

## Economic Inequalities and Mediated Communication

### *Introduction*

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One of the most significant economic developments over the past decades has been the rise in income and wealth inequality. After decades of benign neglect, the issues of economic and social inequalities have reentered the stage of mainstream political attention in the Western heartland over the past couple of years. This is due, in part, to the high public profile of publications by Thomas Piketty and Tony Atkinson. In line with the growing significance of deepening economic inequalities, this Special Section engages with two broad, if overlapping, questions: (1) How do new forms of economic inequality, power, and privilege relate to relevant theories and conceptualizations of the media and institutions of public communication, whether in the fields of communication studies or political economy? (2) What role do the new forms of economic inequality play today in the typical narratives of mediated communication, and how is such inequality framed and discussed?

*Keywords: economic inequality, media coverage, redistributive policies, journalism studies, critical political economy of the media*

After decades of benign neglect, economic inequalities over the past couple of years have surged back to play a more central role in political and media discourses. Recent studies show that the highest income groups have been visibly gaining over lower income groups in ways that differ quite strikingly from the trends prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s—when the communication studies field was first institutionalized and its core theories and concepts developed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Without doubt, one of the most significant economic developments over the past decades has been the rise in inequality. A widening of the income gap, the highly uneven distribution of wealth, and a falling wage ratio are data indicators of this transformation. Moreover, this renewed attention to economic and social inequality unfolds against a background of very slow, partial, and highly uneven recovery from

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Date submitted: 2017-08-23

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the major financial crash, which emerged in 2008–09. Sluggish economic growth, declining or stagnant wages, and state policy regimes orientated toward austerity have followed in many countries in the core capitalist regions, often with extremely high unemployment—one key marker of overall distribution of welfare and power—and turbulence in the formal political arena.

There is an emergent and growing, if not yet widespread, recognition that the key stakes and challenges posed by growing economic inequalities are not merely economic in character but also highly political; the same applies to the origins and solutions of such inequalities. Economic inequalities have become increasingly public concerns and political issues that can no longer be conceptualized as confined to some kind of insular, isolated economic domain or private transaction matter, as is usually imagined by many mainstream models in modern economic science.

The decline of public trust in, and support for, established political parties and other key institutions of the modern liberal order in many parts of the old capitalist heartland—and the concomitant rise of various forms of populism—comprise the most prominent manifestations of the deeply political and public ramifications of economic inequalities in the contemporary period. Yet there is a growing awareness that, a decade after the crash, the business-as-usual approach to the neoliberal type of economic and political conditions is no longer sustainable. In this context, we observe certain signs of a renewed interest in the fundamental political-economic questions that lay at the heart of earlier debates and practices directed not only at the production and distribution of economic output but also at constructing a just, legitimate, or democratic social order. This includes a growing rerecognition that the state (and government policy) can and must play a creative and proactive role in shaping the direction, patterns, and forms of sustainable economic development.

For one thing, the contemporary economy is marked by the challenges of growing material inequalities, and, at the same time, many of the heartland economies of the capitalist system still face a long period of relatively slow economic growth compared to trends in the latter half of the 20th century, according to the IMF and the OECD.

Furthermore, it is ever more evident that monopoly or oligopoly prevails in many leading sectors of the economy, much more than the competitive capitalism imagined by mainstream liberal (and neoliberal) economic models. This means that powerful, large-scale corporations play increasingly significant (if not dominant) roles not merely in economic spheres but also in political, social, and cultural affairs. When considering the roots of economic inequalities today, it is important to note that the concentrated economic resources and power of such corporations has also contributed to the erosion of labor unions and collective bargaining power. In a highly commodified setting, those in control of concentrated economic power also possess unique access to the means of mobilizing political, ideological, persuasive, and even cultural resources and related sources of power, and in ways that simply lie beyond the reach of the multitudes.

