

Media Ownership and Public Service News: How Strong Are Institutional Logics?

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Abstract

This article analyzes the extent to which diverse institutional logics (stock market, privately held, civil society, public) are linked to the exercise of one important mode of media ownership power: public service orientation. The research draws on a content analysis of a total of fifty-one news organizations in Sweden, France, and the United States, representing, respectively, Hallin and Mancini's democratic corporatist, polarized pluralist, and liberal models. We find that two types of institutional logics—affordance and homogenization—shape the amount and type of public-service-oriented news. On average, public-service-oriented news was highest at civil-society-owned media, but there was significant variation within this category: We call this kind of institutional logic an affordance logic because it affords but does not guarantee a certain kind of news content. Public media, on the other hand, exhibited the least deviation across outlets within each country, thus exemplifying a strong homogenization logic. All forms of ownership, but especially privately held and civil society media, exhibited significant variations across individual organizations. Economic field dominance, as in the United States, did not produce greater homogenization across ownership fields as predicted by field theory.

Keywords

media ownership, journalism, public service orientation, investigative reporting, civil society media, stock market traded news companies, privately held news companies, public media, content analysis, comparative research, Sweden, the United States, France

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Previous research on media ownership has tended to be dominated by either critical profiles of powerful individual “media moguls” (Tunstall and Palmer 1991) or broad macro-studies of media industry concentration (Bagdikian 2004; Noam 2009). Too often, this type of ownership research is “too narrow” and ignores variation both within and outside the dominant commercial media: It leaves to the side questions about “whether other ownership forms” such as nonprofit or public ownership would be more oriented toward civic values than the dominant commercial media (Baker 1994: 12). Building on Picard and van Weezel’s (2008: 29–30) call for “more systematic and controlled comparison of performance of actual [media] firms in the various forms of ownership,” this article proposes and illustrates a different approach to media ownership research.

Our analysis focuses on measuring the strength of institutional logics, finding that institutional logics tend to differentiate less-commercialized media from commercial media but that these dynamics play out within national contexts that display varying levels of field uniformity. In addition, we find that institutional logics are multidimensional, and we, therefore, distinguish “affordance” logics from “homogenization” logics. Where affordance logics enable some news outlets within a form of ownership to deepen their public service orientation by producing certain types of news at higher rates (e.g., investigative reporting), homogenization logics contribute to uniformity among news outlets within an ownership form. The article, thus, contributes an original framework for studying the relative influence on “public service” news content (investigative journalism, focus on public affairs, ideological diversity, and international voices) exerted by institutional forms of ownership and the national fields of journalism within which these forms are embedded.

Empirically, we bring together quantitative content analysis and a critical synthesis of the international scholarly literature to analyze media ownership power in three western democratic nation-states—the United States, Sweden, and France. These three nation-states share many common characteristics as relatively prosperous capitalist democratic polities, with broadly similar intellectual and cultural heritages. They are also representatives of three distinct western “media systems”—liberal (pro-market), democratic corporatist, and polarized pluralist, respectively—identified by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini in their landmark study *Comparing Media Systems* (Hallin and Mancini 2004). A cross-national research design allows us to see how institutional logics vary across national contexts and how institutional and organizational logics interact.

How does ownership matter in relation to actual news content? Drawing on a close reading of the scholarly literature (e.g., Bagdikian 2004; Benson and Powers 2011; Breed 1955; Brüggemann et al. 2012; Chomsky 1999; Cranberg et al. 2001; Picard and van Weezel 2008), trade industry press, publisher and editor memoirs and biographies (e.g., Graham 1997; O’Shea 2011; Tiftt and Jones 2000), and semi-structured interviews with more than 60 publishers, editors, and reporters in the U.S., France, and Sweden, three broad modes of ownership power were identified: political instrumentalism, economic instrumentalism, and public service orientation (see also Benson 2016). Political instrumentalism includes either overt or covert attempts to use a media

outlet to promote or attack politicians, social movements, and/or issues of special concern to the owners, via news coverage or opinion commentary that tends to provide a disproportionate amount or unbalanced positive or negative valence to these actors or issues. Economic instrumentalism is the strategic use of a media outlet to achieve owners' short-term or long-term profit goals, primarily by adjusting content to perceived audience demand but also potentially by ethically questionable practices, such as publicizing or failing to publicize events or topics related to one's own business concerns or those of one's competitors. Public service *orientation*, the focus of this paper, is indicated by ongoing investment in reporting and commentary that serves normative ideals of watchdog journalism, public affairs information, and/or ideological diversity.

These modes of media ownership power are analytically distinct but may be empirically intertwined. For instance, for some newspapers serving elite audiences, high-quality public-service-oriented news may be congruent with economic instrumentalist goals to increase the size of their high income/high education audiences, whose subscriptions or desirability for advertisers may also lead to greater revenues and profits (see, for example, Socolow 2010). Similarly, in an increasingly fragmented online news environment, overt political instrumentalism and partisanship may serve to attract and keep audiences. However, some media may pursue public service or political goals in spite of or against any economic reasoning.

The premise of this article is that exercise of these modes of ownership power may systematically vary by the form or "institutional logic" of ownership, as discussed in the following section.

Institutional Logics of Media Ownership

Society is composed of differentiated institutional orders or fields (Bourdieu 2005; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Thornton et al. 2012): These are semiautonomous social worlds each with their own unique modes of action and standards of excellence and virtue. Journalism is a field, with a distinctive ethos and logic of practice. But journalists rarely own the organizations they work for. Journalistic practice as a result may vary significantly depending on the originating field of a given news organization's form of ownership.

Most media owners in western industrialized democracies are linked to the economic field, selling news to generate profits. One important variation within this ownership form is between media companies that are traded on the stock market and those that are privately held, often by wealthy individuals or families. The latter are somewhat insulated from stock market demands for profit maximization (Cranberg et al. 2001; Picard and van Weezel 2008).

