Towards digital predistribution and recognition: disinformation, climate change storytelling, and technological architectures

Understanding and Addressing Digital Inequalities, EUI

20 November 2025

Mafalda Dâmaso and Katharine Sarikakis
mafalda.damaso@eui.eu
katharine.sarikakis@univie.ac.at

www.eui.eu

Context

This unpublished paper is based on first wave research developed in the context of StreamSCAPES (2025-2028), which has received funding from the European Commission under the Horizon Europe programme.

StreamSCAPES explores the underutilised strengths, challenges, and knowledge, practice and policy gaps in Video-on-Demand services in the European sustainable transition. Among other things, the project develops robust methods to measure the carbon footprint of VOD platforms and a pilot SCT VOD certification, and it delivers a first-aid kit handbook to empower VOD professionals, audiovisual and cultural workers, and citizens to support the SCT in a bottom-up manner**, paying particular attention to engaging young people and children in practices and 'Blue Skies' imagination towards innovation.**

It is coordinated by the Université de Liège (prof Antonios Vlassis). https://www.streamscapes.eu/

Structure

- **Redistribution and predistribution**
- **Predistribution and the CCI**
- **Inequalities in the digital landscape**

- **Disinformation and digital inequalities**
- **Climate change and digital inequalities**

- **Technological arquitectures**
- **Technological arquitectures vs capabilities**

- **Addressing digital inequalities: redistribution**
- **Addressing digital inequalities: predistribution**

- **Implications**

Redistribution and predistribution

Predistribution: the policy approach that never was

- **Predistribution:** "the range of ways in which [government] can **shape the distribution of income and opportunity** in a society that are distinct from simply taxing and providing benefits" (Hacker, Jackson, O'Neill, 2013). Two types: social justice predistribution and market justice predistribution (Kerr, 2025).

- **Disagreement re: (p)redistribution:** differences are seen as subtle (focused on aims or effects of policy; O'Neill, 2019); others see it as challenging "regressive 'neoliberal' policies and institutions" (Kerr, 2025).

- **The predistribution agenda** (Chwalisz and Diamond 2015): how can present policies might **preempt the reinforcement of inequities in the future?** Eg. fiscal (Barnes, 2015), labour market (de Beer, 2015, Anderson, 2015) and social investment policies (Hassel, 2015).
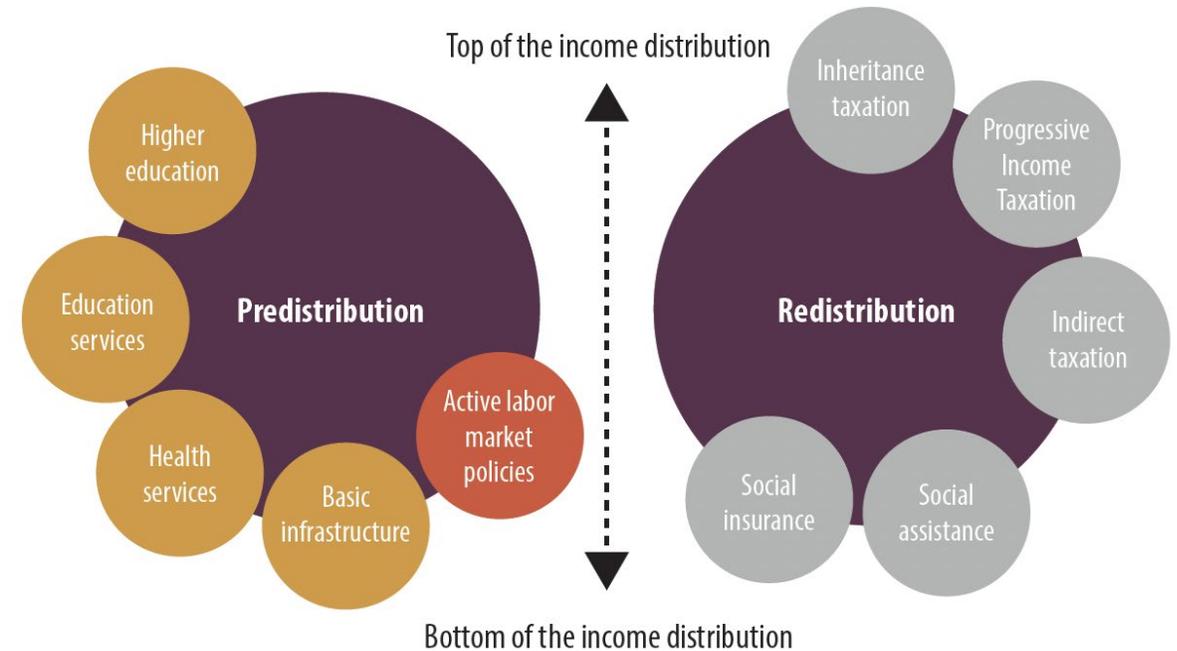
Predistribution and the CCI

- **Redistribution -> Predistribution:** shifts the focus away **from the correction of existent inequalities towards their preemption**

- This requires challenging the logic that is increasingly implicit in policymaking in western liberal democracies, that is, extending its timeframe.

