Class Beyond Socioeconomic Status

The research to understand audiences' news consumption patterns is both expansive and detailed. While initial forays to understand gaps in news consumption tended to focus exclusively on individual-level factors, these studies have been criticized for isolating the individual from the contexts of the social space that they consume news in (see Althaus et al., 2009). Increasingly, the focus has been on the media environment that the individual operates in (Delli Carpini et al., 1994; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), alongside factors such as age, education, socioeconomic status and political interest (Shehata & and Strömbäck, 2011; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020), all of which are factors that impact news consumption patterns across contexts. In this paper, we seek to provide a more granular explanation for one of these factors – socioeconomic status, although we are more interested in its parent phenomenon: social class. While socioeconomic status is an excellent representation of social class, researchers have commented that it is effective insofar as a proxy for the many ways in which class operates in society (for example, see Lindell, 2018). We concur with the agreement that socioeconomic status predicts (online) news consumption, not the least since the news is increasingly privatized and paywalled (Fletcher & and Nielsen, 2017) which leaves only a select section of the population to be able to afford the news or want to pay for it (Groot Kormelink, 2023). Although significant, we believe that this represents only a rather tangible manifestation of class in socioeconomic capital, that does not encompass the spectrum of class-based hurdles to news consumption that exist today.

Calls for research that incorporates a more grounded approach to social class is resounding. If the focus has to shift from an over-emphasis on the tangibility of capital, a more sociologically-conscious theorization of class is warranted. Here, we expect class to be both socially and culturally performative, both of which are ways that can impact audiences' associations with the news. We see the cultural internalization of social class in news consumption, for instance, upon asking audiences about their news habits: when Hartley (2018) interviews news avoiders in Denmark, they report that the news "is something posh people do, and [they] feel like doing the opposite" (pp. 52). Again, Lindell & Danielsson (2017) discover 'cosmopolitan sympathies' within audiences' media habits in Sweden, where students belonging to more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds share their appreciation for perceived 'high-brow' news sources and topics – such as investigative journalism, or news 'from abroad' (*Dokument utifrån*), which are consumption trends not commonplace within those who are not only

socioeconomically disadvantaged but also those who do not perform their class-ness in the same manner. These findings indicate the need for a more socially-oriented media theory (Couldry, 2012) that can identify the cultural *class* undertones that may be associated within the consumption of news.

We believe that this research is warranted on two fronts. One, because we find it reasonable to assume that the association of 'highbrow' class-ness with the news will likely not be homogenously distributed across all sources and pathways to the news in "high-choice media environments" (Van Aelst et al., 2017). If certain pathways or sources are culturally "prized" over others, we are interested in the resultant consumption gaps between those who seek out such pathways or sources – hypothetically as a means to extend their class-ness. Since a population rarely performs class-ness uniformly, we expect news audiences to be fragmented on the basis of their social or cultural performance of class. While research into the social and cultural performances of class are not new (Heffetz, 2011), this paper tries to situate these performances in the sphere of news consumption. Two, following the performance of social class in news habits more sociologically rather than economically helps us identify exactly the kinds of news consumption that is perceived to be 'highbrow', 'middlebrow' or 'lowbrow', which can potentially help unpack avoidance patterns or fragmentation trends regarding the news – especially when the news might be perceived to be 'beyond one's class'.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the social performance of class-ness better, we depend on Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work in *La Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), where he was specifically interested in the enactment of class beyond socioeconomic means. According to Bourdieu, class capitals supersede their economic state into three other specific forms: in their objectified, institutionalized, and embodied states. The objectified state of capital is showcased in the appreciation towards so-called 'legitimate' elements of culture (e.g., going to the opera, art exhibitions etc.), the institutionalized state is represented by the possession of titles from established socio-cultural institutions (e.g., a university degree), and the embodied state is demonstrated through expertise in socially-prized skills or attitudes (such as diverse knowledge of niche music genres) (Ohlsson et al., 2017).

In his thesis, Bourdieu problematizes the meritocratic narratives surrounding cultural consumption by highlighting that cultural participation itself is socially stratified. Through identifying the elements within a larger cultural space that may demonstrate one or many forms of such cultural capitals, individuals possessing varying levels of privilege position themselves accordingly within social hierarchies. Writing about the French social space of the time, Bourdieu highlighted the bourgeois rich in cultural capital to be situated around visiting institutions that signified a position of 'legitimacy', such as museums, art exhibitions, or the opera, to affirm their privileged positions in society. By following similar consumption trends, those within the same social *positions* grow to gradually share similar *dispositions* about *what* is to be consumed, *where*, and by *who*. This notion of "class" is ontological, where the enactment of a certain kind of "class-ness" is a relational phenomenon that occurs between people who share similar "conditions of existence" (Lindell & and Sartoretto, 2018). In a meta-analysis, Prieur & Savage (2013) highlight that privileged sections of society may share an embodied state of '*knowing*' the cultural elements that are 'legitimate' as of today that signify status — even predict the arrival of new legitimacies — over the more 'vulgar' elements that merely serve a functional or 'modest' capacity which belong to the masses (Bourdieu, 1984). Once the "rich" elements have been identified, the privileged seek affiliation towards the same to affirm their positions as the consuming class of those elements, but more importantly to distinguish themselves from those that do not consume the same elements.

