# Beyond Physical Access: Exploring Interaction With Political Content in Social Media Among Citizens Living in Poverty

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Recent research highlights that social media may increase social inequalities in engagement with news and political information. This article explores how citizens living in poverty interact with political content in social media. To do so, it draws on material from a large qualitative effort, comprising 2 rounds of in-depth interviews with 41 citizens living in poverty in Norway, but focuses particularly on 14 interviewees who participated in a social media walk-through method. This article highlights how intersectional categories and circumstances such as gender, ethnicity, class, age, education, and parenthood are significant in shaping how citizens living in poverty encounter and interact with political content in social media. Furthermore, it discusses the significance of intersectionality for Matthew effects in engagement with news and political information in social media. Thus, it argues the importance of considering intersectionality when assessing digital inequalities in general, but particularly about information inequalities in social media.

*Keywords: social media, public connection, poverty, digital divides, intersectionality*

Ever since events such as the Arab Spring of the early 2010s, research and public debate have been interested in the positive effects of social media toward citizenship and political participation (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016), and especially among various groups of marginalized citizens (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2012; Marchi, 2017). Within different strands of media research literature, too, there has been substantial interest in how social media provide users with news and political content and how social media may accidentally inform potentially disengaged or uninterested users (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). As such, these effects have also heightened hopes that social media may be conducive to bridging inequalities in consumption of news and political content. However, recent research efforts nuance this perception. Several efforts have highlighted how social media platform design and automated processes of content curation create information inequalities favoring users who are likely to be interested and engaged in the first place, further reproducing social

inequalities in civic engagement (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021; Kümpel, 2020; Merten, Metoui, Makhortykh, Trilling, & Moeller, 2022).

Social media have increasingly become important channels where citizens encounter and interact with various forms of political content, such as news and other content informing users of public and political matters (Hendrickx, 2024; Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Arguedas, & Nielsen, 2024; Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2018). These interactions are important as they condition citizens' *public connection* (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010), their basic orientation toward matters of public concern, which is fundamental for how they engage in citizenship. As illustrated above, previous research has raised both hopes and concerns about social media use and its consequences for citizens' public connection and civic engagement. However, although there is an emergent body of qualitative research on media use more broadly, and public connection among citizens living in poverty (Lindtner & Nærland, 2024; Smit, Swart, & Broersma, 2024), research on social media remains absent. This article asks:

*RQ1:    How do citizens who live in poverty interact with political content in social media?*

Social media use and its significance for civic engagement among citizens who live in poverty also remains a challenge for research on digital, or *socio-digital inequalities* (Helsper, 2021). For research on digital civic engagement across contexts like Norway, inequalities of physical and material access (i.e., to the Internet and digital technologies) remain a large issue (D'Arcy et al., 2024). Although access to digital technologies and information is important toward achieving equal opportunities in civic engagement, insights from digital inequalities research show that there are barriers beyond material access that shape inequalities in how people use social media for civic engagement (Helsper, 2021, pp. 120–121). In her work on *socio-digital inequalities*, Helsper (2021) argues that such inequalities must regard wider—offline—social inequalities. Further, she argues that "Compoundness (or intersectionality) in inequalities is also important for understanding how inequalities in civic engagement will play out in future digital societies" (Helsper, 2021, p. 121).

The Norwegian context, which this article focuses on, can in this sense provide a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2004) to understand the connection between (intersectional) social and digital inequalities, beyond inequalities of access, and how these shape differences in interaction with political content in social media. Along with neighboring Nordic countries, Norway provides an example of a Nordic media welfare state (Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, & Moe, 2014). As such, Norwegian public policy aims to provide all citizens with access to media and digital infrastructure. Although inequalities in on- and offline news subscriptions do persist, access to the Internet and smartphones is high and near ubiquitous (Newman et al., 2024).

Furthermore, insights from this study are also important toward understanding inequalities in public connection and citizenship. Comparatively speaking, Norway is marked by low levels of social inequality. Yet, an increasing number of citizens live in conditions of relative poverty, defined as having an income lower than 60% of the national median income (around 10% of the population, according to the latest figures; Statistics Norway, 2023). At the same time, links between social inequality and forms of civic engagement have received increasing scholarly attention. Political scientists, for example, have linked experiencing low income and poverty to lower levels of participation in parliamentary elections (Bergh &

Aardal, 2019). Sociologists have also noted the classed differences and increasing inequality in political interest (Helle, Flemmen, Andersen, & Ljunggren, 2024) that could lead to further marginalization in terms of political representation of people who experience poverty.

