



Michael Vaughan

February 4th, 2025

## “Inequality as spectacle” – or why Mangione trumps Gini

*What do people talk about when they talk about inequality? To begin with, they probably don't use the word “inequality” much at all, writes Michael Vaughan. More than elite-led debate about inequality, what captures the attention is the spectacle of inequality, as seen in the Luigi Mangione case, the billionaire space race and other examples.*

---

Sometimes working in an inequality research institute can give you a skewed view of the world. Most people don't spend time poring over wealth distributions or tracking movements in the Gini coefficient. Most people don't ever need to know what a Gini coefficient is. So when we study *political communication* about economic inequality – the way that the wider public makes sense of the unequal worlds they inhabit – what should we expect that communication to look like?

In a [recent article in the International Journal of Communication](#), David Schieferdecker and I argue that we have perhaps too often expected political communication to look like a world full of inequality researchers: elite-led discussion about how resources are distributed at a macro level that is then reported in national newspapers. In our empirical analysis, we summarise this as an identifiable type of communication: “inequality as debate”. Think Guardian opinion pieces about Thomas Piketty's latest book, or Oxfam's annual inequality report.



*We have perhaps too often expected political communication of inequality to look like a world full of*

## *inequality researchers: elite-led discussion about how resources are distributed*



What might that approach be missing? David and I suggest we should perhaps be paying more attention to “inequality as spectacle”.

Let’s take the case of Luigi Mangione, whose assassination of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in New York two months ago sparked an explosion of online commentary. The shocking violence, combined with the unexpected motive and demographic of the killer, all provided a textbook case of Douglas Kellner’s **definition of media spectacles**: events that “disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information and that become popular stories that capture the attention of the media and the public”.

But it did not just capture the attention of the media and the public – the polarised and largely online discussion also swiftly became a way for people to project broader arguments about economic inequality and corporate profiteering in the healthcare sector. People’s “take” on the morality of Mangione versus Thompson became a proxy for wider moral judgments about the economy.

To me, the Mangione media event is a clear example of “inequality as spectacle”, which we define in our article as:

1. Focused less on problems defined by distributional statistics, and more on moral evaluations of the bodily figures of the super-rich;
2. Attentive less to elite and expert deliberation, and more to the views and judgements of everyday citizens;
3. Traceable less through the “newspapers of record”, and more through hybrid assemblages of social and mainstream media.

The Mangione case is a good fit, although David and I developed the idea of inequality as spectacle with a case study from almost four years ago: the so-called “billionaire space race” when Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson were competing to launch private spaceflights at a time (2021) when the majority of people had to abide by the restrictions imposed by the global pandemic. We were struck by the fact that this media event also served as a way for people to express highly polarised views about inequality: on the one hand, Forbes reporting the space race as a **publicity disaster** which might increase support for wealth taxes, while on the other, 200 000 people signing a **Change.org petition** not to allow Jeff Bezos to return to Earth (signed by “the proletariat”).

In the case of both the billionaire space race and the Mangione killing, the “facts” of inequality were much less important than the affective evaluation of the super-rich. It was the spectacle, not the slow accumulation of well-researched data, which brought together these intense moments of transnational discussion about inequality. A striking detail from our study is that in the billionaire space race, people barely mentioned the word “inequality” itself, despite this being a central theme of the discussion. This should spark caution for any researchers assuming keyword searches for “inequality” will neatly demarcate the debate in a given dataset.



*People barely mentioned the word “inequality”, despite this being a central theme of the discussion*



These are just two examples in the wide world of communication about inequality, but our argument is that “inequality as spectacle” might be increasingly important to the moment we occupy now. This is a moment defined *technologically* by processes of digitalization creating **reactive social media public spheres**; *economically*, by **extreme wealth concentration** at the very top end of the distribution; *culturally*, by the highly charged role of displays of consumption in both **claiming** and **disavowing** eliteness; and *politically*, by an **anti-elitist “moment”** imbricated in the rise of populism around the world.

One thing we don’t touch on in our article is the political implications of this kind of communication. In other words, is it a good or a bad thing if we see an increasing prevalence of inequality as spectacle, rather than debate? On the one hand, the capacity for spectacle to attract attention and spark debate could be seen as a gain for public mobilisation around issues of inequality; on the other hand, these mobilisations usually dissipate as quickly as they arise and are often removed from any questions of “what is to be done”. Our hope is that distinguishing between these different types of communication can help future research dig into exactly these questions, and to build bridges between expert and everyday processes of understanding and meaning-making about inequality.

---

For more information, see Michael Vaughan and David Schieferdecker’s article in the International Journal of Communication: *Seeing a New Type of Economic Inequality Discourse: Inequality as Spectacle in the “Billionaire Space Race”*.

Sign up here to receive a **monthly summary** of blog posts from LSE Inequalities delivered direct to your inbox.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s). They do not represent the position of LSE Inequalities, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Image credits: Thumbnail image shows "**The Dissolute Household**" by Jan Steen (circa 1663), courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

## About the author

### Michael Vaughan

Michael Vaughan is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the International Inequalities Institute.

His research interests include digital political participation, far-right politics and the communicative dimension of mobilisation around economic inequality.

**Posted In:** Class divides | Elites | Ideas and Narratives | US inequalities



© LSE 2025