinforces misperceptions about the nature and extent of poverty in the UK. Studies elsewhere tell a similar story: according to PEW’s News Coverage Index, between 2007–2012, the coverage primarily about poverty in 50 major US news outlets was 0.2% (Froomkin 2013).

The coverage of poverty is just one example of a broader phenomenon in which issues that are especially important to the poor receive limited media coverage. In

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this chapter, we explore three questions that relate to this phenomenon. The first is empirical. Why is it that such issues are neglected? The second is normative. What is wrong, exactly, with a news media that neglects the interests of the poor? The third is prescriptive. What reforms are required to ensure that the media serves all citizens equally?

To anticipate our argument, we suggest that the news media's neglect of issues that relate to the interests of the poor has two major causes. The first concerns the media's financial model. Because the media is dependent on advertising revenue, it has a strong incentive to produce coverage that caters to the interests of the better off. The second concerns the composition of the media and its sources. Owing to various factors which we consider below, the poor are largely absent from the making of the news. As a consequence, issues relating to the interests of the poor tend to be neglected. We argue that this neglect has several troubling features: it constitutes discriminatory and distributive epistemic injustices; it contributes to public support for or acceptance of policies that harm the poor's interests; and it undermines political equality. Having diagnosed how the problem occurs and why it matters, we consider some possible proposals that could help the media serve the interests of all citizens equally. These include proposals that change the composition of those who make the news and proposals that change how the media is funded.

Before we make this argument, we note three limitations of the present chapter. First, we focus on a particular problem that flows from the media's dependence on advertising revenue: the way this dependence generates content that is biased against the interests of the poor. We do not discuss all the problems that arise from the way the media is organized.

Second, in looking at the media's coverage of poverty and inequality, we focus primarily on the UK and the US; moreover, we do not examine the differences between them. The UK and the US are similar insofar as they both have a media that is dependent on advertising revenue and largely composed of members of the middle and upper classes. These are the features that we focus on here.

Third, our focus in what follows is on the news media, i.e., radio, television, and print. We do not address social media. This focus might seem surprising given that news media, in contrast to social media, is widely held to be of diminishing importance. However, talk of the news media's demise is premature. Although social media has become an important source of information, the vast majority of content that is circulated on social media is created by the news media and, in particular, by newspapers (Pickard 2020: 102). Far from undermining the significance of the news media, then, social media potentially extends its coverage.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the empirical question of why it is that issues that relate to the interests of the poor are neglected by the news media. Section 3 considers the normative question, what is wrong with news media that neglects the interests of the poor? Section 4 sketches some proposals that might enable the media to serve all citizens equally.

2 Why the Media Neglects the Poor

We start, then, by considering why issues that relate to the interests of the poor are neglected by the news media. We offer two explanations: a demand-side explanation that concerns who the news is written *for*; and a supply-side explanation that concerns who the news is written *by*.

2.1 News For the Better Off

Let us start with the demand-side. The primary revenue source for journalism, in newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting, is advertising (Bagdikian, 2004: 229; Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 2; Curran and Seaton, 2010: 90-1; Pickard, 2020: 43). It is not maximizing circulation but having the right readers that maximizes advertising revenue. Higher reader income means higher prices for advertising space (Depken II, 2004; Koschat and Putsis, 2000). In fact, there is a trade-off between circulation and advertising revenue: beyond a certain point, increased circulation diminishes the average income of a newspaper's readers (Thompson 1989). Thus, newspapers have consciously followed a strategy aimed to increase their appeal to middle and upper class readers. This is apparent in how newspapers market themselves to advertisers. Newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* boast of the "high- quality demographic profile" of their readers and their popularity with the "\$100,000+ income households" in their media kits aimed at advertisers (Martin 2019: 104).

This financial model has two noteworthy consequences. First, because the news media wants to have a high value readership, it tailors its content to the middle and upper classes and neglects the informational needs of the poor (Hamilton & Morgan 2018). For instance, Martin argues that as newspapers became more concerned with having the right readership for advertisers, the number of reporters covering labour issues declined (2019: 47-68). Mass media allocate substantial space to the stock exchange even though only a tiny portion of the population own stocks (Martin, 2019: 123-4; Bagdikian, 2004: 160-1). For the same reason, poverty receives limited coverage.

