

Chapter 1

Inequality, (new) media and communications

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Inequalities have been the unwanted companion of media and communications since public communications emerged. Traditional mass media were criticized for creating inequalities by being biased, serving hegemonic interests, accumulating far too much power in the hands of mighty industrial conglomerates and creating knowledge gaps among their various audiences. Journalism contributed to gender and race discrimination in news rooms and to accepting informal news selection rules in favour of those in power, thereby dwarfing their watchdog role in democracies. Under the digital regime, which evolved around the establishment of the Internet as the core distribution platform in the late 1990s, most of these inequalities survived and new ones occurred. Knowledge gaps have transformed into digital divides, advertising revenues have migrated to social networking sites, which challenge traditional news journalism, and global corporate monopolies outperform media companies and nation state media regulation alike. In addition, algorithmic selection, surveillance, big data and the Internet of Things are creating new forms of inequality that follow the traditional patterns of class, gender, wealth and education.

Inequality should not exist. According to fundamental rights and freedoms, all humans are equal. Democratic constitutions are built on this premise; international diplomatic relations respect this principle and the third estate (judiciary) is fundamentally rooted in the equality of people. However, the contrast to our day-to-day life could not be more pronounced. We are constantly held back against others because of our gender, the colour of our skin, our ethnicity, our social status, our class, our wealth and income and many other factors compromising our fundamental right to equality.

Perhaps for this reason, the inequality debate is one of the “long sellers” both in the political discourse of the day and within the scientific debate in sociology, economics, psychology and many other social science disciplines. Actually, it is a necessarily recurring topos within social sciences, as every cycle of capitalist economic crisis inevitably discharges in contestations regarding inequality. The latest such crisis, originating in the global collapse of financial markets in 2008, once again initiated a heated debate on

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the trends of and damage caused by increasing inequalities. Subsequently, numerous contributions to the public debate were tabled, most prominently from economists. Anthony B. Atkinson (2016), Branko Milanovic (2016), Thomas Piketty (2013; in English 2014), Joseph Stiglitz (2012) and many more have all pointed to the rising inequality in the first decades of this century. Their concern has mainly addressed inequality in wealth and income.

Two years after the financial market crisis of 2008, the Council of Europe adopted its new strategy and action plan for social cohesion. In this document, the Council of Ministers underlined the importance of the fight against inequality and argued (in paragraph 2) that in a “cohesive society the well-being of all is a shared goal that includes the aim of ensuring adequate resources are available to combat inequalities and exclusion” (Council of Europe, 2010). In the reading of the European Union, social cohesion is primarily a matter of regional development that the EU is supporting with no less than EUR 352 billion from 2014 to 2020, representing about one-third of the overall EU budget (European Commission, 2014). Both transnational European institutions perceive social equality as a precondition for social welfare and stability.

In the media and communication field, the economic upheaval of 2008, together with more structural changes (such as digitization and the advent of global social network sites), caused fundamental crises for the advertising-based business model of leading news media worldwide. In parallel to the economic analyses of the implications of the financial crisis for inequality, the question arises of how the various (digital) media crises have influenced and moulded equality in media and communications.

In this chapter, therefore, various approaches to inequality are introduced with the purpose of addressing the relationship between inequalities on the one hand and media and communications on the other. In the literature, this relation is often mentioned but less often chosen as a prism for analysis. Servaes and Oyedemi (2016) collected theories and empirical evidence in their first of two volumes on social inequality and the media (at the time of writing, the second volume has not been published). Similar to their approach, in our book, we basically ask three groups of questions:

1. What are the implications of social inequalities for media and communications? How do the existing inequalities frame media and communication structures? How are the media themselves performing with regard to equality – as employers (being just and fair towards their workers), as reporters on current affairs or as suppliers of information, education and entertainment?
2. What are the implications of media and communications for inequalities? In what way do media and communications contribute to or reduce social inequalities? Are people served equally by the media in relation to the access to and availability of the best information and knowledge?
3. What kind of media and communication policy is needed to address inappropriate inequalities in the age of digital communications?

With respect to the rich epistemological history of the notion of inequality, a number of approaches are reviewed and critically discussed before returning to inequalities in, by and through media and communications.

Economic approaches to inequality

When inequality is addressed publicly, economic causes and implications often dominate the discourse. The major concern of economic approaches is the development of inequality of income, pay and wealth (Galbraith, 2016: 2). Galbraith and other economists have typically asked whether inequality has good or bad effects on the overall economic and social performance of an economic system (ibid.: 7) and what kind of effects inequality has on economic efficiency and individual welfare (Bourguignon, 2015: 15). Another prominent feature of the economic analysis of inequality is its long-term development within and between countries in the context of globalization.

