

Does Media Ownership Matter for Journalistic Content? A Systematic Scoping Review of Empirical Studies

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This study assesses the current state of empirical research on the role of media ownership on journalistic content. Regardless of the differences in focus and research design, our systematic scoping review of 56 studies shows that media ownership matters. The vast majority of studies show that media ownership affects journalistic content. A few empirical studies found no systematic influence or significant connection. Regarding the different types of media ownership, research focuses on the private sector, whereas public and civil society media remain at the margins. Similarly, concerning ownership influence, the examined studies focus on the economic and political impacts on media content, whereas public interest orientation and audience alignment remain somewhat understudied.

Keywords: media ownership, journalistic content, modes of ownership power, systematic scoping review

For decades, media ownership has been a key focus of critical media and journalism research. Both the European Marxist tradition of the Critical Political Economy of Media and Communications (e.g., Fuchs, 2009; Holzer, 1994) and its North American varieties (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008) emphasize the role of profit-driven media business models within the capitalist economy and the disciplining power of wealthy media owners on journalism.

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Curran, Gurevitch, and Woollacott (1982/2005) contend that “theoretical perspectives on the mass media contained within Marxism share a general agreement that the power of the media is *ideological*” (p. 23). However, although there are distinct differences in conceptualizing ideology, there are also significant variations in theoretical perspectives and empirical research relating to questions of influence. McChesney (2008) adds that one focus of Critical Political Economy is to study how structural conditions (such as media ownership) and financial dependencies (such as advertising) influence media content. However, there have been few attempts to theoretically grasp the different ways in which media owners influence media coverage and even fewer attempts to provide systematic overviews of such contributions and studies (e.g., Curran et al., 1982/2005). In fact, Victor Pickard (2016) explicitly calls for “much more research that connects media ownership structures with media content and effects” (p. 3). Such research could, in turn, serve larger (media) policy debates on pluralism and state regulation within specific national settings with potential global implications (e.g., MacCarthy, 2023).

To date, the most complex yet nuanced theoretical concept of the effects of media ownership on journalism is Rodney Benson’s (2019) “four modes of power.” He differentiates between (1) *political instrumentalism*, which refers to media owners’ potential power to use their newsrooms to promote or oppose politicians, social movements, or issues, and (2) *business instrumentalism*, which describes how media owners can potentially use their newsrooms to favor or omit events or issues related to their business interests or those of their investors or competitors. Benson (2019) refers (3) to *audience adjustment*, which underlines how media owners determine what target groups should be served and how strongly journalists should adapt to their preferences to maximize reach and profits, and (4) *public service orientation*. According to the latter, owners can determine the resources made available to editorial desks (staff, money, etc.) and the potential risks (withdrawal of ads, lawsuits, etc.) to be taken by publishing explosive stories in line with public interests.

In addition, Benson (2016, 2019) distinguishes between four types of media ownership within which these “four modes of power” apply in varying degrees. The first type, *publicly owned media*, typically derives its funding from a dedicated license fee or other tax revenues. Consequently, for these media, “commercial pressures are obviously less, although not always completely absent (as in cases where there is partial dependence on advertising)” (Benson, 2019, p. 388). The next two types of ownership—*media traded on the stock market* and *privately owned media*—are private; in both cases, the news is commercial and sold to generate profits. However, the former tends toward short-term profits because the owners are stock market investors. For the latter, media owners are mostly wealthy families or individuals with long-term motives that can exceed short-term profit-only interests.² Finally, *civil society ownership* is “a constellation of forms” of ownership. Although they consist of many subtypes, they all “likely share with public ownership a certain distance from commercial pressures” (Benson, 2019, p. 388). Examples of civil society-owned media include party-owned or affiliated media (*L’Humanité*, France), religious media (*The Christian Science Monitor*, United States), foundation-owned media (*The Guardian*, United Kingdom, and *Frankfurter*

² Both ownership types can overlap (e.g. *New York Times* in the United States).

Allgemeine Zeitung, Germany), and philanthropy or entirely reader-subscriber-supported nonprofits (*ProPublica*, United States, and *Mediapart*, France).³

Despite this theoretical groundwork, there is yet no comprehensive and systematic analysis of the different modes of owners' influence within different forms of media ownership. Empirical evidence is scattered across research fields and methodological approaches. Therefore, in this systematic scoping review, we aimed to draw a comprehensive picture of the current research. We do so by collecting, analyzing, and categorizing a sample set of 56 empirical studies from German- and English-language research journals and book chapters published between 2000 and 2023. We ask: How have the effects of media ownership on journalistic content been researched empirically across thematic focus, time period, geographical area, and media type, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches? Based on this overview, we conclude on the researched effects of media ownership on journalistic content, while taking into account the four types of media ownership and ownership power, according to Benson.

To identify relevant studies, we first conducted a keyword search on Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), both comprehensive abstract and indexing databases of scientific work, and then applied the snowball principle (i.e., we searched the bibliographies of relevant studies). The final sample, comprising 56 studies, included quantitative and qualitative as well as mixed-method approaches (purely theoretical and conceptual papers were not included). We categorized the studies according to the following criteria: method, empirical data (geographical region, media type, and time period), key findings, and form(s) of media ownership.

