Seeing a New Type of Economic Inequality Discourse: Inequality as Spectacle in the "Billionaire Space Race"

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When we study political communication about economic inequality, where do we look? Political communication research has mainly focused on "inequality as a debate": discussion of the distribution of resources over the population, observed via legacy news media, dominated by elites. We argue for greater attention to other types of discourse characterized by emerging media logics like personalization, polycentrism, and hybridity. We analyze the billionaire space race—a 2021 media event in which 3 hyper-wealthy men traveled to space amid a pandemic—using mixed methods on Twitter and news media data. We demonstrate that economic inequality was a salient topic even though the term was hardly mentioned; inequality was problematized through affective evaluations of the super-rich rather than debate about levels. We conceptualize our case as an example of an identifiable type: "economic inequality as spectacle." We argue that "inequality as spectacle" is critical to contemporary inequality discourse, given interrelated trends driving ambivalent attention to the lives of the super-rich, including the formation of reactive social media publics, extreme wealth concentration, and a broader anti-elitist moment.

Keywords: wealth inequality, elites, digitalization, computational analysis, content analysis

Levels of economic inequality are high and rising on a number of dimensions, with significant negative consequences for societies (Chancel, Piketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2022). Yet, support for redistribution is low, not just among influential elites but also among individuals who are less well off (Breznau & Hommerich, 2019; López, Moraes Silva, Teeger, & Marques, 2022). Media discourses play a

crucial role in shaping beliefs, norms, and attitudes. Thus, they are pivotal for understanding the complicated relationship between economic inequality and redistribution, and ultimately explaining why we live in persistently and even increasingly unequal societies (Son Hing, Wilson, Gourevitch, English, & Sin, 2019, p. 109).

So far, media and political communication research has largely focused on one particular type of political discourse about economic inequality, which we label "economic inequality as a debate." In this vein, inequality is considered directly as a factual, and relatively general issue: Above all, how much inequality is there, how has it changed in recent years, and what should (or should not) be done about it? Classic examples of this discourse are journalists reporting in broadsheet newspapers on changes in the distribution of economic resources in the general population or media debate around the research of Thomas Piketty (Grisold & Preston, 2020). Scholarship that focuses on this type of discourse has generated a wealth of important findings, including that news media attention for economic inequality remains relatively low (McGovern, Obradović, & Bauer, 2023), that sources for news framing tend to come from a narrow range of ideological viewpoints (Guardino, 2019), and that media framing often legitimizes inequality rather than problematizes it (Smith Ochoa, 2020). McGovern et al. (2023) conclude that, from this perspective, there is generally a "lack of resonance between the problem and the public in both the UK and the USA" (p. 1229).

In this article, we argue that scholars should look beyond the "economic inequality as a debate" type of communication. In light of the profound transformations brought about by digitalization, it is necessary to broaden the scope of our research to fully understand how economic inequality is addressed and negotiated in contemporary hybrid media systems (i.e., systems "built upon interactions among older and newer media logics"; Chadwick, 2017, p. 5). When studying publics constituted via hybrid media systems, reducing political communication about inequality to that which fits the mold of "inequality as a debate" may miss significant other parts of the overall discourse. A better understanding of how societies negotiate inequality in alternative ways promises to shed light on why democratic communities fail to respond to the rampant—and, in the case of wealth, increasing—concentration of economic resources.

For this article, we use a case study design (a) to test the basic claim that pertinent discourses on economic inequality can be found outside of the traditionally dominant type described above, and (b) to explore the specific nature of one of these alternative discursive constellations. As a case, we explore media debates on the billionaire space race—a 2021 media event in which three billionaires competed to launch privately funded expeditions into space when the world was gripped by the coronavirus pandemic. We use manual coding and computational methods on messages from five legacy media outlets and Twitter to (a) demonstrate that inequality was a salient part of the discourse, and (b) illustrate how this discourse deviated from more traditional debates around economic inequality. We find that contention in the billionaire space race revolved around the dramatization of the relative capabilities of the super-rich (rather than resource distributions across the population), was expressed as an often-emotive plebiscitary reaction (rather than deliberation among experts and elites), and assembled as a relatively transient flow of attention across hybrid social and news media.

Extrapolating from our case study, we argue that scholars should be looking beyond traditional media debates on inequality and begin to consider a complementary discursive type, which we label "economic inequality as spectacle." We argue that "inequality as spectacle" presents a particularly productive lens through which to understand contemporary inequality discourse, given a set of defining and interrelated trends that drive potentially greater attention to and ambivalent judgment of the lives of the super-rich: (1) technologically, processes of digitalization creating reactive social media public spheres (Gerbaudo, 2022); (2) economically, extreme wealth concentration at the very top end of the distribution (Savage, 2021); (3) culturally, the highly charged role of displays of consumption in both claiming and disavowing eliteness within increasingly fluid social hierarchies (Taplin, 2020); and (4) politically, an anti-elitist "moment" imbricated in the much-discussed rise of populism (Ege & Springer, 2023).

