

## 13. The taste for news

### Class shaping young people's news use in Sweden

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Class matters in terms of the extent to which young people find news relevant and interesting, which news genres they prefer and how much news they consume. When the ability, inclination and motivation to take part in news and journalism are set by people's class positions we are faced with a pressing democratic problem. Rather than a collective good, journalism and news have become markers of social status and distinction. In this chapter I summarize key findings from two recent publications dealing with the relationship between class and news consumption: *Smaken för nyheter – Klasskillnader i det digitala medielandskapet* (*The taste for news – Class differences in digital media landscape*) and *Distinction* recapped: Digital news repertoires in the class structure.<sup>1</sup>

Class can be defined as a position in a social hierarchy that is set by an individual's access to resources that in different ways improve chances and opportunities in life.<sup>2</sup> Access to economic means is one such resource. Between the 1980s and the present day, Sweden was the OECD country wherein the gap between the rich and the poor increased fastest.<sup>3</sup> In a recent book, sociologist Göran Therborn describes the distribution of economic capital between the richest and the urban middle classes as being equivalent to the gap that existed between the aristocracy and the urban craftsmen and merchants in 17<sup>th</sup> century England.<sup>4</sup>

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Educational, or cultural, capital is another important resource for one's opportunities in life. While it is true that the Swedish university system expanded greatly during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century – creating the “mass university” – one's social background still matters in terms of the extent to which people pursue an education at a Swedish university.<sup>5</sup> Class, in the form of one's family background and an internalized and pre-reflexive sense of what one can and should do, plays a crucial role when prospective students decide on which topic and at which school or university they should study.<sup>6</sup>

Resources – both cultural and economic – are thus unevenly distributed in Swedish society. The effects of a family's and an individual's access to both economic and cultural capital tend to be manifested in their lifestyles, tastes, consumption patterns and values.<sup>7</sup> In other words, class can be observed in how different people manoeuvre in the social world, in their tastes, practices and, not least, in their news habits.

Another major transformation took place during roughly the same period. Since the 1980s the supply of mediated information and entertainment has exploded.<sup>8</sup> We have moved from a low-choice media environment wherein a significant proportion of the Swedish population shared the same media diet. The main components of this diet were broadcast public service news complemented with a subscription to a local daily newspaper. Globalization, digitalization and deregulation of the media, and the democratization of the internet in the 1990s, have come to mean that today's citizens are forced to tailor their media diets from a vast supply of providers of, for instance, news.

Given that people's choices, tastes and lifestyles tend to reflect their class, we have reasons to believe that news consumption in contemporary Sweden is connected to social hierarchy and status. Next, I present the main findings from interviews with over 50 young men and women from different class positions who have grown up in a high-choice media environment in an increasingly unequal Swedish society. The purpose of the interviews was to get young people that share the same class position to discuss news habits and preferences so as to gain insights into how class forms news diets and attitudes towards journalism. We begin by looking at how the news cultures within different types of homes and schools give rise to different orientations in the news landscape. This is followed by a study of class differences in terms of

how the different classes manoeuvre among news. The closing section summarizes the findings and suggests general principles for policy.

### Socialization into different news diets

Children develop their media habits in their formative years, at home and in school. For different social classes, these milieus tend to be vastly different when it comes to their capacity to constitute cultures that promote orientations in the news landscape. The interviews with the upper secondary pupils that I conducted for the studies that this chapter builds upon suggest that the middle classes (who are defined by their relatively high volumes of cultural and economic resources) are likely to be exposed to news on a regular basis. They learn the value of news from their peers, parents and teachers. In the news-savvy middle-class homes, and in the university preparatory schools wherein middle classes are over-represented, young people cultivate the sense that the news is “for them” and that they are expected to “have an opinion” on current affairs. In both subtle and explicit ways they learn that they “have a voice” and that their views matter.

Homes lacking access to cultural capital and where the parents hold working-class jobs, in contrast, constitute “free zones”<sup>9</sup> that are largely detached from the norms and the demands put forth by the schools and their representatives. Here, spare time is spent on the things that “one enjoys”, which tends to not include reading, listening or watching the news.<sup>10</sup> The vocational programmes, where children from the working classes are over-represented, are far from thriving news cultures wherein students become “one” with current affairs. For these young people discussions about the news and politics are largely absent, both in school and at home. One interviewee recalls that he “can only talk about the sports news” with his dad. The middle-class respondents, on the other hand, describe how their parents provide them with news stories that they may find interesting, and that their teachers encourage them to engage with the news on a weekly, if not daily, basis. These patterns align with quantitative research showing that well-educated parents are more likely to consume and talk about news at home and, in effect, that the middle classes become more news-savvy than the working classes.<sup>11</sup> We may conclude that young people are exposed to vastly different news cultures on an everyday

basis – and that these cultures are class-specific. We now turn to the outcomes of this differentiation.

