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Income inequality and the absence of a Tawney moment in the mass media

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

In this paper we address the paradox of increasing income inequality and the absence of public mobilization around the issue. As the mass media are our most important source of information on wider economic affairs, we examine the salience and framing of income inequality within major UK and US newspapers over the period 1990 – 2015. Despite an initial surge in media attention and again towards the end of the period, the issues-attention cycle of inequality resembles a hype-cycle that is more common with arcane academic or techno-scientific topics than with social mobilisation. The dominant frames present income inequality as the seemingly inevitable result of globalization, market forces and technological change. No new radical frames of economic injustice have emerged, neither have any new actors, and so policy solutions fall back onto existing left-right approaches.

SER Key words: income distribution; inequality; media; discourse; United Kingdom, USA

JEL classification: J3 Wages, Compensation, and Labor Costs

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, income inequality has reached historic highs within many of the countries that make up the OECD (OECD 2015). Among these countries, the largest increases were in the liberal market economies of the English speaking world, notably in the UK and the USA where the GINI co-efficient rose by more than 30 per cent in the years between 1979 and 1991-2 (Smeeding 2005: 963). Significantly, this rise in income inequality has not been accompanied by any noticeable shift in public attitudes over the past few decades. Drawing on cross-national survey data, Mijs (2019) finds that attitudes towards income inequality have remained extraordinarily steady between 1987 and 2009 in the UK and the USA; the public outcry barely reached three percentage points for both countries (UK: 72.4% in 1987; 75.2% in 2009; USA 73.0% in 1987, and 69.1% in 2009).

Against this background, we examine why we have yet to see a 'Tawney moment' for income inequality: the moment when inequality is publicly recognised as a scandalous evil, and named as such, and indifference towards inequality is overcome by public outcry (Tawney 1964 [1931]: 33ff). In our graphic we schematise this hypothetical 'Tawney moment' as the confluence of market problems and academic analysis, which at some definable moment opens up a new issue in society, throwing the spotlight onto the intolerable disparity of 'rich and poor'.

Figure 1: The Tawney moment schematised
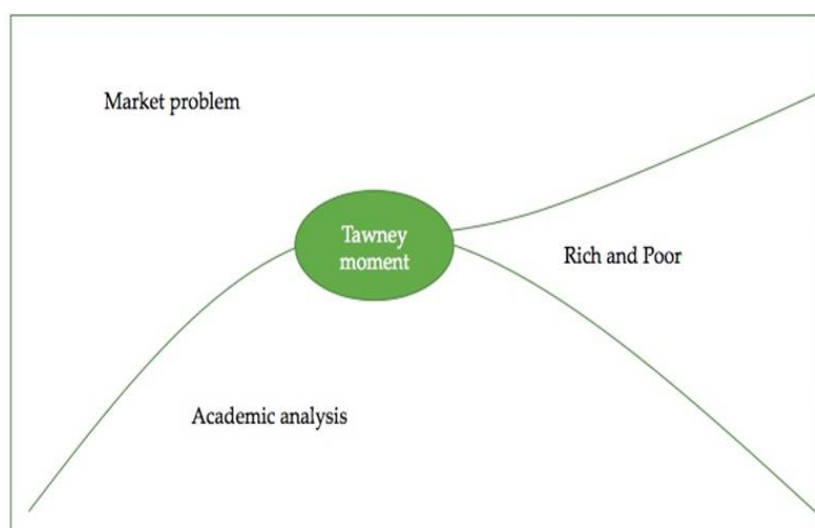
Notes: inequality is initially a matter of economic analysis under market conditions; once 'inequality' becomes scandalous in what we call the 'Tawney moment' the issue turns into a political problem of 'rich and poor' in society

One potential answer to the question of the lack of public attitude change is that the public lacks awareness of the magnitude of income inequality in their society. A growing body of research indicates that ordinary people do not know the general level of income inequality, how it has changed in recent decades or where they fit in the income distribution (Engelhardt and Wagener 2017; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018). As McCall (2013) has argued, limited

information makes it difficult for individuals to appreciate trends in economic inequality or to recognize it as a social problem. The existence of this perception gap raises questions about where people get information about inequality as well as about the content of that information. Aside from personal experience and talking to friends and family, the mass media are also a significant source of information on economic affairs. Certainly, the portfolio of news sources that people consult is changing over time, with radio, television, and recently social media, challenging the dominance of newspapers as daily news source; this follows the sequential penetration of households with radio, TV, telephone, home computers and mobile devices over the 20th century (Gordon 2017: 416, 432).

Considering the importance of mass media in drawing attention to economic affairs and making salient issues in the public sphere, we focus on examining how the mass media might elicit public awareness of income inequality. Despite the emergence of social media since 2000, we focus our attention on print media. In addition to giving us continuity in a data source, the traditional print media retain a significant role in the formation of public opinion despite the strains on their business model (ACCC 2019: 279ff). Some years ago Bartels (1996) found that newspapers led the political agenda though there is some variation depending on the status of the paper. TV news played a mediating role but the major newspapers set the agenda more often than not. Similar observations pertain to the function of newsprint in the age of social media: many readers consult legacy news media on social media, or they take the cue from preferred social media sites and follow-up with newsprint (Dutton et al. 2013; Mitchell 2018). Also, as social media platforms are increasingly associated with 'fake news' and low trust (Newman 2017), there are numerous initiatives to shore up print media as brokers of quality information in the public sphere (ACCC 2019).

2. Literature review: much inequality in the world, but no moral alarm

If we are to understand why the public have not reacted more strongly to rising levels of income inequality we need to get measures of its visibility and packaging within the mass media. Remarkably, there are hardly any studies of how the media report income inequality, despite the huge increase in academic research on the topic in the past 25 years (McCall and Percheski 2010). Following McCall (2013), we examine how the media can shape public awareness by first drawing attention to a social problem, which is indicated by the rise and decline in salience of a news topic, and secondly by explaining how the issue should be understood by the public, which is indicated by the framing of the topic taking into consideration the emotional tone of the content and the key sponsors. Both salience and framing are conditions of defining a social problem. We consider the literature on these two topics below.

Media salience and hype cycles

How do we know that an issue becomes a social problem? One indicator is the degree of media attention. By increasing topic salience, the media move an issue from the margins to mainstream public attention, thus rendering a problem less ambiguous, legitimate and part of routine conversation (Strodthoff et al. 1985). The mass media recruit public attention and create, as demonstrated on environmental news, an 'issue-attention cycle' (Downs 1972). More recently, this is also modelled as 'hype cycle' – tracing the hyperbole that often

accompany techno-scientific developments such as gene therapy – which turns a vice (i.e. creating hyperbole) into a virtue (Van Lente et al. 2013). The power of an attention-cycle lies in the agenda setting effect as it first moves an issue from sponsor-actors to mass media attention, and then from media attention to public perceptions and issue salience which in turn creates urgency of political action down the line (McCombs and Shaw 1972).

