



Battle of the classes: news consumption inequalities and symbolic boundary work

Johan Lindell

To cite this article: Johan Lindell (2020) Battle of the classes: news consumption inequalities and symbolic boundary work, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 37:5, 480-496, DOI: [10.1080/15295036.2020.1829670](https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2020.1829670)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2020.1829670>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 16 Oct 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 933



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Battle of the classes: news consumption inequalities and symbolic boundary work

Johan Lindell

Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Previous research has revealed a connection between news consumption and class, both in terms of how much and what kind of news is consumed. By deploying a cultural sociological perspective on how young people from different class positions make sense of their differences, this study breaks new ground in the study of news use and inequality. Focus group interviews with young working-class and middle-class people show how social groups mobilize differences in news consumption to draw symbolic boundaries between each other. The moral economy surrounding “productive” or “unproductive” approaches towards news and journalism is a venue that allows social groups to construct an *other*, over whom a sense of social, cultural, and moral superiority can be maintained. The study takes the understanding of news consumption inequalities beyond the standard concern with gaps in knowledge and participation by locating news consumption inequalities in relation to symbolic struggles between social groups.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 December 2019
Accepted 22 September
2020

KEYWORDS

News consumption; class;
symbolic boundary work;
focus group interviews;
othering

Introduction: into a deeper layer of news consumption inequalities

For decades, scholars of media and journalism have connected the consumption of news to good citizenship (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lane, 1959; McCombs & Poindexter, 1983). Cultural sociology teaches us, however, that what is deemed good in the world of culture tends to be unequally appreciated amongst citizens, and that “good” culture is a site for struggle and contestation between social groups (Bourdieu, 1984). The main claim of this paper is that news in the digital media landscape—where people tailor their news consumption from a vast supply of news providers (Prior, 2007)—is no exception. Studies from a range of contexts have repeatedly shown that well-educated, well-paid and politically interested people consume more news and are more likely than less resourceful and politically disengaged groups to turn to “quality” news (Bergström et al., 2019; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2018; Ksiazek et al., 2010; Ksiazek et al., 2010; Lindell, 2018a; Ohlsson et al., 2017; Prieur et al., 2008; Strömback et al., 2013; Thorson et al., 2018).

CONTACT Johan Lindell johan.lindell@im.uu.se Kyrkogårdsgatan 10, 751 20, Uppsala, Sweden

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

In setting out to promote an understanding that goes beyond inequalities in volumes and types of news consumption—and also beyond previous Bourdieu-inspired studies on news consumption inequalities (see e.g. Brites et al., 2017; Hartley, 2018; Lindell, 2018a)—this study focuses on how people’s *notions* and *preconceptions* of news consumption are embedded in broader symbolic struggles between social groups. In extending, deepening and theorizing observations from a related research project (Lindell & Sartoretto, 2018)—which partially unearthed moral sentiments connected to news consumption inequalities—the question is how inequality in news consumption, real or perceived, can be mobilized to reinforce the symbolic distance to other people. The focus is here put on young people’s *othering* of their peers—an othering stemming from the preconceived behaviors and tastes of others in relation to news and journalism. This meta perspective on news consumption inequalities takes our understanding beyond the focus upon participation and knowledge gaps, which have been the prevailing concerns in political communication and journalism studies.

It is true, however, that young people’s news consumption has been studied thoroughly, especially with regard to how their media practices depart from those of older news consumers (e.g. Antunovic et al., 2018; Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Buckingham, 2000; Clark & Marchi, 2017; Diddi & Larose, 2006; Edgerly et al., 2018; Van Cauwenberge et al., 2013). Less is known about differences within young generations of news consumers, particularly where those differences may be used to draw boundaries between social groups.

This study takes Sweden as its case. The country’s historically small class differences, both in terms of the distribution of material and educational resources and in relation to news consumption, have increased over the last decades. Economic inequality has increased rapidly (Therborn, 2020) and public services, including the educational system, have been deregulated and privatized (Blomqvist, 2004). Media audiences have become more fragmented (Bergström et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2013). This study is thus conducted with people who have grown up during, or after, relatively fast transitions towards post-egalitarianism, post-broadcasting, and post-media deregulation. The young people participating in this study all attempt to make their ways through an increasingly unequal and media saturated world.

News consumption, othering, and symbolic boundary work

As it is valued by politicians, media scholars, educators and journalists—all relatively resourceful groups—the world of news and journalism is a world of moral contestation. There exist in it expectations and norms regarding what is good and noble, and what is bad and dubious (Danielsson, 2014). Through Bourdieu we understand such a moral economy to be a site for position-taking, where groups distance themselves from those most different in terms of repertoires of cultural preferences and practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu’s argument was that different social classes are unequally equipped, by way of their class habitus (a socially inherited and pre-reflexive “compass” guiding orientations in the social world), to maneuver their way through the supply of cultural goods and practices. Bourdieu’s model explains, for instance, the social classes’ different approaches to journalism and their news consumption patterns (Lindell, 2018a).