### Class-based choices and values in the news landscape

Although the middle classes tend to consume more news than the working classes, news consumption levels are still comparatively high in Sweden.<sup>12</sup> However, class does not only matter in terms of the extent to which people in different social positions consume news overall. The notions that news is worth spending time on, that it is interesting and relevant, is, for instance, more widespread in the middle classes than in the working class. Young men and women in the middle classes approach news as an integral part of their daily activities – they feel they need the news to know “where they stand” and to experience a sense of attachment to the wider society. People in less well-off segments of the population, especially those who lack cultural capital, are more likely to feel that the news is “not for us” and that it is up to “other people” to partake in politics and public matters. The sense of being up to date on current affairs and being endowed with a “general knowledge” (cf. “allmänbildning”) follows similar patterns, where the middle classes feel knowledgeable and where the working classes degrade themselves with sentiments such as “I don’t know anything” or “the teachers sometimes ask us to list weekly current affairs – that list is usually not very long [laughter]”.

Furthermore, the reported interest in news on economics, politics, culture and the wider world – what is sometimes referred to as “hard” or “real” news – is more common in the middle classes, especially the fraction of the middle class that is particularly rich in cultural capital. Young people in this fraction tend to distance themselves from “boring” and “non-relevant” local news, which, in their view, describes how “somebody opened a bakery” or “that some lady finally made it out of bed”. Instead they value more cosmopolitan, world news. In diametrical opposition to such a news diet, the young people in the working class prefer local news since it relates to them on a personal level and since they “don’t gain anything by reading about China”. Overall, the “softer” news genres, such as celebrity news, sports and news about crime and accidents taking place in the vicinity, are more commonly preferred in segments that are less well off. These genres are, in turn, looked down

upon by the cultural fractions of the middle classes who reject them as “silly” or “pointless”.

News preferences follow social hierarchies and enable groups in different positions in society to mobilize the taste for news in order to draw symbolic boundaries toward other classes. This was further evident when the young participants in the study were asked to describe the news diets of *other classes*.

It is not uncommon for the middle classes to describe the working class as uninterested, unmotivated and unable to relate to news in productive ways. Discussions about news consumption become platforms upon which the classes describe themselves as morally superior/inferior to other classes. In the eyes of middle-class respondents the working class is lazy, interested in cars and beer rather than news, and for the most part concerned only with their immediate, local, surrounding. In turn, the working-class respondents describe their middle-class peers as “snobbish know-it-alls” who consume “too much” news, and that they have “never missed a class in school”. News consumption is thus embedded in the wider, “legitimate” and institutionalized, culture, which includes the “correct” behaviour in terms of lifestyle choices and attitudes towards the educational system. These kinds of boundary drawings also take place between different fractions of the middle class, where those whose capital composition is mainly constituted by economic capital tend to view themselves as “too busy” to consume as much news as the “cultural elites”.

### A democratic problem and some general guidelines for policy

This chapter has only glanced at some of the results presented, at length, elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> We have, however, seen that:

- News consumption and news preferences are connected to class. Access to cultural capital is especially important when it comes to embracing the socially recognized and valued news culture.
- The ability to manoeuvre in the media landscape in ways that correspond to society’s expectations (that news is interesting and worthwhile, to value knowledge on current affairs and to be able to “produce an opinion”) is shaped in middle-class domains. The

lack of news presence in the working-class home and in vocational programmes implies that young people in these positions to a small extent incorporate news orientations and diets that correspond to society's expectations.

- The norms surrounding news and journalism (what is “good” and “correct” and “bad” and “incorrect”) enable classes to draw boundaries between each other and to legitimate existing class discrepancies.

These results break with the widespread notion that the news constitutes a “common good” that binds society together, and that Sweden is a society largely ridden with inequality and class differences in terms of media use.<sup>14</sup> Fundamental structural transformations of Swedish society, most notably the increasing inequality and the explosion in the supply of mediated information, suggest that we rethink the role of news and journalism in our society. In fact, similar patterns regarding class-based news consumption among young people have also been unearthed in Denmark and Norway.<sup>15</sup> While there is no doubt that news *can* and *should* be a collective good, we have seen here that it works as a marker of social status and distinction. Should we continue down this line we risk facing the formation of distinct “social islands” – a clustering and subsequent isolation of people who share conditions of existence, media diets and world views, political orientations and lifestyles.<sup>16</sup> Such a development could exacerbate the rate at which inequality is growing in Sweden. Political endeavours setting out to avert this development should focus upon three interrelated points of departure: 1) decreasing the social inequality that has grown at an unprecedented rate over the last few decades; 2) increasing media literacy across the Swedish educational system; and 3) to whatever extent possible, decreasing middle-class bias in news media, and in the supply of mediated information and entertainment at large.

#### Notes

1. Lindell (2018a, 2018b).
2. Bourdieu (1986).
3. OECD (2015).
4. Therborn (2018, p. 101).
5. Öhlin (2010).
6. Börjesson (2016).

7. Bourdieu (1984).
8. Van Aelst et al. (2017).
9. Danielsson (2014).
10. Willis (1977).
11. York and Scholl (2015).
12. Andersson (2018).
13. Lindell (2018a, 2018b).
14. Syvertsen et al. (2014).
15. Hovden and Moe (2017); Møller Hartley (2018).
16. Lindell and Hovden (2018).

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