This article draws on qualitative interviews with citizens living in poverty in Norway. Interviewees in this study were recruited from three sociodemographic groups that are overrepresented in statistics of long-term poverty and particularly vulnerable to experiencing poverty in Norway (With & Thorsen, 2018). These are social benefit recipients, single parents, and Somali immigrants. As such, this article analyzes interactions with political content in social media among citizens who live in poverty in Norway in a general sense. But importantly, it also draws on the different experiences of informants between the groups to highlight the complexity of these experiences and infer how intersectional social inequalities and circumstances linked to their social identity shaped these interactions.

In the following sections, this article first reviews what we know so far about the links between social inequality and interaction with political content in social media. It then introduces the analytical framework applied to analyze the interviewees' experiences before giving an account of the methodological approach of the study. Then, in the analysis and beyond, I highlight and discuss the different experiences between interviewees, how these can be tied to their lived experiences in poverty, and how these were shaped by intersectional differences.

**Literature Review: Social Media, Interaction With Political Content, and Information Inequalities**

As introduced, this article investigates how citizens who live in conditions of poverty interact with political content in social media. By political content, I refer to content that in some way references political issues. However, it is hard to pinpoint exactly what is political content, in this sense, and what is not. On the one hand, political content can describe content that references formal politics and political processes, as it has often been used in previous studies (Boulianne, Hoffmann, & Bossetta, 2024; Bucholtz, Silkane, & Davidsone, 2023; Larsson, 2024). On the other hand, I also want to include social media content that, in line with literature on public connection (Couldry et al., 2010; Kaun, 2012; Penney, 2023), references matters of common concern that require political action (e.g., climate and environmental issues). News and opinion pieces issued by news agencies, and posts by friends and various other individuals who reference news, are types of political content that frequently surface in the feeds of social media users, and such news exposure has also been a focus of much research (e.g., Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019; Hendrickx, 2024; Newman et al., 2024; Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros, & Pak, 2021). Yet, social media are also arenas for countless other forms of political content, such as celebrities and public figures providing commentary (Gonzalez, Schmuck, & Vandenbosch, 2023), information from nonprofit and voluntary organizations (Boulianne, 2023), and political memes (Halversen & Weeks, 2023).

By now, social media and how they facilitate interaction with political content as such, as well as how they facilitate civic and political engagement, have been widely studied. Several overarching meta-studies (e.g., Boulianne, 2015; Skoric et al., 2016) demonstrate positive and conducive effects social media use has in terms of traditional political and civic participation through disseminating information about politics, the work of civic organizations, and mobilizing social network ties to various political actors.

Coinciding research in the field of journalism studies has taken interest in the dissemination of news content in social media and the incidental news exposure social media users experience (e.g., Boczkowski et al., 2018; Feezell, 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Goyanes & Demeter, 2022; Hendrickx, 2024; Kümpel, 2020; Thorson et al., 2021). Last, several researchers highlight how social media have resulted in emerging forms of citizenship beside traditional civic engagement (e.g., Gagrčin, Porten-Cheé, Leißner, Emmer, & Jørring, 2022) that require considerably lower levels of investment or threshold, like *clicktivism* (Halupka, 2018) or *small acts of engagement* (Picone et al., 2019).

Coinciding with the interest in the impacts social media have in exposing users to political content, there has been an interest in what effects this has on marginalized groups of citizens. After events such as the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, terms such as "Twitter revolutions" became widely popularized to highlight the emancipatory potential of social media in mobilizing marginalized citizens and democratizing the grounds of political and civic participation (Gerbaudo, 2012; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). These positive regards of social media have, however, been contested. In terms of the impact social media have on encountering political content, several researchers have recently highlighted inequalities in who is exposed to and who interacts with political content in social media. Several researchers (e.g., Barnidge & Xenos, 2021; Kümpel, 2020; Merten et al., 2022; Thorson, 2020) highlight emerging *Matthew effects* in this regard. As such, those who are more frequently exposed to political content, and who followingly interact with politics in social media, are those who are already more inclined to be interested in politics and who are part of highly politicized social networks on social media platforms. Furthermore, Thorson and Wells (2016) highlight how *curation* processes in social media (i.e., how algorithms and the design of social media platforms impact what content is visible) are shaped by social aspects such as social networks and interests (see also Thorson, 2020). This line of research thus highlights prolific *information inequalities* in social media that reproduce social inequalities in terms of who is interacting with political content and, followingly, is sensitized to public and political matters. This article aims to further the understanding of these information inequalities by exploring the interactions of citizens who live in poverty.

