

Michael Fletcher: I want to start with a harsh, but I think, kind of uncontroversial observation. I don't think this country likes poor people. In America it's just not very, it doesn't feel good about itself when it has to look at the poor, and I think that's kind of a framework for almost everything that we do in the newspaper world, and also for how this country deals with the very real issues of poverty out here.

You know, sure, there are a lot of non-profit groups we know, obviously, you know, Alan's group is here, there are charities, social service outlets of every stripe that they do all kinds of work, yeoman's work in dealing with the problems of the poor. The Government continues to spend billions on everything from the Earned Income Tax Credit to public housing for the poor.

But strip all of that away, and the truth still remains that this country is uncomfortable with poor people, and doesn't really want the poor to be part of the conversation. And I think that's even reflected in our political debate out there. You look at the potential '08 candidates, the only one I can think of who is even talking about poverty on a regular basis is Edwards.

Everybody else talks about the middle class, talks about the affluent, because the affluent and middle class not only vote in higher numbers, but they are seen as the ones who kind of make the economy work, make this country go 'round. The poor, they're not making it, and the reason they're not making it may be because of their own choices. I think that's an attitude that's woven deep in this country's psyche and that, I mean, I think we have to confront if you're talking about trying to get better attention paid, you know, to poor people.

And in the newsroom, I think the attitude, you know, we're not immune from this thing. There's a feeling, and I think it's wrong, that there's nothing new when it comes to the poor. They're an unfortunate fact of life, nothing's really changes, there's no dynamic there. And I think that's totally wrong, but nonetheless is a prevailing attitude.

At the Post -- and we're a huge newspaper -- we cover all kinds of things, there aren't that many people devoted to the coverage of poverty. There's a lack of curiosity about poverty, there's a lack of institutional investment in the issue. You know, to get stories in the paper, obviously you need new angles, you need new information, and we do that, we spend a lot of time thinking about these things, on issues we really care about. Politics is like a franchise thing for the Post, and we have meetings every Monday about political issues, I'm a White House reporter, I get together with the Hill reporters, with the editors and we'll talk about issues, and we'll talk about kind of how to slice these onions.

We'll talk about Danny Hastert all day long and ways to get a new angle on that, how is Bush relating to the Republican Congress, we'll write that story ten different ways because everyone's brainstorming about it, everyone's thinking about it.

Poverty is one of those issues that rarely comes up. And when it comes up, I always feel like I'm the one bringing it up. And you always get this feeling of -- and no one stops you from writing these stories, don't get me wrong, but you sort of suggest a story and becomes kind of like your story, not our story. You go out there, you do the job, you bring the story back, turn the front story, it will get on the front page and people will compliment you but there's really not that investment from, you know, from the whole

institution in covering issues of poverty, and I think because people don't see anything new happening in poverty.

You know, and I think even the exceptions kind of prove my point -- everyone, you know, a couple of people have mentioned Katrina. That was a moment in this country when you thought, Well, maybe poverty is going to be lifted out of the shadows again, and once again put on the front burner as an issue for this country. I actually thought so for a little while there, and I remember talking to you -- I was talking to Alan Curtis about this issue, and I thought he was being a bit of a cynic -- I did a story about kind of the new celebrity you know, given to the poor. And Alan said, You know, these things come up when you have a crisis, people talk about them for awhile, then they forget about them.

And I said, hm, I thought that was kind of harsh, I thought, you know, that we really had sort of turned a corner in this country. But lo and behold, I mean, I think Katrina was on the front page of Newsweek, I mean, just the idea of the impoverished being an issue of Katrina, we wrote front page stories at the Post, but -- and President Bush gave a speech, remember in Jackson Square, President Bush talked about the problems of poverty, talked about, not only that, but talked about how they were rooted in America's racist history and slavery he raised as an issue #NAME? going to pursue this issue, the news media is going to follow this issue, but it went away that quickly.

And I don't exactly blame President Bush for this, necessarily. The Congress, you know, it made him look like he was very compassionate, because right after the, the immediate aftermath of Katrina, the conversation in Washington became, They're spending too much money. The Bush Administration is wildly spending money, they're throwing too much money at this problem. And that quickly became the issue that we followed in the press and became kind of the, kind of helped set the political debate. And, you know, we live with what we live with.

It's funny, I just want to read a quote from Bush, this kind of just brings it home to me. It says, Americans of every race and religion were touched by this storm. Yet some of the greatest hardship fell upon citizens already facing lives of struggle -- the elderly, the vulnerable and the poor. And this poverty has roots in generations of segregation and discrimination that closed many doors of opportunity. As we clear away the debris of the hurricane, let us also clear away the legacy of inequality. And that's your conservative, Republican President talking.

But yet, a year after, roughly a year after that Jackson Square speech, I did another story kind of talking about the issues of poverty. And they have this, on the White House website you can search his speeches and all of his public comments, even made at news conferences and even little two on twos as we call them, like when foreign leaders come into the White House.

And I've learned that President -- I did the search for the word poverty -- President Bush used the word poverty six times in the year, you know, right after Katrina. The issue totally fell off the table. And, is that his fault? Is that our fault? Is it that there's no constituency for the poor? I think maybe it's, you know, a combination of all of those things.

And again, it's not like there's not news surrounding the poor. I think the stories you've seen in the last year about, for example, black men, and the problems of black men, that's a real component of poverty. And that was kind of a new take on kind of an old problem. You have, in many ways, welfare reform and things like that, the poverty rate in this country was beginning to dip, particularly for black women. But black men, somehow, were apart from that improvement.

So it takes kind of that smart looking at what's going on around us to kind of created the kind of, you know, opportunities for journalists to step in and do stories, like in news organizations like the Times or the Post it's hard because -- you know, you can talk about voice and all of that stuff, but as a reporter I can't just, you know, decide well, I'm going to write a story about the poor or about poverty if I don't really have a new angle, and it's tough to come up with that if there isn't the investment, or we aren't getting the tips from, you know, from people doing the research and providing the kind of raw data that become the building blocks of stories.

So that would be kind of my charge to everybody here, is to sort of just find ways to really think about this -- and it's tough, I mean, poverty is a tough, tough issue. I mean Jay Rosen was talking about innocence, and I thought he was going to go to the idea of innocent victims, because I think that's what journalists like, we want this pure thing, like the pure poor person and somehow he's a total victim and it becomes this sort of like tearjerker story that we can write.

But often reality is not like that. People have complex, multi-layered problems and that's a reality. But it's also, they can be addressed. But in the press we need, we just need to sort of disaggregate some of that, and look at them as distinct issues, and I think it would give us the stuff to sort of, you know, put poverty back on the front page.

I'll leave it there, I'll keep it short, and I know you guys want to ask a lot of questions, so have at it.