We show that, methodologically, studies on the effects of media ownership on journalistic content vary greatly. Within our sample, 36 studies used quantitative methods, such as automated content analysis or multivariate analysis. Nine studies were qualitative in design, employing, for instance, qualitative content or frame analysis. Eleven studies used a mix of methods, such as building on case study methodologies or combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The vast majority of studies show—each with their own specific research design and empirical data—that media ownership affects journalistic content. A few empirical studies found no systematic influence or significant connection.

Concerning the different types of media ownership, research focuses on the private sector, whereas public and civil society media remain at the margins. Similarly, concerning ownership influence, the examined studies focus on economic and political impacts on media, while public interest orientation and audience alignment remain somewhat understudied. In a few cases, Benson's classification is not applicable.

In the following section, we first present our literature review, providing an overview of our method and sample studies, followed by a summary of the studies' applied methods and analysis of the types of media, geographic areas, and time periods. We then categorize the sample according to Benson's (2016,

³ A foundation ownership does not per se make for civil society-owned media. For instance, the Bertelsmann Stiftung (foundation) holds the majority share of the Bertelsmann Group, a global media service conglomerate (Tröger & Becker, 2023).

2019) four types of ownership and modes of ownership power. Finally, we summarize the findings of our systematic scoping review, which—regardless of the sample studies' differences in focus and research design—shows that ownership matters. The empirical evidence shows that ownership influence happens on a structural, institutional, and, at times, individual level.

Methods: A Systematic Scoping Review

Following a scoping review framework (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Teare & Taks, 2020), this article provides a systematic review of studies empirically investigating the effects of media ownership on journalistic content. Scoping reviews are useful because they allow researchers to map existing research, identify types of available evidence for a given question, examine how research is conducted on a certain topic, and detect knowledge gaps in past and current research. Following the five stages of scoping reviews suggested by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), we (1) identified the research question; (2) identified relevant studies; (3) studied the selection; (4) charted the data; and (5) collated, summarized, and reported the results.

To select relevant studies, we used Scopus and WoS—the two major bibliographic databases that cover a wide range of scientific journals, books, conference presentations, and other research work (Pranckutė, 2021). We conducted a search using an extensive keyword string⁴ covering various word combinations related to our research interests. This search resulted in a preliminary sample of 250 studies (Scopus) and 116 studies (WoS).

In line with our research interest in systematizing the state of academic research, we excluded dissertations and conference papers from our search and focused on peer-reviewed journals and book chapters.⁵ Since English is the dominant language of international scientific research—particularly for peer-reviewed publications—we focused on English-language studies (although we added three German-language publications during snowballing).

From the initial list, we selected 32 studies based on the following criteria: (a) *media ownership* is at the center of research, and (b) the article in question studies media content *empirically*. Ambiguous cases were discussed by the research team by carefully inspecting the papers. As bibliographic databases tend to be skewed toward natural sciences (Pranckutė, 2021), we additionally used snowballing (i.e., tracking down references and citations of those relevant 32 studies) to identify further studies. This resulted in another set of 24 studies being added to the sample. We acknowledge that we may have failed to include some relevant studies (because of terminologies and limitations of databases).

We analyzed and categorized our final sample of 56 studies according to empirical method, thematic focus, time period, geographical area, and media type (e.g., TV and newspapers). These categories

⁴ Our search string covers word combinations for media ownership and news content. It is based on keywords from early identified studies and was tested through several trial runs.

⁵ There is one book chapter in the sample (Weitz et al., 2019), which we decided to include because it is a highly relevant study.

were derived from the sample studies. Since a substantial number of the studies provided this information, the categories facilitated comparability. In line with our main research interest, we categorized the studies according to Benson's (2016, 2019) four types of media ownership and four modes of ownership power.

We applied Benson's (2016, 2019) concept of four types of media ownership through a close reading of the studies, particularly the methods sections. Most studies explicitly mentioned the type of media ownership in question; accordingly, many were allocated to one of the four types of ownership. Some studies did not mention the ownership type explicitly but referred to general categories of media ownership. We did not allocate those studies according to Benson's framework but recorded the type of ownership where possible. Concerning ownership power, we categorized the studies according to Benson's (2016, 2019) four modes through a close reading of the studies, particularly consulting the method and finding sections. For studies that did not draw conclusions on ownership power, we did not categorize them according to Benson's framework; however, we mentioned them in our review.

Finally, we documented the degree of influence accounted for in the individual studies—that is, whether they showed ownership influence on journalistic content and how strong this influence is. Since it is difficult to assess the degree of any such influence across a diverse set of research designs, cases, and methodologies, we closely followed the research findings of each study. Where possible, we assigned the degree of influence to one of the following three categories: no influence (-), weak influence (+), and strong influence (++). We assigned a study to the first category if it reported no influence of ownership on journalistic content. The second category was met if the study assessed a weak or not very pronounced influence (e.g., using words such as "small effect," "tends to," or "evidence broadly supports"). We assigned an article to the third category if the reported influence was pronounced (e.g., using words such as "significant" or "systematic"). The difference between the second and third categories is a tendency rather than a clear-cut distinction, as our assessments refer to studies using a broad range of methodologies, research designs, and terminologies. Ambiguous cases were discussed thoroughly by the research team.

