

MA Major Research Paper

**Poverty and the Media:**  
***Mainstream newspaper coverage of anti-poverty activism***

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## **Poverty and the media:** **Mainstream newspaper coverage of anti-poverty activism**

### **Introduction**

In the twenty-first century, the mass media is increasingly seen as having a very pervasive influence: the extent and reach of it simply cannot be ignored. In communities large and small, and in countries all over the world, the mass media has the ability to set agendas and influence public opinion. In North America, the mass media is particularly ubiquitous; from television, to the internet, to newspapers, it has become difficult to avoid mass media products.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the growth of the mass media in our society. Much good can come out of the fact that so many individuals read and watch different types of news and entertainment. As well, mass media coverage has been indispensable to many social movements, and has, undoubtedly, helped affect change in many cases (Baxter, 47; Gibbs, 40). However, the mass media has also been responsible for the invisibility of certain types of stories in public discourse. Since the advent of the mass media age, owners, editors, and producers have had to decide which issues to cover, and which to disregard. In recent years, due in large part to the growth of huge media corporations, newspapers and television networks often allow business realities to dictate editorial decisions. Media magnates such as Rupert Murdoch, and until recently, Conrad Black, are able to push certain stories, while ignoring others. An example of this would be the National Post's coverage of Yasser Arafat's death: while newspapers all over the world had this story on their front page on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2004, the Post marginalized this huge event. In the next day's paper, they mentioned the death of Arafat in a few

articles, but only told the parts of this story that they deemed acceptable. The National Post's social and political biases, this time in relation to their pro-Israel stance, can be seen clearly when we examine the death of the Palestinian leader in November of 2004 ("Pro-democracy group chides Martin for statement of sympathy to Palestinians"; "World's nations split on funeral attendance"). The economic and social power that newspaper owners have gives them the ability to portray particular issues in negative lights.

One of the adverse consequences of the conservative nature of mass media conglomerates has been the absence of stories about poverty in the news (Bullock et al, 235). While poverty issues have never received concentrated media attention, before the convergence of so many mass media outlets, there were more chances for stories about the poor to get covered. Evidence of this was the inclusion of more left-leaning, socially progressive writers on staff at the Globe and Mail or Toronto Star during the 1970s and 1980s. For the Globe, Thomson's acquisition of the newspaper in 1980s was a turning point, as it became more conservative in the years to follow. For the Star, we can see the move to the centre in political leanings as renowned progressive journalists such as Linda McQuaig are forced to write columns 'debating' writers on the right, thereby taking much of the criticism of the status quo out of her work. As newspapers are run more like businesses than the fourth estate, and progressive voices cease to be heard, stories about poverty are increasingly rare.

In this paper, I am going to examine why it is that poverty issues receive so little coverage by the mainstream press, and why the attention that poverty does receive is

negative. I believe there are three main reasons that these issues get ignored and portrayed in a negative light:

- The fact that those who live in poverty are often female and non-white;
- The complex relationship between poverty and the neoliberal agenda; and
- The fact that poverty issues are simply inconvenient subjects for newspapers to devote resources to.

After examining why the coverage of poverty is sparse and negative, I will look at why it is that anti-poverty activists are so dependent on mainstream news coverage. If these activists want to affect change, they need to attract the attention of the mainstream news outlets: why is it not enough for them to simply use alternative news outlets and direct action techniques? The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) campaign to “Raise the Rates” of welfare shows how difficult it is for stories about poverty to receive coverage by the mainstream press, and how activists fighting for the rights of those on welfare are often marginalized. The OCAP campaign received little attention from the mainstream press until the provincial government and city councilors made the decision to acknowledge the campaign and modify their treatment of citizens affected by poverty. Much of this lack of coverage was due to the fact that OCAP used far less extreme methods than they had in the past, which allowed the mainstream media to ignore the campaign. After governmental policy changes, coverage of the campaign increased, but the stories that emerged from the mainstream newspapers were often negative and ambiguous.

The first chapter of this paper will address why it is that there are so few stories about poverty in the mainstream news. I will also look at what it is about this issue that

makes journalists uncomfortable, and how this affects media coverage. In the second chapter, I will turn to the role of activists in the fight against poverty in Ontario. I will look at how anti-poverty activists use direct action techniques and alternative media to create awareness about particular causes. In the third and fourth chapters, I will turn to a case study that illustrates how difficult it is for anti-poverty activists to get positive coverage of their causes and actions. The OCAP “Raise the Rates” campaign is an excellent example of how anti-poverty activism is often portrayed in the mainstream media.

## **Chapter One: Poverty in the news**

In Canada, over 5 million individuals live in conditions that we consider to be below the poverty line (Kazemipur and Halli, 8). However, for many Canadians, poverty is an affliction that seems rather foreign. Few stories about issues surrounding the debate on poverty make it to the mainstream, and when articles about those living in poverty do appear, these stories are too often negative and have no contextual information. There is a lack of media coverage about substantive themes relevant to the issues surrounding poverty in Canada. When seen in mainstream newspapers, poverty is portrayed as being one-dimensional and individualistic (Sotirovic, 750). In a society which has so much prosperity, the lives of those who live on the margins are rarely considered newsworthy.

There are three main reasons why poverty issues do not receive much attention, or positive coverage: the feminization and racialization of poverty in the media, the complexity of the issue in a neoliberal political world, and the unpopular nature of these types of stories with elites in the newspaper world. There are certainly other factors that may account for the lack of positive stories about those who live in poverty, including the class element of newspaper readership (targeted readers are not often those individuals who live in poverty), and the preference among media outlets for entertainment news rather than so-called 'serious news', among other factors. However, the three reasons mentioned above are the most important impediments to the coverage of poverty issues in the mainstream press, and they will be discussed in detail in this chapter. Although my case study analysis will focus on newspaper coverage of poverty issues, I will be using both newspaper and television research to develop my arguments. There has been more research on the effects of television news regarding viewers' preferences for welfare and

poverty policies, and it is important to incorporate this research into my discussion of anti-poverty groups and the mainstream press.

### *The Feminization and Racialization of Poverty*

The first reason for the lack of stories about the poor has to do with how those living in poverty are portrayed. Living below the poverty line is increasingly shown as being fundamentally different than living a middle-class existence (Clawson and Trice, 54). When stories about those who live in poverty do appear, often individuals in these stories are seen as ‘the other’. By ‘othering’ poor Canadians, newspapers further distance readers from those living in these conditions. Negative coverage ensues in that both journalist and reader have trouble identifying with the poor, and positive stories do not resonate.

In examining why poverty issues are so often couched in terms of ‘the other’, it is essential to recognize the gendered and racial nature of the issue: poverty is not an equal opportunity hardship, but the extent to which it is portrayed as being an affliction suffered mainly by women or people of colour is exaggerated by the media. Although women, along with ethnic minorities, are more likely to live below the poverty line than are men, the media take this reality to mean that portrayals of poverty ought to focus exclusively on these groups of people (Capponi, 12). This is not to say that men, or even white men, are never shown to be poor: in fact, white men who have a drug addiction, mental illness, or alcohol problem are often portrayed in the mainstream press. However, these troubled men are seen by the middle-class reader of the paper to be essentially different from them, in much the same way that poor single mothers, and new immigrants



to Canada are different. The 'othering' of the poor, therefore, certainly includes white men; however, these white men are almost always shown to have a serious affliction that makes them undeniably different.

Although the mainstream media too often shows the face of poverty to be female, women in Canada do tend to be poorer than their male counterparts and this discrepancy continues to increase (Kazemipur and Halli, 10). This reality has negatively affected media coverage of the issue. As in so many other walks of life, women are not seen in the news as much as men are (Steiner, 123). When women are covered in the news, it is far more often in the role of victim, or in the role of the 'other'. If being white and middle class is considered to be the standard, women who are poor are seen as deviations. Poverty is deviant not only because it is shown to be being overwhelmingly female, but also because being of the middle-class is seen to be the normal and acceptable way of life.

Coverage of poverty issues tends to focus on women who live in poverty as being unable to do anything about it, or worse, as being responsible for their fate (Little, 18). In particular, when stories about women who are poor appear in the news, these stories tend to focus on the relationship between women and welfare (Clawson and Trice, 54-55). As might be expected, it is not often that newspaper articles about those on welfare are particularly positive. Too often, those who are poor are seen as abusing the welfare system: "poor people in general are often portrayed as lazy, sexually irresponsible, and criminally deviant" (Kensicki, 54). When women are seen as living in poverty, societal stereotypes about their lifestyle are perpetuated by media portrayals.

Women on welfare are usually shown as falling into one of three categories: the misfortunate, the feckless, or the young (Gring-Pemble, 346). Those who are seen as misfortunate are portrayed as having had something happen to them that was beyond their control. Examples of such hardships include natural disasters, economic woes, or illness and death. 'Misfortunates' are not seen as being of one race or another: the problems they are suffering from could happen to anyone (Gring-Pemble, 347). These people are seen as needing help to get themselves back on their feet because they truly want to work. These women need short-term assistance to stabilize their lives; they are seen as having the right values and thus deserving of help. Media images and reports praise the abilities and talents of these individuals and emphasize that poverty, in this case, is simply a lack of opportunity (Gring-Pemble, 346).

However, rather than being shown as misfortunate, most female welfare recipients are seen as being inherently feckless. This characterization is by far the most prevalent stereotype perpetuated by the mass media. Women in this group are seen as having poor values, and therefore not deserving of welfare (Hays, 97). It is assumed that the vast majority of women on welfare fit into this group and that poverty thus stems from inferior moral character. Women in this group are portrayed as deviants who need harsh rules to make them accept core North American values. These able-bodied women are shown to rely on welfare for years, and have children that supposedly perpetuate the cycle of public assistance. Class and race are extremely important in this stereotype: feckless women on welfare are seen as being overwhelmingly African-American, Hispanic, or in Canada, Aboriginal (Sotirovic, 752; Mink, 57).

The third stereotype perpetuated by the media is youth: a large number of welfare recipients are seen simply as being young. These young women who have babies out of wedlock and turn to the state for assistance are portrayed as being both deviants and dependents (Gring-Pemle, 350). These 'girls' are seen as needing parenting themselves, and media coverage of this group reflects this idea. Portrayed as victims of a poor upbringing, teenage mothers on welfare are forced to live in an adult-supervised environment if they want to receive financial assistance (Hays, 84-85). The bad choices they made are acknowledged, but it is also recognized that they probably had very hard childhoods themselves. The image of the young welfare mother comes out of neoliberal ideology prevalent particularly in the United States which sees poor young women as having children because this is the only life they know. Policy implications for this stereotype thus include ways to break the so-called welfare cycle and force these women off social assistance (Gring-Pemle, 354).

