



Communication about economic inequality: a systematic review

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Abstract

What do we know about representations of economic inequality in media, and how well does this account for media transformations like hybridization? This article uses a systematic review of academic literature on mediated communication about economic inequality, in order to assess the current state of research around salience, framing, explanatory factors and effects of this kind of inequality discourse. We find an overwhelming focus on legacy newspapers and a small number of Global North countries. We argue for research which builds further links between studies of economic inequality and the contemporary study of communication, including moving past obsolete models of media systems, decentering a small selection of Global North countries, and building a more comparative perspective on nationally-grounded inequality discourses.

Keywords: economic inequality, communication, interdisciplinarity, wealth inequality, digitalization, hybrid media system

Increasing economic inequality (i.e. disparities in income and wealth) is a core challenge for democracies and shapes the life trajectories of individual citizens and the cohesion of the political communities they inhabit (Savage, 2021). Particularly striking is the growing concentration of wealth at the top of the distribution: since the mid-1990s, the top 1% has captured 38% of global wealth increases (Chancel et al., 2022), while global income inequality has stabilized on a notoriously high level (Chancel & Piketty, 2021). Facing the scale of economic inequality and its tremendous negative consequences (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010), we need to understand potential remedies within democratic systems, including the critical role of communication.

In addition to understanding these changing inequality dynamics (e.g., increasing wealth concentration), contemporary research on the communicative dimension of inequality faces a second challenge: changing communication systems (e.g., digitalization and the declining centrality of traditional news media). Motivated by those two dynamics, we investigate the question: how is economic inequality represented in media? Reviewing 99 articles from the last 20 years, this article presents the most systematic literature review on mediated communication of economic inequality to date. It complements and goes beyond earlier attempts to review the field (Grisold & Theine, 2017, 2020) by including a significantly larger set of studies—as a result of both a more systematic search strategy and recent increase in publications in the field. In doing so, we provide evidence about how well the current literature reflects contemporary dynamics in the study of both economic inequality and media systems, providing insight into both what the literature does, and does not, address.

We start this article by justifying the focus of our review at the intersection of inequality studies and communication: in

the study of economic inequality, we summarize an increasing emphasis on subjective dimensions, and the role of wealth and elites; and in communication we describe a focus on disruptive transformations in media systems. We then lay out the steps of our corpus selection and analysis. In our first results section, we map the field in terms of prevalent disciplines, methods, studied media types and geographic focus. In our second results section, we summarize the findings of the studies in our corpus with regards to the nature and form of mediated debates on economic inequality, their contextual conditions, and their relationship to beliefs and attitudes about economic inequality. We end with a research agenda outlining five broad directions for future research: moving past obsolete models of the media system; decentering a small selection of Global North countries; avoiding reification of “economic inequality” through attention to its specific and varied forms; building towards a more comparative perspective on nationally-grounded inequality discourses; and bringing in the perspective of audiences in the reception of media texts.

Why (changing) media systems matter for understanding economic inequality dynamics

Our review is motivated by two potentially related developments in recent research: firstly, the increasing interest in socio-cultural processes within inequality studies; and secondly, the attention to processes of change in communication systems, such as digitalization, which are often viewed within communication studies as transforming dynamics of political communication and contestation. This leads to our interest to assess current research on representations of economic inequality in the media, in the context of changing communication systems.

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To start with, the increase in economic inequality within and across many countries has attracted substantial scholarly attention across the social sciences (e.g., Nolan *et al.*, 2019; Pfeffer & Waitkus, 2021).¹ Historically, inequality has been studied in its manifest forms—quantifiable differences in resources. However, in the last two decades, the object of scholarship shifted from studying distributions to the subjective and discursive dimension of economic inequality. Researchers are increasingly concerned with the subjective experience, evaluation and negotiation of objective levels of inequality (Lamont *et al.*, 2014). This work on the perceptual side of inequality is epitomized in findings such as that people tend to think about themselves as being somewhere in the middle of the distribution regardless of their actual position (e.g., Friedman *et al.*, 2021); and the general underestimation of inequality (e.g., Clark & d'Ambrosio, 2015; Norton & Ariely, 2011). These (mis-)perceptions matter: if people know about the “true” distribution of, for example, inherited wealth, they are also more likely to support its taxation (Bastani & Waldenström, 2021). Closely intertwined, scholars became fascinated with economic elites and the emergence and reproduction of dynastic family structures. In this vein, scholars have branched out to study media coverage of wealthy elites (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2017; Adamson & Johansson, 2021; Waitkus & Wallaschek, 2022) and their public relations strategies (Kantola & Vesa, 2022).

Alongside developments in inequality dynamics, scholars have described transformative changes in media systems. Blumler described a “fourth age of political communication” (Blumler, 2016) in which individuals experience high personal efficacy in their capacity for communication while feeling unable to intervene in political systems. Chadwick's (2017) theoretical model of the “hybrid media system” shares Blumler's emphasis on increasing complexity, interdependence, and polycentrism in contemporary communication. Public sphere theory has also emphasized the transformative effects of digitalisation, with the result being greater disruption and “dissonance” (Pfetsch, 2018) in democratic politics, and a public of more highly differentiated “spherules” (Bruns, 2023).