In Western Europe, the state—or a quasi-state agency—is also an important owner of media: Public service broadcasters such as the BBC in the United Kingdom, SVT in Sweden, and ZDF in Germany are representative of this ownership form, in which funding is also generally derived from a dedicated license fee or other tax revenues. In this ownership form, commercial pressures are less although not always completely

absent (as in cases where there is partial dependence on advertising) (Benson et al. 2017; Cushion 2012).

Civil society—churches and other religious groups, labor unions, political parties, arts societies, and other types of associations—constitutes a final form of ownership that is really a constellation of forms. A religious organization may have different practices and values than a labor union. At the same time, civil society ownership, across its many subtypes, is likely to share with public ownership a certain distance from commercial pressures: Nonearned income such as foundation and donor contributions may make up the lion's share of revenue, and there is no pressure to generate profits for shareholders (Benson 2017). In some cases, however, civil-society-owned media (the U.S. *Christian Science Monitor* or Swedish foundation-owned newspapers *Norran*, *Barometern*, and *Gefle Dagblad*) may operate commercial news operations: Although not required to maximize profits, such “hybrid” civil society media compete in the same market for advertisers and paying audiences as commercial media and, thus, are subject to similar if somewhat lesser constraints.

To what extent can diversity-of-ownership forms promote diversity-of-journalistic practices? Here, one enters the debate between the relatively pluralist “institutional logics” model (Thornton et al. 2012) on one hand and the hierarchically ordered “field theory” (Bourdieu 2005) on the other. From the institutional logics perspective, society is composed of multiple “socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences.” The institutional orders of family, religion, state, market, professions, corporation, and community each provide “unique organizing principles, practices, and symbols that influence individual and organizational behavior” (Thornton et al. 2012: 2). Thus, all else equal, a media outlet owned by a religious organization would legitimize itself through adherence to shared sacred values, a market-owned outlet would emphasize economic self-interest, and a state-owned outlet would seek to maximize democratic participation (Thornton et al. 2012: 73).

Bourdieu uses different terminology and categories but likewise sees society as divided into multiple semiautonomous social “fields” (economic, political, cultural production, religious, etc.). Bourdieu, however, sees these fields as organized in a hierarchical order, in which one field—at this historical moment across most western societies, the economic field—imposes its logic of practice to a greater or lesser degree on all other fields. Previous research (Benson 2013) on the French and U.S. journalistic fields also tends to support the existence of such hierarchies, emphasizing the relative difference between the French and U.S. national hierarchies: Whereas market logics are overwhelmingly dominant in the United States, they are countered to a substantial extent by “civic solidarity” logics in France (emphasizing equality and nonmaterialist reciprocity over efficiency and individual performance, similar to Thornton et al.'s “community” logic; see Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Research on Sweden suggests a more mixed scenario, in which market and civic solidarity logics seem to coexist in a semistable equilibrium (Allern and Blach-Ørsten 2011; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Ohlsson 2012). Field theory also emphasizes that journalism itself is a

field, and thus journalistic practices will be shaped both by external ownership and funding constraints, and the internal logic of the national journalistic field rooted in its history and at least partially shared by all news organizations.

From the institutional logics perspective, a diversity of ownership forms linked to different institutional logics will account for most differences in the uses of various modes of ownership power (in this case, public service orientation). From the perspective of the hierarchical field model, whatever the ownership field origin, media practices will also be mediated by the dominant national field: in the United States, the economic field; in France and Sweden, to a greater extent by the state bureaucracy and civil society, governed partially by a civic solidarity logic. Field theory would, thus, suggest a certain degree of uniformity across fields, with the direction of uniformity different in the United States than in France and Sweden.

A third perspective emphasizes the complex contingencies of history, place, and other circumstances that make every individual news organization distinct. An exemplar of this approach is Boczkowski's (2005) comparison of the adoption of digital technologies by three U.S. news organizations, in which he explained cross-outlet differences by reference to local contextual factors such as the relationship between the online and print newsrooms and conceptions of the audience as inscribed in web interface designs. Likewise, one can observe that despite sharing the same ownership form (publicly traded, with family control of voting stock) over several decades, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* often diverged in their business and professional paths due to their unique organizational histories, management strategies, and local market conditions. If the "organizational contingency" view is correct, we should expect to find substantial variation across all outlets and some degree of unpredictability in the type of news content found in various news outlets, regardless of institutional or national logic. Expressing this perspective, Picard and van Weezel (2008: 29) write, "[Institutional] ownership form itself is not a necessary and sufficient condition for good performance in the public interest, and both good and poor performance can result under all forms."

Public Service Orientation: Previous Research Comparing Forms of Ownership

In scholarly assessments of the democratic normative purposes of journalism, public-service-oriented news is associated with a number of aspects of news content, most commonly news that is in-depth and contextualized, that conveys a wide and balanced range of voices and viewpoints, and that holds accountable the powerful, generally through investigative reporting (Christians et al. 2009). Previous content analysis studies have attempted to measure the degree to which various types of news organizations include or do not include such elements of public service news content.

One consistent finding has been that strong and independent public media (such as those found in western and northern Europe) offer more public affairs and international news, more in-depth news, a greater diversity of speakers and viewpoints, and

more critical news than commercial broadcasters; research has also shown that in democracies with strong legal press protections, newspapers that receive content-neutral subsidies offer more in-depth news and tend to be as critical or even more critical of government than purely commercial newspapers (Albæk et al. 2014; Benson 2013; Benson and Powers 2011; Cushion 2012). When created and funded in ways designed to create firewalls against excessive market or political pressures (again, as is the case in Scandinavia, Germany, and Great Britain), public media offer the clearest proof that the form of media ownership can matter in relation to the production of public service news content.

Although both stock market traded and privately held companies may be large corporations, the stock market traded company is different in that it is obligated to maximize shareholder value. In theory, trading on the stock market provides the company with more resources to invest; it also encourages financial discipline to make the company less wasteful and more efficient (Picard and van Weezel 2008). In practice, stock market traded companies often achieve higher profits by cutting newsroom budgets and reducing the amount and quality of their public service news (Cranberg et al. 2001).