These three distinct stereotypes are not exclusively reserved for women: men on welfare are also often portrayed as being either misfortunate or feckless (although in most mainstream discourse, the feckless label often takes priority). However, it is particularly problematic that women, who are less likely to be in news stories to start with, overwhelmingly face these stereotypes when poverty issues are covered by the mainstream news. Portraying poor women as victims or con artists negatively impacts the public's view on issues of poverty and the rights of the poor, as the mainstream media portrays women as making up a large portion of the poor population.

The problematic coverage of poverty can also be seen with regards to race and ethnicity: in North America, there is a mistaken view that those who live in poverty are

not only female, but also non-white. When news outlets do cover poverty issues, too often the racial makeup of the poor is exaggerated (Gilens, 526). In many different studies of news content, researchers have found that the press is very likely to show those who live in poverty as being a certain race and a certain age. According to the *Media Report to Women* in 1995, “stories about welfare focused on young, non-white, unwed mothers, portraying them as a problem and leaving out responsibilities of the men in their lives” (Sotirovic, 751). Associating young women of colour with poverty has been going on for many years. President Reagan famously named these women ‘welfare queens’ and blamed them for giving welfare recipients a bad name (Davey, 159).

Even before Reagan, however, the idea that the poor were ‘the other’ was prevalent (Nadasen, 4). So-called ‘middle America’ has been shown by newspapers and television that those who are poor, likely deserve to be this way (Kensicki, 54). Martin Gilens conducted a number of content analysis studies in the 1990s on the ratio of African-Americans who live in poverty compared to the percentage of newsmagazine stories that show African-Americans in pictures accompanying stories about America’s poor. His findings were quite disturbing: while African-Americans accounted for 29% of America’s poor, they were shown in these newsmagazine pictures 62% of the time (Gilens, 521). This misrepresentation becomes even more problematic when we examine the public’s opinion on the racial nature of poverty. Gilens looks at a number of national surveys and finds that the public estimates that of Americans living below the poverty line, African-Americans likely make up 50% of this figure (Gilens, 516). Although this is not as profound a discrepancy as the newsmagazines pictures represent, it is still a considerable misconception.

In Canada, the situation closely resembles that of the United States: our newspapers distort the number of ethnic minorities living in poverty as compared to those who are white who live below the poverty line (Kazemipur and Halli, 11). It is not simply a matter of overestimating the number of ethnic minority residents who live in poverty though, that proves to be problematic. Stories about immigrants who are working, and yet still not making enough to live upon, are very rare, as are stories about dismal conditions in which so many new Canadians are forced to live (Capponi, 253). In both Canada and the United States, many poor individuals of colour live in urban neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods often have high levels of violence and crime, and these types of stories do make the news on a regular basis, especially when these stories are about young men of ethnic minorities perpetuating violence against innocents (Kazemipur and Halli, 14). When middle-class readers and viewers hear and read about the situations in these neighbourhoods, the image of poverty becomes further 'other-ed'. These neighbourhoods do not resemble their suburban lives, and those living on poverty are further marginalized. The urban neighbourhood image of poverty is often associated more closely with men of colour, but women who live in these settings are certainly stigmatized as well.

Finally, the fact that those who are most often trying to do something about poverty in Canada are often female, creates further problems for the anti-poverty movement. As discussed above, media stories about poverty usually focus on women as victims or as undeserving recipients of welfare. Women living in poverty who are attempting to create change for themselves and others do not receive much attention. Heavy female involvement in anti-poverty activism should come as no surprise: due to

the fact that women are so often the ones raising children on small salaries or welfare monies, these individuals are the ones who realize the importance of fighting for the rights of the poor (Capponi, 140). Although many men also live in poverty, it is often women, and particularly mothers, who have borne the brunt of extreme measures imposed by governments in North America in recent years (Baxter, 48). In terms of Canadian anti-poverty fights, we can see this manifested in the number of women attending rallies, protests, and demonstrations (Baxter, 12). As well, shelters, women's centres, and other organizations have been at the forefront of the war against welfare cuts. Activism for issues surrounding poverty, therefore, has become an area where women are often the ones leading the way. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty's battle with welfare bureaucrats is no different in that women are involved in the organization from the grass-roots up. This has, unsurprisingly, led to a situation in which activists have had to rely on alternative media, direct action techniques and their own media releases in an attempt to be heard by the mainstream press and public which have so often marginalized these attempts to create change (Armstrong, 24). Due to the gendered nature of the fight against poverty, the mainstream media is that much more likely to ignore attempts by these activists to affect change, and therefore, stories about anti-poverty activists remain a rarity.

### *The Complex Nature of Poverty in a Neoliberal Political Climate*

The second reason why stories about poverty are rare in the mass media is due to the complex nature in which poverty is dealt with in our current political climate, and consequently in the media. Neoliberal policies ensure that poverty is seen as being the

result of individual behaviours, and that those who are poor should receive little help from the government. If it can be avoided, poverty is ignored by neoliberal politicians; this issue is seen as unpopular, and thus is not discussed unless absolutely necessary. The media sees neoliberal politicians dealing with poverty in such a way and follows suit. Poverty becomes a complicated issue that most mainstream media outlets would prefer to ignore. Unlike a shooting, a car crash or a gaffe by a politician, poverty is an issue that is more difficult for these outlets to cover.

The longevity and complexity of poverty in our society ensure that the mainstream media find it a difficult subject to report on (Kaufman, 25). Newspapers have more opportunities to present nuanced portrayals of issues than do television reports, and yet many newspapers fail to provide background information to the stories they report on (Clawson and Trice, 55). As well, the very nature of the fight against poverty means that solutions to this issue tend to be obscured by the magnitude of the problem at hand. An issue such as gun violence tends to elicit certain predictable responses: make it more difficult for guns to make their way to Canada from the United States; punish offenders more severely; teach young people to stay away from gangs. With poverty, solutions are more varied and controversial, particularly due to the fact that the welfare state has been dismantled in both Canada and the United States in the last twenty-five years (Kensicki, 53). Neoliberal ideas regarding the poor are so prevalent in Canada that it is difficult for newspapers to present new ideas. The idea that tax cuts are more important than social programs has made the fight to end poverty more difficult. As a result, newspapers have had a more challenging time in reporting upon issues of poverty, as well as what ought to be done to curb the problem.

Television news shows poverty in one of two ways: poverty is either seen to be episodic, or thematic (Iyengar, 22). Episodic news reports show poverty by presenting a story about an individual living in certain conditions, while thematic coverage focuses on general information about a poverty issue, such as the rising cost of heating or changes in public policy related to welfare. A study done by Shanto Iyengar in the 1980s showed that most television news stories about poverty tend to be episodic (Iyengar, 22). While this phenomenon has not been studied extensively when it comes to newspaper coverage, there is still evidence that newspaper reports about poverty are typically episodic (Kaufman, 25; Iyengar, 31). Like neoliberal political and economic elites, newspaper journalists tend to show poverty as a condition affecting certain individuals, rather than being a societal problem for which all citizens are responsible or something that has come about as a result of punitive government policies.

Poverty is a topic that many Canadians have ambivalent feelings about: we live in a society which encourages a 'can-do' attitude, so what does it mean when certain people cannot get ahead? The news media contributes to this ambiguity by framing news stories about poverty in particular ways. As mentioned earlier, poverty is often framed as being the result of individual choices made by certain groups of people (Kensicki, 56). Having the state take responsibility for giving financial assistance to individuals in need has been a concept that we have accepted in Canada since the end of the First World War. In 1916, the first Mothers' Allowance legislation passed in Manitoba, and other provinces soon followed suit with laws regarding state assistance to widowed women with children. Only white women whose husbands had died or abandoned them were eligible for this money at first; however, other groups of women (and men) were soon deemed



appropriate recipients. Those who received Mothers' Allowance and other early forms of welfare had to abide by strict moral guidelines concerning their lifestyle choices: women who did not live their lives in ways seen as acceptable by state workers could have their privileges revoked immediately (Little, 25). Variations of Mothers' Allowances continued up until the beginning of the 'welfare state' under the minority Liberal government of Lester Pearson. The Pearson government formally enacted wide-ranging legislation aimed at helping the unemployed and the disabled, ensuring medical care for all Canadians, and giving single parents extra help. Although the welfare state had certain underlying faults, it at least provided a social safety net for all Canadians. Since the 1980s, consecutive Conservative and Liberal governments have eroded the welfare state to the point where social assistance once again looks as piecemeal and problematic as it did in the post-World War I era (Little, 198).

The ambivalence about the causes and solutions for widespread poverty in Canada was clearly seen in the debates about welfare in Ontario during the 1990s. Mike Harris' Conservative government introduced a number of devastating reforms to the welfare system (Torjman, 2). When these measures were first implemented, certain journalists did attempt to show the effects of the welfare cuts. Some journalists attempted to live on a welfare budget for a week, while others focused more on what welfare recipients would lose out on when Harris's policies were implemented. However, as the Conservative policies became 'old news', coverage of the welfare cuts slowed considerably. Instead of continuing to show how these reforms hurt ordinary Ontarians, the news media turned to other events and issues (Little, 43). Although there was still some coverage of what Harris was attempting to do, the media were rarely the

ones suggesting alternatives. Also, much attention was given to so-called welfare cheats (McNally, 12). Individuals who scammed the welfare system received far more coverage than they should have. While most welfare recipients did not (and do not) cheat the system, the small percentage of people who did was portrayed in many media reports (Torjman, 8). In the debate over 'workfare', much of the mainstream news media concentrated their coverage on how the policy would allow those on welfare to finally be required to work (McNally, 12).

Instead of providing in-depth information about how and why Ontario's welfare situation was as troubled as Harris claimed, the news media insisted on showing examples of individuals who lived in poverty who were not working, or who were somehow abusing the system. As discussed in the section on the gendered nature of poverty, these individuals were overwhelmingly women, and their choices regarding children and work were questioned repeatedly. Poverty was not presented as something that could happen to anyone in the debate on the Ontario welfare system; instead, Harris' policies were shown as being the only choice available to an unfortunate situation (McNally, 12).

In terms of specific solutions to the poverty crisis in Ontario, government-supported solutions tend to get reported far more frequently and extensively than solutions which rely on activist groups or community-based activity (Kensicki, 65). Reluctance to show activists (who may or may not be poor themselves) as those most able to come up with solutions is a result of two different factors. First of all, government actions on poverty, usually policy changes or implementations, get so much attention because of the official nature of these measures. Policy initiatives by federal,

provincial and municipal governments are seen as legitimate, while other suggestions to change the situation of the poor are often portrayed as being unworthy and unfeasible (Kensicki, 66). Secondly, activism on poverty issues is harder for journalists to report upon due to the nature of the struggle (Armstrong, 120). Anti-poverty activists have tended to use alternative media and direct action techniques to gain a voice; the mainstream media has been slow to recognize the viability of these tools and has not realized the potential these types of solutions have. As well, in a post-9/11 world, journalists have been increasingly wary of techniques such as direct action: the idea that individuals can solve social issues by taking matters into their own hands is at odds with the crackdown on individual liberties following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (Kensicki, 68).