To start with the latter, traditional evidence from economic analysis has suggested an inverted U-curve when it comes to economic development and inequality in wealth and income. This seminal theory by Simon Kuznets from the 1950s stipulates that inequality increases during the early phase of economic development and decreases over time (Milanovic, 2016: 4). While such devolution has been well supported by evidence from the twentieth century, it is hard to explain the sharp increase in inequality in the United States and other developed countries during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

In general, economists have agreed that inequality, when plotted against income, has decreased *between* countries but increased *within* countries. The former chief economist of the World Bank, Francois Bourguignon, explained this increase as follows:

There are various factors at play in the rise in inequality within countries: increased returns on physical, financial, and human (which is to say, of skilled labor) capital, economic restructuring, technological innovation, macroeconomic policy, taxation, and market deregulation, including the deregulation of the financial and labor markets. In a majority of countries, the conjunction of these effects has resulted in a significant rise in wage and income inequality. (Bourguignon, 2015: 114)

Two drivers of inequality stand out: on the one hand, privatization and deregulation allow individuals to become extremely rich, thus increasing income inequality; on the other hand, Bourguignon pointed to new information and communication technologies (ICTs), which allowed the replacement of lower-paid workers with fewer higher-skilled workers and enabled new businesses to create superstars in the very high income bracket (ibid.: 87). Some of these superstars are writers, athletes and artists who profit from the audience multiplication possibilities provided by ICTs. Furthermore, “[a]dvances in communication and information technology have increased the volume of financial

operations and made it possible for a single person to manage a huge portfolio, often worth a few billion dollars, and to generate larger profits” (ibid.: 88).

As a result, globalization has (at least) two facets. While globalized trade has made it possible to pull several hundred million people above the threshold of absolute poverty, in particular in Latin America, China and Russia (ibid.: 117), thereby reducing inequality between countries, globalization has contributed to the increase in inequality within countries.

This sheds light on the other questions concerning whether inequalities have positive or adverse effects on the economy and on individual welfare. Again, the economists’ answers are ambivalent. In general, economies with a lower degree of wage and salary inequality function better and “with lower inequalities come the benefits that we associate with civilized life: public pensions, health insurance, free public education, national parks, and cultural amenities” (Galbraith, 2016: 9). However, this comes at a cost, as a “more-equal society may be poorer, on average, than it was before, with the misery shared by all” (ibid.: 6). This can be explained by the argument that “the simple fact of dividing the cake more equally will shrink the size of the cake” (Bourguignon, 2015: 129). Although Bourguignon himself did not classify this argument as being very robust, there seems to be a trade-off between social equality and welfare in economic terms.

Another equation, no less important, concerns the cost of social inequality. Economists have identified two sorts of such costs. To start with, economic efficiency suffers from inequality when the resource allocation is distorted, for example when credit markets allocate credit to wealthy (thus trustworthy) customers, instead of those with innovative but risky business propositions. Similarly, talent, gender and education may represent areas of distorted resource allocation if wealthy, but not the most promising, candidates are chosen (Bourguignon, 2015: 132). In addition, excessive economic inequalities may lead to social unrest and endemic violence with a high socio-economic cost. Social history is well equipped with examples, both in the more distant European past and more recently in developing countries.

Thus, if reduced economic inequality is the aim, the state policy needs to support forces that drive inequality downwards. Milanovic (2016: 4) identified two such categories. “Malign forces” are wars, natural catastrophes and epidemics. Such events potentially harm humans equally, although more affluent people have better chances of safeguarding an escape route or implementing their individual exit strategy. In any case, malign forces do not constitute adequate policy options. “Benign forces”, in contrast, refer to potentially successful policy tools, such as widely accessible education, increased social transfers and progressive taxation (ibid.).

The latter option, social transfers and progressive taxes, is particularly popular in the economic literature. Some economists have pinpointed financial markets as appropriate objects of taxation: both James Tobin (“Tobin tax”) in the 1970s and lately Thomas Piketty have suggested taxing financial transactions. The latter introduced an “optimal tax policy”, which “involves a progressive tax on labor income and a progressive tax

on inherited wealth” (Piketty, 2015: 453). In his own conclusions, however, Piketty admits that he might have overemphasized taxation and devoted too little attention to institutional evolution, such as intellectual property rights (ibid.: 456). Nonetheless, economists consider policy as a necessary instrument to address inequality:

If we think that excessive levels of inequality within a nation are more unacceptable, economically costly, and socially dangerous, then we should seek to identify and implement policies that would permit us to correct these inequalities or prevent them from emerging (...). (Bourguignon, 2015: 118)

To conclude, the economic discourse on inequality provides ample evidence that societies benefit from more equal distribution of income and wealth and that capitalism does not self-correct towards less inequality. Even economic “superstar” Bill Gates admitted this when reviewing Piketty’s book (Gates, 2014: 2): “excess wealth concentration can have a snowball effect if left unchecked”.

With regard to media and communications, the distinction of inequalities between and within countries is as useful as the conclusion that policy is needed to correct undesired inequality. Furthermore, economic market imperfections favouring wealth over talent can be observed in the media and communication realm. Finally, the prominent role of ICTs in the analysis of economic inequalities emphasizes our own media- and communication-centric analysis.

Social approaches to inequality

Social approaches to inequality differ from economic approaches by extending the scope beyond income, pay and wealth (while still including them). “Social inequalities are usually described as the unequal distribution of opportunities, rewards, goods, wealth, education, healthcare, and punishment for different socially defined categories of persons within a group or society” (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2016: 24). Such a wider definition includes the classical sociological approaches represented by Karl Marx, explaining social stratification and inequality through the fundamental cleavages in capitalist societies “between those who owned and controlled (productive) capital and the majority who did not” (Preston & Silke, 2017: 4328), and Max Weber, focusing on class, status and group affiliation as well as market capacities (Curran, 2016: 7; Sernau, 2014).

