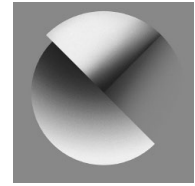


Visual representations of wealth inequality in political communication



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ABSTRACT

Wealth inequality is deepening in many countries around the world, presenting increasing challenges to public notions of fairness while simultaneously proving resistant to democratic intervention. This article looks at one element of the politics of wealth inequality which has so far received relatively little attention: visual representations in political communication. The authors collected an original dataset of 243 images posted on Facebook by UK news media and civil society organizations to explore how different actors visually represent the problem of wealth inequality. They used content analysis to demonstrate that news media in particular tends to visualize inequality through images of wealth itself, such as luxury goods and property, whereas civil society more often tries to contrast richness and poorness. They conducted social semiotic analysis on two sets of recurring tropes to investigate the complex trade-offs in how visual content frames inequality, whether through ambivalent focus on the super-rich or a claim to objectivity and completeness through birds-eye aerial photography.

KEYWORDS

content analysis • economic inequality • elites • semiotics • visual framing • wealth inequality

Academic and public discussion increasingly questions the lack of democratic responsiveness to rising levels of wealth inequality in many countries around the world (Lierse et al., 2022). A mounting body of research points to the role of framing and discourse in the politics of wealth inequality, such as by emphasizing meritocratic values or individualizing responsibility for poverty (Bell and Entman, 2011; Grisold and Preston, 2020;

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Schiffes and Knowles, 2022; Waitkus and Wallaschek, 2022). Yet, despite the importance of multimodal communication in contemporary communication and the rich contributions of work focusing on primarily visual media (such as Fink and Lomax, 2014), the literature analysing inequality framing, including those referenced above, overwhelmingly focuses on text. This article therefore explores the role of images in political communication about wealth inequality by news media and civil society groups in the UK, which we view as contributing towards visual framing – ‘how a particular point of view is emphasised or made salient in visual messages’ (Rodriguez et al., 2023: 15).

Visual communication holds significant mobilizing potential in political debates. Symbols, visual testimony and iconic photographs reproduced in media can affectively mobilize shared grievances (Casas and Williams, 2019; Lu and Peng, 2024), act as heuristics for complex ideological assemblages (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007) and encode deep attachments to collective identities (Mattoni and Teune, 2014). In the politics of inequality, it has been argued that data visualization, such as the production of ‘sparklines’ around the inequality research of Thomas Piketty, has been a central component of gathering momentum in public debates around rising inequality (Savage, 2021). Yet we lack systematic empirical research into how different actors employ images in political communication around wealth inequality, when compared with the more developed literature in other issue domains like environmental politics. The article therefore compiles and analyses a dataset of images used by UK civil society and news media to communicate the problem of wealth inequality, using images attached to Facebook posts between 2014 and 2023. The project uses manual content analysis to compare visual elements and frames before a qualitative analysis of a smaller subset of key tropes which recur across the dataset.

Our content analysis reveals that news media are more likely than civil society to visualize wealth inequality using images emphasizing wealth (e.g. luxury boats, money or property) rather than either poverty or a contrast between rich and poor; news media also tend to focus more on political elites as a prism through which to view conflict about inequality (such as images of former UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and US Senator Bernie Sanders mounting critiques of inequality). Our social semiotic analysis dives into greater detail with two sets of recurring signs used by both news media and civil society: urban wealth elites gazing down on the city and aerial photography of unequal neighbourhoods. We analyse these images in detail to illustrate the complexity of visualizing inequality in terms of what perspective communicates about the problem of wealth, and what is obscured from view. We then conclude with a discussion about how these two methods shed light on the challenges of visualizing wealth inequality in grappling with processes of selectivity, polysemy and (the absence of) iconicity. We argue that the choice of how to visualize inequality (such as through poverty, wealth or contrasts) expresses meaningfully different ways of understanding the underlying problems and potential solutions in the contemporary politics of inequality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wealth inequality in the UK

Globally, wealth inequality has been identified as an increasingly significant problem, with the top 1 percent capturing 38 percent of global wealth increases since the mid-1990s (Chancel et al., 2022). In fact, gains are even more highly concentrated at the very top of the distribution: as Oxfam (see Riddell et al., 2024) has called attention to, the wealth of the five richest billionaires has more than doubled between 2020 and 2024. Within the UK, the overall trend of declining wealth inequality over the 20th century halted in the 1980s, with slowly increasing top wealth shares observable again since that time (Alvaredo et al., 2018). Perhaps more important than the wealth distribution viewed in isolation is the interaction of wealth and income: the UK's aggregate wealth has increased dramatically in recent years at the same time as incomes have largely stagnated, the consequence being that it is much harder for households to use their income to save and move up the wealth distribution (Bourquin et al., 2022).