### Analytical Framework: Socio-Digital Inequalities and Intersectionality

To analyze the interactions informants in this study had with political content in social media, I apply a framework inspired by Ellen Helsper's (2021) concept of *socio-digital inequalities*. Traditionally, studies of digital inequalities have adopted the language of *divides* to address issues of who has access to so-called information and communication technologies (ICTs) or not, termed *first level* divides, and who possesses skills to use ICTs, *second level* divides (van Dijk, 2020). As both penetration and use of ICTs have increased, these divisions have become more nuanced and fine-grained, to the point where it has become commonplace to use the term digital inequalities (Hargittai, 2021). Helsper (2021) furthers the agenda by focusing on inequalities in outcomes of use of ICTs, the so-called *third level* divides. Socio-digital inequalities, as defined by Helsper (2021), refer to the "systematic differences between individuals from different backgrounds in the opportunity and ability to translate digital engagement into benefits and avoid harm" (p. 44). Further, Helsper proposes a framework to understand these systematic differences as linked to traditional—*offline*—inequalities. And last, she proposes that efforts to research socio-digital inequalities should adopt a compound approach to understand inequalities across the three levels of "divides."

This study examines citizens' public connection (Couldry et al., 2010)—understood as citizens' orientation toward public matters—as a domain of socio-digital inequality. Inequalities in access and competencies impact how citizens can engage in and orient themselves with public matters through social media (Helsper, 2021; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Furthermore, even if citizens have access to the necessary technologies and have a good level of competency to use social media, we must be aware of circumstances linked to further reaching and intersectional inequalities that can impact how citizens connect to public matters in their everyday use of social media. Examples of such circumstances are class, gender, ethnicity, or age, which all shape dispositions toward political participation and technologies such as social media (see, for example, Lindtner & Nærland, 2024). In considering inequalities of social media use and the impacts of such inequalities on interviewees' public connection, I therefore stress the need to approach these holistically. Hence, I consider issues of social media use and public connection as compounds of access, use, and as linked to offline inequalities and the specific situations of interviewees.

Additionally, I also stress the importance of analyzing the experiences and interactions of our interviewees in an *intersectional* perspective (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; Walby, 2007). Although intersectional analysis has become common across virtually all disciplines of the social sciences, there is no unifying framework for an intersectional approach. Rather, as Collins and Bilge (2020) summarize, approaches to intersectional analyses have historically centered around and been informed by a set of "core ideas" (p. 31), with social inequality, intersecting power relations, social context, and complexity being some of them. These ideas all sensitize the approach of this study to analyze experiences of political content in social media as well. First, intersectionality is important in highlighting the *intra-group* differences (Walby, 2007) among the informants in this study. People living in poverty in Norway, who are the focus of this study, are not a homogenous group but comprise people of various backgrounds, some of which compound to experiences of "multiple social inequalities" (Walby, 2007, p. 450) in addition to experiencing poverty. Second, this also ties into the strengths of exploring socio-digital inequalities qualitatively. By doing so, one can shed light on the complexity of circumstances that shape interviewees' interactions with political content in social media.

## Methods

The data discussed in this article stems from a large-scale, qualitative research effort undertaken to explore media use, public connection, and citizenship among people living in poverty in Norway. Throughout 2022 and the winter of 2023, the author, jointly with two other researchers, conducted two rounds of in-depth semistructured interviews with 41 interviewees living in conditions of relative poverty in Norway. Interviewees were recruited from three sociodemographic groups who are overrepresented in statistics of long-term poverty in Norway (With & Thorsen, 2018): social benefit recipients, single parents, and Somali immigrants. We, the interviewers, aimed to recruit 13–14 informants from each group and stopped the recruitment when this target was reached. Additionally, we recruited some interviewees who did not define themselves as part of any of the groups but who still experienced poverty. Interviewees were recruited through contacts within community centers and organizations, through the distribution of informational flyers, or through snowballing methods. The interviewees were conducted face-to-face in places they expressed feeling comfortable being interviewed in. Consequently, most interviews took place in third places like private rooms of community and charity centers, and some also took place in cafés, but

a lot of the interviews were also conducted in the homes of interviewees. Most interviews were conducted in Norwegian with a few exceptions where interviews were conducted in English. Interview citations in this article are translated from Norwegian to English.