Contemporary sociological theory emphasizes two additional components when defining inequality: collaborative projects and strategic resources. Canadian sociologist Bernd Baldus stipulates that inequality

exists where people are engaged in a collaborative project, and where the resulting gains in wealth, power or social standing flowing to some are not shared by others, or are obtained at their expense by increasing their deprivation, powerlessness or social exclusion. (Baldus, 2017: 7)

He continues by highlighting the importance of possessing strategic resources, characterized by their ability to increase the opportunities for further accumulation. In his view, four such strategic resources stand out: “the ownership of material wealth, the control of knowledge, the use of influence, authority and power over other people, and the ability to include or exclude other from social relations” (ibid.).

Contemporary German sociology also considers resources as the key to understanding inequalities. According to Nicole Burzan (2012), the command of socially relevant resources and different participation possibilities define inequality (ibid.: 7). In Reinhard Kreckel’s scholarly reflections, resources translate into *social goods* and *social positions*:

Social inequality in the broader sense occurs where the possibilities of access to generally available and desirable social goods and/or to social positions equipped with unequal power or interaction possibilities are permanently restricted and thus affect positively or negatively the chances of life of the concerned individuals, groups or societies. (Kreckel, 2004: 17) (translation by author)

By way of revisiting and extending such classical thinking, Amartya Sen (2009) and Göran Therborn (2013) suggest understanding inequality as “(...) unequal capabilities to function fully as a human being” (Therborn, 2013: 48). For the purpose of our focus on inequalities in media and communications, we follow Sen by arranging the “capability perspective over the resource perspective” (Sen, 2009: 263): “The capability approach focuses on human lives, and not just on the resources people have, in the form of owning – or having use of – objects of convenience that a person may possess” (ibid.: 253). This approach fits well with the rather immaterial world of media and communications, in which ownership is crucial in terms of economy, power and control but less important at the level of users and citizens. Access to and participation in the public discourse is determined not by the physical ownership of media and communication artefacts (newspaper copies, radio receivers, TV sets, smartphones, laptops, etc.) but rather by their content appropriation and use.

The capabilities approach transcends equally well the sphere of digital communication within the notorious information or network society (Castells, 1996; van Dijk, 2012; Webster, 2014). There, inequality is primarily created by cleavages between skilful users of digital technologies and those without proper access or appropriate capabilities to exploit digital opportunities for their own benefit and advantage. Furthermore, substantial inequalities occur at the macro (policy, technology) and meso (company) levels.

According to Therborn (2013: 55ff), there are four distinct ways to create social inequalities. For each of these four ways, a number of (research) questions arise to guide our analysis:

1. Distanciation: Do media and communication applications, companies and actors enable some to distance others? Does the use of so-called “social media” provide tools to outpace other people? Who is better informed than others? To what extent does distanciation create and aggravate the existing digital divides?

Does audience fragmentation support distancing? Does unequal information received and used create new forms of distancing?

2. Exploitation (the worst way of creating inequality): Who is exploited by whom in traditional and modern media and communications? What role do freelance and employed journalists play in contemporary media organizations? How is creative work by users being exploited by social network sites, such as Facebook, Youtube and Instagram? Who owns private data created by users of digital platforms and services of digital intermediaries? To what extent do internet intermediaries exploit the private data of internet users without prior consent?
3. Exclusion: Who is excluded from media coverage today? Are women systematically excluded from leading positions and decision making in the old and new media industry (given that Internet giants are all led by males and internet/software business is predominantly male dominated as well)? Who is affected by first-, second- and third-level digital divides (see Elena Vartanova & Anna Gladkova, this volume, chapter 12)? What problems arise from resource inequality when and if net neutrality is sacrificed to commercial business interests? What new cleavages arise between urban and peripheral areas and between countries of the global north and the global south (in connectivity, cost of access and service quality)?
4. Hierarchization: To what extent do media organizations allow for flat hierarchies? What implications do “terms of use” have for users of so-called “social media”, given the unequal distribution of power between users and platform owners, including lock-in strategies? Why and how did the hierarchy of central and peripheral actors in the digital news business develop?

Thus, the umbrella research questions for this book are the following:

In what way and to what extent do the media and communications in different countries contribute to creating and/or reducing inequalities? What role do digital technologies play in this process?

Media- and communication-centric approaches to inequality

Inequalities have been a feature of the media throughout their history: from exclusive publications for the noble and the clergy (see also Jeremy Tunstall, this volume, chapter 4), to information agents for wealthy traders and to organs of the privileged classes. Only in the twentieth century did the media become mass products available to all, with low barriers to access and consumption – some of them even free of charge (commercial TV and radio, commuter press and online media).

While being so prominent in economics and sociology, media and communication studies did not excel in researching inequalities. There is, of course, one strand

in the research literature dealing with the triad of race, class and gender in the media (an updated overview of this research tradition can be found in the scholarly reader edited by Dines & Humez, 2017). This triad is itself rooted in sociological work and transposed into communications and the media. The concept of intersectionality also includes dimensions such as religion, ethnicity in general and so on (Young, 1997). Other than that, Peter Golding's observation that "[i]nequality has seldom been in the foreground of communication scholarship" (2017: 4305) seems to be accurate. In a special issue of the *International Journal of Communication*, the authors discussed – and deplored – the lack of media and communication studies on the topic of inequality. The issue editors claimed that two fields of knowledge or "culture" production have neglected the issue of growing economic inequality over recent decades:

the professional field of journalism practices and news media on the one hand, and the most relevant areas of the academic field on the other, including (not least) the communication, journalism, and media studies discipline, and economics and other relevant social science disciplines. (Preston & Grisold, 2017: 4258)

