

Rodney Benson, Mattias Hessérus, Timothy Neff, and Julie Sedel, **How Media Ownership Matters**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024, 432 pp., \$39.95 (hardcover).

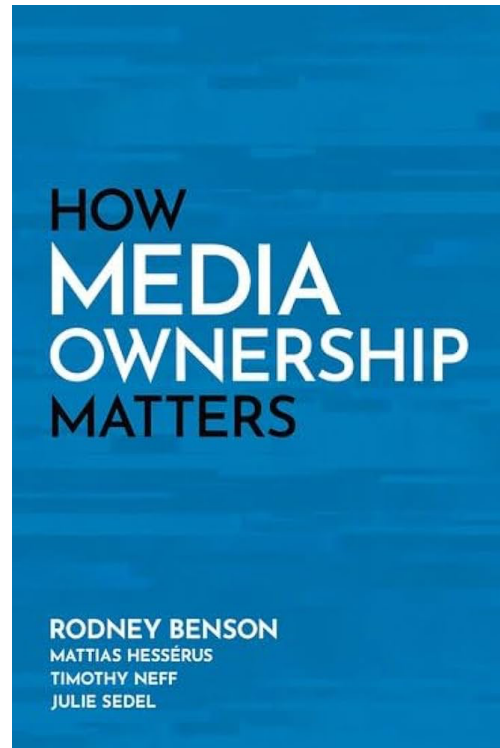
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Canonical scholarship on the interplay between media and politics typically examines the ways in which increasingly authoritarian political actors and media proprietors mobilize and instrumentalize state power and institutional resources to consolidate their influence, often under the legitimizing framework of neoliberal governance. There have been classics like Herman and Chomsky (1988), Curran and Gurevitch (1991), Norris (2000), Baker (2001), Hallin and Mancini (2004), Dunaway and Graber (2022), and Wolfsfeld (2022) that touch upon different aspects of this relationship.

How Media Ownership Matters offers a somewhat different yet familiarly compelling, empirically grounded rationale for reconsidering how scholars conceptualize media ownership in contemporary democracies. Opening with vivid vignettes from the United States, Sweden, and France, the authors demonstrate that ownership power manifests through public service orientation, economic instrumentalism, and political instrumentalism, three modes that structure journalistic possibility across media systems. The book sets out an ambitious agenda: to move beyond binaries of “mogul power” versus “market structure” and to operationalize ownership as an institutional form embedded in funding models and audience dynamics.

The book’s key contribution lies in reframing ownership not as a single variable but as a complex system of relationships, borrowing from Bourdieu’s field theory, institutional logics, and media management scholarship. This innovative synthesis distinguishes the book from classic works by Curran and Gurevitch (1991), Baker (2001), or Hallin and Mancini (2004), offering a more granular typology, that of market, private, civil society, and public ownership forms, which are tested and analyzed alongside subforms such as conglomerate ownership and journalist-controlled outlets across three contrasting national fields. The comparative design is timely given renewed global debates over public service media, non-profit journalism, and billionaire proprietors.

In *How Media Ownership Matters*, the authors argue that media ownership matters in ways that go beyond concentration metrics or anecdotal accounts of powerful moguls. The authors introduce the concept of *ownership complexes*, which combine ownership form, funding strategies, and audience characteristics. This approach acknowledges that ownership effects are contingent, shaped by allocative and operational



decisions within broader social and economic contexts. The book identifies three normatively consequential “modes of power”: *public service orientation* (commitment to civic information and pluralism), *political instrumentalism* (partisan influence exerted by owners), and *economic instrumentalism* (leveraging media for owners’ financial interests).

Empirically, the book draws on more than a decade of research, including over 100 interviews with owners, managers, and editors; proprietary audience and funding data; and a quantitative content analysis of 51 news outlets across the United States, France, and Sweden. This mixed-methods design enables the authors to map structural patterns and test hypotheses about ownership influence on news content.

The comparative scope is another asset. The choice of the United States, France, and Sweden, thus representing liberal, polarized pluralist, and democratic corporatist media systems, allows for meaningful cross-national insights while avoiding the pitfalls of universalizing claims. The empirical chapters are rich with detail, from the Sulzberger family’s stewardship of *The New York Times* to the partisan foundations underpinning Swedish regional newspapers.

However, the book is not without limitations. Its dense theoretical layering, combining Bourdieu, institutional logic, and media management—may challenge readers unfamiliar with these frameworks. While the authors strive for clarity, some sections could benefit from more explicit signposting of key arguments. Additionally, the focus on Western democracies, though justified, leaves open questions about how ownership forms operate in the Global South or under hybrid regimes. The authors acknowledge this gap and gesture toward future research, but readers seeking a truly global perspective may find the scope restrictive.

Another minor criticism of the book would be its accessibility for practitioners. While the book’s normative concerns, such as pluralism, accountability, and democratic performance, are highly relevant to policymakers and journalists, the language occasionally veers toward academic abstraction. A concluding chapter with more actionable policy recommendations would have enhanced its practical utility.

How Media Ownership Matters builds on and significantly extends the foundational debates initiated by scholars such as Curran and Gurevitch (1991) and Baker (2001), who emphasized structural diversity as a bulwark against market failure. It also dialogues with Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) *Comparing Media Systems*, adopting their typology of media systems while introducing ownership forms as an additional analytical layer. Unlike Bagdikian’s (2004) *Media Monopoly* or Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) *Manufacturing Consent*, which foreground concentration and elite control, Benson, Hessérus, Neff, and Sedel argue for a more differentiated approach.

The book also resonates with recent scholarship on nonprofit journalism and media capture, such as Pickard (2020), Schiffrin (2021), Dragomir (2024), and Akser and Baybars (2024), but its comparative design and systematic typology set it apart. By conceptualizing ownership as a “complex” rather than a singular determinant, the authors offer a framework that can accommodate both structural constraints and managerial agency.

This book provides a theoretically rigorous and empirically grounded model for analyzing ownership effects. For practitioners and policymakers, it underscores the importance of ownership diversity. Graduate students in communication, sociology, and political science will find the book invaluable for its synthesis of theory and method. Journalism professionals and media regulators will appreciate its insights into how ownership structures shape editorial autonomy and content diversity. In an era of rising concerns about media capture, disinformation, and the collapse of local news, *How Media Ownership Matters* offers a timely and necessary intervention.

In conclusion, Benson, Hessérus, Neff, and Sedel have produced a landmark study that reframes the debate on media ownership for the twenty-first century. While its theoretical density and Western focus present some limitations, its conceptual clarity, methodological rigor, and normative ambition make it an essential resource for anyone concerned with the future of journalism and democracy. As such, this volume stands as a significant and enduring contribution to communication scholarship, offering a nuanced framework that will inform and challenge future research on the structural forces shaping contemporary media systems.

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