Poverty and Journalism: Transformative Practices?
Introduction

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A ccording to the United Nations, today, worldwide, there are about 100 million people living on the streets, 600 million living in shelters, and over a billion in precarious housing situations (UN, 2011). A recent Oxfam report has warned of the disturbing inequality around the world, showing that the eight richest men on the planet hold resources comparable to those available to the 3,600,000,000 poorest; half of the world's population (Oxfam, 2016). The conventional economic definition of extreme poverty applies to more than 20 per cent of the planet's inhabitants who live on an income of less than $1.00 a day, while relative poverty, also an indicator of economic restriction, includes another 20 per cent of the world's population who live on less than $2.50 a day (Davis, 2006). Poverty is by no means restricted to the Global South. Those who fall below the poverty line in Canada, the United States and Europe—a category that often includes unemployed recent immigrants, especially in major European cities (OECD, 2013)—now make up as much as 40 per cent of the population in some regions (HUD, 2012; Statistics Canada, 2011; Fréchet *et al.*, 2011; OECD, 2011). This fact sharply contradicts the widely held perception that most citizens in the West are middle class. An estimated 3 million Americans and 300,000 Canadians have become homeless since the 2008 recession (Weissman, 2013).

Poverty is a serious global social problem (Alcock, 2006), with disastrous consequences on the lives of millions in the world. However, coverage of the problem, including what might be called the surrounding industry that responds to it (NGOs, intergovernmental and international organizations), is easily distorted, erased, or naturalized in various ways by newspapers, broadcasts and other media vehicles (Pardo, April 2008; Silva, 2009; Pardo, 2012; Pardo, Noblía, 2015; Pardo, Noblia, 2016; Resende, 2016a). While poverty continues to be one of the most important global issues, as these facts indicate, it is also one of the most neglected (Lugo-Ocando, 2015: 15). These intersectional (racialized, gendered, (dis)abled) and mass-unemployed (Hill-Collins, Bilge, 2016) populations are at best marginal when it comes to accessing and using the power of contemporary mainstream media. Two socio-historical factors need to be contextualized to help understand why coverage of poverty is neglected, both locally and globally. First, we need to put into context the ongoing transition in the news industry's systems of production, and second, we need to explain why journalism practices are hard to change while also theorizing the capacity of the existing news ecosystem to create distinct narrative forms and frames of address for subjects of poverty. We outline the general contexts for the systems of production below, and in the following section propose a discussion of the systems' capacity or incapacity to address the lifeworld of subjects of poverty and whether they are even considered to be an audience that journalists seek to address.

Regarding the shifts in the systems of production and practices, Hallin and Mancini (2012) observe that media in North America and Northern Europe tend to be pluralist and are composed of a mixture of fact-based and mixed-genre reporting from public and private organizations that maintain autonomy from political parties. While newspaper industries, the medium that continues to employ the largest number of professional journalists, have enjoyed robust growth over the last decade in India, China, Africa, and much of Latin America, in North America a pessimism about the future economic and civic role of a pluralist news media has been spreading (WAN, 2008; WAN, 2015). The addition of approximately 5,000 new "digital" journalists working with a variety of online startups in the U.S.A. have not come close to replacing the loss of more than 20,000 newsroom positions over the last decade (Pew, 2015). Reports on the so-called crisis in journalism (Gasher *et al.*, 2016; Alexander *et al.*, 2016; Sabés Turmo, Verón Lassa, 2012) are increasingly calling for more European-style subsidies that would support the news industry in North America as it goes through its digital transition (Miles, 2016; Benson, 2014). At the same time, Europe mourns the loss of the former monopoly of public broadcast services to the private sector and the imperatives of the neo-liberal economy.