Regarding the arena of news and politics, Bourdieu wrote extensively about news consumption as a deeply stratified bourgeois social practice, where the enjoyment of "proper" or "legitimate" news topics and sources portrayed the news consumer as a "political subject capable of being", and one where consuming "quality" news over the commonly available rabble gave the reader an "affirmation of a power over the object..." (i.e., the news) "and also of the dignity of the subject" (i.e., their elevated self as a "news consumer") (Bourdieu, 1984; Ohlsson et al., 2017). In France then, the practice of consuming news exceeded a commitment to being a "good citizen" — in fact, it was another avenue of legitimating socio-cultural differences between those high in economic and cultural capital with those lacking in such.

News as Cultural Participation

While Bourdieu's work is widely celebrated, so are its criticisms. Several scholars have pointed out the rigidity of Bourdieu's conceptualizations of cultural class and capital that is not only

specific to France's twentieth-century cultural moment, but also fails to account for other inequalities on the basis of gender, sexuality, or ethnicity (Prior, 2005). In the present day, Bourdieu's conceptualization of news communities as strictly bourgeois circles can prove to somewhat outdated at best, and problematic at worst. Developments in the fields of media technologies over the years has largely democratized the processes of news consumption, breaking down access-related barriers to the news that may have existed earlier (Newman et al., 2024). The urban upper-class concentration of the news is further challenged by the exponential rise of local and suburban news outlets that champion local affairs and dialogue both about and between citizens of the respective areas (Wahl-Jorgensen & Boelle, 2024; Williams et al., 2015), therefore solidifying the role of news in creating representative democracies. The emergence of the 'cultural omnivore' has further criticized Bourdieu's commentary on homologies, that questions the existence of a so-called higher cultural class that enjoys exclusivity over cultural activities – instead, we see a greater tolerance in audiences for high- and low-brow cultural elements seen in the media irrespective of their cultural capitals (for overview, see Warde et al., 2007).

Despite this large-scale democratization of the news towards all kinds of audiences, it should be noted that we continue to observe upper-class *sentimentalities* associated with news use. Studies that have applied Bourdieu's theory discover that the practices of news consumption follow the distribution of pre-existing cultural capital. Even today, we see that the culturally privileged 'understand' or 'recognize' objectified capitals in the news and seek a preference for 'quality' news sources over 'popular' ones (Ohlsson et al., 2017); here, the 'popularity' of a news source indicates its belongingness in the cultural mainstream and thus functions more as a 'negative asset' in the accumulation of valuable cultural capitals with ascribed "legitimacies (Bennett et al., 2009). In a similar strand of research, we find aspirational dimensions of class deeply embedded in the consumption of some kinds of lifestyle journalism (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022). In Sweden, we see that the patterns of "proper" news consumption (i.e., news topics associated with highbrow cultural aesthetics) mimic the distribution of traditional cultural capital markers (e.g., education, urbanity of residence), therefore fragmenting audiences based off of pre-existing inequalities (Lindell & Hovden, 2018). It is important to note that these issues extend beyond first-level digital inequalities regarding news consumption – such as the ones related to access to the news or to media technologies (Hargittai, 2021) – but towards how audiences perceive the "News" as a whole, or at least some

its facilities. These indicate the existence of various third-level digital inequalities associated with the socio-cultural perceptions of news use, which may be used to demonstrate class status or group that further social stratification (Ragnedda, 2017). We believe it is interesting therefore to examine whether news consumption itself has gradually become an activity associated with highbrow cultural participation. The aesthetics of news consumption, according to this theorization, may be a cultural activity that can lie in the same sphere of practices that have hitherto remained a monopoly of privileged classes; here again, we highlight that while the means of access to some of these cultural practices (such as going to the museum, or the cinema) may have become gradually democratized – not unlike bare access to online news in some capacity – we are critical of the notion that this access might have deleted the class-related sentimentalities that have been associated with these practices over time.

Here, we propose two hypotheses. First, it is important to note whether 'highbrow' cultural participation mimics the distribution of cultural capital in our sample. Unlike some previous research (Warde et al., 2007), we are skeptical to position some cultural activities as being 'more' or 'less' highbrow than others – particularly since these can be subjective and inapplicable across contexts. Instead, we borrow these categorizations both from Bourdieu and more recent research that has depended on audiences themselves to classify cultural activities that highlight greater or lesser social status (Bourdieu, 1984; Bronner & de Hoog, 2019). Once selected, we first check whether cultural capital predicts participation in these cultural activities. By 'cultural capital', we focus on the most generally agreed upon cultural capital markers – age, gender, income, education, parents' education, and urbanity of residence. Finally, we hypothesize that:

H1: *Greater levels of cultural capital predicts greater participation in cultural activities typically considered 'highbrow'*

H2: *Greater cultural participation in activities typically considered 'highbrow' predicts greater levels of news consumption*