However, the processing capacity of the mass media is limited by the amount of airtime or the number of printed pages, and topics are selected because they either land a scoop (a first) or because rivals are also covering the issue (herding). Competition and limited capacity in combination with the boredom of readers reading about the same issue day on day, leads to an unstable flow of news topics, or what Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) call the rise and fall of social problems.

One of the most studied examples of an issue cycle is the 'environment' as an issue of public concern (Djerf-Pierre 2013). Bauer (2015) argues that environmental attention saw at least four cycles since the 1950s, moving from water and air pollution to over-population in the 1960s, to environmental disasters such as the Chernobyl nuclear accident, oil spills and chemical releases in the 1980s, and then via the ozone hole and global warming to climate change of today. An early review by Lowe and Goyder (1983: 32) found this attention was indeed episodic as proposed by Downs (1972) 'issue-attention cycle'. The authors show that attention to environment occurred during sustained periods of economic expansion and relative prosperity, and due to the alarm/fear created by dramatic environmental events (e.g., the heat and drought of the summer of '88). Critically, each of these factors specifies the extra-media context, that is, to the wider socio-economic situation that gives resonance to a topic. Similar attention cycles can be found in relation to global warming (Mazur and Lee 1993), socio-political issues of globalisation (Fiss and Hirsch 2005), and emergent technologies such as biotechnology (Bauer and Gaskell 2002).

On the topic of income inequality, there is limited research examining the presence of an attention cycle in the mass media. McCall (2013), with a focus on the United States, is an exception. Drawing on articles from mainstream US periodicals, McCall found little evidence of a general rise in media attention over the period 1980 to 2010. The period is significant because it includes both the sharp rise in income equality and the start of a surge of academic interest on the topic. Though she acknowledges that the coverage came in waves, it was, however, no greater at the end of the period than it was at the beginning. McCall attributes the lack of sustained and meaningful media interest to three factors: income inequality is an abstract concept that is difficult to explain to the average citizen; the difficulty that people have in considering the normative implications of income inequality and, relatedly, the inherently controversial nature of the most obvious remedy, namely income redistribution.

In sum, media attention is important in turning a previously neglected issue that might exist in the specialist margins into a scandalous social problem that features in the mainstream media. But the analysis of media salience and its structure is not sufficient on its own; we must also consider how journalists make sense of and represent income inequality when they draw attention to it.

3. Media framing and sentiment

Framing shows how the mass media create meaning in society, guide audiences how to think about inequality and thus release or build political pressure. Beyond the art metaphor, that every picture needs a frame, golden, wooden or otherwise, the 'frame' is generally considered a story line that defines a problem and offers a possible solution. It defines the problem X as A, an axis of disagreement, and offers a solution B; it links a diagnosis to treatment, and it apportions blame; and thus presents a collective action-schema that links the problem to what needs to be done and who is the culprit (Entman 2004). A frame is therefore a meaning package that allows a succinct definition of the problem, anchored in metaphorical terms and objectified in images and iconic concretisations as Gamson and Modigliani (1989) have demonstrated over nuclear energy. Experimental evidence on how inequality is framed, in terms of what language is used to discuss it, has been found to have an impact on how legitimate individuals perceive it to be (Bruckmüller et al. 2017).

Here we need to be careful not to use 'frame' uncritically as a synonym for 'ideology' as income inequality is likely to draw different views from those on the political right and left. Ideology is a wider concept related to worldviews; however, ideological elements guarantee the success of a frame because they resonate with the public, which only amplifies its salience. Certainly, framing processes involve the accenting of events, experiences, existing beliefs and values, most of which may be associated with ideologies. In this respect, Benford and Snow (2000: 59) acknowledge that '*ideologies constitute cultural background resources that can be tapped and exploited for the purpose of constructing collective action frames*'. Action frames are storied beliefs that inspire, orient and legitimise collective action, and they recruit ideology to achieve cultural resonance. But in contrast to ideologies, framing processes are not just cognitive processes but are more readily observable activities that claims makers and social movements do over and over again for strategic purposes. Take the problem of legalising abortion in the US or Germany: Ferree (2003) has shown how the issue can be framed as 'women's choice' or as 'compassion for women in difficulties' and thus appeal to and reach resonance in different streams of opinion. 'Choice' is the rallying cry among radical core feminists but not sufficient to win, while 'compassion' enables campaigners to broaden support into the more conservative religious middle ground, and thus to win.

In the framing of a particular topic key elements are used to 'build' a particular frame, including which actors are speaking on the issue, as well as the slant. Regarding actors, we can consider who is seen as a trustworthy source to address the topic, and in the case of an emerging social problem, who is identifying the problem, as well as who is seen as responsible for resolving it. Secondly, As (Entman 2010) argues, one-sided framing is common, where emphasis is placed on some elements while ignoring others, encouraging the reader to focus their attention on the evaluative attributes that privilege one perspective over others. This gives news stories a particular 'slant', or sentiment, in favour of one way to interpret the issue. As such, when examining framing it is important to consider the sentiment used to construct income inequality as something readers should, or should not, worry about.

Examining media salience and framing of income inequality, particularly in countries such as the UK and the USA which have demonstrated rises in inequality but relatively stable public

attitudes towards it, allows us to address our key research question; why has the extraordinary rise in income inequality not been treated as a scandal in public discourse?

4. Methodology: Corpus Construction and Analysis

We examine the UK and the USA because both are English-speaking liberal market economies that have experienced sharp rises in wage and income inequalities over the last 30 years (OECD 2015). Crucially, we examine the discourse over time to better understand any agenda-setting effect for the political sphere. Our sampling period was the 25 year period, 1990-2015.. The selected print media included four daily newspapers and two specialist weekly magazines (see Table 1). Note that we do not have reliable annual estimates for the *Economist* nor *Forbes*, so we will use these corpus items only for our overall content analysis.

Table 1: Selected Print Media 1990-2015

Type	Newspaper Name	Circulation (2013) [1]	Source	# articles in corpus	Size: no of words	% of final corpus
Weekly Magazine	**Economist (UK)**	221,080	ECON data file	542	654 388	0.9%
Daily Business Press	**Financial Times (UK)**	275,375	Nexis Lexis	14 976	9 995 437	25.8%
Daily Liberal Press	**Guardian (UK)**	204,440	Nexis Lexis	20 752	17 832 761	35.8%
Bi-weekly Magazine	**Forbes (USA)**	931,558	Factiva [1997-2015]	222	218 067	0.4%
Daily Liberal Press	**New York Times (USA)**	1,865,318	Nexis Lexis	14 172	14 883 900	24.4%
Daily Business Press	**Wall Street Journal (USA)**	2,378, 827	Factiva	7 321	6 679 011	12.6%
Total	UK + US		Mixed	57 985	32 430 803	100

The data was collected using two on-line databases: *LexisNexis* and *Factiva.* We divided the overall search into four different sized corpora for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. For each newspaper (except the *Economist*), we initially explored the potential corpus size by first searching for the term 'income inequality'. A codebook was developed with primary

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[1] Circulation numbers taken from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (UK) and the Alliance for Audited Media (USA). It should be noted that the general trend is towards a decline in print news circulation, only in part compensated by an increasing online presence of the same titles.

and secondary keywords, which guided the selection of articles (see Appendix 1). Primary keywords included 'income inequality' and potential synonyms (such as 'economic inequality' and 'pay inequality'), while the secondary keywords included words with a similar meaning (i.e., 'pay differentials' and 'wealth distribution'); in total we used 19 keywords.