The publication dates of the sample studies spread more than 23 years, from 2000 to 2023. Eleven articles were published between 2000 and 2010, 16 were published between 2011 and 2015, and 29 were published between 2016 and 2023. Slightly less than half of the studies focused on the period between 2000 and 2010. One-third of the studies investigated data from 2011 to 2020, and a smaller number used data from the 1950s, 1960s, 1980s, or 1990s.

In general, the sample included articles from various research fields. To classify these different fields, we relied on the Scimago listing of journals' subject areas. The majority of studies were published in journals listed as communication (e.g., *Journalism* or *International Journal of Press/Politics*), followed by sociology and political science (e.g., *International Sociology* and *Journal of Politics*), economics and econometrics, and business and accounting (e.g., *American Economic Review* and *Econometrica*).

Sample Overview: Methods, Time Periods, Geographic Areas, and Media Types

The systematic scoping review shows that the studies in the sample use various methods to study the influence of media ownership on journalistic content. Furthermore, they focus on different types of

media, geographic areas, and time periods. In this section, we evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the *types of methods* applied and the potential limitations of looking at specific *time periods* (e.g., long term and short term), *geographic areas* (e.g., countries and communities), and *media types* (e.g., newspapers and TV).

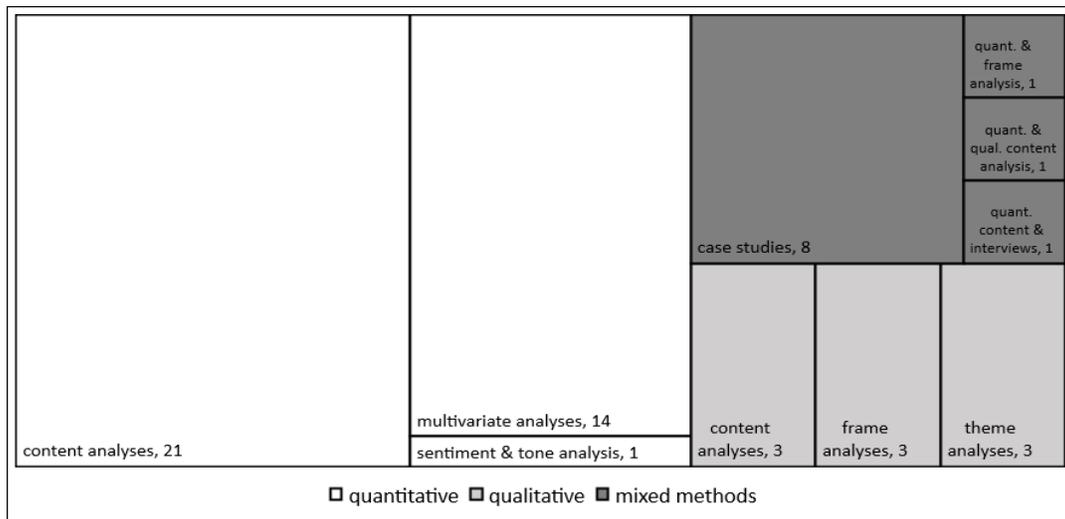


Figure 1. Methods applied in the reviewed studies.

Types of Methods

Of the 56 articles, 36 used quantitative methods, nine relied solely on qualitative methods, and 11 used mixed-method approaches (see Figure 1 for details). Not surprisingly, most quantitative studies use larger datasets with the advantage of generalizable results. Studies using quantitative content analyses take advantage of quantitative category systems to analyze journalistic content and draw connections to media ownership. For instance, Neff and Benson (2021) used quantitative analysis to assess whether and how far different types of media promote ownership interests (owners, investors, and associated economic interests). Rafter, Flynn, McMenamin, and O'Malley (2014) performed a quantitative content analysis of six television and radio programs during the 2011 Irish general election and examined the extent to which differences in coverage were driven by different ownership types.

Other quantitative studies used different types of quantitative analyses of media content (broadly defined) as input for multivariate analyses. For instance, Fan (2013) used an economic-mathematical model to estimate ownership consolidation and newspaper mergers with a variable called the "content quality index" as one key indicator. Durante and Knight (2012) measured the time political actors had to speak on the six main television channels in Italy and used this indicator to assess whether news content on public television shifted to the right after Silvio Berlusconi came into office in 2001. None of the sample studies in the systematic scoping review, however, looked at the length of journalistic content (e.g., articles), which could be an interesting aspect to complement existing content analyses.

