

Introduction

Class in/and the media: On the importance of class in media and communication studies

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Introduction

Social class is one of the most enduring concepts in the social sciences and is associated with many of the key themes and topics across multiple disciplines. Thus, there are many uses to which the concept of social class in media and communication can be put. The ambition of this special issue is to offer a glimpse into the heterogeneity of its uses in the field. While attuned differently in relation to the various approaches and definitions of class, the eight contributions to this special issue collectively focus on the relationship between media and class. One of the ambitions of this special issue is to report on some of the current Nordic scholarship in this growing field of research and to highlight the particularities of the relationship between class, inequality and media in this region. While the special issue also includes contributions from other regions, the main focus is on social class in the Nordic countries.

This introductory article begins with a discussion on the concept of social class and its analytical relevance in the contemporary social landscape. We detail the relationship between media and class as manifested in a growing body of research, followed by a brief presentation of the individual contributions to this special issue. Finally, we identify the road ahead and potential research areas for scholars of media and communication concerned about class and social inequality in the twenty-first century.

Class: A key concept in an increasingly unequal world

Despite its long history of playing a key role in the social sciences, the concept of social class is a contested term. First, because of the definitional uncertainty that stems from a range of academic traditions applying the concept in different ways to different objects of study. Second, due to changes in the sphere of production, social structure, and in the lifeworlds of citizens in many parts of the world, which has made it more difficult to ascertain the empirical reality of social class.

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The Oxford Online Dictionary's (2020) definition of class states, "one of the groups of people in a society that are thought of as being at the same social or economic level". While various strands of social theory and studies of class and inequality would probably agree that this is one of the dimensions of social class, there are key differences between the various theoretical traditions. In the Marxist tradition, class is a materialist concept, the basic contours of which can be traced from the structures of ownership and control over the means of production (Marx, 1867/1990). The starting point in Marxist class analysis is a two-class model, based on the antagonistic relationship between those who own and control the means of production (whether it be land, machinery, buildings, infrastructure, or intellectual property) and those without control over the means of production – who need to sell their labour power in order to provide for their basic subsistence.

The materialistic and antagonistic nature of social class are two key differences between the Marxist tradition and other ways of understanding social class that view class as being only partially rooted in the economic sphere, and not necessarily as a concept that highlights a fundamental conflict between different social actors. For example, Goldthorpe and Marshall (1992) aim to divorce social class from the Marxist concept of exploitation and view the relationship between the classes as a question of empirical analysis. Such "gradational" (Das, 2017: 4) approaches to class – inspired by Weber rather than Marx – are concerned about the differences in, for example, lifestyles, incomes, group affiliations, status, and skills, and may include many different social groups and social strata (Ragnedda, 2017). Social mobility, and particularly the role of culture and education in both maintaining and traversing social stratification, has been an important object of study in neo-Weberian approaches.

Other approaches to social class include "culturalist" perspectives (Thompson 1963/2013; Skeggs, 1997), which view class as a partially cultural and symbolic construct. Here, the focus is placed on how social class is lived and experienced, expressed, reproduced, and contested through "interests and identities" (Bottero, 2004; Holgersson, 2011; Savage, 2000), for example, in the "new working class studies" (Strangleman, 2008). Here, objective class conditions are less the focus of analysis; instead, the subjective perceptions and reactions to these conditions – or what Wendy Bottero (2004: 987) describes as the "absence of clear-cut class identities" – is the main concern. Under the "culturalist" heading we also include research that looks beyond the workplace to understand how class is produced, reproduced, and contested, for example, through routine cultural practices (Devine & Savage, 2000) or popular culture (Wood & Skeggs, 2008).

This typology of different approaches to class – Marxist, gradational, and culturalist – is only a rough guide to the various approaches to class analysis. Actual research designs often combine elements of the various theoretical approaches. Thus, the usefulness of the different definitions of class ultimately depends on the research question one seeks to answer (Wright, 2005). It should also be remembered that one's definition and operationalisation of class – as is the case for many social theory concepts – is not only have theoretical and scientific implications, but also social and political implications.

A broad two-class scheme (as in Marxism) has significance not only for analysing and describing social realities, it also carries implications for how research portrays the conditions for mobilising broad social coalitions for political and social change. Several

notable and important contributions to class theory represent attempts to combine different approaches to class – Marxist, gradational, and culturalist – and they have done this for both theoretical and political reasons.

Erik Olin Wright's analytical Marxism is a notable example that combines the traditional Marxist analysis of social class with insights from the Weberian tradition. Wright's class analysis includes both a person's economic position and their access to non-material resources that affect their chances in life. This includes the unequal distribution of scarce skills, for example, access to education and credentials, as a basis for the formation of a class system (Wright, 1989). One of the reasons for focusing on skills and education is to include the middle classes in the analysis and clarify their role in social conflicts and their potential as an agent for changing the existing class structure and class relations. The question of the middle classes has generally been extensively discussed both within and outside Marxist class analysis, since it falls outside the basic two-class model of workers and capitalists (Ball, 2003; Butler & Savage, 1995).