A recurring theme in narratives around changing media is that the centrality of legacy news has drastically decreased. Instead of “the media” being represented by quality news outlets, we observe declining trust in institutional press (Reese, 2021) and the increasing significance of alternative news media, especially from the right political spectrum. These alternative sources perform markedly different roles within specific debates and broader democratic systems (Holt *et al.*, 2019). Meanwhile, news organizations are increasingly reliant on digital platform intermediaries to reach fragmented audiences, with these platforms disrupting the established business models of news organisations and setting rules about how news circulates through political systems (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Legacy news has lost an integrative role which in turn calls into question central communication theories such as gatekeeping, elite-driven framing processes, or indexing (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Given that elite-driven framing processes have usually been understood as highly consequential in shaping media representations of economic inequality (e.g., Bell & Entman, 2011), this shift towards a

more fragmented media system has significant potential implications for the strand of literature we review in this paper.

In parallel, scholars have observed the rise of networked citizen communication and its far-reaching and multifaceted effects. In positive terms, digital networked communication structures (e.g., social media platforms) can offer citizens and social movements new possibilities to exercise democratic power and engage in “connective action” (a framework developed partly through a case study of Occupy Wall Street in Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). However, networked communication structures have been also associated with problematic developments: social media has been linked to processes of ideological and affective polarization through mechanisms of selective exposure to like-minded media (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Networked communication structures have also been linked with the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016) that undermine the capacity of citizens to agree on basic facts, let alone achieve higher levels of deliberative quality. Yet whether networked communication is viewed as a source of citizen agency or a threat to cohesive political communities, a common thread is that greater attention must be paid to citizen conversations and interactions (both face-to-face and in person) in also acting as a driver of news, rather than just mediating its reception (Shah *et al.*, 2017). In Couldry's (2024) most recent book, he argues that social media's restructuring of the “space of the world” has material consequences for the politics of climate change by undermining the possibility for genuine solidarity—but as he himself states, the core arguments could as easily be applied to the politics of inequality.

Research design

Based on these observations, this literature review aims to answer one research question: what are the key findings in academic research on mediated communication about economic inequality? In doing so, we pay particular attention to how effectively this literature has addressed contemporary inequality dynamics and changes in the media systems. To answer our research question, we collected and systematically analyzed published academic research on mediated communication about economic inequality.

We applied four inclusion criteria to define the scope for our review. First, we only considered publications in English. Second, the time of publication ranges from 2003 to the close of data collection in September 2024, enabling a 20-year window for analysis. Third, publications had to be academic journal articles, books or book chapters, which excluded unpublished theses and grey literature. Fourth, to be considered for our analysis scholarly work had to deal substantially with communication *about* economic inequality. The publications had to study discourses on the topic of economic inequality and this specific combination of concepts had to form part of the research question, methods, data or key findings. Here, we defined both core concepts inclusively. Economic inequality included both disparities in income and wealth. Communication included messages from various speakers (journalists, politicians, social movements, citizens) in different media types (e.g., news, social media).

The last point is worth spending more time with as it has the most far-reaching implications for the scope of our review. Communication *about* economic inequality is only one

¹ The same is true to varying degrees regarding interest in other forms of inequality (e.g., in health, education, or political participation), which are, however, outside of the scope of this review.

dimension of the multifaceted relationship between communication and inequality. To start with, there is an extensive literature on inequalities *in* communication, such as Helsper's (2021) work relating digital opportunities around access, literacy and engagement to other structural inequalities or Napoli's (2024) work on informational inequalities. There is a separate strand of work on inequalities *as a driver of* (particular kinds of) communication, such as misinformation (Nieminen, 2024). Finally, media sociology has engaged with discourses about social inequalities, for example in work by Waisbord (2014) and Pollock (2013, 2015), as well as disparities on various indicators and between various social groups, such as health inequalities (Pollock & Storey, 2012). Our review does not deal with these other aspects of the communication-inequality relationship despite, or even because of the richness of these literatures and their potential interrelatedness with the topic of our article. However, narrowing the scope of our review enables us to provide a comprehensive, systematic and nuanced review of our more specific topic.

Based on these scoping criteria, we constructed our corpus in several steps. We started by constructing a low-precision, high-recall sample from two sources. This included (a) relevant articles drawn from prior knowledge and pre-existing literature reviews on closely related questions (Grisold & Theine, 2017, 2020); as well as (b) a search of three databases (Scopus, Web of Science and Communication & Mass Media Complete) using a search string reflecting the above criteria ($N_{\text{Studies}}=1371$).² We then manually reviewed all retrieved studies and applied the above relevance criteria to reduce the dataset to "true matches" ($n=179$). We also added five studies using a snowball sampling in which we took single studies from the work suggested by the ResearchRabbit.ai tool. After removing duplicates, and a final filtering of studies upon a detailed analysis of relevance and/or quality, we ended with a corpus of 99 relevant pieces of research (see [Supplementary Material](#) for the full corpus).

The analysis of our corpus proceeded in two steps. First, we coded a set of variables to allow a bibliographic mapping of the field. These variables included: the use of empirical data; academic discipline according to Scimago categories listing (for journal articles only); geographic scope of countries analyzed; media analyzed; and method according to inductively aggregated categories (with the last three variables mostly related to empirical research). In the second step, we engage with the corpus in a more qualitative way. For each study, we summarized research question(s), key finding(s), and how the work conceptualized both inequality and the media. In iterative rounds, we then coded abstracts and our summaries for themes, sorted these themes, and re-visited studies for further findings and details.