By showing the causes and solutions to poverty in a problematic manner, the mainstream mass media is affecting how the general public will see the issue. When people are shown stories that suggest poverty is an individual cause, and that solutions must come from the government, there becomes more of a reluctance to create change from community organizations (Sotirovic, 752). News coverage affects how Canadian citizens think about poverty; when news stories are framed only as episodic, support for progressive strategies to deal with poverty decreases. When poverty issues are shown as being part of a larger picture, and not the fault of particular individuals, support for innovative approaches to dealing with poverty increases (Kensicki, 66). The news media's reluctance to deal with the complexities of poverty leaves readers with the impression that it is the responsibility of the poor to help themselves, and that the government's solutions are usually the only way to deal with the situation.

*Constraints of the Newspaper Business*

A third reason why poverty stories get negative coverage, or no coverage, by the mainstream press has to do with constraints of the modern newspaper business. Although it might seem obvious, one of the main difficulties in getting the mainstream media to report on issues of poverty is the reluctance of newspaper elites to cover this topic (Carter et al, 3-4). When business-oriented strategies rule at newspapers, stories that do not resonate with elites in society tend to get ignored. An excellent example of this is the disappearance of a 'labour beat' reporter in the *Globe and Mail*: there is still a 'Business' section in this paper, but there is no longer a reporter responsible for dealing with unions and labour relation issues. Poverty is thought of as being an issue that elites are uninterested in, and therefore gets little coverage. Even when individual reporters, or occasionally editors, want to do in-depth reporting on this topic, they face difficult institutional constraints (Gilens, 531).

Due to resources and time, journalists who do cover poverty issues tend to stick to poverty that they see around them (Gilens, 531-32). Although poverty is a phenomenon that exists all across Canada, major newspapers tend to be based in large cities. Poverty that gets covered, therefore, is the type that exists in such cities: drug use on the streets of Vancouver, Aboriginal poverty in Winnipeg, a lack of beds in downtown Toronto and the large number of new immigrants who live in poverty in Montreal (Capponi, 14). As one can imagine, these examples of poverty are not exactly easy to report upon. Going to the downtown east-side in Vancouver to examine the effects of the methadone clinics is easier said than done. Understanding why so many Aboriginals live on the streets of Winnipeg or Edmonton is also a complicated subject. Reporters have to go the extra mile

to write about poverty in their own cities; few go even further and examine poverty in the rest of the country. Urban ghettos are not places where residents tend to elicit empathy, and newspapers seem to accept the status quo on this issue.

As mentioned in the discussion on the complexity of poverty as a political issue, another reason journalists cover this topic so poorly is due to political preferences of elites. On a policy level, political elites have very specific ideas as to how poverty should be dealt with: individuals on welfare should be encouraged to get off public assistance. Since the 1980s, many governments have spent time figuring out ways to make welfare increasingly difficult to receive. Identifying underlying causes of poverty, raising the minimum wage, or trying to help new immigrants live above the poverty line are not seen as viable solutions by political elites of most Canadian political parties (Baxter, 121). Therefore, when poverty solutions which are innovative and different are proposed by poverty activists or community groups, newspaper journalists are caught unawares. Government policy solutions have been seen as the only way to deal with poverty for so long that the mainstream press does a poor job of treating activist ideas about poverty with any seriousness or enthusiasm.

Another barrier to in-depth poverty coverage is the lack of imagination by journalists who do cover the topic (Kaufman, 26). Poverty issues are difficult for middle-class reporters to write about because of the invisibility of those who live in poverty in many of their lives. When journalists do write about poverty in Canada, there is a real emphasis on telling a story in a way that will resonate with readers. Readers tend to connect with stories when they connect with the individual, so this leads to episodic coverage where a sympathetic figure is chosen, and an issue is discussed from this

perspective (Iyengar, 20). This format also tends to include statistics about those living in poverty, as well as some discussion of a government policy. Readers are often left with the impression that poverty might happen to a few unlucky people, but at least there are many options for those in poverty to improve their quality of life. For journalists, finding information about government policy, or regurgitating statistics is far simpler than covering activists attempting to create change (Kensicki, 61). Journalism, like any other profession, has time and money constraints: getting quotes or information from official sources is far less costly and takes less time than going through more alternative channels.

As newspapers are run more and more like businesses, the bottom line becomes increasingly important. Editors have less say over what is covered, while those in charge of the financial situation have more control (Carter et al, 4). Because stories about poverty are not usually thought to be attractive to elites, they often do not get much attention (Capponi, 20). Before independently-owned newspapers became a rarity, there were often reporters who were assigned to cover social issues regularly; now, it is much harder to find reporters or columnists that write exclusively about social issues. This has made it difficult for those who want to write about these issues as they face an institutional bias against this type of articles. Even a newspaper such as the Toronto Star, which typically has been seen as being 'left-leaning', has increased coverage of business and financial topics, while decreasing coverage of social issues. Social issues are still covered by the Star, but in episodic and predictable formats.

In summary, poverty issues lack the type of sustained news coverage given to topics which are thought to be more acceptable to the public. Poverty is so often seen as

being the fault of the individual that anti-poverty activists face a difficult battle in convincing the public to see it otherwise. Poverty is seen as being something which happens mainly to women, and often to women of colour. This 'othering' of poverty is troubling as it distances readers of newspapers from the terrible situation faced by many Canadians (Iyengar, 27). This method of storytelling implies that poverty is an individual problem and not something that society as a whole has responsibility for. Poverty is challenging for newspapers to cover, particularly because of the lack of interest in poverty issues by elites in both the newspaper world and the business world. When readers are not shown accurate portrayals of poverty in our country, policy preferences change, and support for welfare and other programs diminishes (Clawson and Trice, 60). The news media's failure to go beyond traditional views of poverty is ultimately harmful to those in need.

## **Chapter Two: Activism and the Mainstream Media**

To attempt to change government policy or public opinion on an issue surrounding poverty is very different than trying to change policy or beliefs about less controversial issues. Due to ambiguous sentiments held by many North Americans on the issue of what to do with those who live in poverty, anti-poverty activists face challenges in getting the mainstream press to cover their actions. Anti-poverty activists, many of whom are poor and female, have an extremely difficult time gaining access to the world of the mainstream media (Carter et al, 6). Without political or economic clout, it is hard to get certain issues covered by the mainstream news outlets; this has led to a situation where activists have turned to alternative means to raise awareness. In this chapter, I will examine the social activism that is behind the anti-poverty movement. In particular, I am going to look at the direct action techniques used by these activists, and how activists use alternative media to further their cause. Next, I will look at how the mainstream news media affects the activist process through the use of two case studies. By using case studies of earlier activist attempts to create change we can see how important it is for anti-poverty activists to get at least some mainstream press coverage of their actions.

### *Social Activism: Tools and Techniques*

Social activism is a diverse and wide-ranging phenomenon, referring to an infinite number of causes across an enormous spectrum (Baxter, 5). Activism for social issues can take many different forms: from protests, to street theatre, to songs and dances, and from petitions, to demonstrations, to countless other alternate forms of expression. Those



who are involved in social activist movements are interested in changing the status quo of a particular issue (Nadasen, 63). These activists use numerous techniques to raise awareness about particular issues and create change in their communities. For most issues, it is not enough to simply transmit information and ideas from one person to the next; the population of today's cities, provinces and countries make oral transmission tedious and unsuccessful (Armstrong, 14). As a result of this reality, both large and small social activist movements are increasingly relying on the media as an important tool to use in the struggle against injustice.

In a world where huge media conglomerates are ever more the norm, it is not always an easy task to attract the attention of the mainstream news. Activists are not dependent on the mainstream news to help them in their cause, but without the press's help, it is more difficult for activists to reach such a large number of people (Armstrong, 116). With this said, social activists cannot assume that the mainstream news will be willing to cover their actions and their causes in either a positive manner, or even, at all. Interestingly, certain social issues have more traction with the general public if the mainstream media appears to be in agreement with the goals of the activists (Sortirovic, 751). This is certainly the case with anti-poverty activism. Due to the fact that our society has such a tenuous relationship with poverty and welfare, there is often a great deal of negative press related to this issue. Many people still see poverty as being the fault of a particular individual, and not something that society as a whole has a responsibility to deal with (Iyengar, 20; Kensicki, 54). For this reason, anti-poverty activists need media coverage of specific issues to be positive, or at least not negative: if their goals are going to be reached, the mainstream media needs to cover the issues at

hand in a particular manner (Kensicki, 65). Positive (or neutral) coverage by the mainstream media allows activists to have more of a chance to connect with middle-class newspaper readers.

The study of how media shapes the social activist process is one that is gradually attracting more attention. Anti-poverty activists are realizing that not only is it incumbent upon them to get media exposure, it is necessary for this media coverage to be non-negative (Keating, 18). This can create a difficult situation for activists, as they have to rely on extreme measures if they are going to receive coverage in the mainstream news, but at the same time, they want to make sure their methods do not seem too extreme so as not to immediately offend middle-class readers or viewers. Activists and concerned citizens must try to frame issues in such ways that appeal to mainstream media consumers, but they must also engage in actions that are serious enough to get the attention of the media in the first place. If activist techniques are too moderate, there is a good chance the mainstream media will ignore the event or issue, so extreme measures are often necessary. This may mean that certain strategies employed by activists are only viable if they are both attention-grabbing publicity stunts and serious attempts to create change (Armstrong, 118).

Activism comes in many forms including written texts, the spoken word, and video images; much of what activists do using these tools can be classified as direct action techniques. Those who are interested in seeing social change occur use these unconventional methods to raise awareness and attempt to create change. Direct action is a method of stopping offensive practices and creating more favourable conditions using a variety of available means, including strikes, blockades, demonstrations, boycotts,

occupations, sabotage and sit-ins (Lester et al, 26). Direct action usually encompasses some form of civil disobedience, and is generally carried out with non-hierarchical leadership (Sturgeon, 61). This method of communication uses confrontation and disruption to attract public awareness and action. Activists in many movements today use techniques that were pioneered by civil rights groups of the 1960s (Sturgeon, 63). In particular, women who are involved in social activism have been very willing to adopt these direct action techniques. In a society where men still tend to hold more economic, social and political power, grassroots organizations led by women have been especially open to unconventional methods in order to get their message across to the public (Sheared, 26).

Alongside direct action techniques, activists have also embraced alternative media. This form of communication has grown exponentially in the last decade due to the internet (Lester et al, 27). In the "Raise the Rates" campaign, OCAP's own website has played an important role in the struggle for the diet supplement. However, the internet is not the only place where alternative media manifests itself. Alternative activist media is, at its core, about getting a certain message out to supporters, as well as to individuals who are unfamiliar with a particular cause (Armstrong, 69). Alternative media is a way for grass-roots organizations to have direct access to media consumers, thereby avoiding the constraints of the mainstream press. Activists have long put out their own media pieces in order to have more control over how the public is shown a particular issue (Armstrong, 31-34).

