

How Media Ownership Matters

**By Rodney Benson, Mattias Hessérus,
Timothy Neff, and Julie Sedel. Oxford
University Press, 2025. 314 pp.**

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A good book is one that helps us think better, and I am convinced that this is the case with *How Media Ownership Matters*, by Rodney Benson, Mattias Hessérus, Timothy Neff, and Julie Sedel. Consolidating years of research by its lead author in association with several colleagues, this manuscript already reads as a classic that continues a tradition of critical studies on media ownership. A landmark in this history has been Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly*, published in 1983, followed by seminal contributions by names such as C. Edwin Baker and James Curran. Since then, a rich literature has emerged, but mostly scattered across journals, watchdog reports, or policy briefs. Few authors have attempted to synthesise this knowledge in such a comprehensive, yet accessible book.

The purpose of the book is to discuss the extent to which news media ownership really matters, based on a conceptualisation of four major media ownership forms (private, stock market-traded, public, and civil society) and three 'modes of ownership power' (public service orientation, political instrumentalism, and economic instrumentalism). This theory is tested in three countries with a tradition of strong news media: the United States, Sweden, and France. Public service orientation, of course, is the mode of power that we expect to be exercised by news media, an understanding that heavily relies on the Western normative role of journalism.

The introduction and the first chapter establish the basic theoretical framework and argument, heavily inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach. In a nutshell, each form of media ownership has its own institutional logics and, as such, facilitates one or another mode of power. In other words, media ownership matters not only because of what individual owners do or the increasing power they may accrue with concentration, but because there are patterns of effects depending on whether the main owner is a mogul, a state or several pension funds.

Media concentration research deserves a special critique in this introduction. The authors rightly argue that, as important as the

concern about concentration can be, it misses the actual point, namely that we need media that follow the public service orientation and are able to hold the powerful accountable. If we have a plurality of media whose main effect is economic instrumentalism, what is the real advantage? In this sense, the economic crisis of the news industry may at least force scholars, journalists, and politicians to abandon conventional wisdom and accept that a high number of owners not necessarily leads to a healthier information ecosystem.

The second chapter discusses the historical development of these four ownership forms and establishes the current landscape in the three countries analysed. By going into the details, the authors already encounter one of the main difficulties of media ownership research, which has been a precise categorisation of types of owners (or ownership) and the corresponding classification of single media.

In any case, the authors define private media as those controlled by individuals or families, seeking profit but without the need to generate short-term revenue to shareholders. Stock market-traded media, in turn, have ownership dispersed because they are publicly listed, insulated from personal interventions of non-accountable individuals, but subject to the pressure for immediate financial return. Public media refer to organisations that have some level of state involvement in their ownership complex, be it with direct ownership and governance, be it with arm's length structures that give professionals relative independence. Finally, civil society organisations can be parties, churches, or other organised groups invested in spreading news with a more or less ideological imprint. These forms display varying degrees of development and (material and symbolic) capital across media sectors and countries (e.g., public service media are much stronger in Sweden and France than in the US).

The following two chapters use interviews with relevant stakeholders in media ownership and management as well as document analysis to understand the prevailing logics in each ownership form as well as how media reconcile their objectives with funding strategies, for example trying to reach broad audiences and creating value for advertisers, or focusing on elite audiences and relying on their direct support via subscriptions and donations. The authors confirm that the profit motive and the pressure to retain the audience are stronger among market-driven ownership forms, especially for stock market-traded owners. Public media and civil society organisations are less dependent on these pressures, although the latter usually face a more precarious economic situation that also gives less room to meaningful reporting.

This finding sets the stage for the main thesis of the book – a well-established principle, but that may still be a surprise, if not anathema in the US – namely, that public and non-profit media are better

sued to support the public interest, whereas market-driven ownership forms tend to fall short of the highest normative roles of news media. The Swedish public broadcasters SVT and SR feature prominently as the most successful examples of resourceful, consistent and wide-reaching (i.e., not only focused on elites) public service provision, alongside some civil society-owned outlets, such as *ProPublica* (US) and *Mediapart* (France, with employee ownership).

In fact, the book seeks to outline conditions in which good performance is more or less likely, being very careful in highlighting exceptions to the rule. Private ownership, for example, “provides the greatest discretion to invest or not invest over the short-term or long-term, and in some cases, the investment may be substantial, equaling or surpassing what public or civil society ownership forms can support” (p. 181). The families Sulzberger (*New York Times*) and Bonnier (*Dagens Nyheter*) and Jeff Bezos (*Washington Post*) are often mentioned as examples of owners who significantly invest in news. However, the authors do not shy away from strong and clear conclusions about the main trend, which reinforces “the indispensability of public media to ensure that non-elites also have access to quality public service information” (p. 182). In times of proliferation of ‘nuances’ as explanation, this courage deserves special praise.

The link between certain ownership forms and specific modes of power is completed in the last three chapters. They discuss the ambitious effort to empirically connect structural features of media with content output in order to prove the authors’ point. There have been, indeed, some attempts to do a similar work, but this mixture of structural and content dimensions is still rare in the field. The consistency of the methodology presented in this book is, to my knowledge, unprecedented. The original content analysis covers hundreds of thousands of media articles across over 50 outlets in the three countries, measuring the presence of modes of power with variables such as the percentage of investigative reporting. Their analysis also includes numerous mentions of owners and related businesses, categorised according to institutional affiliation, partisan leaning, among other variables.