Although I draw on all of the interview material, this analysis will mainly focus on material we gathered through a walk-through method we incorporated in the interviews. During the interviews, we asked interviewees if they wanted to pick up their smartphones, scroll through their social media feeds, and tell us what the first items in the feed were. This method was inspired by similar approaches, such as "scroll-back" (Robards & Lincoln, 2016) and "walk-through" (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018; Swart, 2021), which have operationalized think-aloud methods to explore interviewees' social media use. The method was implemented, on the one hand, to elicit impressions of the content interviewees encountered in their everyday social media use. The data gathered from this method (i.e., the descriptions of what interviewees saw in their feeds) should not be considered as overviews of what interviewees were regularly exposed to. Rather, it gives an impression and a glimpse of what the interviewees encountered at the time we interviewed them. Furthermore, as interviewees were free to choose what they disclosed to us about their feeds, these overviews may not give an accurate description of exactly what they encountered. On the other hand, the method was also helpful to elicit detailed descriptions of the interviewees' use and experience of social media platforms.

Not everyone who was interviewed participated in the walk-through method. In the first rounds of interviews, we got an overview of the interviewees' social media use, and following this we decided on who it would make sense to ask to participate in a walk-through. Hence, interviewees who described that they rarely or never used social media platforms were not asked to participate. However, we did gain insights into the social media use of these interviewees as well. In all, 14 of the 41 who were interviewed participated in a walk-through. In terms of the backgrounds of those who participated in the walk-through, this sample reflected the composition of the general sample of interviewees. Yet, few among those on the older end of the age spectrum participated, which suggests less interaction with social media in general or depleting technical skills.

About the analytical approach of this study, I have analyzed the material through an iterative process closely aligned to the guidelines of *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, I first made efforts to read and familiarize myself with the whole interview material and, at the same time, generate initial codes. Based on this process, I infer general tendencies across all interviewees—about issues of access and competencies, as well as contextual circumstances pertaining to each group—in the analysis. Then, in a later effort, I focused on the material from the walk-through method. Here, I looked for meaningful ways to compare, and for analytical concepts that helped in understanding different experiences interviewees had of their social media feeds. Inspired by intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020), I settled on a set of intersecting background categories (*gender, class, ethnicity, age, education*, and *parenthood*) that were tested against the material through iterative reading.

### Analysis: Reading Intersectionality Into Interactions With Social Media Content

Interestingly—both for the aim of this study and in terms of assessing the state of first level divides in Norway—all the interviewees in this study had access to smartphones and to stable Internet, and all of

them used social media in some function. As such, everyone had fundamental access to technology that enabled social media use. However, some were constrained by defuncts, such as broken screens or by unstable home broadband connections. Thus, to borrow Helsper's (2021) conceptualization, there were some marked issues in the quality of access among specific interviewees that further impacted how these used social media in their everyday lives. It is also important to highlight ubiquitous access to social media compared to other channels for political content, for example, news publications. Here, although interviewees generally stressed the importance of news to stay updated, informed, and considered this important for citizenship, most interviewees did not subscribe to any news publications, partly because of unaffordability, and were constrained by paywalls.

Tending to issues of second-level divides, there were differences in skills and use among interviewees. In terms of skills, the most marked differences in confidence and competency in using digital technologies and social media were between the older and comparatively younger interviewees. Thus, the older interviewees expressed having difficulties and that they relied on family members to use smartphones and social media. This is somewhat to be expected, though, and echoes findings and experiences conveyed elsewhere (Sakariassen & Ytre-Arne, 2024). What is more interesting, the interviewees' use of social media was shaped by the meanings social media platforms held for the interviewees and the role they played in their everyday lives. Because of these differences in meaning, social media were important for the interviewees' practices of social orientation, as well as their orientation toward interests such as leisure activities, but less for orientation on public and political matters. It is also here that the approach of this article can serve to further shed light on and assess how interviewees' intersecting categories of identity and lived experience of multiple social inequalities shaped differences in the role social media had in their everyday lives, and in how they interacted with political content.

These differences in interactions, and their links to different intersecting categories became pertinent in the walk-throughs. Thus, further in this analysis, I review the material we gathered from the walk-through method. To give a general introduction to the walk-throughs, most were of interviewees' Facebook feeds. Two instances were walk-throughs of Instagram feeds, and one was of an interviewee's TikTok feed. For one, this sample of walk-throughs reflects the overall use of platforms among informants, with Facebook—and the affiliated messaging platforms—being by far the most popular. However, this might also reflect the ages of interviewees in this study, with most informants falling within the range of late 30s to early 50s. Furthermore, the predominance of Facebook in the walk-throughs also means that the forms and genres of content that appeared in the walk-throughs are different than what would appear in walk-throughs of other platforms. However, that most of the walk-throughs were of Facebook means that we have a basis on which to compare the different interactions, in particular, and consider circumstances among the informants that shaped these interactions.