² The search string we used was: "TITLE-ABS-KEY ("wealth inequality" OR "income inequality" OR "economic inequality" AND {media} OR {news} OR {communication} OR {facebook} OR {twitter} OR {Reddit}) AND PUBYEAR > 2002". The first set of keywords isolate relevance for economic inequality topics by demarcating the key alternative formulations (economic, income and wealth). The second set of keywords isolates relevance for communication (media, news and communication). We additionally included several terms specific to digital media; this is because we expected that the inequality literature had engaged minimally with digitalised communication. To provide greater confidence in any potential null result, we added these extra search terms. In Scopus, we excluded results with the copyright statement "Springer Science+Business Media" in the abstract since this returned a very high number of false positives in response to our search string. A pilot review of a subsample revealed that filtering these false positives in bulk did not skew retrieval of true positive matches.

We believe our data set provides the most comprehensive research on the topic so far. Having said this, we want to acknowledge the limitations of our approach. First, using the specific search term "economic inequality" means that our sample does not extend to related topics of poverty, wealth, and redistribution unless they explicitly mention "inequality". Relatedly, our search will only have picked up social psychological studies on message effects if the stimuli were labelled "media messages". Finally, subjectivity and partial knowledge may have biased corpus construction when it comes to (a) the initial seed list of references known to the authors, (b) the snowball sampling, and (c) definition of the threshold for whether research deals "substantially" with the themes of the literature review—though we attempted to mitigate the last point by flagging and discussing borderline cases among three co-authors.

A bibliographic mapping of the field

When describing the composition of the studies in our corpus, we made six notable observations. First, scholarly interest in the topic has steadily increased over the past 20 years—and in particular since 2015 (see [Figure 1](#)). In general, there are markedly more empirical than theoretical publications. Second, we find that the scholarly interests clustered around several cases: the Occupy movement in 2011, the English publication and reception of Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* from 2014, and to a lesser extent the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. These high-profile events may also explain some of the heightened scholarly interest. The remaining studies either deal with single cases which did not reoccur elsewhere in our review, or analyzed communication over longer time periods—in the most pronounced instances datasets spanning over 100 years (e.g., McArthur & Reeves, 2022; Peters et al., 2022).

Third, scholars used a variety of methods with text analytical methods being the most common approach. Among those, (qualitative and quantitative) content analysis and discourse analysis were most prevalent, with corpus linguistics being slightly and computational analysis (e.g., topic modeling) being markedly less widely-used (see [Figure 2](#)). Surveys and experiments were represented to a lesser degree. Fourth, newspapers were the dominant type of medium (see [Figure 2](#)). This is a finding of utmost importance giving the large-scale transformations in contemporary media systems that we previously outlined. It also implies that the key findings of the existing literature, which we discuss in the next section, relate primarily to news in print media. The focus on newspapers was not tied to a particular methodological approach.

Fifth, the general Western-centric bias in academic publishing was evident in this strand of research too. This will have been reinforced by our focus on publications in English, but is nevertheless notable and concerning. The most commonly studied countries in our corpus were the United States ($n=38$), the UK ($n=31$), and Germany ($n=15$). In comparison, only 11 studies explicitly analyzed communication in countries from the Global South, with an overrepresentation of English-speaking countries (e.g., South Africa as present in four of these). Finally, we found that the scholarly debate happened mainly in communication ($n=26$) and sociology and political science ($n=26$), and to a far lesser degree in cultural studies ($n=6$) and economics, econometrics and finance ($n=5$).