Wealth inequality has also become a political problem in a broader sense. Recent polling suggests that three times as many UK respondents support more equal distribution of wealth even if that total amount of wealth is reduced, versus those who support greater wealth more unevenly distributed (Schifferes and Knowles, 2022: 216). Separate polling in 2023 found that UK citizens most frequently nominated 'the very rich' as having the most power to influence the course of events, ahead of even national governments (39% vs 24%) (APPG on Inclusive Growth, 2023), suggesting anxieties about how unevenly distributed wealth translates into broader power imbalances. New data on racialized (Khan, 2020) and gendered (Women's Budget Group, 2023) wealth divides highlight the material ways in which other inequalities are amplified by growing inequalities in wealth distribution and vice versa. Yet, despite these public concerns, there also appear to be significant barriers to reducing wealth inequality common to capitalist democracies (Lierse et al., 2022).

Framing wealth inequality

Against this backdrop, it is important to try and understand the discursive context which enables the reproduction and intensification of wealth inequality, as well as the non-responsiveness of political systems. One way in which these discursive processes have commonly been understood is with the concept of framing, namely the selective presentation of facts to emphasize particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations or treatments (Entman, 1993). Framing is a natural fit with the topic of wealth (inequality) due to the multiple ways in which the topic can be discussed, and which have been shown to influence audience responses, including attitudes toward redistribution. Three elements of the framing of wealth inequality in

particular are highlighted in the rest of the article: what form wealth takes; perceptions of the wealthy; and causal explanations for inequality.

What form wealth takes matters in framing because, depending on the context, wealth can have powerful positive connotations, such as potential for the future, care for family and insurance against risk (Hecht et al., 2022). This can help explain why, for example, people support taxing some forms of wealth more than others – survey data from the UK found respondents were more supportive of taxes on financial investments and investment properties compared with savings or pensions (Rowlingson et al., 2020).

Framing matters not just in terms of different kinds of wealth, but also in terms of the people who hold that wealth. For example, perceptions of the rich as greedy are associated with increased demands for redistribution (Hansen, 2022). *How* rich people made their money also matters: when asked about different kinds of wealthy individuals, UK survey respondents were more likely to say that business entrepreneurs' wealth should be taxed *less* than income from work (23%) rather than more (19%); this contrasted sharply with the hypothetical case of the 'old-money heir' (13% vs 31%) (Fairness Foundation, 2023). These links between the framing of the wealthy and attitudes toward inequality make the dominance of news media framing of business leaders as entrepreneurs and philanthropists (Waitkus and Wallaschek, 2022) consequential for the broader politics of redistribution. These frames are further sustained by the work of carefully reinforced counter-narratives, key amongst which is the link between talent, hard work and economic success (meritocracy). The affirming of the meritocratic narrative within these 'entrepreneur' frames exerts a substantial semiotic counter-force which serves to legitimize the status quo: people are perceived to be where they should be in the spectrum and, ergo, the system is fair and redistribution is unnecessary (Bauer et al., 2022; Grisold and Preston, 2020). Finally, a significant body of work explores the effect of advantage and disadvantage frames on shifting support towards or away from redistribution in the context of economic inequality ('the rich have more than the poor', versus 'the poor have more than the rich') (Bruckmüller et al., 2017; Chow and Galak, 2012; Jun et al., 2022). From this, we assume that the emphasis within relationships of inequality have potentially significant implications for public attitudes, including toward redistribution. Given the significance of framing in the politics of wealth inequality, it is somewhat surprising that there have not been, to our knowledge, any systematic empirical studies about framing dynamics involving visual content. This should not imply a lack of research on the visual dimension of wealth (inequality) in general. Our impression is that existing research on primarily visual media has generally approached the task as one of multimodal discourse analysis rather than isolating and emphasizing the visual component: we would argue this impression fits research we have been informed by on 'entertainment documentaries' (Carr et al., 2021, 2023), factual television (Mack, 2022; Thomas, 2016), entertainment television shows

(Kuusela, 2023; Winslow, 2010), magazines (e.g. Jaworski and Thurlow, 2017, esp. p. 281), and YouTube (Oliva et al., 2023). There have also been important studies emphasizing the significance of visual media in egalitarian social movements like Occupy and the alter-globalization movement (Memou, 2018; Odih, 2013; Triantafillou, 2019), but we would argue this is directed more at understanding social movement mobilization and contestation than framing processes within a broader discursive system.

The benefit of a framing approach, then, is to understand the strategic selection of visual content in political communication like news reporting as a distinct choice with potentially distinct consequences. Images play different roles in framing compared with text, such as being generally more polysemic and associative (Geise and Baden, 2015); and the same news item can be paired with two different images, to different effects (e.g. see Powell et al., 2015). Just as research on the politics of climate change has included important insight into the role of visual frames and symbols in mediating debate (e.g. O'Neill, 2020), we are interested in building a greater evidence base for how these dynamics play out in the issue of wealth inequality. This leads then to our primary research question:

RQ: How do UK civil society and news media organizations visually represent wealth inequality in political communication?