To highlight differences among interviewees, I present three analytical portraits of actual interviewees. These interviewee portraits have been chosen as they highlight how an interplay between their lived experience of poverty and intersectional categories of their social identities shaped their interactions with political content in social media. About this, I highlight key categories that emerged as significant through a reading of the interview material. The categories I focus on in the following portraits are gender and parenthood (Ingrid), age and class (Arne and Ruth), and ethnicity and education

(Abdisalam). The following portraits also represent the different sociodemographic groups we recruited. As such, the portraits also highlight key commonalities among the interviewees of the different groups. Yet, it should be remarked that these group categories were not mutually exclusive, and some interviewees could be categorized in two or even all three groups. To ensure confidentiality, the names of the interviewees presented are pseudonyms.

## Analytical Portraits

### Ingrid (Female, Late 30s, Single Parent)—Significance of Gender and Parenthood

> Ingrid: The first to appear is a note from [a leisure organization her children are members of] about a registration deadline for a regional camp. . . . Commercials about something to do with books. Sales and exchange. There's someone who has knitted something and posted it. . . . Some Reels, but I do not usually watch them. Something about cycling skills, traffic and bike training. Something from *Family and children* [Facebook group]. A post from Cirkus Arnardo [circus]. More advertisement, and more sales and exchange.

Above is an excerpt from the walk-through we did with Ingrid. Ingrid is one of the female single parents we interviewed, and she was the sole provider for her three children. Coincidentally, as was the case with many of the single parents we interviewed, she also had a part-time employment status. These single parents therefore lived with a double burden of being a sole provider and living with precarious working conditions and unpredictable access to work and income. As a result, many expressed feeling exhausted. Furthermore, many expressed that their situations were compounded by a lack of money, where the little they had was prioritized for their children to get by. Thus, many of the single parents we interviewed for the study experienced a combination of lack of economic resources, time, and energy that structured and constrained what they were able to do beyond work and parenting. Many single parents also expressed that their social media use was constrained by a lack of time and energy in their everyday. Consequently, many expressed that they were able to use social media only in passing or in moments of rest. Ingrid also expressed similar everyday constraints to her social media use: "I go through Facebook, and those things, the mornings, and then very hastily on my way home."

Interestingly, what is evident from Ingrid's Facebook feed, which she is reading from in the excerpt, is that there is a lack of political content that references formal politics and processes. Rather, as also became evident with other single parents who participated in the walk-through, the content curation (following Thorson & Wells, 2016) in Ingrid's Facebook feed was heavily influenced by the fact that she was a parent. Several of the items Ingrid listed are related to her children. The first item is, for example, a note for one of her children's leisure activities. Likewise, three other posts in her feed were related to children and upbringing: a post on cycling and road safety, a post from a parenting magazine's Facebook page, as well as a post from a circus relating to children's entertainment. Furthermore, and somewhat related to motherhood, there is also the case of the content curated for Ingrid on Facebook being gendered. Even though this is hard to separate from the case of motherhood, gendered issues and content are apparent in the items that relate to gendered tropes of household labor and caretaking. Examples of this are evident in the content relating to sales and exchange groups and hobbies like knitting in Ingrid's feed. However,

gendered content in this sense was more apparent in the feeds of other single mothers we interviewed, where sales campaigns on items like groceries and clothes appeared.

Thus, there is an apparent intersectional aspect of the content curation in Ingrid's, as well as other single parents' social media feeds, that resulted in interaction primarily with content related to parenthood and gender. Given the circumstances of the walk-through method, it can be the case that the curation algorithm of Facebook provided Ingrid, as well as other single parents we interviewed, with apolitical content at the time. Ingrid also suggested that her recent inactivity impacted the curation at the time: "I have not been too active on Facebook, that probably affects what appears." However, Ingrid also described using Facebook and other social media platforms primarily for practices of social orientation, such as chatting and keeping up with friends and family, as well as for practical purposes, such as sales and exchange. Thus, she expressed that political content, such as news and content about formal politics, only incidentally occurred in this pattern of use and was often a result of friends who were active in political parties posting about formal politics: "I do have a couple of friends who are active in political parties. There might appear a few things from them." In Ingrid's case, traditional media also mattered more for her as a source of news and information about politics than social media, as she habitually watched the main evening news program on TV. Yet, although there are few items that related to news and politics in a formal sense, some items can be regarded as political in a broader sense, as they orient toward matters of common concern—for example, the posts about cycling and road safety and the post in the *Family and Children* group.