Studies comparing “independent” (often family owned) and “chain-owned” (a rough proxy for stock market traded) newspapers have generally shown that the latter place a higher emphasis on profits over professional or community goals and have smaller news staff (Edmonds 2004); Rohlinger and Proffitt (2016) show that “independently owned newspapers cover controversial ideas more often” than their corporate chain-owned counterparts. In a study of political campaign news coverage, Dunaway (2008) found that stock market traded corporate ownership was associated with lower substantive issue coverage than privately held ownership both for newspapers and television news.

One variant of stock market traded ownership is the “dual-stock” structure established by the founding families at the *New York Times* (Sulzbergers), *Washington Post* (Grahams), and *Wall Street Journal* (Bancrofts). Of the three, only the *Times* still has this structure, in which the family controls voting shares, while nonvoting shares are sold to the public. This kind of “responsible” family control of stock market traded companies has been widely viewed as at least partially responsible for the commitment to quality news at these leading national news organizations (Tifft and Jones 2000). However, it must also be acknowledged that there are cases of family-owned newspapers (either entirely privately held or with dual stock structures) whose public service records are not clearly superior to those of stock market traded companies (Cranberg et al. 2001).

Like taxpayer-supported public service media, civil society media often have strong public service orientations (Konieczna 2018); in France and Sweden, however, such orientations may also be joined to well-entrenched partisan identities (Allern and Blach-Ørsten 2011; Benson 2013). Because they do not have to distribute profits to shareholders, Swedish foundation-owned (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2011: 304) or U.S. charitable nonprofit media can and often do spend a higher proportion of revenues on their newsrooms. A study by the Knight Foundation (2013) of eighteen nonprofits, representing local (e.g., MinnPost, Voice of San Diego), state (Texas Tribune),

and national investigative organizations (ProPublica), found that they devoted from 34 to 85 percent of their budgets to editorial, compared with an average for commercial news outlets of 12 to 16 percent (Doctor 2013). In a comprehensive survey of 172 U.S. nonprofit news organizations founded since 1987, the Pew Research Center (2013: 6) showed that more than half focus on investigative reporting, government, or public and foreign affairs. In the United States, however, the overall public service impact of nonprofit news outlets may be limited given their generally small (and elite) audience reach and precarious financing (Benson 2017). The literature does not speak to the question of international news, but one might expect that civil society media focused on international issues would indeed produce more and higher quality international news articles than their commercial counterparts (see, for example, Seo 2016).

Method

In this section, we first provide an overview of how outlets were identified for inclusion in the research and then detail how content was collected and analyzed to measure the public service orientation of these outlets.

Sampling Procedure

News outlets were selected to represent roughly comparable ownership types in the United States, France, and Sweden: stock market traded, privately held, civil society (nonprofit, foundation-owned, etc.), and public (owned by a governmental or quasi-governmental body, and at least partially supported by citizen “license fees” or general tax revenues). The analysis includes an additional subvariant within the stock market traded ownership type: dominant shareholder, composed of commercial news outlets in which a single individual or family holds a dominant interest. Ownership type refers to the ultimate holding company, which may not be equivalent to the individual outlet: for example, in Sweden, it is the Norwegian company Schibsted, not the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, that is publicly traded, and *Svenska Dagbladet* is one of several newspapers owned by Schibsted. Some outlets bridge ownership types, especially between the privately held and civil society categories: Keeping in mind national context, we sought to locate the outlet in relation to its dominant ownership logic. Given that legacy mediums (TV, radio, print) now compete and cooperate alongside digital native websites, both legacy and digital-only outlets were included in the sample, for the sake of comprehensiveness and the general lack of distinctions made by both producers and audiences in relation to online news content. To be clear, the goal is not to provide an exhaustive, large representative sample, but rather to draw on a variation-rich small sample of influential, major outlets for detailed, contextualized analysis. For all outlets, only online news textual content was analyzed. (See Table 1 for a list of outlets included in the study and Supplementary Material online appendix for outlet ownership information along with additional tables.)¹

Online audience composition in terms of education (college degree or higher) and income (\$60K or equivalent) for each of the news outlets’ websites did not vary

Table 1. List of Sampled Media Organizations by Ownership Form and National Media System.

Ownership Form	The United States	Sweden	France
Stock market traded	<i>Los Angeles Times</i> <i>USA Today</i> ABC CNN Huffington Post	<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	TF 1
Stock market traded with dominant shareholder	<i>New York Times</i> <i>Metro</i> ^a CBS News Fox News Slate	<i>Metro</i> ^a	<i>Le Figaro</i> Le Huffington Post <i>Metro</i> ^a
Privately held	<i>Washington Post</i> <i>Minneapolis Star-Tribune</i> Buzzfeed Vice	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> <i>Göteborgs-Posten</i> <i>Jönköpings-Posten</i> ETC. Kit.se <i>Nyheter24</i>	<i>Ouest-France</i> <i>Le Monde</i> <i>Liberation</i> Rue89 Slate.fr Vice France
Civil society	<i>Christian Science Monitor</i> CIR/Reveal MinnPost ProPublica Texas Tribune	<i>Dagen</i> <i>Norran</i> <i>Barometern</i> <i>Gefle Dagblad</i> <i>Dagens Arena</i>	<i>La Croix</i> <i>L'Humanité</i> Mediapart
Public	NPR PBS	sr.se svt.se	France info Francetvinfo

Note. Italics indicate print legacy media.

