

April 2019

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MEDIA-POVERTY Jun-10-2008 (760 words) xxxn

Panelists discuss how news media look at poverty issues

Editors: "Mik" in 10th paragraph is correct.

By Mark Pattison Catholic News Service

MINNEAPOLIS (CNS) -- The news media look at poverty issues -- when they bother to look at all -- with a negative connotation, according to the co-author of one study.

The word "poor" is considered a pejorative word when used in the media, according to Janan Compitello, senior associate for new media for Douglas Gould and Co., a New York-based communications strategy firm for nonprofit organizations.

Even the phrase "working poor" was found to have negative connotations, said Compitello June 6 during a panel presentation on "Economic Justice, Media Issues and Faith" at the National Conference for Media Reform, held June 6-8 in Minneapolis.

The conference drew an estimated 3,500 people to discuss such varied issues as media consolidation, journalistic quality, federal communication policy and the concept of net neutrality, short for network neutrality, which is about guaranteeing all people equal access to all parts of the Web.

Compitello cited findings from a Douglas Gould study, "Religion in the Media," of major U.S. newspapers and magazines that was conducted December 2006-October 2007. Seven faith-based Web sites not connected to major media also were examined.

The Gould study looked for articles containing references to any one of six major faith groups (Christianity, for example, not just Catholicism), plus one of more than 50 topics, including the names of major presidential primary candidates and topics such as "poverty," "affordable housing," "minorities," "racism" and even "war on Christmas."

"Low-wage work received 20 percent more media attention than in 2001," when Douglas Gould conducted a similar survey, said Compitello, a Catholic. Terms such as "low-wage work" and "low-wage workers" were in stories that suggested poverty was "framed by systems" that kept people in poverty, she said.

Compitello, who suggested that "low-wage workers" is a better way to identify such people, said 43 percent of the stories featuring these workers used the term "working poor" during the period of the latest study.

Compitello noted after the panel discussion that she would have been defined by the media as poor when she was a child. "Oh, we were poor. We ate a lot of government cheese," she said, referring to a surplus commodity that was distributed free to senior citizens and families in poverty in the 1980s, particularly during President Ronald Reagan's first administration.

Mik Moore, director of communications and public policy for the New York-based Jewish Funds for Justice and editor of the jspot.org blog, told of the public relations efforts he had made on behalf of Rabbi Jill Jacobs' proposed "teshuvah" to highlight how the media often ignore the plight of workers.

Rabbi Jacobs is the rabbi in residence at Jewish Funds for Justice, a national public foundation dedicated to mobilizing the resources of American Jews to combat the root causes of domestic social and economic injustice.

A teshuvah is a written argument making the case for requiring Jewish employers who had not acted responsibly toward their workers to ask for forgiveness and make it up to them. It is presented to the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. All teshuvahs require repentance and restitution.

Rabbi Jacobs' teshuvah was approved in May, after having been turned down the previous two years, Moore said. Those media outlets -- including Jewish media -- covering it wanted to follow one of two angles: either profile Rabbi Jacobs as a rising young star in American Judaism or take an inside look at how this teshuvah was approved.

None, Moore said, wanted to interview any low-wage workers hired by Jews. "I suppose I could have tried harder" to interest writers and editors in that angle, he added.

Moore also told of the assistance he was asked to provide on behalf of the world's largest kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa, the target of a federal immigration raid May 12.

Agents arrested 389 people, ultimately charging 304 of them with felony criminal counts such as possessing a false ID. The remaining 85 were charged with civil immigration violations and released "for humanitarian purposes" such as caring for their young children.

"Yes, it's a terrible thing" that more than half of the United States' kosher meat production was interrupted because of the raid, Moore said, but he examined what the situation at the plant had been before the raid, including the working conditions inside the plant and the wages the employer was paying the immigrants.

Moore concluded that the meat may have been kosher by Jewish standards, "but maybe we need to redefine kosher for all in this situation."

END

06/10/2008 4:03 PM ET

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