In contrast to the aforementioned multivariate analyses, other authors aimed to study the influence of ownership by executing a more in-depth analysis of media content. In particular, studies based on qualitative methods (e.g., qualitative content analyses) provide more nuanced insights into media ownership issues. For example, Chomsky (2006) examined so-called Sulzberger files containing more than 400 memos from Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the then owner and publisher of the *New York Times* (NYT). Chomsky's study provides findings on how Sulzberger influenced the writers of the NYT and its content. Although these notes date back to the 1950s and 1960s, the study allows for conclusions on how ownership might influence media content in current times. Another example is McKnight (2010), who used content analysis to investigate climate change coverage in editorials, columns, and commentaries across different outlets of News Corporation (NewsCorp) in different countries. In fact, several studies focus on NewsCorp and Rupert Murdoch, all concluding that ownership has a significant impact on journalism (Archer & Clinton, 2018; McKnight, 2010; Wagner & Collins, 2014). For future research, it might be interesting to analyze other news corporations and their owners at different times in history.

Several studies use case study research designs by combining different methods and collecting data from various sources to provide in-depth pictures of selected "cases." For instance, Shardow and Asare (2016) combine an analysis of documents, content analysis of media coverage, and in-depth interviews to analyze the extent to which media and journalists can perform their watchdog role independent of ownership structures and government interference after two decades of constitutional rule in Ghana.

Time Periods

The articles in the sample studies used data from different time periods (see Table A1). Twenty-four studies analyze survey periods of two to five years, 13 examine data from periods of 6 to 10 years, and three studies analyze more than 10 years (Dellavigna & Hermle, 2017; Govenden, 2022; McKnight, 2010). Thirteen studies focused on periods of one year or less. Three studies did not specify the period (Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Koltsova, 2001; Ward, 2018). The advantages of studies focusing on a shorter period include relatively consistent settings and stable outside conditions (e.g., social developments and environmental crises) that could influence the reporting and agenda setting of the media outlet in question. However, examining a longer period is interesting because it allows for a broader analysis of developments, potentially including the effects of ownership changes. For example, Garz, Ots, and Sjøvaag (2023) examined 130 newspapers over a period of six years to assess how far and to what extent different forms of market and for-profit ownership influenced the diversity of political viewpoints.

Geographic Areas

Empirical studies on media ownership cover a wide range of countries (see Table A1). Most sample studies focused on one country, and only eight conducted cross-country analyses. The majority of studies were concerned with the North American context, with 22 articles focusing exclusively on the United States, five in conjunction with European countries or Australia, and one examining Canada. The remaining studies either focused on one or multiple countries in Europe (15 articles), South and East Asia and Russia (seven

articles), Africa and the Middle East (four articles), Australia (two studies), or compared countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America (one article).

Cross-country research allows for comparisons of ownership influence on journalistic content across different national contexts. Four studies explicitly discuss differences across countries (Benson, Neff, & Hessérus, 2018; Harlow, Camaj, & Pjesivac, 2022; Humprecht & Esser, 2018; McKnight, 2010). McKnight (2010) examined ownership's influence on climate change coverage in British, Australian, and U.S. media belonging to the Murdoch-owned NewsCorp and showed that climate change reporting was "most skeptical in the United States and Australia, where editorial support was given to climate denial" (p. 703). He suggested that this could be attributed to a political elite culture in the United Kingdom that was strong enough to resist a largely U.S.-generated campaign.

Benson et al. (2018), on the other hand, investigated the degree of public service orientation across different ownership types. They found that public service news content was much higher in Sweden than in the United States and France—regardless of ownership type. Humprecht and Esser (2018) analyzed diversity in online news concerning individuals, regions, and viewpoints. They showed that public service media in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France performed better compared with the United States in news diversity. The authors stressed that media policy could promote more public service-oriented media ownership: "These national patterns suggest that media systems that financially support strong public service-oriented news outlets are most likely to create media discourses that meet the normative goal of diversity in voices, backgrounds, and perspectives" (p. 1841). Harlow et al. (2022), finally, compare protest-related news in Serbia and Montenegro (Eastern Europe) and Guatemala and El Salvador (Latin America), aiming to overcome U.S.-centric analyses of protest coverage around the globe. They showed that regardless of the country, public broadcasters were more likely to cover protests thematically, while private media focused more on protesters' behaviors and appearances.

Empirical studies focusing on one country allow for insights into ownership influences on a country's broader media environment. This means that more media outlets within one country can be examined. Thus, broader insights into the importance of ownership in any national context and more differences between individual media outlets can be gained. For instance, in her qualitative analysis of five German newspapers, Löblich (2011) showed that economic self-interest affected the coverage of each, allowing for broader conclusions about the German media environment. Similarly, Govenden (2022) investigated whether racial changes in print media ownership facilitated by Black (economic) empowerment in the first 20 years of South Africa's democracy led to a transformation of content about racial stereotypes of blackness. The study concludes that in "the case of South Africa ownership does not matter, a change from White ownership to considerable Black ownership since 1994 did not significantly 'transform' historical racist tropes of blackness in content" (p. 1). Hence, this study draws broader conclusions about racism in the media more generally. In conclusion, studying different media in different countries might help generate more varied results within and across countries. However, based on the number of studies looking at individual countries, it can be stated that ownership matters regardless of geographic area.