However, according to both Lamont (1992) and Sayer (2005), the Bourdieusian model did not go the whole way in explaining the moral and affective dimensions of class. For Sayer, differences in tastes and values ultimately play out in a moral economy where one can make right and wrong choices. What news we turn to, and how we consume it can be subjected to *layman normativities* in positioning oneself against others (Lamont, 1992; Sayer, 2005). Media practices and preferences, “productive” or “unproductive,” may thus generate gains or losses in the struggle over positions in the social space (Bengtsson, 2007). As already noted, previous research has shown that the resourceful segments of the citizenry, generally those endowed with high volumes of cultural capital and particularly those with educational capital, are better equipped to ingest the elements of journalism that correspond to what it means to be a “good citizen.” Indeed, being informed and cosmopolitan in outlook have emerged as new forms of cultural capital in the twenty-first century (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017; Prieur et al., 2008; Prieur & Savage, 2015). News avoidance, or exclusively consuming “soft” news, may in contrast be viewed as dubious and non-productive media practices that, in effect, can reify a subordinate position in society (Danielsson, 2014; Lindell, 2018a).

Inequalities in terms of how much and what is consumed and valued by different groups in society matter because they may generate knowledge and participation gaps (Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019; Tichenor et al., 1970). This has been the main concern for journalism and political communication scholars studying inequality. However, inequality is not only set in motion by the manner in which people negotiate the media landscape. It may also be reproduced in the way different groups understand and describe their peers, and how they make sense of the (perceived) differences between their own and others’ news consumption. Thus, the perspective endorsed here is not so concerned with knowledge gaps or the well-documented (Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019) yet important observation that different social groups are unequally equipped for democratic participation. In fact, the perspective taken here is not necessarily concerned with actual differences in people’s news consumption. Instead, the focus is put on the reproduction of social relations via moral and affective regimes connected to preconceptions of others’ ways of orienting the news landscape.

Post-colonial scholars have referred to this process of symbolic degradation or stereotyping as othering (Jensen, 2011; Riggins, 1997; Spivak, 1985). Othering thus refers to the

discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups. Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate. (Jensen, 2011, p. 65)

In relation to the symbolic struggles played out in the realm of news consumption, othering occurs, as we shall explore later on, when, for instance, middle-class people describe the working class as not fit to know what’s going on in the world, or as more interested in beer and cars than in the news. The concept of othering allows us to move beyond the focus on differences in volumes and types of news consumption to study the moral and affective regimes that are mobilized, discursively, when social groups are asked about others’ news consumption. While post-colonial scholars have, naturally, focused mostly upon racial and ethnic power relations, they have acknowledged that othering may occur between social classes and intersect with race and ethnicity (Jensen, 2011;

Spivak, 1985). However, the operational definition of othering, as deployed in post-colonial scholarship, has two shortcomings that can be addressed by way of cultural sociology.

First, the concept of othering tends, as is evident in the above definition, to focus upon the powerful and how they assert their moral and cultural superiority—what Jarness and Flemmen (2019), drawing upon Parkin (1979), calls *exclusionary strategies*. This implies, somewhat ironically, that the voices, strategies, and agency of subaltern/less resourceful groups remain unaccounted for. Recent work in cultural sociology may have remedied this shortcoming. Scholars focusing upon *symbolic boundary work* have shown that groups across the social space use cultural tastes and behaviors to draw moral and cultural boundaries between each other. Lamont (1992) and Jarness and Flemmen (2019) have focused upon working-class challenges to the lifestyles and norms of the privileged, noting how they rely on symbolically *usurpatory strategies* to distance themselves from the middle class (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019). Also, it is not uncommon for people with low amounts of cultural capital to distance themselves both from people with high volumes of cultural capital and from those with even lower amounts of cultural capital (Sayer, 2005, p. 98). Jarness (2017, 2018), in turn, has shown how boundaries between different factions of the middle class—“the rich” and the “cultural elite”—are maintained when they are asked to evaluate each other’s cultural practices and tastes. While othering fruitfully captures the moral dimensions of inequalities, the related terms of layman normativities (Sayer, 2005) and symbolic boundary work (Jarness, 2017, 2018; Lamont, 1992) allow for the widening of the frame of othering to include the social space in its entirety.

Second, as an effect of its inherent focus upon the resourceful’s symbolic degradation of those below them in the social hierarchy, the concept of othering risks failing to account not only for the subaltern’s usurpatory strategies, but also the instances where the victims are complicit in their own degradation, that is, how less resourceful groups partake in the subordination of their own identity formation, to use Jensen’s (2011) vocabulary. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) understood this as a form of *symbolic violence*. Not entirely unrelated to the example given by Spivak (1985, p. 234) of how the colonized native comes to see himself/herself as an *other*, this process describes an othering directed at the self, by way of one’s class habitus. In the present context, this may entail the sense of belonging to a social group “unfit” to enjoy or to understand the cultural practices and preferences of consecrated individuals (Bourdieu, 1984; cf. Willis, 2017).

Differences in news consumption—real or perceived—form the basis on which social groups attempt to ascertain their moral and cultural superiority over one another. The theoretical framework of othering and symbolic boundary work allows us to delve deeper into the inequalities in news consumption, and to broaden the scope of what is at stake beyond knowledge or participation gaps to include the wider symbolic struggles that take place in society.

