

What Media Ownership Meant

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Rodney Benson, Mattias Hessérus, Timothy Neff and Julie Sedel, **How Media Ownership Matters** (Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2024, 328 p.)

On September 10, 2025, the far-right campus activist, racist, and conspiracy theorist Charlie Kirk was assassinated at Utah State University. This prompted an outpouring of grief among those who shared his views, including the President of the United States of America and many elected leaders, both in the United States and around the world. Five days later, late-night comedian Jimmy Kimmel speculated on ABC that the shooter was himself on the far-right side of the political spectrum, an allegation with little basis in fact that prompted an immediate and widespread outcry among Kirk sympathizers. On September 17, chairman of ~~the~~ broadcast regulator **the** Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Brendan Carr took ABC to task for Kimmel’s statements, threatening the network with undisclosed punishments and saying “we can do this the easy way or the hard way.” Network affiliate owners Sinclair Broadcasting and Nextar (themselves seeking FCC approval for an upcoming merger) vowed not to air the Kimmel show, and on September 17 ABC suspended Kimmel temporarily. A backlash to the backlash soon mounted, however, with many people across the American political spectrum calling the suspension of Kimmel a blatant violation of the US First Amendment, and on September 23, less than two weeks after the Kirk killing, Kimmel was back on air.

Far away from New York and Washington DC, a similar scenario played out at two tiny Alaskan newspapers on the Kenai peninsula. The *Peninsula Clarion* and *The Homer News*, with a combined total staff of six journalists, had themselves run a story about a candlelight vigil for Kirk organized by a conservative Alaskan state representative named Sarah Vance. In the story on the vigil, the author ~~referenced~~ **called** comments Kirk had made through his career as “racist” and **accused him of** trafficking in “conspiracy theories.” Vance took to her Facebook page and, using her legislative letterhead, threatened to lead an advertising boycott unless the story was taken down or edited. As she requested, the owners of the

paper, who themselves had recently been acquired by a much larger corporate chain, removed the story without consulting the journalists or editors involved, re-wrote it, and reposted it with no **explanation** ~~changes noted~~. Rep. Vance took to the internet again to crow about her success, and four of the six employees of the paper resigned in protest ~~at the~~ **of the** violation of their First Amendment rights.

I detail these two stories at length—one that was global news and involved Hollywood A-listers and the President of the United States, another that took place on an underpopulated strip of land near the Arctic Circle and barely registered outside Alaska—because they are remarkably similar and together highlight the state of the US press in 2025. It is in this context that we inevitably must read the book under review here and read it in a way we would not and could not have done even a year ago. A number of intellectual problems emerge from this confluence of political events and serious scholarship, some of which are more pronounced in the study of journalism and news, but all of which relate to practices of sociology more generally in this hyper-mediated, rapidly moving digital age of extremes.

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How Media Ownership Matters, by Rodney Benson, Mattias Hessérus, Timothy Neff, and Julie Sedel is (as the title indicates) a study of how and why media ownership **matters** ~~is an important factor in the operation and construction of the cultural field concerned with the regular production of public affairs –related content~~; in other words, “the news.” I will turn to a more thorough discussion of its arguments and contents shortly, but let me begin by saying that **this** ~~it~~ is an unusual book. Or rather, it is an unusual book for 2025. It would not have been an unusual book in 2004 or maybe even 2013, but it stands out in today’s publishing environment.

What kind of research is being done on the news in 2025? In an important 2005 chapter, “Approaches to the Sociology of News”¹, itself a revision of a 1989 article², Michael Schudson outlines four lenses through which we can tie the content produced by news organizations back to the conditions of their production. What structural factors matter most in terms of how news gets made? These structural factors (or lenses) are not mutually exclusive, but rather matters of emphasis, and the emphasis in journalism scholarship since the dawn of the internet has tended toward the analysis of what Schudson calls the “*organizational level*” of news production. This is a meso-level analysis at which the dominant factors shaping news work are managerial and procedural, with journalistic routines tending to shape the bulk of news production. Most of this organizational scholarship has integrated the development of new digital technologies into its framework, examining how technological affordances tend to shape (or not) journalistic processes. From the point of view of political communication research, on the other hand, the main lens has tended to be (not surprisingly) political, particularly the cross-national analysis of how different state systems tend to facilitate different kinds of news. Large-scale comparative analysis of fact-checking processes, or the spread of misinformation, tend to be part and parcel of this analytical frame.