Literature Review

Existing Communication Research on Media Discourses of Economic Inequality

The communication literature on social inequality is vast and rich. Having said this, prior work on media portrayals of economic inequality has been largely preoccupied with a specific configuration of mediated contestation. We will describe this dominant discursive configuration by looking at three questions. How is inequality problematized? Which actors speak? And how do different types of media structure the discourse? We argue that in the main strand of literature we survey, these dimensions form a recognizable type of inequality discourse, which we label "inequality as a debate."

First, discourses falling within the "inequality as a debate" type will commonly *problematize* inequality in a straightforward manner as the unequal distribution of economic resources across a given population. As such, these debates are closely anchored to the semantic core of inequality as a relational concept, yet they operate from an aggregate and relatively abstract macrolevel perspective. These media texts commonly deal with inequality and redistribution in a fairly explicit manner and make them their main topic. Scholars have accordingly traced this discourse by using keyword searches of media databases for "inequality" and closely related terms. For example, McGovern and colleagues (2023) assembled a database of news media articles around the issue using a core search term of "income inequality." In a subsequent analysis, they found that before the 2008 financial crisis, news revolved around the questions of how to conceptualize and measure inequality, whereas post-2008 frames more often linked to blame attribution or policy solutions.[2] Alternatively, scholars have chosen specific media events that had a primary focus on inequality as their research object. For example, Bank (2017) analyzed two editorial series from German newspapers that were explicitly dedicated to "the issue of inequality," whereas others studied the media's reception of Thomas Piketty inequality-focused work (Grisold & Preston, 2020; Rieder & Theine, 2019).

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[2] Similar search strategies with a similar conceptualization of the problem tying together inequality discourse are common across other studies (e.g., Baumann & Majeed, 2020; Lugo-Ocando & Lawson, 2022; McCall, 2013; Smith Ochoa, 2020).

Second, the *actors* talking about economic inequality in this type of media debates are often a part of organized politics. Politicians and parties are in privileged positions in media debates on specific policies such as regressive tax cuts or taxes on wealth, most obviously because they can ultimately decide on the outcome of debate (Bell & Entman, 2011; Guardino, 2019). Yet, even in studies that analyzed more general discourses on economic inequality, elites hold a particularly important role, as exemplified by Smith Ochoa (2020) interviewing politicians and journalists. Studies involving social movements such as Occupy Wall Street provide empirical insight into more grassroots and citizen-led communication (Baumann & Majeed, 2020; Gaby & Caren, 2016). However, even these social movements are driven by actors with a higher degree of political participation and experience in coordination than the average citizen has. So, whether elites or social movements, the actors speaking about inequality in this discourse type tend to be embedded in formalized political arenas in contrast to more informal, unstructured, and spontaneous "everyday talk" (Mansbridge, 1999).

Third, studies of the debate-type of communication around economic inequality usually focus on *attention flows* and logics in legacy news media. All the studies referenced in this section up until now deal exclusively with legacy news media. This anecdote is corroborated in a recent systematic literature review that found that scholarship on social media debates on economic inequality is extremely rare (Vaughan, Theine, Schieferdecker, & Waitkus, forthcoming). In addition, the conceptual focus often lies on processes and conditions that are fundamental to the working of legacy media. For example, scholars have used indexing theory to explain the influence of elites on news media agendas around inequality-related topics (e.g., Bell & Entman, 2011; Epp & Jennings, 2020) or provided rich descriptions of the interdependence between business interest groups and news media frames (Emmenegger & Marx, 2019).

Changes in the Media System Challenge the Traditional Approach

In the wake of digitalization, mediated communication has undergone major transformation, and it stands to reason that these changes also have consequences for how people communicate about economic inequality. Several attempts have been made to describe and illuminate the transformations in holistic frameworks: Blumler (2016) wrote about the "fourth age of political communication" (p. 19); Chadwick (2017) coined the term of the "hybrid media system" (p. 5); Pfetsch (2018) conceptualized "dissonant publics." These conceptualizations operate with varying analytical units and emphasize different processes; yet, they share basic observations that are relevant to the discursive configurations introduced above.

First, *new forms of problematization* emerge. Issues, perspectives, and arguments that would not have been accommodated by the agenda of traditional legacy news media can now become part of public communication beyond marginal niche audiences. This new epistemic openness becomes apparent in its most extreme forms in the spread of mis- and disinformation in networked digital communication (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). Not only the content but also the form of communication has changed toward a less formalized expression of thoughts and emotions. Debates are often characterized by incivility, provocations, expressions of outrage, and other affective intensities (Papacharissi, 2016).

Second, these new types of debates are partly a consequence of the appearance of *new actors*. Politicians, governments, formal civil society organizations, informal social movements, companies, citizens, and consumers—they all can record and air their views without the need of intermediaries (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Moreover, various alternative news sources have emerged—particularly on the far-right political spectrum (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019). As a result, the ensemble of public speakers has become more heterogenous.

Third, *attention flows*—the way the actors engage with topics—have changed on various levels. Communication networks are increasingly polycentric. Legacy news have lost their dominant position, competing for attention with alternative news sources and nonpolitical content, experiencing declining levels of trust, and a dependency on social media platforms and digital corporations as distribution channels to fragmented audiences (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Communication flows are also multidirectional with interactions among nonjournalistic actors driving news (Shah et al., 2017) and, as a consequence of overall media abundance, an algorithmically enhanced choice in increasingly polarized publics (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

Media Spectacles and Spectacles of Wealth

In our case study, we use the concept of "spectacles" as a heuristic foil to "debates" about economic inequality. Yet this concept has its own genealogy that relates to two relevant strands of literature: media spectacles and spectacles of wealth.