^aMetro was owned by the publicly traded company Kinnevik (with dominant shareholders Cristina Stenbeck with companies and founding families Klingspor Family and von Horn Family) during our sample period, but as of February 2017 has been owned by the privately held company Custos AB.

substantially, as best we could determine from estimates for online audiences relative to the average Internet population gathered by Alexa.com on January 30, 2017. For the U.S. sample, “high confidence” estimates were available for all sampled outlets and only BuzzFeed and Vice.com had online audiences with average education and income indexes more than 10 percent below the national mean of sampled outlets. For the Swedish sample, sample sizes were too small for “high confidence” estimates; most outlets had only “low confidence” estimates, and those larger outlets that were able to attain “medium confidence” estimates were generally within 10 percent above or below the national mean. Finally, for the French sample, “high confidence” estimates were available for more than half of outlets and none of these outlets were more than or less than 10 percent outside of the national mean; those with medium or low

confidence estimates also were within 10 percent of the national mean. Previous research has found substantial audience differences between self-described elite and popular print newspapers (Benson 2013); to prevent such large audience differences from affecting our findings, media outlets explicitly targeted to mass lower-middle or working class audiences were not included in the samples. Moreover, online audiences may be different from print audiences and, given the ease with which audiences move from one website to the next, may also be generally more homogeneous (at least for content not behind a paywall, which is the focus of this study, with the exception of *Mediapart*, whose content is only available to subscribers). Overall, Internet users are a more elite group (significantly more likely to have a college education and to make more than \$75,000 per year) than non-Internet users, who still make up one in six adults in the United States (Perrin and Duggan 2015). This difference should be kept in mind when interpreting the *Alexa.com* indexes, which are based only on Internet users.

Gathering Content

PDFs of news items from each news outlet were gathered for a “constructed business week” of five noncontiguous days, spread over six months: Friday, December 11, 2015; Wednesday, February 24, 2016; Thursday, March 31, 2016; Monday, May 9, 2016; and Tuesday, June 14, 2016. The five days were randomly selected and coincide with a broad range of news events: political campaigns, proposed legislation, protests, crimes, scandals, and new business offerings and products, just to name a few. No single news event comprised more than 10 percent of the articles gathered on a single day for any of the national samples (French, Swedish, U.S.), with the exception of the June 14, 2016 U.S. coverage in which 28 percent of coverage was devoted to the Pulse nightclub shootings in Orlando, Florida. Swedish and French media also covered this shooting, though not as much. The sample was drawn during the period of U.S. political party primaries, but only one of the sample dates was taken the day after a primary election (Nevada Republican caucus, February 24, 2016). Political party news was also common in Sweden and France during our sample period.

On each day, the sample included the most prominent (based on placement, headline size, and photo accompaniment) general news, business, and opinion items, with the goal of drawing five from each category. However, some outlets produced few or no business or opinion articles, in which case additional news articles if available may have been drawn to round out the sample. Therefore, the overall samples broadly reflect the differential production of general news, business news, and opinion from outlet to outlet and cross-nationally. All three national samples had roughly similar percentages of opinion articles (Sweden 29.8 percent, the United States 26.1 percent, and France 21.2 percent). The Swedish sample had far more general than business news (60.3 percent vs. 10 percent), whereas the United States (37.5 percent vs. 36.5 percent) and French samples (45.6 percent vs. 33.3 percent) were more evenly balanced between the two. As we will see, however, this Swedish difference in sample

composition does not appear to have substantially biased the findings. Historically, business news has tended to be less oriented toward investigative reporting than political reporting (Starkman 2014), and yet the U.S. and French samples with their greater proportions of business news contain as many or more investigative articles as the Swedish sample. More “general” over “business” news could conceivably contribute to more public-affairs-focused articles or a greater proportion of civil society or international speakers, yet the Swedish sample is not the highest of the three national samples in any of these indicators of public service orientation.

Our selection process did not allow us to measure the comparative overall volume of public-affairs-oriented news, arguably one of the key differences between better-funded commercial media over some civil society and public media. However, our method did capture the degree of public affairs orientation of the most prominently displayed news items on each homepage, which will generally be the items most likely to circulate and be read by large audiences regardless of the volume of other items produced.

This process resulted in the selection of a maximum of seventy-five pieces of content for each news outlet. The final sample included 1,401 articles from twenty-one U.S. outlets, 926 from fifteen French outlets, and 1,125 from fifteen Swedish outlets.

Measures of Public Service Orientation

To measure public service orientation, the following indicators were used: (1) proportion of articles including investigative reporting, (2) proportion of articles focused on public affairs, (3) proportion of civil society actors in relation to all actors mentioned (as an indicator of ideological diversity), and (4) proportion of foreign or international actors in relation to all actors mentioned (as an indicator of international orientation).

Investigative reporting included any article that involved journalistic initiative to hold government, business, or the nonprofit world to account for its words or deeds (e.g., from the December 2015 sample: “Small-scale violations of medical privacy often cause the most harm,” ProPublica, and “College sports’ fastest-rising expense: Paying coaches not to work,” *Washington Post*). An article was focused on public affairs when its primary (though perhaps not exclusive) focus concerned one or more of the following topics: national domestic politics/policy, local or regional politics/policy, national foreign politics/policy, and international affairs (distinguished from national foreign politics/policy by the absence of a connection to the home nation-state of the media outlet). Civil society actors included the following groups and/or associated individuals: labor unions, social movements, academics, media (when cited within an article), entertainers, artists or sports figures or organizations, religious organizations, and other voluntary associations, both domestic and foreign. Foreign/international actors included international bodies such as the UN, World Trade Organization (WTO), and so on, as well as foreign governments, businesses, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or other civil society actors (thus, incorporating a small degree of overlap with the civil society category).

Content Analysis Process

A person either native to the country or fluent in that nation-state's main language coded the appropriate sample.² Coders participated in multiple pre-tests to clarify coding rules and establish adequate intercoder reliability; coders consulted throughout the process as questions of interpretation rose. A postsample reliability test taken by the study's three coders showed the following in relation to the variables tested in this study: Holsti's agreement scores (average of three two-way comparisons) of 95 percent for investigative reporting, 82 percent for public affairs focus, 93 percent for civil society actor mentions, and 98 percent for foreign/international actor mentions.