As mass media outlets become more conservative and resistant to change, the importance of direct action initiatives and alternative media have increased tenfold in the

fight for the advancement of social issues (Lester et al, 56). On its own, alternative media can be an important step in the struggle to create change. However, the interaction between alternative media and mainstream media cannot be ignored. Alternative media and direct action techniques do not always reach a particularly large audience (Armstrong, 22). For this reason, the mainstream media is often counted upon to get the word out to a greater number of people. In certain cases, activists are able to have some control over how the mainstream media agenda looks, due to innovative alternative media and direct action strategies (Jetter, 44). In cases related to poverty and welfare, though, it is often more difficult to get mainstream media to react positively to activism.

#### *Differences in Media Coverage of Activism*

To illustrate this point, I am going to discuss two cases where activists attempted to use direct action techniques to attract attention to their causes. Although activists in both these cases faced difficult battles, one activist group certainly received far more positive media coverage than the other one. One reason for the discrepancy in mainstream media coverage is due to the fact that the first case was a health and environment issue while the second was related to welfare mothers, a decidedly less sympathetic group. Other reasons for different treatment between the two groups of activists will be discussed at the end of this section.

Lois Gibbs led a similar life to many young women in the late 1970s: she was a stay-at-home mom whose main focus was her two small children. She and her family lived in a neighbourhood called Love Canal, just outside of Buffalo, NY. Both of Gibbs' children had extreme health problems: her son had colds, pneumonia, epilepsy, asthma, a

liver disorder, and a urinary tract infection, while her daughter had a blood disease called ITP which caused her to bruise easily (Gibbs, 29). After reading a newspaper article about a toxic chemical dump in Love Canal, Gibbs tried to get her son moved to a school that was farther away from this problem. The school officials denied her request. At this point, Gibbs realized that she had to do something about the situation. She started talking to other mothers in the community and realized that their children were sick too.

Disturbingly, one in four women living in the Love Canal area could expect a miscarriage (Kaplan, 35). She and the other women in the area began to collect signatures on petitions, asking government officials to close down the school. When this did not appear likely, Gibbs and two others traveled to Albany to talk to state health authorities. This was the point at which Gibbs first encountered the mainstream media: when she arrived, everyone wanted to speak to her (Gibbs, 34). She and Debbie Cerillo, another Love Canal mother, spent the meeting telling the Commissioner that it was not going to be enough to just remove pregnant women and infants; instead, these mothers insisted that all families be moved and the property bought by the government. Gibbs became the spokesperson for this group of mothers: she played a large role in media interactions with the Love Canal residents (Kaplan, 37). The goal was to get the Governor to pay attention to the problem, and force the issue during re-election time.

Due to the fact that Gibbs was raising awareness about Love Canal at a time when the internet was not yet a reality, she and her fellow activists had to use different forms of communication. One of the more interesting examples of this was when the Governor visited the community for a second time. While Gibbs asked the Governor a question, rows of three, four, and five-year old children marched through the auditorium in dresses

and little suits (Gibbs, 38). Gibbs asked the Governor if he was going to allow these children to die, simply because they were over two-years old (the maximum age for children to be moved with compensation out of the community). The public image of these small children moved both the politicians, as well as the media outlets covering this event. This was a turning point in how the media covered the Love Canal affair: up to this point, few major media outlets were undeniably behind Gibbs and her fellow activists. After the images of little children walking towards the Governor were replayed across the country, many mass media newspapers and outlets became far more sympathetic. The next theatrical move by Gibbs and her fellow activists was the taking hostage of an EPA public relations person and a doctor. Although Gibbs claimed she realized how detrimental this could be to her cause, she said that the majority of participants wanted to do this in order to show the government just how serious they really were (Gibbs, 40). This move, while not shown in a particularly positive light, was still not condemned too harshly by the mass media; the sympathies of the American public were now firmly with the Love Canal activists and even extreme techniques such as this one could not change this fact. President Carter finally agreed to move the entire community (over 230 families) immediately thanks in part to the mass media's coverage of this issue. For the activists at Love Canal, getting the media to pay attention to their respective causes was not easy. However, once the mainstream media was convinced of the value of the fight the activists were engaged in, their support came soon after. In this fight for environmental justice, the injured citizens were moved to other areas of the country and the immediate problem was solved.

As we will see with the "Raise the Rates" campaign in Toronto in 2005, it is more difficult for poverty issues to achieve traction in the mainstream press. For another example of how the media can affect the activist process, I turn to the fight by poor mothers in Las Vegas to get politicians to increase the rates of welfare in order to ensure their children did not go hungry. Led by Ruby Duncan, a former hotel maid, a group of mothers rallied together in an attempt to convince state welfare officials to provide more care for their children (Orleck, 103). This fight began in 1969 in Westside, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Las Vegas, Nevada. After five years of fighting state politicians to no avail, Duncan and the other activists decided to start their own organization to improve the lives of Westside children (Orleck, 103-04). This non-profit corporation, called Operation Life, turned out to be enormously successful: it provided welfare recipients with a day-care centre, after-school programs, teen recreation centre and summer programs (Orleck, 103). Although Operation Life provided essential services to many poor Las Vegas residents for almost ten years, it faced criticism and political maneuvering courtesy of state officials who felt that these welfare mothers were overstepping their boundaries (Nadasen, 205). Ultimately, the issue could not attract positive media attention, and eventually collapsed.

So how did the welfare mothers in Las Vegas fail while activists in Love Canal succeeded? One important factor had much to do with the nature of the issues at hand in the Westside neighbourhood in the 1960s. Like many other African-American women in Las Vegas, Ruby Duncan was working both days and nights, and yet could not make enough family to feed her seven children (Nadasen, 204). Duncan first went on welfare when she fell on hot oil while working; soon after, she became an instrumental part of the

fight against welfare cuts in Nevada. In 1971, state legislators announced that they were going to wage a war on those 'cheating' welfare by cutting the welfare rolls by thousands, welfare activists across the state realized they had to do something (Nadasen, 205). On March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1971, led by Duncan, angry mothers and other concerned citizens staged a march down The Strip (Orleck, 106). The goal was to shut down gambling and tourism in order to get state officials to listen to their concerns. Duncan realized the importance of gambling to the state of Nevada; by shutting down this industry, even for a short period of time, she was able to show the direness of the situation for many welfare mothers. The mainstream media outlets showed up to the march and duly recorded images of small children and tired-looking women carrying signs which read "Nevada Starves Children" and "Don't Gamble With Human Lives" (Orleck, 114). One week later, the activists went back to The Strip and again slowed traffic and disrupted gambling. Soon after, the state reinstated welfare benefits to those families who had been cut off after the war on welfare cheaters was first waged. However, the mainstream media in Las Vegas never really got on board with the fight against poverty (Orleck, 117). Media coverage of the actions of Duncan and other activists were shown to be detrimental to the well-being of the state of Nevada. The general public was not convinced that the welfare mothers were doing the right thing; ultimately neither were the national officials. Even with these unique and powerful direct action techniques, Operation Life eventually met its demise during the anti-welfare Regan administration. Duncan's ability to envision novel ways to engage both politicians and the public was important, but the goal of taking welfare out of the hands of state politicians and giving



poor women a say over how welfare was allocated had no chance at success due in large part to the mass media coverage.

Before we turn to a discussion on the "Raise the Rates" campaign in Toronto, I would like to examine some other reasons for the discrepancies between the activists at Love Canal, and those in Las Vegas. Besides the different issues at hand, the two situations described above have other dissimilarities: race, class, and geographic location all play an important role in determining the outcome of the activist movements. Race and class have long been decisive factors in activist movements as well as in attempts to get attention from the media. Lois Gibbs and the women fighting for environmental justice at Love Canal were white, middle-class Americans living in New York state. Their struggle was seen as particularly alarming by much of so-called 'middle America' because this was not the type of community that was associated with injustice. In regards to the amount of press given to Love Canal, Lois Gibbs once said, "Love Canal was neither the first, nor the worst, toxic waste site identified in 1978. But it was the site that captured the media's attention, making it the most famous" (Kaplan, 38). The fight at Love Canal resonated with the media, and with white, middle-class America, making government inaction impossible. The decision by President Carter to pay for Love Canal families to move came as a result of intense media and public support, much of this driven by the outrage that such a situation could develop in this middle-class suburb. Ruby Duncan, on the other hand, did not receive widespread support from much of the outside world. Part of the reason the media failed to pick up on the story of welfare mothers lobbying for greater state funding in Nevada was due to the fact that Duncan was poor, black, and Southern. Her fight against the state was seen by many in the

mainstream media to be unpalatable: an older, African-American single mother on welfare is not seen as a particularly attractive figure by much of middle-class America (Nadasen, 2005). Besides fighting for welfare rights, a morally unsavory issue for many in the mainstream at this time, Duncan also faced race, class and geographic barriers which made her struggle even more difficult.

Although class and race, as well as geography, cannot be ignored in the two case studies discussed above, the fact that Duncan was an anti-poverty activist fighting for welfare rights was still a determining factor in her failure to ultimately change government policy. Much more so than many other types of activists, anti-poverty advocates struggle to get their voices heard by the mainstream press (Nadasen, 15). However, through alternative media and direct action techniques, these activists can often take the initiative and attempt to influence the discussion on issues such as poverty. In the "Raise the Rates" campaign, OCAP used a number of alternative media strategies, as well as direct action projects to raise awareness about the state of welfare in Ontario. As we can see by looking at the fight by welfare mothers in Nevada, versus the battle for environmental justice in Love Canal, New York, anti-poverty activists face a different type of resistance. Besides facing opposition from political figures and economic elites, anti-poverty activists also face serious resistance from the press (Kensicki, 66). Gaining positive coverage is more difficult for movements such as the "Raise the Rates" campaign, or the Operation Life campaign in Las Vegas, because of the nature of the fight against poverty, and the stereotypes that go along with much of the mass media treatment of poverty issues. In the next chapter, I will examine how the "Raise the Rates" campaign was waged, and what OCAP activists did to fight the municipal and

provincial government on the issue of diet supplements for welfare recipients. However, the fight was not just against government officials: OCAP activists also had to convince the mainstream media to cover this issue, and when they did cover it, to treat it in a positive, or at least non-negative, light. This campaign clearly illustrates the importance of having the mainstream media on the side of the activists when attempting to affect change.