Kellner (2015) defines media spectacles as "media constructs that present events that disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information and that become popular stories that capture the attention of the media and the public" (p. 55). The role of media spectacles in the democratic process is ambiguous. On the one hand, spectacles have been implicated in disguising the reality of how capitalist systems operate (Debord, 1967), displacing impactful social and political action (e.g., Dean, 2009), and reproducing prevalent and mainstream ideas (Berrocal Gonzalo, Redondo García, & Torres Chico, 2015; Edelman, 1988). In all these accounts, audiences of spectacles are conceived as passive spectators that interpret and understand events in a relatively shallow manner. On the other hand, even relatively superficial reactions by the audience (e.g., liking or reposting on social media) can still be understood as expressing a plebiscitary and reactive political participation (Gerbaudo, 2022). Spectating can evidence an intermediate position between active engagement and disengaged passivity (Amnå & Ekman, 2014). Finally, approval and disapproval expressed in the context of media spectacles can serve as an indicator of public opinion and the interests of the electorate, and so meaningful in a democratic sense (Green, 2010). Media spectacles, as conceptualized by Kellner (2015), therefore have ambiguous consequences—often pacifying or commodifying, although at times participatory or even emancipatory.

Intersecting with literature in media studies, there is a particular history of spectacles around wealth and the wealthy. A cornerstone in this literature is the concept of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899), which held that the exhibition of wealth is an integral strategy in the competition for social status. In the present moment, these displays are particularly scrutinized—both in social life and academic research—among the super-rich, who have more wealth than ever, yet negotiate their position within

increasingly fluid social hierarchies (Taplin, 2020). These spectacular displays of consumption can operate as vignettes dramatizing the exploitative economic relations operating between elites and wider publics, and thus can be used to question the moral appropriateness of extreme wealth (e.g., Sayer, 2016).

However, research has also shown that more privileged individuals have incentives to differentiate themselves from exhibitionist displays of wealth as a way to legitimize their own positions through claims to their relative "ordinariness" (Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Sherman, 2018). In this way, observing and scrutinizing the super-rich serve a range of uses: fueling aspirations but also absolving middle-class audiences of their culpability in unequal societies (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2017), and even policing racialized notions of respectability by judging which members of the super-rich really "fit" (Maguire, 2019). Wealth and the super-rich therefore act as a lightning rod for the attention of diverse audiences and motivations, making them fertile ground for the kind of media spectacles described by Kellner.

Case Study

Since our overarching goal is to identify and differentiate between types of inequality discourse, we needed to select a case that likely belongs to the wider phenomenon of inequality-related discourse, which in our conceptualization deals with differences in wealth, income or general economic capabilities between different individuals or groups. Yet the case should also have the potential to diverge from the dominant type of "inequality as debate." This means that the case should (a) not be solely motivated by a direct and general problematization of inequality by (b) experts and elites, and (c) be observable in other media than legacy news so that we can capture the distinctive forms of publics that social media afford as well as intermedia attention flows. Beyond that, the case should ideally feature aspects of media spectacles— it should be attention-grabbing, event-based, and allow for affectively intense judgments that mix celebration and condemnation of super-rich actors.

The Billionaire Space Race

Based on these considerations, we decided to study the discourse around the billionaire space race. The "billionaire space race" is a colloquial term that describes the efforts of three of the wealthiest men and their companies to launch commercial space flights. We focus on its peak as a media event, in the months surrounding a key flight launch in July 2021.

The high-profile protagonists of the billionaire space race include Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Richard Branson, who together held more than US$330 billion in wealth in 2021 according to the "World's Billionaires List" (*Forbes*, 2021). In the early 2000s, they founded three individual companies to pursue space travel— SpaceX, Blue Origin, and Virgin Galactic. The companies drew on a complex cocktail of metanarratives about the purpose of this endeavor that meanders from the idea of commercial space travel to utopian scientific visions of expansion and anxieties about the sustainability of Earth's environment.

The billionaire space race became a major media event that culminated in 2021 when the companies launched the first trips to space. In one of the rare empirical studies on the subject, Minenor-Matheson (2023) demonstrated that U.S. news media had covered the space race rather positively in the

time between 2002 to 2021. Journalists emphasized the contribution of the private sector and billionaire investors and contrasted the entrepreneurial spirit with failures of the public NASA program. Although systematic evidence is missing, we observed that the events increasingly drew negative attention in the final phase of the launches that happened amid the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, World Food Programme director David Beasley called on the world's wealthiest individuals to contribute more to help solving world hunger rather than pursuing space travel (Mahdawi, 2021). Similarly, *Forbes* labeled the space race a "publicity disaster" that would harden public sentiment that the resources put into the exploration of space should have been spent instead addressing "problems facing Earth" and might even increase support for a wealth tax (Williams, 2021, para. 2).