The appeal to better off readers also influences the coverage of various issues. Martin suggests that this is seen in the changing coverage of strikes in American newspapers. In earlier periods when newspapers were aiming for wider circulation, their coverage of strikes would focus on the grievances of the workers, and present the strike as a labour dispute. As their readership became more heavily dominated by middle and upper class readers, newspapers became more likely to adopt the viewpoint of the consumer and view the strike as a story about the interruption of the routines of white collar professionals (Martin 2019: 109-132).

Second, low income geographic areas have lower quality journalism. In her study of the collapse of local journalism in the US, Penelope Muse Abernathy finds that "news deserts" —communities "where residents have very limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feed democracy at

the grassroots level” —tend to be in poorer areas (2020: 19). A study of three New Jersey communities with different levels of income also finds that the local journalism that poor communities have access to tends to be of lower quality (Napoli et al. 2017). The newspaper that served the poorer community had fewer stories that originated with the local paper, fewer stories about the local community, and fewer stories that addressed the community’s critical information needs, such as health, education, and local politics.

Predictably, lower income individuals do not consume as much news as other income groups. In the United States, the bottom 40% of the income distribution accounts for 20.8% of the spending on reading, which includes purchases of newspapers, magazines, and books. The top 20% accounts for 36.9% (Hamilton & Morgan 2018: 2833). Those with lower incomes also follow fewer media sources compared to those who are better off (Kennedy & Prat 2019). Hamilton and Morgan sum up this situation succinctly: “Poor people get poor information, because income inequality generates information inequality” (2018: 2833). As we shall argue in 3.1, this is an instance of distributive epistemic injustice.

2.2 News By the Better Off

We have so far looked at demand-side determinants of the news. On the supply-side of the news there are two pertinent issues: who makes the news and who are the sources for the news. The answer in both cases is “the better off, predominantly”.

According to a Cabinet Office report in the UK, journalists and broadcasters born in 1970 typically grew up in families with an income of around 42.4% above that of the average family (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009: 19). The report further notes that if current trends continue, the typical journalist will be from a family “better off than three in four of all families in the UK” (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009: 21).¹ This is, partly, because entering into the profession requires a university degree and often a postgraduate degree (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009: 25). A second leading factor to the elite dominance of the profession is inequalities in internship opportunities (Friedman & Laurison 2020: 234). Internships are usually the first step towards a journalism career. However, securing internships typically requires connections, and since most internships are unpaid or very low-paid, undertaking them requires other sources of financial support. A system in which internships are a gateway to the profession is, therefore, one that effectively ensures that the news is created by the better off.

Political and, to a lesser extent, economic elites are the primary source of news (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 18-22; Schudson, 2002; Bennett, 2016: 89-123; Pickard, 2020: 35-6; McChesney, 2008: 32-3; Berry, 2019: 150-2). There are several reasons why this is the case. First, and most obviously, they have infor-

¹We lack comparable figures for the US. One suggestive study finds that journalists working in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* tend to come from elite universities (Wai & Perina 2018). These results are of limited use, because elite education is only a proxy for class and the study looks at only two newspapers.

mation that the public will be interested in. Second, they provide a steady flow of information for free, in effect subsidizing the production of news. Third, they are deemed credible sources whose acts and pronouncements are deemed newsworthy. In contrast, the poor rarely appear as sources even in news about poverty (McKendrick et al. 2008: 23-4).

Journalists' dependence on elites as sources has increased in recent years due to the worsening economic conditions in journalism. Thanks to the rise of internet advertising, traditional journalism has seen a rapid fall in its advertising revenues. Newsroom employment in U.S. newspapers has dropped by 51% between 2008 and 2019 (Grieco 2020).² Journalists have less resources to critically engage with their sources. Furthermore, because they are more dependent than ever on their sources, alienating them has a higher cost. These economic conditions undercut investigative journalism which often goes beyond official sources and can challenge them.