### **Chapter Three: The OCAP Campaign**

For many poor individuals and families, the only way they can survive is by relying on public assistance. The amount of money that Ontario welfare recipients receive is minimal: many cannot afford to eat, let alone begin to get themselves on a path to self-sustenance. All across Canada there are activists working to improve the lives of those living in poverty; in Ontario, the most well known and active of these activists groups is OCAP. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty is an anti-poverty organization that arose in the late 1980s as a result of the struggle surrounding poverty issues in Canada in an age of neoliberal reforms. After the provincial Liberal government set up a committee to review welfare rates in Ontario in the late 1980s that advocated an increase in welfare rates, various union and activist groups came together to press the government to follow up on the committee's recommendations (Clarke). The successful March Against Poverty to Queen's Park in 1989 led the involved groups to believe that a long-term poverty advocacy organization was sorely needed in Ontario. In the 1990 Ontario election, the newly-formed coalition played an important part in defeating Peterson's Liberal government, which many poverty activists found to be slow in responding to the growing poverty crisis in the province (Clarke). The Rae years proved to be difficult for OCAP in that the fight against poverty was supposed to be aided by the NDP government, and yet, on the ground, poverty in Ontario continued to worsen. By the election of Mike Harris's Conservatives in 1995, OCAP had honed their direct-action techniques, and were ready to fight Harris's extreme measures. Perhaps the most known protest during the Harris years was the so-called "Riot at Queen's Park" on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Here, OCAP activists, and other concerned individuals gathered to protest Harris's

policies on the homeless (McNally, 12). A peaceful march turned violent, in large part because of police actions against the protesters, and the demonstration received a great deal of media coverage, much of it rather negative. In recent years, OCAP has continued its struggle against uncaring government policies on poverty, and has been especially critical of welfare cuts that have not changed, even under a supposedly more sympathetic Liberal government.

On its website, OCAP describes its mission as follows:

As a militant, anti capitalist organization, we reject the notion that we have any common set of interests with those who hold economic and political power. We also reject the rituals of token protest that confine movements to the level of futile moral arguments. We fight to win and are part of a growing force in society that is ready to organize on just that basis (Clarke).

As this mission statement demonstrates, OCAP is not an organization that is interested in incremental change; the goals of the activists at OCAP have to do with a complete restructuring of our current economic and social systems. However, the "Raise the Rates" campaign ended up being extremely different from other campaigns waged by OCAP in the last two decades. Unlike the fringe support that OCAP campaigns received in the past, "Raise the Rates" was supported by doctors, nurses, community leaders and other influential individuals. "Raise the Rates" was an attempt to put more power into the hands of welfare recipients by raising awareness about extra money they could receive from the government, and this goal was greeted with enthusiasm by many in the middle-class. It is for perhaps this reason that the mainstream media chose to ignore the "Raise the Rates" campaign for the first few months of the OCAP actions. OCAP was doing something different than usual, so the major Ontario newspapers became hesitant to cover a movement from supposed extremists that was increasingly popular among

certain members of the mainstream public. Only when OCAP was forced to go on the defensive did major media outlets begin to cover this story in more detail.

### *The "Raise the Rates" Campaign*

The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty began the "Raise the Rates" campaign in order to combat low welfare rates in Toronto, as well as in the rest of the province. In particular, OCAP wanted to raise awareness about a special diet supplement of \$250 a month available to those receiving OW (Ontario Works) or ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program); this supplement could only be received by those who received a note from a practitioner calling for this extra money. This practitioner could be a doctor, nurse, dietician, midwife, or other medical personnel. Although this supplement was not new, it was not widely advertised to those on welfare. Activists at OCAP wanted to make the supplement more known and available to help those in need receive a bit of extra money each month. The diet supplement was available to those individuals on welfare who were seen as having needs that were supplemental to the normal welfare allotment. These circumstances included those with dairy allergies, those who requested bottled water, and women who were pregnant, as well as a number of other situations where individuals could get additional funds. OCAP activists believed that due to the amount of poverty seen in Toronto, all welfare recipients ought to get this supplement, and the way the supplement was set up, it allowed anyone who could get a letter from a practitioner to get the extra \$250. Once granted, the diet supplement was available to the recipient for 12 months, at which time it would have to be renewed. The supplement was

funded in part by the city council, and in part by the provincial government (municipalities were expected to pay about 20% of the supplement monies).

In order to inform welfare recipients of this opportunity for more money from the government, OCAP activists staged a campaign to raise awareness about the supplement. This campaign was very dependent on the ability of doctors and nurses to sign forms for welfare recipients, allowing them to receive extra funding. In addition, "Raise the Rates" involved marches down Toronto streets, protests at ministers' offices, and other direct action techniques. The city of Toronto and the provincial Liberal government became concerned with the increase in the number of individuals receiving this supplement, and began a process to change the nature of diet supplement. OCAP responded accordingly and continued to press city and provincial officials to offer the supplement in its original form. What is particularly interesting about this development is that it was due to OCAP's own publicizing of the issue that the supplement was negatively impacted. To begin this chapter, I am going to look at how the direct action initiatives and alternative media strategies worked in the "Raise the Rates" campaign, through an examination of website pieces and OCAP media releases. This campaign also received attention in NOW magazine, rabble.ca, and other alternative media outlets in Toronto; these sources will not be examined in this paper but their importance in raising awareness about the campaign should not be ignored.

To raise awareness among welfare recipients about this diet supplement, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty first began to publicize on their website. On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005, OCAP posted a notice to welfare recipients that explained what the diet supplement was, and how they could get it (If you are on OW or ODSP- Read this!).

There were links that interested parties could go to, including information on letter-writing techniques that doctors could employ, details about exactly what the special diet policy referred to, and a public letter from other doctors extolling the benefits of the special diet policy. Before the activists at OCAP began their struggle to allow more Ontario residents to receive the diet supplement, only 6000 of Toronto's 140,000 residents were receiving the extra supplement (Special Diet Victory). By July 20<sup>th</sup>, 10,000 welfare recipients in the city of Toronto had signed up for, and were beginning to receive, the diet supplement. It was at this point that the provincial and municipal governments began to get nervous about OCAP's actions, and started to consider changing how the supplement was allocated. The first change that the bureaucrats wanted to make was in regards to who could sign the letter stating that the welfare recipient was eligible for the diet supplement. Policy makers wanted to restrict the power to sign this letter to only those who were doctors. Secondly, the provincial Liberals wanted to make the supplement available only to those who had so-called 'nameable' illnesses (diabetes, heart disease) rather than for anyone who claimed they needed the extra money for their diet. Thirdly, the Liberals proposed a deduction in the overall amount of money available to those receiving the supplement.

Before the Liberal government's proposed changes to the welfare diet supplement, the OCAP website concentrated on raising awareness about the diet supplement through open letters that doctors could sign that urged politicians to take a good look at the state of social assistance in Canada today, as well as information about welfare recipients about how they would go about receiving the diet supplement. An example of the type of letter evident on the website reads, "We, the undersigned,



recognize that current Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program benefit rates are too low for recipients to adequately feed themselves after attending to other basic necessities such as rent and transportation costs” (Hunger: A Serious Medical Issue for OW and ODSP Recipients). On May 12<sup>th</sup>, OCAP organizers marched to the Ministry of Social Services to protest the pitiful amount of welfare money given to poor Torontonians each month. This demonstration, while quite small, was aimed at encouraging Minister of Social Services, Sandra Pupatello to change the Liberal government’s stance on welfare issues. After the demonstration, the OCAP website posted a ‘wanted’ poster with Ms. Pupatello’s face on it in an effort to show how little the Liberals cared about those who lived in poverty. During this period, the OCAP organizers were clearly on the offensive: their demonstrations and protests were about expanding the supplement so that all welfare recipients received it, not just those who had a letter signed from a practitioner. This situation changed, however, once the provincial government proposed the changes listed above that they intended to make to the diet supplement.

All of a sudden, OCAP activists were on the defensive: they spent the summer and fall of 2005 combating the proposed changes to the welfare diet supplement. Instead of leading protests to make this supplement universal, they had to fight the Liberal government to keep the supplement as it currently existed. Although this turn of events was frustrating for OCAP, the use of direct action techniques certainly proved important in their effort to maintain the status quo for those receiving the welfare supplement. On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, a “Mass Hunger Clinic” was staged at Queen’s Park; this hunger clinic was an attempt to show the politicians how desperate many of those in need truly were.

Welfare recipients were invited to come to Queen's Park on this day to be assessed for the diet supplement; everyone who turned up was deemed eligible, as the doctors present were sympathetic to the cause at hand. There was also a press conference which many of the doctors spoke at, as well as some diet supplement recipients, in an attempt to encourage the mainstream media to come and cover the clinic. Activists from all over southern Ontario came down to Toronto for the Hunger Clinic, and also worked at fighting local bureaucrats in their home towns: shortly after the Queen's Park Hunger Clinic, there were protests in Sudbury, Belleville, Ottawa, and Guelph about the proposed cancellation of the diet supplement.

The next direct action initiative by OCAP took place at a Liberal party fundraising dinner on October 24<sup>th</sup>. OCAP activists barged into the dinner (a \$4000/plate affair) and confronted Premier McGuinty over his government's proposed cuts to the diet supplement. Barging into a dinner of this sort is a common tool used by OCAP and other activists, as it allows protesters to voice their displeasure directly to involved politicians and business leaders. This type of stunt was designed to not only get the attention of the Liberal party, but also to get the attention of the mass media, as well as the general public. It was successful in that the mainstream media was forced to pay attention to what OCAP was attempting to do; however, media coverage, as we will see in the next section, continued to be limited, and when it was present, ambiguous. The provincial government also was not moved into positive actions by OCAP's efforts. The diet supplement was changed on November 4<sup>th</sup>: now medical practitioners had to write down the exact illness or disease from which the applicant suffered, if he or she was to receive any money as a diet supplement. As well, the rates associated with the diet supplement

dropped, making it harder for those on welfare to survive. A number of doctors spoke out against these cuts, as well of course as the OCAP activists, and yet the government went ahead with their plan. On November 26<sup>th</sup>, OCAP held a protest at Nathan Phillips Square; 600 people attended to protest the government's actions. Protesters held signs stating "We're here for our money" and "Raise the rates now!" at this demonstration near the Ontario government offices. Three days after this, OCAP went to a conference on Violence Against Women at which Ms. Pupatello was speaking; the female activists who attended were kept silent and escorted out by male bodyguards. In December, a town hall meeting was sponsored by the Health Providers Against Poverty at which doctors, nurses, and diet supplement recipients discussed with the audience how harmful the changes to the supplement really were. OCAP activists played a big part in getting people out to this event, and in publicizing it on their website.

It has not just been activists in Toronto that have been fighting the cuts to welfare in this province. Anti-poverty groups all around Ontario have attempted to make welfare recipients aware of the diet supplement, and have fought regressive government policies. Activists in Belleville staged numerous hunger clinics in 2005, and when the diet supplement was changed in November, they began protesting regularly at their local MPP's office. In Kingston, hunger clinics were also quite successful: a relatively few number of health professionals signed up hundreds of poor Kingstonians for this supplement. In Hamilton, there were protests and demonstrations, while Windsor and London both had rallies and clinics as well.

