

**Journalism, Poverty, and the Marketing of Misery:****News from Chile's "Largest Ghetto"**

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**Abstract**

Research on the news coverage of poverty has largely overlooked the agency of the actors involved. This study addressed this gap by combining ethnographic fieldwork in a poor neighborhood with an analysis of television news about the neighborhood and interviews with the journalists who produced this news. The analysis shows a relationship between journalists and poor people significantly more complex than the relationship described in previous research: Journalists and poor people marketed the neighborhood's misery collaboratively. They shaped news in ways that could be stigmatizing, but that served their converging interests. By acknowledging that structure and agency presuppose each other, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of journalism, as well as to efforts to address poverty's symbolic injustice.

**Keywords:**

Journalism, poverty, Chile, structure, agency, television news, marketing, neoliberalism

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## **Journalism, Poverty, and the Marketing of Misery:**

### **News from Chile's "Largest Ghetto"**

Scholarship on poverty knowledge has stressed the need to understand poverty not only in its material, but also in its non-material dimensions. Poverty, that is, involves both economic *and* symbolic injustice; it demands (economic) redistribution *and* (symbolic) recognition (Lister, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Poverty's symbolic injustice is largely communicative: It derives "from people in poverty's everyday interactions with the wider society and from the way they are talked about and treated by politicians, officials, the media and other influential bodies" (Lister, 2004, p. 7). Particularly problematic in this respect is that some people—primarily the non-poor—have the prerogative to describe who and how the poor are and to define the reasons for, and possible solutions to, poverty. As dominant descriptions and definitions impact political decisions, they also have material consequences. Thus, calls for recognition—namely, for the acknowledgement of poor people as equal partners in communication (Fraser, 2000)—are central to efforts to fight poverty in general.

Unsurprisingly, communication research has been particularly apt to identify and deal with communicative aspects of poverty. In fact, communication research has provided significant evidence of the impact of mediated portrayals of poverty on poverty itself. Specifically, with respect to mainstream news, research has shown that poverty is regularly neglected as a news topic (e.g., Entman, 1995; Gans, 1980; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Iyengar, 1990; Kendall, 2005). The news affects poverty in this case by keeping it off the agenda. Moreover, research has demonstrated that when the poor are covered, it is typically through stereotypical and stigmatizing portrayals, which undermine the audience's sympathy towards the poor and thus support for social policies against poverty (e.g., Clawson & Trice, 2000; Entman, 1995; Gilens, 1999; Iyengar, 1990; Mantsios, 1998; Redden, 2011). Overall,

research shows that news about poverty “rarely challenges existing power structures and in fact serves to reproduce the hegemonic order” (Devereux et al., 2012, p. 513).

However, despite its significant concern with some of the symbolic aspects of poverty, communication research has generally neglected the actors involved in the news coverage of poverty. As discussed in detail below, this research has focused on structural constraints at the expense of agency and, as a result, has largely taken for granted poor people’s inaction in relation to the media and journalists’ nearly mindless compliance with hegemonic interests. In this way, communication research has failed to fully acknowledge—and thus contribute to—poor people’s need for recognition and potential spaces for such recognition within mainstream media. The study presented here aims at overcoming this limitation by combining the analysis of news content—which most research about news and poverty is limited to—with interviews and fieldwork with journalists and poor people involved in that content.

The paper starts by discussing how communication research has addressed the relation between structure and agency in the coverage of poverty and what an alternative approach may look like. It then presents the research methodology and the specific case study: mainstream television news coverage of a poor urban neighborhood in Chile. The data and analysis, in the subsequent section, point to a relationship between news and poverty that differs in important ways from the one described in communication research to date. The paper concludes by considering the specific socio-political context in which the data were gathered in order to outline the broader relevance and implications of the findings.

### **Poverty and Media Research: Beyond the Dichotomy Structure vs. Agency**

Consistent with its awareness of the links between the symbolic and the material, communication research on news and poverty has conceived news production as the result of structural forces and, at the same time, as key to the maintenance of symbolic and material

inequalities. Analytically, this has involved explicit efforts to address questions of structure and agency and a tendency to underscore the role of structure over agency. This section explains that while valuable, this analytical approach tends to overlook important aspects of the relationship between news and poverty.

With a few exceptions (e.g., Deveraux et al., 2012; Redden, 2011), research on news and poverty has limited its focus to large mainstream media. These media are described as powerful and conservative institutions not only due to their impact on society, but also due to how news production is organized and controlled (e.g., Redden, 2011). Informed by scholarship on the sociology of news, research on news and poverty sees mainstream journalists as “individuals engaged in patterned interaction” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 47). This paradigm has been criticized for assuming that journalists operate almost unconsciously in ways that serve organizational needs and that make their work highly homogeneous and aligned with the interests of “social and political elites and the endorsement of the status quo” (Cottle, 2000, p. 22; see also Peterson, 2003). In the specific case of news about poverty, research suggests that even journalists who would prefer to contest dominant ways of covering poverty end up succumbing to standardized practices and organizational pressures (e.g., Devereux et al., 2012; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Redden, 2011).

According to these accounts, the dominant coverage of poverty is problematic not only because it is negative, stereotypical, and sensationalist, but also—and very importantly—because it disregards structure in favor of individualistic accounts of poverty. Iyengar’s (1990) framing analysis of television news on poverty is a prominent example in this respect. He identified a “thematic” and an “episodic” frame and classified news stories accordingly. The thematic frame presented “poverty primarily as a societal or collective outcome;” the episodic one, “in terms of particular victims, for example, poor people” (pp. 21, 22). Iyengar found that not only episodic framing prevailed in news about poverty, but

also that it contributed to viewers' attribution of responsibility for poverty to poor people and thus to diminished support for governmental anti-poverty measures. Similar to Iyengar's work, a more or less explicit critique of discourses that "blame the victim(s)" of poverty by privileging individualistic accounts is common in media scholarship (e.g., Bullock et al, 2001; Gilens, 1999; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Kendall, 2005; Mantsios, 1998).