METHOD

Our approach analyses images in political communications using two different methods, namely quantitative content analysis of image elements and emphasis frames (O'Neill, 2020; Parrott et al., 2019) and social semiotic analysis of two key tropes (Fahmy et al., 2014: 4–5). These two methods are both commonly used within the literature on visual framing (Bock, 2020), and our goal was to triangulate the comprehensive breadth of content analysis with the interpretive richness of semiotic analysis.

In the rest of this section, we describe how we combine these two methods using a dataset of images collected from Facebook.

Data collection

In order to investigate our research question, we first sought to compile a database of images used to frame wealth inequality.

We chose to collect images from public Facebook pages using the CrowdTangle API. Our choice of Facebook as a source for data partly reflects the accessibility of the researcher API, which also allows for retrieval of historical data. This choice also reflects the centrality of Facebook as a social media platform used by both civil society and news media.

Having selected Facebook as a platform to collect images, our next step involved designating a sample of actors, which we identified from two broader

populations. *Civil society organizations* were drawn from the UK-based affiliates in the ‘Fight Inequality Alliance’, comprising a mix of international and national groups, such as Oxfam, the Equality Trust and Debt Justice UK. In total, 22 pages were added in the sample for civil society groups (see Table 1 of Supplemental Material for the full list). *News media* were identified purposively to include some of the largest UK news outlets, while also including a mix of ownership, editorial perspectives (e.g. more left- or right-wing orientation) and publishing formats (e.g. broadsheet vs tabloid). The six news organizations included in this list included BBC News, the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*. At different stages of our analysis we either explicitly compare these two types of groups, or focus on visual elements employed by both, as we describe in further detail in the next section.

In order to then construct a dataset of images, we first collected a low-precision, high-recall sample of Facebook images which might relate to wealth inequality and could be subsequently reviewed manually. We searched for posts between 1 January 2014 to 31 March 2023 to allow the maximum amount of historical data collection from the CrowdTangle API. For civil society groups, we searched for image posts with the keyword ‘inequality’ either in the post text or image ($n = 437$). For media groups, we instead searched for normal posts with the ‘inequality’ keyword, in order to analyse images in the link previews ($n = 649$).¹

We next applied a manual filtering process to isolate only those posts that related to visual framing of wealth inequality. Full instructions are available in the supplementary material, but this involved establishing that both the post’s *textual* and *visual* content related topically to wealth inequality (see Table 2 of Supplemental Material for Krippendorff’s alpha values for these and following variables, demonstrating intercoder reliability levels).

By the end of this step, we had a database of 243 Facebook posts containing visual framing of wealth inequality (173 from news media pages, 70 from civil society organizations).

Content analysis

The first stage of our analysis used a content analysis approach. We developed a codebook based partly on deductively formed categories and partly on inductively identified visual motifs which had seemed particularly salient in the initial review of the dataset (see supplementary material for codebook). We coded for the image’s genre, such as whether it was a photograph, data visualization or meme. We also coded for the presence of particular objects including wealth (as well as its particular form, e.g. cash, property, luxury goods or financial assets) and elites (including whether the elites were economic, political, academic or cultural). We then coded for a simplified version of the frame concept, focusing purely on problem definition to ask whether wealth inequality is framed *visually* in terms of emphasizing wealth, poverty, or the

relationship between the two. For example, an image of super-yachts would emphasize wealth, an image of homelessness would emphasize poverty and an aerial photograph of a city with sharply contrasting affluent and impoverished suburbs would emphasize the relationship between the two. We would like to underscore that these three kinds of emphasis frame do not simply represent objects denoted by the image in our view; in the context of a set of Facebook posts about inequality, and noting the literature surveyed above about the consequential differences between ‘advantage’ and ‘disadvantage’ frames, we apply our content analysis as a way to differentiate between meaningfully distinct interpretive schemas used in communicating about wealth inequality. It is also important to note here that the content analysis (and subsequent qualitative analysis) considered images primarily in isolation from their accompanying text to understand the specific choices made about the visual content in each case, and to be able to draw social semiotic inferences directly between the images and their social context (for example, in looking at the use of images of elites in the context of the high levels of wealth inequality described in the introduction). We recognize that other work in this field looks more explicitly at the interplay (or ‘relay’ as per Aiello, 2020) between text and image in multimodal communication. The content analysis method also supports a direct comparison between news media and civil society groups: frequency of frame elements is reported for each of these two groups in order to point towards possible differences, on the assumption that news media are relatively more motivated by reader engagement while civil society places relatively more emphasis on strategic frame contestation.

