

Citizen Detriment: Communications, Inequality, and Social Order

PETER GOLDING

Northumbria and Newcastle Universities, UK

Citizenship is an active role, requiring information to enable people to deliberate and arrive at decisions that they can then effectively voice. This article argues that the cumulative evidence of research is that mainstream media fail to provide such information and the essential analysis to buttress it. The result is information detriment, a significant element within a broader citizen detriment. This problem is only minimally addressed by the proliferation of information accessible through the widening availability of online and digital resources. Deepening inequality is translated into citizen detriment because of the growing cost of information resources. Evidence is provided of the significant advantages of the better off in an increasingly commercial and costly information environment, both as consumers of information and through lobbying, as sources of ideas and information in the political and public arena. The fundamental problem at the heart of this issue, therefore, is that of growing material inequality more than media and communication practice and policy.

Keywords: inequality, communications, citizenship, digital divide, information

Inequality has seldom been in the foreground of communication scholarship. The political economy tradition of communication analysis, of course, regards structural and material inequalities as critical social determinants of communications capacity and activity, but has always been, and remains, a marginalized or minority approach. Similarly, the notion of a digital divide starts from the impact of variable opportunities to access or own digital communication resources, but has developed an increasing interest in multiple digital divides, of which income or wealth inequality are but two, and often not the most significant, of many reasons for the uneven spread of digitalization. Indeed, with the increasing availability and ubiquity of digital media and information, scarcity and maldistribution have often disappeared from the agenda of media researchers. This article seeks to return inequality to where it belongs, at the heart of media and cultural analysis, and as an indispensable concept for our understanding of social and cultural structure.

Such concerns have often cohered around questions of access and ownership of communications goods and resources, a focus that I have always regarded as essential and, both analytically and politically, of huge significance. The link however, the “so what” that follows, is about citizenship and the importance of

Peter Golding: peter.golding@northumbria.ac.uk

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informed participation as a necessary resource. The participating citizen is an informed citizen—in a familiar cliché, information is power—and impediments to this condition obstruct what has been called by Nancy Fraser “participatory parity” (Fraser, 2008, p. 136). Increasingly, and now critically, the media in their various forms provide the means for this, and thus our interest in them is driven by a need to understand the operation and limitations of citizenship.

Being informed has costs. The obstacles to acquiring the necessary cultural capital (education, knowledge, performative superiority) are well understood. But the mundane, everyday limits to becoming informed are as yet only minimally documented. Having resources not only enables information to be obtained and used but also bestows the capacity to have “voice”—to inject into the social and political system the demands and expectations that enhance the advantages of the well-resourced (see Couldry, 2010, on the capacity to inject a distinctive voice in the continuing debates about the forward march and hegemony of neoliberalism). The material that follows largely deploys data and examples from the UK, but the patterns described are increasingly, if variably, evident in many industrial societies.

A World of Inequalities

When the world’s most powerful and wealthy gathered in Davos in early 2017 for their annual World Economic Forum (WEF), the ironies of their discussions about the urgency of action on the environment being propelled by people arriving in gas-guzzling private jets, and seeking to pontificate over rising inequality while coddled in the unparalleled creature comforts of the luxury Swiss resort, were palpable. Pressure groups were quick to take advantage of the media attention these gatherings provide (e.g., Oxfam, lowering its previous startling discovery—that 62 billionaires had the same wealth as half the world’s population—down to a figure of just eight such individuals). The renewed attention given to such grotesque data, beyond debunking it by those targeted, reflected the concern of certain segments of the wealthy that the gap between rich and poor posed a threat to the global economy and social stability, or to “increased multistakeholder and interdependent cooperation” (World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 3) to use the near impenetrable and congested jargon of the WEF. Such recognition of both the huge and increasing gap between rich and poor, and its growing visibility and potential consequences, have become, in the words of one analyst, “the greatest social threat of our time” (the opening to the invaluable compilation of relevant data in Dorling, 2014, p. 1). The threat understood by the WEF is, of course, very different to that construed by writers like Dorling, or by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), whose careful compilation of data demonstrates that “most of the important health and social problems of the rich world are more common in more unequal societies” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010, p. 173).