Capturing otherings in talk about news consumption: method and material

In order to explore how the discursive regimes of othering are mobilized by people in different social positions to demarcate moral and cultural distances between each

other, the study used focus group interviews with young people. The focus group interview method was chosen because it allows for the study of the group, rather than the individual (Kitzinger, 1994). In total nine focus groups comprising a total of 56 respondents at various upper secondary schools in Sweden participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews with the young people (17- to 20-year-olds) were conducted in 2015 and 2016, and lasted on average 56 min. The study was conducted in a research project on inequalities and news consumption, and parts of the empirical material have been discussed elsewhere (Lindell, 2018b; Lindell & Sartoretto, 2018). The purpose here is to delve deeper into material, specifically focusing upon othering.

Each group represented a small cluster in the space of social positions as described by Bourdieu (1984). Given the purpose of this study, the participants were analyzed from a cultural sociological lens focusing on class dispositions. It is worth noting, however, that the sample was mainly, but not exclusively white, and that men were overrepresented in the working-class groups.

For Bourdieu, and scholars who have replicated his study of the social space in Scandinavian countries (Flemmen et al., 2018; Lindell, 2018a), there are two main axes of division in terms of class relations. The first concerns the overall *volume* of primarily economic and cultural capital, and the second describes the relative *composition* of individuals' economic or cultural capital. While this study includes respondents from several "corners" of the social space, the focus is mainly on comparing middle-class groups to less resourceful ones, who consist primarily of representatives from the working class. Although some divisions along the capital-composition axis are discussed, the greater attention is placed on the *otherings* along the capital-volume axis. When necessary, the middle-class faction whose economic capital outweighs their cultural capital are referred to as the "economic middle-class faction," while the term "cultural middle-class faction" is used to describe the opposite.

Respondents were recruited at various upper secondary schools in a mid-sized Swedish city. Respondents within (not across) each focus group knew each other. While this created a more relaxed interview environment, it could also explain the "harsh" nature of some of the comments explored in this study. The study used a screening survey that included questions on study programs, parents' occupations, cultural consumption, aspirations for the future, and levels of satisfaction with the household economy. This was to ensure the homogeneity of the groups in terms of their class positions. The entry of private educational institutions in the 1990s, and the "free choice" reform, imply that Swedish 15-year-olds have to make choices in a myriad of study programs—including a number of vocational (sheet metal, hairdressing, car mechanics etc.) or academic (humanities, law, economics, science, etc.) programs. This has exacerbated the instances of social reproduction taking place within the educational system (Broady & Börjesson, 2002).

The class schema deployed in this study combines insights from the Bourdieusian concern with the volume and composition of capital and the neo-Weberian focus upon occupations (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). Accordingly, alongside a focus on cultural practices and views on their economic circumstances, the young people's class positions were understood in terms of their work-life aspirations as well as their parents' occupations (which may be understood as forms of embodied cultural capital [Bourdieu, 1984]).

The middle class was defined as possessing relatively high volumes of capital, with parents who held relatively high positions in the labor market. Both the economic and cultural middle-class factions were included in this overarching category. They were recruited from theoretically oriented educational programs including humanities and foreign languages, law and business, and natural science. Virtually all these respondents aspired to pursue a higher education once they graduated from school (either immediately, or after “seeing the world”), they were relatively satisfied with their household economy, they consumed institutionalized culture (books, museums, opera), that works practically as an embodied form of cultural capital, comparatively often. Their parents were almost exclusively white-collar workers with a tertiary education. The working-class respondents, in contrast, were recruited from vocationally oriented programs such as car mechanics, sheet metal work, and social care. They sought to find a job once they had graduated, and their parents were blue-collar workers. These respondents were, furthermore, somewhat less satisfied with their household income and much less inclined to read books and visit museums and the opera compared with their middle-class peers (Appendix).

The interviews began in general terms, asking how respondents obtained information when “something important” happened. Gradually, the interviews shifted to questions about how one group perceived another’s relationship to news and journalism. Thus, the concept of othering was operationalized in an open-ended way, by asking the groups to describe the typical “news avoider” or the “news junkie.” The interview transcripts have been translated from Swedish and slightly shortened and edited to increase readability.

Analysis

The middle-class otherings

The main target of the middle-class groups’ otherings, on the basis of the preconceived news consumption of others, was the working class. Thus, the middle-class respondents deployed exclusionary boundary strategies (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019, p. 173). When they were asked who they thought did not consume the news, they tended to answer along the lines of “those people in the vocational programs.” During a discussion on the Sweden Democrats (a populist right-wing party that had successful turnouts in the last two elections, currently holding 17.53% of the vote [The Swedish Election Authority, 2019]) and their predominately male working-class electorate, a young woman in one of the culturally rich middle-class groups became indignant at their (according to her preconceptions) lack of news consumption. She claimed that she would have felt “really fucking bad” if she had not stayed up to date with the news, and she queried whether people in this segment of the electorate “have any brains at all.”

During the interviews with the middle-class groups it was striking how the working class were portrayed as being too unmotivated (that is, not “driven”), incapable (“do they have any brains at all?”), and uninterested (“they are better at taking care of their cars”) to consume the news in any “productive” way. While not knowing about the actual news practices and preferences of their target—indeed, what are described here are layman normativities—the middle-class mobilized preconceived notions to position

themselves against a less capable, less dignified and culturally different other (Jensen, 2011; Spivak, 1985). In effect, they reiterated their social position, or at least their identity, as socially, morally, and culturally superior to the working class (Jarness, 2017; 2018; Lamont, 1992).