The fact that journalists tend to come from better off backgrounds and rely on elites as sources bears on the content of news. First, it gives the better off influence over what counts as news and what the public finds out. Since the news influences political agendas, influence over news also gives unequal agenda-setting power to the better off. Second, it gives the better off influence over how the news is presented, that is, how they will be framed. (We return to these two points in 3.3.) Third, the domination of newsrooms by economically better off groups makes them ill-suited to serve the informational needs of the poor. Since the vast majority of people making the news do not have first-hand experience of poverty, it is unsurprising that coverage of poverty is relatively marginal, whereas issues that relate to the better off receive a disproportionately large focus. Fourth, when elites are the primary sources of news and very few journalists are from poor backgrounds, the poor are denied a voice in their presentation in the public sphere.

3 Objections to the Media's Neglect of the Poor

Having seen why the media fails to cater for the interests of the poor, we now turn to the question of why this matters from a normative perspective. While the following discussion is not intended to be exhaustive, we identify three main problems: it constitutes discriminatory and distributive epistemic injustices; it contributes to public support for or acceptance of policies that harm the interests of the poor; and it undermines political equality.

3.1 Epistemic Injustice

Our account of the media reveals three distinct epistemic injustices.

²Has the loss of advertising revenue reduced the media's dependence on advertising? It is true that the share of advertising as a ratio of news media's total revenues has diminished. However, the news media has not been able to make up for that loss by increasing circulation. Thus, they still have an incentive to pursue advertising revenue and attract better off readers.

First, when they are not treated as authoritative sources about their condition or on other issues where their views should be taken into account, the poor suffer a testimonial injustice. According to Fricker’s canonical formulation, testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer gives a deflated level of credibility to a speaker due to identity prejudice (Fricker 2007: 1). Here, however, the problem is not, exactly, that the poor are given low credibility when they speak. Rather, they are not even treated as informants. Identity prejudice and structural factors preempt informational exchanges with them in the media. What they suffer is, thus, a particular form of testimonial injustice that Fricker calls “pre-emptive” (Fricker 2007: 130). Conversely, the elites enjoy “credibility excess”: their views are given disproportionate authority (Medina 2011). As well as being an instance of testimonial injustice, the media’s coverage of the poor, which we discuss at length in the next section, can also entrench testimonial injustice. For instance, through its inordinate focus on benefit fraud (which bears no relation to its actual prevalence), the media undermines the credibility of people claiming benefits. It thereby makes benefits claimants (and other people in poverty who can be perceived as benefits claimants) more likely to suffer testimonial injustice in the future.

Second, the poor suffer hermeneutical injustice, that is, significant areas of their life are “obscured from collective understanding” (Fricker 2007: 154). The media is not just a source of news, but also a site where “collective social meanings are generated” (Fricker 2007: 152). When the media relies on elites as sources and few journalists come from lower income groups, the poor are hermeneutically marginalized: they do not get to partake on equal terms in the generation of social meanings. It is poverty as the better off interpret it that is circulated in society, not poverty as the poor experience it. As such, they are deprived of the opportunity to develop and/or share the hermeneutical resources that would enable others to make sense of their experience. And so it is that the poor are often chided for failing to conform to middle class norms of good economic sense when they fail to save or do not economize in their shopping, even though, more often than not, such behaviour makes financial sense for them given their constraints.³ Likewise, they are criticized for buying expensive brands by a media that simultaneously portrays these brands as status-symbols and entry tickets to social inclusion.⁴

In addition to being subject to discriminatory epistemic injustices, the poor also suffer a *distributive* epistemic injustice. Distributive epistemic injustice occurs when the institutions that are primarily responsible for producing and disseminating knowledge, such as the media and institutions of science, and institutions of

³Orhun and Palazzolo argue that poor households make seemingly wasteful purchases, such as not buying frequently used items like toilet paper in bulk, because they cannot afford such intertemporal saving strategies (2019).