The direct action initiatives undertaken by OCAP in the fall of 2005 were occasionally covered by the mainstream media in Toronto and the rest of the province.

However, it is important to note that in previous campaigns, OCAP received more attention and media coverage, mainly because these earlier campaigns tended to use more extreme measures. In "Raise the Rates," there was increased support among health professionals, community workers, and even the mainstream public. Due in part to this support techniques used by OCAP activists in the "Raise the Rates" campaign were far less radical. The mainstream press was not used to this face of OCAP and gave the campaign less attention that it would have received had the activists been using extremist measures to attempt to create change. The more violent OCAP has been, the more media coverage they have received: part of the reason that "Raise the Rates" did not find sustained coverage in the press was due to the moderate methods used in this campaign. Violence used by OCAP discredits the group's message, and yet when OCAP eschews violence, the media finds it easier to ignore their actions.

Although OCAP has continued the fight against the cuts to the diet supplement in 2006, there is also a realization that for now, the changes to the diet supplement are quite permanent. For this reason, OCAP press releases in late 2005 and early 2006 began to focus more on making welfare recipients aware of the changes to the diet supplement. An interesting fact sheet on the OCAP website tells recipients of the current situation in no uncertain terms: "The money you can qualify for is a sick joke... Wait until near the end of the 90 day period to get the new forms filled out because you will almost certainly either get less money or no money at all once you submit them" (If you are on OW or ODSP- Read this!). Recipients of the diet supplement must now disclose to the medical practitioner who signs their form whether or not they are HIV positive; this was not required before the changes to the supplement. As well, even recipients who had been

granted permanent special diet requirements by their practitioner now had to re-submit forms if they wanted to continue to receive any extra funding.

The defensive position that OCAP was forced to take after these setbacks has affected the way the media has portrayed the campaign. Unlike other campaigns by OCAP, support from doctors, nurses and health professionals was a factor in "Raise the Rates" and this changed the way the campaign was waged. OCAP tried to shed its' much-publicized image as a violent troublemaker, but the mainstream media was resistant: they were less interested in what OCAP had to say once the activists relied on less extreme measures. The lack of media interest is apparent upon examination of articles about this campaign in the mass media; the next chapter will attempt to illustrate how this campaign was portrayed in major newspapers in Ontario.

## **Chapter Four: Media coverage of "Raise the Rates"**

The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty's campaign to raise the overall rates of welfare, and to encourage recipients of welfare to apply for the special diet supplement turned out to be relatively unsuccessful if we look at the end result. Before the campaign began, few Toronto residents received the diet supplement. After the campaign ended, again, there were relatively few recipients on this supplement; however the situation had certainly changed. Instead of people being unaware of the supplement, and thus not be receiving it, the supplement had now been drastically reduced to the point that very few individuals could qualify for it. Although OCAP initiatives allowed many more people to receive this supplement for a few months in 2005, most of these individuals are now back to getting the same amount of money they were receiving before the campaign began. To say that the campaign did not end up helping many Toronto welfare recipients is not to say that it was useless: if this campaign raised awareness among the general public about the plight of the city's poor, than it was certainly worthwhile. As discussed in Chapter One, so few middle-class Canadians think about the lives of those who live in abject poverty, and when they do consider these people, too often poverty is seen to be the fault of the individual, and something that they cannot relate to. In an attempt to examine how the campaign was portrayed in the media, I am now going to turn to treatment of this topic by the mainstream newspapers in Ontario.

### *National Coverage of the Campaign*

Mainstream media coverage of the "Raise the Rates" campaign in 2005 is important to examine in that it shows how readers in Ontario saw the campaign.

Although certain people would have been aware of the OCAP campaign due to OCAP press releases, alternative media, and word-of-mouth, many individuals would have had their only exposure to this movement through the mainstream papers. My first goal was to find articles in the three main newspapers in Toronto, in order to see what readers of these newspapers were shown about this campaign. However, I quickly saw a problem developing: while the Toronto Star covered the campaign in some detail, both the National Post and Globe and Mail chose not to cover the "Raise the Rates" campaign at all. The National Post did not even discuss the demonstrations and rallies mentioned above, and the Globe and Mail only had one article in all of 2005 (and early 2006) about what the OCAP activists were attempting to do. Both of these newspapers had a few articles about another OCAP campaign going on in early 2005 (related to Mayor Miller's crackdown on homeless people sleeping in public spaces), but almost nothing about the "Raise the Rates" campaign, or the changes made to the diet supplement. The absence of articles about "Raise the Rates" is still very telling. The fact that OCAP was holding clinics across Toronto, and other cities, that allowed OW and ODSP recipients to receive an extra \$250 each month was considered un-newsworthy by the major papers is troubling. The limitations that anti-poverty activists face in their quest to create social changes is illuminated by the absence of articles about "Raise the Rates" in the Globe and Mail and the National Post. As discussed in Chapter One, there are many reasons why poverty-related stories do not make it into the mainstream. The importance of this campaign to so many people in Toronto and Ontario is simply not acknowledged by those who hold economic and political clout in the newspaper world.

Before moving on to an analysis of the newspaper articles that did mention the “Raise the Rates” campaign, I decided to look at what the Globe and Mail, and the National Post, were covering instead. While understanding that the Globe and Mail and the National Post are national newspapers, it is still shocking that they so systematically disregarded the OCAP campaign. By ignoring the campaign to raise the rates of welfare in Ontario, what were these major newspapers looking at on the days around major policy announcements and rallies related to this topic? I picked three important events in the progression of the “Raise the Rates” campaign, and looked at what the Globe and the Post covered in the days leading up to, including, and immediately following the date in question. The first date I looked into was May 12<sup>th</sup>; this was the day that protesters went to Sandra Pupatello’s office to protest the McGuinty government’s lack of interest in raising the rates of OW and ODSP. The second date I researched was October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the day that the massive hunger clinic was staged at Queen’s Park. This date was important to both OCAP and to the provincial government as it set in motion the changes that the Liberals wanted to make with regards to the diet supplement when OCAP helped hundreds more OW and ODSP recipients sign up for extra money. The third date I looked at was November 4<sup>th</sup>; this was the day that Minister Pupatello signed the bill that officially changed the welfare supplement and made the work of the activists that much more difficult.

Between May 11<sup>th</sup> and May 14<sup>th</sup>, the National Post covered a number of topics including: the airline Jetsgo’s near return to existence; CNN’s new survival strategy to beat other all-news networks in the ratings game; the problem with ‘quickie’ marriages; an attempt by a California couple to sue Wendy’s for a finger found in a bowl of chili;



and the rising price of gas in Canada. During the same time period, the Globe also looked at gas prices, the finger-in-chili scam, and the latest development in the Jetsgo saga, as well as some different topics, including Paul Martin's polling numbers, poor illiteracy rates in certain parts of Ontario, and the B.C. provincial election.

The October 3<sup>rd</sup> Hunger Clinic was undoubtedly an important day for welfare advocates in Toronto and across the province; this was the day that hundreds of advocates, doctors and welfare recipients were going to work together to show the Liberal government how problematic low welfare rates were for Ontarians. Instead of covering this clinic, the National Post and the Globe and Mail turned their attentions elsewhere. Both papers reported on: a mysterious virus at a Scarborough nursing home; the latest news about troubled American politician Tom DeLay; the possibility that Canadians were among the deceased passengers of an overturned boat in Lake George, NY; and negotiations in the CBC strike. The Post also had stories on Deborah Coyne's decision to challenge Jack Layton in the next federal election, the average price of home renovations in Canada, and the sale of a Sylvia Plath painting of her husband Ted Hughes. The Globe also covered opium growers in Afghanistan, Google's copyright woes, and federal heat rebates.

The third date in question, the November 4<sup>th</sup> announcement by the McGuinty government that restricted access to the diet supplement, saw the Post and the Globe looking at: follow-ups to the Kashechewan evacuation; polls regarding support for the federal government; and the ramifications for those who participated in the police union rally on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. The Post also covered a jab by Liberal MP Scott Brison at Stephen Harper's alleged lobbyist past, the return of a special Aboriginal mask to

Vancouver Island by the British Museum, and the changes that have occurred in Brampton in the last decade. The Globe covered an update on the avian flu, the fight over the proposed St. Clair streetcar line, CIA jails in eastern Europe, and the Beach Boys legal issues.

While recognizing that the Post and the Globe are national papers, and therefore cannot be expected to have as much Toronto and Ontario news as the Star, I still think the lack of coverage received by the “Raise the Rates” campaign is problematic. This campaign was an important part of 2005 for many activists, medical practitioners, welfare recipients, and others. The fight against social service cuts is a big one, and this OCAP campaign is an excellent example of how individuals can make a difference. The awareness raised by OCAP led the Ontario government to take action, albeit action that the activists consider to be harmful. This campaign ought not to have been ignored by the major papers considering its relevance to the fight against low welfare rates and increasing levels of poverty in this country; however, the reality is that the Post and the Globe are run by business and political elites who have little interest in activist attempts to reduce poverty.

### *Research Methodology and Hypotheses*

I want to turn now to the newspapers that did cover the campaign to raise the rates of welfare in Ontario. Due to the fact that I could not use the National Post or Globe and Mail, I decided to look at the cities surrounding Toronto, as well as Toronto itself, in order to understand how residents in these places were shown the campaign to raise the rates. In order to narrow down which cities to look at, I decided to only examine those

locations with over 150,000 residents that were within 300 kilometers of Toronto.

Although OCAP is a provincial organization, it is undoubtedly most prominent in southern Ontario, and particularly Toronto. I chose to use cities with large populations for the reason that the mass media in these cities will reach the most number of people. Therefore, along with the Toronto Star, I looked at the Hamilton Spectator, the Kingston Whig Standard, and the London Free Press. Hamilton, Kingston and London are all cities of the appropriate size and location, and all had significant OCAP rallies and demonstrations related to this campaign. Please see Appendix B for full citations of all newspaper articles used.

There are many ways to examine newspaper texts, but for the task at hand, I have decided to use content analysis. Although content analysis certainly has its limitations, it is also a useful way of examining how certain words are being used, which actors are getting quoted, and how issues are being portrayed. This campaign was waged from March onwards, but it certainly got more attention in the summer and fall than in the spring. Overall, there were 28 articles in the four newspapers (the Toronto Star, Hamilton Spectator, Kingston Whig-Standard, and London Free Press), and I will look at them all in order to achieve a good understanding of what these news items were saying about the OCAP campaign.