The excerpt below deals with the working class as news avoiders. It begins with Sofie, who was in the middle of an argument regarding the lack of interest in the news among those in the vocational programs:

- Sofie: No [on whether the working class consume the news], since they are not enrolled in a university preparatory program like we are. They're studying in the vocational program, right.
- Klara: Yeah, but they learn the trade. They get something we don't.
- Sofie: If you're in the car mechanics program you'll get good at caring for your car so ... (Cultural middle-class faction)

When asked which groups in society were well-versed in the world of news the middle-class respondents tended to answer "driven" and "motivated" people, a construct that overlapped with how they describe themselves and their busy and purposeful lives. In one group it was explicitly argued that people in retail- and carpentry-oriented programs did not belong to the category of "driven" people. The middle-class idea that these groups "are not keen on learning" testifies to the relationship between news and the "legitimate culture," not least school culture, where "correct" and "productive" practices are found in the will to be informed and to be educated (cf. Lindell, 2018b; Danielsson, 2014).

- Linus: It is the driven people that consume the news and care more about everything that's going on.
- Markus: Not those in the retail programs, right?
- Linus: No ... it's not very likely that some people over there would sit down with the paper.
- Nora: I don't think some of them want to learn that much. They are not configured for wanting to know much.
- Interviewer: Why do you think that is?
- Nora: Well you can just be that kind of person. You feel that you don't need to ... or that you don't have the need to know (laughter).
- ...
- Interviewer: Mm, but if we stay with those who never consume news, who don't find them interesting, are there more examples on who they are?
- Linus: Like, a carpenter.
- Markus: Yeah, but maybe they listen to the radio.
- Nora: Yes.
- Linus: Well, I mean those in practical trades, they are not super interested maybe (laughter).
- Nora: I think it boils down to how motivated you are. Had they been motivated maybe they would have chosen to study in a university preparatory program. (Economic middle-class faction)

In one interview segment with a middle-class group particularly rich in cultural capital the othering took on a different character. The excerpt below illustrates that some of the middle-class respondents felt that they were in a position to pity the working class (because they do not consume the news, in their view), while simultaneously displaying a distaste towards their (preconceived) lifestyles (cf. Sayer, 2005). The intersectionality of

living in the countryside, being working class, and “drinking folk beer [a type of alcoholic beer that is legal to buy at the age of 18]” was constructed as the kind of lifestyle farthest away from a position where one would find news worthwhile. According to this particular middle-class group, these beer-drinking blue-collars in the countryside “don’t care what’s going on in Africa or Nepal.” The excerpt furthermore reveals a kind of reversed othering directed at their own social group, as they refer to themselves as “snobs” or “know-it-alls” via a hypothetical working-class othering of themselves.

- Interviewer: Then there are people who are completely off news and such.
 Lisa: Yeah, and I pity them (laughter).
 Emma: (laughter).
 Interviewer: Who are these people?
 Lisa: Those in the car mechanics program at [vocational school].
 Several respondents: (laughter).
 Lisa: But it’s true.
 Emma: It’s very true
 Interviewer: Can you elaborate on that?
 Lisa: Yeah, I don’t know. I don’t really think that those in the car mechanics program are so into watching the news.
 Sara: I mean, it doesn’t feel like they are particularly into the news.
 Emma: But it must be so boring, not to care about what is happening.
 Lisa: But they think it’s more fun to tweak on their cars and take some snuff and drink some beer, I think.
 Emma: Yes.
 Lisa: They’re not really thinking about the news, in my mind.
 ...
 Saga: There’s a theory that describes that what is closest to you is what you consider normal. It’s called Axis Mundi. So, if you live in Small Town and go to Small Town’s vocational school and drink folk beer you don’t care about what’s going on in Africa or Nepal.
 Emelie: No.
 Johanna: Well, then it’s precisely them who don’t watch the news.
 Rebecka: Yeah, exactly. And I pity them.
 Several respondents: (laughter).
 ...
 Saga: Yeah, they say “I don’t care. This is my home and this is what I care about.”
 Rebecka: Our school is a bit of a snob-school if you compare to [vocational school].
 Johanna: (laughter).
 Rebecka: I mean, they do think that we are real snobs and posher than they.
 Johanna: Mm.
 Rebecka: I think that they think that we are like, “I know everything.” (Economic middle-class faction)¹

While it was first and foremost the working class that acted as a target for the symbolic boundary drawings of the middle class, the different factions of the middle class were not always in harmony (Jarness, 2017, 2018). In the excerpt below the young people in the economic faction use an ironic and somewhat degrading tone to describe their more culturally oriented peers as “artsy” and “creative” people focused on following cultural news at the expense of economic news. This type of othering thus had a horizontal, rather than vertical, trajectory in the social space.

- Viktor: These creative people ... artsy people ...
- Tomas: The aesthetic people [A literal translation from “esteterna”—a term used to describe students enrolled in the aesthetic program, a term that can also have negative connotations amongst Swedish upper secondary school students].
- Viktor: I imagine that they are well up to date with these cultural news.
- Wera: Yeah.
- Viktor: I don't think they know the exchange rate for the US dollar and other economic issues.
(Economic middle-class faction)

Furthermore, some members of the economic middle-class faction suggested that they could not match their cultural counterparts in terms of news savviness. For the former, there was an upper limit on how much news one can and should consume. In their view, the cultural faction seemed to have more time on their hands to consume news. The economic faction, in contrast, presented themselves as too busy to be able to say, “oh, in 2015 this happened.” As “driven” people, they needed to weigh their news consumption against physical exercise, studies, and work. It is interesting to note that the cultural faction did not draw the same clear boundary between itself and the economic faction. While the two groups shared an *other* in the form of the working-class group, the othering occurring between themselves was one-directional.

