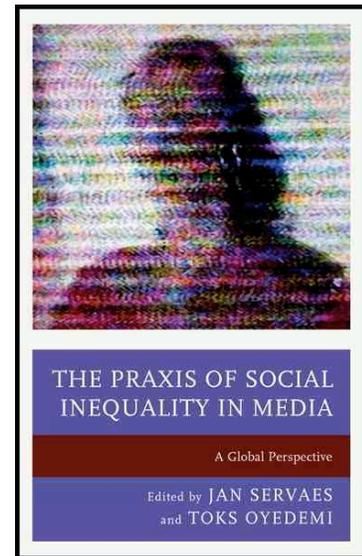


Jan Servaes and Toks Oyedemi (Eds.), **The Praxis of Social Inequality in Media: A Global Perspective**, Lanham, MD, London, UK: Lexington Books, 2016, 269 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover).

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Talk about inequality has finally come of age. Unfortunately, not much of that talk engages the role that communications media play in helping to shape the debates about the causes, consequences and appropriate public policy responses to the social problems that inequality both reflects and redistributes (Platt, 2011). Fortunately, Jan Servaes and Toks Oyedemi have divided an impressive selection of timely scholarly responses to this problem of neglect between two different volumes, one focused on theory (Servaes & Oyedemi, 2016), and the other on praxis. Servaes' Conclusion in this volume offers a "Matrix for the study of social problems" (pp. 250–254) that brings theory and praxis together quite well.



One of the many things that sets *The Praxis of Social Inequality in Media* apart from other engagements with social policy in this area, is the fact that engagement with and responses to the problems of inequality do not only take place within governmental policy centers. As these case studies from around the world demonstrate, they take place in important relationships at the grass roots levels where individuals, groups, and social organizations organize resistance and work to produce alternatives to dominant systems of representation and analysis within media.

The first chapter on poverty and the media by Steven Harkins and Jairo Lugo-Ocando associates the marginal status of inequality within the British press as part of an attempt to normalize a neoliberal construction of inequality as a non-problem. Indeed, as they characterize this elite strategy, its goal was, over time, to "make inequality acceptable and somehow necessary" (p. 3). Their analysis of media coverage of poverty in four newspapers representing left and right, as well as tabloid, popular and quality formats and style provides evidence in support of that view. They were especially interested in calling attention to the almost complete disregard in the press for an analytical framework that identified inequality as a causal determinant of the levels of poverty within nations (p. 16).

The second chapter in this section by Greg Nielsen and his colleagues, offers a perspective on an imagined, rather than the actual relationship between newspapers and their audiences. On the basis of their analysis of coverage within twelve English and French language newspapers in eight "paired cities," we are provided with a number of carefully selected perspectives on how "subjects" and audiences are framed, as well as a particularly insightful "thematic analysis of audience address" that describes the main narratives used in presenting these stories. The primary narratives, those characterized as "descriptive

accounts of poverty,” occasionally make use of an “internal authority,” which is occasionally used to bring an important affective or emotional component (p. 22) to the less engaging elements of a story.

In the next chapter, Rebecca Wells and Martin Caraher examine the way national newspapers in the UK have represented the users of food banks between 2008 and 2014. Although their primary interest was in the frames used most often by food bank clients, they note that “there was an under-representation of those voices with others talking for them” (p. 51). Despite these constraints on the agency of the subjects of these stories, they note that they were primarily portrayed as sympathetic victims of circumstance. This chapter is notable for the authors’ attempts to offer structural explanations for the way this special segment of the poor has been represented in the press. In the final chapter in Part I of the volume, Kaan Tasbasi provides an introduction to the kinds of challenges in both theory and praxis that researchers must confront in trying to use an analysis of media as source of explanations for the “lack of social policy mechanisms in Turkey” (p. 62).