Yet another important attempt to bridge the different theoretical traditions is the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, seeking a firm theoretical link between "culturalist" and "structuralist" (gradational and Marxist) approaches and combining insights from both Marxist and Weberian traditions. He approached class relations as a space of positions wherein classes, or groups, cluster together when they share the same volume of social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). By way of a socially shaped orientation to the world (*habitus*), groups of people who share "objective conditions" (that is, access to various forms of capital) tend to share "subjective" orientations (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). In this way, class is performed, manifested, and enacted in people's manners, tastes, and consumption. By extension, the social function of cultural practices is that they maintain class boundaries and uphold structures of social inequality.

As stated above, there are also other problems with the concept of social class, beyond discussions about how to define it. This includes debates regarding the explanatory value of the concept for understanding social formations in contemporary society. It has been claimed that the concept of social class is associated with the circumstances of its original formulation under industrial capitalism, and that the disappearance of the factory system as the primary means of organising work has meant that social class as a category has become blurred and fragmented. It has been argued that the explanatory value of the concept has been weakened. This critique stretches back to at least the 1950s (e.g., Nisbet, 1959) but had a particularly strong revival during the 1990s. At this point, some authors declared class a "dead" concept (Pakulski & Waters, 1996). Ulrich Beck, in turn, treated class as a "zombie category" that failed to explain social differences in an individualistic "reflexive modernity" (Beck & Willms, 2004). Additionally, political analysis shifted its focus from material to post-material divisions (Inglehart, 1977) – that is, from the study of divergent attitudes about material redistribution, which were often shown to be associated with class position, to a focus on a more or less classless "life politics" (Giddens, 1994). However, Crompton (2010) has argued that many of these debates about the "death of class" are mainly about the death of a specific definition of class, in particular, about definitions that include "class consciousness", that is, the experience of belonging to a certain class, as an important component of social class. But as Crompton likes to remind us, the fact that people do not identify as belonging to a class does not mean that class as a sociological concept is dead.

There is certain irony in the fact that class was declared dead in the very middle of a period which had witnessed the greatest increase in inequality that the world had seen for a long time, with a concentration of wealth approaching pre-modern, feudal societies (Therborn, 2020). The neoliberal counter-revolution which emerged in the late 1970s in response to the welfare state and Keynesian economic policies had a huge impact on the relationship between workers on the one hand, and shareholders and creditors on the other (Lapavitsas, 2013). The financialisation of the economy meant increased profits for the financial sector, while growth in other sectors of the economy faltered, resulting in increased unemployment (Dumenil & Levy, 2005). Simultaneously, workers' parties across the European Union effectively abandoned the working-class vote in favour of the middle-class vote. Economic policies during these decades mainly favoured the middle and upper classes (Evans & Tilley, 2017). However, although partially discredited, the concept of social class never disappeared from social and cultural analysis, not least since the claims that class no longer had any explanatory value found minimal empirical support (Wennerhag et al., 2012). Thus, one of the consequences of the increasing social inequalities has been a "return of social class" in the social sciences (McDowell, 2008; Sanchez, 2018). Nevertheless, the recurrent debates about the "death of social class" have resulted in researchers engaged in class analysis becoming more aware of the need to argue for the relevance of social class, and they have highlighted the need for it to be theoretically developed and refined.

One reason for theoretical refinement is that working life today is very heterogeneous and includes both manual labour and different forms of service and care work, thereby fragmenting the working class. Self-employment has become more common, which also complicates class structure (Muller & Arum, 2009). Furthermore, and as discussed above, the rise of the middle classes calls for new analytical models, since this class occupies what has been called contradictory locations within class relations, being both employed and therefore, in a sense, workers, but also often occupying managerial positions directing and leading the work of others (Wright, 1989). The elites are more fragmented today than ever before, and there are huge differences between the rich and the superrich (Piketty, 2014). Also, the financialisation of the economy has meant that the majority of people now own shares in the form of pension funds, thereby aligning their interests with the capitalist class (Dumenil & Levy, 2005). Also, more people own property and therefore have an interest in protecting the value of their property. The class system is also fragmented along other lines, including gender, race, and ethnicity, which further complicates any class analysis (McDowell, 2008). Identifying with your own class position has diminished in favour of other identities connected to lifestyles and the world of consumption (Savage, 2001). Supplementing such theoretical adjustments, sociologists have questioned whether contemporary class distinctions in the realm of lifestyles and culture should be reconsidered, as traditional "high-brow" culture appears to be less of a dividing line compared to cosmopolitan modes of consumption (Prieur & Savage, 2011; Wright et al., 2013).