The global scale of such inequality is staggering. According to Credit Suisse (2016), who should know, “North America and Europe together account for 65% of total household wealth, but contain only 18% of the adult population” (p. 6). At the other end of the scale:

China accounts for 21% of the adult population of the world, yet only 9% of global wealth. The ratio is similar for Latin America: 8% to 3%. For Africa and India however, the population share exceeds the wealth share by a factor of more than ten. (Credit Suisse, 2016, p. 6)

The pattern within rich societies is similar. In the world's wealthiest nation, "the wealthiest 5 per cent of Americans, who own more than two-thirds of all household stock wealth, are back on track" (Stiglitz, 2013, p. xi). In the UK, by 2013, the average mean salary for the top 1% was 15 times larger than that of the average earner. The disparity between the salaries of the wealthiest and others has become increasingly evident. The European Banking Authority showed that almost 3,000 London bankers took home more than €1 million in 2014, a rise of 40% over the previous year, and the financial crisis of 2008 seems to have had little impact on the richest, with Britain's billionaires seeing their net worth double between 2009 and 2015 while average incomes stagnated. The High Pay Centre calculated tellingly that by the second week of January 2017 (on a day they termed "Fat Cat Wednesday"), the average Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 CEO had received earnings equivalent to the total annual income of the average UK salary earner (see High Pay Centre, 2017). In general this reflected a situation in which "the average pay ratio between FTSE100 CEOs and the average total pay of their employees in 2015 was 129:1" (High Pay Centre, 2017). The Office for National Statistics (2017) calculated that by 2015 the richest 10% in the UK owned about half the country's wealth, and had seen a 21% increase in their wealth in the previous two years. In Atkinson's magisterial summary of the situation, he notes that "the top 1 per cent in the US now receives close to one-fifth of total gross income—meaning that, on average, they have twenty times their proportionate share," while in the UK "this group still receives one eighth of total gross income" (Atkinson, 2015, pp. 19–20).

All this has enormous implications for my theme, since such disparities coincide with the increasing cost and marketization of information, meaning that the capacity to be an informed citizen is in large part determined by the material inequalities that have come increasingly to characterize industrial and other societies in the 21st century. In the remainder of this article, therefore, I indicate, first, the inadequacies of past and existing information provision from the media, and, second, the growing cost and inequity of access to communications, which thus inhibit any likely compensation for these failings arising from the presumed abundance of digital provision.

Informing the Citizen: The Lessons of Research

Media and communications scholars have an unfortunate habit of regular and anguished self-examination to ask whether the field is going, and at what crossroads it finds itself. Among the flails used to scourge the flesh of scholars in media research is the conviction that we have failed to accumulate conclusive and definitive evidence about the nature of media and communications, a charge buttressed by recurrent attempts to revivify or reconstruct the field radically. But there seems little question that, after several decades of analysis of media provision, we do in fact have a well-established and largely consistent analysis of news provision, whether press or broadcasting, and whatever the details, at the very least it demonstrates the, perhaps inevitable, limitations and emphases, lacunae and excesses, of such coverage. It would be hard to insist that what has been provided is a fully sufficient resource for informed citizenship. This claim can briefly be illustrated by looking at coverage of two areas: politics and policy, and the economy.

The Political World

Surveillance of the polity in which the citizen lives, enabling considered and informed deliberation from which rational action, demands, and reactions can be derived, is a primary claim of the media, both news media and more generally. The notion of the media as a fourth estate, as watchdogs on behalf of the citizenry, both holding the powerful to account and shedding light into the murkier corners of power, is a central and prevailing myth for producers and audiences alike. Yet research has consistently and repeatedly demonstrated the restricted, partisan, or partial flow of information about policy and politics provided by most media in most countries to most people. I cannot review all of this material here, but it is often displayed most evidently in studies of communication during election campaigns, which are prone to attract both intensified political coverage and extensive research.

Five features of such research illustrate the general point. First, the range of issues brought to the attention of voters is usually limited and dominated by the top few (e.g., Deacon, Golding, & Billig, 2001). In the 2015 UK general election, issues such as foreign policy, transport, public services, crime, health, and the environment each received less than 1% of news coverage in both television and press (Loughborough Centre for Research in Media and Culture, 2015, Table 3.1). Research consistently shows a focus on a very few issues, whereas many others are either reduced in scope or completely absent. While elections crystallize such a focus, and it could be said (and often is) that the media can only report what political parties choose to air, coverage between elections, in normal times displays a similarly circumscribed range (see Negrine, 2016).

Second, research has demonstrated a reducing attention span within, especially, broadcast coverage of electoral issues, in what is sometimes termed a drift toward a sound-bite format for political quotes or material generally (Hallin, 1992). Studies, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, have documented the diminishing time or space devoted to interviews, descriptions of policy initiatives, and so on, as election coverage has steadily restricted the length and space of individual items. A third feature is what has been termed the horserace preoccupation of political communication, especially in elections, when the latest polling results, and the performance of political parties and actors as they near the electoral finishing line, outweigh what many would regard as the more substantive aspects of the messages and issues at the heart of the political debate. This was a matter of considerable comment in the earliest analyses of electoral reporting, for example, in the U.S. (Graber, 1976), and has remained a feature universally. Sometimes interpreted as a fascination within the media for their own role in the political process, a recent example in the UK was observed in the 2015 general election, in which coverage of the electoral process itself far outweighed any other issue reported (Loughborough Centre for Research in Media and Culture, 2015).