Research Questions

We believe the billionaire space race presents a suitable case to develop a preliminary understanding for the existence and nature of inequality-related discourses outside of the traditional "inequality as debate" type. Although public discussion and interpretation of the event likely incorporated some consideration of inequality issues (as suggested by the *Forbes* reference above), the original media event apparently differed from what we might expect from more familiar "inequality as debate" cases (e.g., a new publication of Oxfam on the extent of wealth inequality over time). Reflective of the analytical dimensions introduced above, we set out to answer four research questions:

RQ1:   Is economic inequality a salient theme in the discourse around the billionaire space race?

RQ2:   How was inequality problematized in the discourses around the billionaire space race?

RQ3:   Which actors problematize inequality in the discourses around the billionaire space race?

RQ4:   How are attention flows distributed between news and social media in the discourses around billionaire space race?

Method

Data

To capture the discourses on the billionaire space race, we collected media texts from two types of sources: Twitter and legacy news media. We decided to center our analysis on Twitter (now X) as a social media platform alongside legacy news as it features typical forms of reactive social media participation (e.g., liking, retweeting; Gerbaudo, 2022); and because prior research has shown that the platform is a crucial node in the network of multidirectional flows of information in the hybrid media system. Our data collection spanned June 20 to October 20, 2021, to capture one month before and three months following the key event of the main launch.

We used the same search terms for both media types to isolate the discourse on the billionaire space race. Specifically, we queried for documents that contained the term "space" as well as one out of:

"billionaire", "billionaires," "Bezos," "Musk," or "Branson." For Twitter, we queried the API for any original tweets (i.e., excluding retweets and replies), which amounted to 242,663 tweets. Of those, we randomly sampled 1,500 tweets for our analyses. For news media, we queried the Factiva database for articles in five major news sources: the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Times*, and *Al Jazeera*. These news sources cater predominantly for audiences in English-language countries and comprise a mix of editorial orientations. As such, we assume that they approximate (what we assumed to be) a U.S.-skewed but transnationally diffuse Twitter discussion. We used the same query, yet additionally required that the two desired terms occurred within the same paragraph. This totaled 199 news articles for our analysis.

Analysis

To answer our research questions, we drew upon a mixed-method approach that combines manual content analysis and exploratory computational analyses.

To describe the *salience of economic inequality* (RQ1), we ran two analytical steps. First, we conducted a dictionary keyword search using the term "inequality" over the tweets and news articles in our data sets. This is a replication of the default method of the "inequality as debate" literature. Second, we conducted a manual content analysis. For each document, coders were asked to assess whether "economic inequality [is] present as a theme in the document as a whole?" Answer options were on an ordinal scale from being "absent" to "present with low centrality," and "present with high centrality." Coders were provided with the general rule that economic inequality was judged as "present as a theme" if the document referred in one way or the other to the distribution of wealth, income, or general economic capabilities among individuals, groups, or national or global populations.[3]

To describe *how inequality was problematized* (RQ2) in the discourse around the billionaire space race, we first attempted to manually code complete frame sequences for each document for which we had established the presence of economic inequality as a theme. Despite multiple rounds of iterative modifications of the codebook, it became evident that we could not reliably code classic frame elements like problem definition and causal attribution for the tweets. In these short messages, the frame elements were highly fragmented and allusive. In response, we changed our approach and tried to describe the underlying semantic structures more openly (rather than deductively forming additional coding categories and applying them to the documents). Toward this aim, we ran a computational analysis using word embeddings. This analysis essentially allows us to use the "inequality salience" labels generated in the previous step to identify key terms that characterize the underlying construct (in an example of what Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart

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[3] We trained four coders who worked in pairs on different variables. After several rounds of training, we achieved acceptable reliability: Krippendorff's alpha for the inequality salience variable was slightly low (0.65 for Twitter and 0.69 for news); however, when aggregating the codes for "low" and "high" salience to a binary variable for the presence of inequality, this increased to 0.74 for Twitter and 0.81 for news. Differentiation between low- and high-inequality salience should therefore be interpreted more cautiously than the contrast with noninequality topics. Other variables met the usual thresholds: actors speaking on inequality (0.93 Twitter, 0.80 news) and actor sector (0.71 Twitter, 0.79 news).

(2022) call "fictitious prediction problems"). In our case, this is achieved by mapping a vector to our inequality construct in the high-dimensional word-embedding space, within which all other terms in the data set are also positioned.[4] We visualized how inequality-related discourse related to other terms in our data set by projecting the high-dimensional space of the contextualized word embeddings with reference to the salience of inequality in the document and the type of media (news vs. Twitter).[5] As a final check, we triangulated our interpretation of this word-embedding analysis by manually inspecting a sample of texts designated atypical/typical of inequality discourse, to understand better how key terms were used in context.

To describe the *actors speaking* (RQ3) in the discourse around the billionaire space race, we manually coded the "most important actor" addressing inequality for each document where inequality was present as a theme. Toward this aim, we applied the conceptual framework of actor-frame-sequences from Waldherr and colleagues (2013). Specifically, we coded the (a) name of the most important actor, (b) whether they were an individual or an organization, (c) the name of their affiliated organization if applicable, (d) their role in the affiliated organization if specified in the text, and (e) the societal sector the actor belonged to (with options for the last variable including "political," "economic," "media," "civil society," "think tanks," "academia," and "citizens").