The pluralist model is more polarized in the Global South, as can be seen in the mix of organizational forms—minority public and predominant private—and the parallel relations with political parties (Hallin, Mancini, 2012). Brazil is an exception to this in that its media organizations have in the main been privately owned since the beginning. While there was an early shift toward fact-based reporting away from the parallelism between political parties and the press, fact-based reporting was interrupted during the years of dictatorship (1964-1985), and even more polarized in the context of the recent political crisis (Albuquerque, 2011). Most countries in Latin America experienced different forms of authoritarian rule that helped create large private and largely uncontested conglomerates like Globo in Brazil and Televisa in Mexico, as well as the "duopolies" in Argentina, the Grupo Clarín and Telefonica, and Grupo Phillips and Cisneros in Venezuela (Moto, 2011). In Peru, Ecuador and many other countries in the region, there is a mixture of ownership comprised of some public, but mainly family-based conglomerates. In almost all cases, historically "domestic media groups became regime allies in the quest for political power" (Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez, 2014, p.55). Obviously, these characteristics of the journalistic environment have an impact on the representation of social problems linked to the inequality of distribution of material and symbolic resources (Villarruel, 2014).

Both the pluralist and private monopoly systems are evolving at different speeds today, with a series of well-documented pressures being brought to bear against the civic ideals and economic viability of what we might call the institutions of journalism. The institutions have no body, no voice and no point of view, except those of spokespersons who are mainly journalists and who are themselves (Nielsen, 2016a) "situated, self-interested, libidinous, and hence condemned to the ineluctability of the point of view" (Boltanski, 2011: 84), all pretence to objectivity aside. Professional journalists see themselves as responsible for performing the craft, reproducing its codes, methods and techniques, and legitimizing the ideals, but are aware they cannot act without the organizational and technological infrastructures and their complex labor, capital, and state relations. The outpaced transformation on the organizational side of the institutions is putting pressure on the craft in a variety of ways. These pressures differ greatly across regions, and range from deregulation and increased corporate concentration to overt in-

tervention, intimidation and censorship in more authoritarian contexts. Collapsing advertising revenue streams, technological innovation, and the increase in audience fragmentation are said to be driving media platform convergence and the loss of local news outlets.

As a consequence, from the news-making standpoint, it seems that there remains a duality between the instituted coverage (from both commercial and non-commercial organizations) that emphasize standard practices (with the over-representation of external governmental or corporate sources on the coverage or the selection and treatment of news based on traditional news values) on the one hand, and, on the other, advocacy movements promoted by other social actors in order to impact or disrupt mediated public agendas (Silva, 1998) and possibly institute new journalism practices. At the same time, citizen journalism (with and without editorial control) has emerged alongside the fusion of news and entertainment and the overrun industry of public relations (spin). While the rise of social media has shown much emancipatory potential, it has also lead to the return of muckraking and yellow journalism ("fake news") on a massive scale (Park, 1923), which begs the questions: "Where does news come from? What is true? What isn't? What's the agenda, if there is one, of the publisher?" (Doctor, 2016). An in-depth study of the way these pressures are affecting journalism coverage and the representation of poverty has yet to be done.

We do not need to look far to discover negative influences that appear to have deteriorated a century's worth of values committed to autonomous, balanced, fact-based and verified reporting by the institutions of journalism. Nowhere have these values been more threatened than in the reporting on the unexpected results from the American presidential elections in 2016, the vote on the Brexit referendum or the globally publicized impeachment ("constitutional coup") of the President of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff. This is not simply an ideological shift toward right-wing authoritarianism, bigger big business, militarization, or the scapegoating of minorities, but in many instances the fabulous denial of social facts journalists are expected to expose and in so doing provide a democratic counterpoint as a fourth estate. One U.S.A. commentator has summed it up this way: "The decline of the mass media's business models; the continued rise of personalized social feeds and the content that spreads easily within them; the hollowing-out of reporting jobs away from the coasts: These are, like the expansion of the universe, pushing us farther apart in all directions" (Benton, 2016).