Fourth, and most obviously, at least in newspaper coverage of electoral politics, is the partisanship displayed by news media. Broadcasting, and especially public service broadcasting, is often regulated by strict requirements ensuring at least superficial, and often carefully calibrated, impartiality as to time and space devoted to participating parties. Newspapers are rarely governed by such restraints, leading to the type of concern expressed by the Second Royal Commission on the Press, which suggested in 1962 that while "there is still a considerable range of choice in the national daily and Sunday

press . . . it is less than it was in 1949 and it would be better if there were more" (Royal Commission on the Press 1961–1962, 1962, p. 18). In the 2015 UK general election, the Loughborough study (Loughborough Centre for Research in Media and Culture, 2015) found more or less stop-watch parity in broadcast coverage, but a very wide dominance in pro-Conservative coverage in the press. Finally, consistently demonstrated by research on media coverage of politics is what has been termed personalization, that is to say a palpably greater interest in the personalities and people in the political game than the policies, processes, and institutions behind them (on this process in Italy and France, see Campus, 2010). Many would argue that this process reached a zenith in the election of a former reality television presenter to the presidency of the United States in 2016.

It is impossible here to elaborate on the voluminous research undertaken in many countries into media coverage of politics. Two examples of more specific policy areas, crime and the environment, can illustrate the general point, however.

Being made aware of transgressions of social norms and laws is plainly a civic need as well as a long-established staple of both news and fiction. The penny dreadfuls of Victoriana and the gothic high drama of the contemporary police television series have formed a major part of media provision and audience diet. But if imagery, narrative and reporting of crime are plentiful, the sum picture of the world of crime, the penal system, and policing is far from a complete or sufficient provision in this central area of public policy. Crime is probably the best example of one of the two paradoxes of news, in that its most dramatic or extreme instances receive prominent coverage, inevitably creating an exaggerated impression of their frequency. In general, news reports the unusual, but in so doing recurrently contributes to a culture that is likely to overstate the prevalence of such events (see Golding & Elliott, 1979). The other example, briefly mentioned below, the environment and culture change, exemplifies the other paradox—that news reports events rather than process.

Three characteristics illustrate the departure of crime news from any full account of criminality or criminal justice: the rate of crime events, the nature of crimes committed, and the perpetrators of crime. Crime news has repeatedly been shown to overstate the volume and frequency of crime. Of course, this immediately prompts the question, "Compared to what?", quite properly to recognize that official statistics are themselves a social construct, attracting as much quizzical comment as news coverage. Yet, as Carter Wood (2016) notes, in a compendious review of relevant accounts, "crime news has consistently offered a distorted view of crime, with the greatest attention being given to those crimes that least frequently appear in official statistics" (p. 301). Combining human interest with dramatic appeal, crimes fulfill many of the most important requirements of a medium straddling information and entertainment. Taking the long view of this, Rowbotham and her colleagues, having analyzed news content in the UK local and national press over more than a century, conclude that the urge to entertain and thrill with such news has left the UK the "most ill-informed society (in terms of its comprehension of laws) in modern history" (Rowbotham, Stevenson, & Pegg, 2013, p. 6). It would be difficult, however, to be sanguine about this problem elsewhere, research generally having discovered very similar trends in many other countries.

A second feature of crime reporting is its emphasis on violent crime, which is repeatedly shown to be significantly overreported compared with property crime or other forms of nonviolent criminality, such

as fraud (Dailey & Wenger, 2016). More emphatically, Lin and Phillips restricting themselves to coverage in the U.S. of capital crimes, sum up the coverage as presenting “a distorted reality in which brutal crimes tend to be committed by minority offenders against vulnerable, worthy victims” (2014, p. 934). In the cliché long associated with newsroom decision making, if it bleeds it leads. While far from adequate as a summary of the sociology of journalistic practice, the phrase simply, if crudely, identifies a primary news value. As Dowler (2003) concludes, in a review in the context of the United States, “there is an overemphasis on crimes of violence . . . murder and robbery dominate while property crimes are rarely presented” (p. 121), and while the direct effect of this on fear of crime is uncertain and unproven, it is an undoubted factor.

Third, it is important to note the demography of the perpetrators of crime portrayed in the media. As the recent summary by Lin and Phillips (2014) suggests, it is a not-uncommon conclusion, notable in the U.S., to write of the “racialization” of crime, and Mancini and colleagues suggest that “media accounts and policy discourse have presented Blacks and criminality as virtually synonymous” (Mancini, Mears, Stewart, Beaver, & Pickett, 2015, p. 996). They note that the direct impact of such stereotyping is substantially mitigated by direct experience and contact between Blacks and Whites, a finding fairly generalizable about much media coverage.