### Arne and Ruth (60s, Social Benefit Recipients)—The Significance of Age and Classed Dispositions

> Arne: A doctor from Italy whom we have been in contact with has posted some photos. Foraging. Property for sale. Electricity—this is something a friend of her [Arne's wife] posted. [Arne's wife, reading the caption of the posted photo: "what the h—dot dot dot." That's the electricity prices . . . 9,70 kr between 19 and 20, average price is 8,08 tomorrow.]

Next, I turn to Arne and his wife, Ruth, who participated in the interviews alongside Arne. Both Arne and Ruth were in their 60s, and both were social-benefit recipients who had lived in poor economic conditions for a long time. The economic hardships they had been facing also influenced their lifestyle and how they accessed and used different media. For instance, they did not subscribe to newspapers or to TV packages.

Arne and Ruth were among the oldest interviewees in this study. This is significant as a general tendency was that both use of social media and the perceived competencies and confidence in using these were lower among older interviewees. Furthermore, and linked to this general level of competency, older interviewees preferred using traditional media to orient themselves to public matters. Yet contradictory to this tendency, Arne and Ruth used social media quite frequently, and a PC was a central medium in their everyday lives. Arne attributed his competencies and confidence in using PCs to his experience with working with computers since the 1980s. Furthermore, the PC became central in Arne's practices of seeking news. Where news content was locked behind paywalls, Arne googled to find open websites to circumvent paywalls and read about the same news. This he described as an ingenious way to save money while also staying updated on current affairs.

Social media, or Facebook, which was the social media platform that Arne used most, had little value as a source and channel for news about political matters. Arne first signed up for Facebook to find old classmates and organize a reunion. Furthermore, social media was likewise used primarily for social orientation. During the walk-through, there were, however, instances of political content in Arne's feed. In the excerpt above, the pair stumbled upon a post a friend of Ruth had posted about soaring electricity prices. The post was also accompanied by an angry comment: ("What the h . . ."). Further, there also appeared a piece from the public broadcaster in Norway, NRK, about a flooding catastrophe. Although upon seeing this piece, both Arne and Ruth expressed skepticism about how reliable this piece was:

Ruth: Flooding catastrophe—but I do not believe this, because these photos are very often manipulated.

Arne: Oh, these ones. It's so typical . . . I saw one photo which was a bit amusing though. There were some who struggled to keep their head [sic] above the water, but in the background, someone was standing with water only to their knees. . . . Media have done this a lot. It's as if you shout "wolf" too many times, you believe it less and less.

Earlier in the interview, Arne had also expressed skepticism toward the same broadcaster when asked whether he watched content from this broadcaster on TV:

Arne: No, I don't bother watching NRK. They only air propaganda there anyway.

Interviewer: What makes you say it is propaganda?

Arne: It's the same over and over again—how terrible the conditions are in all the countries, and how good the conditions are here. It's the way it's always been. It's war and famine all the way . . . it's all they nag about all the time.

As such, Arne's general skepticisms toward NRK and the content they produced but also the media generally—"*media* have done this a lot"—carried over to news content that appeared in his Facebook feed as well. Upon seeing content from NRK and legacy media agencies in the walk-through, Arne, as well as Ruth, reaffirmed their stances that this type of content was to be doubted—that NRK and other legacy news media should not be relied on in describing events accurately, and that, for instance, they used staged or manipulated photos in their reporting.

There are a few different things that can be read into Arne and Ruth's sentiments. For instance, that they do not trust legacy media, that they are critical of the presentation of stories in the media, or that they are fatigued with media portrayals of "war and famine." I argue that these are all expressions of an unease with political content, which was echoed among other interviewees. Many interviewees in this study were, in fact, disapproving of news and discussions of political matters and expressed that these were unwanted elements in their social media feeds. What is more, I argue that this unease can be related to the interviewees' social position and, as such, is a "classed" disposition of their interaction with political content.

Furthermore, these "classed" dispositions, as well as age, are also important to understand the circumstances that shape the motivations of Arne, Ruth, and other interviewees to interact with political content in social media. They are also helpful to understand interviewees' inclinations to use social media for social orientation, and to value the content of friends over, for example, legacy news agencies.

### Abdisalam (Male, 30s, Somali Immigrant)—Significance of Ethnicity and Education

Abdisalam: Okay, the first thing to appear is Somali politics. I see Youtubers analyzing politics in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. I see the prime minister of Somalia visiting some main places, yeah. . . . Also, I see Somali news. International news. They talk about their neighbors Kenya and Somalia. If they can agree with this new Somali government and office, presidential I mean. Yeah. I see Somali TV . . . Somali republic, their TV and news.