(1) Full corpus (N=57985]: The full corpus includes all items retrieved with the full bag of 19 keywords. This pool of items was uploaded into QDA Miner, a software analysis tool that allows for both quantitative and qualitative text analyses. This heterogeneous corpus includes many marginally relevant news items, which a human reader might find irrelevant, but probably with few omissions or false negatives.

To compare between corpora using different keyword sets for the semantic field 'income inequality', two derived sub-corpora of smaller sizes were created. As a single keyword is no guarantee to cover the semantic field 'inequality', synonyms are needed, not least as topic labels might shift over 25 years. A set of keywords casts the net either too narrow or too wide to capture 'relevant' items. This ultimately involves a balancing act to reach any estimates; comparing corpora allows for sensitivity analyses to the width of the semantic net.

(2) Mid-size corpus (N=20631): The mid-size corpus was developed from the full corpus by running proximity plots in QDA Miner to see which five words had the highest co-occurrence with the phrase 'income inequality' and then compiling all of these into a smaller dataset.[2]

(3) Small corpus (N=6063): The small corpus included all articles hitting on 'income inequality' only and is therefore the most homogeneous and narrow set of items. We have no way of estimating its rate of omission, i.e. false negatives.

In order to analyse shifts over time, two time-variables were added to all files, defining significant time periods before and after the financial crisis of 2008 (1990-2007 and 2008-2015), and considering the initial shape of the issue cycle.

 (4) Q*ualitative corpus* (N=240): this was constructed in order to examine the framing of income inequality through in-depth reading and manual coding. This subset of 240 articles was sampled in two batches; the first set of 120 articles included 60 articles (10 from each news outlet, pre- and post-crisis) and another 60 articles were selected by examining the co-occurrence of 'income inequality' alongside other keywords in QDA Miner. The top 12 keywords were selected (covering 20% of articles) and these included *'economic, education, government, health, labour, law, market, minimum wage, pay and poor'*. The second set of 120 articles was sampled randomly; for each news outlet and the two timeframes (1990-2007 and 2008-2015) we imposed a systematic strategy with variable sampling fractions. For example, in a time-window with 145 articles paper X and a target of 10, every 14th item would be selected. All sampled items were coded according to a codebook which we developed on close-reading of items and in discussions within the team (see Appendix 2). The coding categories cover the framing of income inequality, the key actors mentioned, and sentiment ratings about 'inequality' in the media. The coded data was analysed with SPSS.

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[2] The five words with highest co-occurrence were inflation, income tax, middle-class, economist and income.

5. Findings

Our findings pertain to (1) the changing media salience and (2) the framing of inequality in the British and US American mass media over the period of 1990 to 2015. We will briefly state how these were measured and present our results for each of these in sequence.

Media Salience: The unsteady rise of income inequality

Our first set of observations on inequality in the press concerns the salience curve as shown in Figure 2. We graph here our index of salience in mainstream UK and US 'broadsheets' over the period 1990 to 2015 on annual figures. We note that the salience curves move more or less identically in the UK and the US and as there is little difference here this allows us to pool them together. Taking a three-year moving average across all newspapers we can identify a bi-model hype cycle on inequality: an initial wave that started in the early 1990s and peaked towards the end of the decade before declining into the mid-2000s when a second wave emerges. This second wave took off 2005/06, stalled between 2008 and 2009 at the level of the previous peak, and rose vigorously into the 2010s to double intensity. Over the observation period, publications of the academic research literature on 'inequality' increased exponentially ($Y = 3.1278\ e^{0.1346X}$; $R^2 = 0.92$).

To put it another way, our 25 year observation period - a period in which academic research on inequality grows continuously - can be divided into three distinct surges with the first peak in 1998, a second wave peaking in 2007 before declining, and a third surge from 2010 going far beyond anything seen before. During this final surge the news intensity doubled over five years. That said, the sheer scale of the rise in coverage after the 'Great Recession of 2008-9' means that we will make a simple distinction between the period before and after the recession for our later analysis. Overall, we conclude that inequality takes the shape of a bi-model hype cycle as schematised in figure 2 with little deviation between UK and US: an initial surge in coverage that sounds the alarm on inequality, followed by a gradual decline; a second surge takes the issue into a new stage, possibly bringing a resolution of the problem, at least according to the issue-attention model. However, as our observations end in 2015, we cannot be certain whether this second surge reached its peak or continued to date. Our three-phase hype model predicts however, that the narrative will have shifted across these phases; we will come back to this below with our frame analysis.

Figure 2:
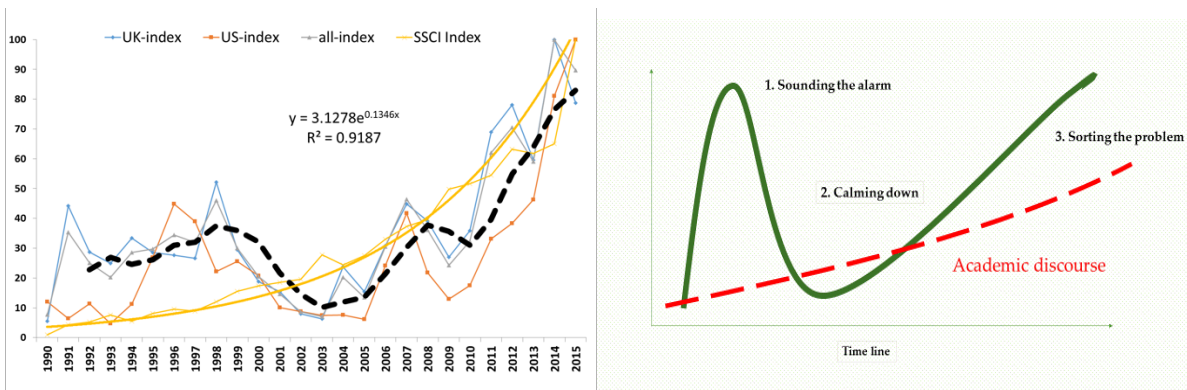
Notes: <u>On the left</u>, the growth of scholarly economic literature in 'income inequality'; SSCI frequency of publications on 'income inequality', 1990 – 2015, with the log fit curve. UK and US-Index show the salience of 'inequality' relative to newshole indexed to 2015=100; the dashed line is 3-year moving average on the all-Index of news, combining UK + US news. <u>On the right</u>, a stylized bi-modal hype-cycle of public discourse X in relation to academic publications (dashed line) on X showing the three phases of 'sounding the alarm', 'calming down', and 'sorting the problem'.