Types of Media

Research on the influence of ownership on journalistic content examines a wide range of media types—newspapers, television, radio, magazines, and online news—with a strong preference for newspapers and television (see Table A1). Methodological approaches differ depending on the number of media types examined. Studies analyzing more than one type often focus on television and newspapers and/or radio, investigating the effects of ownership in cross-media investments.

Research on traditional media (e.g., print and broadcast media) has the advantage of being able to rely on broader timespans. This offers the added value of long-term comparisons of patterns across different types of media. Furthermore, considering various types of traditional media is useful because such comparative studies can question the influence of media ownership on *several* types of media (e.g., radio and magazines), not only on those extensively researched (e.g., newspapers). Our systematic scoping review shows that, in response to digital transformation and changes in media use, more recent studies tend to include online news content. All of these studies, except Dellavigna and Hermle (2017), conclude that ownership matters (Cushion, 2021; Harlow et al., 2022; Herzog & Scerbinina, 2020; Humprecht & Esser, 2018; Scott, Bunce, & Wright, 2017; Udris, Eisenegger, Vogler, Schneider, & Häuptli, 2020; Zeveleva, 2018). Still, analyses of online news content in combination with ownership remain at the margins, and related issues remain understudied.

Types of Ownership and Modes of Power

Our systematic scoping review aims to conclude the effects of media ownership on journalistic content. This section, thus, gives an overview of the different types of ownership, modes of power, and degrees of influence detected by sample studies. Drawing on Benson's (2016, 2019) four types of ownership and four modes of ownership power, we examined and categorized the various approaches found in the sample.

Types of Ownership

While most sample studies focus on privately owned media, some analyze commercial media without specifying the type of private ownership. Others differentiate between media owned by families or individuals and corporately owned media, mirroring Benson's (2016, 2019) theoretical framework. Only 19 studies examine the other two types of media ownership (public ownership and civil society ownership), either by focusing entirely on one of those two or by studying them in conjunction with other ownership types. Thus, past research significantly leans toward privately owned media, highlighting the need for further research on other types of ownership.

In addition, our systematic scoping review includes studies that do not correspond with Benson's (2016, 2019) ownership framework (Humprecht & Esser, 2018; Pritchard et al., 2008; Rohlinger & Proffitt, 2017). Pritchard et al. (2008) studied three independently owned media outlets that were not linked to each other and compared them to cross-owned corporate media. However, since it remained unclear who the owners of the independently owned media were, Benson's ownership model fit only partially. Humprecht

and Esser (2018) and Rohlinger and Proffitt (2017) used Picard and van Weezel's (2008) typology, which broadly aligned with Benson's (2016, 2019) framework.⁶

Our sample studies used different research designs to analyze and uncover ownership influences on journalistic content. Some provided in-depth analyses of one form of ownership. For instance, Herzog and Scerbinina (2020) analyzed 43 news pieces on the CNN news website to account for an in-depth analysis of whether the coverage of media ownership concentration could be described as self-centered, self-promoting, or self-legitimizing. Most of our sample studies, however, compare and contrast different types of ownership. For instance, Curran, Iyengar, Lund, and Salovaara-Moring (2009) compared public service media and commercial media across various countries and concluded that European public service television channels tended to be more news-oriented compared with contemporary channels in the United States. Whether it is an in-depth analysis of one ownership type or a comparison of different types, it is difficult to determine whether changes in journalistic content are caused by ownership or other societal conditions and developments (e.g., elections, inflation). Though this uncertainty cannot be entirely eliminated through a control group or a comparative study, it can be minimized by examining and comparing multiple forms of ownership.

Modes of Ownership Power

Most sample studies either fit Benson's (2016, 2019) four modes of power—*political instrumentalism*, *business instrumentalism*, *public service orientation*, and *audience adjustment*—or conceptualize other types of ownership influence that correspond well with Benson's framework (see Table A1). For example, Lee, Hong, Kim, Hong, and Lee (2013) examined the extent to which climate change coverage differs among privately owned companies, depending on ownership structure.

In our sample, political and business instrumentalism are the focal points of research: 18 studies analyze the former and 15 the latter—two compare both and one compares the two with public service orientation. Political instrumentalism is particularly studied in conjunction with family/individually owned media, with some studies providing clear evidence of owners' influence to promote their political interests (broadly defined). For instance, Chomsky's (2006) analysis of the Sulzberger file (see above) documents a pervasive influence by the owner on both the opinion pieces and the news content of the *NYT*. Grossman, Margalit, and Mitts (2022) and Durante and Knight (2012) provide other examples of families or individuals influencing the journalistic content of the media they own. Grossman et al. (2022) show how the reporting of the free-daily *Israel Hayom* aligns with its right-leaning owner, Sheldon Adelson. According to the study, the daily has a significant influence on the Israeli electorate and is a key reason for the rise of Likud, the right-wing political party founded by Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister and ally of Sheldon Adelson. However, political instrumentalism can also be found in news media that does not belong to families