There now exist enormous quantities of research and debate about the nature and consequences of crime portrayals in the media. The point is to underline its departure from any comprehensive or even account that would enable the citizen to deduce well-founded and informed conclusions about the infringement of society’s legal and moral boundaries and the consequences and causes of it.

My second policy area example, climate change and the environment, is of a different order. While the occasional subject of event stories, notable in exceptional natural events (volcano eruptions, violent storms, tornadoes, forest fires), the increasingly (though not universally) accepted importance of climate change is a challenge for the media in many ways. It is not surprising that the issue was barely evident in media output in earlier decades, although the anthropogenic character of climate change, that is, its connection with human activity, has been known, or at least discussed, for some considerable time. Occasional news about reports by international bodies, or the latest meteorological data showing yet another improbably hot year, or even dramatic film of forest fires across the globe or unlikely and disastrous flooding, are all important bases for news stories, but amount to a good deal less than the informed citizen might wish or need to know about such an important and increasingly apocalyptic subject.

The emergence of climate change denial, and promotional lobbying designed to question the scientific evidence, which following a rise in environmental coverage in the 1980s, swiftly increased in the 1990s, prompting what was to become one of the primal dilemmas of news reporting in this area. In seeking balance between two apparently contradictory views—that climate change was indeed anthropogenic, or that it was not, or even that its very existence was dubious—invited many media to see these two positions as requiring balanced presentation by offering equal prominence to each. Such slavish adherence to one of the apparently basic requirements of journalism, in practice, gave the overwhelmingly consensual scientific view of the seriousness and human origins of climate change no greater prominence

than the very much smaller and sectional, if vociferous, denial of such concerns. For the citizen seeking clarification, active pursuit of information and evidence became essential if not to be becalmed by this apparently reassuring balance (Boykoff, 2011).

It is not surprising then that "the environment, more than many issues, brings to the surface some of the most persistent anxieties surrounding news media practices" (Lester, 2010, p. 59). News is about events, not process, yet climate change is very much the latter. The requirement of balance seems otiose when scientific consensus is overwhelmingly behind one position, so that balancing it with the contrary view gives the reader/viewer an inevitably misleading sense of the relative weight of explanations on offer. The concerned citizen, anxious to explore what has become one of the most profound, some would argue the fundamental, issue of our age, would certainly need to be an active seeker for information and analysis to get to grips with the topic in any sustained manner.

The Economy

A second example of the limitations of mainstream media provision arises from accumulated evidence about the presentation of the economy and the economic. As John Corner has perceptively pointed out, news seeks to be narrative as much as expository, and in this area particularly, what he terms the "narrative/expository tension" may often "let the 'poetic' dimension of news obscure the extent of its 'referential' obligations" (Corner, 1998, pp. 54–55). In other words, in seeking to keep interest alive, much of the basic explanation of what is going on in the economy may be lost. Three aspects of economic news are salient: its dependence on a restricted range of authoritative commentators, its much-discussed failure to explain or predict such monumental events as the 2008–09 financial crash, and its apparent adherence to a consensual and often neoliberal set of assumptions about the economy.

Like environmental news, financial and economic news has relatively recent origins as a specialist area in the mainstream media, although the business and financial press has much longer roots in many countries, meeting the needs and interests of an ever rising commercial and mercantile class. Most TV bulletins now would see the need solemnly to announce the latest fate of national stock market indicators, or exchange rates, in much the same way they might ritualistically impart the weather news, though with only the most limited of explanation or purchase on audience comprehension. Where economic news is provided more analytically, it commonly deploys the help of so-called expert commentators to assist the reader or viewer. Research has frequently shown the quite limited range of accredited witnesses, to use Stuart Hall's phrase, who provide this commentary. Never in any way labeled as *parti pris*, city financial elites or international bank economists provide the required explanation and act as arbiters as to whether an event should be construed as good or bad. Indeed, their views, or the reaction of some apparently impersonal entity, such as the markets, are themselves often the substance of the story (see, e.g., Deacon, Wring, & Golding, 2005).

Economic and financial journalism is often regarded as having failed to predict, or indeed explain, the financial crash of 2008–9, though this might perhaps be regarded as a stern demand. It was the Queen of England who famously, if mischievously, asked economists (at a seminar at the London School of Economics) why they had failed to see the credit crunch coming (she had, after all, probably seen about

£25 million disappear from her own personal fortune). If news aspires to provide explanation, full description, and thus fuel for understanding the economic environment, then analysis of its coverage of the most dramatic events of recent Western economic history has been harsh in its judgment. In studies of both the BBC and press, Berry (2016a, 2016b) demonstrates that coverage was dominated by elites, unchallenging of their orthodoxies, and unquestioningly accepted austerity as the solution. This acceptance of austerity as the normal solution framed coverage of government economic policy (Kay & Salter, 2014), and, in general, journalism failed in providing the public with either warning or explanation—a judgment of the U.S. media provided at length, if harshly, by Starkman (2015), for whom the public was “left in the dark about and powerless against complex problems that overtake important national institutions” (p. 1).