News as Status Demonstration

If we consider news consumption to have become a cultural activity associated with performing 'highbrow' class-ness, the normative assumption suggests a relationship between higher social class and news consumption. This perspective can be operationally limiting, since class is indicative – not restrictive – of participation in 'highbrow' culture. Not only is it difficult to chart out a comprehensive matrix of social class in any society, but extant research also suggests that the erosion of socioeconomic barriers to various cultural activities associated with high culture causes an overlap between classes regarding the consumption of cultural activities (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Warde et al., 2007). Furthermore, as we noted in the earlier sections, class can be both socioeconomic and socio-culturally performative. It is possible therefore that those higher in social class *socioeconomically* do not always perform their class-ness uniformly towards all cultural activities perceived to be 'highbrow'. At the same time, the converse is also possible – those that are lower in socioeconomic class can be culturally 'upper-class' through their participation in 'highbrow' cultural activities, the socioeconomic barriers to which may have eroded.

To address this caveat, researchers have noted status measures as a more useful proxy for measuring class (Peterson, 1997). Instead of a social space explained purely on the basis of class, the inclusion of status helps understand how certain cultural products or activities may symbolically communicate higher status even when socioeconomic class is controlled. The relationship between class and status is often complicated; for instance, while it is indeed true that traditional markers of higher classes such as income or education are correlated with higher status, it is possible that higher educated earners do not always strive to affiliate themselves with higher status markers (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004, 2007). At the same time, status markers that are publicly visible are often the ones most sought after and associated with, even when the marker is outside of one's immediate socioeconomic class (Heffetz, 2011). The desire of associating oneself with markers of high status is often related to the perceived social visibility of such associations (Josiassen & George Assaf, 2013), therefore positioning one's cultural activities towards "reference groups" who are typical to such status markers (Kotler et al., 2008). Status markers can therefore be a crucial component in understanding audiences' cultural consumption.

A growing body of research has documented that the sphere of news consumption is not without demonstrations of status. In the UK, for example, we see that reading broadsheet

newspapers convey ‘more status’ than tabloids (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007), even when controlling for education and socioeconomic status. In Denmark, where the news “is something posh people do”, we notice that even the so-called non-“posh” of society can recognize status markers in the news (Hartley, 2018), and are yet apprehensive to pursue status through news use. It is unknown whether this perception of the news to high status is about the news as a whole, or if status markers are unequally distributed within specific types of news or its consumption patterns.

The literature on status demonstration through consumption patterns – news or otherwise – is conflicted. On the one hand, consuming ‘highbrow’ culture to denote status is categorized as conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2017) – “conspicuous” since there is often (a) a high financial capital required to participate in such cultural activities, and since this kind of consumption is (b) generally performed to signal one’s status or identity to the public. For news consumption itself, this conceptualization is significant. Not only is there a variety of low-cost news-choices available to those who want to consume the news, but a lot of news consumption also happens in the privacy of one’s home (Toff et al., 2023) and not always in public (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). However, news consumption practices tell a different story. Some studies – although not focusing explicitly on cultural capital – have found traditional markers of cultural capital (e.g., income, male gender, higher education) nonetheless – to predict the willingness to not only pay for news, but also for more “specialized” kinds of news (e.g., investigative journalism) (O’Brien et al., 2020). Additionally, we know that (online) news consumption can often be associated with its social element, where people share, comment on, or discuss the news with their social circles online (!insert at least 3 citations one for each different platform – one SNS, one news website, one offline!). In essence, evidence supports the notion that the news people consume can be directly perceived to be associated with their own self-identity, lifestyle, and social position (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2004, 2007; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010).

If we do discover that the news has become associated with highbrow cultural participation, it is reasonable to hypothesize that there may exist cultural attitudes that the news demonstrates social status. Studies on social status demonstration discover that activities that enjoy highbrow sentimentalities are used most extensively to signify one’s own social status (Bronner & de Hoog, 2019; Heffetz, 2011). At this preliminary stage, of course, we cannot make a causal

argument that attitudes regarding news use for status demonstration is the primary motivator for news consumption. Instead, we propose a more foundational hypothesis to inquire whether (a) these attitudes regarding news as a tool for status demonstration exists *at all*, and (b) whether these attitudes are more commonly observed among those who share highbrow cultural sentimentalities regarding the news. Thus,

H3: *Greater levels of cultural participation in 'highbrow' activities predict attitudes that the news can demonstrate social status*

If we find these attitudes regarding news use to exist, we propose a final hypothesis to check whether such attitudes – correlated with a belief that news use is 'highbrow' – to predict greater levels of news consumption. We believe that this hypothesis is novel, since previous research on news, class, and social stratification have focused exclusively on some specific news pathways or sources to map the distribution of class sentimentalities within the news (for e.g., see Ohlsson et al., 2017).Instead, we hypothesize that the practices of news consumption *as a whole* may be used to demonstrate social status by those who share highbrow sentimentalities regarding news use:

H4: *News consumption is greater among those who participate in 'highbrow' culture and believe in status demonstration through news use*