Media Poverty: Understanding Mediated Public Connection in Everyday Conditions of Deprivation

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The Media Poverty project

Examines how conditions of poverty affect people's possibilities to enact informed and active citizenship through their use of the media

- Five-year project (2021-25)

- Funded by the Norwegian Research Council (RCN)

- Methods: Interviews, survey, and field experiment

- Policy development

Poverty in the Nordic 'media welfare state' of Norway

Poverty in Norway is measured in **relative terms**, as opposed to absolute measures

- 11 % of the population in Norway belong to low-income households (Statistics Norway, 2023)

- Poverty most prevalent among (With & Thorsen, 2018)
  - social assistance recipients
  - some groups of immigrants
  - single providers

A Nordic 'media welfare state' (Syvertsen et al, 2014):

- cultural policies are deployed to pursue various measures of access.
  - extensive press support
  - well-funded public service media
  - efforts to make news available through public sponsorship and libraries,
  - developed digital infrastructure

The case of Norway allows for insights into how and why inequalities in media use and public connection persist, despite favorable conditions overall.

Method and data

- **Interviews** with poverty-stricken citizens from three demographics
  - Social benefit recipients
  - Single providers
  - Norwegian-Somalis

- **42 informants** (interviewed twice): 12-15 from each group

- **Recruited** through local charity organisations and snowballing

- **Recruitment criteria**: EU's low-income definition of sixty percent of national median income (Fløtten et al, 2011), pluss indicators of education-level and housing (With & Thorsen, 2018).

- **Location**: Bergen and surrounding areas

Theoretical starting-points

Public connection (Couldry et al, 2010):

..an orientation towards a public world where matters of common concern are addressed.

Socio-digital inequalities (Helsper, 2021):

..systematic differences in the ability and opportunity for people to beneficially use (or decide not to use) ICTs.

Lifestyle (Weber, 1978)

..the structured whole of people's behaviors and practices.

Media Poverty: a thee-dimensional framework

1. **Everyday life conditions** illness, stress, disposable time, lack of money, stable housing, heating, etc.

2. **Access:** media content, platforms, technology, media repertoires

3. **Resources:** digital skills and literacy, interpretative skills, media literacies, language competence, dispositions

Directs attention to **critical factors** inhibiting or facilitating civically enabling media use.

Focus on the **composite nature** of poverty-incited disconnection and its grounding in the **lived life of poverty.**

The case of Aasiya: **Everyday life conditions**

- Enduring economic hardship

- Unpredictability

- Conservative gender roles

- Lack of time

- Lack of space

You know, we have six children. They need activities. We have to pay for internet, clothes.. what children need. Like Norwegian kids, they go to school and need money for food, cinema and activities. This is difficult.. what are we supposed to do?

Access

- Stable internet connection at home

- Some, but limited access to ICT's

- Limited cell phone connection

- No subscriptions: news and streaming services

- Media repertoires:
  - Few media sources
  - News relating to her own life: immigration/deportation
  - Pedagogic and accessible news content
  - Somali politics

I mostly read the headlines and look at the pictures

I look at news about immigration.. I know people that has been sent out because they have given wrong information about where they come from

Resources

- Lack of language competence

- Limited technical skills

- Dispositions: news not important / natural

- Tight-woven social networks

I like when they speak slowly and clearly on television

..its not typical for Somalis to read newspapers

Politics are for the men

Media Poverty across the groups

	Social benefit recipients	Norwegian-Somalis	Single providers
Everyday life conditions	Strained economy Unpredictability Stress Health challenges	Strained economy Unpredictability Stress Crowdedness/ large families Conservative gender roles	Strained economy Unpredictability Stress Health challenges Lack of time Sole responsibilities
Access	Basic internet connection Limited subscriptions Narrow news repertoires	Rudimentary internet connection No subscription Limited ICTs Limited/diasporic news rep.	Basic internet connection Limited subscriptions Narrow news repertoires
Resources	Varying digital competence Limited news dispositions	Limited language competence Limited digital competence Non-news oriented dispositions	Varying digital competence Limited news dispositions

Conclusion: Towards a more substantive vision of media welfare

- I argue that the identification of real-life conditions is **instrumental to design more just and targeted policy interventions.**

- For this, I advocate **a capabilities approach**: public policy must move beyond insufficient measures of access alone. It **must address the real-life needs and barriers** of the lived life of poverty.

- Such interventions need to be guided by empirical research that is attentive to **not only access, but also resources and everyday life conditions**

- Media welfare: from 'resourcism' (Rawls, 1971) to substantive possibilities (Sen 1979)