More recently, however, there are some (tentative, far from universal) signs of a renewed interest in fundamental questions concerning the optimal modes of ownership, control, and distribution of material resources and economic production. One such signal or sign comprises the surprisingly

widespread interest sparked by the publication of Thomas Piketty's best-selling book in 2014, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. As is now well known, this book focused on the striking trends toward growing inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income in recent decades and their implications. For a work written by an economist, and one containing voluminous tables and data, this publication proved to be a veritable "surprise hit" as it topped the sales charts for nonfiction books in many countries in 2014. This book also prompted (and received) massive levels of media attention that were highly unusual, if not unprecedented, for an economics book, and, indeed, especially so for a work focused on the theme of economic inequality.

We start from the observation that the high-profile and extraordinary success of Thomas Piketty's book has much to do with the resonances between its core concerns and the zeitgeist or, to borrow from Raymond Williams (1958/1989), its affinities with a widespread "structure of feeling" rooted in our contemporary times.

The onward march of economic inequalities in recent decades can be explained by shifts in political and economic ideas, values, discourses, and especially the associated practices of employers and employees, trade unions, and government policies, all of which the media of public communication, as carriers, enablers, or shapers of public opinion, the so-called fourth estate, must be highly implicated.

In multiple ways, the articles in this Special Section serve to highlight and explore how the issue of growing economic inequalities over recent decades have been generally neglected by the two fields of knowledge or "culture" production of central concern here: the professional field of journalism practices and news media on the one hand, and the most relevant areas of the academic field on the other, including (not least) the communication, journalism, and media studies discipline, and economics and other relevant social science disciplines. For example, journalists and professionals in the mainstream media tend to ignore or neglect the power and influence that is attached to the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and income, and indeed from other concentrated forms of ownership and control over economic resources (Preston, 2009).

In viewing the forms and patterns of communication as lying at the center of the fabric of society, Raymond Williams (a key founding figure in the cultural studies approach to media studies) emphasized that it was impossible to discuss communication or culture in society without addressing the issues of power. As Williams noted, we must engage not only with the power of established institutions but also with the growing power of money—with the latter imposing certain patterns of communication that are becoming more influential in society as a whole (Williams, 1958/1989). At the same time, Williams argued that all forms and patterns of communication are human constructions and so are subject to both critique and the possibilities of change. Despite Williams's emphasis on the growing role of economic factors in modern cultural formations, these linkages have been neglected in many subsequent cultural studies approaches to news-making processes (Golding & Murdock, 2000). The so-called cultural turn in media studies during the 1980s and 1990s was often marked by a striking neglect of material factors.

The media are playing an increasingly important role in the very definitions and performance of formal politics, as the concept of mediatization indicates. This occurs as prior forms of popular

participation in “democratic” political processes and institutions continue to decline in the older established liberal democracies—not least in those with strong social democratic traditions (Preston, 2009).

### **Overview: The Focus and Concerns of the Articles in This Special Section**

However, despite the centrality that the media has in terms of (1) providing citizens with information about the distribution of resources and opportunities; (2) priming, thus making more or less accessible certain values or exemplars that would be associated with evaluations of equality and inequality; and (3) framing debates regarding different realms of equality, the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of inequality is virtually unaddressed in the extant literature. (Friedland, Rojas, & Bode, 2012, p. 288)

In line with the growing significance of deepening economic inequalities, and in line with international scope and remit of the *International Journal of Communication*, the articles in the following themed section attempt to advance our understanding related to some three core, if broad and overlapping, sets of questions and concerns:

1. To what extent and in what ways are economic inequality issues observed, framed, and discussed in two areas of knowledge production: (1) in journalism and news media, viewed as key institutions of modern, mediated, or public communication; and (2) in key areas of the academic field (especially economics, communication studies, and other relevant social science disciplines, such as political science, sociology, and innovation and technology studies)?
2. How do these new forms of economic inequality, power, and privilege relate to relevant theories and conceptualizations of the media and institutions of public communication, whether in the fields of communication studies and/or political economy? How does this knowledge base serve to help forward-looking analyses of the meaning and implications of recent economic inequality trends?
3. How does the framing of economic inequality and related mediated story telling take place, and what kinds of sources of ideas, information, or expertise are favored by news media and journalistic practices? What kind of sources and other influences tend to shape and inform the routine practices of journalism and newsrooms in the mainstream media? What role do the new forms of economic inequality, thus power and privilege, play in the typical narratives of mediated communication today?