The figures for "civil society" and "foreign/international" actors in this paper stem from the identification and coding of "actors" within the first five paragraphs and last two paragraphs of the content.³ To be coded, a noun indicating the presence of an actor must refer to a specific individual or group. For example, "terrorists" would not be coded if the reference is to terrorists in general, but it would be coded if the word refers to a specific group such as ISIS. There are a total of 11,881 actors in the U.S. sample, 7,619 actors in the French sample, and 9,547 actors in the Swedish sample.

Each actor was categorized to indicate its institutional category. The codebook included thirty-eight categories, such as "mainstream left political party," "mainstream right political party," "bureaucracy," "business," "law enforcement," and "unaffiliated." Aggregate categories, used in this paper, were then created after the coding was finished to capture larger groupings of actors relevant to the analysis.

Deviation Index (DI)

A "deviation index" (Hellman 2001) is used to measure the difference between sampled outlets: (1) between outlets in a given ownership type and (2) between all outlets in a given national journalistic field. The DI (also called "mean absolute deviation") is calculated by subtracting the average (in decimal form) of a given variable's categories (e.g., percentage of articles with a public affairs focus) in one outlet from the corresponding average in another outlet, and then summing and averaging the differences across multiple outlets; these calculations are performed for all outlets in a given ownership category (e.g., civil society) to calculate the degree of diversity/isomorphism of an institutional logic, and also for all outlets across the entire national sample, to calculate the degree of diversity/isomorphism of a national field logic. The highest possible score is 1.0, while the lowest is 0 (indicating no deviation at all): the higher the score, the greater the deviation between news outlets. For the purposes of this investigation, a *stronger* (homogenization) logic is indicated by *lesser* deviation between news outlets and, thus, by *lower* DI scores. Another measure used to assess deviation across outlets is standard deviation, which produced slightly different numbers but revealed the same pattern of findings.

Findings

The United States

In the United States, investigative reporting was highest at civil society media, led by the CIR [Center for Investigative Reporting]/Reveal and ProPublica,⁴ appearing on average in one-fifth (21.3 percent) for this ownership category. Other types of media followed at some distance: privately held (2.1 percent), total stock market traded, including with dominant shareholder (1.4 percent), and public media (0.0 percent). (See Table 2 for means for each ownership category [with the “dominant shareholder” variant included in “total stock market” traded media given that we did not find substantial or consistent differences between the two sub-types of stock market traded media] for all three national media systems.) Within these categories, only a few outlets stood out for relatively greater emphasis on investigative reporting: Huffington Post (5.3 percent) and *Washington Post* (4.0 percent), but given the relatively small *N*s, the differences with other outlets were not substantial. Although the numbers are not large, the U.S. field is distinctive from the Swedish and French fields (as we will see), in that a relatively high percentage of outlets have at least *some* investigative reporting.

Public-affairs-focused coverage was highest at civil society and public media, making up 52.9 and 45.3 percent of total coverage on average, respectively. Commercial media lagged behind, and there was little difference between total stock market traded (38.2 percent) and privately held media (35.6 percent). This cross-institutional differentiation is strongest when we hold constant for television as the legacy medium: Public PBS, with 46.7 percent of its coverage focused on public affairs, provides a strong contrast with stock market traded ABC News (20.0 percent) and CBS News (30.9 percent).

Mentions of civil society actors, an indicator of ideological diversity in the news, was highest at civil society media (29.1 percent) and public media (26.9 percent), followed by privately held media (20.2 percent) and stock market traded media (18.8 percent). Again, the public/nonprofit versus commercial distinction comes into sharp relief when we compare PBS (35.9 percent) with its closest commercial television homologues ABC News (19.2 percent) and CBS News (18.0 percent).

Mentions of foreign and international actors did not differ dramatically by type of news organization: Foreign/international actors made up 17.4 percent of mentions in the privately held media sample, followed by 12.5 percent at civil society media, 12.4 percent at public media, and 12.3 percent at stock market traded media. What is perhaps most striking here is the relatively low level of foreign/international actor mentions across the national field, with two exceptions: the *Christian Science Monitor* (45.0 percent), which has long specialized in international affairs, and *Vice* (38.3 percent), which is a relative newcomer but which has also made an international focus a major part of its “brand” (Ip 2015).

These averages do not take into account the degree of variation within news ownership categories, which was sometimes substantial. Although civil society media produced by

Table 2. Public Service Orientation Indicator Means and Significant Negative Divergence^a of Ownership Form Deviation Indexes from National Deviation Indexes.

Ownership Form	Countries (N Articles, Actor Mentions)	Investigative Reporting	Public Affairs Focus	Civil Society Actor Mentions	Foreign/International Actor Mentions	Total Average: Public Service Orientation ^c
Total stock market ^b	The United States (679; 5,714)	1.4% (-0.087)	38.2%	18.8%	12.3%	17.7%
	Sweden (150; 1,349)	0.7%	38.7%	25.6%	(-0.048) 31.7%	24.2%
	France (234; 1,950)	0.6%	31.8%	31.4%	(-0.109) 32.6%	24.1%
	Average^c	0.9%	36.2%	25.3%	(-0.099) 25.5%	22.0%
Privately held	The United States (294; 2,590)	2.1% (-0.084)	35.6%	20.2%	17.4%	18.8%
	Sweden (450; 3,697)	0.2%	34.7%	26.3%	24.6%	21.5%
	France (382; 3,119)	0.9%	40.6%	28.6%	48.7%	29.7%
	Average	1.1%	37.0%	25.0%	30.2%	23.3%
Civil society	The United States (318; 2,635)	21.3%	52.9%	29.1%	12.5%	29.0%
	Sweden (375; 3,153)	1.9%	46.1%	29.8%	16.1%	23.5%
	France (211; 1,757)	2.8%	44.6%	24.9%	30.4%	25.7%
	Average	8.7%	47.9%	27.9%	(-0.043) 19.7%	26.0%