Together with other fields involved in the study of poverty, research on news and poverty has thus problematized dominant individualistic discourses of poverty. To do this, communication researchers have predominantly adopted what Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin (2010, p. 698) call the "structure/context counter narrative." The strength of this counter narrative is its emphasis on "structural aspects of poverty and the discovery of the option that people in poverty do not differ in their values from middle-class people" (p. 699). Its flaw, however, is that it makes people invisible: The poor are presented as "mere victims of their situations, thereby reinforcing the image of passivity" (p. 699). Journalists, in turn, easily become "mere supports or bearers of the organizational system" (Cottle, 2000, p. 22).

The downside of the structure/context counter-narrative is evident already in the design of most research about news and poverty: The vast majority of this literature is purely based on the analysis of content. Notably scarce are studies that also include data from interviews or fieldwork with journalists (Devereaux, 1998; Golding & Middleton, 1982) and/or with poor people (Devereaux et al., 2012). As a whole, this body of literature fails to take into account the perspectives and practices of poor people, and of the journalists who cover them. Research suggests, but cannot possibly confirm, that these actors have practically no say in how the coverage is done and what it conveys.<sup>2</sup> Challenging this suggestion is an important step towards a more nuanced and diverse understanding of journalism (see Bird, 2010; Cottle, 2000; Peterson, 2003). Moreover, with respect to the poor, this is a crucial step to facilitate a full engagement—and avoid complicity—with poverty's symbolic injustice.

Similar to other discourses of poverty, research on news and poverty should avoid further silencing the poor and thus becoming “part of the problem rather than part of the solution” (Piachaud, 1987, p. 161).

The challenge in addressing the shortcomings of existing research is paying attention to agency without neglecting structure. There is, as Lister (2004, p. 125) explains, a “fine line between acknowledgment of the agency of people in poverty, including their capacity to make mistakes and ‘wrong’ decisions like the rest of us, and blaming them for that poverty.” Similarly, in analyses of media production, it is necessary to grasp “the creative capacity” of journalists “to make decisions and carry them out (...) while still recognizing their embeddedness in larger structures of power” (Peterson, 2003, p. 164).

In relation to poverty knowledge, Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin (2010) have identified two alternative approaches that counter individualistic assumptions about poverty while taking agency into account: (a) the “agency/resistance” counter-narrative, which “challenges the assumed moral deficit, passivity and dependence of people living in poverty by showing the many ways people negotiate their best path of action within limited opportunity structures” (p. 694), and (b) the “voice/action” counter-narrative, which underscores poor people’s expertise on their lives and turns them into research collaborators through participatory methodologies (e.g., Bennett & Roberts, 2004; Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). These counter narratives have their own risks, as Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin (2010) warn us: to overlook structure and depoliticize poverty, either by idealizing poverty and the poor or by giving them “voice” in decontextualized or superficial ways. Whatever the approach, then, the key is to keep in mind that “human agency and structure, far from being *opposed*, in fact *presuppose* each other” (Sewell, 1992, p. 2, italics in the original).

The general question posed in this study, then, is not whether journalists and poor people have agency. Taking into account that “a capacity for agency is as much a given for

humans as the capacity for respiration” (Sewell, 1992, p. 20), the research question is rather: What kind of agency can journalists and poor people have and how do they exercise it within a given historical and institutional context? Posing this question in relation to a specific case study implies that no generic model of agency for poor people and journalists will be presented. The aim, instead, is to provide initial evidence of the kind of knowledge about news and poverty we may gain from efforts to pay attention to the actors involved.

## **Methods**

### **The National Context**

Apart from drawing attention to the agency of the actors involved in the news coverage of poverty, this study is also innovative in its effort to respond to calls to de-Westernize media studies in general (Curran & Park, 2000) and journalism studies in particular (Bird, 2010; Wasserman & de Beer, 2009). While most research on news and poverty has been conducted in North American and European countries, the data for this paper were gathered in Chile, a country that the World Bank (n.d.) praises for its fast growing economy and macroeconomic stability and, at the same time, criticizes for its social inequality, “still a massive challenge needing to be faced” (World Bank, n.d.).

The Chilean media system is mostly private and highly concentrated (Mellado, 2012; Sunkel & Geoffrey, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Although the legal framework secures relatively high levels of freedom of speech, journalists are subject to significant commercial and economic pressures (Mellado, 2012; Mönckeberg, 2009; Polumbaum, 2002). According to journalists themselves, the quality of news is limited by a very strong orientation towards profits (UAH, 2011). A recent survey has shown that only 24% of the journalists think that the media do a good job in balancing “what the audience wants to know with what is really important for the audience to know” (UAH, 2011, p. 15).

Asked to evaluate the different news media, Chilean journalists give television the lowest grade (UAH, 2011, p. 16). However, newscasts are the most watched TV programs (CNTV, 2012). Moreover, due to the growing demand, the offer of television news has increased in the last years (Fuenzalida & Julio, 2011). In 2008 and 2009, two cable 24-hour television channels were founded (including the first CNN venture in South America). In 2010 prime-time newscasts in open-air television went from 60 to 90 minutes. Longer newscasts have been associated with an increase in human-interest stories, in the use of non-elite or ordinary sources (mostly witnesses or victims), and in the dramatic and opinionated treatment of certain topics (CNTV, 2011).

### **The Case Study**

Even before prime-time newscasts became 30 minutes longer, poverty had a prominent space in Chilean TV news. According to a study from 2005, stories explicitly dealing with poverty were present in more than half of all prime-time newscasts and, in most cases, in a prominent position (Hogar de Cristo et al., 2005). However, news about poverty—as news about most other topics—tends to be heavily centralized in Chilean news, with most of the “national” coverage focused on the capital city, Santiago, which is also where all large media are based (CNTV, 2011). Within Santiago, certain areas appear more in the news than others. Particularly prominent in the coverage of poverty in 2012 was Bajos de Mena, the neighborhood that is the focus of this paper. As a well-known television news anchor and reporter told me, the neighborhood became an “icon” of poverty, inequality, poor urban planning, marginalization, and crime. “As a news medium, we need to give a face to these problems,” she explained (C. Santa María, personal communication, October 10, 2012).