The articles in this themed section are innovative and explicitly transdisciplinary in scope. They bring together several leading researchers, based in the communication studies, journalism, economics, and the political economy fields—all engaged in complementary ways in exploring the relations between media and public communication institutions and economic processes.

The editors of this Special Section and other authors of the following articles are currently engaged in a major multicountry project, conducting empirical research on the coverage of socioeconomic inequalities in major media outlets following the publication of Thomas Piketty's best-selling book. This

project, *The Mediation of Economic Inequality: Media Coverage of Piketty's Book Capital in the 21st Century*, is funded by the Anniversary Fund of the Austrian Central Bank (Project No. 16789). Three of the articles are revised versions of work initially presented and discussed at the IAMCR conference held in Leicester, UK, in July 2016.

### **The Scope and Concerns of the Articles in This Special Section**

In the first article of this Special Section, titled "How Come We Know? The Media Coverage of Economic Inequality," Andrea Grisold and Hendrik Theine examine the following question: How do people acquire their knowledge about economic processes and affairs that they are not, or only indirectly, part of, and why is this of importance to both communication studies and economics? They observe that despite the rediscovery of the inequality topic by economists as well as other social scientists, relatively little is known about how economic inequality is being mediated to the public. The question is never discussed in the economics field at all, while it is only rarely mentioned in the communication studies field. Grisold and Theine provide a systematic overview of the existing empirical studies on the media coverage of economic inequality and embed these findings in a theoretical context. Drawing on recent studies that empirically examine the coverage of inequality and redistributive policies, the authors explore the role that mass media play as information providers. Acknowledging that scholars adopting a political economy approach frequently engage with issues on inequality, they finish by turning to this research tradition for theories and insights that may help to better comprehend how economic inequality is contextualized in the mass media.

Grisold and Theine's review shows that despite increasing coverage of inequality topics as observed by quantitative studies, more qualitative analysis reveals the one-sidedness of the reporting, with the coverage being framed in an episodic rather than a thematic way. They do not see a diversity of information on economic inequality but a bias toward individualistic explanations, and a neglect of the positive implications of redistributive policies to diminish inequality. This article also highlights the relative absence of in-depth analysis of media coverage on inequality and redistributive policies, as only 11 studies on those topics were published (in the last 17 years). As the authors conclude, there is ample scope for fruitful analyses for both scholars of (political) economy and for media scholars interested in economic inequality issues. Grisold and Theine identify a number of ways in which the analysis of economic inequality in the media may proceed in future to better engage with redistributive policies and other relevant remedies.

The emergence of modern media, as well as the major historical transformations in the institutions of public communication, have usually been explained in terms of the triangular interplay between political, economic, and technological factors. At the same time, such major transformations in the past also tended to favor the interests and power of certain sets of actors over others. Today, certain influential actors propose that innovations in digital technologies signify societal progress and the promise of equitable and sustainable societies, whereas others link an increasingly complex digital system to multiple and persistent inequalities. Industry leaders tend to suggest that investment in the development and use of novel digital applications, including intelligent or social machines and robots, supported by algorithms and machine learning, are inherently beneficial. It is frequently claimed that these innovations

will serve to raise income levels and foster movement along a singular pathway through a fourth industrial revolution—one that will transform the way we live, work, and relate to one another.

In “The Mediation of Hope: Communication Technologies and Inequality in Perspective,” Robin Mansell adopts an ambitious, multidisciplinary approach to examine competing perspectives on the digital economy, including whether and how they privilege short- and medium-term ex post interventions aimed at adjustment and risk mitigation. She discusses the neglect of the long-term consequences of the contemporary digital environment while emphasizing the need to historicize the process of change and to reflect on alternative futures. Mansell explores and compares research traditions in economics, the economics of technological innovation, and critical studies of technology and society, all with a predominant focus on digital economy policy. She examines the potential for a productive engagement among researchers working in otherwise parallel traditions and assesses whether such engagement can help to focus digital economy policy on measures that could encourage a reorientation of the digital technological innovation pathway, consistent with an inclusive and more equitable society. She points to how the adoption of such critical interdisciplinary engagements could influence digital-economy policy makers to consider alternative digital-technology innovation pathways and more proactive policies that could serve to foster sustainable and inclusive human flourishing and thus yield a better future.