This negligence is unjustified for at least two reasons. The first reason is that inequality in obtaining information puts the institution of democracy at risk. Here, Golding pointed to the close relation between economic welfare and informed citizenship and argues that:

(...) sufficiently informed citizen needs to seek and obtain rather more than is routinely provided if she or he is to fulfill the ideals of engagement and deliberation implicit in the full notion of citizenship. The problem is that such a task is impeded, in a period in which disposable incomes and wealth are so unequal, if the information required is only, or significantly, available at a price. (Golding, 2017: 4312)

Citizenship, he continues, "diligently seeking to acquire the necessary resources for active engagement and judgment as a participating member of society, is hindered by the cost involved in so doing" (ibid.: 4313). These factors result in *citizen detriment*, which becomes "an ineluctable feature of the communication ecology in a society riven by deep and widening inequality" (ibid.: 4317). The cost of acquiring information is just one element along the line of functioning as democratic citizens. Another element, which follows it at least partly, is *civic disengagement*. When discussing inequality in the information society, Johannes M. Bauer (2016: 1) associated high levels of inequality with "lower civic disengagement and the rise of populist movements with considerable potential for political unrest and strife".

The second reason for the negligence of inequalities in media and communication studies being unjustified, is the significant role that the media and journalism have in shaping our culture. In the introduction to their reader *Social inequalities, media, and communication*, Toks Oyedemi and Jan Servaes (2016: xxix) argued that imbalances and inequalities in the media have negative implications for global and local cultures.

Despite the rather scattered and undertheorized media and communication research on inequality, evidence of inequality abounds both in the scholarly literature

and in practice. Seen through the prism of inequality, a long and rich tradition becomes visible that can be structured analytically along two axes. One is the segmentation of the field into macro, meso and micro levels, whereby policy and technology are located at the macro level, media companies and professional journalism represent the meso level and media and communication use as well as content constitute the micro level. The second axe of analysis draws a (blurred) line between traditional legacy media, composed of linear broadcasting (radio and television), printed press (newspapers and magazines), films for movie theatres and so on, and digital media, basically defined by distribution over the internet. Both traditional legacy and digital media and communications follow rules and patterns of governance and regulation, that is, different *regimes*. These regimes constitute the second axe of analysis.

Table 1. Media and communication equalities and inequalities

		Macro level (policy and technology)	Meso level (business and profession)	Micro level (content and use)
Traditional regime	Equalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> public service broadcasting universal services media subsidies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cooperative national news agencies affordable press and broadcasting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> low price and non-discriminatory information and entertainment access “television for all” ubiquitous terrestrial broadcasting
	Inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cultural imperialism “old” world information and communications flow of information to and from developing countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> media concentration national/regional monopolies commercialization global news agencies economic market entry barriers gender gaps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> news bias knowledge gaps “propaganda model” (news) representation
Digital regime	Equalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> net neutrality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> low-cost online start-ups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blogs, Web 2.0 easy access to society-wide participation
	Inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> protectionist policies (“safe harbour”, tax breaks) capacity and frequency (mobile) allocation for networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “one per cent economy” “winner-takes-it-all economy” global monopolies gender gaps low-paying jobs, unemployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> digital divides surveillance algorithmic filtering misinformation and fake news big data, data protection intransparent digital searches news representation social scoring by “social media”

The combination of the two axes results in a matrix (shown in Table 1) used for analytical purposes. The fields of the matrix do not, however, have clear-cut boundaries but

rather overlap and influence one another. Nonetheless, these axes allow for the analysis of the ongoing longitudinal development of media change from analogue to digital and for the identification of long-lasting patterns of inequality across time and technology.

Equalities and inequalities in legacy media (the traditional regime)

Denis McQuail (this volume, chapter 2) outlined the history and genesis of the normative value of equality in the *traditional regime* in respect of publication and the media. In doing so, he highlighted ownership, literacy, news flow, representation and the distribution of knowledge as the main strands (and contested areas) of media equality research.

At the micro level, McQuail insists, traditional media, in particular television, have served – and are serving – society well. Information and entertainment under the traditional regime are ubiquitously available to all citizens at a low cost. These services are hence available with no or low barriers to access.

Mass media content, however, has of course been criticized for what has become known as “news bias” (Bennett, 2016; Schiffer, 2018). This decade-long research tradition experiences a vibrant revival under the heading of misinformation and “fake news” with regard to “mainstream media”. News bias, understood as “distorting reality, giving a negative picture of minority groups of many kinds, neglecting or misconstruing the role of women in society, or differentially favoring a particular political party” (McQuail, 2010: 357), creates inequality as it affects capabilities and contributes to exclusion. McQuail illustrates this by collecting news content statements, showing that news media over-represent the social “top”, concentrate on nearer, richer and more powerful nations, have a patriotic and ethnocentric bias, give more attention and prominence to men than women, marginalize, stereotype or stigmatize ethnic minorities and immigrant groups, treat business leaders more favourably than unions and workers and neglect the poor (ibid.: 358).

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky expressed another strand of traditional media inequality critique in *Manufacturing consent* (1994 [1988]). The media, following their argument, serve the ends of a dominant elite.