This issue of *About journalism – Sur le journalisme – Sobre jornalismo* includes contributions that seek to unravel the complex combination of political, organizational and creative forces that struggle with and against each other to define "good" journalistic practice. This means situating analysis in homology with the sociological tensions and diversity found in social and organizational structures as well as in discursive practices. Journalistic attitudes and backgrounds, editorial consistency, levels of verification required and professional cultures differ vastly across the various media, but even more so across urban, national and global regions. Everywhere journalists raise questions about poverty, but how are the poor named, represented and classified? Are they represented as numbers? Where are the places journalism is reporting on? How can we change the practice? What experimental medium might facilitate the transformation? How are the poor represented in images? What role do gender, race and class play in coverage? Does it matter who is working in the newsroom? Why are images of "the poorest of the poor" so journalistically compelling? These are some of the relevant questions raised by the seven papers published in the present issue.

Let us now briefly outline some of these questions as we present the papers:

CAN THE SUBJECTS OF POVERTY FIND THEIR VOICES IN THE CURRENT NEWS ECOSYSTEMS?

It is important that we do not reduce multiple levels of cultural meanings journalists create to the political-economic imperatives and contradictions from emerging crises in the news industry and in political societies. On the one hand, as mentioned above, the history and critique of the political economy of media organizations that cover poverty is yet to be written. On the other hand, one should not ignore transformative initiatives in the institutions of journalism that seek to include the social actors/groups it reports on as the addressee.

There remains an important political role that journalists fulfil in "shaping" the news about poverty, and it should be discussed. In the first paper in this issue ("A política das imagens e a pobreza: mulheres do Bolsa-Família no fotojornalismo entre 2003 e 2013"/ "The Politics of Images and Poverty: Women Beneficiaries from the Bolsa-Família Cash Transfer Program in Photojournalism between 2003 and 2013"), Ângela Marques focuses on the implications of the ostensive use of poverty images in journalistic activity, arguing that besides constituting a "large gallery of unidentified sufferers," this use also reinforces the narrative capacity of images. Reflecting upon the relationship between poverty and photojournal-

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ism, she investigates the expressive elements that characterize situations of poverty in images. If it is true that hegemonic journalism has been supportive, at least through a charitable framing of stories about poverty—what may be, and indeed is, questioned—it has also been narrowly focused on problems related to a lack of access by significant portions of the world population to material and symbolic resources, in often superficial ways that too easily associate poverty and violence, as Pardo Abril (2008) pointed out in the Colombian case and Pardo (2013; 2014) discusses in the Argentinian one.

Two papers in this issue address the problem of the poverty/violence association in media. In "*Las representaciones discursivas sobre los vecinos de las villas en noticieros e historias de vida: entre la pasividad y la agentividad*" (The Discursive Representations of Neighborhoods in Impoverished Communities in News and Life Stories: Between Passivity and Agency), Analía Zilber highlights the discursive representations of residents living in impoverished communities in Buenos Aires. Zilber applies different methods and linguistic theories to life histories, news from the Telenoche newscast and news from *Visión Siete Central*. Her research points to a stigmatization of these communities. In "*Mídias francesas e estigmatização dos moradores de periferia em casos de 'violência urbana'*" (French media and the stigmatization of peripheral populations in cases of 'urban violence'), Paula Paes also discusses the association between poverty and violence in the media representation of peripheral suburbs, focusing on the French case. She argues that the problem of urban violence is also the result of a matter of definition and therefore scholars of media representation must ask themselves: Who does the violence refer to? What questions are raised? The article, then, investigates the social conditions of news production and the media's participation in the construction of reality..

