

Rodney Benson, New York University

### **Toward a Sociology of Media Ownership Power**

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#### ABSTRACT

In the context of the contemporary financial crisis in American journalism, this paper presents a preliminary model of news media ownership power. In other words, what difference does the form of ownership or the particular owner make in the production of news? Despite popular fascination with media moguls and periodic political concerns with media concentration, little systematic attention has been paid to this question. Drawing on interviews and close readings of publisher memoirs, the paper identifies six modes of ownership power: profit expectations, market adjustment, resource allocation, public service, political instrumentalism, and business instrumentalism. The author posits that the particular mix and orientation of these strategies may be linked to social structural factors: 1) logics of fields (field of ownership, professional field, national hierarchy of fields), 2) social location of media outlet, with the possibility of some mismatch between owners, managers, journalists, and audiences, and 3) critical reflexivity, linked to biographical trajectory and/or intellectual formation of owner/manager(s).

Recently, I had occasion to participate in a conference on media power held in London. The air was thick with Murdoch stories, among others, how Murdoch sensationalized an already sensational tabloid newspaper culture in the UK; how he has tried to do the same thing in the US with the *New York Post* and Fox News; how he raised up an unknown congressman named Ed Koch to mayor of New York; how his Fox

News called the 2000 election for George W. Bush and helped create the momentum that Al Gore was never able to overcome.<sup>1</sup>

At a conference full of sociologists, the power attributed to this single individual named Rupert Murdoch was really astonishing. As the anecdotes accumulated, I finally had to stand up and ask: What do all these stories about Murdoch ultimately add up to? Are we saying Murdoch stands outside of our sociological theories? Do we want to say there is such a thing as a one-of-a-kind Rupert Murdochism? If not, then, what does the case of Rupert Murdoch allow us to say about the functioning of media ownership power in general? Or for that matter: What can we say about media ownership based on the records of the Sulzbergers or Grahams, two well-known and often praised publishing families?<sup>2</sup>

We seem to be living at a time of renewed fascination with media moguls. In recent years, there have been notable biographies not just of Murdoch but also of historic figures like Henry Luce, Joseph Pulitzer, and William Randolph Hearst. Discourse about media moguls expresses a kind of nostalgia for the possibility of individual agency – maybe not for ordinary people but at least for charismatic, swash-buckling individuals who make it to the top of the heap.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, to my knowledge there are no comprehensive sociological works on Murdoch or of his work in relation to other media owners, but there are numerous journalistic accounts. See, for example, Sarah Ellison, *War at the Wall Street Journal* (New York: Mariner Books, 2010) and Michael Wolff, *The Man Who Owns the News: Inside the Secret World of Rupert Murdoch* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See Susan E. Tift and Alex S. Jones, *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2000) and Katherine Graham, *Personal History* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

Perhaps this explains even Rupert Murdoch's appeal. He's not, for instance, Al Neuharth. Neuharth is less well known, but exemplifies a different kind of power that has probably had more far-reaching effects than all of Murdoch's blustery maneuvering.

In his book *The Media Monopoly*, Ben Bagdikian reports this tale about Neuharth, the former CEO of the largest newspaper chain in America that includes USA Today and more than 90 other newspapers. Neuharth was speaking to a group of potential investors. One of them asked Neuharth to settle the long-standing confusion about how to pronounce the corporation's name. "Is it GAN-nett or Gan-NETT?" Neuharth smiled and replied: "The correct pronunciation is MONEY."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Gannett revolutionized the newspaper industry by showing other publishers – and Wall Street – that newspapers could not only be profitable but veritable profit-machines, earning 25 percent margins or higher.<sup>4</sup> The formula? Invest in monopoly newspapers (or create monopolies by forcing out the local competition), gut the news gathering budget, rely more on wire services, and put the focus on light, upbeat stories.

So here we have another image of the powerful media owner or manager. Neuharth is not portrayed as exerting whimsical instrumental business or political power. Power flows not from him but through him. The power is the power of capitalism. In other words, the possibility of doing what Gannett did – of transforming newspapers into profit-maximizing machines – had been present as soon as newspaper companies sold public shares on the stock market, which began in the 1960s. It just took about 20 years for the full consequences of this shift to be felt. Gannett accelerated the process but others were doing the same thing.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism* (New York: Nation Books, 2010).