⁶ Picard and van Weezel (2008) distinguish between private ownership (that is "individuals, partners, families, or privately held corporations" [p. 25] holding the ownership rights of a firm), publicly traded ownership (with the possibility of "selling ownership shares on stock markets" [p. 26]), foundation, charitable, or not-for-profit ownership and employee ownership (an "alternative to private and corporate ownership, particularly by labor activists and critics of excesses of capitalism" [p. 28]).

or individuals. For instance, Hedding, Miller, Abdenour, and Blankenship (2019) compared the content and quality of national political news on TV stations owned by the Sinclair Broadcast Group with that of other stations. The authors find evidence for what they call the "Sinclair Effect," that is, Sinclair stations airing more stories with "dramatic elements and political dissension" (p. 487), commentary, and partisan sources (which we interpret as a form of political instrumentalism). Closely related, but in a separate study, Blankenship and Vargo (2021) quantify the effect of Sinclair ownership by analyzing more than 340,000 news stories from six station websites, documenting a decline in number after the TV stations were acquired by Sinclair.

Business instrumentalism becomes particularly evident in corporate-owned media. Several studies have presented evidence of corporate media owners using their newsrooms to address or leave out events or issues affecting their corporate interests. A recurring theme in these studies is the question of whether the journalistic content of corporately owned media favors other companies or brands owned by the same company. For instance, Neff and Benson (2021) studied promotional economic instrumentalism (EI), which is a news organization's tendency to mention and praise its ownership interests (owners, investors, and associated economic interests). Comparing promotional EI across different ownership types, they show that "stock market-traded media mention their ownership interests most often, while conglomerates with substantial non-news media holdings combine relatively frequent mentions with a higher proportion of positive mentions than other media" (Neff & Benson, 2021, p. 2103). A second recurring research focus is the analysis of the potentially skewed news coverage of government regulations endangering the financial interests of a given media company. However, business instrumentalism has also been studied in conjunction with family or individual media ownership, for instance, in Jeff Bezos' takeover of the *Washington Post* (Weitz et al., 2019) or Rupert Murdoch's ownership of NewsCorp (Arsenault & Castells, 2008).

The remaining types of ownership power, public service orientation, and audience adjustment are studied to a lesser extent. Seven articles focus solely on public service orientation; two study it with other types of ownership power. They find that public service orientation is prevalent in publicly owned media (Benson et al., 2018; Cushion, 2021; Humprecht & Esser, 2018; Udris et al., 2020; Wouters, 2013), family/individually owned media (Rohlinger & Proffitt, 2017), and civil society-owned media (Achtenhagen, Melesko, & Ots, 2018; Harlow et al., 2022). For example, Udris et al.'s (2020) study on media in Switzerland found that hard news orientation and journalistic quality were significantly higher in public than in private and corporately owned media. Similarly, Wouters (2013) assessed the determinants of television coverage for protest events in Belgium and concluded that "[d]istinctive selection mechanisms are at work on the commercial and public broadcaster, suggesting that media ownership matters for news selection" (p. 83). Cushion (2021) points out that public service media in the United Kingdom offer more politics, public affairs, and international coverage compared with commercial media.

Among the two studies analyzing audience adjustment, Scott et al.'s (2017) findings are particularly noteworthy. They show that a shift in the ownership structures of the humanitarian news organization IRIN News (from an NGO with public funding from the United Nations to a foundation with private donors) led to a change in news coverage. Mediated by dominant professional values within the news organization, the authors interpret these changes as audience adjustment. Their findings highlight the

importance of studying public service orientation and audience adjustment in addition to political and business instrumentalism, as these avenues for research help fill current gaps.

In our sample, 11 studies examined the effects of ownership in contexts not applicable to the four modes of ownership power. For instance, Ward (2018) provided evidence that religious media conglomerates, such as the Salem Media Group in the United States, use their ownership to boost religious authorities and control access to religious goods. These studies highlight that ownership structures can be linked to other types of ownership power beyond Benson's framework.

Degree of Influence

We assessed the degree of influence in the sample studies, that is, whether ownership influence on journalistic content was detected and how strong this influence was (see section Methods: A Systematic Scoping Review). Overall, there is overwhelming evidence that ownership influences journalistic content. The majority of sample studies have identified ownership as a major factor influencing the production of news: 13 reported a weak and 33 reported a strong ownership influence (for three studies, the degree of influence was unclear). Only seven of 56 studies found no systematic and/or significant relation between the two—although the sample studies used various methodological approaches, research designs, and criteria to detect and show such influence. For instance, Jiang (2022) studied how opinion journalists in Australia assessed the Belt and Road Initiative and concluded that journalists' individual stances and experiences were more decisive than media ownership. Our analysis did not reveal any distinct correlations between the strength of the effect and specific categories (e.g., country, type of media, ownership type). Future research could investigate this aspect further.