To finally describe *attention flows* (RQ4) in the discourse of the billionaire space race, we plotted the incidence of tweets and news articles over time, grouped by week. We then compared dynamics between the two media by manually inspecting peaks of activity in the two time series and relating them to key events in the billionaire space race.

Results

The Salience of Economic Inequality (RQ1)

A keyword search for "inequality" in our data sets returned matches in 3% of news articles and 0% of tweets. In other words, mimicking the standard approach of research that looks into discourse of the type "inequality as a debate," we find that inequality is largely absent in the discourse on the billionaire space race in our samples.

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[4] We relied primarily on the *text* package in R (Kjell, Giorgi, & Schwartz, 2023). We generated contextualized word embeddings for our combined corpus using the BERT base model (uncased), resulting in aggregated embeddings for each document (i.e., each tweet or news article) as well as each "word type" (i.e., each different term that was already part of the pretrained model, such as "rich," or "spaceship"). As a robustness check, we tested whether these contextualized word embeddings could predict our (manually coded) indicator of salience of inequality as a theme and found that they did. As recommended by Kjell et al. (2023), we ran a ridge regression predicting word embeddings by the manually coded salience of inequality. Results showed a Pearson correlation of 0.72, $p < 0.001$ with 10-fold cross validation.

[5] For visualization, we used the Supervised Dimension Projection function of the *text* R package, adjusting each document's aggregated embedding score to subtract one occurrence of "space" that had formed part of the search term.

Our manual coding of the topic's salience in the documents revealed a vastly different picture. As can be seen in Table 1, when human coders looked beyond the sheer mentioning of the term and coded whether inequality appeared as a salient theme, almost half of the documents showed traces of inequality-related semantics. The following tweet illustrates the discrepancy between the two approaches: "Private space flight is possible because of the ultra-wealthy ignoring the rest of the world's problems" (personal communication, July 21, 2021). Even though the tweet explicitly refers to economic resources and contrasts the "ultra-wealthy" with the "rest of the world," it does not mention "inequality" (or "injustice"). This means that scholars using the traditional keyword approach would have likely dismissed the billionaire space race as part of inequality-related discourse. This gap appears particularly significant for Twitter, where explicit references to "inequality" were entirely absent in our sample. Notably, we can observe only minor differences in the salience between the two media: On Twitter, the salience is slightly lower overall, but when inequality is present in a document, it has a higher likelihood of having a high centrality.

Table 1. Salience of Economic Inequality.

	Twitter	News
Inequality as a theme is		
. . . present with high centrality.	26%	18%
. . . present with low centrality.	17%	36%
. . . absent.	57%	46%
Total number	1,489	199

Note. Results from a manual content analysis.

The Problematization of Economic Inequality (RQ2)

Our computational analysis using word embeddings provided an exploratory view into how actors discussed inequality as a problem in the discourse of the billionaire space race. Figure 1 visualizes how the underlying "inequality" construct that defines our manual labeling is related to other terms in the data set.
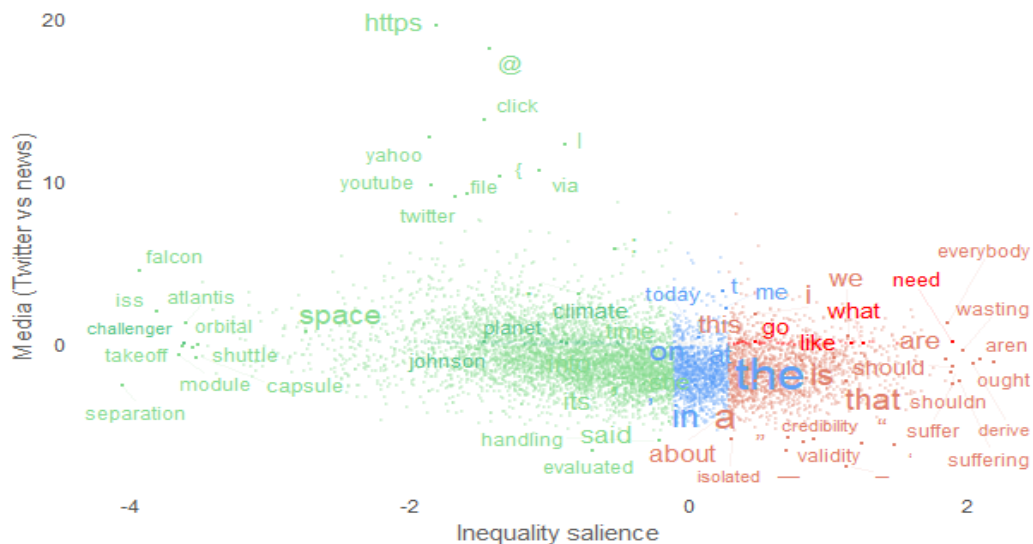
Figure 1. The semantic context of economic inequality.[6]