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Ownership Form	Countries (N Articles, Actor Mentions)	Investigative Reporting	Public Affairs Focus	Civil Society Actor Mentions	Foreign/International Actor Mentions	Total Average: Public Service Orientation ^c
Public media	The United States (110; 942)	0.0% (-0.107)	45.3% (-0.129)	26.9%	12.4%	21.2%
	Sweden (150; 1,348)	3.3%	38.0%	24.6% (-0.120)	35.7% (-0.073)	25.4%
	France (99; 793)	1.0%	19.2% (-0.095)	27.3% (-0.065)	24.9% (-0.061)	18.1%
	Average	1.4%	34.2%	26.3%	24.3%	21.6%
National averages	The United States (1,401; 11,881)	6.1%	41.9%	22.2%	13.3%	20.9%
	Sweden (1,125; 9,547)	1.2%	39.5%	27.1%	24.2%	23.0%
	France (926; 7,619)	1.2%	36.2%	28.4%	37.6%	25.9%

^aDJ relative scores in bold are substantially lower (approaching or exceeding -0.050 rounded) than the national averages, thus suggesting that the institutional logic is stronger than the national logic.

^bTotal Stock Market includes both "Stock Market Traded" and "Stock Market Traded with Dominant Shareholder."

^cSo that ownership forms or media systems with larger samples do not dominate the analyses, total averages equally weight each of the sub-total averages.

far the largest amount of investigative reporting, there were substantial variations within this category (DI of 0.333). On one hand, around half of the CIR/Reveal (62.7 percent) and ProPublica (40.9 percent) samples consisted of investigative reporting; on the other hand, the *Christian Science Monitor* and Texas Tribune had no investigative reporting, and MinnPost (2.7 percent) had only a tiny amount (about the same as the most investigative-oriented commercial media).

Despite this wide variation, it would be a misinterpretation of the findings to deny that there is a link between civil society ownership and investigative reporting in the United States. While the civil society DI was much higher than other categories, and higher than the national field score, it was only in the civil society category that we see any news organizations with such a high proportion of investigative reporting.

Civil society and public media had the highest proportion of public-affairs-focused articles, on average, and variation within these categories also tended to be low. One sees a strong institutional logic at work in U.S. public media (DI of 0.027, well below the U.S. total DI of 0.156 for public-affairs-focused content). Variation within the civil society media category (0.165) is not substantially different from stock market traded media (0.154) and privately held media (0.195), but this figure is not as important as the fact that *all* of the civil society news organizations in the sample had higher percentages of public affairs articles than the averages for commercial media. Going beyond the aggregate numbers, a few outlets within the commercial media categories stand out. The *New York Times* (54.7 percent), Slate.com (55.6 percent), and the *Washington Post* (52.0 percent) are notable for their emphasis on public affairs well above the national mean of 41.9 percent: Two of these outlets are fabled legacy newspapers with either family trust control of shares (*Times*) or private control (*Post*) publicly committed to quality public affairs reporting; Slate was founded by Microsoft with the explicit goal of covering politics and is now owned by Graham Holdings (via the Slate Group), the family company with majority shareholder control of the *Washington Post* until it sold to Jeff Bezos in 2013.

Sweden

In Sweden, overall levels of investigative reporting were much lower than in the United States, and the difference across ownership categories was quite small. We do see, however, a slightly greater prevalence of investigative reporting in civil society (1.9 percent) and public media (3.3 percent) than in privately held (0.2 percent) and stock market traded (0.7 percent) media. Although the percentages are not large, these figures also suggest important cross-national differences in public media; Swedish public media may offer more investigative reporting than U.S. public media, because of the relatively greater legal and regulatory protections afforded to public media in Sweden and in other Nordic countries (Benson et al. 2017).⁵ These figures also show the importance of taking into account broader contexts in interpreting findings based on a single constructed week sample. *Dagens Nyheter* is well known in Sweden for its well-funded investigative team and yet had zero investigative reports on these particular sampled days (in similar fashion, the *New York Times*, clearly a U.S. leader in

investigative reporting, only had 1.3 percent in the U.S. sample). The overall trend that should be noted is that on a typical news day, investigative reporting makes up only a very small percentage of the top news articles. The major exception, in this study, are U.S. nonprofit websites such as ProPublica and CIR/Reveal, which are by design almost entirely dedicated to investigative reporting.

Public affairs focus was highest in Sweden for civil society media (46.1 percent), followed by stock market traded (38.7 percent), public (38.0 percent), and privately held (34.7 percent) media. The privately held ETC. (49.3 percent) and the civil society Dagens Arena (70.7 percent) stood out for well above average attention to public affairs: Both are politically focused news organizations identified with the left. Within the public media category, the legacy radio Sr.se focused on public affairs twice as much as the legacy television Svt.se (50.7 percent versus 25.3 percent, respectively): This difference reflects a parting of the ways between the two branches, with public radio (particularly the national radio channel P1) continuing to focus almost exclusively on news and in-depth reporting, whereas public television has sought to broaden its appeal in recent years due to commercial competition.

Civil society actors were mentioned most often in civil society media (29.8 percent), with other ownership categories following behind by a slight amount and bunched together: privately held (26.3 percent), stock market (25.6 percent), and public (24.6 percent). In contrast, there were more substantial gaps in the amount of foreign/international actor mentions, with public media and stock market media leading the way (35.7 and 31.7 percent, respectively), followed by privately held media (24.6 percent) and, at some distance, civil society media (16.1 percent): This finding may be explained in part by the strong presence of local newspapers in our samples of the latter two categories.

In Sweden, variation within ownership categories tended to be greater than variation across the entire sampled journalistic field, thus indicating relatively weak ownership institutional logics. The main exception was for foreign/international actor mentions (see Table 2.)

France

In France, investigative reporting, led by Mediapart (6.8 percent), was highest at civil society media with 2.8 percent overall, followed by public media (1.0 percent), privately held media (0.9 percent), and stock market traded media (0.6 percent). Only Mediapart (civil society/independently privately held) and *Le Monde* (privately held) had more than one investigative article; most French media outlets in the sample had none.