Although I believe that the importance of the OCAP campaign cannot be overstated, I do not believe that the mainstream media will have given these events much positive coverage. Given that anti-poverty activists face a difficult time in getting their issues covered by the mainstream press, and that when poverty issues are treated, poverty is often shown as an individual failing or an ambiguous happening, my assumption is that

the four mainstream newspapers will have relatively little positive (or even neutral) coverage of the “Raise the Rates” campaign. My hypothesis is that coverage of the “Raise the Rates” campaign will be limited, and when it does exist, the stories that these newspapers print will be overwhelmingly negative. There are four assumptions in particular that I want to examine. First, I believe that government and city officials and bureaucrats will be quoted or referred to more than OCAP activists. Due to the ease in getting quotes from government sources, as well the difficulty in talking to OCAP activists, I think that government officials will be referred to more frequently. Secondly, I believe that the current poverty ‘epidemic’ in Ontario will usually be framed as a problem that is the result of individual failings or unspecified causes that are too difficult for the reader to understand. Some articles, undoubtedly, will show a more in-depth view as to why so many individuals in our society live in poverty, but I think these articles will be in the minority. Thirdly, I am going to look at the context of “Raise the Rates” in the newspaper articles. To do this, I’m going to examine how many articles only discuss the campaign, and how many mention it as a way of examining widespread poverty in our society. My hypothesis is that many newspaper articles will be presenting this campaign as an isolated incident, instead of trying to highlight other issues related to welfare and poverty. Finally, I want to look at how “Raise the Rates” is portrayed: do the mainstream news articles show the “Raise the Rates” campaign as a positive force in battling poverty in the city? My hypothesis is that this campaign will be shown to be negative and illegal.

As the only coder of these articles, I had to make sure my categories were relatively unambiguous so as to have some validity when coding. As discussed above, there were four main things that I was looking for in the articles: which actors were

named and quoted more (government sources or OCAP activists), who was blamed for the current poverty problems in the city, whether “Raise the Rates” was the main focus of the article, and how the “Raise the Rates” campaign was seen. Please see Appendix A for the content analysis protocol.

### *Research Results and Discussion*

I turn now to what I discovered through the content analysis process. As mentioned above, there were 28 news items about the campaign to “Raise the Rates” of welfare in Ontario by expanding the number of applicants receiving the diet supplement. The Toronto Star had the most articles about this topic with 16, while the Kingston Whig Standard had 6, and the Hamilton Spectator and London Free Press had 3 each. Instead of examining whether the different newspapers had particular biases, I want instead to look at the three types of news items that appeared in these papers and identify the differences between them. Besides so-called ‘regular’ news articles by paid journalists of each paper, there were also a number of guest opinion-editorials, as well as letters to the editor. The presence of these op-eds and letters to the editor is important: the fact that the newspapers are choosing to print these items calls attention to the fact that this is one way that readers learn about this topic. Of the 28 news items, 14 were articles, 6 were letters to the editor, and 8 were guest op-eds. The fact that only half of the total news items about “Raise the Rates” were from paid members of these newspapers’ staffs is certainly telling. Instead of covering this story through sustained information about happenings with the campaign, activists, and government announcements, newspapers printed letters to the editor and guest op-eds about this topic. OCAP asked Sue Cox and other activists

who supported the campaign to write many of these guest opinion-editorials. These op-eds were printed by the mainstream newspapers, even though the opinions put forward in these pieces were often quite different from those presented in articles written by the newspaper staffs. In examining my hypotheses, I hope to see how these op-eds, as well as the letters to the editor, fit in with the rest of the newspaper coverage on “Raise the Rates.”

In terms of the first question, regarding whether OCAP actors are referred to as much as government sources, we can see a lot of similarities between articles, and the letters to the editor and op-ed pieces.

**OCAP actors are quoted or referred to:**

	Articles	Letters to the Editor	Guest Op-Eds	Total
More than government or city officials/bureaucrats	7	1	2	10
Less than government or city officials/bureaucrats	5	2	3	10
As often as government or city officials/bureaucrats	2	3	3	8
Total	14	6	8	28

While articles are actually slightly less likely to focus on government or city bureaucrats than are letters to the editor or guest op-ed pieces, we can say that the three types of news items were quite similar in this regard. Overall, 10 news items quoted or referred to OCAP actors more than official sources, and the same number used more official sources. Eight news items used the same number of references to official sources as they did to OCAP actors. My first hypothesis, that government sources would be quoted and referred to more than OCAP actors, can be shown to be untrue. We can safely say that news items covering this story used both OCAP sources and government sources approximately the same number of times. The context of what these quotes or references were to cannot fully be answered in this section; we must turn to my later hypotheses to see if the number of OCAP versus government sources count is relevant.

My second hypothesis is with regards to how poverty in Ontario is portrayed. I wanted to know how these news items were showing poverty conditions: did they appear as a result of government cutbacks, individual shortcomings, societal indifference or something else? The mainstream media often frames poverty as being a complicated problem that readers will have trouble understanding; I believe that poverty will be shown as something overly complex in the news items in question. Again, I have broken the results down into the three different types of news items in order to better analyze the coverage.

<b>Current widespread poverty is a result of:</b>	Articles	Letters to the Editor	Guest Op-Eds	Total
Individual behaviours and actions	3	1	0	4
Government cuts to social services	3	2	6	11
Societal disinterest	1	1	2	4
Unidentified causes	7	2	0	9
Total	14	6	8	28

As I hypothesized, certain news items are most likely to show the high levels of poverty in our society as a result of causes that are too complicated to get into to. News articles written by journalists at the four mainstream papers in question often showed poverty as being the result of numerous, complex factors. Of course, poverty is a complicated subject, but the news media should not be portraying it as being too difficult for ordinary readers to understand. Current levels of poverty are the result of specific policies by municipal, provincial and federal governments, some individual choices, as well as a society that allows certain individuals to be treated as second-class citizens. To not explain how and why the Ontario situation exists is to further problematize any attempt at solutions. Readers need to see how poverty comes to affect so many, and how so many different segments of society can make positive contributions to alleviate these

conditions. Of the 14 articles in the four papers, half of these attributed poverty to causes too complicated and numerous to go into. Guest op-eds, on the other hand, attributed the current poverty epidemic to government cuts to social services 75% of the time, and to societal disinterest 25 % of the time. Letters to the editor were more varied: government cuts received 2 counts, as did unidentified/complex causes, while individual behaviour and societal disinterest received one count each. The tendency to attribute poverty to individual failings, as we so often hear from politicians on the right, was not particularly present in the news items: 3 articles and 1 letter were written from this viewpoint. Often, cuts made to the welfare system in Ontario during the Mike Harris years were pointed to as a cause of the current poverty crisis in the province (11 of the 28 news items attributed high levels of poverty to government actions).

My third hypothesis was that “Raise the Rates” would feature in many of the news items as an isolated incident. Instead of showing how this campaign is highlighting the lack of funds and attention being directed to the poor, my hypothesis was that “Raise the Rates” would be the focus of the article, and other related news stories would be ignored. To examine this hypothesis, I looked at whether “Raise the Rates” was shown in context to other stories about poverty. The attempt by OCAP organizers to sign welfare recipients up for the diet supplement was never meant to be a final solution to the problem of widespread poverty. Instead, activists wanted city and provincial government officials to understand how desperate the situation really was, and how these people had to apply for extra funds just to survive. My hypothesis, then, has to do with how often “Raise the Rates” is shown in context, namely as part of the larger fight against neoliberal measures and cuts to social services in Ontario.



**“Raise the Rates” is:**

	Articles	Letters to the Editor	Guest Op-Eds	Total
the main focus of the article (no related stories discussed)	10	0	3	13
the secondary focus of the article (some discussion of other poverty issues)	3	3	2	8
mentioned only in relation to other poverty issues	1	1	1	3
used as a metaphor or sign/signifier	0	2	2	4
Total	14	6	8	28

As I had predicted, “Raise the Rates” was the main focus of the article 13 times, 10 of these in articles written by journalists at the four major newspapers. Newspaper articles only discussed the broader picture 4 times; in the other 10 they focused only on “Raise the Rates”. In the letters to the editor, the campaign was always shown to be part of a larger fight: in three instances “Raise the Rates” was the secondary focus of the article, meaning there was some discussion of other attempts to fight poverty, once it was mentioned in relation to other poverty issues, and twice “Raise the Rates” was used as a metaphor. The guest op-ed pieces had various focuses: the campaign was the main topic 3 times, while another 5 it was discussed in relation to the broader fight against poverty, or as a metaphor or sign.

My final hypothesis was in regards to how the “Raise the Rates” campaign was shown in the media: was it portrayed as a positive campaign, or did newspaper articles focus on the unlawfulness of the activists’ actions? My prediction was that the campaign would be shown to be negative much of the time, even in newspaper articles that were written by supposedly objective journalists. This aspect of my content analysis was somewhat complicated in that it had much to do with tone: news pieces were rated as portraying the campaign as positive, somewhat positive, neutral, or negative.

<b>“Raise the Rates” shown as:</b>	Articles	Letters to the Editor	Guest Op-Eds	Total
Positive	0	3	6	9
Somewhat positive	4	1	2	7
Neutral	5	0	0	5
Negative	5	2	0	7
Total	14	6	8	28

Of the 14 newspaper articles, none of them showed the “Raise the Rates” campaign as an overly positive development in the fight against poverty. Four articles portrayed the campaign as somewhat positive, five as neutral, and five as negative. Only two letters to the editor portrayed the campaign negatively, and none of the guest op-eds did so.

Newspapers used letters to the editor and opinion editorials to show a more positive view of the campaign: all 9 of the positive portrayals of the campaign came in these two forms of news items. None of the letters to the editor or guest op-eds were neutral; all of these items had a particular take on the campaign and their viewpoint was evident.

Interestingly, all the guest op-eds were positive or somewhat positive. As mentioned above, OCAP asked supportive individuals in the community to write guest editorials in the Toronto Star and other papers. Along with Sue Cox, the director of the Daily Food Bank, social workers, doctors, and activists all wrote editorials expressing support for the OCAP campaign. In the Kingston Whig-Standard, a doctor who signed hundreds of forms that allowed recipients to get the diet supplement wrote a long and detailed guest editorial. Although my hypothesis was correct in that the articles themselves did not often show a positive view of the campaign, I had not predicted that the letters to the editor and guest op-eds would be so different. An important conclusion to draw from this is that writing letters to the editor and opinion-editorial pieces is a successful media strategy for community activists if they want to show a particular campaign in a positive light.