Social semiotic analysis

As a second stage of our analysis, we conducted a social semiotic analysis (Aiello, 2020; Rose, 2016). This analysis was shaped by a broader critical discourse framework, first in understanding images to be an element of discourse and, second, in understanding social reality as ‘conceptually mediated’ (Fairclough, 2013: 9). We approached the objects of our critical social analysis (images about wealth inequality) as ‘material-semiotic’ (Jessop, 2004, in Fairclough, 2013: 9): they seek to define – or ‘mediate’ – through heavily coded imagery a complex material problem. We focused on shared motifs and symbolic elements, especially focusing on visual elements which recurred across both media and civil society groups; rather than differentiating between media and civil society as in the content analysis, the goal at this stage of analysis was to focus on persistently available semiotic resources that have demonstrated their resonance by being traceable across both types of groups. To shed new light on the way that these images mediate the problem of wealth inequality, we borrowed concepts and approaches from critical visual theory, namely: the epistemologies specific to different ‘scopic regimes’ (Jay, 1988); the gaze (Berger, 1972; De Certeau, 1984); and frontality and positioning

(Sontag, 1979). Our intention in this part of the analysis was to explore how wealth inequality is framed across a complex 'genre chain' (Fairclough, 2003) comprising news articles, campaign literature and web content, each of which combines textual and visual components.

RESULTS

Content analysis

In the following section, we summarize the quantitative content analysis results, by focusing in particular on the framing of wealth inequality and the presence of elites. Before doing so, it is worth drawing some attention to the distribution of posts between different specific pages. In particular, news media posts showed a heavy over-representation of content from *The Guardian*: out of 173 relevant news media posts, 141 were from *The Guardian*. The key point we would emphasize is that this over-representation in content from *The Guardian* entirely reflects the different editorial interest of the respective news organizations; it is striking but also meaningful that the other major news pages we sampled only posted about wealth inequality, on average, at 5 per cent of the frequency of *The Guardian*. This is consistent with other research which has found that *The Guardian* plays a unique role in the UK media landscape as a driver of public debate on economic inequality (Savage and Vaughan, 2024). Although the results for media frames reported below therefore disproportionately reflect content from *The Guardian*, we maintain that this does accurately reflect the frames circulating on UK news media's Facebook pages, given we confirmed the relative absence of relevant content on other major pages (potentially reflecting the reluctance of the public broadcaster or right-leaning outlets to prioritize coverage of more left-leaning content). Content was slightly more evenly distributed among civil society organizations: out of 70 relevant posts, the most represented was Oxfam UK with 22 posts.

Firstly, considering the framing of wealth inequality, we differentiated between emphasis on wealth, poverty and a contrast or relationship between the two. Figure 1 provides illustrative examples of these three visual frames, all of which are attached to posts problematizing wealth inequality in some way. The wealth emphasis frame shows an image of a luxury car; the poverty emphasis frame shows an image of homelessness; the contrast frame shows two groups of figures illustrating wealth shares held by different segments of the population. Figure 2 then provides a quantitative overview of the distribution of these frames, showing that there is a clear difference between how news media and civil society groups frame the 'problem' of wealth inequality. For news media, 29 per cent of images emphasize inequality as a problem of wealth concentration, 18 per cent of images as a problem of poverty and only 11 per cent as some kind of relationship or contrast between the two.



Figure 1. Illustrative examples of different emphasis frames.
Note. From left to right: wealth emphasis frame (Guardian 2018); poverty emphasis frame, (Guardian 2017a); contrast emphasis frame (Positive Money UK 2017).

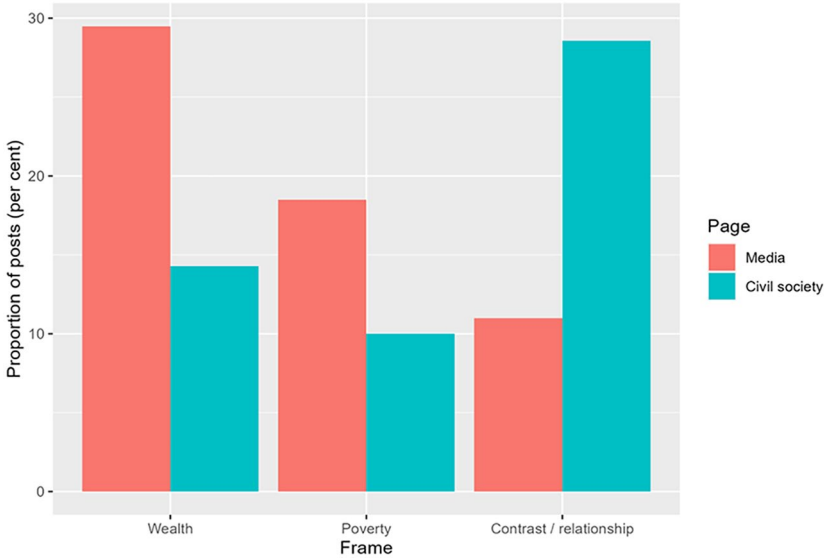


Figure 2. Framing of the problem of wealth inequality.

For civil society groups, the most common emphasis is this ‘Contrast/relationship’ frame (29%), compared with wealth concentration (14%) or poverty (10%). A chi-square test of independence showed that there was a significant relationship between organizational type and visual emphasis frame, $X^2(2, N = 243) = 16.91, p < 0.001$. Although we will return to this point in the discussion, we wish to emphasize the potential significance of visual framing which anchors inequality discussion in images of luxury and wealth (as dominated in news media) in activating discourses of consumption and status which have been demonstrated to dampen support for redistribution (e.g. Thal, 2020).