Civil-society-owned media also had the highest proportion of public-affairs-focused news: 44.6 percent on average, only slightly above the 40.6 percent for privately held media, and followed at a greater distance by stock market traded media (31.8 percent) and public media (19.2 percent). When we hold constant for legacy media origin, however, we see that the public Francetvinfo.com (22.0 percent) is higher than the stock market traded TF 1 (14.0 percent).

Table 3. Average Total Public Service Orientation Percentages by Ownership Institutional Logic.

	The United States	Sweden	France	Cross-National Average
	CS 29.0%	PM 25.4%	PH 29.7%	CS 26.0%
	PM 21.2%	SM 24.2%	CS 25.7%	PH 23.3%
	PH 18.8%	CS 23.5%	SM 24.1%	SM 22.0%
	SM 17.7%	PH 21.5%	PM 18.1%	PM 21.6%
High-low percentage point gap	11.3	3.9	11.6	4.4

Note. SM = stock market; PH = privately held; CS = civil society; PM = public media.

Civil society actors appeared most frequently in stock market traded media coverage (31.4 percent), followed by privately held (28.6 percent), public (27.3 percent), and civil society (24.9 percent) media. Foreign/international actors were mentioned most often by privately held media (48.7 percent), followed at some distance by stock market traded (32.6 percent), civil society (30.4 percent), and public (24.9 percent) media.

Judging by relative DI levels—that is, the net difference between the DI for each ownership category and the French journalistic field as a whole—public media demonstrated the strongest institutional logic. For public affairs focus, civil society actor mentions, and foreign/international actor mentions, the average deviation between the two public media outlets was less than for the entire French journalistic field sample. These findings need to be tempered, however, by the fact that French public media tended to have lower overall averages than other ownership types, thus indicating a *weaker* overall public service orientation—related, probably, to the weaker relative autonomy of French public media to political and economic pressures compared with Swedish public media (Benson et al. 2017). For foreign/international actor mentions, stock market traded and civil society media were also more homogeneous than the French sample as a whole. However, this finding is somewhat misleading: Privately held media, by far, had the most mentions of foreign/international actors, averaging 48.7 percent of all actor mentions, and all of the outlets in this category save one (*Ouest-France*) had percentages well above those for all other French news organizations. Thus, it would be more accurate in this case to say that privately held French media had the strongest tendency to emphasize foreign/international sources.

Variations in Institutional and Organizational Logics across National Fields

This study shows that public service orientation (as indicated by investigative reporting, public affairs focus, and civil society and foreign/international source mentions) can vary substantially across ownership institutional logics. Averaging the

percentages of the four news content indicators, civil-society-owned media have the strongest public service orientation (26.0 percent) followed by privately held media (23.3 percent), stock market traded media (22.0 percent), and public media (21.6 percent) (see Table 3). Civil society media tend to have stronger public service orientations than other types of media for three aspects of public service orientation in all three countries (see Table 2): investigative reporting (with the exception of Sweden, where public media narrowly outpaced civil society media), public affairs focus, and civil society actor mentions. Privately held media in the United States and France gave the greatest proportions of source mentions to foreign/international actors, whereas public media was again highest in Sweden.

Analysis of DIs provides a different way to compare the relative power of national, institutional, and organizational media ownership logics. The numbers in parentheses underneath the percentages in Table 2 indicate those instances when DIs for forms of ownership (institutional logics) were substantially less than for the national sample as a whole (national field logic), thus indicating that institutional ownership logics were stronger than national field logics. Using this measure, public media exhibit the strongest institutional logic (seven of twelve possible instances across the three national fields), followed by stock market media (four of twelve), and at some distance by privately held (one) and civil society (also one). This finding confirms previous studies that have found consistent logics of practice in stock market traded and public media; it also reveals a strong tendency for privately held and civil society media to vary substantially from one outlet to another.

Taken together, these findings suggest two distinct types of institutional logics at work: “affordance” and “homogenization.” Affordance logics refer to the capacity of a given institutional logic to make possible, though not guarantee, a certain kind of journalistic practice. Civil society ownership offers an affordance logic, as evidenced by the extraordinary levels of investigative reporting and public affairs orientation that some but not all civil society media outlets are able to achieve (especially in the United States). Homogenization logic refers to the power of a given institutional logic to “enforce” a degree of uniformity, because of conditions that tend to be consistent across all outlets sharing this form of ownership. In our study, public media and to a lesser extent stock market media exhibit homogenization institutional logics, as evidenced by DIs often below those of the entire national field (see Table 2). Conversely, DIs for civil society and privately held media are almost always higher than the DIs for their respective national fields: This finding shows that contingent organizational logics, indicated by high differentiation across individual news organizations, are strongest for these two types of media ownership. Affordance institutional logics and strong organizational logics are complementary: As the examples cited throughout this article show (e.g., in the United States, *Vice*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Slate* for privately held media, and *ProPublica*, *CIR/Reveal*, and *Christian Science Monitor* for civil society media), the civil society and private ownership forms “afford” well above average levels of public-service-oriented news content for some news organizations but do not guarantee it.

These overall patterns, however, must be nuanced considerably by the national media system and by public-service-orientation content indicator.

Distinct national patterns emerge from the data (see Table 3). U.S. civil society media (29.0 percent) and public media (21.2 percent) have higher overall public service orientation scores than privately held (18.8 percent) and stock market traded media (17.7 percent). In France and Sweden, there is no such clear-cut opposition. In France, privately held media (29.7 percent) exhibit the strongest logic, followed by civil society (25.7 percent), stock market traded (24.1 percent), and public media (18.1 percent); in Sweden, public media (25.4 percent) are followed closely by stock market traded (24.2 percent), civil society (23.5 percent), and privately held (21.5 percent) media.