For Knowles, Phillips, and Lidberg (2015), in a comparative study, these failings were but a stark example of a more general deficiency, reflecting reporting of earlier events such as the recession of the late 1990s and the dot-com boom in 2000. They claim that their interviews and empirical evidence indicate “a decline in mainstream financial journalism standards since the 1980s, as the media have faced increasing institutional, ideological, and industrial pressures” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 322); more generally see Schiffrin, 2015). All these analyses, and others, see economic news as provided by a media locked into a neoliberal consensus as to financial and economic processes and solutions. Not least, this leads to almost complete failure to report much of the economic environment, including the failings and misdeeds of the corporate sector (Doyle, 2006). In part this arises from the demarcation of economic and financial news into separate and, indeed, specialist sections—*Money Mail*, *The Financial Times*, Bloomberg Television, Fox Business Network, and so on—which has evolved continuously.

I cannot here take a long march through the institutions to review similar deficiencies in coverage of health, education, immigration, and so on. Yet, as these examples suggest, in all such areas of reportage the trend toward the fusion of entertainment and information, much analyzed in research into “tabloidization” is important, though not new. The first Royal Commission on the Press in the UK had recognized that the commercial success of a popular title necessarily depends “on something other than the authoritative discussion of public affairs; they depend on the power to interest and entertain a wide variety of readers whose concern with politics is limited and intermittent” (Royal Commission on the Press 1947–1949, 1949, p. 41). Not surprisingly the commission concluded, perhaps coyly, that “we have found some evidence of willingness to be satisfied with what at best corresponds only roughly to the truth” (p. 150). The broad conclusion from such research is well summarized by McQuail (2013), who suggests that “the net effect on the news of the factors outlined risks transforming ‘reality’ into a new form (often called ‘infotainment’) that is not primarily designed to meet the informational needs of audience or society” (p. 115).

The Cost of Being an Informed Citizen

Such a brief overview can only hint at the limitations of routine or mainstream provision. But the point to be pursued is that the sufficiently informed citizen needs to seek and obtain rather more than is routinely provided if she or he is to fulfill the ideals of engagement and deliberation implicit in the full notion of citizenship. The problem is that such a task is impeded, in a period in which disposable incomes and wealth are so unequal, if the information required is only, or significantly, available at a price. The

result is what we might term information detriment, suggesting that the well-informed citizen, diligently seeking to acquire the necessary resources for active engagement and judgment as a participating member of society, is hindered by the costs involved in so doing.

More broadly this results in citizen detriment, a corollary to consumer detriment, the harm or damage suffered by people buying goods or services, especially when it is exacerbated by the disadvantages resulting from low disposable income—such as having to pay higher unit prices for smaller quantities. Citizen detriment has a wider scope than examined here and would include, for example, the disenfranchisement endured by large numbers (millions in the UK, mainly on low incomes, possibly more than one in five adults in the U.S.) not registered to vote. The detriment under consideration in this article is the deficiency of information available to people as a result of widening economic inequality. There are several reasons for this, and three can be examined here. First, the price of information and communications, and the resources required to obtain them, both discriminate in favor of the better off. Second, the huge proliferation of digital resources, both software and hardware, far from rectifying or addressing that first imbalance, compounds it and is in any case much exaggerated. Third, we should acknowledge the decline in forms of publicly or civically available information and knowledge.

Let us look at each of these in turn. Newspaper readership has been declining for many years. As Curtice and Mair (2008) plaintively asked nearly a decade ago, “Where have all the readers gone?” (p. 161). In 1983, just over three-quarters of UK adults regularly read a daily newspaper. Fifteen years later, it was just half. The decline has continued, and national newspaper sales dropped by about 50% between 2004 and 2014. Since 2008, year-on-year reductions in aggregate circulation of national newspapers in the UK have been between 5% and 12% a year, and while some of that represents a migration to other sources of material (notably online), much of it simply represents a retreat from consumption of news. This needs much further dissection, for which there is not space here. But one undoubted factor is the continuing rise in cover prices driven, not least, by an attempt to compensate for the disappearance of classified advertising and the movement of advertising spends more generally to other media. Price changes in the decade after 2004 varied from just a third at *The Sun* to 190% at *The Guardian*, which by 2016 had increased its cover price by virtually 400%, from 55 pence to £2.00. *The Times* [of London], *Daily Telegraph*, and *The Financial Times* all increased cover prices by over 100% between 2004 and 2014, and all but four titles, including Sundays, increased their prices by above inflation in that decade (Turvill, 2014).