The multiplicity of methods in their research effort helps cover some of the most persisting gaps in this kind of research, especially providing better evidence on the relation between owners’ power and media content. Some challenges remain though, such as how to account for the ‘silence’ in coverage. One of the most powerful ways to steer coverage is not to mention a topic or person at all, instead of attack or promotion. The book seeks to tackle it with a relational approach; how outlets cover topics in relation to others in the same country. This approach does not solve everything, but certainly

offsets most of the ‘silence’ gaps regarding the influence of owners in how journalists report about their businesses.

Despite such high scientific standards, the authors do not bother the readers with several pages of methodology before showing what most of us are interested in: the results. A summary of a couple of paragraphs in the introduction and short passages across those three chapters are complemented with a highly detailed appendix, which allows not only an assessment of the (high) quality of the work done, but also an understanding of its few limitations and possible follow-up endeavours. This makes the book also accessible for non-academic but highly engaged audiences, such as journalists, media managers and owners, policymakers, and civil society activists.

Facing such an ambitious and successful effort, one must feel intimidated by trying to raise critical points, but this is the exercise required in the intellectual world, so I have taken the bait and would like to raise three points as a ‘provocation’.

First, the more I read about the ownership forms and, as the authors term them, the ‘ownership complexes’ around them, the more I see potential for refinement in this conceptualisation. The four categories of ownership resonate with the historical approach of media ownership research, although historically private and stock-traded forms have more often been collapsed into a single category, ‘commercial’ ownership, at least in the European tradition. The biggest benefit of the book’s approach over the traditional categorisation, is that it analytically separates the owners from funding models. The historical insistence of media research and policy on conflating the two things has become ever more problematic in light of the news industry crisis, which has led to a diversification of ownership forms – through the rise of trusts and foundations, the mixing of families and public shareholders in an outlet’s ownership, and increase of non-profit ownership forms (Sjøvaag & Ohlsson, 2019) – as well as pressure for public funding regardless of type of owner. If we want to understand what is going on, we will necessarily need to account for those tensions. Such distinctions could be extended further – between partisan and non-partisan civil society owners or between public and state media – so that we have more precision on which specific owners produce the desired effects. The authors realise the need for more precision, and often speak of sub-forms of ownership, but it is not clear why their approach leads to splitting commercial media, but not to doing the same for public and civil society ownership.

At the same time, this effort shows the limits of ‘owners’ as a category to understand why media do what they do. Often, the same legal ownership forms account for completely different organisational features and content output. The authors recognise this and

offer the concept of ‘ownership complexes’, combining ownership forms, funding, and audiences, as a clever solution to broaden the perspective. Then the question could be where exactly governance sits in this arrangement. The book correctly points out that there are striking differences between US PBS, Russia’s RT and China’s CCTV as “state broadcasters receiving taxpayer public funding” (p. 3). How to account for these differences? Either one differentiates ‘public’ and ‘state’ as owners or one introduces the level of governance – in this case, arm’s length structures – which probably is the best explanation for their differences. Therefore, a possible idea could be to expand the concept of ‘ownership complex’, explicitly including the layer of governance.

A second important factor, related to the previous one but still distinct, is to what extent factors such as professionalism, political culture, and prevailing mode of production shape managers’, editors’, and journalists’ practices without the need for any intervention by owners. This factor significantly moderates the impact of certain media ownership forms. Indeed, professionalism has been discussed as a reason for decisions of the journalistic staff throughout the book, including for low levels of suppression (of bad news) and promotion (of the owners’ own businesses) in economic instrumentalism (p. 173-178). A step further would be to discuss how media professionals themselves have been shaped by political, economic, and societal forces to defend ideals that economically benefit profit-seeking owners (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). More importantly, even the ‘ideal’ mode of power, public service orientation, can be said to have a strong bias toward the primacy of capitalist democracies which comes not from the owners, but from deep convictions of media professionals shaped by broader, hegemonic forces.

This brings me to my third reflection, regarding the role of public service orientation in the argument. As identified above, the book’s assumption on the best modes of power and, as such, of ownership forms rests on the Western normative tradition of the media. Whereas public service orientation – a label that synthesises all liberal values of journalism such as objectivity, non-partisanship, and independence – is presented as a given, this normative ideal was forged in a specific geographic and temporal context, namely of the Western liberal democracies, for whom ‘good’ journalism is the one that holds the powerful accountable. As critical scholars notice, it is part of the Western effort to assert hegemony, especially against the communist threat in the 20th century (Lugo-Ocando, 2020; Nerone, 2013).

Other societies, however, have very different understandings of both power and the role of the media, ranking values such as the “preservation of social harmony and respect for leadership” higher,

as observed by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018, p. 149). Therefore, the need of ownership forms that strengthen the public service orientation can be understood in Western capitalist democracies, but this normativity should not be considered a universal standard that needs to be exported to all political and media systems across the Global South, as the modernisation theory has always assumed. Actually, even in Western democracies this normative model may be ill-suited for understanding future developments, as fraught societies abandon the relative consensus on which modern journalism has built its foundations (Kreiss, 2021; Nerone, 2013), and digital capitalism challenges the monopoly of professional journalism on information (Daros & Rüdiger, 2022). This is not to say that the authors failed to take into account the reality beyond capitalist democracies, but only that media ownership research in other contexts requires more work than mere translation of this already very comprehensive approach.

These reflections testify to the greatness of this book, which opens several avenues of thought, fulfilling the call of every intellectual piece. In my opinion, bringing back the focus on the quality of different media ownership forms, instead of clinging to liberal-capitalist principles, such as 'foster competition', is the best contribution that Benson, Hessérus, Neff, and Sedel provide through their efforts, and this is deeply needed in an age of intensifying media and information crisis. We need not more, but better news.

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