Against this backdrop, it seems evident that social class is a concept that cannot be taken for granted. Whether it is employed from a Marxist, gradualist, culturalist, or other theoretical perspective, it needs to be defined and operationalised with care, taking into consideration the empirical context to which it is being applied. Its explanatory power also needs to be established rather than assumed. Furthermore, and as noted above, we

must also be aware that even if the language of social class is moving away from the public debate – and people today tend not to think of themselves as belonging to any class (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Savage et al., 2001) – this does not eliminate the persisting correlations between class positions and wealth, educational levels, health, political orientations, cultural consumption, media practices, and so on (Atkinson, 2007; Hörnqvist, 2016; Oskarsson et al., 2010; Suhonen et al, 2021). Research has also shown how new words and euphemisms sometimes replace the language of class, thereby obscuring the socioeconomic conditions behind such words and euphemisms (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Skeggs, 2005), and that even if social class as a category of self-identification is rarely used explicitly, it still features as a sub-text or structuring absence in everyday life, as well as in literature, film, and other forms of media (Wood & Skeggs, 2008).

Class and the Nordic countries

The Nordic countries are of special interest regarding the issue of class. During the twentieth century, these countries created welfare states with high degrees of social equality, decommodified welfare services, and a high level of democratic involvement in the economy (Bengtsson, 2020). When viewed “from afar”, the Nordic countries still fare quite well in cross-national socioeconomic indicator lists (Kautto, 2020: 600). However, “Nordic exceptionalism” is waning, and its welfare model is increasingly challenged. The last 30 years have been marked by policy reforms that have fundamentally changed the functions and logics of the Nordic countries (Kvist et al., 2011). For example, in recent decades, Sweden has seen the fastest growing economic inequality among all OECD countries (Therborn, 2020), and welfare retrenchment has been ongoing in varying degrees in all of the Nordic countries since the 1980s (Kvist et al., 2011). This is associated with international developments and changes in the global economy, but is also a consequence of a changed political climate in the Nordic countries and a shift away from equality as a prioritised political goal. Overall, the statistics demonstrate that Sweden, Denmark, and Finland are the OECD countries that have weakened the redistributive mechanisms in their economies the most since 1990 (Bengtsson, 2020), with marked effects on the issue of class and social inequality.

The 1990s saw a range of tax reforms in the Nordic region. The introduction of dual-income taxation, lowering the degree of progressivity in capital income taxation, the reductions in top marginal tax rates, and the general lowering of capital taxation in the Nordic countries – from between 50–60 per cent to between 20–30 per cent (2020) – resulted in an increasing accumulation of capital incomes towards the top of the income distribution (Iacono & Palagi, 2020). The fact that the rich have become richer has been further spurred by inheritance tax being abolished (in Sweden and Norway), real estate tax being repealed (in Sweden, although it has been retained in the other Nordic countries), and corporate tax being reduced to a level far below the postwar period.¹

Furthermore, the labour market in the Nordic countries has been restructured, with potential consequences for class relations. Also, deregulation, private employment services, new forms of temporary employment, and models of “flexicurity” have been introduced in the Nordic countries. Around 30 per cent of the workforce in the region is now working in “non-standard forms of employment” (Rosenberg, 2019). Such em-

ployment encompasses fixed-term contracts and working through staffing companies, on-call workers, and so forth. This also includes an increasing number of gig workers, the uncontracted workforce tied to apps such as Uber with very limited job security and who are generally not unionised. Unionisation is generally in decline, and in the OECD countries has fallen by 50 per cent since 1980. This also applies to the Nordic countries, with the exception of Iceland, and the falling rate of unionisation is by far the largest among the working class, organised in what are called LO unions in the Nordic countries (SAK in Finland) (Wingborg, 2017). At the same time, automation and semi-automation have led to unemployment and increased employment competition in the labour market, with potentially negative consequences on wages and working conditions, particularly in working-class and lower-middle-class occupations (Roine, 2016). The introduction of digital technologies to automation or semi-automation has also tended to increase managerial control and decrease autonomy, resulting in a deskilling of the workforce in what Mikael Nyberg has described as a “social backlash” in the contemporary labour market (Nyberg, 2020).

Inequality and class differences have not only been sharpened in the Nordic countries as a result of tax reforms and changes in the labour market. Social security systems and decommodified welfare institutions have traditionally formed an integral part of the redistributive mechanisms of Nordic societies. Here, the changes in recent decades have been dramatic and political decisions in all the Nordic countries have reshaped the traditional Nordic welfare model. The contours of this development have entailed a shift in which the general levels of social security and insurance have been lowered, with Norway being the exception (Kangas & Kvist, 2018). Swedish unemployment insurance is an extreme outlier, being one of the lowest in Europe and by far the lowest in the Nordic countries (Essemyr, 2018). It has become increasingly difficult to access social benefits (Altermark, 2020). Meanwhile, privatised pension systems have resulted in lower pensions (Ebbinghaus, 2015), and the welfare systems have been commercialised (Anttonen & Karsio, 2017) and significantly defunded (Allelin et al., 2018), resulting in increasing inequality (Ambrose, 2016) and the rise of a parallel system based on private insurance for those who can afford it (Lapidus, 2017).