Discussion and Conclusion

Regardless of the differences in focus and research design, our systematic scoping review of 56 sample studies shows that media ownership matters. Media owners do not simply provide structures within which editorial teams and journalists conduct their work professionally. Instead, empirical evidence strongly suggests that media ownership influences happen on a structural, institutional, and, at times, individual level.

To come to this conclusion, we first outlined our method (systematic scoping review) and sample and then analyzed the studies according to their applied methods, time periods, geographic areas, and media types. In line with our research interest, we analyzed and discussed the types of ownership, modes of ownership, and power and degree of influence across the studies in our sample. In this way, we not only systematically reviewed empirical evidence on media ownership influence but also provided an overview of scattered and methodically diverse research. However, by applying Benson's (2016, 2019) theoretical framework, we conceptualized these studies and made them fruitful for further research and discussion.

We found that researchers studying issues of the influence of media ownership on journalistic content apply various quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g., case studies, content analyses, frame

analyses, and historical research) over shorter and longer time periods (e.g., one year or less, two to five years, and six to 10 years). The focal point of interest is the state (one country) in the Western hemisphere, with a heavy bias toward North America (especially the United States) and Western Europe. Cross-country or multicountry analyses remain at the margins, as does the Global South. While the advantage of focusing on one country is an in-depth perspective on the influences of ownership within a country's broader media environment, studying different media in different countries might help with more differentiated results to show patterns within and across regions.

Furthermore, studies have examined a wide range of media types (e.g., newspapers, magazines, television, and radio), with a strong preference for newspapers and television. While research concerned with more traditional media (e.g., newspapers and television) has the advantage of long-term comparisons, potentially detecting patterns across broader timespans, the heavy focus on newspapers allows only for limited conclusions. More recent studies have focused on the effects of ownership on online news content, although this focus still remains at the margins.

Most studies in our sample focus on privately owned media, often differentiating between media owned by families or individuals and corporately owned media, partially mirroring Benson's (2016, 2019) theoretical framework. Some studies also examine the other two types of media ownership: public ownership and civil society ownership. Thus, there is a bias toward privately owned media and much need for further research examining other types.

The same holds for modes of ownership power. Various studies fit Benson's (2016, 2019) four modes of power—political instrumentalism, business instrumentalism, public service orientation, and audience adjustment—with the focal points of interest being political and business instrumentalism. In our sample, 18 studies analyzed the former, 15 the latter, and two both. Political instrumentalism is particularly studied in conjunction with family/individually owned media, with some studies providing clear evidence of owners' influence in promoting their political interests. Business instrumentalism becomes particularly evident in conjunction with corporately owned media. However, it is worth noting that business instrumentalism has also been studied mainly in relation to corporate media, leaving much room for further research relating to other ownership models. The remaining types of ownership power, public service orientation, and audience adjustment were studied less significantly.

This offers new avenues for research, especially concerning the two understudied forms of media ownership (public and civil society media, although the latter could certainly be differentiated further) and the two modes of ownership power (audience adjustment and public service orientation). These gaps in research need to be closed if the goal is to adequately inform media policy debates across different countries and national settings around desirable forms of media ownership (i.e., safeguarding the diversity of content and pluralism of opinion). In turn, future systematic reviews could add to our findings by including studies conducted in languages other than German and English (e.g., Spanish, French, and Chinese), which will most certainly broaden the scope of geographical areas while giving more attention to shifting conditions as part of the digital transformation. This would help shift the focus from international scientific research dominated by the English language to Western-centric research problems.

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Appendix

Table A1. Overview of the Reviewed Studies.

Study	Time period	Geographical area	Type of media	Type of ownership	Mode of power	Degree of influence
Achtenhagen et al. (2018)	2015–2017	Sweden	Newspaper	Civil society	PSO	++
Apuke and Omar (2021)	2020–2020	Nigeria	TV	Private		
				Public	PI	++
Archer and Clinton (2018)	2004–2008	USA	Newspaper	Private-family/individual	PI	++
Arsenault and Castells (2008)	n.d.	USA	-	Private-family/individual	BI, PI, AA	++
Bailard (2016)	2009–2011	USA	Newspaper	Private-Corporate	BI	++
Bajo et al. (2020)	2007–2011	Italy	Newspaper	Private-Corporate	BI	++
Benson et al. (2018)	2015–2016	USA, Sweden, France	Newspaper, TV, online news	Private-Corporate (Stock Market)	PSO	+
				Private-family/individual		+
				Public		+
				Civil society		++
Blankenship and Vargo (2021)	2014–2018	USA	TV	Private	PI	+
Chomsky (2006)	1956–1962	USA	Newspaper	Private-family/individual	PI	++
Couture (2013)	2011–2012	Canada	Newspaper	Private-family/individual	BI	+
Curran et al. (2009)	February–April 2007	US, UK, Denmark, Finland	TV, Newspaper	Private		N.A.
				Public		
Cushion (2021)	June 2019	UK	TV, Radio, Online	Public	PSO	+
				Private		N.A.
Dellavigna and Hermle (2017)	1985–2010	USA	Newspaper, magazine, online news, TV	Private-Corporate	BI	-