A second set of observations on media salience of inequality arises from comparing the peak of news with other issue attention cycles over the period. We ask ourselves, is the peak of 2014 in the coverage of inequality a large peak or not? We find that in 2014, *The Guardian* carries about 2000 (89), the FT about 950 (172), the NYT about 1450 (526), and WSJ about 650 (149) items on 'inequality'; this according to our full corpus (with numbers in parentheses from the small corpus). This indicates that 'inequality' has consistently gained in salience since 1990s in Britain and in the US, and in all newspapers. What was in 1990s at most an occasional news item on a monthly cycle, is by 2015 clearly a regular new item on a weekly if not daily cycle. Clearly the salience of inequality has increased; but how hot exactly is the topic, especially when compared with others?

Here we are able to compare inequality with other topics that indicates social problems in modern society, such as global warming, the emergence of biotechnology and controversies over GM food and stem cell cloning, and the emergence of the internet and social media with controversies over surveillance capacities and privacy protection. Evidence from Britain shows that climate change news might have peaked in 2009 with about 4,217 items in the London *Times* (Tennant 2012). Biotechnology reached its news peak in 1999 during the 'great food debate' with 1,666 items in *The Times* (Bauer 2015: 188), the coverage of the 'internet' peaked in 2000 with 7,329 items (average across three newspapers, (Bauer 2015: 137)). Further comparisons are 'the Gulf War' in 1990 with 4,185 items, or the 'credit crunch' of 2008 with 5,320 items, both in *The Guardian* (Bauer 2015: 83). Considering these UK base-line comparators, 'inequality' falls far short of surges in news coverage of other topic such as the internet, climate change, the Gulf War of 1990, or the credit crunch of 2008. It is in fact more in line maybe with GM food in the late 1990s but only if we consider the wider semantic field of the term. Using the stricter term of 'single keyword search', inequality only amounts to one tenth the 'Great food debate' of 1999.

How might we explain this surge in media interest over 25 years? One possible answer might be that the increased news value simply is a direct reaction to rising levels of inequality in society. As inequality grows, so also does media attention and public interest. To investigate this possibility, we compiled data for the Gini coefficient for both the UK and the USA between 1990 and 2015. We found that the Gini increased noticeably for the USA across this period (41.8 to 45.4) but remained at roughly the same level in the UK (33.9 to 34.7). Even if the long-term in media coverage had corresponded to the rise in the US Gini coefficient this still raises the question of why there were fluctuations in the coverage of income inequality in the *New York Times* and in The *Wall Street Journal*. To put it another way, rising inequality cannot explain rising media attention because inequality rose only in one of the two countries while the Gini index rises regularly or stalls.

We conclude, that with regard to media salience: inequality news does not differ in intensity between the US and the UK (Figure 2). But, in contrast to McCall's analysis (2013) we find that it certainly increases in salience, particularly towards the end of the period. That said, inequality does not reach the critical mass that other news cycles have reached over the period. It compares at best with the GM food debate of the 1990s in Europe in terms of news volume, but it falls far short of events such as climate change, the credit crunch of 2008 or the Gulf War of 1990. Furthermore, our evidence indicates that the issue-attention cycle of inequality resembles that of a hype cycle often observed in scientific technological developments. As it grows within the academic literature, it unwinds a bi-modal surge of news in three phases: an initial alarm is followed by a calmer phase, after which the surge resumes into a different stage. For inequality, we find a first surge between 1990 and 199 that falls back in 2004/5, and a second surge in 2006 that drops back to 1998 levels in 2007/08 before re-doubling in intensity to 2015. Overall, the issue-attention cycle of inequality looks more like a techno-scientific hype-cycle than the kind of fully politicised issue-attention cycle we see with climate change. We conclude, that inequality has not yet reached the critical mass that is necessary to define a new social problem. But this leaves us with our second research question: has the framing of the media discourse of inequality shifted over time and if so, might this be consistent with an emerging politicisation of an issue-attention cycle?

## 6. Media Framing of Income Inequality

As indicated earlier, we are analysing the shifting narrative of inequality by examining four dimensions over time: the inequality frames, the emotional tone of the stories, the political slant of news coverage, and the sponsors or actors that are positioned in the discourse.

Different Frames of Income Inequality

A growing body of scientific research on an abstract topic is, of course, unlikely to generate headlines. Instead, the topic must resonate with journalists who, as gatekeepers, deem it newsworthy. Here a more fine-grained analysis of the actual news stories can provide insights into what journalists and their editors' think will capture public imagination. These secondary guesses of news value are our analytic frames of inequality. Each frame designates a complex narrative of what inequality is, who might be blamed for it, and what should be done about it, if anything. From close reading and qualitative analysis, we identified eight such frames (n=240; see Appendix 3 for frames and examples).

Considering two periods of pre and post credit crunch 2008, we find that the framing of inequality is indeed changing taking a different emphasis pre- and post -crisis. Generally speaking, the pre-period frames try to understand the phenomenon while post-crisis the emphasis is on how to manage it. Figure 3 shows the shifting proportions of each frame: *Conceptualization* and *Type of Change* had more than 70% of their mentions pre-crisis, while *Attribution Level* and *Policy Making*, had similar weight in the second period. Given this shift in frame structure, it is worth dwelling on their content.

Figure 3 : The shifting distribution of 'inequality frames' in the press pre- and post-crisis of 2008
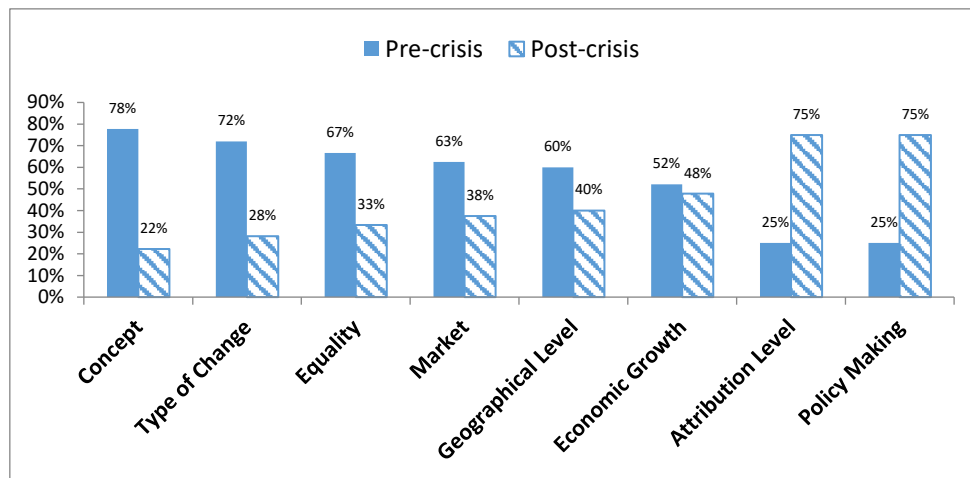
Notes: qualitative sample, N=240; pre = 1990-2007, post = 2008-2015.