Regarding social mobility, the Nordic educational system grew significantly in the latter half of the twentieth century, paving the way to higher education for the working class. Family background also had a relatively low impact on study results in the Nordic countries, although Sweden and Denmark are more similar to the rest of the world (Kangas & Kvist, 2018). However, the upper and middle classes have found ways of differentiating themselves from the working class by way of selection of educational institutions and disciplines (Börjesson & Broady, 2016; Gripsrud et al., 2011; Melldahl, 2015).

Hansen (2014) argues that the “New Nordic Model” is still characterised by a comparatively high level of equality in the general population, as well as by elite dynasties with significant resources and high levels of inheritance. Also, studies of class structures at the level of the general population suggest that the Nordic countries “move more and more into conformity with Bourdieu’s model” (Rosenlund, 2015: 157) – that is, a two-fold structure delineating differences in both volume and types of capital, which tend to structure lifestyle choices, tastes, and educational trajectories.

Regarding the relationship between social class and the party system, developments in the Nordic countries share many similarities with what is happening in other parts

of the world. Historically, class-based voting patterns have been strong in the Nordic countries, but are now in decline. Traditional working-class parties such as the Social Democrats no longer attract a majority of the working-class vote, and it has been argued that other dimensions of conflict in the political field (for example, the so-called GAL-TAN scale) play a more important role than previously (Oscarsson, 2017). This is connected to the so-called post-political condition (Brown, 2015), in which conflicts between social interests (as expressed through the political parties) have been replaced by a consensus on key issues, such as the relationship between the state and the market and the overarching goals for societal development. While the traditional working-class parties have moved towards the centre of the political field, this is also true for the traditional right-wing parties, resulting in increased competition for the “middle-class vote” (Evans & Tilley, 2017). Also, the neoliberal era has led to privatisation and deregulation, resulting in political decisions having less influence and scope in society, while globalised capital has a stronger hold on the overarching societal development. In this post-political vacuum, it is not surprising that conflicts emanating from class society and class differences are transposed to other dimensions, and that a relatively high proportion of the working class have turned to populist parties (Gidron & Hall, 2017). This working-class abandonment of labour parties has been noted in the Nordic countries, in which populist right-wing parties have grown considerably since the 1990s.² While there is nothing to suggest that social class is less important for the everyday lives and living conditions of citizens in the Nordic countries than it had previously been, class-based mobilisation is no longer as strong as it was, at least not as far as the working class is concerned. In many ways, the class interests of the elites are stronger and better organised than ever before, with deep connections to both right-wing and centre parties, as well as a much higher level of organisation than the working class (in Sweden, for example, 65% of workers are unionised, while over 80% of employers are members of the Swedish Confederation of Enterprise).

Media and class

In line with the broader return to class analysis in the social sciences, there has been increased interest in media studies in the analysis of media and class. Three major anthologies have gathered much of this work, *Media and Class* (Deery & Press, 2017), *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century* (O’Neill & Wayne 2017), and *The Routledge Companion to Media and Class* (Polson et al., 2020). Additionally, a number of articles have been published on various aspects of the relationship between class and media.

The media is connected to the issue of class in a number of different ways. A basic observation is that the media is created and exists within the class structure of any given society. As a consequence, control of the means of communication tends to be concentrated in the hands of the few: the class of owners and managers constituting a ruling elite within the media sector (Freedman, 2014). The analysis of structures of ownership and control, and the relationship between those who control media and communication and other elite groups, are an important aspect of a class analysis of the media (Castells, 2013). Technological innovations and developments during the last decade, including intensified digitalisation and datafication, have led to a restructuring of the ruling media

elite, as tech companies have gained more control and power over global information flows (Zuboff, 2019). New structures of inequality in which ownership, control, and the possibility of extracting value from vast amounts of data have created new elites, while a global “underclass” of data producers (including both labourers on crowd-work platforms (Altenried, 2020) and ordinary users of the platforms, leaving data traces) has been established. New conflicts among the previous “media elites” and the new “tech elites” have emerged (Jakobsson, 2012; Popiel, 2018). These issues, as well as analyses of the work of the global supply chains of raw materials, electronics, and devices – relying on a division of labour between North and South (Fuchs, 2014) – are important aspects of the relationship between media and class. While exploring topics related to the digital media landscape, we should not forget that social class also shapes traditional media settings, representing an important area of study regarding what we can learn about the kind of workplaces for which we are training our students (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013), as well as what we can learn about the ways in which labour conditions and class interests shape the products emerging from these workplaces (Hesmondhalgh, 2017).