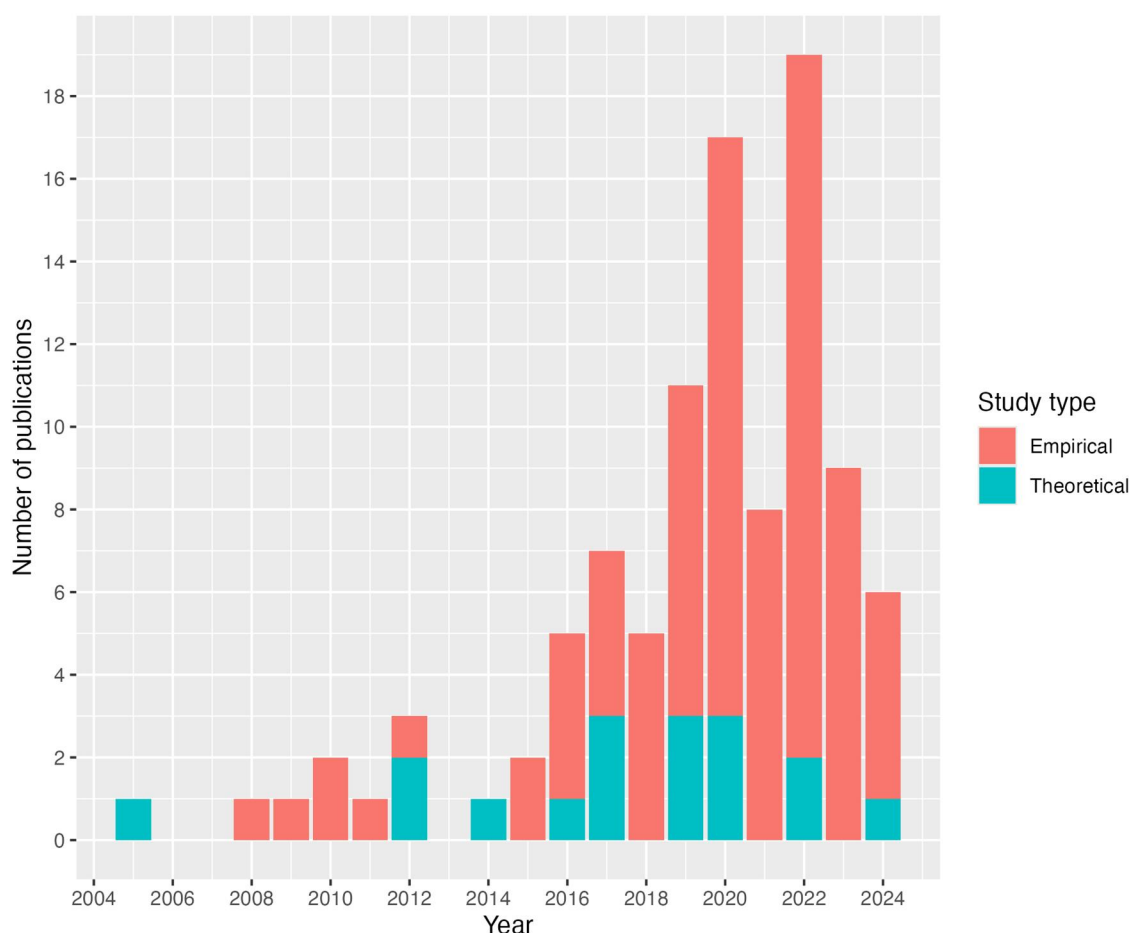


Figure 1. Publications over time.

A review of the core findings of the field

In this section, we review the substantial core findings of the studies from our corpus. We first present findings on typical characteristics of inequality discourse, proceed to factors that shape this discourse, and finish with consequences of that discourse. For each core finding, we present a few exemplary studies and reference other studies that addressed similar research questions.

The portrayal of economic inequality in media discourses

The most fundamental question to ask is how often economic inequality is featured in media debates. We did not find any study that provides a systematic answer encompassing different types of inequality, media and country contexts. The existing literature is not fully conclusive, but suggests that attention to economic inequality is rising somewhat, albeit from low levels. Whereas McCall (2013) found no obvious increase in reporting on income inequality in the United States between 1980 and 2010, Thomas (2020) documented minimal increases from 2007 to 2014, yet from low baselines levels, where 4% of all television news items in the UK referred to income inequality, wealth or poverty). Other studies have on the other hand claimed a modest increase in economic inequality's media salience following the 2008 financial crisis (for the UK media, see McGovern et al. 2023; Savage & Vaughan, 2024; for rising interest in “global inequality” in this time window see Christiansen, 2023).

Finally, research from around the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized that economic inequality was crucial to the overall construction of the crisis, although it is not clear whether this is part of a longer-term increase in issue salience at this stage (Knowles et al., 2024; Lee & Song, 2022; Odriozola-Chéné et al., 2020).

The pressing next question is how economic inequality is discussed when it is part of media debates. A major portion of studies in our corpus dealt with interpretations of inequality, mostly working with a (more or less narrowly defined) “framing” concept (Entman, 1993). A handful of studies suggest inequality was regularly introduced as a cause of concern in media coverage. Bank (2017) analyzed inequality-related articles in two German quality newspapers and found that more articles raised concerns about increasing levels than downplaying or denying the problem. Grisold and Preston (2020) found that the majority of news media in four European countries covered Thomas Piketty's best-selling book *Capital in the 21st Century* in largely positive terms and agreed with its basic premise about rapidly growing inequality. Inequality was problematized in terms of violating the moral ideal of fairness and its association with undesirable outcomes, such as the erosion of social cohesion, economic stagnation, or democratic backsliding (for an analysis of the Piketty debate, see Grabner et al., 2020; for the broader inequality discourse in Germany, Smith Ochoa, 2020).

Despite showing awareness of the problems associated with economic inequality, media debates (seem to) tend to relativize the urgency of these problems. For example,