Conceptualisation: As inequality is a relational concept, it is no surprise to find that the discussions are pre-occupied with indicators and comparisons. This frame covers comparison between the extremes of the pay distribution which serves to make an abstract concept that is not evident in everyday life easier to understand. 'Top versus the bottom' was a regular reference, where the top ten per cent of the income distribution was compared to the bottom ten percent. Another comparison, which featured initially in the US press was the ratio of 'CEO to worker pay'; worker pay being the median earning employee (i.e., *"the compensation of top CEOs was about 35 times the pay of the average employee in the mid-1970s; by 1990 the ratio had risen to 120"*, WSJ July 3rd, 1992). Temporal comparisons also come in here to highlight growing income inequality (i.e., *"If we want to get a valid measure of U.S. trends over the past two decades, all the same people in 1979--wherever they lived--should be compared with all the same people in the U.S. work force in 1999"*, *The Guardian*, April, 1991). It was of course research by economists that fed media coverage, with the result that a previously obscure measure such as the 'Gini coefficient' entered the public discourse to indicate growing inequality.

Type of Change: Another frame of inequality reflects something of an early consensus among economists on the causes of inequality. In this narrative, skill-biased technological change, notably in the form of computerisation, creates strong demand for skilled employees who can exploit the new technology. When combined with the subsequent skill shortages, the wages of these workers rise considerably. At the same time, developments in automation make it difficult for those in more repetitive forms of work to maintain a decent wage as their jobs are eliminated. And so it is through such skill biases of technology that wage inequality is exacerbated (Acemoglu 2002). The result is that journalists either point to technological change *'as the main driver of the growing earnings gap between high-skilled and low-skilled in the US and the UK'* [FT, October, 2004] or else explain the rise in inequality as the *'result of the demand for skilled, college-educated workers in an ever more high-technology workplace'* [NYT, January, 2002]. Our evidence [not shown] indicates that this was the frame most commonly used.

Another discourse on inequality that features in economic explanations is that of *Geography*. This frame compares level of inequality in different locations, and examines differential impact across the labour force as '*the earnings of the unskilled have been far more exposed to the pressures of low-wage competition from developing countries*' [FT, 42344, 1995]. As in the case of technology, rising inequality is attributed to abstract forces that seem both impersonal and inevitable. This sense of inevitability was also echoed in the *Market frame* which presented inequality as a necessary feature of a capitalist market economy; this narrative can also argue that this market effect is necessary even if it is also viewed as scandalous.

Attribution Level: A prominent frame of the post-crisis period discusses the level at which income inequality originated as a problem, and thus where remedies should be focused. Here articles ranged from attributing inequality to the behaviours of individuals (i.e., *"A better and more compassionate policy to fight income inequality would be helping the poor realize that the most important decision they can make is to stay in school, get married and have children -- in that order"*, WSJ January 23rd, 2014) to focusing on macro-level changes needed, such as cultural, ideological or structural changes. One side of the argument is neo-classical economics which assumes the market for labour is as competitive as the market for apple and pears and that workers with different characteristics, notably education and skill training, would earn different wages. By contrast, the institutional argument claims that 'the game is rigged' as structural barriers prevent the market from operating fairly. It follows that politics has to address the basic premises of how a market economy operates.

Policy Making: This frame links inequality to policies or to the rhetoric of political actors. Here we distinguished between old and new policies as we wanted to see if inequality was framed in such a way that it would suggest new kinds of policy solutions. This brings us to a core finding, which is that the way income inequality was presented did not lend itself to the creation of a radical new frame of economic injustice. This then meant that no 'novel solutions for a new problem' were proposed but rather, inequality was absorbed by the existing policy repertoire for dealing with poverty. That is, the discourse was dominated by such established measures as the raising of the minimum wage and the reform of the tax system for the low paid. We could identify no substantial shift in the discourse that addressed inequality *in toto*.

Sentiment of Income Inequality

To examine the overall tone of the reportage on income inequality, we coded the 'temper' of each article using four categories: Negative, Neutral, Positive and Contested and examined each for the presence of morality-laden words (i.e. 'inequality is not morally excusable'). For example, a neutral temper, most common with 42%, would entail articles that simply report statistics on the rise or fall of income inequality without judgement while contested articles (18%) would present different sides of contradicting arguments without taking sides (e.g. *"income inequality within the nation may rise but global inequality probably declines, especially if the new arrivals send money back home",* NYT, 2014). Positively (8%) or negatively (32%) tempered articles include value-laden and moral words in either direction. Significantly for our purposes, the neutrally and negatively tempered articles were the most common.

We examined changes in temper pre and post- crisis (Figure 4). Here we see that *Contested* framing declined over time, which is consistent with earlier findings indicating that the pre-crisis period focused more on the conceptualization and measurement of income inequality.

However, we do observe a rise from pre- to post-crisis in both negatively or positively tempered articles, which indicates a growing polarization in the framing of income inequality, with articles presenting less balanced positions on the topic and instead taking a more either/or approach to the presentation of the topic.

Figure 4: Comparing news temper of income inequality pre- and post-crisis in percentages of items (n=240)
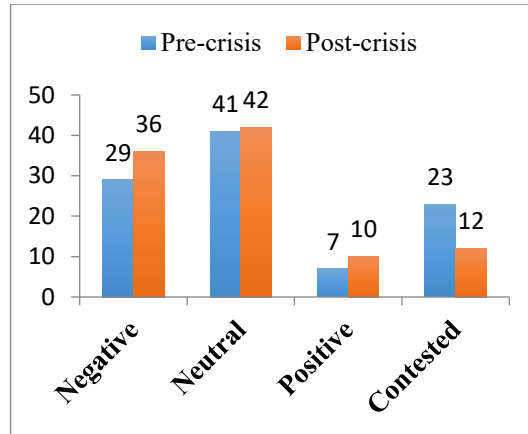
Similarly, we see an increase in morality-related keywords in the post-crisis dataset. Figure 5 illustrates the increase in four morality-laden words identified in the qualitative dataset; scandal, ill, obscene and appalling. Examples of these include discussing income inequality as an 'economic and social ill' (*Forbes*, 2005; NYT 2007) and 'greater inequality, apart from an appalling human cost...' (*Guardian*, 1992).