Apart from being major players in the capitalist economy, the media is a space in which social class is expressed, experienced, depicted, and represented. Although the language of social class is on the wane, analyses have shown how social class still figures in media narratives (Tyler & Bennett, 2010) and structures our online and offline media space (Pitcan et al., 2018; Skeggs & Yuill, 2019). In a recent book, Martin (2019) claims that most Americans are unfamiliar with the diverse working and living conditions of the American working class, and that they do not even know if they themselves are part of it, because the working class is not “newsworthy”, according to the practices and beliefs of American journalists. However, the invisibility of the working class in the media is nothing new (see, e.g., Butsch, 2003; Smythe, 1954), and research has firmly established the agenda-setting power of elite groups (Davis, 2007; Gandy, 1982). Thus, in theory at least, online platforms and social media promise to be a more inclusive space in which voices other than the elite and middle classes are heard. In some contexts, as Jack Qiu (2016) argues in relation to China, this also appears to be the case regarding the emergence of “worker-generated content” on platforms such as *QQ*, *Weibo*, and *Wechat*, which have become instruments of online labour activism and working-class resistance. However, other studies have pointed in the opposite direction and shown that the middle classes, whose interests and perspectives are already well-represented in the traditional mass media, are also optimising on the use of online networking and social media in pushing agendas that suit their interests (Avigur-Eshel & Berkovitch, 2017; Blank, 2017; Dagoula, 2019). Indeed, studies on the digital divide tend to identify persisting inequalities, not only in terms of access to various communication technologies, but also in their uses (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Danielsson, 2014; Lindell, 2018).

Existing research shows that media representations and media use are patterned in accordance with existing divisions of social class. But what are the consequences of these patterns? Here, social class as a concept has been used to highlight developments on both large and small scales. In the critical tradition of media and communication studies, the media’s role in relation to class has often been understood as a means for the powerful elites to exert symbolic power and establish cultural hegemony (Hall, 1979; Murdock & Golding, 1979). From this perspective, the media actively contribute to upholding existing divisions and strengthening the power of owners and other elite groups. Through

ideological processes of rationalisation and legitimisation, and the establishment of a common-sense understanding of the world (Downey, 2008), the media is contributing to the legitimisation of socioeconomic processes that form the very basis of a class society. Although social divisions other than class are currently being highlighted in the works of, for example, discourse analysts, social class is still sometimes featured as a unit of analysis in such works (see, e.g., Abalo, 2017; Jacobsson & Ekström, 2016).

Besides these societal concerns, media research has also investigated how people's identities, their participation in society, and their well-being are affected by the mediation of existing divisions of social class. The "hidden injuries of class" (Sennet & Cobb, 1993) have been explored in relation to mainstream genres such as reality-TV (Couldry, 2011; Tyler, 2015). However, as argued by Hesmondhalgh (2017) – citing Biressi and Nunn (2013), Kelly (2010), and Stiernstedt and Jakobsson (2017) – the problem of working-class people being depicted negatively and stereotypically goes much deeper than the ways they are depicted in reality-TV and occurs across a range of media genres, including journalism. As some researchers have argued, this could explain people's unwillingness to identify as belonging to the working class (Skeggs, 1997), negatively impacting the working class as a political force. The failure to describe the socioeconomic conditions of the working class by the mainstream media is also evident in social analyses of the emergence of resentment-driven right-wing populist movements and their ability to mobilise support from the working class (Peck, 2019; Winlow et al., 2017).

Finally, the media is also a crucial means of challenging class society and inequality, and through which support for social change can be rallied. Schradie (2018) argues that scholarship on digital activism has primarily focused on exceptional events, such as the anti-globalisation protests and the Occupy movement, thereby sidelining the issue of class. However, there have been discussions about, for example, the role of young middle-class people in increasingly precarious life circumstances as one of the driving forces in digital protests (Treré, 2018). In line with Schradie (2018), this can possibly be seen as a consequence of social class placing restrictions on who possesses the social, cultural, and economic resources to become engaged in such mobilisation.

Media and class in the Nordic countries: Contributions to the special issue

Surveying the literature on the relationship between media and class, it is clear that this is a field that has received a degree of attention in recent years. However, most of the research discussed above has been conducted in an Anglo-American context, whereas research from other parts of the world and in other kinds of class societies is not as proliferate or has not received the same level of visibility. To some extent, the relative lack of research on media and class in the Nordic countries could be attributable to the specificity of Nordic societies and media landscapes. If the Nordic countries (as discussed above) might be perceived as global outliers regarding socioeconomic equality, their media systems also share some "exceptional" features, and might be perceived as "media welfare states" (Syvertsen et al., 2014) characterised by strong public service organisations, extensive subsidies for journalism, high levels of news consumption across the social spectrum, and robust trust in the media, facilitating a media society that has less significant class differences and class conflicts than in other parts of the

world. Of course, the media welfare state is a highly debatable concept, and its empirical support can be, and has been, questioned (see, e.g., Ala-Fossi, 2020; Jakobsson et al., forthcoming). The perception of Nordic countries as global outliers – whether real or not, also regarding media and communication – is perhaps one of the reasons why social class has rarely been placed on the top of the research agenda in Nordic media and communication studies.