IMF (2022), Tackling Inequality on all fronts

Upstream and downstream
Fiscal policy tools can affect inequality before and after it develops. Some have a greater impact on people on the higher rungs of the income distribution, while others benefit those on the lower rungs more.

Top of the income distribution

Higher education

Education services

Predistribution

Health services

Basic infrastructure

Active labor market policies

Inheritance taxation

Progressive Income Taxation

Redistribution

Indirect taxation

Social insurance

Social assistance

Bottom of the income distribution

Source: IMF staff.
Note: The spheres represent different fiscal policy tools for reducing inequality. Those on the left help correct inequality primarily at the predistribution stage, those on the right at the redistribution stage. The vertical position of the tools shows where they have the most impact on the income distribution scale. Yellow = basic public services; gray = transfers or taxes; red = labor market policies.

Predistribution and the CCI

- **Cultural and Creative Industries:** their potential in addressing inequalities through predistribution remains **underexplored.**

- Why? **Normative constructions of what constitutes 'policy priority'** – hard (economy, crime, politics) vs soft (culture, gender) policy areas + limited '**cost-benefit'** calculations and risk assessment (of, namely, digital structures).

- All in all, CCI are **not considered fields for remedial justice** or as a matter of fundamental rights for the wellbeing of humanity and democracies.

- **What happens if predistribution is applied to something as intangible as cultural and digital rights** (the right for individuals and groups to access, create, participate in, and enjoy culture, including cultural heritage, the arts, languages, and knowledge, UNESCO 2001, 2005) **and the public sphere?**

Inequalities in the digital landscape

- **Limited access to media distorts the information individuals have** (Petrova, 2008; Grisold and Theine, 2020) -> **redistributive policies focus on e.g media ownership, competition policy, distributed/public control, market access**

- A **predistributive** approach to **information and media inequality** would focus on e.g.:
  - How **limited access to quality information about citizen rights**, for example, can skew citizen understanding of what their lives can look like and **weaken their future autonomy and freedom**.
  - **How unbalanced access to information** might limit e.g the career choices of less privileged children and young people, **reinforcing future economic inequity.**
  - How limited pathways to create and share alternative stories **limits cultural diversity and the future canon, reinforcing cultural inequity.**

Inequalities in the digital landscape

- A predistributive approach would reinforce a shift in **understanding the audience as citizens whose human dignity and flourishing requires having real opportunity** across multiple areas**.**

- **If access to storytelling is unequal, this limits the circulation of alternative narratives about the future** (McDowell, 2019), which subsequently limits civic and political imagination.

- **Storytelling** explains why certain narratives gain traction (Henkel 2021)
  - Journalism/news as storytelling (Roeh, 1989; Barkin, 2013) -> Disinformation
  - Filmmaking as storytelling -> Climate storytelling by young people

Disinformation and digital inequalities

- Disinformation: "**verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public**, and may cause public harm" (EEAS, 2018, p.1).

- Disinformation "**amplifies epistemic inequality**" by interacting "with two background inequalities, namely the **unequal distribution of opportunities to become competent knowers and the unequal social status of oppressed minorities**" (Amantini, 2024).

- However, research on the intersection between disinformation and inequality remains scarce (Thakur and Hankerson, 2021).

Disinformation and digital inequalities

- **Technological factors enabling disinformation:** e.g. by allowing for the creation and dissemination of **deep fakes** combined with hyper-personal targeting (Roesner et al, 2018).
- **Social:** exacerbated by network-based effects (e.g. the social dimension of **echo chambers,** the consensus effect and social marginalisation; Nero, 2023).
- **Individual:** individual characteristics motivate individuals to share disinformation: affective emotion, "**cognitive biases** such as confirmation bias and the illusory truth effect" (Munusamy, 2024, p.11).
- **Cultural:** declining **trust in media** (Siddiqui & Gupta, 2022) and in social institutions (Sharon & Encarnación, 2024) make social media users more susceptible to disinformation.