Bajos de Mena was developed between mid-1990 and mid-2000 and consists of 49 *villas* or social housing projects, composed of row-houses and high-rise apartment blocks. Like other Chilean *villas*, Bajos de Mena is the result of a privatized model of social housing,



in which construction companies target the demands of low-income families with a governmental subsidy to buy a house. Successful in shortening the country's housing deficit, the model has been criticized for promoting the construction of poor quality housing in cheap lands at the outskirts of the big cities (Gilbert, 2004). This is evident in Bajos de Mena. Built on what used to be rural land and an informal garbage dump, 23 kilometers South of downtown Santiago, apartments in this neighborhood are between 38 and 42 square-meters (409 to 463 square-feet) and house an average of four to five people. In total, 120,000 people live in Bajos de Mena. Due to its vastness, limited accessibility, lack of basic services, and homogeneously poor population, a 2010 technical report identified it as "*el gueto más grande de Chile*" ["Chile's largest ghetto"] (Atisba, 2010, p. 24). Today, references to Bajos de Mena as a ghetto or, more specifically, as the largest one are commonplace in Chilean media.

The news coverage of Bajos de Mena offers a valuable opportunity to observe how television news about poverty is produced in Chile today. To understand this process taking into account the agency of the actors involved—while keeping structural factors in mind—I opted for a multi-methodological approach. Specifically, I combined an analysis of news content and interviews with the journalists who produced it, as well as with Bajos de Mena residents involved in that news. Furthermore, informed by participatory approaches to poverty and the poor and aware of ethnography's advantages in dealing with "the dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structure" (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 11), I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Bajos de Mena. This enabled me to establish close relations with some residents. I could rely on them as guides not only in navigating the neighborhood, but also in identifying relevant issues, events to attend to, and people to contact. I could also ask feedback for my interpretations in an environment of mutual trust and respect (see Bennett & Roberts, 2004; Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005; Paley, 2001).

Fieldwork in Bajos de Mena took place between September and November of 2012. I

spent most of my time there with a group of 20 to 25 community leaders—with one exception, all of them women—from sixteen *villas*, organized in the committee “Así quiero vivir” (“This is how I want to live;” hereafter, the committee). The committee’s aims were the demolition of the high-rise apartment blocks in Bajos de Mena and funding to cover residents’ move to better housing. Fieldwork entailed attending weekly committee sessions and meetings with authorities, as well as accompanying members in other activities related to their personal life and community work. I went with some of them to hospital appointments; municipal offices; political campaigning activities for local candidates; and informational gatherings with other residents. On one occasion, I also joined community leaders before and during the visit of a television crew, which was producing a story about Bajos de Mena.

My interviewees were community leaders from Bajos de Mena and nine journalists responsible for eight feature stories about the neighborhood, broadcast on the four largest open-air Chilean television stations and on CNN-Chile between May and October 2012.<sup>4</sup> Interviews with journalists lasted 1 to 2 hours, were audio-recorded, and transcribed. Interviews with people from Bajos de Mena varied significantly in length and in style. With seven members of the committee, I had a relatively formal interview: We met at their homes, work places, or the community center; I asked questions and voice-recorded and/or took detailed notes of their answers. With these and other people, however, I also held additional, more informal conversations. While none of my interviewees requested anonymity, community leaders explicitly asked me to use their names. To identify journalists, in turn, I opted for impersonal labels (J1, J2, J3, etc.).

The analysis of news content focused on the eight feature stories mentioned above and was the basis for the interviews with journalists and community leaders. Six of these stories were broadcast on prime-time television and include: four 4 to 12 minute reports for the main newscast, one 5 minute introduction to a debate for the municipal elections, and a

20-minute segment dedicated to Bajos de Mena in a 54 minute investigative program. The two other stories were an 8 minute-long live-dispatch for the morning news and a 13-minute on-site interview for a midnight news program.

The sample is not meant to be representative of television news in general, nor of news about poverty in particular. The intention, instead, was to focus on stories about Bajos de Mena, broadcast within a limited period by a variety of television stations, programs, and reporters (four men and five women, ranging in age from the early 20s to the early 60s, and working for seven different programs across five TV stations); and that—given their duration at least—reflected a significant level of editorial interest (brief reports or stories that referred to Bajos de Mena in passing, for example, were excluded). In this way, the study is not designed to identify general trends in news production, but to contribute to our still “under-theorized” knowledge about the “differentiated nature of the news field” (Cottle, 2000, p. 33).

### **Findings**

Bajos de Mena gained outstanding media attention in 2012.<sup>5</sup> A series of events contributed to this. In May, local residents, led by the committee, started a series of protests to back their housing demands. A month later, locked in their apartment by their own security bars, a mother and two children died in a fire. The accident also underscored Bajos de Mena’s distance from a fire brigade, aggravating residents’ grievance. In the run up to the local elections of October 2012, Bajos de Mena became a key campaign issue in Puente Alto, the municipality it belongs to. In October as well, the government announced a recovery plan for particularly pauperized housing blocks throughout the country, including Bajos de Mena.

Since the analyzed stories were broadcast at different times between May and October 2012, the events mentioned above were not referenced in all of them. However, all stories underscored the miserable living conditions of Bajos de Mena, the overcrowding in apartments, and the neighborhood’s general isolation from the rest of the city. Except for one

story with a rather narrow focus on the lack of urban planning and poor quality of the construction, all stories referred as well to the prevalence of crime and drugs and the resulting fear among residents. Six stories explicitly called Bajos de Mena a ghetto; four of those, “Chile’s largest ghetto.”