The U.S. pattern comes closest to representing a clear opposition between noncommercial and commercial media logics, consonant with the national media system's substantial differences in their respective public service expectations and obligations. In France, there is a strong tradition of civically engaged, often partisan, privately held media, blurring the line between commercial and noncommercial media. Similarly, Swedish civil society media (chiefly "foundation-owned" newspapers) do not have to maximize shareholder profits, but they remain commercial enterprises: They are less distinct from privately held media than are U.S. nonprofits. French public media, partly dependent on advertising and only partially autonomous from government influence, are subject to a hybrid form of media ownership and are, thus, unable to play a leadership role in promoting public service orientation. In contrast, Sweden's wholly license-fee funded and fiercely autonomous public media set the tone for the entire Swedish media system, helping explain the small high-low percentage gap across the four ownership types of 3.9 points, compared with 11.3 in the United States and 11.6 in France.

The findings also point to an important differentiation within the mode of public service orientation (see Table 2, National Averages), which is not revealed by the overall national average percentages: France (25.9%), Sweden (23.0%), and the United States (20.9%). The generally more commercialized U.S. media are nevertheless more likely to emphasize public affairs content (41.9 percent, vs. 39.5 percent in Sweden and 36.2 percent in France) and to engage in investigative reporting (6.1 percent vs. 1.2 percent in both of the other countries); on the other hand, civil society and foreign/international actor mentions are higher in Sweden and France than in the United States. This pattern suggests that the U.S.'s mode of public service orientation is closer to the elite model of democracy whereas Sweden and France's orientation emphasizes pluralism (Baker 2002). These findings also seem to accord with Humprecht and Esser's (2017) study that showed that news content "diversity" was highest in "national environments with strong public service media." In three out of the four public service orientation indicators, national average percentages for the U.S. and France are at opposite poles, with Sweden in the middle: This finding provides support to Hallin and Mancini's observation that democratic corporatist countries such as Sweden combine elements of both the liberal and polarized pluralist systems.

Conclusion

This study engages with the debate about the relative power of institutional logics, organizational logics, and dominant national fields in shaping the amount and type of public-service-oriented news content. We find evidence of the shaping power of all three.

Institutional logics can shape the amount and type of public service orientation, but it is important to distinguish two types: “affordance logics” and “homogenization logics.” On average, public service orientation tended to be highest at civil-society-owned media, but there was nevertheless significant variation within this category. For this reason, we call this an affordance logic because it affords but does not guarantee a certain kind of news content. Public media and to a lesser extent stock market traded media, on the other hand, tended to exhibit homogenization logics, because outlet variation within these forms of ownership was often less than overall national variation.

We found evidence of organizational logics at work across all institutional ownership types, supporting Picard and Weezel’s (2008: 29) prediction that “good and poor performance can result under all forms.” However, our research nuances this statement, showing that variation at the organizational level is higher for privately held and civil society media than for public and stock market traded media.

Finally, we do find cross-national variation in the degree of homogeneity across fields or institutional orders, in particular, that the amount of public service news content across institutional orders is closer together in Sweden than in the United States and France. This finding challenges Bourdieu’s argument that a market-driven economic field is the most powerful force contributing to homogeneous news content, suggesting instead that a strong governmental-administrative field (as in Sweden) may be a more powerful homogenizing force. Our findings also demonstrate that public service orientation is multidimensional. This study found that two types of public service orientation were at work across the three countries: In the United States, media outlets as a whole tended to have more investigative reporting and an overall higher amount of public-affairs-focused news (democratic elite model); in Sweden and France, in contrast, media outlets tended to offer a greater pluralism of civil society and foreign/international voices (democratic pluralist model).

Although comprehensive in comparison with most cross-national comparative content analysis research, additional studies over different time periods and with larger samples of outlets and articles are needed to confirm the generalizability of our findings. Another limitation is that our findings concern proportions rather than absolute amounts of public-service-oriented news coverage. In relation to investigative reporting and public-service-focused news, in particular, while we find that civil society media tend to include a higher percentage of investigative and public-affairs-focused articles, this does not mean that they necessarily produce a higher overall volume of such coverage or reach as many people as do better-resourced, larger audience, commercial or public media. Future research is needed to analyze total amount of items and their audience reach.

Content analysis is also unable to capture the mechanisms through which ownership logics affect, or do not affect, news content. The findings presented in this study demonstrate systematic correlations that suggest the possibility of such logics at work. Future research, based on ethnography or in-depth interviews, could follow up to establish the existence of such effects and how they operate inside news organizations in variable ways depending on organizational, institutional, or national field logics. Close readings of texts and images, perhaps linked to a similar event covered by all media, could bolster this study's quantitative findings with more nuanced qualitative analyses. Further research should break apart the category of civil society ownership and examine more closely the differences in public service orientation between political party, trade union, foundation, and religious ownership and between various forms of nonprofit journalistic ownership and funding: Indeed, one interpretation of this study's findings is that the U.S. charitable nonprofit ownership form is substantially different from other forms of civil society media ownership.

Despite its limitations, this article presents methodological innovations that could be tested and refined in subsequent studies, in particular, use of content indicators such as investigative reporting, public affairs focus, and types of sourcing as measures of public service orientation; use of the DI as a measure of the strength (or weakness) of a given institutional logic; identification of two types of media ownership institutional logics: affordance and homogenization; and close attention to variation within and across institutional categories and national media systems to build and test theory in the dynamics of media ownership power.

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Notes

1. All ownership forms specified in Table 1 were current as of the time period of the study's 2015–2016 sample.
2. Content coding was conducted by Timothy Neff (the United States), Ella Shoshan (Sweden), and Elly Hanauer (France).
3. Research shows that most readers do not read the entirety of news stories, particularly in an age in which content is quickly accessed and scanned online (Lee and Treadwell 2013; Nielsen 1997).
4. For space reasons, tables with percentages for individual news outlets and ownership type/national deviation indexes are not included in the body of the article. These tables are available in the Supplementary Material online appendix.
5. In addition, the degree of political intimidation and threatened interference from Congress has served to make U.S. public media more cautious (see Benson et al. 2017). To be fair, the PBS news magazine Frontline does conduct significant investigative reporting but was not captured by the sampling of text-based online items.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

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