So far, I have sketched a portrait of media ownership power that is far from adequate. On the one hand, we have a model of charismatic leadership, of media owners as unmoved movers. This model is alive and well, not only in portraying “bad boys” like Murdoch but also in the semi-hagiographies of computer and internet startup entrepreneurs such as Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Ariana Huffington, and less well-known innovators in the non-profit sector.

On the other hand, we have a model of profit-maximizing Wall Street market logic in which the power of the individual owner or firm almost completely recedes. In this view, individual agency is structurally constrained, as part of a nearly totalized conception of society. The question is: how we can move toward a more nuanced, variable account of structured agency. In other words, market logic may be dominant, but it is not the only operative institutional logic. It can be and is countered both from within (from variable business models) and from without (from various non-market organizational models rooted in the scientific, artistic, religious, and civic fields).

What does this mean for explaining media ownership power (or for power in general)? John Bogle, the founder of Vanguard, recently expressed a pithy summary of the model I develop in this paper. In an interview in the *New York Times*, Bogle was explaining why his company has substantially lower fees than other mutual fund companies: its non-profit ownership model means that no profits have to be siphoned off to pay investors or shareholders. In short, Bogle concluded, “Strategy follows structure.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Crisis in American Journalism**

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Sommer, “A Mutual Fund Master, Too Worried to Rest,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2012, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/business/john-bogle-vanguards-founder-is-too-worried-to-rest.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/business/john-bogle-vanguards-founder-is-too-worried-to-rest.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

Before I develop this structural model of ownership, let's first fast-forward to today's crisis of journalism. The old "business model" of the publicly traded company financed mostly by advertising seems to be breaking down. During the 1990s, news media companies were among the most profitable companies in the Fortune 500.

Around this time, some of these companies got caught up in the mania for mergers and acquisitions. So they went deep into debt and were caught short when they were hit by a series of crises, including the dramatic decline of classified advertising to Craigslist, the financial crises of the early 2000s and 2008-2009, the decline in print advertising and its meager replacement by online advertising.

According to the 2012 Pew State of the Media report, total newspaper advertising revenue has fallen from \$46 billion to just under \$24 billion; it would be even worse if not for a slight rise in internet advertising.<sup>6</sup> But let's not exaggerate – online advertising has not helped much. As one newspaper publisher has said, "It's like trading dollars for dimes." Total revenues are down, but profits are not down as much as you might think. Due to severe cost cutting including massive layoffs, profit margins a year ago averaged 15 percent.<sup>7</sup>

And what has happened to the journalists and the journalism? According to the Downie-Schudson Report for Columbia Journalism School, the number of full-time newspaper journalism jobs fell over the past decade from 60,000 to 40,000 – that's a 1/3 decline for a net loss of 20,000 jobs. The number of reporters covering local and state

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<sup>6</sup> Project for Excellence in Journalism, State of the Media Report 2012, available at: <http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2011/overview-2/key-findings/>.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Waldman, *The Information Needs of Communities* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Communications Commission, 2011), 10, 192.

government and international affairs has declined substantially. The number of foreign news bureaus has declined substantially.<sup>8</sup>

Another Pew report suggests three main reasons US journalism has suffered from the economic crisis far more than western European journalism. First, the publicly-traded and private equity ownership forms that are dominant in the United States create higher profit pressures than in other countries and hence “force” owners to lay off workers in order to maintain these high profits. Second, because US news media are so dependent on advertising—as opposed to reader subscriptions and public subsidies, which provide a greater proportion of revenues in Europe—the drop in revenues was more pronounced in the United States when advertising dried up. And third, due to US government policies that allow or encourage debt-driven mergers and acquisitions, many US media companies were in a far more fragile economic position than their European peers when the financial crisis hit in 2008.<sup>9</sup>

Now, this is clearly a case of what the legal scholar C. Edwin Baker would have called “market failure.”<sup>10</sup> The market does not seem to be providing news and information necessary for a democracy. This breakdown of the long-dominant market model – and in particular, the model of the publicly traded corporation – makes visible

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<sup>8</sup> Leonard Downie, Jr. and Michael Schudson, “The Reconstruction of American Journalism,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 19, 2009, [http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the\\_reconstruction\\_of\\_american.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php?page=all).