In messages in which inequality was not a salient topic, language focused on the specifics of space travel with significantly associated terms like "orbital," "galactic," and "capsule." The following tweet is illustrative of the discourse where inequality was absent as a theme, combining instead a focus on luxury consumption, scientific innovation, and personalized celebrity: "In Photos: See Inside The Luxury Supersonic Space Plane That Will Take Richard Branson Into Space" (personal communication, July 21, 2021). When inequality was a salient theme, language was characterized by contrasts between a constructed collective of the "people" and the super-rich ("everybody, they, individuals"), as well as by moral evaluations (e.g., "blame, should, wasting"). In particular, the valence of the moral evaluations led us to the cautious interpretation that inequality was conceived as a social problem in a sizeable number of documents. The following tweet illustrates how collective identity construction and affective moral evaluation were combined: "We really live in a world where people are struggling to recover from the pandemic and meanwhile billionaires are having a pissing contest to see whose ego and fortune can boost them to space faster" (personal communication, July 20, 2021).

Finally, it was notable that words that build a collective identity of the people as a crowd were more significant in the inequality-related documents on Twitter (e.g., "I, we, everybody").[7] News media appears

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[6] 2D Supervised Dimension Projection. Simplified, each dot represents a word in our data sets. The horizontal axis differentiates documents in which economic inequality is not a salient issue (as determined by the manual coding; green dots on the left-hand side) from those documents in which it was a salient theme (red dots on the right-hand side). The blue dots represent terms that are not significantly associated with inequality salience in either direction. The vertical axis differentiates the media types, with words in the upper part being more likely to appear on Twitter and words in the lower part being more likely to appear in legacy news data.

[7] The fact that the word embeddings for the Twitter discourse include words that unlikely to appear in news reports, such as "https, click," and "YouTube," attests to the face validity of the statistical analysis.

more likely to critique the space race via references to rationality like "credibility" and "validity." A text fragment from an *Al Jazeera* article exemplifies how these appeals take place in context:

> "I think the danger here is the idea that this is related to the quest for exploration of space or that it has any scientific validity, when in fact it's PR and it works against gains in scientific knowledge," Hiltzik told Al Jazeera. (Al Jazeera, 2021, para. 13)

Actors Speaking About Economic Inequality (RQ3)

Our manual content analysis revealed which actors made inequality-related statements. As can be seen in Table 2, most actors speaking on inequality in the discourse in both media types were individuals rather than organizations. When it comes to the societal sectors they belonged to, we find stark differences between Twitter and legacy news sources. On Twitter, 75% of the tweets in which inequality was a salient theme came from the "citizens" category. In legacy news, 79% of the inequality-related articles came from "media" actors such as opinion columnists. Actors that have been shown to be vocal in traditional discourses around economic inequality—political actors, civil society, think tanks, and academia—are less represented, making up less than 15% of the speakers in both media. Interestingly, the most commonly quoted speaker within the "political" category was Prince William, the United Kingdom's then Duke of Cambridge. He made front page news by appearing to criticize the space race with the statement that "we need some of the world's greatest brains and minds fixed on trying to repair this planet, not trying to find the next place to go and live" (Low, 2021, para. 1). Political actors that are more closely associated with the issue of inequality—the U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres and Democratic Party representatives like Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders—only appeared in a marginal number of texts.

Table 2. Actors Speaking About Economic Inequality.

	Twitter	News
Type of actor		
Individual	94%	89%
Organization	6%	11%
Sector of actor		
Political	5%	9%
Economic	3%	2%
Media	12%	79%
Civil society	1%	1%
Think tanks	1%	0
Academia	1%	3%
Citizens	75%	6%
Unclear	3%	1%
Total number	633	107

Note. Results from a manual content analysis.

Attention Flows (RQ4)

To gain an idea about the dynamics in attention, we finally compared the distribution of documents with differing levels of inequality salience over time. Figure 2 provides several insights into the discourse in the studied time period. First, a major peak in attention happened after July 20–21, 2021, when Branson and Bezos launched their first flights. This resulted in 70,177 tweets in our full Twitter data set and 17 news articles in the five news outlets on the day after the launch. Second, a subsequent peak was media-specific: Attention in legacy news sources grew exponentially in the middle of October 2021, when former Star Trek actor William Shatner boarded as a passenger on another flight by Bezos's company and Prince William voiced his criticism. Although attention on Twitter also increased at that point, the daily peak in October was less than a tenth of the highest level reached in July. Third, our data tentatively suggest that inequality was a relatively constant subtheme of the discourse rather than one that grew or disappeared over time.
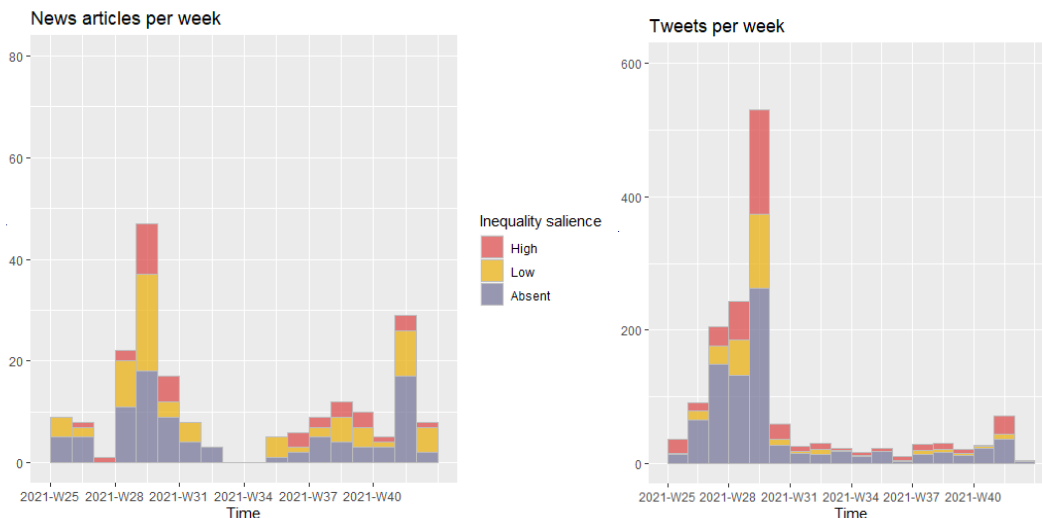