- Gabriella: Maybe they don't have anything else to do. We study, we exercise, maybe we work. We don't have time to sit around and say, “oh, in 2015 this happened.” Maybe news has to come to us for us to consume them. If you don't exercise for instance, you'll have five more hours per week to search for news.
- Hanna: But then it's like a hobby.
- Gabriella: Yeah, consuming the news.
- Ines: They have, like, more time than we do.
(Economic middle-class faction)

The working-class otherings

In the working-class groups, four types of otherings were constructed in relation to attitudes and practices towards news and journalism: (1) the disconnected self, (2), those with lower positions in the social space, (3) the representatives of the institutionalized culture, that is, teachers not involved in practice-oriented subjects, and (4) those with higher capital volumes than themselves, that is, the middle class.

When asked about news as a source of knowledge and information and about their own knowledge on current affairs, the answers from the working-class groups testified to the observation that young working-class people tend to approach their spare time as a “free zone,” detached from the expectations and norms represented by “society” (Danielsson, 2014; Willis, 2017). While for the most part they did feel that it was important to “know what is going on,” they did not feel that they were particularly knowledgeable themselves. Thus, in what may be described as self-othering, or as exercising symbolic violence upon themselves (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), the working-class group provided some legitimacy to the cultural norms that they, in their own view, failed to live up to.

- Interviewer: It is quite common to think that one should be knowledgeable on current affairs. What do you think?
- Patrik: No.
- Kristoffer: Why should you?
- Patrik: It's unnecessary.
- Interviewer: Ok, why?
- Patrik: spend my time on other things instead. The things that I enjoy.
- Interviewer: Rikard, what do you say?
- Rikard: I guess it something good?
- Andreas: No ...
- Interviewer: Mm, why is it good then, Rikard?
- Rikard: It could be good to know a little bit on what's going on.
- Kristoffer: Yeah, exactly. So that you at least know a little bit.
- ...
- Interviewer: But if I ask this ... do you feel that you are knowledgeable on current affairs?
- Kristoffer: No.
- Andreas: No. I don't think so.
- Interviewer: Why?
- Andreas: I don't know anything.

(Working-class group)

The working class constructed themselves as strangers to the virtuous preferences and practices in the world of news and journalism, which include “the duty to keep informed” (McCombs & Poindexter, 1983, p. 88). Thus, Andreas claimed, “I don't know anything.” However, they were also, like the middle class, deploying exclusionary boundary strategies in order create an *other* of those below them in the social hierarchy (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; cf. Sayer, 2005). News consumption in their view—in tandem with the sentiments of the middle class—did not sit well with “beer drinking” and “aimlessly driving around in old, cheap cars:”

- Filip: Where I live there are lots of raggare [a Swedish, working-class, and male-dominated subculture revolving around US 1950s culture, particularly cars and rockabilly music, a subculture predominantly found in rural parts of the country]. And these people, they don't give a fuck about what's happening in other places. They care about their hometown.
- Jesper: They drive Impalas and drink German beer.
- Hannes: Mm.
- Filip: I don't think they are so up to date [on the news].

(Working-class group)

When prompted on who led lives in accordance with the “legitimate” culture the working-class designated some of their teachers and middle-class peers as the other. Thus, the third and fourth types of otherings deployed by the working class fell into the category of usurpatory strategies “aimed at biting into, or challenging, the privileged position of others” (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019, p. 73). Although the vocational programs undertaken by the young working-class participants primarily serve the function of ushering pupils into the labor market, they do provide basic academic training. Teachers in that category—who teach the Swedish language and world religions for instance—were presented as those who make attempts at introducing current affairs and news into the classroom. At one point a teacher had provided them with a current affairs

quiz in relation to which one respondent triumphantly recalled that he “did not have many correct answers on that one,” which was followed by laughter in the group. The teacher of world religions, who was mentioned as one of the few who made attempts to discuss news with the students, was described as “having the most boring life you could imagine.”

A similar kind of othering occurred when the working-class groups described their middle-class peers as “proper” news reading individuals who were “so very good” and had “never missed a class in school” (cf. Jarness & Flemmen, 2019). Like the economic middle-class faction, this group used the epithet of the “aesthetic” people (that is, those with more cultural capital than themselves) to demarcate a symbolic distance from the middle class. Alongside “old people” it was primarily the culturally rich middle class who were constructed as people who engaged in the news. Although the working-class group did recognize the value and importance of news and of being, at least to some extent, up to date on current affairs, there was a point when news becomes “boring,” and when news consumption is “too much” and “dorky.” Such degradation of the “pretentious” is, according to Sayer (2005, p. 183), a way for the working class to construct an other against which they pit their own, more genuine, lifestyles. Part of this process is exemplified by the excerpt below, where a working-class group is asked to describe a “news junkie:”

- Jakob: The people in artsy programs seem to be very good.
 Tom: Why don't you describe what they look like.
 Jakob: No ...
 Several respondents: (Laughter)
 Interviewer: Jakob ... are these people at this school?
 Jakob: No.
 Interviewer: Where are they then?
 Jakob: At the university preparatory schools in town.
 Interviewer: What are they like?
 Tom: They're like ...
 Several respondents: (Laughter)
 Jakob: High grades. Proper. Yes.
 Nils: Yeah.
 Jakob: Nah, I don't know how to explain ...
 Interviewer: You guys, do you know what he means?
 Several respondents: Yes, absolutely/Mm.
 Nils: Well, the types who haven't been a minute late to school in their entire lives.
 Oliver: Snobs.
 Nils: They've never missed a homework.
 Adrian: Nerds.