By examining the 28 news items about “Raise the Rates”, I was able to better understand how readers across southern Ontario were shown this campaign. As I had predicted, much of the newspaper coverage on this topic was rather problematic. First of all, only 14 articles about “Raise the Rates” appeared in these four newspapers. The other 14 came from letters to the editor, and opinion-editorials. The high number of letters to the editor that were printed shows that readers were genuinely interested in the topic, but perhaps felt that newspapers did not cover the campaign in enough detail. The decision by the newspapers to print these letters, as well as the opinion-editorials is indicative of an attempt to cover a topic without wasting precious time and resources on it, but it also shows just how successful opinion-editorials can be. If activist groups are worried about the type of coverage they are receiving in the mainstream press, an excellent strategy is to ask supportive community leaders to write op-ed pieces. Newspapers that may not tend to show activist campaigns positively, are often still willing to print op-eds and letters to the editor that support the same campaigns. “Raise the Rates” was portrayed as a positive development in the fight against poverty in Ontario by a number of op-eds and letters to the editor. We can conclude from this content analysis that writing these pieces can prove to be a successful media strategy for activist groups.

In terms of my hypotheses, I think we can see a pattern: anti-poverty activists certainly face a difficult time getting newspapers to cover their actions positively. Readers of mainstream newspapers are not shown the bigger picture; poverty is portrayed as being too complicated to really understand. Although OCAP sources were perhaps used as often as government sources, we can still see a tendency in the news media to use

government sources even when the story is nominally about an activist movement.

“Raise the Rates” was often shown as being an isolated event: background to the campaign was rarely given by newspaper articles. The campaign was shown as being a one-time struggle by many newspaper articles; the larger fight was often ignored.

Finally, showing the campaign in a positive light was not something that journalists often did. Newspapers relied on letters to the editor and opinion-editorials to get any sort of positive portrayal across.

## **Conclusion**

The mainstream news media has undergone many changes in the past fifty years, technically as well as economically. Newspapers now have to compete with television and internet for readers, and many have gone from being owned by one owner to being part of a news corporation. With newspapers being run like businesses, where the bottom line is the most important thing, editors and journalists now have less control over stories that appear in the newspapers we read. However, both journalists and editors do make certain choices about what issues are considered newsworthy. In Canada, we see much political and business news in our mainstream papers. What we do not see that much of is news about social policies. In particular, the lack of news stories about poverty is shocking: although many Canadians live in extremely distasteful conditions, poverty is an issue that rarely makes the headlines. Widespread poverty in the inner cities, as well as in other parts of the country, is often seen as being too complex to cover. Stories about poverty that do make it into the mainstream newspapers are often formulaic. Poverty is shown as being the result of poor decisions made by certain groups of people, namely women and ethnic minorities. The tendency to portray those living in poverty as non-white females is harmful to the fight against poverty because it effectively 'others' poor individuals. Readers of newspaper articles that treat poverty as something that only happens to certain groups of people will be less likely to see poverty as something which society as a whole has a responsibility to deal with.

Newspapers also tend to show solutions to current levels of poverty as few and far between. The idea that the government should do something or that individual people could escape poverty if they worked hard enough is very prevalent. Anti-poverty

activists are not often shown in the news, and when they are, they tend to be portrayed rather one-dimensionally. The lack of coverage of anti-poverty activists is somewhat different from the coverage that other types of activists receive: poverty still has such a stigma attached to it that newspapers find anti-poverty activism a particularly hard topic to cover. Many anti-poverty activists, therefore, have turned to alternative media to get their message across; they use internet resources, independent papers, and other unique ways to gain a voice. However, there has been a realization among some activists about the importance of achieving some kind of status within the mainstream press. The amount of readers that the mainstream newspapers in Canada get can mean serious social and political attention to issues important to activists. For this reason, anti-poverty activists, such as OCAP has been more aware of the type of attention they are getting from the mainstream news. Whether direct action techniques that are used by these activists are seen positively by readers is dependent on the treatment of these methods by the mainstream papers.

The refusal of certain mainstream papers to cover issues related to poverty can be seen in the case of "Raise the Rates". Both the National Post and the Globe and Mail did not cover OCAP's campaign to increase the amount of money welfare recipients were receiving each month. The failure of these newspapers to do so is telling: these mainstream national papers completely ignored an important part of the Toronto anti-poverty movement. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty instead had to rely on smaller newspapers to cover their campaign. As might be expected, the coverage on this campaign was ambiguous at best. Although the four newspapers in question did cover the campaign, too often they portrayed poverty as an isolated issue. Also, letters to the

editor and guest opinion-editorials were left to do the job of presenting the campaign in a positive manner as news articles tended to take a more guarded view.

The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty's "Raise the Rates" campaign was not meant to be a 'be-all-end-all' solution to the low welfare rates in Ontario. Instead, these anti-poverty activists decided to exploit a loophole in provincial government policy in order to help those living on welfare receive a small amount more of money each month. The failure of the activists to protect this loophole (evidenced by the changes made to the diet supplement in November 2005) is not indicative of a failure to change the livelihood of those living in poverty in Toronto or Ontario. One goal of the OCAP campaign was to raise awareness among the general public of the pitiful amount of money welfare recipients receive each month. Another goal was to change government policy: if pressure was exerted on Liberal Members of the Provincial Parliament, the hope was that there would be an initiative to raise the rates of welfare. Finally, the goal of bettering the lives of those who are forced to live such difficult existences cannot be ignored; OCAP activists were waging this campaign to get thousands of welfare recipients to realize that they had rights and choices when it came to their livelihoods. The mainstream media has covered some of the actions by OCAP activists, but too often, the major newspapers have not been there. If the Canadian public is to be a truly informed population, the mainstream newspapers must take some responsibility for covering stories that matter to our society. Their neglect in this case cannot be excused: national newspapers should have devoted resources to this campaign and covered it in some form or another.

The decision of the McGuinty government to cut the diet supplement is extremely problematic, but the war against poverty goes on. The campaign to "Raise the Rates" has

continued into 2006 with new initiatives started all the time. Even if the diet supplement is never returned to its earlier form, these anti-poverty activists will continue to look for new ways to demand higher rates of assistance for those in need. Alternative media, smaller mainstream newspapers, and other sources will need to continue to cover these campaigns. Mainstream newspapers can play an important role in the fight against poverty: the right type of coverage can help activists show the majority of Canadians about our responsibilities to those who live in poverty.



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Vallis, Mary, "World's nations split on funeral attendance," National Post, 12 November 2004, Toronto edition: A15

Appendix A:  
Content Analysis Protocol

Newspaper:

1. Toronto Star
2. Kingston Whig-Standard
3. Hamilton Spectator
4. London Free Press

Date-Month-Year:

Headline:

Reporter/Author:

Article Length:

Type of Article/Item (letter, article or guest op-ed piece)

OCAP actors are quoted or referred to:

1. More than government or city officials/bureaucrats
2. Less than government or city officials/bureaucrats
3. As often as government or city officials/bureaucrats

Current widespread poverty is a result of:

1. Individual behaviours and actions
2. Government cuts to social services
3. Societal disinterest
4. Unidentified causes

Focus of Article/Item- "Raise the Rates" is:

1. the main focus of the article (no related stories discussed)
2. the secondary focus of the article (some discussion of other poverty issues)
3. mentioned only in relation to other poverty issues
4. used as a metaphor or sign/signifier

"Raise the Rates" shown as:

1. Positive
2. Somewhat positive
3. Neutral
4. Negative

Appendix B:  
Newspaper Articles Used in Analysis

Amdur, Reuel, "No excuse for stripped-down welfare system," The Toronto Star, 7 October 2005, Ontario edition: A25

Benedetti, Paul, "Forget the pills- go for the fruit," The Hamilton Spectator, 24 October 2005, Final edition: A16

Bloch, Gary and Janet Maher, "Bitter choice: Shelter or food," The Toronto Star, 3 October 2005, Ontario edition: A18

Connell, Helen, "Bank calls for reforms to relieve poverty," London Free Press, 4 October 2005, Final edition: F04

Cox, Sue, "Time to examine support system," The Toronto Star, 9 November 2005, Ontario edition: A25

Cox, Sue, "Working people go hungry," The Toronto Star, 28 June 2005, Ontario edition: A16

Crowe, Jean, "People on welfare can't buy food they need," Kingston Whig-Standard, 18 November 2005, Final edition: 6

"Dietary allowance comes with a snag," London Free Press, 4 October 2005, Final edition: B10

Ferguson, Rob and Robert Benzie, "Activists protest 'diet' cut; OCAP says poor need food assistance but minister says program being abused," The Toronto Star, 4 October 2005, Metro edition: A07

Gillespie, Kerry and Robert Benzie, "Province closes welfare loophole; Tightens rules for \$250 supplement, MD must specify qualifying illness," The Toronto Star, 8 November 2005, Metro edition: A02

"Give poor more for food, MDs say," The Hamilton Spectator, 17 October 2005, Final edition: A01

Goar, Carol, "Subversive way to fight hunger," The Toronto Star, 1 April 2005, Ontario edition: A20

Gonda, Gabe, "Activists trying to take a bite out of hunger; loophole allows more people to get extra allowance but city officials say OCAP method is going to backfire," The Toronto Star, 20 July 2005, Ontario edition: B05

Gonda, Gabe, "City to let nurses okay benefit; welfare recipients can get up to \$250 per month extra food allowance for people with medical conditions," The Toronto Star, 26 July 2005, Metro edition: B05

Hardill, Kathy, Debra Phelps and Mimi Divinsky, "Rogue activists for GTA's poor speak out," The Toronto Star, 25 November 2005, Ontario edition: A19

Janczur, Axelle, "All people should live in dignity," The Toronto Star, 6 October 2005, Ontario edition: A25

Leishman, Rory, "Welfare cuts didn't increase poverty," London Free Press, 19 July 2005, Final edition: A7

Livingston Gillian, "Ontario to spend \$11 million training nurses to fill vacant nurse-practitioner spots," The Toronto Star, 6 February 2006, Ontario edition: A15

Lukits, Ann, "Starved for funds: Anti-poverty groups decry new limits on food allowances," Kingston Whig-Standard, 10 November 2005, Final edition: 1 front

Newman, Adam, "Restricting diet allowance another hardship for poor," Kingston Whig-Standard, 9 November 2005, Final edition: 8

Noble, Mark, "Anti-poverty activists derail business event: politicians shouted down," Kingston Whig-Standard, 25 January 2006, Final edition: 2

"Ontario government urged to extend food benefit for the poor," The Toronto Star, 13 May 2005, Ontario edition: A07

Palmer, Sally, "Welfare rates need bolstering," The Hamilton Spectator, 30 January 2006, Final edition: A14

"Province failing people in need," The Toronto Star, 15 October 2005, Ontario edition: H06

Sam, Kim, "\$250 supplement no luxury for poor," The Toronto Star, 23 July 2005, Ontario edition: F07

Schliesmann, Paul, "Don't use deficit as an excuse," Kingston Whig-Standard, 14 November 2005, Final edition: 4

Shartal, Sarah, "Heart of the issue," The Toronto Star, 10 October 2005, Ontario edition: A15

Wallace, James, "Ontario closes costly welfare 'diet' loophole," Kingston Whig-Standard, 5 November 2005, Final edition: 5