Looking more closely at how wealth itself is visualized in images in our dataset, Figure 3 shows a more matched distribution between news media and civil society groups: property is rather more common in news media images, whereas cash and luxury goods are rather more common in civil society images; neither set of pages commonly visualizes wealth in terms of financial

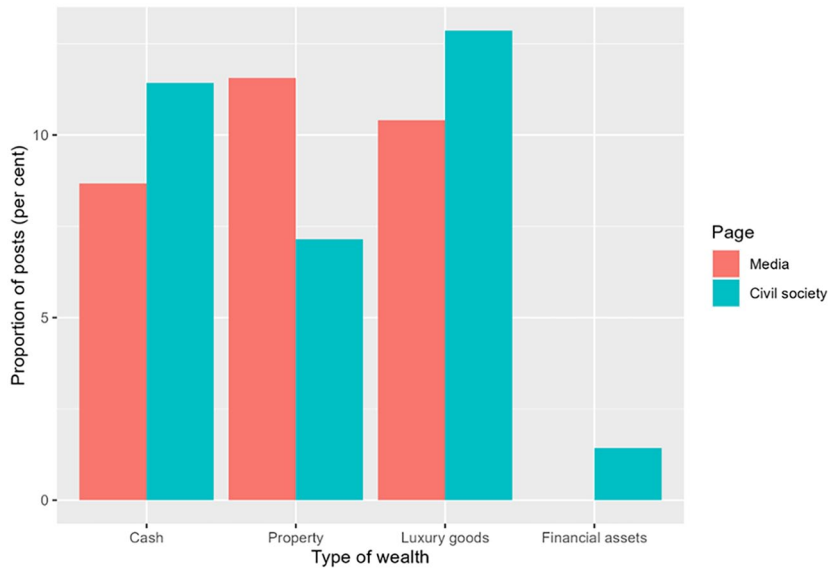


Figure 3. Visualization of forms of wealth.

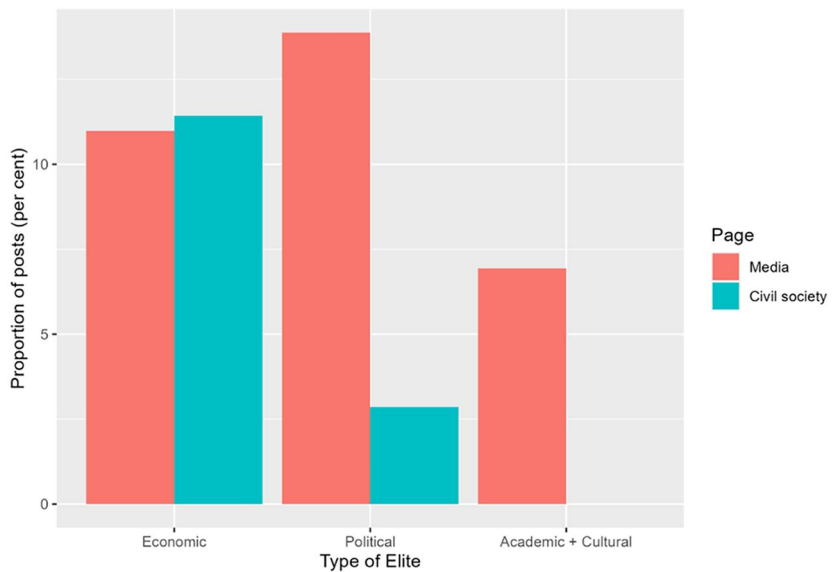


Figure 4. Visualization of elites.

assets (for example, images of share prices or stock market trading floors). Differences between news media and civil society pages, however, were not significant.

In Figure 4, we can summarize how elites are visually represented in images in our database. Economic elites are present in approximately 11 percent of images in both types of pages, however the representation of



Figure 5. Images of urban wealth elites.

Note. Image on left posted by *The Guardian* (2015), headline ‘Inequality has become a challenge to us as moral beings’; image on right posted by Robin Hood Tax campaign (2020).

other elites diverges sharply. Political elites are the most common kind of elites in news media images (14%), while they are less frequent in civil society posts (3%); meanwhile academic and cultural elites appear in around 7 percent of news media images but are absent from posts of civil society groups. The difference in the presence of elites between page types is significant, $X^2(2, N = 243) = 7.7, p < 0.05$. It is important to emphasize here that elites perform multiple functions in images around wealth inequality, particularly in news media: they can both symbolize the ‘problem’ of wealth inequality, as with images of Jeff Bezos (Executive Chairman of Amazon) or the previous UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak; they can also embody critiques of that same problem, as with frequent images of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn attached to stories around political contests or policy ideas around increased taxation. For civil society groups, the concentration of elite references among ‘economic’ elites reflects a generally more consistently adversarial representation of elites as responsible for inequality and obstacles to its redress.

