

Bob Ray Sanders, Fort Worth Star-Telegram editorial columnist

Interviewed by Christian Clark

CC: What is your assessment of how the media has covered the issue of economic inequality?

BS: The media in covering anything that deals with numbers usually does a poor job of it because often, all they deal with is the numbers. They don't deal with the reality of the individuals. I grew up in a time when we were told that the media had to put faces with the numbers, and occasionally you will see the media do that. But often they don't. To the average person, I'm not sure what a number means. Obviously there is income inequality between gender, between ethnicities. All of that is real and it has to do with a lot of things. It has to do with education; it has to do with discrimination and opportunity. It exists without a doubt, but I'm not sure the media does a great job of explaining number one the what, but more important, the why.

CC: This is a tough, big issue, but what is the what, and what is the why?

BS: It's not one why, and again that's often why we here in the media get in trouble because we often look for one reason as opposed to maybe there are three or four or five sides. Part of the why is education; employment. You probably have the figures before of you in some form or fashion, but based on your education, whether you graduate from high school or college...I mean the difference between a high school graduate and a non-high school graduate in terms of income level is incredible. You take that to the college level, the difference between the college level and a high school graduate, the income is an incredible difference. Of course, minorities are often in the lower levels of those graduation rates, therefore they are in the lower levels of those income ranges. Now when you get to gender, there is something else that's happening there. There's discrimination to some degree between women, particularly in terms of promotion and salary, despite the graduation rate. Because there are many women who graduated at a higher level than men, who are making less money than men. They are surely at the same level as men in terms of education but are making less money. Those numbers are real. So you've got to take in the graduation rates, the education. You've got to take in the discrimination that still exists against women and minorities in the work force. And there are youth unemployment figures that are even higher. Blacks still have among the highest...still have double digit unemployment. It fell last month to just under 11 percent from I think around 11.4 percent among. But that's compared to 5.9 percent for the average American. So all of those things come into play. And it takes time to explain those things. And we often in media don't often like to take time, particularly with our new fast-paced media. Our social media we like to deal with. It has to be quick. It's hard to explain all of that in 140 characters.

CC: Have you seen economic inequality in Fort Worth and on the national level worsen in recent years?

BS: Certainly for a while when the economic situation got worse after 2008. I can't think of who said it, but when a system falls in any particular country, it falls on those who are already at the bottom. It falls on them harder...I think from my memory and from everything I've read, the economic gap widened between blacks and whites. It widened to some degree between blacks and Hispanics even. But the point is that every time the economy gets bad, the people affected most by that bad economy are those who are already in the middle or are on the bottom. And that certainly happened. We've seen a little reversal over the last year or so as far as coming back and some of the unemployment numbers dropping a little bit, but you haven't seen much increase in wages. The wages are staying basically the same. They're not increasing except at the higher level. Who occupies the higher levels? Those are quadrupling in some cases. The gap is not getting better to any measurable degree. Those who are already feeling the negative impact aren't getting any sense of hope.

CC: You kind of just said from what I understood, when there is an economic recession, the people who feel it are on the middle and on the bottom. What is your definition of the middle class?

BS: That's a great question. I'm not sure that I know what that even is anymore. Those who don't fall right now below what is called the poverty level are generally called the lower middle class, and those above that.....when you talk about a family of four or a family of five and you talk about income that is in many cases one or two working people, you would have to think in terms of the \$50,000-70,000 income level. Well there are people who are being classified as middle class who are making far less than that, which is hard for some people to believe, but it's true. I'm not sure what the official definition is, but that's where I would put it. And again it would depend on what region of the country you're in because certain incomes go further in some parts of the country than in others. I don't see how people who make \$30,000 live in New York City but they do. And of course people who make \$30,000 here in Fort Worth live a little better than they could in New York City because housing and food alone would take most of that income.

CC: Just as far as Fort Worth and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* go, do you think the Star-Telegram devotes a proportional amount of its coverage to economic inequality? Or would you like to see more or less?

BS: I would like to see the paper devote more coverage to a lot of things. Our coverage has decreased in many ways because our staff has decreased and our number of pages has decreased, and within those pages, the space of those pages has decreased for certain kinds of articles. But certainly that's important, but as I said, explanatory stories, as opposed to a budget story or job numbers. We don't get a lot of information on that and it's incumbent on those of us in the media to make sure we do do that. Sometimes we're successful. Most often, we're not. It gets down

to limitations and down to staffing, which newspapers and a lot of media are confronted with now days. Certainly our own paper is.

CC: What, if any, misconceptions do you see with the media's coverage of economic inequality?

BS: When our audience hears information, in some cases some of them ask, why didn't you cover it? They sense that you did or didn't based on a political point of a view; that we didn't do it because it would show up the president, or we did do it because we were in favor of the president. They try attaching a political reasoning to our level of coverage, which, believe me, we're not that cynical, and there's not a conspiracy within the media industry to make that happen. But the average person — that's all they see. They see many of their opinions on political ideology, and they automatically assume they're being told what side of the fence we're on. We're either very conservative or very liberal. And most think that with mainstream media, we have to be liberal. And any of our coverage that's negative of the Obama administration, we don't do it, or don't do it well. Or if it's in favor, then that's when we do it. That's totally, not just a misconception, but idiotic.

CC: How do you recommend journalists cover this issue without polarizing it?

BS: The best you can do is the old fashioned journalism. It's to source it as best you can with multiple authorities. Yes, there are political issues with this story for sure, and there are political candidates who run on this issue, and that has to be covered as well. But there are economists; there are sociologists; there are people who are dealing with individuals. My philosophy as I was taught, even in college, and certainly as I started my journalist career, was how do you put a face to these stories about economics, income inequality, or anything else? Where are the people? That takes work. That takes getting out of the office. It's not what you do over the phone or over the Internet. You have to go out and meet these people. See their homes; see what their children are dealing with; see what kind of groceries they have to buy based on their income. Tell it from a human side and not just the ledger side on a balance sheet.