The expanding role of digital media and technologies has often been linked to the idea that we are shifting toward a “knowledge society” and/or “knowledge-based economy.” Think tanks might be one of the most prominent examples/components of such shifts, whose growth over the last few decades “has been nothing less than explosive,” as Núria Almiron puts it in her article, “Favoring the Elites: Think Tanks and Discourse Coalitions,” for this Special Section. Indeed, according to one global database, there were 6,846 think tanks in the world in 2015. As these organizations have increased in number, scope, and impact, they have become influential and much-used sources of information and reference points for news media, policy makers, journalists, and the construction of what passes as public opinion, alike.

As Almiron points out, many of these think tanks can be accurately defined as “very much knowledge-oriented” or as “organizations involved in the political process through knowledge production.” She also notes how some think tanks may be best viewed and defined as interest coalitions or networks supporting specific ideological stances. Perhaps the most famous example of the latter comprises the coalitions of think tanks promoting the so-called Washington Consensus, which has successfully promoted the deregulation of financial markets and established a highly specific set of policy ideas, values, and beliefs among the political and economic elites. The latter has, in turn, operated as a major influence on the amplification of economic inequalities in recent decades.

Despite that, Almiron’s article describes how there has been relatively little research on the forms and degree of influence that think tanks exert on journalists and news media—not least their role in setting or framing the media and public opinion agenda on important topics, including economic inequalities. Almiron sets out to elaborate on the role of think tanks in the public communication sphere by examining first the specificities of think-tank organizations according to the key classical theoretical frameworks, and then more recent approaches, such as field and discourse coalition theories. She then proceeds to examine what recent research on think tanks and interest groups reveals with respect to

global discourse creation processes in selective key policy areas. Almiron's analysis underlines how think tanks comprise an increasingly important reference for the media, exploring how they can regularly be found as sources in the news while their members are invited to provide expert opinion in op-ed sections. Although there may be differing views on the precise extent of their influence, one thing is clear: Think tanks have become a complex mixture of knowledge and interest attempting to shape public opinion.

In his article titled "Citizen Detriment: Communications, Inequality, and Social Order," Peter Golding observes at the outset how inequality has seldom been in the foreground of mainstream communication scholarship. This, however, does not apply to the political economy tradition of communication analysis, which has long regarded structural and material inequalities as critical social determinants of communications capacity and activity. However, this stand has tended to comprise a marginalized or minority approach within the communication and media studies field overall. Golding also considers the communication studies field's interest in the "digital divide," noting that such work generally starts from the impact of variable opportunities to access or own digital communication resources. This strand of work has developed an increasing interest in multiple digital divides, of which income or wealth inequality are but two, and often not the most significant, of many reasons identified as the sources of the uneven spread of digitalization. Indeed, he finds that scarcity and maldistribution have almost "disappeared from the agenda of media researchers," not least because of (erroneous) assumptions and claims concerning the increasing availability or ubiquity of digital media and information.

Golding proceeds to argue why and how it is important "to return inequality to where it belongs, at the heart of media and cultural analysis," and how it is an indispensable concept for our understanding of social and cultural structure. Citizenship is an active role, requiring information to enable people to deliberate and arrive at decisions that they can then effectively voice. The cumulative evidence of prior research reveals, it is argued, that mainstream media fail to provide such information as well as the essential analysis to buttress it. Golding defines the result as "information detriment," while also addressing this as a significant element within a broader "citizen detriment." This problem is only minimally addressed by the proliferation of information accessible through the widening availability of online and digital resources. Golding analyzes how deepening inequality is translated into citizen detriment because of the growing cost of information resources. He draws on evidence of the significant advantages enjoyed by the better-off in an increasingly commercial and costly information environment, both as consumers of information and, through lobbying, as sources of ideas and information in the political and public arena. For Golding, the fundamental problem at the heart of this issue is that of growing material inequality, more than media and communication practice and policy.