  - Existing capability frameworks to countering disinformation (content correction and public resilience measures; Pamment, 2022, 17) are insufficient to address these dimensions

# Climate change and digital inequalities

- **Climate change vulnerability is not equally distributed,** impacting in particular **young people (**Parsons et al, 2024). Humans are custodians of the planet (Barry, 1997; Tremmel 2009) and good ancestors (Krznaric, 2020) -> **empowering young people is an issue of intergenerational justice.**

- **Social tipping points: Climate change** is not merely a technical challenge. Rather, it is also **social** (Otto at al., 2020; Winkelmann, 2022) **and cultural.** That is, individual and social behaviour is "shaped by cultural contexts, changed with new information and social influences" (Noll et al, 2021).

Climate change and digital inequalities
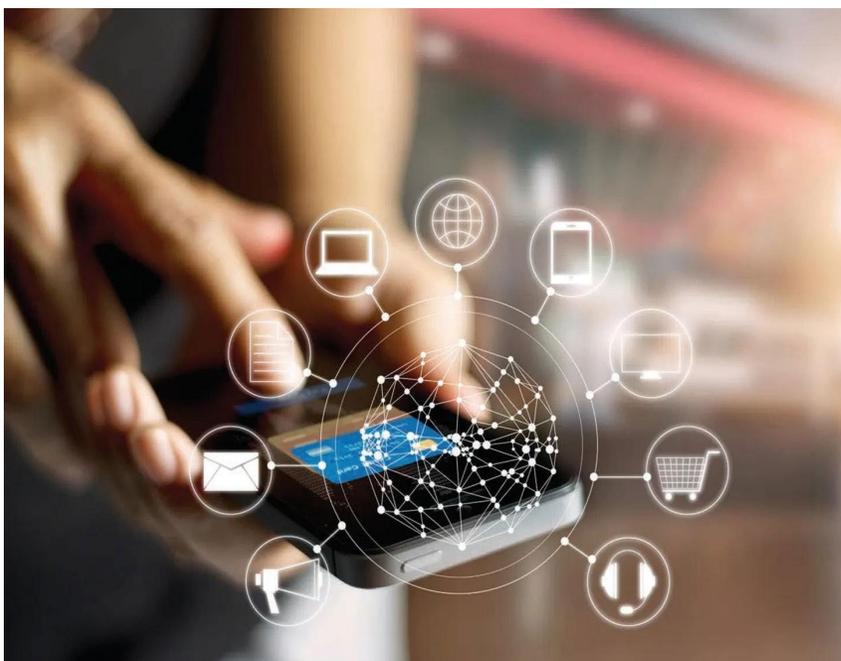
- In a context of climate catastrophe, it is **important to widen the pool of storytellers and the circulation of stories to motivate social change and reach social tipping points.**

- **Platformisation** (Evens and Donders. 2018) allows for the digital exchange of stories. **Video-on-Demand (VoD) platforms** have a potential role in driving the changes in perception, attitudes and behaviour that are necessary to tackle climate change.

- However, there is **limited research examining the potential of digital storytelling as enabled by VoD platforms** to support broader social and political transformation, let alone by addressing digital inequality.

Technological architectures

- **Both case studies highlight the effacement of technology** (the ways in which technology and the technological object are repackaged aesthetically and discursively in ways that the actual materiality of those becomes less visible; Schaefer and Durham, 2007). It serves an ideological function, **obscuring the resource intensity of technologies of dis/information and storytelling.** Resources must be understood to mean **natural** (AI, streaming, platforms) as well as **human** (cognitive, emotional)