The rise in the price of subscriptions to cable television has become a major cause of grievance in the United States. The U.S. national regulatory body, the Federal Communications Commission, reported in 2014 that the average monthly price of the most popular cable packages increased by 5.1% in 2012, compared with a 1.6% annual increase in the Consumer Price Index. From 1995 to 2013, the price for the same package increased at an average annual rate of 6.1%, compared with a 2.4% growth rise in the Consumer Price Index. In the UK, cable subscriptions have risen less dramatically, but represent a substantially higher figure than the cost of the license fee for BBC services. Typically, a subscription for cable TV would cost about £250 to £500 a year, including broadband and landline, compared with a TV license, which now costs £145.

One of the unusual characteristics of new communications goods and services on which I have frequently commented in work with my colleague Graham Murdock (see, e.g., Golding, 2010; Murdock & Golding, 1989), is that they require continuing expenditure. In other words, their cost to the consumer, unlike earlier generations of “white goods,” such as refrigerators, central heating, and so on, includes recurrent expenditure on software and add-ons to maintain the efficiency and currency, or perhaps even viability, of the goods. Computers require printers, new software, and fairly regular replacement. To be online requires a regular service payment as well as additional equipment such as a modem. Any well-provided and connected wired citizen will be meeting not just substantial start-up costs, but regular commitments to recurrent spending to sustain this position. The high cost of the start-up hardware means an inevitable and enduring digital divide, illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Ownership of Communications Goods by Income Group: UK 2016.

	Home computer	Internet connection	Telephone	Mobile phone
All households (%)	88	88	88	94
Gross income decile group				
Poorest 10%	55	55	70	84
Sixth decile group	96	97	92	99
Richest 10%	100	100	96	100

Source: Office for National Statistics (2017). Adapted from Table A46.

The point about such evident gaps in ownership is that, unlike previous waves of technological consumption, in which any snapshot inevitably captures a stage in the gradual extension of ownership, an interim period before such things become ubiquitous, the recurrent expenditure required for communications goods makes such a trend less possible. Table 2 takes this analysis one stage further and shows what different income groups are able to spend on information and communications services.

Table 2. UK 2016: Household Expenditure on Selected Communications Services.

	£/week		% of all expenditures	
	Poorest 10th	Richest 10th	Poorest 10th	Richest 10th
Telephone and fax services	5.40	17.50	1.54	3.0
Internet	1.40	4.30	0.8	0.38
TV (cable, licenses, etc.)	3.20	9.70	1.8	0.85
Newspapers, magazines, etc.	1.20	3.10	0.7	0.28

Source: Office for National Statistics (2017). Author’s calculations from Tables A.6 and 3.1E.

Table 2 shows, for example, that, while the poorest 10% in the UK spend nearly three times the proportion of their disposable spending on things like newspapers and the Internet, as do the richest 10%, in absolute terms they, nonetheless, only manage to spend a little over a third as much. In general, therefore, while low-income households spend a higher proportion of their disposable income on things such as TV, newspapers, and so on, this represents a much lower absolute figure than can be afforded by better off groups. This is a pattern typical of necessities (housing, clothing, food, etc.), and is as clear an illustration of the scale and form of information detriment as it would be possible to provide.

It is often suggested that the rise of the Internet, and digital communication generally, has more than compensated for these inequities by creating a readily accessible and cheap abundance more likely to provoke information overload than information detriment. Two reasons at least cause pause for thought about this claim. As Table 1 shows, the Internet is not yet universally available, and the presumption that this is but a temporary period before its universal adoption seems to be confronted by the stubborn refusal or inability of many to enter the new digital playground on offer. This is sometimes thought to be willful (digital disengagement as an active and considered rejection) or as the passing conservatism of an aging predigital cohort. Both no doubt explain part of the disengagement inevitably discovered by use surveys. But there remain more mundane if significant material explanations. Roughly 9% in the UK suggest their lack of Internet use is due to the high level of either hardware or subscription costs (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Access persists in mirroring income inequality. As the most recent Family Spending survey notes (see Table 1), "55% of households in the lowest income group had Internet connection, compared with 100% of households in the highest income group" (ONS, 2017). Internationally, according to the Pew Research Center (Poushter, 2016), there remains a strong relationship between per capita income and Internet access.