⁴For a study suggesting that conspicuous consumption by the poor is a response to perceived threats to one’s self-integrity, see Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010. In her study based on in-depth interviews with 50 low-income families in the UK, Hamilton argues that poor individuals purchase expensive brands “to disguise poverty and portray a socially acceptable image” but, ironically, this causes further stigmatization (2012: 75).

education do not serve all citizens' knowledge needs fairly (Kurtulmus and Irzik, 2017; Kurtulmus, 2020). Thus, when the media systematically neglects the poor's knowledge-needs and denies them an equal opportunity to acquire the knowledge they need for leading flourishing lives and enjoying political equality, this constitutes an injustice. This lack of knowledge is particularly worrisome because it is what Wolff and de-Shalit call a "corrosive disadvantage", that is, a disadvantage that will cause or contribute to other disadvantages (2007: 121). So, to give just one example, when there are no reporters covering issues relevant to your community or your class, environmental problems that afflict your area are less likely to be reported. Thus, lack of knowledge contributes to living in a polluted environment.

3.2 Political Outcomes

The second objection is that the way that the media currently functions contributes to public support for or acceptance of policies that harm the interests of the poor.

Before we make this argument, it is important not to have a too simplistic model of the media's influence on public opinion. People are selective in their use of media, both which media they pay attention to and which messages they pay attention to. They do not passively accept everything that is on the news. They filter it through their ideological beliefs and everyday experience. Thus, the media's influence is not uniform: it does not influence everyone equally or influence people's beliefs on all issues. However, the media does not need to influence everyone or even the majority to affect political outcomes. In a two-party political system like the US, or in a first-past-the-post voting system like the UK, influencing a small number of voters is enough to change political outcomes. The media, without doubt, has such influence.

The first way in which the media influences public opinion is the most obvious. The whole of social reality is not available to us. We only have access to a tiny fragment of it. As such, we depend on institutions like the media to provide us with information that will complete the picture. What the media reports and does not report can thus influence our beliefs through rational mechanisms. Consider three topics relevant to poverty and inequality: the amount and breakdown of welfare spending, the level of inequality, and the incidence of benefit fraud. People's everyday experiences offer limited guidance for acquiring true beliefs on these topics. The coverage in the media will, thus, have a huge impact on people's beliefs about these matters: by selectively reporting facts that favour a certain party or political position, media can influence people's political views (Broockman & Kalla 2022).

The media also influences public opinion by setting the agenda. At any one time there are multiple issues that are potentially of public concern. The media selects some of these issues as worthy of the public's attention. Such agenda-setting power should not be underestimated. Indeed, research has suggested that the media "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*" (Cohen, 1963: 13; for a survey of the literature documenting this effect see McCombs and Reynolds,

2009).

In addition to influencing what the public thinks about, media coverage can also influence how the public perceives the news through the frames they adopt. Frames make certain elements of a story salient, and in doing so they “*promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation*” (Entman, 1993: 52, emphasis in original). Media scholars find that the frames that the media employs are not friendly to the poor (Rose & Baumgartner 2013). Iyengar argues that broadcast media tends to employ episodic frames, which focus on personal experiences, rather than thematic frames, which contain information on general trends and public policy, in its coverage of poverty. In an experimental setting, he finds that episodic framing of poverty leads audiences to assign responsibility for poverty to individuals and decreases support for public assistance to the poor (Iyengar 1990).

It seems highly likely that the inadequate coverage of inequality and the negative coverage of the poor influence public opinion. People hold mistaken beliefs about inequality, the burden of welfare spending on the public budget, and the moral character of the poor. These misconceptions are likely to sustain or even exacerbate anti-poor policies. People in the UK and the US “dramatically underestimate” pay inequalities (Kiatpongsan & Norton 2014). Most people in the US overestimate the percentage of the budget spent on welfare and the total proportion of American families who are on welfare (Kuklinski et al. 2000). 44% of the British public believe that unemployment benefits are the largest area of social security spending (in fact, pensions cost several times the amount spent on unemployment benefits) (Geiger 2018: 1006).

In the UK, the median person thinks that 30% of disability benefit claims and 35% of unemployment benefit claims are false or fraudulent when the actual figures are 1.1–1.2% and 3.4% respectively (Baumberg et al. 2012: 28). Here, the case that media coverage is driving these misperceptions is quite compelling. In their study of the coverage of benefits in several UK newspapers between 1995–2001, Baumberg and colleagues found that 30% of articles about benefits mention fraud even though the rate of fraud is less than 3.5% (Baumberg et al. 2012: 38). In this context, it is unsurprising that welfare policies that aim to improve the condition of the poor enjoy limited support.

