

Discourses on Poverty in Austria

Defamation, Battles of Interpretation, and the Counter-Public Sphere. *By Alban Knecht, Michaela Moser, and Martin Schenk*

This article examines poverty discourses in Austria, focusing on their media representations, political struggles over interpretation, and the emergence of counter-publics. The contribution is situated within broader debates on the social construction of poverty and aims to provide both a theoretical and empirically grounded analysis of how poverty is publicly negotiated.

The central research questions guiding the article are twofold: First, how is poverty constructed, framed, and communicated in Austrian mass media and public discourse? Second, in what ways does the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network “Die Armutskonferenz – Österreichisches Netzwerk gegen Armut und soziale Ausgrenzung” intervene in an attempt to reshape these dominant discourses? These questions are rooted in the assumption that public discourses on poverty are not merely descriptive but actively shape social realities, political decisions, and the lived experiences of those affected (cf. Knecht 2024).

The theoretical framework of the article is grounded in discourse theory, particularly drawing on the work of Michel Foucault (1971). From this perspective, discourses are understood as structured systems of knowledge and meaning that define what can be said, by whom, and with what consequences. The article also integrates insights from the sociology of knowledge-oriented discourse analysis, emphasizing the interplay between language, power, and social practice. Poverty is thus conceptualized not as a purely material condition but as a socially constructed category that emerges through discursive processes. Classical sociological insights, such as those of Georg Simmel on the relational definition of poverty, further inform the analysis by highlighting the role of societal recognition and institutional practices.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, multi-layered approach. It synthesizes findings from an extensive media-discourse and narrative analysis of Austrian print media, particularly drawing on recent empirical studies (cf. Pernegger

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2025; Griesser 2024). This is complemented by a literature-based examination of initiatives by the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network. The methodological design thus combines secondary analysis of empirical data with a theoretically informed interpretation of discourse patterns and institutional practices.

The findings reveal that poverty in Austrian mass media is frequently framed within narrow and moralizing narratives, as discussions of social welfare are often linked to narratives of abuse and fraud, reinforcing stigmatizing stereotypes of welfare recipients as exploitative or unwilling to work. Dominant discourses tend to individualize poverty, attributing it to personal failure, lack of effort, or moral shortcomings. A recurring pattern is the distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, which has structured both media representations and political debates for a long time. These representations are not only reductive but also have significant social consequences, contributing to the stigmatization and exclusion of people affected by poverty.

Empirical studies further indicate that people experiencing poverty are rarely given a voice in media coverage. When they do appear, it is often within highly selective and emotionally charged narratives, such as charity-oriented stories that emphasize individual hardship while obscuring structural causes. Other forms of poverty—such as in-work poverty or poverty related to illness and aging—remain largely invisible in mainstream media. As a result, public understanding of poverty is shaped by partial and often distorted representations.

Against this backdrop, the article highlights the role of “Die Armutskonferenz” as an important player in challenging dominant discourses and fostering counter-publics. The network employs a range of strategies aimed at making alternative perspectives visible and amplifying the voices of those affected by poverty. Three types of interventions are particularly emphasized.

First, participatory narrative projects such as “sketches of life” (“Lebensskizzen”) seek to render marginalized life experiences visible by enabling people affected by poverty to tell their own stories. These projects disrupt stereotypical representations by presenting complex, nuanced accounts of lived realities and structural constraints. Second, initiatives targeting journalism—such as the “Journalism Prize from Below” (“Journalismuspreis von unten”) and guidelines for respectful reporting—aim to influence media practices and promote more differentiated and non-stigmatizing representations of poverty (cf. Schenk 2024). Third, participatory research projects involve people with lived

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experience of poverty as co-researchers, thereby challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge production and contributing to more inclusive and reflexive forms of inquiry.

The analysis shows that these interventions can contribute to the emergence of counter-narratives that emphasize structural causes of poverty, highlight systemic inequalities, and re-frame people affected by poverty as knowledgeable actors rather than passive objects of policy and media representation. In this sense, the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network plays an important role in reshaping public discourse and expanding the range of perspectives that are considered legitimate (cf. Schenk 2024).

At the same time, the article also identifies limitations and challenges. As a civil society player without formal political power, the influence of the network depends on the receptiveness of political institutions and the broader media environment. There is also a risk that participatory initiatives may be co-opted or reduced to symbolic forms of inclusion without leading to substantive change. These constraints point to the structural conditions under which counter-publics operate and the difficulties of achieving lasting transformations in dominant discourses.

The key findings of the article can be summarized as follows: (1) Poverty discourses in Austria are strongly shaped by moralizing and individualizing narratives; (2) media representations play a central role in reproducing these discourses; (3) counter-public interventions can (at least) challenge dominant narratives but remain structurally constrained; and (4) the inclusion of people affected by poverty as active participants in discourse production is crucial for developing more accurate and just representations.

In terms of future research and practical implications, the article points to several avenues for further exploration. These include the need for more systematic empirical studies on the impact of counter-discursive interventions, comparative analyses across countries, and deeper engagement with digital media and social platforms as emerging arenas of discourse. Moreover, the findings suggest that interdisciplinary collaboration between media studies, social policy, and participatory research can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of poverty discourses and their transformation.

Overall, the article focuses on studies and real-life interactions to better understanding of how poverty is constructed and contested in contemporary societies and underscores the importance of discursive interventions in addressing social inequality.

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