Surveying the Nordicom database,³ it can be noted that class is a concept that occasionally surfaces, but it is relatively rare for it to be the main focus of analysis in Nordic media research. Reviewing the 800 results from a search for “social class” in Nordicom’s database, it would appear that the concept of social class primarily features in a small number of rather limited sub-fields of the discipline as a whole. Structuralist and gradational class definitions are rare, and theoretical discussions on class are somewhat limited in Nordic media research. An exception to this is the relatively large impact of Bourdieu’s writings in Nordic media research, and it is perhaps within this context that the concept of social class has been used most frequently in Nordic media and communication studies. In our view, in Nordic research on media and culture, cultural capital and the middle classes appear to be two of the most frequently used concepts in conjunction with social class. This suggests that research on media use and consumption tends to focus more on issues of class than, for example, studies on media production or content. The Bourdieusian tradition has spurred several important studies in the Nordic region, both larger, quantitative survey-based research and qualitative work based on interviews and fieldwork in various parts of the region (Andersson & Jansson, 1998; Bengtsson & Lundgren, 2005; Danielsson, 2014; Hovden & Moe, 2017; Hartley, 2018; Lindell, 2018, 2020; Lindell & Hovden, 2018).

This strand of research is also represented in this special issue. Most of the contributions focus on class *in* the media – that is, the mediation of social class, class interests, and class conflicts, particularly in journalism – though some contributions focus on class *and* the media – that is, how people from various class positions navigate the contemporary media landscape.

Class in the media

Five of the contributions address representations of social class, class interests, and class conflicts in the media. Four of these articles study the press in different Nordic countries and examine how working-class people are portrayed, given (or denied) voice and visibility, and how issues of class and conflicts between social classes are framed in journalistic output.

Ernesto Abalo and Diana Jacobsson analyse the struggle in the Swedish labour market between the Swedish Dockworkers’ Union and the employer’s organisation, Sweden’s Ports. Through critical discourse analysis, they demonstrate how reporting obscures the issue of class and instead centres the conflict around nationalist discourses, which, they argue, ultimately legitimises a corporate perspective. In their analysis, this connects to the post-political condition characterising Western democracies, including the Nordic countries – a politics of consensus in which alternatives to neoliberal capitalism appear to be unimaginable and in which political conflicts centre around issues other than economic questions of rewards and redistribution.

Vladimir Cotal San Martin takes a global perspective in his contribution. In studying how workers in the Global South are reported and portrayed in Swedish dailies, he shows that when newspapers report on transnational companies and outsourced production, this mainly takes place in what he calls a “consumer framework”. Such a framework creates proximity and relevance to the topic, but also serves to effectively obscure the class dimension of labour relations and global production. Cotal San Martin contextualises these findings in broader social tendencies, such as the shift from Keynesianism to a neoliberal form of global capitalism and a “colonial imagery”.

From a slightly different perspective, but connected to Cotal San Martin’s argument, Yiannis Mylonas and Matina Noutsou analyse another facet of contemporary transnational capitalism, the so-called Greek crisis from 2010–2019. Of interest in their analysis is their coverage of the events relating to such political and economic turmoil in the liberal mainstream press in Denmark. They conducted a qualitative content analysis of 70 news items and found three dominant themes: the moralist, culturalist, and technocratic/anti-leftist. In all these themes they trace how nationalist and racist ideas are prevalent and how they contribute to publicly unfolding class politics and confirming class supremacy, presented in national terms as a conflict between the Northern and Southern Europe.

From Norway, Tine Ustad Figenschou, Elisabeth Eide, and Ruth Einervoll Nilsen analyse a “journalistic blind spot”, namely, the steady decline in how the traditional working-class sectors are covered in mainstream newspapers and trade union magazines. Through a content analysis of materials dating from 1996 to 2017, they show that reporting on the working lives of the working class has gradually declined. This is not only associated with societal and ideological changes, but also reflects a restructuring in journalism, in which the “labour beat” as an established specialisation is disappearing, and how reporting on labour issues is losing status among journalists. However, they find that there have recently been attempts to revitalise the labour beat in mainstream newspapers and that the unions have initiated new media initiatives that could change the future coverage of working-class occupations and people.

Another perspective on how the working class is represented in the media can be found in the contribution by Michael Iantorno, Courtney Blamey, Lyne Dwyer, and Mia Consalvo, which explores “working-class heroes” in videogames from the 1980s until today. Exploring games in which taxi drivers, firefighters, and janitors are the protagonists and heroes, Iantorno and colleagues discuss changes in working-class occupations more broadly – changes which are reflected in the games – while also unpacking the class relations and conflicts integral to the games.

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that the working class is (increasingly) absent in the media and journalism, which also confirms previous international research. They also show that issues of class and class conflicts are largely absent or even concealed in contemporary news reporting. These findings are associated with both social and political tendencies on a macro level (post-politics, neoliberalism) and developments in media industries and in the daily work procedures of journalists. What we also learn from these contributions is that there is scope for more complex representations of social class – particularly the working class – outside of journalism. Videogames represent one of the forms of media in which both the hardships and the heroics of working-class life are currently being explored.