(Working-class group)

The working-class otherings, it should be noted, were not always of such an antagonistic character. One group described the middle class not as “snobs” or “know-it-alls,” but rather as people who genuinely found news interesting, and for whom news and journalism were a “popular conversation point” in their schools, unlike their own. Despite its softer sentiment, such a construction nonetheless reproduced the idea of “them” and “us” in the preconceptions of how the social classes maneuver in the world of news and journalism.

Inequalities beyond volumes and types of news consumption

In the spirit of functionalism, much of the media scholarship that has focused on inequalities in news consumption has been concerned with the weakening of democratic society (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2013). Previous Bourdieu-inspired research has also tended to focus on what, and how much news people (of different classes) consume (Brites et al., 2017; Danielsson, 2014; Hartley, 2018; Lindell, 2018a). While it is important to study systemic differences in how much and what news different segments of a population consume and how that may obstruct democratic participation, this study has probed an underexplored tenet of news consumption inequalities. The focus has been put on how social classes mobilize preconceived inequalities in news consumption to construct an other in relation to which a moral and cultural superiority is asserted (cf. Jensen, 2011; Lamont, 1992; Spivak, 1985).

When prompted, in a focus group setting with peers sharing their social position, to describe the typical features of a “news avoider,” the middle class conjured an *other* in the form of the working class. Their exclusionary boundary strategies (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019) worked to sustain a twenty-first century middle-class identity formation revolving around being a busy, up-to-date cosmopolitan (Prieur & Savage, 2015) with a “duty to keep informed” (McCombs & Poindexter, 1983, p. 88). The young people of the middle class contrasted this identity with a lazy, sedentary and disconnected working-class lifestyle. Working-class usurpationary strategies (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019), on the other hand, challenged the pretentiousness of the middle class—for instance, by portraying them as “proper,” “boring” “news junkies” who failed to live life at its fullest. Both classes, however, came together in the belief that news is indeed important and that one should at least have a minimum sense of what is going on in the world. The difference is that the middle class portrayed itself as meeting that expectation, while the working class othered itself by feeling detached from the journalistic discourse.²

One striking feature in the boundary work explored here was the *trope of connection* that extended from the pole of “we consume news to stay connected to the world” at one end to that of “they only care about the place where they live” at the other. While primarily used by the middle class, this trope was also deployed by the working class to “punch down” those below them in the social hierarchy. This should be understood in light of previous research on the changing character of cultural capital in late, globalized, modernity which has revealed the entanglement between a traditional taste for “high end” culture and the increased value of connectedness (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017; Prieur et al., 2008; Prieur & Savage, 2015). In relation to these new lines of class division, news and journalism, because of their connective potential, emerge as key cultural artefacts in the formation of class identities and their boundaries.

It must be emphasized that the symbolic boundary work (Jarness, 2017, 2018; Jarness & Flemmen, 2019; Lamont, 1992) deployed by the classes to construct their identities in relation to a morally, socially, and culturally different other may well be constructed upon false premises. It goes without saying that young middle-class people do not know exactly how much and what news the working class consume, and vice-versa. The working class may be underestimating themselves and the middle class may be tainted by a sense of entitlement and self-righteousness (Piff, 2014). The participants in this study may have “inflated” the extent of their news consumption (Prior, 2009). Ørmen’s (2019) study

using digital trace data found inequalities in volumes of news consumption, but suggested that previous studies using self-reports may have overestimated them. The classes may, in other words, have more in common than we think. None of this, however, is the point here. What has been described are discursive sentiments of identity formation based upon *beliefs* of how other people orient themselves in relation to news and journalism. We recall the famous theorem “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). The real consequence of these discursive constructions—whereby usurpatory “punching up” strategies are deployed by the dominated, and exclusionary “punching down” strategies by the dominant—is that the structure of the social hierarchy is maintained.

Inequalities in how social classes orient themselves in the digital news landscape translate not only to gaps in democratic participation and levels of knowledge of current affairs. These inequalities are also embedded in the wider symbolic struggles between social groups (Bourdieu, 1984). This study contributes to the literature on news consumption inequalities by showing that media practices not only widen the “knowledge gap” between resourceful and less resourceful groups in society (Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019). When approached from a cultural sociological perspective it becomes clear that news may be mobilized in social groups’ identity formation to serve the function of demarcating and maintaining social differences. In order to further understand the various boundary-drawings that may take place in the world of news, the cultural sociological framework adopted here should be supplemented with an intersectional approach that would take into account gender and ethnicity alongside class (see e.g. Alper et al., 2016).