An examination of the visuals through which Bajos de Mena was portrayed in the sampled stories concurs with research on how television news about poverty relies on recurring images that “convey information by drawing on the audience’s stored assumptions and categories” about poverty (Entman, 1995, p. 142). In this case, one of the most recurring images was that of the metal bars with which neighbors protect windows, shared corridors, and doors. A visual emphasis on these bars was present in all analyzed stories. In some, images of metal bars were accompanied by verbal cues, as in a story entitled “Imprisoned in their own houses” or another, in which the journalist referred to the “nightmare of living in gated neighborhoods.” However, due to their relatively clear-cut connotations (in this case, fear and insecurity), these and other recurring images did not always warrant an associated text. For example, only one of the four stories in which the camera focused on shoes hanging from utility wires—which in Chile, like in other parts of the world, “mark the boundaries of drug dealing areas” (Duck & Rawls, 2012, p. 53)—explicitly mentioned a connection with crime and drugs. Other recurrent images showed children playing in the street (7 stories); washed laundry hanging in public areas and living rooms (7 stories); buses passing by and/or people waiting for them at a bus stop (7 stories);<sup>6</sup> close-ups of broken electricity and water installations and/or filtrations and wet walls inside apartments (6 stories); overcrowded bedrooms (6 stories); deserted pieces of land between apartment blocks, commonly used as garbage dumps (5 stories), and street dogs (5 stories).

This imagery’s significance and stigmatizing potential becomes clearer in comparison with the visual treatment of positive aspects of Bajos de Mena. Half of the sampled stories

included a few positive images, which were consistently—and verbally—presented as exceptional. In one case, for example, images of a tidy park and playground illustrated an authority's quote about a plan to transform Bajos de Mena. Another story showed well-kept parks and schools, which the journalist described as “striking” sites in “this area of rows of identical, depressive and prison-like blocks.” Another story included a scene that the journalist who produced it described to me as “hopeful” and unexpected (J8): an enthusiastic group of young people painting a mural on a concrete fence. The journalist's voice-over during the scene explained: “On these separating walls, these youth look for other ways of living in Bajos de Mena.... They focus on art more than on the bars, more than on the fear.”

The remaining four stories in the sample lack positive images. The journalist who produced one of them explained:

It's true that in the story I didn't cover anything positive. You may find a stigmatizing trend in that sense, in showing [Bajos de Mena] as a ghetto. I feel I contributed to that, for better or for worse.... OK, I did see a green park, but the feeling that you get is that they [residents] don't care about that, that a green park doesn't help them, doesn't change their life. I placed myself on their [residents'] side 100 percent (J9).

This quote corresponds with the literature in pointing to the journalist's decision to focus on negative aspects of Bajos de Mena. Interestingly, however, the journalist is not only aware that she may contribute to stigmatizing the neighborhood, but also implies that doing so may help residents: In producing this specific story, that is, the journalist saw herself as siding with Bajos de Mena residents. In order to understand the logic behind this conceptualization of stigma and the underlying relationship between stigmatized residents and stigmatizing journalists, the next sections focus on residents' role in the stories and on journalists' accounts of their experience covering Bajos de Mena.

### **The Role of Residents**

It seems reasonable to assume that stigmatizing news harms and thus upsets poor people. However, the community leaders with whom I conducted fieldwork saw a value in negative stories and, in most cases, welcomed the media. As explained in this section, they not only appreciated the news coverage of their neighborhood in 2012, but also took credit for the amount and type of coverage.

**Residents on the Screen: Not Just Answering Questions.** Bajos de Mena residents have a significant presence in the sampled stories, in contrast to journalism's generalized and well-documented tendency to privilege elite sources (Berkowitz, 2009). Out of the 74 sources used in the sample, 56 were residents. Authorities and experts accounted for the rest (10 and 8, respectively). Except for two stories in the sample (see below), Bajos de Mena residents did not appear on screen simply answering questions. They demonstrated, on camera, for example, how hard it is to reach the closest fire hydrant or to get medical assistance; how many gates must be crossed to enter an apartment; how residents experience overcrowding and infrastructural problems. As announced in the introduction of one of these stories, "neighbors themselves showed us how they live." Similar statements and associated narrative techniques—such as residents talking directly to the camera—were common in the sample.

Residents' visibility on screen hints to some kind of collaboration with reporters. The two stories that differed in this respect serve as deviant cases (Silverman, 2001) to help explore what this collaboration implied. In the first, a live dispatch of a protest, residents simply answered questions and had little time to do so: 12.8% of the total story time (vs. 17.13% for authorities and 70.1% for the reporter). The reporter told me that with more editing control over the story—something particularly scarce in live coverage—she would have let residents further explain their situation and limited her own presence (and voice) to the beginning and end of the dispatch (J3). The second case, in contrast, involved months of planning and reporting, and thus producers' significant control over the result. This 20-

minute section about Bajos de Mena in a larger investigative program heavily relied on undercover reporting. Here, the journalist did most of the talking (55,5%) and 11 out of the 13 resident sources had their voices distorted and/or their faces blurred because they were unaware that they were being filmed or because they refused to talk openly about gangs, violence, insecurity, and drug trafficking, central topics in the story.

These two stories—deviant in the visibility of resident-sources—suggest that the relation between journalists and residents depicted in the rest of the sample was not a mere discursive effect, but reflected actual collaboration. In the case of the live dispatch, the journalist told me that she would have preferred to make residents' collaboration more visible. In the case of the investigative piece, collaboration of this kind was minimized. For the most part, the journalist worked independently—and even covertly—from residents to produce a story that was different (though not necessarily contradictory) to the story residents would have liked to tell. This journalist was in Bajos de Mena “simply reporting what was happening.... feeling the atmosphere, how people live, what they think” (J1). He was not there to work *with* residents and tell *their* story, a general attitude among his colleagues. Only towards the end of the reporting did the television crew openly approach and interview some community leaders. One of them, Viviana Fuentes, helped them find a testimony and shared with them a video, but she also asked reporters to produce a different story, one focused on the efforts of “hard-working people” in Bajos de Mena. “They just laughed” at her, Viviana recalled. Other committee members also described this piece without the sense of ownership they expressed about other stories. Julia Valenzuela, for example, told me that given the story's focus on drugs and crime, she was happy that everyone (especially in Bajos de Mena) knew that journalists had produced it on their own.