Schudson's other two lenses—that of culture and the economy—have received comparatively less ~~recent~~ attention from scholars. Most of the economic analysis of journalism tends to be either polemical (identifying bad actors in the journalistic ecosystem and denouncing the kinds of censorious shenanigans discussed in the opening pages of this review) or historical (such as Victor Pickard's [2014]³ important work on the development of the American media regulatory regime). So the first thing that makes *How Media Ownership Matters* unusual is that it is an attempt to bring the study of the structures of media ownership, and an analysis of economic power in journalistic production, back into the toolkit of media sociology. In seven compelling chapters, Benson and his co-authors identify a compelling framework for the analysis of ownership forms and make a compelling case for the importance of a *cross-national* analysis of those forms of economic power⁴. The forms of ownership they consider are privately held, publicly funded, market driven (usually large conglomerates trading on the stock market) and those news outlets owned by “civil society.” ~~and~~ The countries they analyze are France, Sweden, and the United States. Likewise, the power that these ownership forms can possess are also varied; they can attempt to control political, economic, or public affairs-oriented outcomes. After defining their terms and clarifying their conceptual framework, Benson, Hessérus, Neff, and Sedel discuss the different ways in which media ownership matters in the coverage of current affairs.

So, how *does* it matter? While a great deal of interest can be said about the concepts, frameworks, and theoretical interventions that lie at the heart of this book, most readers will want to answer the question that drives the study. The authors make bold claims about what their book will do—how well does the study fulfil the promises it makes to the readers in the opening pages?

The answer is complicated, and my *real* answer to this question will have to wait until the end of this review. For now, however, we should honestly admit that some of the findings presented here seem obvious. Let's start with how much public service content is provided by the different ownership forms under examination. It won't surprise many people to hear that civil society-owned media outlets provide the most such content, including the non-profits funded not just by philanthropic dollars but by religious charities and ~~similar~~ organizations. When it comes to the power to provide public affairs content, not only do civil society ownership forms publish the most public service news, but they also give more room to voices that are not part of the mainstream and outside the official corridors of power in the countries in question—they ~~contain~~ have more “external pluralism,” as political communication scholars would put it. Likewise—and again not terribly surprisingly—market- and corporate-oriented forms of ownership underperform when it comes to public service journalism. Advertising-driven media is the worst of all, with a noticeably large amount of sensationalist journalism. Public media, finally, plays a crucial role somewhere between these two ownership forms, ~~and it is in the discussion of public media that the findings become less intuitive~~. While ~~these types of media~~ they do not provide as much public affairs-oriented news as civil society groups, they do contribute substantially more than the commercial outlets

discussed earlier. This has interesting consequences for the public sphere, as I will discuss. Perhaps most interestingly, the authors provide compelling empirical evidence that there is a correlation between public service journalism and ownership forms that goes beyond simple audience demand and funding models. While the political orientation of an outlet's audience *and* the formal mode of revenue generation have a major effect on journalistic production, ownership forms matter in ways that demonstrate independent structuring effects.

What about political instrumentalism—the power to use media outlets for partisan political purposes? As anyone who watched the 2016 American presidential election will remember, political partisanship can have a profit-driven motivation. Benson *et al.* find that in the 2015/16 presidential primaries, stock market-owned and/or subscription-reliant outlets disproportionately highlighted the controversial candidacy of Donald Trump **vis-a-vis** ~~versus~~ other GOP candidates. Such political “tipping of the scales” did not have political motives, in the end, as much as profit-oriented ones; as CBS Chief Executive Officer Leslie Moonves said of Donald Trump’s presidential run: “it may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.” Such decisions reflected a desire to maximize audience revenue more than they did owner ideology. Startlingly, perhaps, partisan intensity was highest at civil society outlets. These strong providers of public affairs content were *also* the most politically driven (in either direction) of the different media ownership forms examined by the authors. Despite all of the pressures of audience maximization and ownership ideology, however, counter-pressures on partisanship also exist in the form of professional journalistic norms and legacy brand commitments. Even the strongest push toward partisanship can run aground on what journalists think is the “right” thing to do.

The final form of power that Benson and his co-authors examine is the ability to slant news in order to benefit owners’ economic objectives. Here there is very little to find, as the data demonstrate that economic instrumentalism, to the degree it exists, is usually so subtle that it is hard to capture through traditional social scientific methods. There are so many ways that news owners can advance their economic objectives, the authors argue, there is very little point in doing it in such a way that will inevitably invite backlash and scrutiny.