Notes

1. Parts of this quote has been analyzed in Lindell and Sartoretto (2018).
2. The differences between the classes in terms of self-reported knowledge in relation to current affairs have been explored in greater detail elsewhere (Lindell, 2018b).

Note on contributor

Johan Lindell is an Associate Professor in Media and Communication studies at Uppsala University, Sweden. His research interests include the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and social and cultural stratification. He has previously published his research in, for instance, *New Media & Society*, *European Journal of Communication*, *Media, Culture & Society*, *Poetics* and *Communication Theory*.

ORCID

Johan Lindell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6689-0710>

References

- Alper, M., Katz, V. S., & Clark, L. S. (2016). Researching children, intersectionality, and diversity in the digital age. *Journal of Children and Media*, 10(1), 107–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2015.1121886>

- Antunovic, D., Parsons, P., & Cooke, T. R. (2018). 'Checking' and googling: Stages of news consumption among young adults. *Journalism*, 19(5), 632–648. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916663625>
- Bakker, T. P., & De Vreese, C. (2011). Good news for the future? Young people, internet use, and political participation. *Communication Research*, 38(4), 451–470. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650210381738>
- Bengtsson, S. (2007). *Mediernas vardagsrum: Om mediemoral och moral i vardagslivet* [Mediated living rooms: Moral dimensions of media use in everyday life] [Doctoral dissertation, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg]. <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/17077>
- Bergström, A., Strömbäck, J., & Arkhede, S. (2019). Towards rising inequalities in newspaper and television news consumption? A longitudinal analysis, 2000–2016. *European Journal of Communication*, 34(2), 175–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119830048>
- Blomqvist, P. (2004). The choice revolution: Privatization of Swedish welfare services in the 1990s. *Social Policy and Administration*, 38(2), 139–155. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2004.00382.x>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Brites, M. J., Ponte, C., & Menezes, I. (2017). Youth talking about news and civic daily life. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(3), 398–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1241862>
- Broady, D., & Börjesson, M. (2002). En social karta över gymnasieskolan i Stockholm i slutet av 1990-talet [A social map of the upper secondary school in Stockholm at the end of the 1990s]. *Studies in Educational Policy and Educational Philosophy*, 2002, 1.
- Buckingham, D. (2000). *The making of citizens: Young people, news and politics*. Routledge.
- Chan, T. W., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (2007). Social status and newspaper readership. *American Journal of Sociology*, 112(4), 1095–1134. <https://doi.org/10.1086/508792>
- Clark, L. S., & Marchi, R. (2017). *Young people and the future of news: Social media and the rise of connective journalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Danielsson, M. (2014). *Digitala distinktioner: Klass och kontinuitet i unga mäns vardagliga mediepraktiker* [Digital distinctions: Class and continuity in young men's everyday media practices] [Doctoral dissertation, School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, Jönköping]. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:739329/FULLTEXT02.pdf>
- Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. Yale University Press.
- Diddi, A., & Larose, R. (2006). Getting hooked on news: Uses and gratifications and the formation of news habits among college students in an internet environment. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(2), 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem5002_2
- Edgerly, S., Vraga, E. K., Bode, L., Thorson, K., & Thorson, E. (2018). New media, new relationship to participation? A closer look at youth news repertoires and political participation. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(1), 192–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699017706928>
- Erikson, R., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (1992). *The constant flux: A study of class mobility in industrial societies*. Oxford University Press.
- Flemmen, M., Jarness, V., & Rosenlund, L. (2018). Social space and cultural class divisions: The forms of capital and contemporary lifestyle differentiation. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 69(1), 124–153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12295>
- Hartley, J. M. (2018). 'It's something posh people do': Digital distinction in young people's cross-media news engagement. *Media and Communication*, 6(2), 46–55. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i2.1322>
- Jarness, V. (2017). Cultural vs economic capital: Symbolic boundaries within the middle class. *Sociology*, 51(2), 357–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515596909>
- Jarness, V. (2018). Viewpoints and points of view: Situating symbolic boundary drawing in social space. *European Societies*, 20(3), 503–524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2017.1371317>
- Jarness, V., & Flemmen, M. P. (2019). A struggle on two fronts: Boundary drawing in the lower region of the social space and the symbolic market for 'down-to-earthness'. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 70(1), 166–189. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12345>