A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. (ibid.: 2)

In addition to Herman and Chomsky’s focus on wealth and power, the commercial character of traditional media is considered to be another source of media inequality. McManus (2009) argues that editorial decisions on which events become news are biased

by commercial considerations rather than by the interest and preferences of readers and viewers. Media coverage serves the anticipated interests of affluent consumers with a high disposable income rather than those of the majority. Therefore, considerable shares of the citizens are not at all or not well represented by traditional media.

A third source of inequality at the micro level is the proclaimed “knowledge gap”. This gap originates from different uses of the media, resulting in unequal knowledge bases of people, which create unequal life chances. This argument from the 1970s states that persons with higher education and social status profit more from media use than those in less privileged positions. Later research demonstrated that there are ceiling effects whereby the well informed are not able to increase their knowledge any further (Bonfadelli, 2002). Furthermore, prior knowledge, motivation and the structure of the media system are moderating factors.

At the traditional regime’s meso level are media companies considered to provide news and entertainment services at affordable prices for readers and viewers. Their prevailing business model includes internal cross-subsidies from the advertising department to the editorial newsroom. This business model, however, is currently challenged by an enormous shift of advertising revenues from linear television and the press to internet-based platforms, such as Google and Facebook. Furthermore, some traditional news media decided to create cooperatives for their constant news supply. These are still considered to be non-biased, due to their heterogeneous ownership structure (national news agencies, such as the Austrian Press Agency (APA), Italian ANSA, Portuguese LUSA, Swedish TT, Swiss SDA, etc., but also the US American cooperative Associated Press (AP)).

The flip side of media cooperation is an increase in media ownership concentration. Such concentration has been criticized for its power and capacity to influence politics and public opinion (Cunningham et al., 2015), for endangering the plurality of sources and the diversity of content (Iosifidis, 2014: 474), for limiting the range of voices (Hardy, 2014: 104), for creating barriers to market entry for new competitors (Doyle, 2013) and, finally, for constituting a burden for democracy (Meier, 2007). All these factors create inequalities among news companies and foster hierarchization and exclusion. Media concentration also fulfils Baldus’s criteria of participation in a collaborative project (creating and defining media landscapes) and of further accumulation of strategic resources, such as the exploitation of advertising revenues.

Another form of inequality at the meso level of the traditional regime is gender inequality within media organizations. “Glass ceilings” and “invisible barriers” have been well documented for over three decades (see, for example, NORDICOM, 2018; UNESCO, 1987). Further details and arguments are presented by Claudia Padovani, Karin Raeymeaekers and Sara de Vuyst in their chapter 10 on gender inequalities in this volume.

At the macro level of the traditional regime, public service broadcasting stands out as an equalizing force. Public service broadcasting was established in almost all countries of Western Europe (with the notable exception of Luxemburg) at the latest

after the Second World War and currently exists across the entire continent. Through its universality of availability and appeal, its dedication to giving access and voice to minorities and its commitment to the education of the public (Tracey, 1998: 26ff), public broadcasting has substantially contributed – and still does – to more media equality in society. Further, beyond broadcasting, the governance principle of universal service in the field of telecommunications has equally contributed to providing a densely knit grid of cable and mobile networks, available to all at an equal cost.

Policy instruments to create, foster or maintain media equality are more controversial than universal services. Nonetheless, most European countries have decided to support their media industry by means of indirect subsidies, such as tax breaks (e.g. VAT), or reduced tariffs for newspaper transport and telecommunication connections (Trappel, 2018). Others have taken even further steps by supporting their media industry under defined conditions by providing direct state subsidies. Such support is contested, as some have argued that it would compromise editorial independence instead of levelling the playing field of competitors. However, when designed properly and at arm's length from the government, subsidies might help, at least temporarily, to balance some of the negative effects of media ownership concentration and commercialization on media equality (Trappel, 2015).

At the transnational and global macro level, traditional media regimes have been heavily criticized for constantly creating inequalities. A strong and influential line of contestation was tabled in the MacBride report (1980), following up the so-called UNESCO Media Declaration (1978). Both documents pointed to the unequal flow of information between the global North and the global South as well as within these spheres (Nordenstreng & Hannikainen, 1984). Article VI of the UNESCO Declaration advocates more balanced information and communications:

For the establishment of a new equilibrium and greater reciprocity in the flow of information, which will be conducive to the institution of a just and lasting peace and to the economic and political independence of the developing countries, it is necessary to correct the inequalities in the flow of information to and from developing countries, and between those countries. To this end, it is essential that their mass media should have conditions and resources enabling them to gain strength and expand, and to co-operate both among themselves and with the mass media in developed countries. (UNESCO, 1978, Article VI)

These activities by UNESCO prompted the United States (in 1984) and the United Kingdom (in 1985) to withdraw from this UN organization. It took them more than ten (the UK in 1997) and almost twenty (the US in 2003) years to rejoin UNESCO. The debate, however, did not cease. Under the heading of “cultural imperialism” (Mattelart & Chanan, 1979; Tomlinson, 1991), the topic of unequal relations between the West and the developing countries returned and survived. David Hesmondhalgh (2007: 214) refers to cultural imperialism as “the way that the cultures of less developed countries have been affected by flows of cultural texts, forms and technologies associated with

‘the West’”. The concept of cultural imperialism has been contested and juxtaposed in the critical debate following the trend of globalization. “There is no question that the concept of globalization has replaced the imperialism paradigm as the main way of thinking about the international media” (Sparks, 2007: 126). Whichever terminology is used, media inequality between nations and cultures appears as the bottom line of the traditional regime.

