

Not About Us, But With Us!

Opportunities and Challenges in the Portrayal of Poverty in Public Service Broadcasting. *By Andreas Schulz-Tomančok and Josef Seethaler*

This article examines how Austria's public service broadcaster (ORF) represents poverty and social exclusion, how this is perceived by people affected by poverty and by experts, and what changes are needed for ORF to fulfil its statutory and normative Public Value mission "for all." Against the backdrop of multiple crises—rising prices, energy costs and displacement—the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Austria has grown markedly; depending on the definition, around 17% of residents (approximately 1.5 million people) are affected. Public debates and media coverage have intensified. While tabloid outlets tend to individualise and emotionalise poverty, often neglecting structural and intersectional causes (cf. Pernegger 2025), even high quality media can reproduce distorted images (cf. Butterwegge 2020).

Research into the media portrayal of poverty has primarily been conducted in print journalism and commercial media (cf. Borden 2021), while the research landscape regarding public service broadcasting remains under-represented, despite a few studies (cf. Stang 2018). It is particularly interesting to note how those affected, as well as experts, perceive the way the topic is addressed and how the ORF should approach poverty from a public value perspective. The objective is clear: to portray poverty and social exclusion as accurately and nuancedly as possible and to reach the diverse group of people affected by poverty in a way that meets their information needs.

The central question is whether ORF is perceived as a medium for all and whether its programming sufficiently addresses and includes precarious groups, thereby avoiding secondary exclusion via omission or misrepresentation. The study is guided by three research questions: (RQ₁) How does ORF portray poverty and social exclusion from the perspective of people affected and of experts? (RQ₂) How should ORF depict these issues to serve the needs and dignity of affected audiences and to counter prejudice? (RQ₃) Which structural and editorial measures can enable poverty coverage that is designed from the perspective of those affected "not about us, but with us"?

Andreas Schulz-Tomančok, M.A., M.A., is a researcher at the Institute for Comparative Media and Communication Research (CMC) at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna and a lecturer at the University of Klagenfurt.

Dr. Josef Seethaler is the coordinator of the Horizon Europe project "Mapping Media for Future Democracies (MeDeMAP)" at the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Theoretically, the article draws on representation and framing to diagnose individualising narratives and stereotype reproduction; on deservingness discourses that shape views of who merits support; and on Public Value (cf. Scherer 2011) as a lens for assessing democratic, societal worth created by public service media.

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative design combining focus groups and semi structured interviews. From March to May 2025, one expert focus group (n=13) was conducted with participants from media education, communication and social policy, poverty research, social work and NGOs (e.g., Diakonie, Caritas, Volkshilfe). Three additional expert interviews complemented this discussion. Recruitment for the second stage with engaging people affected by poverty, proved challenging due to shame, burdens tied to poverty and exclusion, and limited resources. Ultimately, one focus group (n=3; three no shows) and five problem centred interviews with affected individuals were carried out, conducted face to face in trusted environments or via Zoom. All conversations were transcribed and thematically analysed using MAXQDA24.

The results present an ambivalent picture. Both affected participants and experts judge ORF's coverage as notably more discrimination sensitive than that of commercial outlets; flagship information programmes (e.g., Ö1, ZiB) and some reportage formats are singled out positively. At the same time, inconsistencies persist across genres. Infotainment and entertainment formats sometimes mobilise stereotypical codes, suggestive editing and classist jokes. Coverage is often event driven (e.g., holiday seasons), with little sustained visibility of affected groups. Poverty is frequently individualised rather than situated within structural contexts such as wage regimes, housing markets, care infrastructures or migration policy. On- and off screen representation gaps are conspicuous: people with migration, working class or poverty biographies are scarce, older women are underrepresented, and minority topics are sometimes "delegated" to minority staff.

In response to RQ2, participants advocate for content that fuses personal narratives with structural analysis. Portraits should be complemented by statistics, trend lines and accountability. Cross topic linkages (e.g., climate, economy) can illuminate the complex drivers of exclusion. More first person voices should appear, yet not reduced to "the poor" role: show full persons with skills, identities and aspirations. Diversifying the visual and narrative repertoire beyond homelessness and child

poverty is considered essential. Instead of voyeuristic “poverty porn” the study’s participants suggest series on everyday competencies, coping strategies and achievements, also in entertainment genres (quiz, satire, regional youth and culture formats) that include poverty in low threshold ways.

Media literacy should be advanced through ORF’s channels, including recognising disinformation, ideally via playful edutainment. Information should be tailored to different target groups, accessible and multilingual. New technologies such as AI can support Easy Language and translation, co created with affected communities and quality assured to reduce exclusion in information access.

Regarding RQ3, structural and editorial measures are pivotal. Collaboration at eye level with self advocacy groups can anchor community knowledge and enable inclusive editorial setups. Participation must be more than a fig leaf: Bottom up processes require time, resources and sensitivity. Editorial guidelines for respectful poverty coverage should be co developed with civil society actors (e.g., die Armutskonferenz [Austrian Anti Poverty Network]) and embedded across departments. Audience facing dialogue formats and citizen programmes should lower academic barriers without sacrificing substance. Platform strategies must prioritise native production, community management and consistent moderation to limit harmful dynamics.

The study’s limitations, notably the small number of affected participants and the difficult field access, reflect the very exclusions under investigation. They point to clear avenues for future work. Longitudinal analyses of ORF’s poverty coverage across genres could track frames and contextualisation over time. Reception research with affected groups in Easy Language and multiple languages should assess how formats impact understanding, self efficacy and trust. Organisational research is needed to develop Public Value metrics specific to poverty coverage, integrating content quality, participation, reach among vulnerable audiences and community impact.

Overall, the analysis suggests that ORF possesses many prerequisites for discrimination aware poverty coverage, but does not yet achieve consistency across all genres and platforms. Moving from the slogan “for all” to everyday practice requires binding organisational commitments, participatory production and platform appropriate mediation. If these shifts are realised, ORF can both counteract media driven inequality and strengthen its democratic legitimacy.

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Full Article

(German):

Andreas Schulz-
Tomančok/Josef

Seethaler:

Nicht über uns,
sondern mit uns!

Chancen und
Herausforderungen
in der

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Armutsbetroffenheit
beim öffentlich-
rechtlichen Rundfunk.

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