Figure 2. Attention flows in the discourse around the billionaire space race.[8]

Discussion

Summary of Case Study Findings

Before we move to inductively describing it as a subtype of inequality discourse, we want to take a moment to synthesize the findings of our case study. Our analysis showed that the discourse around the billionaire space race deviated from the "inequality as a debate" type of communication in four key respects.

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[8] Weekly totals of documents in the random sample of 1,500 tweets and the full set of 199 news articles for the study period which encompasses the launch of the first flights in 2021. To ease comparison, the y-axes in both plots are standardized against their respective corpus sizes.

To start with, the case demonstrated that economic inequality can be a salient topic in media texts, despite the absence of direct references to the term inequality itself (RQ1). Even more oblique references to overall inequality levels and population-wide distributions—which preoccupy much of the communication research on inequality—were hardly present in the discourse on the billionaire space race. Instead, the focus lay narrowly on the very top of the distribution, in the figures of super-rich billionaires.

Yet, the discourse was far from a uniform celebration of wealth and entrepreneurial spirit. Tweets and articles dramatized the radically different capabilities of the super-rich and affectively evaluated the priorities underlying them, often in negative ways (RQ2). As such, the debates built momentum from the personalized and antagonistic relationship with economic elites, rather than the distributional question per se.

The actors speaking about inequality in our case study were largely not political elites embedded in organized politics (RQ3). Twitter discourse was articulated by a broad base of individual citizens. News media discourse on the space race was introduced by journalists and opinion columnists rather than quoted sources from organized politics.

Finally, the attention flows in the billionaire space race were less dominated by classic mechanisms of legacy news media (RQ4). Attention on Twitter had one extremely intense but rather transient peak. News media reports peaked in addition around the conflict among elites as would be predicted by indexing theory (when Prince William criticized the space race). However, this failed to translate into a parallel secondary peak on Twitter. Moreover, inequality was a constant latent part of the discourse, rather than the main focus of a short-lived focus of attention (as it is after the release of reports on levels of national or international income or wealth inequality).

We want to end the discussion of our case by illustrating how these aspects come together to form a specific instance of communication. One of the most heavily circulated links in our Twitter data set was to a Change.org online petition titled "Do not allow Jeff Bezos to return to Earth" (Ric, 2021). The mission statement only said, "Billionaires should not exist . . . on earth, or in space, but should they decide the latter, they should stay there" (Ric, 2021, para. 1), yet it was signed by over 200,000 people. We suggest that the petition's success is not despite its lack of hard facts on overall economic inequality, lack of orientation to institutional politics, or incompatibility with traditional news media logic. Rather, all these factors together form an alternative mode of expressing an irreverent, affective, and plebiscitary verdict on contemporary inequality as embodied by the figure of the billionaire. And this kind of irreverent irony is particularly characteristic of the position of democratic spectatorship in the online spaces of hybrid media systems (see also, Litvin, 2023).

Media Spectacles on Economic Inequality

Our case study provided us with clear evidence that economic inequality can be a salient feature of media discourses that are not elite debates about the distribution of economic resources in legacy news sources. We now want to argue for the generalizability of our case study findings—in conjunction with

existing theorizing—by describing how the different dimensions (problematization, actors, and attention flows) together form an alternative type of discourse that we label "inequality as a spectacle."

First, we argue that *problematization* in debate of this alternative discursive constellations will focus on visceral inequalities. Savage (2021) argued that the current degree of wealth concentration at the very top end of the distribution has created a context where inequalities are increasingly apprehended via the bodily figures of the ultrarich, which embody both the lack of a level playing field and the intersection of economic with other categorical inequalities (such as gender and race). In our case, we observe this focus on visceral inequalities through the contrast between the figures of the ultra-wealthy going to space and many of those on earth going hungry. We propose, then, that "inequality as spectacle" discourse will cohere around personalized public figures that express these kinds of stark differences and make them more tangible. Although fascination with the spectacle of the ultra-wealthy sometimes serves to celebrate their wealth or conceal its structural causes (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2017; Serafini & Maguire, 2019), this emotionalization can also be intertwined with anti-elitist sentiment. As Savage (2021) writes, the pulling away of elites at the top is "part of a wider process involving the breakdown of nation spaces and a growing sense from exploited groups that they can never fully belong to a social order defined by a small and aloof elite" (p. 228). In this sense, we suggest that inequality as a spectacle is not problematized through consideration of the overall distribution of resources across society, but rather focused observation of the super-rich.