3.3 Political Equality

The third objection is that the current organization of the media undermines political equality.

As we have observed, the media relies on political and economic elites as news sources. This gives them inordinate power over what the public knows about and the political agenda. This dependence also hinders the press’s ability to hold political and economic power to account.

The current organization of the media also gives media owners inordinate influence over public opinion. Media ownership in both the UK and the US is highly

concentrated (Media Reform Coalition, 2021; Curran and Seaton, 2010; Pickard, 2020: 106; Bagdikian, 2004). While some of these media conglomerates are publicly traded, many are owned by individuals. This provides media owners significant power to influence public opinion, a power that other citizens lack. Such power is incompatible with political equality.⁵

Owners of media enjoy disproportionate power over the poor specifically. This is because, as economists Kennedy and Prat (2019) rightly argue, how much power the media enjoys depends not only on ownership patterns but also on audiences' access to diverse news sources. It will be relatively difficult to shape the beliefs of someone who gets their news from several different sources, because the different sources will challenge and correct each other's claims. Conversely, it will be relatively easy to shape the beliefs of someone who gets their news from one source. Thus, lack of access to different news sources makes people more vulnerable to manipulation. Since the poor get their news from fewer sources, often a single TV channel, the people who own these sources enjoy more power over them than they do over the better off.

The poor not only have access to less news sources but, as we have seen, the content of news is also not tailored to their needs. This exacerbates the political inequality between the poor and the better off. In addition to being more vulnerable to manipulation, they also do not get news coverage that would help their political agency (Strömberg, 2015: 187, and the literature cited therein). Thus, the current media regime is a source of two different political inequalities. One is between the owners of the media and the political and economic elites who act as news sources, and the rest of society. The other is between the middle classes, whose informational needs are better served and who are less vulnerable to manipulation, and the poor.

3.4 The Better Off

In the previous sections we have argued that the media's failure to inform the public about poverty and inequality harms the poor. However, the media's failure to cover poverty and inequality in an appropriate manner can also be said to harm the better off—in two ways.

First, the media's failure to cover poverty and inequality deprives all citizens of vital information. The poor are undoubtedly harmed by this to a greater degree; after all, the lack of information about poverty and inequality sustains policies that directly harm the poor's material wellbeing. However, it would be a mistake to see this information as inconsequential for the better off. As citizens of democratic

⁵It has been argued that economic incentives should reign in this threat, but they are not always effective, especially for media firms that are owned by individuals or families. For instance, studies find that Fox News's ideological slant is further to the right of what would maximize its ratings (Martin & Yurukoglu 2017). The Israeli newspaper *Israel Hayom*, founded by an American billionaire at the encouragement of Benjamin Netanyahu, provides an even better illustration. The newspaper, which is handed out for free, loses \$27 million a year. Political scientists find that the newspaper enjoys significant electoral influence and has played an instrumental role in establishing Netanyahu's dominance in Israeli politics (Grossman et al. in press).

societies, this information is required for deliberation about a range of issues, such as which political party to vote for, whether to endorse a particular policy, and which social causes to support. Without access to this information, all citizens—including the better off—will find it difficult to discover and pursue the common good.

Second, the media's negative portrayal of the poor can also be said to harm the better off. This requires some explanation. It is easy to see how the media's portrayal of the poor harms the poor themselves. Being portrayed as helpless victims, benefit cheats, and scroungers is a horrible way to be seen by others. Indeed, such depictions can plausibly be seen as an attack on the poor's self-respect: the sense of one's value, and the conviction that one's conception of the good is worth carrying out (Rawls 1971: 386). But, at the same time, it is also a horrible way of *seeing* others. If the better off accept these negative portrayals of the poor, as the empirical evidence suggests they often do, they will then live their lives with a deep suspicion of, and even disdain for, their fellow citizens—a suspicion and disdain that is arguably made worse by the fact that it is overwhelmingly based on misinformation. This will deprive citizens of the good of fraternity. Unlike the threat to self-respect, this is a harm to rich and poor alike (Scanlon 2003: 212-3).

4 What should be done?

Having explained why the news media fails the poor, and why this matters, we turn finally to the question of how this situation might be addressed.