The two chapters in Part II are focused on dramatically different versions of “the digital divide.” The first by Roberta Bracciale and Isabella Mingo, considers the European context with an emphasis on the Italian case. This is an extensive analysis, actually the lengthiest chapter in the book, which examines the impact of differences in digital skills on the potential for individuals to participate in the digital world. After defining the variety of operational, instrumental and relational skills that users of digital technologies might have acquired, they set out to assess how the possession and use of these skills relate to membership in different segments of the population “exposed to the dynamics of exclusion” (p. 94). Sophisticated, and well-presented analyses of these data provide a basis for differentiating between different kinds of skills and abilities and their relationship to whether their primary uses were instrumental or relational (p. 105). These analyses also provide support for the existence of a “Matthew Effect,” that supports the accumulation of advantage for one segment, and “multiplication of disadvantage” to the poorer members of the population for whom “*the dangers of digital marginalization are likely to worsen*” (p. 106).

A very different set of questions are explored by Gyuri Kepes in the next chapter. Focused primarily on the educational uses of computers by youngsters in Bangladesh, this study explores an aspect technology assessments rarely considered— the role that collaboration among peers in the use of shared resources can play in socioeconomic development. Kepes provides a strong argument and powerful examples that challenge dominant assumptions about the extent to which shared access to informational resources “can provide a path to empowerment through civic engagement and knowledge creation” (p. 131).

Part III is focused on women’s concerns and their successful efforts to use media to improve their social, economic and political status. Arpana Moitra and Archana Kumar provide an insightful account of the efforts of women in the Himalayan highlands in India who make use of community radio programs to mobilize a public response to a variety of challenges attributed to climate change. Francisco Caballero and his colleagues provide an analysis of the role that their experience of media appropriations in Oaxaca, Mexico played in their empowerment. While the first chapter is more promotional than analytical, this chapter offers an “approach from below” based on interviews, focus group discussions, and a series of “life

stories” from the women involved. It provides us with privileged access to the nature of the process of empowerment that included the development of a collective “*antagonistic identity*” in some of these women (p. 171).

In the fourth and final Part, three chapters explore different aspects of race, sexuality and gender in the media. Louise North provides a cross-national comparative analysis of gender inequality in the news media. She begins with an assessment of the status of female journalists in Australia, and then extends the analysis to include the U.S., the UK and Canada. Beginning with a timely investigation of the “culture of sexual harassment in newsrooms,” she moves to an analysis of story assignments, which she terms a form of “horizontal segregation,” (pp. 188–190) through which women are corralled in “the pink ghetto” of soft news. North identifies three additional markers of differential treatment of women within the industry; one being the threat to career that parenthood represents for women, and another being the nature of the negotiated contracts that enable pay inequality to exist, and the last being the “old boys” network of associations that constrain movement up the promotional ladder.

In the next chapter, John Pollock and his colleagues apply his “community structure approach” to a cross-national analysis of rape and rape culture as represented in leading newspapers in 21 countries. As is quite common in these studies, a very large number of hypotheses are derived from several theoretical constructs that Pollock and his colleagues have developed over the years. Unfortunately, in ways that seem likely to be related to the differences between the smaller communities like the cities usually studied, and the much larger and internally diverse communities represented by the nation state, very few of these hypotheses gained support.

The final chapter in this section was a critical assessment of Canada’s pursuit of multiculturalism as a social policy. Arguing that multiculturalism, at least in the Canadian context, is a disempowering paradigm, Fay Patel suggests that Canada has failed to place immigrants within mainstream society (p. 231). She also suggests that multiculturalism operates on a “deficit model of communication” where the burden is placed on the immigrant to understand the government’s communications (p. 233). Additional examples are provided that add weight to the claim that immigrants are not truly welcomed as permanent residents, including a misleading scoring system and retraining program requirements that the reported scores should have made unnecessary. The chapter concludes with recommendations to improve the programs that have been developed in support of a multicultural policy.

References

- Platt, L. (2011). *Understanding inequalities: Stratification and difference*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
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