Figure 5: Comparing presence of morality keywords in articles on income inequality pre- and post-crisis in percentages of items (n=240); inequality is 'a scandal', 'ill', 'obscene' or 'appalling'.
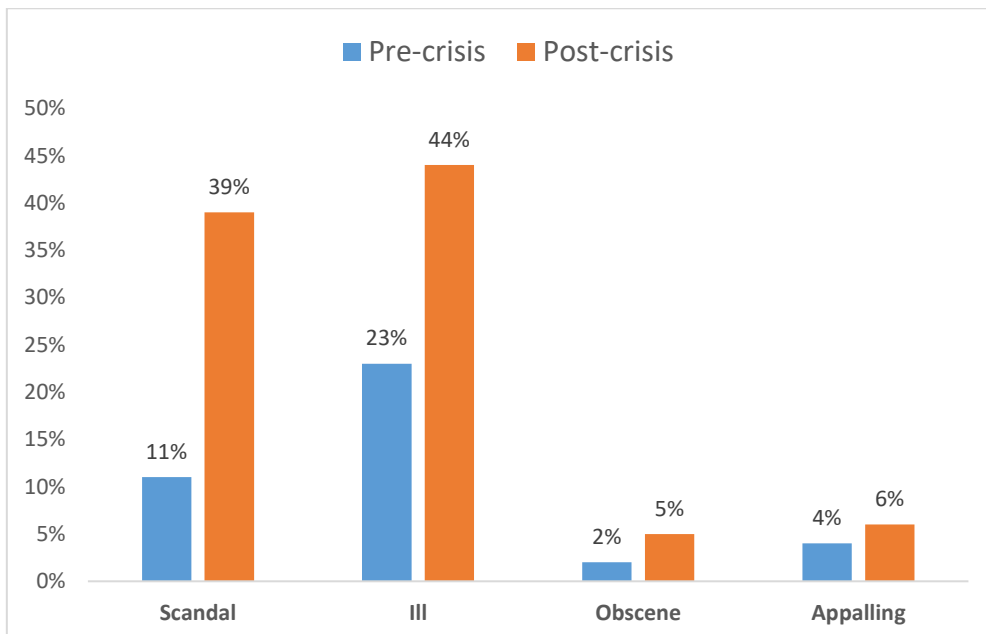
Political Slant of Income Inequality

We also assess whether the slant of the article is politically left or right leaning; for this we create a simple index, the rating of right-leaning [0-5] minus the rating of left-leaning [0-5]; this yields an index [range -4 to +4; M= -0.31; SD=1.41; MD=0; n=135]. Our analysis indicates that more of the frames are associated with the Left than with the Right; the association between frames and Left slant (Cramer's V = .32**) is stronger than with Right slant (V = .26 n.s.). Also, the 'attribution level' frame, in which inequality is ascribed to either individual or institutional causes, is strongly related to the Left (see Figure 6). That is, the tendency in this frame is to counter the argument that inequality is a simply a problem of individuals, their skill level or personality traits when it is society or the system that is rigged'.

Figure 6 shows how the political loading of frames shifts from pre- to post-2008 crisis. Pre-crisis there is an association of frames with political slant (V = .40**); for post-crisis this association is less clear (V = .38 n.s). Before 2008 'attribution', 'growth', 'market' and 'type' frames tend towards a Left argument, this is less the case after 2008. Post-crisis 'geographical', 'markets', growth, and 'equality' arguments tend to recruit more of a Right position. Overall, post-crisis these frames of inequality lose their clear political positioning, as both Left and Right are equally inclined to make use of the same frames.

Figure 6: Average political slant of inequality reportage in different frames, and pre and post-crisis
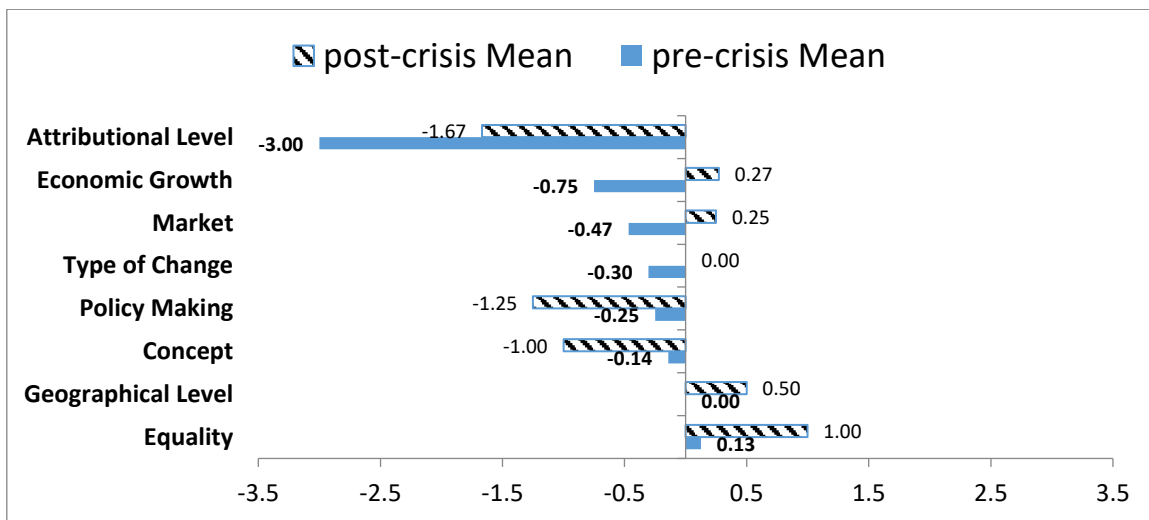

Notes: qualitative sample n=240. The slant scale ranges -4 to +4, with negative scores indicating left-liberal leaning, positive scores indicating right-market leaning.

Sponsors of Income Inequality Discourse

Finally, we are able to distinguish between applied economists working in think tanks and international organisations, academic economists working in universities, and party politicians (both left and right). We also investigated references to trade unions since they have traditionally been a force against inequality. What we found points to a discourse on income inequality with a clear Brahminic quality. That is, the discourse was generated mostly from within the ranks of experts and frequently by economists of different kinds (49%) though

politicians have some presence (43%). Examining the relative frequency of the different discourse sponsors over time (Figure 7) we find the professional or applied economists were the leading sponsors pre-crisis, with academic economists becoming slightly more involved in the early 2000s. Again, what is especially telling is political sponsorship did not move into the dominant position in a way that would indicate that the issue has moved from being a marginal concern to one that is squarely on the political agenda. Indeed, their degree of sponsorship is surprisingly unchanged even towards the end of the period when there is a dramatic increase in coverage of the topic.