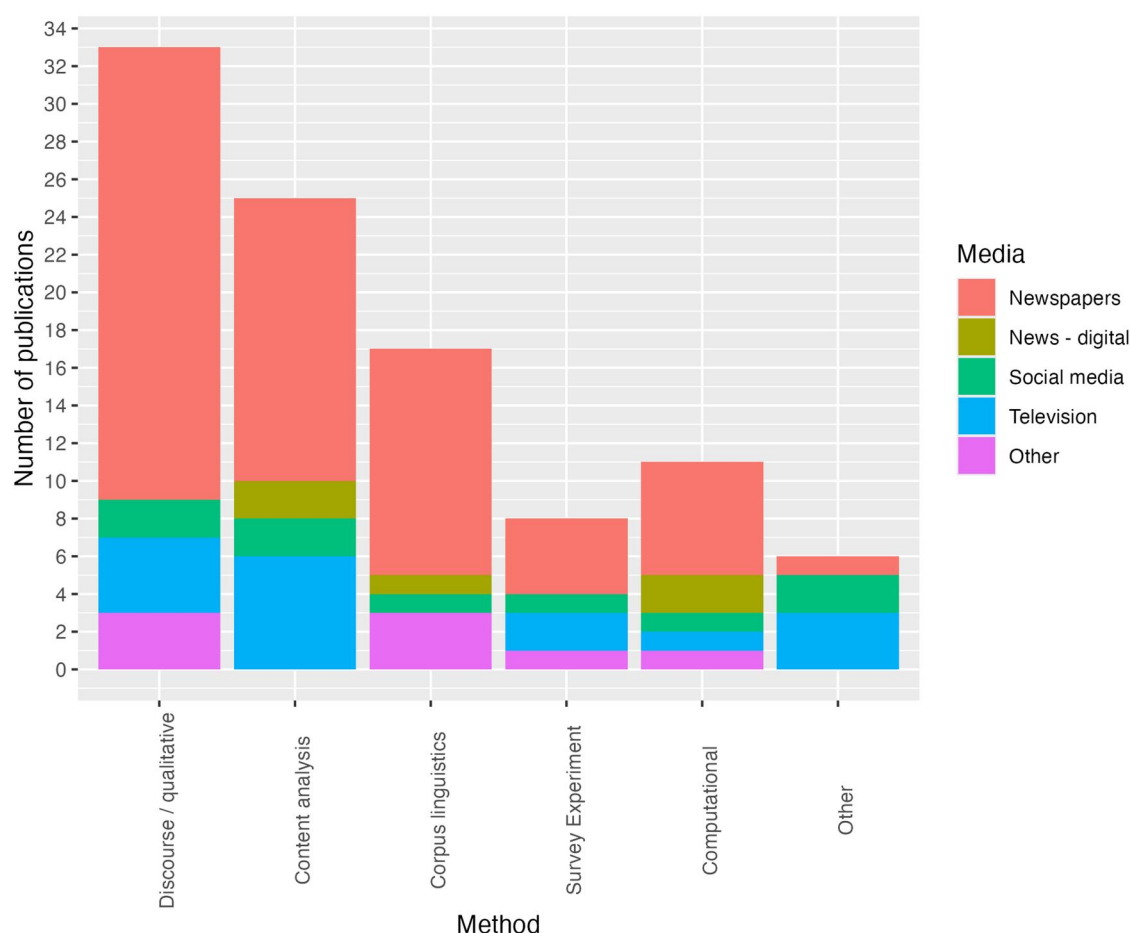


Figure 2. Methods, used by type of media (empirical studies only).

Grisold and Silke (2020) documented that a considerable portion of the coverage of Piketty's book denied its core claim about rising inequality, usually questioning his methods and data (see also Grisold & Silke, 2019). Other work suggests that media in the United States and the UK commonly portrays inequality as an inexorable result of globalized market forces and technological change (Champlin & Knoedler, 2008; McGovern et al., 2023). Finally, some studies suggest that inequality is regularly presented as the lesser of two evils and justified with reference to trickle-down effects, meritocratic notions of fairness, and the importance of competition for innovation (for the Piketty debate, Grisold & Silke, 2020; Grisold & Theine, 2020; for the broader German discourse, Smith Ochoa, 2020).

Presenting inequality as something inevitable and even functional predetermines what could and should be done about it. Several studies in our corpus investigated how debates on economic inequality were linked to debates about redistributive policies. The literature is rich and shows a high level of agreement that redistribution is usually met with skepticism in media debates. As expected, lower concerns about inequality usually went hand in hand with lower support for redistribution. Arguments against redistribution warned about job losses and economic harms; were silent about the benefit of a small affluent group; framed the policies as unfairly burdening the collective; and questioned the feasibility, scope, and effectiveness of individual policies and state interventions in general. At the same time, they glorified entrepreneurial innovation; underlined the collective benefits

of economic growth; suggested the value of trickle-down effects; and endorsed merit and individual responsibility for success. In some cases, scholars even came to the conclusion that the coverage did not allow for a sound evaluation of proposed policies (for television and newspaper debates on tax cuts and redistributive policies in the US, see Bell & Entman, 2011; Boxman-Shabtai, 2024; Champlin & Knoedler, 2008; Limbert & Bullock, 2009; for discourses on child poverty and maternity leave in the UK, see Gomez-Jimenez, 2018; Toolan, 2020; for news discourses on redistribution in German-speaking countries, see Bank, 2017; Dammerer et al., 2023; Emmenegger & Marx, 2019; for debates on minimum wage in South Korea, see Park & Kaye, 2022; for the Piketty debate, see Grisold et al., 2020; Grisold & Theine, 2020; Rieder et al., 2020).

With regard to the link between inequality and redistribution, a last notable observation was that media debates remained within a reformist framework. McGovern et al. (2023) argued that no radical new frames transcending left-right divisions had entered the UK media discourse in the post-2008 period. This resonates with findings from Germany that public critics of inequality solely proposed established policy measures to alleviate it (Smith Ochoa 2020) and that party politics and the need for compromise dominated the debate on wealth and inheritance taxation (Theine & Rieder, 2019). This tendency has been corroborated by first studies from the vastly differing contexts in the Global South: Li et al (2024) documented that social media discussions in China focussed on economic development

rather than redistribution, and saw “no shift towards drastic wealth redistribution or populist measures” (p. 20). Şen (2023) analyzed Twitter communication of parties in Türkiye during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding only minor differences across the political spectrum and that economic issues “were ignored or tried to be solved by tentative methods” (p. 50).

Our search string also picked up a considerable portion of studies that studied economic inequality along with poverty and wealth. These studies suggest that inequality, wealth and poverty are hardly discussed together in the media despite the fact that the concepts are structurally and analytically closely related (Butterwegge, 2020). Mack (2022) posited that television in the UK has either focused on the poor or the rich, yet not presented their destinies as interconnected in the last four decades (see also Lugo-Ocando & Lawson, 2022). Even if the rich and the poor were contrasted, representations sometimes helped to gloss over structural economic inequalities and pointed to individual merit, as Márquez (2012) showed for US media.