- Jensen, S. Q. (2011). Othering, identity formation and agency. *Qualitative Studies*, 2(2), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.7146/qs.v2i2.5510>
- Kalogeropoulos, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018). Social inequalities in news consumption. *Factsheet, News Media Digital Media*, 461–475.
- Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 16(1), 103–121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep11347023>
- Ksiazek, T. B., Malthouse, E. C., & Webster, J. G. (2010). News-seekers and avoiders: Exploring patterns of total news consumption across media and the relationship to civic participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 54(4), 551–568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2010.519808>
- Lamont, M. (1992). *Money, morals, and manners: The culture of the French and the American upper-middle class*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lane, R. E. (1959). *Political life: Why people get involved in politics*. Macmillan.
- Lind, F., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2019). What we do and don't know: A meta-analysis of the knowledge gap hypothesis. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 43(3), 210–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2019.1614475>
- Lindell, J. (2018a). Distinction recapped: Digital news repertoires in the class structure. *New Media & Society*, 20(8), 3029–3049.
- Lindell, J. (2018b). *Smaken för nyheter: Klasskillnader i det digitala medielandskapet [The taste for news: Class differences in the digital media landscape]* Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Lindell, J., & Danielsson, M. (2017). Moulding cultural capital into cosmopolitan capital: Media practices as reconversion work in a globalising world. *Nordicom Review*, 38(2), 51–64.
- Lindell, J., & Sartoretto, P. (2018). Young people, class and the news: Distinction, socialization and moral sentiments. *Journalism Studies*, 19(14), 2042–2061.
- McCombs, M., & Poindexter, P. (1983). The duty to keep informed: News exposure and civic obligation. *Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 88–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1983.tb02391.x>
- Ohlsson, J., Lindell, J., & Arkhede, S. (2017). A matter of cultural distinction: News consumption in the online media landscape. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(2), 116–130.
- Ørmen, J. (2019). Not so distinct after all: Assessing social stratification of news users on the web. *Journalism Studies*, 20(11), 1653–1670. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1539342>
- Parkin, F. (1979). *Marxism and class theory: A bourgeois critique* (no. 217). Tavistock.
- Piff, P. K. (2014). Wealth and the inflated self: Class, entitlement, and narcissism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(1), 34–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213501699>
- Prieur, A., Rosenlund, L., & Skjott-Larsen, J. (2008). Cultural capital today: A case study from Denmark. *Poetics*, 36(1), 45–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2008.02.008>
- Prieur, A., & Savage, M. (2015). On “knowingness,” cosmopolitanism and busyness as emerging forms of cultural capital. In P. Coulangeon & J. Duval (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to Bourdieu's distinction* (pp. 307–318). Routledge.
- Prior, M. (2007). *Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections*. Cambridge University Press.
- Prior, M. (2009). The immensely inflated news audience: Assessing bias in self-reported news exposure. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 73(1), 130–143. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfp002>
- Riggins, S. H. (1997). The rhetoric of othering. In S. H. Riggins (Ed.), *Communication and human values, Vol. 24: The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse* (pp. 1–30). Sage.
- Sayer, A. (2005). *The moral significance of class*. Cambridge University Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1985). The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives. *History and Theory*, 24(3), 247–272. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505169>
- Strömbäck, J., Djerf-Pierre, M., & Shehata, A. (2013). The dynamics of political interest and news media consumption: A longitudinal perspective. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 25(4), 414–435. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/eds018>
- The Swedish Election Authority. (2019). *Valresultat 2018* [Election results 2018]. <https://www.val.se/valresultat.html>

- Therborn, G. (2020). Sweden's turn to economic inequality, 1982–2019. *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*, 52, 159–166. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.strueco.2019.10.005>
- Thomas, W. I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs*. Plimpton Press.
- Thorson, K., Xu, Y., & Edgerly, S. (2018). Political inequalities start at home: Parents, children, and the socialization of civic infrastructure online. *Political Communication*, 35(2), 178–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1333550>
- Tichenor, P. J., Donohue, G. A., & Olien, C. N. (1970). Mass media flow and differential growth in knowledge. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34(2), 159–170. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267786>
- Van Cauwenberge, A., d'Haenens, L., & Beentjes, H. (2013). Young people's news orientations and uses of traditional and new media for news. *Communications*, 38(4), 367–388. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2013-0022>
- Willis, P. (2017). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Routledge.

Appendix

Table A1. The composition of the focus groups.

Social class	Program	Parents' occupations (examples)	Share of parents with tertiary degree	Aspirations post-graduation (examples)	Consumption of institutionalized culture (mode value)	Satisfaction with household economy (mode value)	N
<i>Cultural middle-class A</i>	Humanities and foreign languages	University lecturer, CEO, information officer, physician, travel agent	8/10	University, travel.	Monthly/weekly	Very satisfied/rather satisfied	5
<i>Cultural middle-class B</i>	Law	Head of hospital, librarian, government officer, sales	13/16 (1 "don't know")	University, travel	Quarterly, monthly	Very satisfied/rather satisfied	8
<i>Economic middle-class A</i>	Management/Communication Program	Sales, business owner, economist	6/12	University, travel	Never/seldom	Very satisfied/rather satisfied	6
<i>Economic middle-class</i>	Business Program	Sales, engineer, physician, head of marketing, social care	6/8	University, travel	Once or twice during the last 12 months	Rather satisfied	4
<i>Working-class A</i>	Vehicle program	Car mechanic, social care, truck driver, cleaner, masseuse	2/16	Work or look for work	Never/seldom	Very satisfied/rather satisfied	8
<i>Working-class B</i>	Sheet metal program	Carpenter, factory worker, unemployed, social care	2/12	Work	Never	Rather satisfied	6
<i>Working-class/Mix</i>	Children and social care program	Head of municipality, masseuse, pre-school teacher, factory worker	3/8	Work	Never	Very satisfied	4
<i>Less resourceful/upwardly mobile</i>	Humanities and foreign languages	Famer, electrician, technician, social care, truck driver	2/14	University, work	Quarterly	Rather unsatisfied	7
<i>Less resourceful/upwardly mobile</i>	Law	Salesman, carpenter, technician	0/16 (2 "don't know")	University, work	Once or twice during the last 12 months	Rather satisfied	8