Before considering this question, it is worth considering a radical response. The problems we have identified flow from the fact that we live in a highly unequal society in which large numbers of people live in abject poverty. As such, it might be argued that the appropriate response is to address poverty, not to reform the media. After all, if poverty were abolished, then the media's lack of coverage of poverty would cease to be a problem.

While we are sympathetic to this response, it is important to consider issues of transformation, that is, how we can get there from here (for discussion, see Wright, 2010: 25-9). The point is that, even if the ultimate goal is the elimination of poverty, we will not achieve that goal unless anti-poverty measures receive widespread support. And anti-poverty measures are unlikely to receive widespread support with a media that fails to cover poverty or depicts the poor as scroungers and benefit cheats. As such, it would be a mistake to think of our focus on reforming the media as an abandonment of the more radical end of abolishing poverty; it is, rather, a precondition for the achievement of that end.

So, how might the media be reformed to ensure that it serves all citizens' interests equally? Recall that one problem is that news is created by the better off, because journalists and broadcasters typically come from higher-income households, and because the elite are the primary source for journalists. To address this problem, we need to change the composition of those who make the news, bringing in more people from poor backgrounds into journalism. This might be done by abol-

ishing unpaid or very low-paid internships, which provide unfair opportunities to those with independent sources of income; or by providing scholarships for students from poor backgrounds to go into journalism.

Changing the composition of journalists would plausibly lead to a media that does a better job in covering poverty and inequality. If more journalists—especially those covering news beats related to poverty and inequality, and those making editorial decisions—had first-hand experience of poverty, it seems reasonable to expect that the media would be more sensitive to it.

However, it is clear that this proposal alone is insufficient to address the problem. Even if this changed the composition of journalists, it would not change the composition of their sources, who would remain drawn from the elite. Furthermore, even with journalists who are more sensitive to issues of poverty, we would still be stuck with the problem that the existing structures would not allow them to do so. This is primarily because of the financial model we discussed in section 2 that incentivizes journalists to cater to the better off in pursuit of advertising revenues.

So, rather than merely changing the composition of journalists, we must also look to change how the media is funded. One solution is a system of public funding for journalism. This could be provided in a variety of ways, but one proposal that has gained traction among media commentators in recent years is the use of a voucher system (see, e.g., Ackerman, 2011; McChesney and Nichols, 2010). While the specific details need to be worked out, the basic idea is that everyone would be provided with a publicly-funded voucher, which they would then get to spend at a news outlet of their choice, with the revenue going to that news outlet.

This solution would address the demand-side of the problem: if the media was less dependent on advertising revenue, journalists would be free to pursue their interests without fear of alienating their primary source of revenue. In addition, with greater resources at their disposal via the voucher scheme, journalists would be less dependent on elites as a supplier of easily accessible, cheap news. Coupled with a more representative and diverse pool of journalists, this could lead to a marked improvement in the media's coverage of issues of poverty and inequality. Moreover, since the revenues of news outlets would depend on their audience's endorsement, which would include the endorsement of poorer citizens, they would have a strong economic incentive to cover issues that relate to the poor's interests and not to treat the poor in a condescending or disrespectful way.

Of course, the public voucher proposal faces important objections. Perhaps the most pressing concerns its consequences. Is there a danger that the poor will make the “wrong” choices and spend their vouchers on dubious news outlets who are peddling fake news or don't serve their interests?

While this is an important worry, we do not think it is decisive. First, proponents of the voucher system can mitigate the concern by placing restrictions on what people can spend their voucher on. Just as public funding of political parties sets certain ground rules for eligibility, the public voucher scheme can similarly set certain ground rules for which news outlets can receive funding. But again, like the ground rules for funding of political parties, these rules cannot be so restrictive so

as to rule out a diversity of different views some of which me may not like. Second, we should be wary of making pessimistic predictions about the choices of our fellow citizens. While some people will probably spend their vouchers on outlets of dubious value, it does not seem unrealistic to hope that many people will take the choice seriously, and that over time the voucher scheme could itself contribute a greater concern among citizens about the quality of the news media. In any case, the worry that the poor will spend their voucher in the “wrong” way invokes the same condescending attitude that we have criticized in this chapter.

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