Last, I turn to Abdisalam. Like many of the other Somali immigrants we interviewed, Abdisalam had migrated to Norway in the 2000s, fleeing civil war in Somalia. Unlike the other interviewees of Somali descent, however, Abdisalam pursued a higher education degree and studied political science. Yet, this also impacted his personal economy as he had to forfeit his right to social benefit payments, instead living off his student loan. To make ends meet, Abdisalam worked an extra job in a hotel kitchen. Nonetheless, Abdisalam expressed great pride in being a student and pursuing a political science degree.

As is evident in the excerpt shown above, there are many elements in Abdisalam's Facebook feed that point back to both his interest in politics and his ethnic background. To start with, most of the content that appeared in Abdisalam's Facebook feed focused on political matters. On the one hand, this reflects his interests in politics and life situation as a political science student. On the other hand, this reflects his everyday digital and social media practices that were primarily centered around his PC and mobile phone: "Sometimes I watch NRK and TV2 [Norwegian TV broadcasters], but I watch on my laptop, sometimes on my mobile phone," as well as being motivated by his life situation as a political science student:

Abdisalam: For me, as a student, I get information from Facebook. I do not always go to Facebook. If there is any useful information, I gather it, take note, and listen. If it is interesting to me yes, if it is not, I will not do it.

Facebook was, in this sense—at times—a valuable source of information in his studies.

Interests like Abdisalam's in politics are one of the social aspects that shape the curation processes on platforms like Facebook (Thorson, 2020). Interests motivate forms of engagement—clicks, "likes," and extended time spent on content—which result in algorithms providing more content of the same kind.

Another characteristic of Abdisalam's Facebook feed is the large proportion of content that is oriented toward international matters, and in Abdisalam's case, to political matters in Somalia and East Africa. This was also characteristic of the Facebook feeds of other interviewees with ethnic backgrounds from outside of Norway; much of the content they saw and interacted with in social media was oriented

toward matters in their countries or regions of origin. In Abdisalam's case, this became evident in the large amount of news from Somalia and the surrounding region, although he also subscribed to the Facebook pages of Norwegian news agencies and broadcasters. However, interaction with content from Norwegian sources on social media was often hindered by paywalls or by a lack of command of the Norwegian language. About this last point, however, many subscribed to Facebook pages and social media profiles that provided news and informational content in either English or the interviewees' first languages. Social media, in one sense, provide *tactics* to circumvent language competency barriers as such (Smit et al., 2024). Abdisalam did this too. He subscribed to a Facebook page that presented news about Norwegian matters in English and hosted an arena for discussion in the comment section.

Last, apart from news and formal political content, Abdisalam and other Somali immigrants who participated in the walk-through also encountered "softer" content that related to broader matters that could be linked to the interviewees' backgrounds. Examples of this were content featuring imams and Muslim relationship advice on TikTok. After the walk-through of Abdisalam's Facebook feed, he also did a similar but shorter walk-through of his TikTok, although he did not find the time he spent on TikTok as useful as the time he spent on Facebook ("I don't waste my time"). In this walk-through, a few comedians with African ethnicities appeared who humorously remarked on immigrant tropes in the Norwegian context.

Abdisalam's case as such highlights two interesting interplays between educational status and experience of social media content, on the one hand, and ethnic background and experience of social media content, on the other. Abdisalam's educational status had a role in motivating his seeking and interaction with political content in social media. Thus, his educational background had a role in the curation processes of his Facebook feed. Abdisalam's ethnic background also played a role in this sense, as a large proportion of the content he accessed and interacted with was internationally oriented or otherwise could be linked to his ethnic background. This last category also became significant across several of the walk-throughs and interviews we did with interviewees who had ethnic backgrounds other than Norwegian.

**Discussion**

Recent research has highlighted the prevalence of Matthew effects in citizens' interaction with political content in social media (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021; Kümpel, 2020; Merten et al., 2022). This research suggests that those who are exposed to and engaged in political content in social media the most are those who are already interested in politics. Arguably, this inequality in engagement can further augment social inequalities in political participation that are linked to citizens' social positions and class (Merten et al., 2022, p. 1129). The findings in this study provide nuances to this narrative. Although it is true that some interviewees encountered very little political content in their social media feeds—especially in terms of content relating to formal politics—most of the participants in the walk-through encountered political content in their everyday use of social media. However, as I highlight in the portraits, there are significant differences in terms of the content citizens living in poverty encounter and how they interact with political content in their everyday use of social media.