Social semiotic analysis

In this section, we qualitatively analyse two sets of two images each (see Figure 5 and Figure 7 later in the article) where we observed symbolic elements recurring across both news media and civil society group posts. We focus on these images in particular because we assume that their recurrence across groups reflects their salience as ‘semiotic resources’ in political communication about wealth inequality, pointing to significant potential to mobilize symbolic power, the power of ‘constituting the given through utterances’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 170). Across these two sets of recurring representations of wealth inequality, we ask two broad questions: what do we see – in particular from what perspective, and involving which gaze(s); and what do we *not* see? By discussing these questions with regard to two very different approaches to visualizing wealth inequality, we aim to illustrate some of the complex trade-offs in visual communication in this domain.

The trope of the urban wealth elite. Figure 5 shows two images reproducing strikingly similar portraits of the wealth elite in an urban context: one by *The Guardian* in 2015 accompanying an opinion piece titled ‘Inequality has become a challenge to us as moral beings’, and one by the Robin Hood Tax campaign in 2020.

We want to start our analysis of these images by considering the role of the gaze in the visual framing of inequality. De Certeau’s essay ‘Walking in the City’ uses his experience of seeing the city of New York from the top of the World Trade Center to suggest that the elevated view from the top of the building ‘transfigures’ its beholder into ‘a voyeur . . . transform[ing] the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god’ (De Certeau, 1984: 92). This way of looking embodies what Martin Jay describes as the dominant ‘scopic regime’ of modernity, ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’. The ‘eye’ of this scopic regime is ‘understood to be static, unblinking and fixated’; its way of looking (and therefore knowing) is ‘the gaze’. The gaze is steady and unifying and accords the viewer a ‘transcendental and universal’ position (Jay, 1988: 7). De Certeau (1984) recognizes in this act of seeing/knowing the idea of the spectator or beholder as a ‘voyeur god’. He contrasts this voyeur god with the lives of those existing ‘down below’, below the threshold at which visibility begins, who experience the city in a more visceral way as walkers (p. 93). Our first observation then, is that the gaze of the wealth elite in Figure 5 elevates him through his positioning as a ‘voyeur god’: problematization, insofar as it occurs visually, arises through scrutiny and evaluation of the elite himself rather than any underlying inequalities.

Second, in positioning the viewer next to (or on the same level as) the wealthy elite, the camera creates an improbable alliance: we share the perspective of the elite looking down at a distant, invisible other. In this way, the images participate in a process of group identity making by setting apart an ‘us’ (here) from a ‘them’ (down there). This is important in terms of the politics of framing inequality. The production of ‘us and them’ is a key – and intensely pernicious – part of a prevailing political frame that falsely divides citizens into contributors (taxpayers) and takers (claimants) (Hills, 2017) and which has been mobilized recently to justify austerity (on the basis that ‘we’ are all in it together), and to avoid introducing a wealth tax (on the basis that our interests and those of the wealth elites align, and thus taxing ‘their’ wealth would risk ‘our’ economic wellbeing).

Our third observation is that Figure 5 inhabits or renews a familiar visual trope (e.g. the ‘frontier’ gaze) whose history pre-invests it with certain semiotic values. Below we have reproduced the (1818) Caspar David Friedrich painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (Figure 6) as an example of the kind of trope being renewed (which we similarly observed in other examples, such as promotional material for Edward Frumkin’s 2021 documentary *The American Frontier*). The recurrence of this trope



Figure 6. Wanderer above the Sea of Fog by Caspar David Friedrich (c. 1818).

across different texts, without any suggestion of direct referencing, demonstrates its availability and power as a semiotic resource: an image of a man looking out from a raised vantage point, across an open space, or down towards a space of industry/development/wilderness (pick the landscape to be civilized, exploited, developed for profit).

We want to conclude our analysis of these images of the urban wealth elite by considering our second overarching question: what *can't* we see? In De Certeau's (1984) essay, he talks about the world of the walked-in city as existing below the 'threshold at which visibility begins' (p. 93). What these elevated images do is to avoid visually describing that which is below this visible



Figure 7. Inequality from above.

Note. Image on left posted by *The Guardian* (2017), headline 'Inequality . . . in a photograph'; image on right posted by Oxfam Great Britain (2015). Original photograph in 2004 by Tuca Vieira.

threshold. As such, they maintain a sense of wealth as clean, as unblemished by and as apart from the rhythms and demands of the urban lives of those below. In the first image of Figure 5, the man is literally insulated from this unclean, blemished, crumpled life by being behind glass. In the second, he is apart from it, separated by a fence and by space. We would like here to read this image in the light of two important sets of literature that have grown particularly in parallel to new quantitative data post Piketty (2014). These are literatures that look at the 'legacies of empire' (Bhambra, 2022; Koram, 2022; Mukherjee, 2010); and literatures that explore the deployment of stigma as a governmental technology (Tyler, 2020). What these literatures combine to show is that wealth in our now is *not* unblemished. It drags with it the weight of the past (Savage, 2021). This violent, exploitative past is 'coded' into contemporary means of governing wealth distributions (Koram, 2022; Pistor, 2019). Wealth is not clean, sparkling, glass and steel high-rises and god-like white men in unruffled suits. It is not elevated and it is not magically apart from the misery that its accumulations and hyper-concentrations cause 'below'. In her important work on stigma, Tyler (2020) described stigma as 'a *relation* which 'exists between people in the immediacy of social interactions [and] a power relation which is exercised across the network of relations between people, society, media, culture and the state' (p. 188, emphasis added). It is 'embedded within political economies'. In Figure 5, it animates the space between the viewing platforms these men stand on and the landscapes they look down on, in which they will never participate but over which they have dominion. Our fourth observation, then, is that images that are clean and elevated, or of clean and elevated people or buildings, are in effect bracketing out history by failing to engage with what we know about the classed, racialized and gendered – blemished – nature of contemporary wealth and its intimate relationship with contemporary poverty.