Considering the *actors* who speak on inequality, we argue that discourse around the spectacle of inequality foregrounds everyday plebeian rather than expert voices. When a diffuse public audience observes the super-rich, it is precisely the responses that articulate this ordinariness and structural remove, which are naturally positioned to express critique. For example, Green (2016) argues not only that a plebeian democratic response is predicated on occupying the role of a removed spectator; it may also involve actually violating deliberative democratic norms, including forms of "principled vulgarity" on the part of "everyday citizens," like expressions of indignation.

When it comes to *attention flows* in "inequality as spectacle" discourse, we argue that these will be more hybridized between news and social media and characterized by greater reactivity. Indexing and other mechanisms that are characteristic of news media will not necessarily apply in the same way to social media communication. Instead, we can consider Gerbaudo's (2022) concept of reactive democracy, where in the social media public sphere "reactions embody the new logic of democracy" (p. 133). To be clear, we are not suggesting that social media will inevitably produce a more democratic or anti-inequality discourse than news media. Yet, we expect to find constant interaction, variation, and contestation between news and social media discourse around economic issues. In our case study, we could also show how the peaks of attention between Twitter and news media coincide in the original media event of the flight launches but diverge in the "second peak" in October when news media is more attentive to elite conflict between Prince William and the company founders.

Future Research

We acknowledge the inductive and explorative nature of our case study and theorizing, which we have approached as a "building block" case study (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 132). The crucial next

question is how well this inductively described discourse-type travels across context and to other cases. In other words, does this configuration of communicative characteristics truly describe a discourse *type* rather than an idiosyncratic case? As we laid out above, we expect that the tendencies with regard to problematizations, actors, and attention flows occur across a wide range of cases, in more or less intense forms. Other discourses immediately come to mind: cases of the super-rich taking seemingly unnecessary and extremely brief private flights, or media events around the lifestyles of political elites.

In the long run, typological theorizing could enable us to better study what factors in wider political and media systems shape the way a society negotiates economic inequality, and whether different types of discourses produce different responses. Most critically, can the spectacular discourse of inequality influence political outcomes, or does it merely divert attention from genuine contests about political power into the arena of symbolic cultural politics? For example, an implicit expectation of "inequality as debate" discourse is that more information about income and wealth distributions leads to more accurate public perception and, thus, higher public engagement. For audiences of "spectacle"-types of discourse, inequality is dramatized with narratives that foreground and reinforce interpretations about how socioeconomic structures operate, premised in part on being revelatory and unexpected. In line with this thinking, our case study of the billionaire space race provides an ambivalent picture. On the one hand, it demonstrates the power of spectacular personalized dramatization. It is the central placement of the personalized figures of Bezos, Branson, and Musk in the horserace narrative that enabled the reinscription of their motives as greedy and callous, and illustrative of the problem of contemporary inequality. On the other hand, the antagonism generated by the spectacle remained relatively disconnected from the question of "what is to be done," as Bramall (2023) has equivalently described in anti-elitist campaigns against the wealthy as tax dodgers.

Finally, our study hints to methodological challenges ahead. We used a resource-intensive, case-specific manual approach to label the data. If we had operated on the level of manifest semantic structures and inspected only discourses that explicitly referred to inequality, we would have missed the inequality-related dimension of the billionaire space race. Hence, researchers working on "inequality as a spectacle"-type discourses will need to scan a larger universe of debates for less tangible, more latent-meaning structures. It remains to be seen whether methods can be developed to isolate these kinds of inequality-related discourse across different media events, time periods, or geographies.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that media discourse about economic inequality can take different forms than debates about income and wealth distributions in legacy news media. Our case study of the billionaire space race shows that the absence of an explicit problematization of resource distributions in media discourses does not necessarily mean an absence of contestation. Instead, the billionaire space race was attuned to visceral inequalities embodied by economic elites, the foregrounding of plebeian voices, and was subject to reactive hybrid media logics—with the three aspects mutually reinforcing each other.

We suggest that scholars approach mediated discourses on economic inequality with greater openness to the different forms that discourse can take outside of the dominant expectation of "inequality

as a debate," including the type of "inequality as spectacle" as described in our case. We also believe that thinking about inequality discourse in terms of different types can potentially provide a bridge between complementary research traditions, including those focusing on different arenas of communication. We observe rich veins of research on the cultural politics of economic elites and social class that could more frequently be drawn on in political communication research, particularly when thinking about the kind of spectacularized discourse we have analyzed in our case (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2017; Kendall, 2011; Kuusela, 2023). Finally, a better understanding of different inequality discourses may complicate earlier assessments about how pervasive contention around inequality is and has been. If we looked at other discursive spaces, inequality may no longer be the "Brahminic issue" that is "resonating among an academic elite, but . . . has so far (nota bene to 2015) been unable to generate larger resonance with the wider public" (Bauer, McGovern, & Obradovic, 2022, p. 148).

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