I proposed to approach these differences in interaction with political content in social media with an analytical framework (inspired by Helsper, 2021) that considers digital inequalities across the different

levels of access and use, links digital inequalities to wider social inequalities, and regards the differences in outcomes. It is also here that an intersectional approach can highlight the significance intersectional categories of social identity and circumstances in the lives of citizens living in poverty have for their interaction with political content in social media. Next, I sum up the key insights from the three portraits and infer and discuss three overarching themes of how the categories I focused on were significant in shaping these interactions. These themes relate to how some categories were significant for the kind of content interviewees encountered, while the two other themes relate to whether interviewees were able and found it meaningful to interact with political content.

In the first theme, we can see how some categories I highlight are significant for the content interviewees encountered. This aligns with Thorson's (2020) argument about content curation and the social determinants that "attract news" unequally, but we can see the impact across different content in the interviewees' feeds. In the walk-throughs, gender, parenthood, and ethnicity became significant categories that shaped the curation of Ingrid and Abdisalam's feeds, respectively. Thus, these circumstances had a fundamental role in what kind of content interviewees encountered in their everyday uses of social media.

The next theme can be summed up in terms of how some of the categories are significant for how interviewees were able to use social media to interact with various content. Differences in skills, particularly between the younger and older informants, were significant in this regard and constrained how confident interviewees were in using social media in the first place. But we also saw the significance of some life circumstances, such as parenthood among Ingrid and other single parents, in constraining the time and energy informants had for using social media and interacting with political content in social media.

The last theme I will infer concerns how some categories are significant for motivations toward interacting with political content in social media. In terms of this theme, we see how certain circumstances in the lives of interviewees spurred the use of social media to interact with political content. In Abdisalam's case, the content he encountered and interacted with can be linked to his status as a political science student. This educational status thus motivated an interest in and interaction with political content in social media. This is a contrast to other interviewees, like Arne and Ruth, who did not perceive the same close connection to politics in their everyday lives and who rather expressed an unease toward news and politics in their social media feeds. Thus, we can see how classed circumstances in the lives of interviewees, such as education and proximity to political life, do have significance for their motivation to interact with political content in social media.

## Conclusion

This article is premised on the significance social media have in providing citizens with information on public and political matters, and as such, the significance social media have in conditioning citizens' public connections. However, previous research argues that the design and curation processes in social media reproduce information inequalities and Matthew effects that favor those who are socioeconomically well-off. This article furthers and nuances the issues raised by this line of research by exploring how citizens living in poverty in Norway interact with political content in social media. As the findings here highlight, intersecting

categories of social identity and everyday circumstances are significant in shaping what citizens living in poverty encounter and how they interact with political content in social media.

To conclude, I argue that this study makes two notable contributions toward understanding socio-digital inequalities and their outcomes of public connection among citizens living in poverty. For one, the study offers empirical insight into everyday social media use among citizens who live in poverty. As such, it offers knowledge about the kinds of digital inequality citizens living in poverty face in their everyday lives, and the role living in poverty has in impacting citizens' ability and use of social media for public connection. An intersectional perspective is helpful in this regard, as it sheds light on the complexity of life circumstances among people who live in poverty, which leads to different patterns of social media use and outcomes of social media use. Second, the study contributes knowledge toward the inequalities and differences in what citizens encounter and interact with in social media. Whereas previous research highlights differences and Matthew effects in content encounters and interactions between citizens of different socioeconomical positions, this study contributes nuanced perspectives to this issue. Through exploring content interactions among citizens living in poverty in depth, this study links the content interactions of informants to their diverse life circumstances.

This study has some notable limitations, particularly related to the methodological approach and research context. About the methodological approach, I want to reiterate the benefits of conducting think-aloud and walk-through methods, as they yield in-depth insights into the use of social media and the kind of content users encounter. But findings like those highlighted and discussed in this article would also benefit from more participants, which would increase thematic depth and validity. Future research could therefore aim for more participants in similar walk-throughs. As this study took place in Norway, a context with high connectivity, the findings are somewhat contextually limited. The findings are particularly relevant for contexts of high connectivity and relative poverty. Nonetheless, the intersectional approach of this study is valuable in assessing and understanding differences in interactions with political content in social media across contexts either similar or different from Norway in terms of diversity of citizens who experience poverty. Furthermore, the findings are also valuable to understand which issues, beyond access to the Internet and digital technology, underpin inequalities in civic participation in digital societies.

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