The trope of aerial photography of inequality. We want to contrast our observations about the semiotics of the urban wealth elite in Figure 5 by examining a very different kind of elevated image of inequality (see Figure 7).

In our dataset, we find this same aerial photograph reproduced by different actors at different times, suggesting its enduring resonance: Oxfam UK used it in a major campaign around inequality in 2015 called ‘Even it up’, while *The Guardian* used it in a story in 2017 titled ‘Inequality . . . in a photograph’. The original image of the Paraisópolis favela in Sao Paulo and Morumbi, an affluent area of the city, taken in 2004 by photographer Tuca Vieira. The image was reproduced 16 years later by photographer and multi-media storyteller Johnny Miller as part of a photographic project titled *Unequal Scenes*. It is now used extensively, as book covers and illustration for inequality beyond Brazil. Inter-textually, it references other iconic ‘zoned’ images of urban space, notably Booth’s poverty maps (Morgan and Sinclair, 2019).

Returning to our two overarching questions, we consider now what perspective in these aerial photographs implies for visual framing of wealth inequality, and what it is that we cannot see from this perspective. Aerial photography has a multifaceted and historically rich set of associations, at different points implying a position of panoptic surveillance or promising a kind of emancipatory sublime (Amad, 2012). We can consider both associations as in play with aerial photography of inequality: that it offers a ‘complete’ view of inequality which escapes us when we experience it from within, at street level; it also offers an escape from entanglement in these embedding social structures (and, as discussed in our analysis of Figure 5, protection from the contamination of ‘dirt’ from the ‘walked-in’ city), and the possibility of viewing them dispassionately from above. This claim to completeness is underscored by *The Guardian* headline that this is ‘Inequality . . . in a photograph’. As Serafinelli and O’Hagan (2022) argue in regard to drone photographers, this kind of aerial perspective defamiliarizes the familiar and makes accessible the previously inaccessible, which explains in part why it is such a powerful way to visualize inequality dynamics which are experienced as simultaneously naturalized and obscured from view. Mijs (2021) has argued that the ‘paradox of inequality’ (i.e. rising inequality accompanied by dampening concern) is partly because ‘the lives of the rich and poor are increasingly divided between separate institutions’; aerial photography offers the possibility to literally rise above these divisions and apprehend the ‘real’ scale of inequality.

It is particularly in the context of these visual claims to completeness, however, that we want to consider our second overarching question: what is it that we cannot see from this perspective? Here, we should not be misled by the triviality of the most obvious answer: we do not see people. In Figure 5, the central figure of the urban wealth elite foregrounds the question of morality of the super-rich, and their relationships with the rest of the city (albeit struggling in our view to maintain a critical stance on these questions). In Figure 7, these figures and the power relationships are absent altogether. In this way, although the contrast between rich and poor neighbourhoods is painfully obvious, this is presented as two juxtaposed social realities rather than one system of interdependencies. To make the same argument in a slightly different way:

inequality is visualized here as a difference in living standards between the two neighbourhoods; yet, bearing in mind that the compounding force of wealth inequality is driven by the income-generating power of assets, the likely reality is that the poorer residents own no assets at all (certainly not their home), while the richer residents are able to sustain their quality of life by receiving income streams from a mix of assets including rental properties – perhaps even in poorer neighbourhoods as shown in the photo. From this perspective, a ‘complete’ view of inequality would be able to reveal flows of wealth from poor to rich communities: not their segregation from one another.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The two methods we use in this study provide very different insights into the same dataset of Facebook posts about wealth inequality. Content analysis allowed us to summarize the dataset of 243 images as a whole in order to understand the dominance of frames emphasizing wealth (e.g. luxury goods, cash and property) especially among news media outlets, as well as the interest of news media in images of elites across economic and political domains; yet the content analysis necessarily compressed the data into standardized coding categories, losing much of the richness of the images themselves. Our social semiotic analysis sacrificed breadth of the dataset in favour of analysing four particularly rich images illustrating recurring tropes across news media and civil society groups: in doing so, we highlighted some of the complex implications of choices about what perspective is taken in images about wealth inequality, as well as what is bracketed out of view. These two methods illustrate some common themes about the central challenges of visualizing wealth inequality, which we discuss below in terms of selectivity, polysemy and iconicity.