**Behind the Screen: Media Responsibilities of Community Leaders.** To further examine the relationship between journalists and residents, as well as the committee's

resulting sense of ownership (or co-authorship) with respect to news coverage, I inquired about its members' role in the production of news. Ten of the 56 resident-sources in the sample were committee members. One of them, Mónica Palma, told me that neighbors usually want to talk to the camera, but not everyone can do a good job: "We [the committee] try to organize the people and sometimes we're the ones who speak because we know how to do it better." She exemplified this with a story about the fire for which the committee agreed that Mónica would talk to the journalist in the apartment in ruins. Other residents were watching the interview outside in a small monitor brought by the television crew. "I made many people cry," Mónica recalled. When I asked whether that was good, she explained that being in the charred apartment, where a mother and her children had died was indeed terribly sad. To express that sadness on television was important because it helped making other people aware of the problems in Bajos de Mena and the need for demolition.

Since committee members saw their presence on television as central to their campaign for demolition, they also created their own media opportunities. The clearest example of this was a demonstration they organized in mid-June 2012, blocking the entrance of a large television station. A group of more than 200 Bajos de Mena residents arrived in four to six large buses (numbers vary in the various accounts) on time for the late night news program. "We went there to protest and occupy the station so they would listen to us," recalled Julia, one of the organizers. The journalist who conducted the program and whom I asked about this said he faced the protesters and told them he would not change that night's agenda, but he could visit Bajos de Mena in the following days to record an on-site interview. "Let's work on this together," he told Pilar Aravena, who was leading the group. "I will go with the camera and you will be able to show me what you want; you will tell me the story with images and we will touch the things. She understood immediately," the journalist recalled (J7). The result was a 13-minute interview with Pilar in which she explained the



problems in Bajos de Mena and guided the journalist through several *villas*. As promised, the camera showed the dirty streets and deteriorated apartments; the journalist touched the wet walls, described the humidity in the rooms, and the “absolute indignity” people lived in.

Community leaders also facilitated media opportunities by interacting with journalists with some regularity. Whenever they met one, they told me, they kept his or her telephone number. Most committee members I talked with had two or more of these numbers saved in their cell phones. They notified journalists about unforeseen events (such as a fire), and about their own activities. As Viviana explained: “One knows that it is necessary to call the press to do something.” Viviana and other committee members also offered journalists newsworthy cases and audiovisual material.

An example is the recording of a visit of Sebastián Piñera to Bajos de Mena in 2009. At the end of the visit, the then presidential candidate acknowledged the need for demolition and said that—if elected president—he would tackle the neighborhood’s “inhuman” conditions. Community leaders kept their own video recording of Piñera’s visit to pressure him to fulfill his promise. When Piñera took office, in March 2010, committee members faced two obstacles: the earthquake and the miners. Viviana, Yvonne, Julia and Pilar told me that because of these two tragedies—the earthquake that destroyed some 200,000 houses in late February 2010 and the 33 miners trapped underground in the North of Chile between August and October of that year—nobody would pay attention to Bajos de Mena at the time. Thus they waited until their first large protest for demolition in 2012. During the protest they asked Piñera to keep his promise (through banners and statements to the press) and offered the video to reporters. Several news stories, including two from this study’s sample, included Piñera’s quote about the need for demolition. In both cases, the journalists relied on the material provided by community leaders (J1; J3).

While the video of Piñera may be a particularly effective example, there is significant

evidence of the efforts of community leaders and other residents to help in (and thus influence) news production. Most of the journalists I interviewed found the cases they showed—bedridden youth, practically imprisoned at home; a teenage mother who worked as a prostitute to support her family; particularly damaged and overcrowded apartments, for example—through neighbors. I observed this kind of collaboration first hand when I joined some members of the committee waiting for a television crew that was reporting the government's announcement to demolish some apartment blocks. During most of the 40-minute wait, 16 women discussed where to take the journalist and what to show him. They wanted particularly dramatic cases, overcrowded and untidy apartments, and people who would be willing to talk to the camera in ways that would support their demands. They also decided to take the journalist to the building Piñera had visited in 2009 and to the precise spot where he had made his promise. When the journalist arrived, community leaders accompanied him throughout his visit to two of the *villas*, including places and cases they had agreed on and new ones the journalist asked for.

In general, community leaders described their relationship with journalists as one of mutual advantage. Pilar, one of the most experienced members of the committee, explained to me that they made reporting “cheaper and more valid” for journalists by being the ones who “generate the news and make the contacts.” In return, Pilar said, residents gain publicity: “Now the whole country knows Bajos de Mena.” Thus, committee members described their relation with journalists as reciprocal. In the words of Claudia Mejías: “They [journalists] win and we win.” More importantly, committee members presented this as the kind of relationship they purposely wanted and pursued. The aforementioned efforts—for example, to look for media opportunities and newsworthy cases and to decide who will speak to the camera and how—substantiated their sense of agency with respect to the news. As Yvonne Peñailillo told me in the first weekly committee meeting I attended: “*We* have managed to

keep Bajos de Mena on the fore; otherwise, this committee wouldn't exist.”

### **The Role of Journalists**

Most journalists I interviewed also referred to their interactions with Bajos de Mena residents and poor people more generally as relations of mutual interest. For example, one reporter usually tells the following to relatively disempowered sources: “This is the minute to speak; say whatever you want, but do it now when we can help each other. I need your testimony and you need to be on television and tell your story” (J6). This and other journalists saw themselves as offering people in Bajos de Mena a platform to show their misery and, in doing that, to pressure authorities to comply with their demands. Moreover, it seemed clear to journalists that Bajos de Mena residents “communication-wise, also saw an opportunity” in their interactions with the media (J5).

Nonetheless, it would be unwarranted to assume that people who collaborate do it freely or, in other words, that collaboration implies lack of constraints. It would be possible, for example, for two parts to work together, while one of them—in this case poor people—are compelled to serve the goals of the other—in this case, journalists. In fact, given the power imbalance between Bajos de Mena residents and mainstream media professionals, one could expect the relation between them to be yet another manifestation of the “manipulative nature of reporters’ relationship with sources” (Awad, 2006, p. 922). Moreover, given mainstream media’s organizational pressures, one could expect journalists to also engage in this collaboration despite (or maybe even against) autonomous preferences.

This section provides evidence that would initially support this view from the perspective of journalists: Commercial appeal was indeed an incentive for them to produce dramatic stories, with attractive characters, about Bajos de Mena. However, the discussion below also problematizes this view by underscoring journalists’ own interests in producing these stories. Bajos de Mena offered journalists opportunities to produce stories that sell, but

that they also found worth telling, a combination they do not always easily find in their work.