Figure 7: Comparing presence of actors in articles on income inequality pre- and post-crisis in percentages of items (n=193, total articles with relevant sponsors).
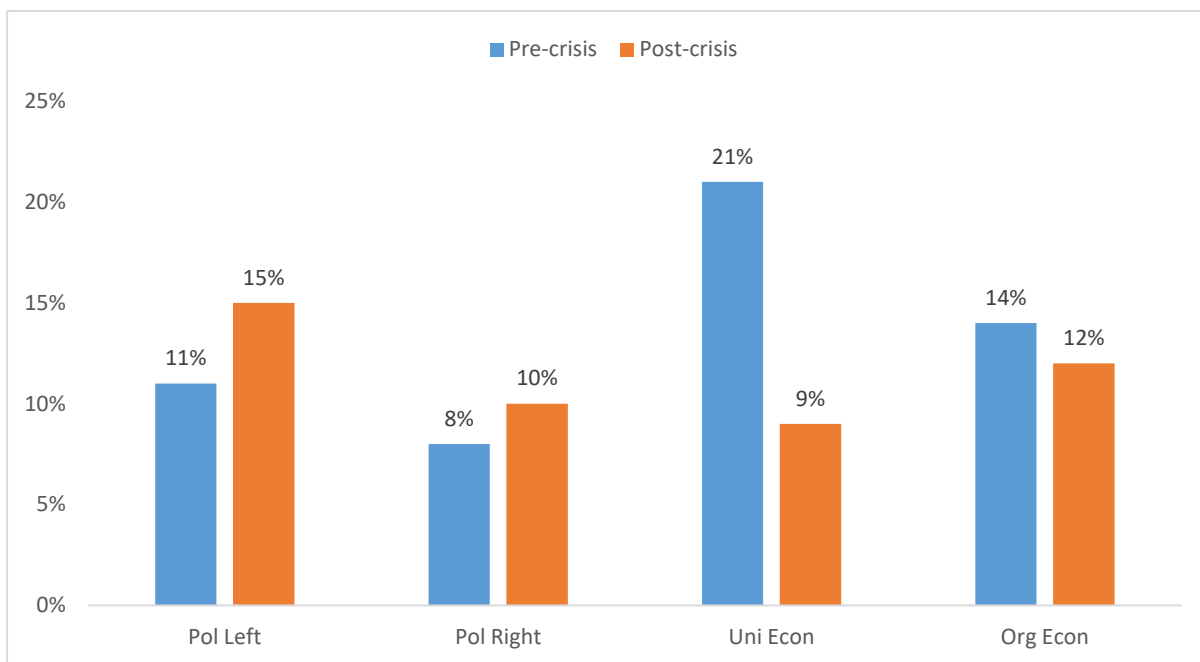
Another indication that the politicisation of inequality is limited comes from our evidence on trade unions. We find that the number of times that trade unions are mentioned across the period is relatively small. Though there is an increase in the number of articles on income inequality that mention unions after the 2008 crisis it could not be described as a major surge. In sum, there is nothing to indicate that the public discussion of income inequality has engaged the range of sponsors that might be associated with the kind of agenda setting that would characterize a new social problem.

7. Summary and Discussion: Why is there no 'Tawney moment'?

So why has the rise in income inequality not been accompanied by a change in public attitudes? We contend that part of the answer has to lie in the way the issue is covered by the mass media since it remains a key source of information about the economy. Mass media coverage of inequality was examined along two dimensions, salience and framing.

To summarise our factual findings on salience in three points:

a) Coverage of inequality news increased from 1990 to 2015 in the UK as well as in the US. It ran at the same levels of intensity in the UK and US newspapers and takes a similar trajectory over time.

b) At its peak in 2014, media attention levels could be compared to the European GM food debate of the late 1990s but it falls far short of peak news intensity recruited by the internet, climate change, the credit crunch and the Gulf War.

c) The mass media have limited processing capacity so a topic is likely to fluctuate over time and present itself as an issue cycle with a characteristic shape. The issue cycle of inequality shows two peaks and a trough: following the growth of academic research literature on inequality, we find an initial news alarm between 1990 and 1998, calming down to 2004/5, and a second stronger surge between 2006 and 2015, interrupted by the credit crunch of 2008. Overall, this issue cycle resembles a techno-scientific hype-cycle more than to fully politicised attention cycle such as that of climate change.

d) There is no direct correlation between changing measures of inequality as in Gini index and mass media coverage of inequality, neither in UK nor US; public attention to inequality needs to be understood as a societal response to a 'challenge', rather than a mechanical reaction to economic change.

We conclude, that inequality has not yet reached the critical mass that is necessary to become the kind of full-blown scandal that defines a new social problem in society. No Tawney moment has appeared, at least as yet, over inequality in the 21st century. Even so, it is still worth considering if the framing of the media discourse of inequality shifted over time and, if so, whether this might be consistent with at least the emerging politicisation of an issue-attention cycle.

e) The framing of inequality discourse is shifting from the initial surge pre-2008 to the second surge post-2008. Initially, the narratives focus on describing the key concept of inequality by using measurement comparisons and by explaining it in terms of an inevitable technology wage bias. Post crisis 2008, the discourse moves to frames that discuss political interventions at national and international level.

f) The alarm phase of inequality of the 1990s and early 2000s is dominated by expert voices; these are somewhat in retreat post-crisis of 2008, and are balanced somewhat by political voices. But the Brahminic nature of public discourse persists.

g) The fact that the different frames are more closely associated with political Left-Right slant pre-crisis than post-crisis 2008, suggests that the politicisation of inequality remained within clear limits over the period 1990 to 2015.

These observations on salience and framing of inequality suggests that while the issue gained in salience when it went through an alarm phase in the 1990s it has not been able to mobilise strong and distinct political voices promoting a radical new framing of the problem. This lack of mobilisation hints at a lack of resonance between the problem and the public both the UK and the USA. Why so?

How to explain the absence of a Tawney moment?

Rather than directly explaining this absence, we want to list a number of plausible explanations for it. Our observed facts regarding salience and framing are at least consistent with some explanatory inferences.

Firstly, we must acknowledge that our findings differ from McCall (2013) in that we not only have evidence of increased media attention for the UK but also for the US where her research is based. So the fact that income is an abstract concept that may be difficult to explain has not stopped it gaining substantial attention. However, we think her argument that it is hindered by the controversial nature of the most obvious remedy, namely income redistribution, is worth taking more seriously.

Secondly, and relatedly, we find that the framing of inequality is controversial in that it is absorbed by the established conflict between the political right and left over the way they view economic matters. Of course, the science of climate change was also contested but with the difference that 'inequality' is but a continuation of an ancient political contest between the right and the left; that is, between those who want to regulate markets and contain the excesses of capitalism and those who want to liberate markets to generate prosperity and wealth. Similarly, the 'attribution' frame, which contrasts individual versus institutional causes of inequality, pits a philosophy of individualism and individual failure or success against a discourse that presents inequality as a systemic feature of capitalism in which the game is rigged to favour the rich.

Thirdly, when it came to policy solutions it was therefore no surprise to find that the frames collapsed onto policies that were already part of the repertoires deployed by the left and right. These included, for instance, raising the minimum wage, increasing taxes on the rich, and investing in public education, especially in relation to new technology. We could find no evidence of a emergence of a new frame of economic injustice that was parallel to the environmental injustice frame that helped to mobilize the environmental movement (Taylor 2000). Specifically, no master frame of economic injustice emerged that brought together discourses on inequality into a new paradigm that suggested new kinds of policy measures.