How many of these findings will surprise us? I would **repeat what I said above:** ~~argue that they are all~~ **many of them are** rather commonsensical, with a few important exceptions. Chief among these is the conclusion that civil society outlets, despite their many virtues, often do most to advance a partisan agenda. Public media, on the other hand, provide a more balanced form of civic content than civil society outlets do, but remain tied to the same set of fairly centrist experts and points of view. A third, somewhat surprising point, or at least an important one, is that subscription-based business models, while they may indeed provide a sustainable path forward for news outlets, amplify the drift towards partisanship. Fourthly, economic instrumentalism—the use of media power to get economic rewards—is rarer than ordinary people might expect. Fifth and finally, public service media is increasingly an elite genre. As

advertising collapses, both commercial and nonprofit outlets targeting affluent, educated audiences have become the main vessels for serious journalism. The public mission survives, but primarily for those with the means to pay. More than any of the other findings in this book, this is the one that probably has the most to say to us about the broader state of journalism in the digital age in a way that transcends questions of ownership and speaks to the broader state of the sector.

So what *does* this excellent book have to tell us? It is a monumental and impressive piece of scholarship, in both its research conception and research design. And yet I have also argued here that its findings are not particularly earth-shattering, for all the bells and whistles attached to the conceptual apparatus. For better or worse, it is very much of the scholarly “old school.” I alluded to this paradox in the opening pages of this review, and I will conclude with some thoughts on it and the broader way it relates to the importance of this monograph in an era of rapid media change.

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In 2004, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini published *Comparing Media Systems*, a book that set the paradigm **through** ~~in terms of~~ which serious comparative political communication scholarship ought to carry out research on its broader object of inquiry⁵. In the years since this book came out it has become enormously influential, while both the world of journalism and that of journalism *scholarship* have been transformed in significant ways. *Comparing Media Systems* might be said to be a comparative guide to the way journalism looked at just the moment when the tsunami of the internet and digital technology crashed upon the shore of the media world that Hallin and Mancini analyzed. Given the digital events that came after it in 2004, the book was almost immediately of historical as well as sociological interest. The digital world has changed the dynamics of journalistic production and consumption across all the countries discussed in *Comparing Media Systems*. The book draws part of its power from its exploration of a more ordered world, a world that largely pre-dates the explosion of digital technology.

At the same time, scholarly books about journalism have *also* changed, with shorter and shorter “manifestos,” “guides,” “keywords,” and other accessible volumes cluttering the shelves as academic publishers seek to keep on top of the next big thing in online media. Longer, more theoretically innovative and empirically rich monographs have become increasingly rare, particularly when it comes to thinking and writing about digital technology and its relationship to news. All publishers, it seems, want readable books about the internet that can also be useful for students, as well as scholars. This trend in academic publishing makes *How Media Ownership Matters* stand out, both for its conceptual rigor and methodological sophistication, but also its reluctance to make too much of its own findings. *How Media Ownership Matters* does not purport to tell us what the future of journalism might be; how to solve the business model problem of digital news; what disinformation is doing to democracy; or what an AI future might mean for journalistic production. But it does tell us how media ownership matters, to which the

answer is: in some ways not much and in other ways quite a lot.

What this means for this book, I think, is that it will find a role for itself that is quite similar to the role of *Comparing Media Systems* in the larger academic marketplace. It will serve as a guide and inspiration for scholars looking for rigorous and compelling research. It will serve as a reference point for literature that takes economic questions concerning news production and consumption seriously. And it will stand as marker of a moment when the world of journalism (and media more generally) seemed slightly less complex and post-modern than they are about to become. For even the journalism world of 2016 has changed a great deal in the intervening decade, with news blurring with other forms of partisan entertainment and mobilization. What ownership ~~matter~~ **matters** more, after all? Elon Musk's ownership of "X" (formerly Twitter) or the moguls who control the Jimmy Kimmel Show? Both matter of course, but Benson and his co-authors discuss one format and pay less attention to the other.

How Media Ownership Matters is, in the end, as much a history of issues of ownership and journalism as it is a sociology of these rapidly shifting phenomena. It will be appreciated as much for what it tells us about the world that was as it about the world that is to come. For that, and for showing us that serious empirical research on journalism can indeed still be done in this rather intellectually debased age, Benson and his co-authors deserve our thanks.

Notes

¹ Michael SCHUDSON, 2019. "Approaches to the sociology of news," *Media and Society*, 6: 139–166.

² Michael SCHUDSON, 1989. "The sociology of news production," *Media, Culture & Society*, 11 (3): 263–282.

³ Victor PICKARD, 2014. *America's battle for media democracy: The triumph of corporate libertarianism and the future of media reform* (New York, Cambridge University Press).

⁴ It is important to note here that Benson et al. compare different ownership forms *within* the countries they study – France, the US, and Sweden – rather than between them. The case for this strategy makes sense; comparative analysis between multiple forms of ownership in multiple countries would make an already structurally complex book entirely unwieldy. If certain patterns repeat themselves in different countries and different media systems, they note, this is increased evidence for the accuracy of their findings.

⁵ Daniel C. HALLIN and Paolo MANCINI, 2004. *Comparing Media Systems: three models of media and politics* (Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press).

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