- **EU policy debates understate the importance of the regulation of technological architectures** (Porcedda, 2024) linked to obscure and domineering algorithm-based parameters that dictate the ecosystem of information and content for individuals.
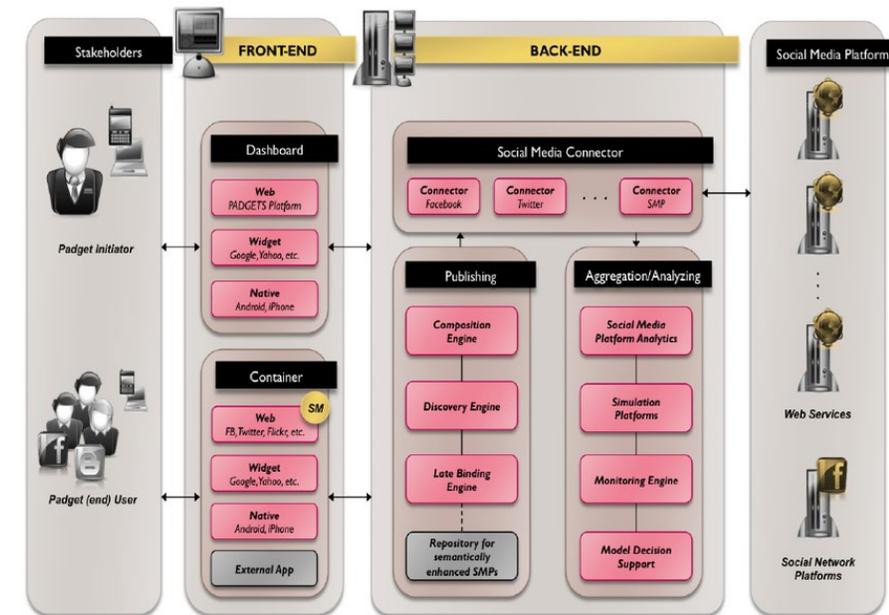
Technological architectures vs capabilities

- **The case studies highlight limitations provided by the current design of information and media technology to support individual capabilities in the digital realm,** that is, **real opportunities and freedoms** to achieve valuable functionings, accounting for the individual's ability to convert resources into achievements – what people can do and be in their lives (Sen, 1987; Nussbaum, 2000)

- What would **policies focused on maximising individuals' capabilities** to engage with information and media in ways supportive of their ability to flourish (vis-à-vis eg. disinformation and climate change) look like?

- **How to make them both redistributive and predistributive?**

Addressing digital inequalities: redistribution

- **In the case of disinformation**

  - **Technological dimension**: correcting information inequalities by **supporting algorithmic transparency**, data socialisation

  - **Social dimension:** demanding illegal content removal, **content moderation**

  - I**ndividual dimension: media literacy** could contribute to addressing cognitive biases

  - **Cultural/declining trust** in the media/social institutions: **dedicating resources to lowering cost and other barriers** and expanding attention given to underreported communities

- **In the case of young people and climate change:** correct **market inequalities associated with access of young people to e.g. VOD platforms** with high sustainability standards (e.g. through subsidies)

Addressing digital inequalities: predistribution

- In both cases, a predistributive approach to policy would address inequalities of **access to the role of journalist and media/storyteller,** e.g. through subsidies to enable access to technological resources or to media higher education programmes.

- **But predistribution concerns alone are not sufficient to address the speed, the depth and the intensity of change created by the digital transformation and its technological architectures**
  a. Inequality as the unequal distribution of **resources and symbolic recognition** (Fraser, 1995; Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 3) -> highlights importance of **meaning making**
  b. Equality = participation by all (**inclusiveness) and parity** of participation (Fraser, 2010, 16). **->** correcting inequities in access to symbolic recognition by linking groups (that face heightened barriers) in **common institutions** and, in doing so, co-developing a **plural public** (Fraser, 1990; Fraser, 2005, 21).

Implications

- Revisiting the **predistribution** agenda foregrounds **the short- to medium-termism of current EU media/information policies**

- Fraser's recognitory and pluralist approach highlights that **the public sphere is constitutive of citizens**

- **However, current technological architectures** (which are effaced in public and policy discourse) **make plural spaces either unlikely or violent and exclusionary**

- The problem is not only that **digital inequities are being addressed with measures that do not preempt them;** it is also that, if individuals are unable to become competent knowers and to participate fully in the co-creation of narratives about the present and the future, **their constitution as full citizens is hindered by current technological architectures and policies.**

Implications

- Policymakers should aim to **preempt digital inequities (predistribution) and at the same time** identify untapped policy pathways to **reinforce _plural_ agency in the digital realm (recognition)**

  - **To return to case studies: EU policies should strengthen the media capabilities of young people as well as their participation as storytellers**: e.g. reinforcing the circulation of their stories (VOD platforms and beyond), supporting news co-creation opportunities, redesigning technological architectures to make them more user-centered/co-created by young people and others. This would empower the citizens of today and tomorrow.

  - This **predistributive and recognitory approach is compatible with but would expand current EU policies** (e.g. European Media Freedom Act, Media and Audiovisual Action Plan).

Thank you.

Mafalda Dâmaso and Katharine Sarikakis

mafalda.damaso@eui.eu and katharine.sarikakis@univie.ac.at