Paschal Preston and Henry Silke commence their contribution to this Special Section with their contribution, "Contrasting Conceptions, Discourses, and Studies of Economic Inequalities," by highlighting how the issues of economic and social inequalities have reentered the stage of mainstream political attention and debate over the past couple of years. One key indicator of growing public attention to "inequality matters" was the surprisingly large sales and media attention paid in 2014 to a lengthy academic book largely comprising data on trends in the distribution income and wealth in the major capitalist economies (Piketty, 2014). Another is that Bernie Sanders, a self-defined socialist and relative

outsider highlighting the issues of growing inequalities, came very close to winning the candidate selection process as the Democratic Party nominee for the 2016 Presidential election in the U.S.

Furthermore, this article introduces the core themes of economic inequalities while (briefly and selectively) considering why and how they feature and matter in the history of modern political and economic thought. Preston and Silke explore how the inequality and austerity trends of recent decades pose significant challenges and implications for the prevailing models of liberal and electoral democracy, the structures and distribution of power, and, in turn, for understanding the role and practices of professional journalism and news media. They observe how different conceptualizations, definitions, and framings of inequality and socioeconomic justice are central to the conduct and outcomes of such struggles over the future shape of the social order. A core section of this article provides a brief, if selective, overall review of how inequality matters have been addressed and understood in the political economy as well as the more recent field of economics. These authors then proceed to outline the results of a brief but systematic review of how socioeconomic inequalities are addressed in the relevant academic disciplines, including communication studies. In the final part of this article, Preston and Silke outline some key conclusions and implications.

In the last article of this Special Section, Julian Bank focuses on the treatment of economic inequality in selected German print media. In so doing, he turns the focus to similar themes as those addressed earlier by Grisold and Theine, in the first article, but takes a different angle. Bank observes in his study "Economic Inequality in the German Quality Press: Framing Concerns About Inequality and Redistribution" that while international institutions and researchers have increasingly voiced concern about rising inequality of wealth and incomes, the treatment of economic inequality in the media has been more ambiguous, especially in Germany. Bank takes this to mean that some academic and journalistic actors still refuse to think that concerns about inequality should be taken seriously, or tend to deny that there is any need for redistributive policies. At the same time, he notes that some recent studies indicate that, overall, coverage of inequality in German print media has been steadily increasing.

The central aim of this article, according to Bank, is to "put the treatment of economic inequality itself center stage," regardless of whether it is discussed as a topic of social justice or one of macroeconomic instability. He adopts a methodological focus that is more close-up than that of large-scale, quantitative corpus analyses, by seeking to identify elements of framing that determine the way in which the issue is presented in the respective publications. To that end, the article analyzes the German public debate on economic inequality as represented in two series on inequality in the business and finance sections of the two leading national quality newspapers, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ). In a qualitative content analysis of articles relating to inequality, he assesses the extent to which they consider economic inequality to be a relevant problem, the extent to which they describe redistributive policy as necessary, and the manner in which they discuss conceptual ambiguities and data problems. As an overarching result, the analysis identifies diverging patterns of framing showing that evaluations of concerns about economic inequality and redistributive policies crucially depend on the thematic context. The analysis also finds that FAZ is less affirmative of concerns about inequality and more often opposed to redistributive policy than SZ.

### Conclusion

The contributions in this Special Section provide some novel analyses and initial answers to the increasingly pressing issues and questions posed by the onward march of economic inequalities in recent decades. They also serve to address the implications of such trends for better understanding the role and influences of mediated communication in the contemporary period. They comprise a welcome start—an initial contribution to an increasingly urgent and much-needed debate concerning the intricate and complex ways in which mediated communication is bound up with the perpetuation or amelioration of the neoliberal counterrevolution and the rise of the power of economic elites over that of political forms of counterpower.

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