Dunaway (2008)	2004	USA	newspaper, TV	Private-Corporate (Stock Market) Private-family/individual	PI	++
Dunaway (2013)	2004–2008	USA	Newspaper	Private-Corporate (Stock Market) Private-family/individual	N.A.	++
Dunaway and Lawrence (2015)	2004–2008	USA	Newspaper	Private-family/individual Private-Corporate (Stock Market)	BI	++
Durante and Knight (2012)	2001–2007	Italy	TV	Private-family/individual Public	PI	++ +
Dybski et al. (2010)	2007	Germany	Newspaper	Private-Corporate	BI	-
Fan (2013)	1999–2005	USA	Newspaper	Private-Corporate Private-family/individual	PSO	+
Garz et al. (2023)	2014–2019	Sweden	Newspaper	Private-Corporate (Stock Market) Private-family/individual Civil society	N.A.	+
Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010)	2005	USA	Newspaper	Private	PI	+
Gilens and Hertzman (2000)	1995–1996	USA	Newspaper	Private-Corporate	BI	++
Govenden (2022)	1992, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013	South Africa	Newspaper	Private	N.A.	-
Grossman et al. (2022)	2007–2016	Israel	Newspaper	Private-family/individual	PI	++
Harlow et al. (2022)	2017–2019	Serbia, Montenegro, Guatemala, El Salvador	TV, Radio, Newspaper, Online News	Public Private Civil society	PSO PI PSO	++ + +
Hedding et al. (2019)	2018	USA	TV	Private-Corporate	PI	++
Herzog and Scerbinina (2020)	2017	USA	Online News	Private-Corporate	BI	++

Humprecht and Esser (2018)	2012	USA, UK, Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy	Newspaper, Online News	Civil society		
				Private-Corporate (Stock Market)		
				Public	PSO	++
Ji et al. (2021)	2010–2015	China	Newspaper	Private	N.A.	++
				Public		
Jiang (2022)	2013– December	Australia	Newspaper	Private	N.A.	-
Kemner et al. (2008)	2005–2006	Germany	Newspaper	Private-Corporate	BI	++
Kiwanuka-Tondo et al. (2012)	2000–2004	Uganda	Newspaper	Private-Corporate		
				Public	PI	++
Koltsova (2001)	n.d.	Russland	TV	Private-family/individual	PI	++
				Public		++
Lancaster et al. (2012)	2003–2008	Australia	Newspaper	Private; independently owned	N.A.	+
Lee et al. (2013)	2009–2011	Korea	Newspaper	Private	N.A.	++
Lee et al. (2020)	2013–2016	South Korea	TV, newspaper	Private-family/individual other	BI	++
Löblich (2011)	2008	Germany	Newspaper	unclear	BI	++
Mazumdar (2021)	2006–2007	India	Newspaper	Private-family/individual	PI, BI	-
				Private-Corporate		
				Civil society		
McKnight (2010)	1997–2007	USA, UK, Australia	Newspaper, TV	Private-family/individual	PI	+
Neff and Benson (2021)	2015–2016	USA	TV, Newspaper	Private-Corporate (Stock Market), Private-family/individual, Public, Civil society	BI	+
O'Neill (2013)	2010	USA, UK, Australia	Newspaper	Private-family/individual	PI	++
Panis et al. (2015)	2006, 2009, 2012	Belgium	Newspaper	Private	BI	+

Pritchard et al. (2008)	2004	USA	TV, Radio, Newspaper	Private	PI	-
Rafter et al. (2014)	2011	Ireland	TV, Radio	Private Public	PI	
Rennhoff and Wilbur (2012)	2005–2010	USA	Newspaper, TV	Private	N.A.	
Rohlinger and Proffitt (2017)	2000–2004	USA	Newspaper	Private Independently owned	PSO, AA	++
Schejter and Obar (2009)	2006–2007	USA	TV	Private-Corporate	BI	++
Scott et al. (2017)	2014–2015	Switzerland	online news	Civil society	AA	+
Shardow and Asare (2016)	2004–2012	Ghana	Newspaper	Private-family/individual Public	PI PI	++ ++
Stetka (2012)	2010–2011	Central and Eastern Europe	unclear	Private-family/individual	BI, PI	+
Udris et al. (2020)	2015–2019	Switzerland	TV, Radio, Newspaper, Online News	Private Public	PSO	++
Wagner and Collins (2014)	2004–2009	USA	Newspaper	Private-family/individual	PI	++
Ward (2018)	n.d.	USA	TV, Radio, Newspaper	Unclear	other: religious interests	++
Weitz et al. (2019)	2008–2017	USA	Newspaper	Private-family/individual	BI	-
Wouters (2013)	2003–2010	Belgium	TV	Public Private	PSO	++
Zeveleva (2018)	2016–2017	Ukraine; Russia	TV, Radio, Newspaper, Online News	Private Public	PI	+

Note. The abbreviations in the column “mode of power” refer to the following concepts: PI = Political instrumentalism, BI = Business instrumentalism, PSO = Public service orientation, AA = Audience adjustment.