Equalities and inequalities in internet-distributed media (the digital regime)

Along with other factors, digitalization has changed the ways in which the media function – in content production, in editing, in dissemination/distribution and in reception/using the media. At the micro level, what has become known as Web 2.0 (blogs, postings in online media, online fora, wikis, etc.) (Gillmor, 2004) has vastly expanded people’s opportunities to express themselves in public and increased communication equality by providing technical resources for participation. Social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and many more, have added another layer to communication, connecting private personal communication and public communication by creating many shades between them. For political communication (see also Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, this volume, chapter 5), Twitter has gained superiority over other platforms, particularly since the US President Donald Trump chose to use this platform as his every-day, direct communication line to the American people.

However, the early enthusiasm about the potential of SNSs to foster and enhance social and political participation has diminished considerably over time. In its early days, the internet was expected to activate citizens to participate in the democratic discourse, thereby reducing inequality by giving voice to the silent. Furthermore, new sources of information would liberate public information from its gatekeepers by providing unlimited sources of political communication: “if there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers” (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000: 62). However, it turned out that the gates did not disappear. In his critical reading of digital democracy, Matthew Hindman (2009) worked out that the infrastructure and design of the internet do not allow for many gains in democratic participation.

Most online content receives no links, attracts no eyeballs, and has minimal political relevance. Again and again, this study finds powerful hierarchies shaping a medium that continues to be celebrated for its openness. This hierarchy is structural, woven into the hyperlinks that make up the Web; it is economic, in the dominance of companies like Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft; and it is social, in the small group of white, highly educated, male professionals who are vastly overrepresented in online opinion. (Hindman, 2009: 18f)

Hindman insisted that the internet might have opened new opportunities for people to express themselves but that there are strong mechanisms that by default (such as the link structure of the internet) make it difficult for single voices to be heard. He concluded his book by affirming: “It may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard” (ibid.: 142).

Another source of digital inequality at the micro level is the various forms of digital divides, which have been analysed extensively (see also Elena Vartanova and Anna Gladkova, this volume, chapter 12). Digital divide researchers “seek an understanding of relationships between the spread of digital technologies and the factors contributing to the inclusion or exclusion of countries, regions and people in the digitally mediated world” (Mansell, 2017: 148). According to various research traditions, digital divides can create inequalities through access to connectivity (first level), through skills and competencies (second level) and through what users can achieve in their lives when they are well connected (third level) (ibid.: 149; Ragnedda, 2017). Only if all these levels are addressed can people develop their capabilities in the digital communication realm. However, the use of the internet differs widely between users. In a report on the future of news for the BBC, James Harding (2015: 8) concludes that “[i]t is an age of growing information inequality. The world is dividing into those who seek the news and a growing number who skim it. Those searching, those who expect to be found, those who don’t want to know.” Such user patterns are similar to those found by the “knowledge gap” research tradition and nurture the assumption that previous social inequalities “reinforce and exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities” (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2016: 29). These two authors further concluded that social inequalities are the root of digital inequalities and that there is a recurring cycle between the two (ibid.: 30).

In her analysis of the neo-liberal order in media and communications, Natalie Fenton (2016: 2) accuses the traditional media of serving hegemonic interests, thwarting participatory democracy and legitimizing social inequality. However, this inequality did not evaporate with the age of the internet. To the contrary: “We are faced with astounding and increasing inequality” (ibid.: 13), as rich nations enjoy far more internet usage than poorer nations, and, in the UK, “almost all of the wealthiest people use the internet, while this falls to 58 per cent among the lowest income group” (ibid.: 14).

Digital divides exceed the dimension of information inequality and expand more generally to affect life chances. Given the huge variety of application-based services to master the challenges of daily life, those who are not well connected are likely to be distanced and excluded. “Those who function better in the digital realm and participate more fully in digitally mediated social life enjoy advantages over their digitally disadvantaged counterparts (...)” (Robinson et al., 2015: 570). This might be painful in terms of consumption when purchasing goods and services is cheaper and easier online than offline. More importantly, though, such exclusion reinvigorates the gender gaps that existed (and still exist) in the analogue world. “Recent evidence suggests that digital inequalities intersect with gender in two primary ways: (1) through the

gendering of skills and content production patterns and (2) through gendered labour market processes associated with jobs involving technology” (ibid.: 572).

Gender inequality in media and communication organizations has survived the digital transformation. A snapshot of leading figures in the digital communication industry reveals the following gender picture (see Table 2). One of the very rare female leaders was Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo! from 2012 to 2017.

Table 2. Gender glass ceiling in selected world-leading digital communication companies

Company	Leading figures, CEO	Sex
Alphabet	Sundar Pichai	Male
Amazon	Jeff Bezos	Male
Apple	Tim Cooks	Male
Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram	Mark Zuckerberg	Male
Google (Alphabet)	Larry Page, Sergey Brin	Male
Microsoft	Satya Narayana Nadella	Male
Netflix	Reed Hastings, Marc Randolph	Male
Snapchat	Evan Spiegel	Male
Twitter	Jack Dorsey	Male
Youtube (Alphabet)	Susan Wojcicki	Female

Source: Company information (2018, April).

Over and above the well-known and familiar forms of inequality in access, skills, outcomes, life chances and gender, new information and communication technologies are creating new varieties of social cleavages with the potential to create new inequalities. The use of two technologies stands out: algorithms and surveillance technologies.