As both papers stress, this common approach tends to avoid critical investigative reporting. Yet, it is also true that alternative journalism like street papers, community media, some citizen journalism, some social media, as well as emerging First Nations television networks and some public broadcasters have sought other forms of association between journalism and extreme poverty. Various forms of civic journalism have sought to establish different political relationships when it comes to addressing the subjects of poverty as potential audiences, for example by reporting protagonist actions taken over by subordinate groups (Acosta, 2012). In the paper "*Por uma estética jornalística da pobreza*" (Toward a Journalistic Aesthetic of Poverty?), Augusto Paim considers the dynamics involved in the functioning of narrative genres and their potential, and asks whether supposedly objective conventional journalism, can contribute to an exercise of citizenship and humanity. Is it possible to produce socially engaged content in a conservative format? The author concludes that even if it addresses social issues, traditional journalism is incapable of provoking transformations when it uses enshrined formats and techniques that only simulate objectivity. Thus, he argues that the practice of a socially engaged journalism should be based on an aesthetic supported by narrative techniques coming from the arts. Theorizing the cultural power of journalism, its professional ethics, and its relative autonomy from economic and political forces means explaining what makes it a distinct field of cultural practice. The unique cultural power of journalism is seen in the shaping of symbols of collective representation. It does this through reporting on the performances of actors from any number of fields that are selected as newsworthy (Alexander, 2015; Bourdieu, 2005). What is easily missed, though, in accounts that favor the autonomous role journalists play, are the interpretive contradictions between the subjects of reports and the implied or imagined *demos* or "normal people" most news media address (Boltanski, 2011). Beyond the problem of a plurality of voices and perspectives that are said to define "good journalism" through an assumed system of checks and balances (Benson, 2014), we need to problematize the way in which journalism is able to imagine its audience without addressing itself to the subjects being reported.

For example, when and where journalists do report on the voices of the poor, or most often, of the agencies, groups or individuals who speak for or about them, they are framed in mainly rational and to a lesser extent moral tones that are legitimated through reference to independent or government data, expert testimony, or opinion from scholarly sources (Nielsen, 2008; Resende, 2016b). Emotional quotes from subjects, like the emerging U.S.A. genre favoring first person emotional narratives (Schudson, 2016), are designed to provide a response from the imaginary reader or a hook for the standard narrative, but too often they also stigmatizes the addict, the squatter, or the victim of famine or natural disaster. Multiform (print and audio-visuals) and multi-platform (tweets, blogs, snapchat, etc.) narratives, as well as Op-Ed pieces, documentaries, letters to editors, and wire reports through legacy media can and do provide important supports through critiques of oppression or simply by witnessing injustice. However, one rarely finds original reporting that recognizes either the immediate subjectivity of

poverty or the structural causes of inequality that give rise to it.

HOW HAVE JOURNALISTS RECOGNIZED THE VARIOUS SITUATIONS OF POVERTY?

Because of mainstream journalism's use of rational or moral tones, and a third-person form of address that separates the journalist from the subjects of the reports, news risks freezing the experience of poverty into a second, more distanced level of recognition (Nielsen, 2016b). Professional journalists often avoid putting themselves in the story for good reasons; distance from the subject helps maintain credibility and, for some, a level of detachment is integral to striving for a sense of objectivity, balance, and accuracy. This makes sense for watchdog journalism that tells stories about governments, institutions or official subjects. But we need to question this need for distance when reporting the complex kinds of exclusion that can apply to the more hidden subjects of poverty.

In this issue, the problem of objectivity is addressed in the paper "*O jornalismo que cala a periferia: a dislexia discursiva e o silenciamento da pobreza*" (Journalism That Shuts Out the Periphery: Discursive Dyslexia and the Silencing of Poverty). Monica Sousa problematizes discrepancies between journalistic theory and practice, pointing out that "journalism rituals become strategic forces that contradict the 'social' essence that the rituals of objectivity, impartiality and truth claim to defend." The author then proposes the concept of discursive dyslexia, which, she argues, assures journalism strategies maintain a "subaltern" status quo, in which the inhabitants of peripheries are "immersed in their mediatic historicity," which has the potential effect of immobilizing resistances. On the other hand, in his article, John Delva addresses the issue of the media coverage of racially-based police violence in the United States, provoking reflection about the potential for news to impact social movements. In "*Content with Diversity: An Interview and Textual Analysis Based on the Huffington Post Crowdfunded Ferguson Coverage*," Delva argues that the broad media coverage of police brutality against black populations can serve as evidence for activists and victims' families, performing an important social mobilization function around sensitive intersectional issues linking class and race.

Taken together, these two papers illustrate the double articulation of discourse in society, highlighting its potential to both maintain and transform social inequalities. Operating from conventional understandings of newsworthiness and who constitutes the imagined audience, journalists create categories of relevant and irrelevant, compatible and incompatible, same and other, and divisions between—what Lugo-Ocando (2015) calls "othering." Silverstone (2007) employs the concept of the "mediapolis" to describe the mediated public space in which we engage with sameness and otherness. This discursive work, however, can lead to unexpected results, including appropriation possibilities, like those pointed out in Delva's paper.