The remaining studies usually focused either on poverty or wealth. These studies found repeatedly that poverty was predominantly framed in ways that highlighted personal failures and unfortunate individual circumstances and obfuscated its socio-structural roots and, thus, political nature (for media portrayals in the United States, see Epp & Jennings, 2020; Silver & Boyle, 2010; Winslow, 2010; for center- and right-wing newspapers in the UK, see McArthur & Reeves, 2022; for a poverty on a global scale, see Lugo-Ocando & Harkins, 2021; for portrayals of the urban poor, see Macek, 2019; for a recent general overview of the field, see Power & Devereux, 2024). In stark contrast, the empirical studies suggest that the portrayal of economic elites is, overall, rather favourable. Waitkus and Wallaschek (2022) demonstrated that the personal conduct of wealthy business owners in German media was seldomly criticized and that their wealth was juxtaposed with references to their indispensable contributions to the economy (for a similar analysis of Australian discourse on philanthropists, see Liu & Baker, 2016). Jaworski and Thurlow (2017) argued that media coverage deflected attention from the privileges of the most affluent segments of society by creating “lurid spectacles” (p.276) that mocked and celebrated the lifestyles of a few outstanding hyper-rich individuals. Carr *et al* (2023) concluded that UK television programs offer wealthy heirs a range of interpretive maneuvers to downplay privilege and maintain “the illusion of meritocratic conditions.” A markedly different finding is offered by Feldman and Moraga Núñez (2023) who show how right-wing populist actors in Peru construct and discredit their opponents in Peru as the “caviar left”—benefiting economically from their activism despite making public claims for greater equality.

The factors shaping media discourses on economic inequality

We now turn to the question of why media debates about economic inequality look the way they do. The literature exhibits significant heterogeneity. Scarcely two studies have examined the influence of the same specific contextual factor on a specific, narrowly defined aspect of the discourse. Nevertheless, a number of tentative patterns emerged.

A first recurring interest of scholars is the extent to which media coverage responds to changing inequality within a

society. As described in the previous section, media coverage seems to be more responsive to crises like the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic than to changes in the objective levels of economic inequality. McArthur and Reeves (2022) found that the language used to describe the poor in UK media became more stigmatizing when unemployment rose, yet this trend was reversed once unemployment rose above a threshold of about 10%. Similarly, Epp & Jennings (2020) found that frames that attribute poverty to individuals’ wrong decisions were more prevalent in times of higher inequality in US newspapers. Jacobs *et al* (2021) found indications for “class-biased economic reporting”: the overall positivity or negativity of economic reporting in the United States tended to reflect the welfare of the most affluent (largely due to the tendency to report aggregate economic performance).

The mixed findings could be a hint that long-term developments in the media sector may have moderated the pressure to report on rising inequality. Mack (2022) argued that UK broadcasting has extended its entertainment content over the last decades at the cost of hard news (and therefore news about inequality) as a result of commercialization and a broad neo-liberal consensus at the political center (for a similar argument for the US, see Guardino, 2019). In line with these arguments, Thomas (2020) demonstrated empirically that the public broadcaster BBC featured more inequality-related news segments than the commercial ITV network in the wake of the financial crisis from 2008 to 2014 (but see Park & Kaye, 2022). Finally, Benson (2005) argued in their study of US news on immigration that it was not just commercialization, but the stronger valorization of ethnic and racialized identities that reduced attention to economic inequalities and labor perspectives.

Many of the studies in our corpus draw on political economy approaches and, thus, stress the influence of ideology and political interests as well as pressures from commercialization. First, ownership structures in the media seemed to matter: several studies suggest that liberal/progressive newspapers more often treated economic inequality as a cause of concern, treated inequality as a structural problem, and supported redistribution compared with conservative newspapers (for Germany, see Bank, 2017; for the United States, see Baumann & Majeed, 2020; for the UK, Knowles *et al.*, 2024; for South Korea, Ha & Shin, 2016). Second, with regard to the (direct or indirect) influence of political parties and their representatives, preliminary evidence suggest that media attention can increase if it becomes subject of intra- or inter-party debate (for the influence of the US president’s agenda, see Eshbaugh-Soha & McGauvran, 2018). Relatedly, Song (2023) argued that Chinese state media would suppress certain elements in the reporting of economic inequality to maintain the government’s image as a socialist regime.

Third, many articles in our corpus allude to the influence of wealthy individuals on the media agenda. Existing research points towards information brokerage, frame-setting and back-stage advocacy by lobby groups representing business interests, as well as the power of large corporate advertisers and ownership concentration (for the debate on wealth and inheritance tax in Switzerland and Austria, see Dammerer *et al.*, 2023; Emmenegger & Marx, 2019; for the dominance of neo-liberal ideology in the US media, see also Guardino, 2019; for communication strategies of the wealthiest 0,1%, see Kantola & Vesa, 2022; for the role of marketing in shaping journalistic practices

in lifestyle journalism, see [Banjac & Hanusch, 2022](#)). Fourth, civil society may also influence media debates. In this regard, the studies in our corpus dealt exclusively with the Occupy Wall Street movement, suggesting that the movement increased the salience of inequality in the media notably and beyond its hot phase in the United States and Canada ([Baumann & Majeed, 2020](#); [Gaby & Caren, 2016](#)), yet not necessarily elsewhere (for the UK, [Thomas, 2020](#)).

The mixed findings we have reported above could be an indicator that media debates on inequality—and even the influence of certain factors on these debates—vary from country to country, or region to region. Comparative evidence is very limited, but enough to suggest that country-level factors matter. For example, [Rieder et al. \(2020\)](#) found slightly less positive coverage of Piketty's book in Germany, compared to the UK, Austria and Ireland. [Baumann and Majeed \(2020\)](#) learned that Canadian newspapers were more likely to introduce socio-structural determinism as a reason for inequality and poverty than US newspapers, even though there were also notable differences between the Canadian outlets. In the most systematic manner so far, [Carbone and Mijs \(2022\)](#) showed that popular songs that made allusions to meritocracy were more popular in countries which were more equal and where individuals had stronger beliefs in meritocracy.