**Stories that Sell.** Journalists agreed that stories about Bajos de Mena got significant attention and high ratings. “I think that that is why we paid so much attention to Bajos de Mena, because it scored a lot,” said one journalist (J3). Another one categorized Bajos de Mena within a broader category of human-interest stories that “do best,” not only in ratings, but also on Twitter (J2). What specifically made these stories so attractive? “The location is very attractive.... the metal bars, the trash, the small children, the smells,” said one journalist (J4). From him and his colleagues I learned that Bajos de Mena stories gained strength from the dramatic living conditions, as much as from how residents talked about them. In journalists’ recollection of the reporting process, finding appealing resident-sources was crucial and easy. Most of them emphasized that people in general are increasingly savvy in dealing with the media and that poor people in particular tend to be willing to help. Thus, journalists were also interested in sharing their telephone numbers. As one journalist explained: “They [people in general] sometimes “do the job for us, you know? In the sense that now they know; their (news) criteria are sometimes very uniformed with the [TV] channels. And they video-record and all” (J4). People in Bajos de Mena, journalists specified, have “great intuition” (J8) and are particularly “well-prepared” (J3) to face the press.

The following experience from a committee member, Claudia, exemplifies residents’ contribution to the attractiveness of news stories. She recalled that after the fire, a journalist told her: “Look, Claudia, now you’re the journalist; *you* will teach *me*.” First, she hesitated to hold the microphone, but then “it came out naturally: [I said to the camera] ‘Ok, now, I’ll show you how we live in Bajos de Mena, how we live in ghettos of poverty, the shit we live in.’ It came right out of my soul.” For the journalist, this was a “risky” story (J4). Assuming that “people believe the story more when it is told by the people who live it”, he decided to remain invisible, replacing the voice-over with intertitles and letting Claudia and another

committee member lead the way through the neighborhood (J4). Later that day, Claudia met another television reporter and participated in a second story. In this story, she guided the camera—by foot and by bus—to a pharmacy, failing to get her medicine and complaining about the absence of a pharmacy nearby. The 90-second segment, in which the reporter hardly speaks, helped making the story more appealing, said the journalist, someone who also thinks that in television today it is important to “write less and let people talk more” (J5).

“People learn from when we [reporters] arrive and start asking things. They know we’re looking for drama, the thinly chopped onion that sustains the story, they know what we need,” explained another journalist to me (J3). In Chile, “to chop onions,” in its metaphorical sense, is to tell overly sentimental stories that make people cry. That Bajos de Mena residents tend to exaggerate their misery to attract the media’s attention is something that several journalists acknowledged, not as a criticism, but as a key strength, with which residents guaranty that they will be listened to. One journalist told me: “They have to exaggerate to place their topic in the public opinion and achieve results. If they do not do this—with protests and shouting to the camera, for example—nobody will pay attention” (J4). In the words of another reporter, “it has to be like that. Neighbors have one objective, that is, to change their situation. They have to show the worst of their situation to change it” (J9).

**Stories that Are Worth Telling.** The interviewed journalists were generally critical of television news. They emphasized that the need to fill one-and-a-half-hour newscasts and the extreme concern with ratings damaged news quality. Food stories were usual examples. “The hot-dog story” (J5), “the empanada route” (J8), or the “ceviche trail” (J6) were assignments that succeeded in terms of ratings, but made journalists unhappy. One recalled a “depressing” period in which she was frequently assigned to those kinds of stories, which she found irrelevant and too hard to produce. They once asked her to report a story about sneakers. “What do I do with sneakers?” (J5). She did two things: a story about people’s

preference for certain shoe brands as a marker of social status, and telling her boss that she refused to continue covering those kinds of issues. She was thus transferred to the section for which she later covered Bajos de Mena. Her request was accepted, in her view, because “there is a lot of awareness in the media that we all want to develop professionally” (J5).

While not alone, stories about Bajos de Mena are particularly useful in enabling journalists to escape the simplistic logic of ratings and engage in a kind of journalism they feel more satisfied with. *Because* of its dramatic appeal—which journalists and residents proactively strengthen—Bajos de Mena secures a news space to discuss poverty and injustice. Thus, either through the reporter’s voice-over or through some of the sources, all sampled stories explicitly criticized housing and the urban policies that led to Bajos de Mena. Six stories also underscored the contradictions between this neighborhood and Chile’s image of a modern country. “I challenge any journalist who goes there to be able to talk about other things that are not inequality, rage, injustice,” said a journalist, who on television described Bajos the Mena as “the symbol of how Chile needs to change” (J7). Similarly, towards the end of another story the journalist’s voice-over explained:

“Hundreds of thousands of compatriots live in this backyard of Santiago and in the many backyards of Chile’s main cities. The moment for education has come, the moment for health will arrive and rather sooner than later we’ll have to attend the urgency and the still desperately disillusioned time of our prison-like ghettos” (J1).

Thus, although commercial and other organizational imperatives cannot be discarded, news was also shaped by journalists’ own social and political concerns. Bajos de Mena was a good story, in their view, not simply because it sold well (food stories also did), but especially because it enabled them to address ill-conceived policies and injustice. The most common answer I got when I asked journalists about the aim of their story had to do with residents’ recognition. J3, for example, wanted people outside Bajos de Mena to “recognize”

the real conditions in which people live there. J8 wanted to convince people outside Bajos de Mena of the need for public investment in the area. J9, in her introduction to an election debate, tried to be “the voice of the neighbors vis-à-vis the candidates.” J4 said that in this, like in other stories, he was driven by his “individual bias” and “social interest” to denounce problems associated with social inequality.

The motives journalists mentioned when they talked about their coverage of Bajos de Mena suggest that their relation with poor people cannot be seen as simple manipulation to produce selling stories. At least some times and in significant degrees, journalists’ collaboration with poor people is driven by an agreement with their demands and by a desire to support them. Further evidence of how this collaboration involves a complex interplay of individual agency and structural factors on the side of both poor people and journalists becomes clearer in relation to the notion of stigma.