Class and the media

The three contributions that address the issue of class *and* the media all draw their inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of taste and culture consumption. The Bourdieusian tradition leans heavily on multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) – the exploratory statistical technique that Bourdieu favoured himself because of its affinity with a relational understanding of social class through the notions of fields and social space (Lebaron, 2009). Two main strategies prevail in MCA-orientated research (Rosenlund, 2015). The first strategy corresponds with Bourdieu's own analyses in *Distinction* (1984), in which focus is placed on the main dividing lines in a universe of lifestyles and tastes, at a given time in a given context. After establishing the tensions existing in this symbolic space, the coordinates of the various socioeconomic and demographic traits in this space are scrutinised. The second strategy is a mirror image of the first. Here, the main empirical object of study is the social space – the structure of class relations. In a second step, various lifestyles and tastes – for example, media practices and preferences – are located in the social space. Bourdieu also relied on qualitative methods and interviews, not least to study the lifeworlds of the dominated factions of society (Bourdieu, 1999). All these methodological strategies are represented in the three contributions to social class and media use published in this special issue.

Semi Purhonen, Adrian Leguina, and Riie Heikkilä rely on MCA to study the “space of media usage” in Finland before (2007) and after (2018) the widespread diffusion and use of social media and smartphones. They find that the structure of the Finnish space for media usage – which revolves around use versus non-use of the Internet for various purposes on the one hand, and “legitimate” versus “ordinary” media practices on the other – has remained stable over the years. The fact that Internet savviness and legitimate modes of consumption are associated with high levels of education and income lends support to the notion that the logics of social reproduction have remained intact in the midst of rapid technological change.

Shifting focus from the space of lifestyles to the space of social positions, Jan Fredrik Hovden and Lennart Rosenlund adopt MCA in their study of the relationship between class and media use in Norway. In tandem with Bourdieu's (1984) conception of social structure, the Norwegian space of social positions is found to be primarily structured in terms of the volume and composition of capital. Various media preferences and practices systematically map onto this space, lending support to the notion of the homology thesis – that social space and the space of lifestyles are governed by the same social forces, volume, and composition of capital. Although gender and generation are also associated with people's media practices and preferences, Hovden and Rosenlund show that the dividing lines in people's everyday media use across gender and generational differences are significantly tied to class positions.

Turning to Sweden and to Martin Danielsson's contribution, we are presented with a qualitative view on the relationship between media practice and class. Danielsson's focus on young men with different volumes of cultural capital on the one hand, and parents living in conditions of material scarcity on the other, allows him to show that “the wiring of Swedish households and schools has barely transformed the basic realities of social class”. Such realities include a single mother making “considerable sacrifices in order to secure equal digital opportunities for her kids” and the restricted living spaces among people living in conditions of material scarcity.

These contributions unite not only in their Bourdieu-inspired sociological analyses on media use and access, but also in their outcomes – that class remains a crucial factor in shaping how people navigate the contemporary media landscape, including the Nordic (media) welfare states.

Media, communication, and social class: The road ahead

A recurrent theme in this introduction to the special issue is the paradox that class identification, class consciousness, and the discourse of social class disappeared during an age characterised by rapidly increasing social inequality. The declining importance of social class as a category of self-identification is a tendency that goes back several decades and has been interpreted as being a consequence of changes in the labour market and the organisation of work, as well as a consequence of changes in the political strategies of the traditional labour parties and unions. Also, changes in spheres of consumption and lifestyles, including the media, have arguably also played a role. How class is discussed, whether it is discussed, as well as how social relations and cultural identities are more broadly represented and negotiated in and through the media, are of importance in relation to how individuals adopt the language of class and other categories in their everyday lives. As highlighted by several contributions in this issue, the issue of class is invisible, downplayed, or silenced in much contemporary media and journalistic output, which undoubtedly contributes to the confusion surrounding this topic, and a person's reluctance to use categories of class to understand their own living conditions. In future research, the study of how social class is represented and narrated in the media should be more systematically connected to the discursive shifts in relation to the concept of class. From a historical perspective, it would be worthwhile to analyse when the concept of class started to disappear, how and when (and whether) it has been silenced, in what ways and to what extent, as well as the conditions under which, it is possible to talk about class in different forms and genres of media (from journalism to social media interaction and entertainment, etc.). These analyses also need to be more connected to political, socioeconomic transformations on a macro level, for example, the spread of neoliberalism since the 1970s, as well as other contextual factors, such as media ownership structures and production practices (Hesmondhalgh, 2017).