As the annual Ofcom communications market survey confirms (Ofcom, 2016a, Figure 5.12), the variance in the proportion of adults with various Internet-enabled devices remains substantial. Comparing adults in consumer groups AB with those in groups DE, their figures are 76% compared with 62% for smartphones, 78% compared with 48% for laptops, 67% to 43% for tablets, and 43% to 18% for desktop computers. Of course, this also takes no account of the quality of the device or its connectedness. A brand-new, all-singing, all-dancing, desktop with the latest software, copious memory, and a big monitor screen is still "a desktop" along with its five-year-old, creaking and groaning low-spec predecessor owned, of necessity, by the low-income user across town.

The use and usefulness of such equipment also vary profoundly. It is a common political regret that consumers will not make best use of the digital facilities available to them. The shift from this view to one of blaming the victim is often swift, assuming that information detriment is a willful inertia among those too obtuse or inflexible to make best use of the digital possibilities of e-politics, e-education, e-commerce, and e-learning provided for them by the more enlightened. I have explored this view and its ramifications in the EU (Golding, 2007). Again, Ofcom research offers some clues to this (Ofcom, 2016b). This shows that while 68% of low-income adults had used the Internet compared with virtually all ABC1 adults (p. 9), fewer than half of the lower income groups had used it for banking and only about a quarter to access government or council websites, whereas the equivalent figures for ABC1 users were 69% and 42%, respectively. Using the Internet for such things as news is in any case still fairly limited, ranking 10th among the various uses to which it was put by users in the Ofcom market survey (2016b, Figure 5.21). As always, it is also important to note how far news online is in any case garnered or compiled from mainstream news sources—in the UK, for example, the BBC and the *Daily Mail*.

Consumer detriment and information detriment combine and coincide in much digital equipment use, as lower income users find themselves either succumbing to the blandishments of equipment retailers or the premature and punitive demands of government agencies. The bewildering and ultimately penalizing requirements imposed on social security claimants in a world seeking to become digital by

default (the service standard now adopted by the UK government) were poignantly illustrated in Ken Loach's 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake* (Loach, 2016), in which a bemused adult benefit claimant attempts to master the utterly unrealistic requirements imposed on him to claim online. Many smartphone users, having spent unaffordable amounts as start-up costs, find themselves unable to use or pay for the time they need to spend online with it, not least if their use is inefficient through unfamiliarity. At any one time an estimated 10 million pay-as-you-go phones in the UK are without the credit needed to make calls or receive voicemail (Armstrong & del Arbol, 2015). Frequent well-meaning initiatives to encourage the digitally reluctant to go online have fallen foul of the dire realities of everyday hardship among the intended beneficiaries. For example, research undertaken in the Communities and Culture network showed the difficulties faced by many low-income users: smartphones might not be owned by their user, the owner or user's monthly allowance might not cover necessary download costs, and limited use means inefficient use of time that costs money in any case (see various reports produced by the Communities and Culture programme, listed at Communities and Culture Network, 2016).

The third factor signaled above in assessing the reality of information detriment is the decline in the volume and range of publicly available civic information. A commonly cited and obvious example is that of public libraries. In the UK, about 8,000 jobs disappeared between 2010 and 2016 in public libraries, about a quarter of the total, and 343 libraries closed completely, according to a BBC survey (March 23, 2016). A further 174 libraries had been transferred to community groups and 50 to other external organizations. In recurrent surveys, Marcella and Baxter have shown to what extent public libraries are preferred sources for citizenship information (see, e.g., Marcella & Baxter, 2000). Having started life in the 19th century as an affront to big brewers who saw them as an unwelcome competitor for the leisure hours of the working class seeking somewhere warm and hospitable outside the home, public libraries have become an expensive luxury of local civic provision. More generally, the availability of government information, despite the apparent surface appearance of abundance in the age of the leak and freedom of information requests, is hedged about by its growing commercial environment. The development of tradeable information, and its piecemeal evolution, have long been noted (Abd Hadi & McBride, 2000), but the implications of this trend for informed citizenship have yet to be adequately explored.

The travails of the BBC in recent times have been well documented and much discussed. A government white paper in 2016 argued for the BBC as a source of distinctive output—in other words, output unattractive or unprofitable for commercial providers—in direct contrast to evidence from elsewhere in Europe, showing that where public service broadcasters competed with commercial providers across the full range of services, the public received the highest quality of service from both (e.g., Ibarra, Nowak, & Kuhn, 2015). The finances of the BBC were savaged by a new requirement that it meet the cost (previously met by public expenditure) of providing free licenses to people over 75, partly in 2018–19 and fully from 2020–21, a reduction of £650 million in the corporation's income. BBC news services have been a regular victim of pressures on its income. After the license fee was frozen in 2010, the corporation announced it would seek £800 million in efficiency savings. Roughly 2,000 job cuts were announced in 2011 on top of the 7,000 lost in the previous seven years. The 2011 cuts led to announcements of 700 to 800 jobs lost in BBC news, notably in business coverage, investigative journalism, and foreign news. In 2014 came a move to cut 415 jobs in the news department, and in early 2016 the corporation announced it would seek to save £550 million in news services by 2021–22.