The influence of media discourses on economic inequality

Much scholarly work on media discourses on inequality is motivated by the assumption that these debates matter for how societies think about and act with regard to inequality. Although the question of the influence of media discourses on inequality is no longer “virtually unaddressed” as [Friedland et al. \(2012, p. 288\)](#) concluded 10 years ago, it is still in a nascent stage. There are no two studies in our corpus that test the same relationship, although several core themes recur.

The majority of studies asked whether framing can impact individuals' support of redistribution. These studies usually use quasi-experimental data to show that support for redistribution policies decreased when poverty was attributed to personal failures (rather than social structuring; [Epp & Jennings, 2020](#)). In contrast, support for redistribution policies increased when economic inequality was framed as lower-class disadvantage (rather than upper-class advantage) and when redistribution was portrayed as disadvantage-reducing (rather than advantage-reducing; [Dietze & Craig, 2021](#)). Observational data supports these notions: the prevalence of personal failure frames in real-life media coverage correlated with lower public support for social welfare (even in lower-income segments; [Epp & Jennings, 2020](#)). Moreover, US-Americans who habitually consumed entertainment TV that emphasizes ‘rags-to-riches’ narratives were more confident about social mobility and less supportive of redistribution ([Kim, 2023](#)). Finally, [Song \(2023\)](#) found that users of state-owned media in China tended to provide lower estimates of inequality than users of internet media—reflective of the aforementioned framing in Chinese state-owned media.

Other studies tested the effects of different message features, usually again linking back to inequality perceptions or support for redistribution. In a survey in Colombia, [Coppini and Rojas \(2018\)](#) observed that higher news consumption went hand in hand with lower perceived levels of income inequality, whereas exposure to soap operas had the opposite effect. [Thal \(2020\)](#) showed that the celebration of economic

successes among peers on Facebook can make affluent US-Americans more conservative about economic policies. [Brown et al. \(2023\)](#) found that messages informing participants about racial disparities in the United States had greater effects on social media engagement and disparity-mitigating policies in the context of health than in the context of poverty, suggesting that racialized economic inequalities are perceived as less transgressive of sacred moral values. [Hughes \(2015\)](#) randomly varied the scaling on a figure so that it was more or less congruent with information provided about inequality in a text. When the graph was less obvious in its support of the information in the text, Republican and conservative participants reported a staggering 40% decrease in support for interventions against inequality. [Sánchez-Rodríguez et al. \(2024\)](#) found that international organizations were more persuasive as a source of information about economic inequality than left-wing parties. [Neimanns \(2021\)](#) investigated effects on the societal level showing that support for redistributive policies is lower in European countries in which media ownership is more concentrated (controlling for various individual- and country-level factors).

Finally, [Kósa and Balint \(2022\)](#) provide the only study in our corpus that focus on when audiences turn to inequality-related coverage. They found that participants were more likely to select news headlines about the rich while in a negative mood. In contrast, participants were more likely to choose headlines about the poor when in a more positive mood.

Summary and future research agenda

We systematically reviewed the literature on mediated communication about economic inequality spanning the last 20 years, identifying 99 relevant research studies, primarily from sociology, political science, and communication studies. Scholarly interest has notably surged since 2015, in the aftermath of events like the Occupy movement, Piketty's book release, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the empirical literature is disparate and does not allow for definite statements, we are confident about the following five key findings.

First, there is no clear consensus on whether economic inequality has become a (more) prominent topic in media coverage during the dramatic increase of objective levels of inequality in many societies over the last decades, although small increases have been documented in the post-2008 period and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the media often portrays inequality as an issue of concern linked to the erosion of social cohesion and democratic risks. Despite this, there is a tendency to relativize inequality, make it seem inevitable and even justified—for instance, by using tropes of meritocracy. Third, redistribution policies and the population groups that would benefit from them frequently encounter skepticism or outright resistance in media coverage. In stark contrast, economic elites tend to enjoy favorable depictions, are rarely criticized, and the linkage between wealth and inequality remains underreported. Fourth, commercialization, political orientation of media owners and political interests play a substantial role in shaping media coverage. Finally, media messages matter since they have the power to impact individuals' understanding of inequality and their stances on redistribution.

In the remainder of the article, we turn to a more general reflection about future research around media discourses on

economic inequality. It is welcome that we have moved past Preston's diagnosis (2016, p. 52) in 2016 that the study of media communication of economic inequality is "greeted by 'significant silences' by much of the communication, media and journalism studies fields". Nevertheless, we argue here for five areas where steadily mounting interest in recent years can be further built upon.

First, and in stark contrast to the motivations of this review, we found a dramatic absence of studies that reflect the deep transformations in our media systems. Past research largely draws on newspapers and other legacy media. Only a few studies explored the nature and impact of digitalized discourses of economic inequality (e.g., Song 2023; Thal 2020). As a broad mission statement, we suggest that future research decenters newspapers—both empirically as sources of data, and theoretically in the conceptualization of political communication processes like agenda-setting. Going hand in hand, scholars should analyze communication by and among networked citizens beyond case studies of social movements. Attention to these shifts may provide a richer understanding of deepening inequality in several ways, for example, by highlighting disruption of the "liberal script" and the strengthening of illiberal actors (Knüpfer, 2023), or by pinpointing barriers to online mobilization created by platform ecosystems (Vaughan *et al.*, 2023). More generally, building further links between inequality studies and communication studies requires actively interpreting rather than avoiding the present disconnect—namely that inequality scholars seem to perceive media systems largely as an explanation for the stability of hegemonic reproduction whereas communication scholars describe these systems as essentially "disrupted" and "dissonant" (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Pfetsch, 2018). Although this disconnect conforms to a broader pattern of relations between communications and other fields like sociology (Hampton, 2023), the potential here is that inequality can operate as the specific kind of problem that Chen (2018) has described as essential for anchoring the "transfield network" of media sociology.