The findings presented in the articles in this special issue are also associated with the current need to clarify the role of media and communication in relation to the populist wave in current politics – particularly the working class is increasingly identifying with – and voting for – right-wing populist parties. There would appear to be two media-related narratives about this issue in the public debate. On the one hand, social media platforms have been accused of spreading disinformation and reinforcing resentment and anger, thereby driving the working class towards the far political right. On the other hand, it has been claimed that this development is attributable to the established media's espousing of cultural values associated with elite groups and journalism's neglect of working-class people. Both of these issues have been the focus of media and communication studies. There have been many studies on filter bubbles, selective exposure, and echo chambers, not least through social media (for a critical review of this discussion, see Bruns, 2019). However, these studies rarely make a clear connection with the issue of social class (Lindell & Hovden, 2018). Research on media bias, and so forth, also has

an extensive history. However, sustained engagement in theories of social class is also partially missing from such research. In this context, the issue of “symbolic annihilation” (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2018) may also be of relevance. As has been shown in previous research, the feeling among some media users that they are being excluded and made invisible by the mainstream media and popular culture could motivate them to engage with and vote for right-wing populist parties and movements, which make the (illusory) promise of giving voice to “ordinary people” and taking back control from the “elites” (Mckenzie, 2017).

However, given the place that the “media elite” occupies in public discourse, it is rather surprising that this group has not received much attention in media and communication studies. Who are the media elite? What are the consequences of the power that this group wields? Unfortunately, such questions have been rather neglected, at least in Nordic media research (for an exception, see Djerf-Pierre, 2007). Investigating these questions requires the analysis of multiple sectors of the media industry, including both digital media companies and legacy media companies. However, such analyses should not ignore those actors in the political sphere and public organisations who can influence the media landscape, as well as the relationships between the different elites and power spheres (political, economic, cultural, etc.).

Related to the issue of a restructured media industry is the use of digital technologies to transform the labour market. The rapid transformation of work, involving the development of new tasks and jobs, increased control, (semi-)automation, and the rise of the gig economy, has placed tech companies and media technologies at the heart of an ongoing restructuring of the crucial conflict between capital and labour (Fuchs, 2014; Qui, 2016). This has far-reaching consequences for the structure of class society and for the conditions and opportunities to organise the working and middle classes (Graham et al., 2017). This is an area in which more media research is required. Also, media researchers need to reconsider the impact of this development in working conditions and class relations in the traditional media, as well as in the new media and communication industries (Roberts, 2019). Media researchers must also analyse the impact of media, both symbolically and materially, on the structure of contemporary class society.

Finally, as editors of this special issue on class in/and the media, we welcome the return of social class as a key concept in media studies which, as argued above, we have anticipated for some time now. However, it is not sufficient to address social class and its relationship to the media as an empirical phenomenon that we must study more. If this research is to generate new knowledge and insights, it is crucial that we develop our theoretical frameworks for addressing such phenomena. As discussed above, there are different theoretical traditions which, one way or another, have addressed the issue of social class. There is, however, a tendency in our field to use common-sense understandings and vernacular definitions of “working”, “middle”, and “upper” class. This might be suitable for a limited range of research problems and forms of analysis, but if social class is to have analytical purchase, this is not enough. We hope this special issue might trigger a discussion about where to look for such a theory or what it might look like. There are indeed a number of important ontological and epistemological questions relating to class that need to be answered – if there is any point in using the concept in research.

Notes

1. Corporate tax in the Nordic countries ranges from 20 per cent (Finland, Iceland) to 22 per cent (Denmark, Norway), with Sweden in the middle at 21.4 per cent. This places all the Nordic countries well below the EU and OECD average. Since 1980, corporate tax has been heavily reduced globally: the global average in 1980 was around 47 per cent and is currently (data from 2019) around 26 per cent (see <https://taxfoundation.org/publications/corporate-tax-rates-around-the-world/>).
2. Following the national elections in 2017, the Progress Party [Fremskrittspartiet] held 15.3 per cent of the vote in the Norwegian parliament. In the 2018 national Swedish election, the Sweden Democrats [Sverigedemokraterna] increased its share of the vote from 12.8 per cent (in 2014) to 17.5 per cent. In the 2019 Danish national elections, the People's Party [Dansk folkeparti] dropped from the position of second-largest party with 21 per cent (in 2015) to just 8.7 per cent of the vote. However, the party still holds mandates in the Danish parliament. Such a decrease can partially be explained by the fact that anti-immigration policy was adopted by mainstream politics and by the emergence of a new anti-immigration party on the extreme right (formed in 2017) – Hard Line (Stram kurs) – which retained 1.8 per cent of the vote. In the 2019 Finnish election, the Finns' Party [Sannfinländarna] retained 17.5 per cent of the vote, securing a position as the second-largest party in the country. A populist right-wing party entered the Icelandic parliament a while later when, in 2017, the People's Party [Flokkur fólksins] received 6.8 per cent of the vote. While all Nordic parliaments currently host a populist right-wing party, only the Norwegian Progress Party, formed in 1973, existed before the end of the 1980s: the Sweden Democrats were founded in 1988, the Finns' Party and Danish People's Party in 1995, and Iceland's People's Party in 2016.
3. See <https://www.nordicom.gu.se/en>

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