Fourthly, compared to the issue of the 'environment', inequality does not seem to either recruit or form new actors. The discourse of inequality is led by social scientists, notably by economists who are based in agencies such OECD or the World Bank or at universities. If an issue is to gain attention and to become a recognized social problem, it needs to widen its field of actors. Again, this contrasts with the developments around the environment which produced ecologists in Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, as well as in Green parties in many countries, and, perhaps most impressively, on the international stage in the form of the IPCC (Radkau 2014). Also, when compared to the ecology where large scale disasters in the 1970s and 1980s concretised an abstract problem in the public eye (e.g. Exxon Valdez oil spill; Seveso or Bhopal chemical disasters), no such scandals of magnitude usher in the discourse of inequality beyond a temporary outcry about bankers during the financial crisis of 2008. However, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, which brings to light massive national and international inequality, could have the effect of changing this situation; but this is a matter of follow-up as it falls outside our period of observation.

Finally, when we examined whether politicians, trade unions and religious organisations became a significant voice on inequality, we found that neither politicians nor trade unions became prominent actors in a way that would indicate social mobilization around the issue. Instead, the dominance of economists, which was somewhat balanced by politicians in years after the 2008 crisis, indicates that the public discourse of income inequality seems Brahminic, that is, it takes the form of the popularization of an arcane science that is unable

to generate resonances with the wider public. As with 'evolutionary psychology' during the 1990s or 'sexology' in the early 20th century, an initial hype-cycle of public attention allows an academic field to grow on a newly found flow of funding and PhDs. In sum, the discourse on income inequality has not generated a Tawney moment up to 2015 because it has been unable to break through the left-right schemata that are the habitual frame of mind in the UK and US.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Keywords guiding data collection

Primary Keywords (12)	Secondary Keywords (6)	Tertiary Keywords (1)
Income Inequality	Inequality **OR** income distribution	Inequality **OR** income distribution **OR** wage differentials
Inequality	Inequality **OR** Wage distribution	
Salary Inequality	Inequality **OR** Wealth distribution	
Wage inequality	Inequality **OR** Wage differentials	
Economic inequality	Inequality **OR** Salary differentials	
Compensation inequality	Inequality **OR** Pay differentials	
Pay inequality		
Income *AND* inequality		
Salary *AND* inequality		
Wage *AND* Inequality		
Economic *AND* Inequality		
Pay *AND* Inequality		

Appendix 2: Qualitative codebook

Article number	ID number
Year	1990-2015
Newspaper	1 = Guardian UK 2 = Economist [UK weekly] 3 = New York Times US 4 = Financial Times UK 5 = Wall Street Journal US 6 = Forbes [US weekly]
Focal[3]: Is income inequality the focus of the story?	1. Yes 2. No *Criteria for Yes:* 1. Income, inequality, rich/poor in title, first three sentences and/or conclusion.
Frame:	1. Concept

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[3] Depending on whether an article was coded 1 (Yes) or 2 (No) it was either analysed in full or discarded from in-depth analysis.

How is income inequality framed in the discourse?	2. Equality 3. Market 4. Economic Growth 5. Attribution Level 6. Type of Change 7. Geographical Level 8. Policy Making 9. Other/ NA
Temper: How is II discussed?	1. Negative 2. Neutral 3. Positive 4. Contested 9. Other/ NA
Measurement: What kind of measure of II is used in the article?	1. Top-bottom comparison (Richest 10% vs. poorest 10%) 2. Temporal (1970s v. 1990s) 3. Gini coefficient 4. International (comparing countries) 5. CEO-worker comparison 6. Other 9. None
Sponsors: What actors are mentioned in the article in relation to II?	1. Politicians (Left-wing) 2. Politicians (Right-wing) 3. Economists (University-affiliated) 4. Economists (Organization-affiliated) 5. Other
Type of argument (Entman 2004):	1. Descriptive only 2. Descriptive and analytical 3. Full: Descriptive, analytical and policy recommendations 9. Other

Appendix 3: Income Inequality Frames and Examples

Frame	Description	Anchor 1	Anchor 2
1. Concept	Coded for when articles debate (or propose) how income inequality should be conceptualized; top-bottom comparison, family-individual incomes, country-comparison etc. and the various results (rising v. declining)	Concept: About Extremes The conceptualization is anchored in 'extremes'; top 10% v. bottom 10%, rich v. poor.	Concept: About everyone The conceptualization of income inequality is anchored in more broadly such as in household income comparisons, GINI and changes across time.
2. Equality	Discussed in relation to either	Equality: of Opportunity	Equality: of Outcome

	providing equal opportunity or equal outcome - some arguing that equal opportunity is already available but should not stifle intelligence and hard work, while others argue that true egalitarianism comes from equal outcomes.	Equality is about creating an equal starting-point for all, but not in regulating outcome (which is perceived as socialism).	Equality is about managing outcomes, where differences between social strata need to be remedied by government intervention.
3. Market	Income inequality is discussed in relation to market forces either as an inevitable outcome or as harmful for individuals and society.	Market: Necessary evil

Discussed as a necessary evil of a capitalist society, arguing that income inequality policy measures would only stifle economic productivity and growth with which would only make things far worse. | Market: Scandal

Discussed as a scandal or social evil when social ills (such as poverty, unemployment, health-care access etc.) were related to growing income inequality. |
| 4.   Economic ++++++++++Growth | Discussed as a trade-off between income inequality and economic growth. Jeopardy argument – tackling income inequality would risk economic decline. Or rising income inequality slows down growth. | Economic Growth: Freedom

When articles emphasize economic growth as more important than dealing with inequality as it risks slowing down productivity and economic growth. | Economic Growth: Regulation

When articles construct the need for institutional and government regulations on both social and economic issues so that income inequality does not rise, but also as a way to promote growth. |
| 5.Attribution Level | When article discussed whether II was an issue needing either individual remedies or, | Attribution Level: Individual problem

The scale 'individualized' when an article | Attribution Level: Institutional problem

The Scale of income inequality |

		placed emphasis on making poor people richer, helping them make better decisions etc. without addressing larger structural causes for their predicament.	was considered structural when it was discussed within the broader context of societal and institutional forces and actors.
6. Type of Change	When income inequality was caused by technological change leading to the need for more computer-friendly skilled workers with less need for manual labor etc. Or else change is viewed as an impersonal and neutral phenomenon.	Type of Change: Neutral Pace of change influences trends in income inequality; slower change leads to more stable income differences and equality. fast change produces noticeable inequalities	Type of Change: Skill Bias Technology is biased towards skill and education, meaning that technology favours high-skilled and highly educated members of society.
7.Geographical Level	When article places a nation's growing income inequality in a global context, (using international comparisons) to illustrate a general / natural trend among affluent nations, or to argue that while national income inequality may be growing nationally, globally it has been decreasing (thus being a defence of II).	Geographical Level: Global phenomenon Framing income inequality as a global trend.	Geographical Level: National phenomenon Framing income inequality as a national-level phenomenon, focusing on within-country changes.
8. Policy Making	When articles discuss income inequality in a largely political frame, meaning	Policy Making New policy remedies Cap CEO pay, restricting the rich	Policy Making: Existing policy remedies

	the issue is linked either to certain policies (wages, taxes etc.) or the rhetoric of specific political actors.		e.g., Raising minimum wage, strengthening trade unions, progressive taxation or anti-poverty measures.