Second, the reviewed literature has generally a narrow focus on the UK, the United States, and German-speaking countries. Research on and from the Global South and non-Western countries was relatively limited in our corpus, although there are indications that this imbalance may be lessening in recent years. There is no reason to believe that inequality is less pressing in these contexts—quite the opposite, most countries in the Global South have levels of inequality that exceed those observed in the countries mentioned above. Admittedly, we will have missed studies from these countries if they have not been published in English, but the gap is striking and attests to a center-periphery-structure of the academic system (see also Rossini, 2023). We therefore join calls for a *de-Westernisation* (Curran & Park, 2000) of the field to establish more representative knowledge in the study of media discourses on inequality. Work that does not marginalize Non-Western perspectives is an aim in itself, but it will also help us to understand media discourses better, from the range of different existing historical relationships between states and egalitarian political projects, like in China (Li *et al.*, 2024; Song, 2023), to the specificities of language and discourse across different contexts (like the Peruvian discourse on the "caviar left"; Feldman & Moraga Núñez, 2023). The experiences of post- and neo-colonialism, globalized capitalism, and systemic racism differ fundamentally in the Global South, and the same goes for the relation to average global wealth and income

levels. Finally, a broadened scope would provide us with cases where wealth taxes—quite in opposition to the global trend—have been introduced (e.g., in Latin America).

Third, although the problem of "economic inequality" is a powerful basis for transfield networking it also risks reification, meaning there is benefit in openly reflecting on its contingency and limitations as a conceptual anchor. Encouragingly, our review points to the trend that scholars are studying the various elements that comprise economic inequality, such as an increasing prominence of studies on the mediation of wealth (as opposed to income). At the same time, our observation is that studying the mediation of something called "economic inequality" frequently involves obscuring variations which are treated as significant in other fields, such as different kinds of ownership structures within societies and different types of wealth ownership. Building up recent work by Waitkus and Wallaschek (2022) or Kantola and Vesa (2022), for example, future contributions could analyze the (self-)portrayal of inherited versus "self-made" wealth. At the same time, the problem of "economic inequality" often functions to bracket out intersectional inequalities (as illustrated by our own research design) in a way which is very much at odds with the actual real-world experience of many people who typically do not face "just one" but are exposed to various types of inequality at the same time, such as along racialized or gendered lines, which economic disparities serve to compound and reproduce (for welcome exceptions in our corpus, see Brown *et al.*, 2023 on racialized inequalities, and Knowles *et al.*, 2024 on gender and climate framing during the pandemic). We do not want to diminish this point, but have to caution that the little attention on racialized, gendered and other social inequalities may be partly a result of our relatively narrow conceptualization of *economic* inequality, potentially missing research which alternative searches (e.g., around "inequality" or "social inequality") may have included. This note of caution extends to our findings about the portrayal of redistributive policies. To be included in our corpus, studies had to link redistribution to inequality. In principle, this may have overstated the media's critical take on redistribution policies. Yet, in practice, several studies on media coverage of redistributive policies that did not make into our corpus generally correspond with our conclusion (e.g., Carson *et al.*, 2019, 2021; Limbert & Bullock, 2009; Sawulski *et al.*, 2023).

Fourth, the somewhat patchy state of research lacks systematic insights from comparative studies (with notable exceptions e.g., Carbone & Mijs, 2022; Neimanns, 2021). Although national context is frequently analyzed to provide rich insights into separate countries' inequality debates, we have very few insights into whether or how these amount to systematic patterns. This stands somewhat in contrast to what we know about national differences in democratic capitalism, resulting in variegated media systems and ownership structures. Consequently, we might expect discourses to vary in part by varieties of capitalism, media systems, or simply the unique national features of the super-rich and entrepreneurialism. Future projects could develop theory and research about which factors shape national inequality discourses, and whether these national discourses conform to identifiable "types".

Fifth, when it comes to questions about how media debates influence the thinking and potentially behavior of those who consume these debates, the near absence of an audience perspective in the existing research is glaring (but see Banjac and

Hanusch 2022). The study of communication about inequality is partly motivated by the assumption that information and interpretations shape attitudes towards inequality and redistribution. Yet, we cannot assume simple stimulus–response relationships, and should instead empirically dissect the potential complexities and nuances. For one, individual, situational and contextual characteristics will likely affect how media users understand and react to these debates (Schieferdecker, 2021). In addition, media debates may affect individuals in indirect ways: individuals use and (re-)interpret media texts to make sense of their experiences of inequality, of their socio-economic position of oneself or their social group (Strelitz, 2006). Similarly, media texts may provide the impulse and arguments for further conversations on the topic.

High and rising economic inequalities in many societies around the world come at tremendous costs for societies. For this reason, it remains crucial to understand how societies communicate about these inequalities as well as their causes, consequences and possible remedies. Against a backdrop where both inequality structures and media systems are experiencing profound and ongoing change, it is essential that the insights of both literatures mutually inform one another to build a more complete picture of mediated power relations.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Annals of the International Communication Association* online.

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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