The absence of first-level subjective recognition in reporting on the subjects of poverty can also be seen to take the form of what Nancy Fraser calls "status subordination." For example, when news reports display charitable openings toward "helping" the poor, from the point of view of the journalists' intentions this would not appear to create any impediment to first-level recognition. But first-level recognition requires a dialogic form of address (a second-person "you") that would address the subjects themselves as co-creators in the utterance/report (Bakhtin, 1984). Missing the first level of recognition via the framing and third-person form of address does not mean that the subject is "simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction" (Fraser, 2000: 113).

In her paper published in this issue, "*Pessoas em situação de rua: o que dizem sobre elas e o que mais poderiam dizer?*" (People in homelessness: what do they say about them and what else could they say?), Suzana Rozendo focuses on an original question about audience: considering the way the homeless are represented in the mainstream media, what do professionals who deal with this population think about the news reported by journalism? Her purpose in the paper, then, is to unveil the positioning of professionals who deal directly with homeless people regarding news about them. Thus, her text promotes a critique of the media by voices that are affected by news in their professional performance, since representation is also a form of action.

Even if the mainstream media regularly addresses issues of poverty in supportive or charitable terms—without establishing relations between poverty situations and other social issues, thus reducing the representation to a logic of appearance (Fairclough, 2003)—there is also the matter that reporting rarely addresses the social actors being reported on as also being their readers, viewers or listeners. In other words, in the main, the journalist speaks from the point of view of "haves" toward other "haves" about "have-nots" (Resende, 2016b; Molina, 2011). Does it

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not follow that public understanding of the experience of poverty is diminished, even when the press passionately pleas in the name of greater democracy for solutions? Does it not follow that coverage of poverty operates in such a way that it produces a silencing of a set of social actors—curiously the very ones who are the most directly concerned by this subject—who are thereby excluded from media representation and access to the public debate on this subject?

Exclusion from the implied audience has not been problematic for mainstream journalism as it has long been embedded in its normative practices that news stories should address the interests of the majority readership (Retief, 2002; Ward, 2006). The first responsibility of the journalist and news editors has traditionally been to imagine and judge the newsworthiness of the story for this empirical audience. Our claim is that this is so basic to the industry that it overlooks how marginalized groups become subjects of news reports and yet are only rarely if ever addressed as the active subjects of the implied audience. We recognize that socially and economically marginalized actors do not constitute an attractive market for commercial news organizations and we are equally aware that research has long pointed out that journalists are reluctant to change habits and set narrative patterns (Tuchman, 1978; Ryfe, 2012). We have further noted that the news media have been undergoing a major shift in their economic models over the past decade, but we also need to critically examine the concept that new digitized technologies herald a democratization of media. It may be true that the new technologies and emergent practices have transformed the audience into a medium itself, or at least made it that anyone belonging to what was once the "audience commodity" can now directly report whatever news comes to mind (Anderson *et al.*, 2014), but this remains a perpetual possibility and is far from a proven means of producing reliable and accessible news and information for all, as several researchers have suggested (Alexander, 2015; Jurkowwitz, 2014; Hass, 2007; Curran, 2010).

Social-historical contexts and orders of discourse shape the institutions of journalism, how the audience is addressed, emotional-volitional tones, the selection of external and internal sources, and moral or rational judgments. In turn, journalism practices influence the ways publics perceive and react to social vulnerability, people in poverty are identified and audiences identify themselves (or not) in relation to social issues (Resende, 2012). Since the relationship between language and society is two-way, these same processes have been shaped in previous social practices. The "shaping" of the news (Benson, 2013) on poverty by news organizations, their geo-political contexts, professional cultures, and relationships to power thus become an object of interest for research in different disciplines. It is in this spirit that this multidisciplinary issue presents articles that address the many subjects of poverty in the context of the institutions of journalism in transition and transformation.

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