Algorithms are embedded in countless digital services, from search engines (Google, Bing, Yahoo, etc.) and the social scoring of users (practised extensively in China) to the feeds of so-called social media (Facebook, Instagram, Tinder, etc.). Marketed as beneficial for users wishing to avoid, for example, irrelevant advertising or find the right job or partner, algorithms tend to “perpetuate our existing social stratification, with all its injustices” (O’Neil, 2016: 70). Algorithms are also designed to learn from the past and to predict people’s future behaviour by creating virtual representations. Therefore, Cathy O’Neil convincingly argues that, in most cases, algorithms increase asymmetries and inequalities. On the one hand, algorithm-based advertising creates powerful campaigns, but, on the other, it “fuels their predatory cousins: ads that pinpoint people in great need and sell them fake or overpriced promises. They find inequality and feast on it” (ibid.). Another, more worrying, example is how algorithms of various kinds create vicious feedback loops: “The problem is that they’re feeding on each other. Poor people are more likely to have bad credit and live in high-crime

neighbourhoods, surrounded by other poor people” (ibid.: 199). Algorithms are backward oriented, not open to change and do not allow for creativity. O’Neil concludes “Big Data processes codify the past and do not invent the future” (ibid.: 204).

Surveillance technologies can be seen and understood as another breed of algorithmic filtering and selection (Just & Latzer, 2018; Latzer et al., 2016). Vincent Mosco (2017) sketches a post-internet society along three parameters: cloud computing, big data and the internet of things (IoT). He defines the latter as “a system for measuring, monitoring, and controlling the activity of objects and living organisms through sensors that gather, process, and report data over networks, including the Internet” (Mosco, 2017: 39). The inequality lies in the huge power imbalance between those who surveil and those who are surveilled. In most cases, citizens are not asked for their consent to be surveilled, irrespective of whether such surveillance is legal or illegitimate.

Mosco’s second parameter, big data, also related to algorithmic selection, is mainly relevant at the meso level in the context of digital inequalities. In the best case, big data allow companies to operate more efficiently, producing goods and services that meet the demand and avoid waste and misallocation, because the preferences of consumers are better known and more transparent. However, there are considerable risks attached to economies based on big data. “The fundamental problem is the reliance on data and machine learning and the lack of diversity of data and algorithms. These make them particularly vulnerable to troubling concentration as well as system failure” (Mayer-Schönberger & Ramge, 2018: 12).

Big data are not the only concern with regard to the digital media and communication economy. Across the board of scholarly writing, the “internetisation” (Hardy, 2014: 14) of mass media is considered to pose a major threat to diversity and journalistic independence that promotes the emergence of global oligopolies or monopolies – all affecting social equality. Once again, early expectations of what the internet would deliver in terms of diversity appear to have been in considerable contrast to the reality twenty years later. For example, Nicholas Negroponte (1995: 57) expected powerful media conglomerates to disappear: “(...) the monolithic empires of mass media are dissolving into an array of cottage industries”. However, he did not foresee that, out of these “cottage industries”, new and even more powerful global companies would emerge. At the same time, the mass media empires are still at work. In the preface to his book *The internet is not the answer*, Andrew Keen stipulates:

The more we use the contemporary digital network, the less economic value it is bringing to us. Rather than promoting economic fairness, it is a central reason for the growing gulf between rich and poor and the hollowing out of the middle class. Rather than making us wealthier, the distributed capitalism of the new networked economy is making most of us poorer. Rather than generating more jobs, this digital disruption is a principal cause of our structural unemployment crisis. Rather than creating more competition, it has created immensely powerful new monopolists like Google and Amazon. (Keen, 2015: ix–x)

According to Keen, media internetization results in a winner-takes-it-all economy, in which “profits are being made by a tiny group of increasingly monopolistic Internet companies” (ibid.: 142). Jonathan Hardy (2014: 128) highlighted the network character of the internet media economy as an important reason for this winner-takes-it-all pattern. In conjunction with strong effects of scale and scope economies, a handful of dominating media conglomerates have emerged, creating unprecedented global oligopolies. Such concentration creates inequality between media companies but also between nations.

The dominance of American Next Internet companies makes it very difficult for most nations, with the possible exception of China, to develop independent information systems that can consistently avoid American corporate filters and, particularly, their interest in maximizing profit through commercialism and the commodification of personal identity. (Mosco, 2017: 130)

Robert McChesney (2013: 130) states that the internet “has become one of the greatest generators of monopoly in economic history”. McChesney continues by asserting that “The grand irony of the internet is that what was once regarded as an agent for diversity, choice and competition has become an engine of monopoly” (ibid.: 191).

What, then, have been the reasons for allowing a few companies to become so powerful on a global scale? At the macro level, a few policy decisions in the United States have essentially been responsible for promoting communication monopolies. Taplin (2017: 80) refers to the *Internet Tax Freedom Act*, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1998, which prevents any government body from imposing internet-specific taxes. This tax break enabled the internet start-ups of that time to grow fast, privileging them over their competitors from the analogue world. The second policy decision, which still supports internet media companies, was the “safe harbour” provision of the *Digital Millennium Copyright Act*, also signed by Bill Clinton in 1998, which protects internet companies from copyright infringement prosecution, provided that they had no knowledge of and gained no financial benefit from the copyright violation (ibid.: 254). This provision has gained relevance over the years, not least with the heated debate on misinformation and “fake news” distributed over the internet by global platforms. Mosco (2017: 194) calls for the removal of the “safe harbour”, while others recall the history of the US Supreme Court and boldly suggest breaking up monopolies: “It is time to break up Google. The problem is simple: the company is just too powerful, as are Apple and many other big tech groups” (Sennett, 2013).