Local news is another provider of information for citizenship that is ultimately unlikely to find online provision replacing its diminished services. The number of local papers has steadily diminished in recent years, by perhaps 200 in the last decade, resulting not least in increased concentration of ownership, with four publishers controlling some three-quarters of titles. Varying estimates suggest between 50% and 80% of journalism jobs in UK local papers have been lost in the past 10 years or so (Ponsford, 2016). In a report from the Reuters Institute, Nielsen quotes Hindman, who, reflecting on the U.S. situation, suggests

there is little evidence . . . that the Internet has expanded the number of local news outlets . . . while the Internet adds only a pittance of new sources of local news, the surprisingly small audience for local news traffic [also] helps explain the financial straits local news organizations now face. (Nielsen, 2016, p. 8)

Thus, citizen detriment, and in particular information detriment, is an ineluctable feature of the communications ecology in a society riven by deep and widening economic inequality. The corollary of this is the systemic advantage enjoyed by actors with the resources, both material and cultural, to be effectively heard in democratic debate. In this sense communication is two-way, allowing the powerful and wealthy to sustain influence over policy and opinion through their ability to have, in the terminology of political communication, "voice." For Habermas, this is one of the pathologies of political communication. As he argues,

Social deprivation and cultural exclusion of citizens explain the selective access to and uneven participation in mediated communication, whereas the colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives leads to a peculiar paralysis of civil society. (Habermas, 2006, pp. 421–422)

Among the major vehicles for this paralysis are lobbyists and, more generally, the public relations industry, whose very *raison d'être* is to translate financial muscle into communications influence. What Cave and Rowell describe as the "commercial influence industry" in the UK is the third biggest in the world. In their view the work of corporate PR is "getting someone else to say what it is you want them to say (unlike advertising which is all about blowing your own trumpet)" (Cave & Rowell, 2015, p. 81; see also Miller & Dinan, 2008). They estimate the industry to have been worth about £2 billion in 2015, having doubled in size in 30 years. In fact, the industry body has a much grander calibration, suggesting that, by 2016, the PR industry was worth £12.9 billion, showing growth of 34% since 2013, when it reached £9.62 billion (Public Relations and Communications Association, 2016).

Of course, public relations and lobbying (which, just before becoming prime minister in 2010, David Cameron described in a speech as "the next big scandal waiting to happen") are not the same (Porter, 2010). His comment followed the publication by Parliament of a report on the influence of lobbyists on members of Parliament (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2008). The report was driven by a growing awareness that "there is an inside track, largely drawn from the corporate world, who wield privileged access and disproportionate influence" (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2008, p. 3). Their concern was with the shadowy world of private

meetings, chummy lunches, words in ears, and revolving doors between Whitehall and corporate boardrooms. Lobbying is a subset of public relations and seeks to influence government and public policy. It will often, but not always, use the media both to develop and influence public opinion and, indirectly, to pressure politicians and civil servants. Both demand resources, often very substantial ones.

Citizen Detriment: The Core of Communications Inequality

As communication scholars we can, I have suggested, reasonably point to a credible accumulation of data and analysis about the net contribution of the media to the information available to citizens. If we regard citizenship as an active role, only realizable if the actor as citizen is sufficiently informed to make effective and well-founded judgments, and to have those judgments noticed and responded to, then we have made the study of communications, as it should be, central to our understanding of social and political process. Such a task, however, returns the brute facts of inequality to the center of communications research. Problems of ideology and democracy are impossible to interrogate without a clear understanding of the inequitable distribution of material resources and the implication of such inequalities for both acquiring and communicating information and ideas.

We should not, of course, unduly romanticize the past, imagining a time in which all were adequately informed, able duly to consider the state of the world, and vote or act wisely as a consequence. Schudson suggests, perhaps overly seeking the silver lining, that in reviewing the past in the U.S., "the quality of information available to citizens is . . . more complete, more researched, more readily retrievable, more widely accessible" (Schudson, 1996, p. 368) than a century ago. Nonetheless, in a world in which communications goods and contents are increasingly only available at a price, and in which wealth and income divides are rapidly and dramatically widening, the capacity of citizenship across social and economic divides becomes a pressing and central concern for the communications researcher. Such concerns might well arrive at the conclusion that, whatever the important achievements may yet be of media practice and policy, at root citizen detriment can only be addressed by urgent and fundamental consideration and change in the field of social and economic inequality.

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