### **The Uses and Misuses of Stigma**

Whether portrayals of Bajos de Mena and the misery of its inhabitants contributed to stigmatizing and to harming the neighborhood was an important question for journalists. The producer of one of the stories, for example, told me that she agreed with the on-camera journalist on not using the word “ghetto” because they found it stigmatizing (J6). They also avoided stigmatizing the neighborhood, the producer said, by focusing on the fear of some neighbors, mainly hard-working women, more than on the threat posed by others (J6).

Commonly, however, journalists did call Bajos de Mena a ghetto. In the interviews, they recognized the term’s stigmatizing potential, but justified it by assuming the perspective of residents. The journalist who covered a protest, for example, recalled she had asked some of her sources whether they worried that the protest and the news coverage could increase the neighborhood’s stigma (J3). They told her that increasing the stigma was impossible. “It is strange to put it this way, but showing the misery in which they live is useful for them” (J3).

Similarly another journalist criticized local politicians who blame the media for stigmatizing Bajos de Mena, by calling it a ghetto. In her view, they do not understand the people who live there. “They [Bajos de Mena residents] are the ones who increase that [the stigma] to attract attention and change their situation” (J9). In the words of yet another journalist (J8), people in Bajos de Mena think: “Do you want to call us a ghetto, OK, go ahead, but resolve the problem. If the cost is that they tell us that we live in a ghetto, I have no problem with that.”

My conversations with people in Bajos de Mena echo the ones I had with journalists. I frequently heard residents themselves referring to their neighborhood as a ghetto and even as “shit.” They saw themselves and their neighbors as the victims of unfair public policies and of the neglect of authorities. For them, the media in general and stigmatizing stories in particular were not inherently good or bad. Their value needed to be assessed in relation to the community’s needs. As Julia explained to me: “If we need the media, we will look for them one way or another (...) but we don’t want the media to be following us [all the time].” Accordingly, residents were not happy with all news coverage, nor were they willing to accept any kind of stigma. This was clear, for example, with the burnt apartment: Yvonne and some of her neighbors showed it to several journalists, aware that the tragedy—and its images—supported their claims for better housing conditions. However, while the dead bodies of the mother and her children were still inside—as a matter of respect, Yvonne told me—they forced out all journalists who wanted to video-record or take photos.

With respect to drugs and crime—particularly common negative themes associated with poverty in TV news (Entman, 1995)—the committee in general seemed to support accounts in which these issues were raised as a result of the poor housing conditions. In contrast, they were uninterested in, or simply opposed, stories about crime and/or drugs that failed to make this connection. Several committee members, for example, remembered participating in a 2008 protest against two television programs about crime in Puente Alto.



An example that I could observe more closely was a current events conversation program broadcast in November 2012. I was with Viviana when she was invited and accepted to participate in the program. She told me she would talk about the need for demolition.

Broadcast that same night, the episode was called “The narcotics dominance in the hot zones of Santiago” and the panelists included two journalists and a public prosecutor, but not Viviana. The next day she explained to me that she had arrived at the television studio, met the prosecutor, and realized that the program would focus on drug trafficking instead of housing. She thus refused to participate. One of the two journalists who were there told me that he and the other panelists tried, but failed, to convince Viviana to join the panel. She wanted to talk about overcrowding in the apartments and requested a different title for the episode, something the journalists did not accept (Villarubia, G., personal communication, 21 November, 2012).

### **Discussion**

This paper has shown how poor urban residents and journalists collaboratively shaped television news coverage of Bajos de Mena in 2012. The extent to which this news coverage contributed to the neighborhood’s symbolic, and thus political, value became evident in mid-May 2013, when the Chilean Ministry of Housing launched its recovery plan for pauperized housing blocks, by demolishing one building in Bajos de Mena and compensating the 26 families who left it to live elsewhere. The selection of Bajos de Mena as the place to launch this urban recovery plan, which also includes housing blocks in other parts of Chile, guaranteed significant coverage of the governmental measure. Furthermore, on 21 May, 2013, the president’s annual message to the congress included footage of the demolition. With the bulldozer tearing down the Bajos de Mena building as the accompanying image, President Piñera spoke about his government’s intervention in the “poverty ghettos that we [the Chilean state] had built in the past, where not only poverty, but also drug, alcoholism,

crime, and desperation are concentrated.” His reference to Bajos de Mena demonstrates that the neighborhood’s appeal was not limited to journalists. In the run-up for a presidential election, Bajos de Mena was important for authorities and politicians as well. By attending to residents’ demands, they could also capitalize on the neighborhood’s symbolic value.

In some ways, news about Bajos de Mena in 2012 confirmed what communication research has previously shown about the news coverage of poverty: Journalists produced negative, relatively cost-efficient, and sensationalist stories that appealed to large audiences. However this paper has also exposed aspects of this coverage overlooked in most studies until now. It has shown that television news coverage about Bajos de Mena cannot be simply interpreted as the result of structural constraints that overpowered journalists and poor people. This is not to say that structural factors, including poverty and a commercial media logic, are irrelevant to news coverage. It means, instead, that structure should be seen as “both constraining and enabling” (Giddens, 1986, p. 25). In its multi-methodological approach—complementing the analysis of news content with interviews and fieldwork—the paper has thus paid attention to poverty and media logic, but also to poor people’s and journalists’ agency, namely, their capacity “for desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively” (Sewell, 1992, p. 20). The result has been significant evidence of how Bajos de Mena residents actively *managed* their own image and journalists produced appealing stories that also responded to their own political and social views. The findings thus urge us to question the mindlessness and passivity attributed in previous research to journalists and poor people, as well as the assumed negative effects of stigmatizing news. In the case of the television journalists and poor people involved in the news coverage of Bajos de Mena in 2012, stigmatizing stories could be useful.