Another source of inequality at the macro level is the recurring issue of capacity distribution for terrestrial transmission. The digital promise has been to radically abandon shortages of capacity and to use the terrestrial spectrum more efficiently. In other words, policy interventions favouring one company over another by allocating bandwidth of the useable spectrum should be history. It has turned out, however, that spectrum shortages are returning with the spectacular growth of mobile communication. Frequencies are short again, and digital terrestrial broadcasting (radio and televi-

sion) are challenged for their bandwidth by mobile communication operators. While terrestrial broadcasting is available for all, mobile communication discriminates in price and quality. Some rural areas are served with low-capacity mobile infrastructure or receive no service at all, while urban areas benefit from a high-capacity network infrastructure.

Policy answers

While a few rather stable building blocks can be identified in the traditional regime, the digital regime is much more fluid and elusive in media policy terms. If media policy is understood as “the development of goals and norms leading to the creation of instruments that are designed to shape the structure and behaviour of media systems” (Freedman, 2008: 14), the essential norm of the traditional regime has been diversity and the public interest and the dominant instrument public service broadcasting or universal services in general. In the digital regime, neither norms nor instruments can be clearly noticed. Rather, the digital regime seems to be out of hand for policy altogether, due to the transnational and even global nature of the services provided by the dominant media and communication companies. Nonetheless, a few available policy items stand out at all three levels discussed earlier.

At the micro level, digital divides are addressed by various policy initiatives – any serious media policy initiative addresses access as well as training and learning (“media literacy”). Bauer (2016: 28), however, pinpointed a fundamental policy dilemma of connectivity and inequality: “On the one hand, policy-makers ought to facilitate the deployment and adoption of (advanced) communications to avoid the serious disadvantages associated with limited connectivity. On the other hand, increased connectivity aggravates the inequality-increasing dynamics associated with the digital economy.”

Despite such objections, connectivity seems to be the norm in the digital regime, irrespective of its consequences for equality. Furthermore, policy in the past has often focused exclusively on the first level of the digital divide, assuming that connected citizens would automatically profit from having access to the internet. In this respect, the European Commission’s *A digital agenda for Europe* (2010) has been criticized for overemphasizing the supply side and neglecting the “difficulty of bringing stakeholders with commercial interests in the market, networks and service designers and innovators, consumers, and representatives of the state and other civil society interest groups into a dialogue that might start to address incommensurable value” (Mansell, 2014: 213).

Among the media policy instruments of the digital regime, a cornerstone is – or rather has been in the US – the provision of net neutrality, allowing all internet traffic to be transported with the same speed and priority and without discrimination. While the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) decided to abandon net neutrality in December 2017 (taking effect in June 2018), to make the internet “better, faster and

cheaper” and to remove unnecessary regulations to promote investments in broadband (Federal Communications Commission (FCC), 2018), the European legislation confirmed – in principle, with notable exceptions – net neutrality as a policy directive (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2015). While the underlying norm of internet freedom might be shared by all actors, the instruments of its political protection differ widely. For some, it equals the freedom of internet companies to ensure priority for their business. For others, it is rather the freedom of users to receive and impart information without discrimination.

In Europe, the traditional media policy instrument of public service broadcasting safeguarding equality is up for renewal. In its *Vision 2020*, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), representing public service broadcasters all over Europe and beyond, indicates that its members “must reinvent PSM, in the sense that we translate the values and the remit to inform, educate and entertain, within the new context of a networked society” (European Broadcasting Union (EBU), 2014: 11). PSM stands for “public service media,” extending the operation mandate from radio and television to online and the internet. Indeed, public service media continue to fulfil many of the equality requirements in the digital regime, and their remit should be taken forward across the digital boundary (Trappel, 2016).

There are, of course, many more areas of policy trying to safeguard and extend equality in society, among them strong measures controlling further expansion of media power by global platforms and intermediaries, limiting media concentration at the national level, holding platforms to account for pernicious content and protecting privacy against big data and algorithmic selection. Some of these policies are addressed in this volume; for example, chapter 16 by Werner A. Meier profoundly addresses the governance of digital divides.

Over and above these fields of media policy in the digital regime, equality – like democracy and other civic values – constantly needs to be defended. It is necessary to remember that:

(...) inequality is not the inevitable by-product of technology and globalization (...):
It is the direct result of the fact that since the rise of the Internet, policy makers have acted as if the rules that apply to the rest of the economy do not apply to Internet monopolies. (Taplin, 2017: 9)

Conclusions

This brief *tour d’horizon* through several decades of media inequality and policy research suggests that we are travelling from old to new forms of communication inequalities. Many forms of inequality have survived the transition from the traditional to the digital regime (e.g. ownership concentration, control of a very few companies over large numbers of customers, gender gaps and knowledge gaps), and some have

diminished or decreased in importance along the way (access to information and voice). In the digital regime, some types of inequality are aggravated (e.g. power shared by an extremely small number of actors worldwide), while some are new (algorithmic filtering and selection, big data, surveillance and social scoring). Similar to the economic inequality discussed above, increasing inequality in the media risks endangering social cohesion, creating exclusion and distancing.

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