By selectivity, we mean that visualizing a complex social problem like wealth inequality requires narrowing the focus on a specific part of the picture: our content analysis showed that this often meant focusing on wealth *or* poverty rather than the relationship between the two; our social semiotic analysis showed that this could involve focusing on the moral evaluation of the super-rich *or* an attempt to understand inequalities in living standards between different communities. A book-length treatment of the problem of wealth inequality would hope to deal with all of these themes, whereas a single image – the mainstay of political communication – seemingly struggles. Future research could usefully unpack the reasons why news media images appear to involve more stringent selectivity (i.e. less frequently visualizing contrast between wealth and poverty), for example, whether it reflects resourcing constraints in news organizations or a strategic decision to use images which maximize reader click-through rates on digital news links.

Alongside selectivity, we have highlighted the general challenge of polysemy, i.e. the multiple meanings that can be communicated in visual content, which manifests in particular ways in the area of wealth. In our content analysis, the risks of polysemy are evident in images of luxury goods attached to

articles about wealth inequality; given the exact same images could be used to advertise such goods or promote wealth accumulation, it is unclear whether the accompanying text can fully ‘anchor’ (Barthes, 1977, in Aiello, 2020: 370) meaning away from such consumerist associations that have been shown to undermine support for redistributive politics. In our social semiotic analysis, we showed how the trope of the wealth elite as a ‘voyeur-god’ recalled similar presentations of the ‘frontier man’ across other cultural texts, reinforcing the potentially treacherous territory of our fascination with the super-rich as an ambiguous mix of condemnation and desire (e.g. see Jaworski and Thurlow, 2017). Future research might also explore the challenge of polysemy in constituting advantage and disadvantage frames in visual communication.

Finally, we believe our mixed methods design helps to build a picture about visual communication around wealth inequality as lacking iconic images. Hariman and Lucaites’ (2007) study of iconic photographs underpinned their argument about how such images through (re)circulation come to perform complex discursive work like reproducing ideology, communicating social knowledge and providing resources for communicative action. This concept of iconicity has been applied in other cases, such as how the occupied square came to function as an icon of democracy in the wake of the indignados movement (Rovisco, 2017) or the role of images in climate change politics such as polar bears and smokestacks (O’Neill, 2020). Iconic images can in some ways therefore compensate for the challenges of polysemy and selectivity by acting as reliable heuristics for more elaborate sets of arguments and ideological attachments. Yet our study of visual representations of wealth inequality shows a marked absence of such icons: we found very few images which recurred between different civil society groups, or between news media and civil society (one striking fact, for example, is that images of the Occupy movement were used by news media to accompany reports on wealth inequality years later, but never by civil society groups themselves). The closest thing approaching an iconic image of inequality is the Vieira aerial photograph which we discussed in detail; yet even this photograph’s visual claims to a ‘complete’ representation of inequality needs to be thought through carefully.

The images in our study demonstrate some of the challenges in visualizing wealth inequality. The most common news media approach – images of wealth such as yachts and cars which could be borrowed from the pages of luxury life-style media – also seems to our eyes to offer the least leverage in problematizing wealth or wealth inequality. Richer images as explored in our social semiotic analysis nevertheless face complex trade-offs: centring the culpability of the super-rich risks losing a critical orientation toward inequality and its consequences (as in Figure 5); attempting to capture a ‘complete’ view of inequality in terms of different standards of living risks losing sight of the power relations which produce those differences (as in Figure 7). These trade-offs are partly inherent to the exercise

of framing in political communication, and partly related to limitations of the medium. The ability of a single image to capture the *processes* of accumulation, not simply the objects that reify these processes in our eyes is challenging: time does not unfold in an image in the way it does on the screen (Berger, 1972). Some new image-making in critical photography is promising in this respect – notably Lewis Bush’s *11 Privatised Public Assets* – a series of 11 aerial images which implicitly capture the process both of the original development of the assets (e.g. British Petroleum), their sale and sequestration, and their current use (Bush, 2018). It is also worth noting that our analysis focuses purely on images, and, in many instances, meanings will be enriched and anchored by accompanying text in multimodal frames (the ‘relay’ referenced in Aiello, 2020 – these multimodal frame interactions offering a rich avenue for future research). In our data, Oxfam’s EVEN IT UP campaign material seems to most effectively reconcile the focus on visualizing contrast (Figure 7) and the need for an image series to communicate complexity and process (or time). Articulating a campaign slogan to a single composite image re-politicizes the contrast as unfair inequality. The three words both introduce a causal and prognostic element, attributing the inequality and its solution to collective human agency. Our exploration of the nature and role of images in media and campaign communication about wealth inequality suggests that there is much to be done in mobilizing images for use in the media and in campaign materials if images are to play their full part in stimulating democratic responsiveness.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the terms of use for Crowdtangle but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

NOTE

1. When searching news media pages for *image* posts there were only three matches in total, reflecting the overwhelming tendency for news outlets to use Facebook to post links to articles on their website.

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