Based on this paper, then, one can argue that research on the coverage of poverty has unduly overlooked the role of marginalized citizens and of journalists and thus their

possibilities for collaboration and for taking advantage of commercially attractive news. However, the gap between this paper's findings and previous studies cannot be fully explained in these terms. It is important to keep in mind that previous research has been largely based in the USA and the UK. Efforts to de-Westernize media studies, to which this paper tries to contribute, stress the need to consider the economic, social, and cultural conditions in which media practices occur. In his "theory of structure," Sewell (1992, p. 20) makes a similar point, when he argues that while agency characterizes all human beings, its forms "vary enormously and are culturally and historically determined." This does not mean that the Chilean case is irrelevant to research on news and poverty elsewhere. The point, instead, is that in order to interpret the data from this study and assess the broader relevance of the findings, these data must be placed within the particular context in which they were obtained.

The Chilean socio-political context of 2012 is marked by its well-entrenched neoliberalism (Atria et al., 2013; Harvey, 2005, Posner, 2008). Neoliberal policies have been directly linked to the country's social inequality and urban segregation (Gilbert, 2004; Posner, 2008; Solimano, 2012), as well as with its highly deregulated and commercialized media (Bresnahan, 2003; Wiley, 2006). Furthermore, neoliberalism is manifest in Chilean society through the prevalence of marketing. In another ethnographic study in a poor urban neighborhood in Santiago, Paley (2001) described Chile of the 1990s as a democracy shaped by free market economics and promoted through marketing techniques, in short, a "marketing democracy." Paley focused on the image management techniques with which government and businesses targeted foreign investors and citizen consumers to conceal (and thus legitimize) social inequalities. Fifteen years later, Paley's analysis continues being useful to understand, for example, President Piñera's use of the miseries of "the ghetto" and the images of a bulldozer to uphold his commitment to eradicating problems caused by previous

governments. Today, however, it seems unwarranted to limit the use of marketing techniques to those in power. In the case of Bajos de Mena, marginalized citizens marketed their own misery, publicizing their problems to advance demands for better living conditions.

The spread of the effective use of marketing from the powerful to those with less power can be related to other important transformations in the last decades. On the side of news production, it would be productive to further examine journalistic practices associated with the increased consumption and offer of television news. Journalistic trends, in Chile and elsewhere, widening spaces for the visibility of ordinary citizens (Turner, 2010) arguably offer new opportunities for people to promote their causes. On the side of the population at large, the growing access to media technologies may be altering people's relationship with journalists and with processes of media production more generally. All the youth and adults I met in Bajos de Mena have a cellphone, television, an email and/or Facebook account, and (albeit irregular) access to the internet. The use of these technologies probably changes their sense of how the media work. Additionally, people's exposure to commercial advertisement and to the kind of top-down marketing messages described by Paley (2001) may directly affect their views on how to promote their needs and desires.

The specific appeal and effectiveness of poor citizens' marketing efforts in Chile in 2012 should also be understood in relation to the avid debates about social inequality at the time. An unprecedented social discontent surged in Chile since 2011 with massive and diverse protests demanding "the government to guarantee a fairer society" (*Economist*, 2012; see also Atria et al., 2013; Solimano, 2012). Thus, for example, Chileans at the time had the lowest perception of justice with regards to income distribution in Latin America (a 6% as opposed to a 20% average for the region) (Latinobarómetro, 2011). This seems to be a particularly propitious context for poor people to pose claims about injustice, for journalists to give space to those claims, and for politicians to listen to them. In fact, most of the

journalists I interviewed referred to 2012 as a special moment, in which they were not simply allowed, but even encouraged, to tune into the public's discomfort, by denouncing poverty and inequality.

Given the contextual specificity of the Bajos de Mena case, an interesting challenge for future research is to examine how poor people relate to the media in other neoliberal contexts and, in that way, respond to the need for “a more complex understanding of the media in the Age of Neoliberalism” (Hallin, 1998, p. 44). Studying neoliberalism in its local articulations helps avoid determinist approaches that treat neoliberalism as an omnipresent and homogenizing force (Clarke, 2008; Ong, 2006). Following that same logic, it is an empirical question whether disempowered people at different times and in different places use similar strategies and whether these strategies can be similarly effective. The marketing of misery employed by Bajos de Mena residents in collaboration with journalists in 2012 successfully took advantage of neoliberalism's contradictions. To use Ferguson's (2009, p. 174) words, residents engaged in the “re-appropriation of ‘market’ techniques of government” for non-neoliberal purposes, notably, the demand for governmental plans and funding that would guarantee them better housing conditions. However, precisely because they relied on marketing, the strategies used by Bajos de Mena residents may be risky and not easily transferrable. First, these strategies were based on an implicit competition with and distinction from other poor neighborhoods. Not all of them can symbolize poverty and inequality. Secondly, the marketing of misery was effective to the extent that it met a “market” demand tied to a commercial need with negative news and a generalized concern with poverty and inequality. Once/if residents promote other kind of goals—like housing preservation and improvement, instead of demolition, for example—and concerns with inequality lose their prominence on the public agenda, the marketing of misery may also lose its appeal.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The use of redistribution and recognition in this sense—as necessarily interrelated claims of justice—is borrowed from contemporary discussions in political philosophy (e.g., Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Interesting in this respect is a study by Sei-Hill et al. (2010), in which the authors suggest that U.S. journalists' political preferences might partly explain a relatively high number of stories framing poverty as a social problem. Since the study solely relied on the analysis of content, however, this could not be demonstrated.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly relevant for this study, four major broadcasters concentrate 90% of television consumption (CNTV, 2012). Three of them—Chilevision, Megavision, and Canal 13—are owned or co-owned by some of the biggest Chilean business conglomerates and international corporations Televisa and Time Warner. The fourth big player is TVN, a public broadcaster with no financial support from the state and thus programming that does not substantially differ from the rest (Godoy, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> The number of journalists is larger than the number of analyzed stories because for one story I interviewed the producer and the on-camera journalist.

<sup>5</sup> The lack of a comprehensive archive makes a historical review of news coverage impossible. However, data from *El Mercurio*, one of Chile's main national dailies, are revealing: There were six stories referring to Bajos de Mena between 1991 and 2000; seven stories between 2001 and 2010; no story in 2011; 24 stories in 2012; and 45 stories in 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Public buses in Chile can be considered markers of low social class.