<sup>9</sup> Laura Houston Santhanam and Tom Rosenstiel, “Why U.S. Newspapers Suffer More than Others,” *The State of the News Media 2010*, October 2011, <http://stateofthemedias.org/2011/mobile-survey/international-newspaper-economics/>. See also Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Ten Years that Shook the Media World: Big Questions and Big Trends in International Media Developments* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, October 2012), 3.

<sup>10</sup> C. Edwin Baker, *Media, Markets, and Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

what had heretofore become naturalized. For a long time, it was difficult for many – certainly journalists and those working in the news media industry – to imagine alternative models. With the breakdown of the profit-maximizing market model, both residual and emergent alternative ownership models have become more visible and legitimate.

First, new radically scaled down commercial models are emerging on the web. One of the pioneers was the Huffington Post founded by Arianna Huffington. The formula is to get as much content as possible for free – either from volunteer bloggers or aggregation, then supplement this with a handful of well-trained, high profile professional journalists.

Second, the possibility of government-funded media is at last being seriously discussed – even if it's not going anywhere for the moment. The Republican Party has made it clear that they would like to get rid of even this very limited funding. It says something, though, that funding so far has not been cut for NPR and PBS. Polls show that they are the most trusted media in America -- Jim Lehrer's performance at the first debate not withstanding.

And third, we see an unprecedented proliferation of foundation and other non-profit models. Dozens of foundations are investing in new forms of journalism and citizen civic communication. At the local or regional level, prominent start-ups are MinnPost, Voice of San Diego, and Texas Tribune; at the national level, foundation-supported start-ups include Pro Publica and the Investigative Reporting Workshop. None of these new and not-so-new non-profit outlets (and here I would include the Christian

Science Monitor) are big operations. Their staffs range from a half-dozen to 50. Their budgets range from \$1 million to \$10 million.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the old “legacy” media which relied on business advertising for 70 to 80 percent of revenues, the non-profit news outlets seek funds from a variety of sources – small and large individual donors, business sponsorships, local and national foundations. In interviews I have conducted over the past two years, top managers or editors at these outlets told me they were trying to replicate the “public radio” model – not just at the relatively big websites like MinnPost or Voice of San Diego but also at smaller alternative startups like the San Francisco Public Press, which aspires to be the “Wall Street Journal for Working People.” It is staffed by volunteers – mostly laid-off and disillusioned former reporters for legacy outlets like the San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle. It produces beautifully designed print newspapers that it sells for \$1 in rich and poor neighborhoods alike.

Compared to the advertising-supported editorial resources that have been lost, however, the investment in this new non-profit sector is quite small. Depending on the estimate one uses, \$1 to \$25 billion in revenues for the press have been lost. Only \$30 to \$85 million is being reinvested.<sup>12</sup> And given the structure and purpose of funding – short-term and focused on innovation – the long-term prospects for sustaining these experiments are quite fragile. I will return to this point.

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<sup>11</sup> See recent reports on the new non-profit news published by the Knight Foundation, Pew, and the Oxford-Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

<sup>12</sup> See Waldman, *The Information Needs of Communities*, and C.W. Anderson, Emily Bell, and Clay Shirkey, *Post-Industrial Journalism: Adapting to the Present* (New York: Columbia Journalism School, 2012).



Even so, we are clearly witnessing some limited movement toward greater pluralism in the forms of media ownership. And this natural experiment allows us to consider how variable forms of media ownership matter in ways that were not possible in an era of concentrated aggregate ownership and a mostly homogenized form of ownership.

How do we conceptualize this power? I want to begin by briefly considering power more broadly and then move step-by-step to a theorization of the power of media ownership forms, particular media firms, and individual owners or management teams.

### **Power as Capacity to Act: What do Publishers Do?**

To do so, I want to build on a distinction between two forms of power raised by Steven Lukes in his book *Power: A Radical View* – that is, between “power over” and “power to.”<sup>13</sup> “Power over” defines power in terms of domination, that is, the capacity of agent A to get agent B to do so something or not do something or to even shape B’s deepest desires. “Power to” refers to the social power that flows through all social agents. It is a power understood as capacity to act.

Lukes associates “power to” with structural-functionalists like Parsons or with more totalizing structuralist theories of power as in some of Foucault’s writings. Because agency and inequality are less clear in such accounts, Lukes mostly abandons this notion of power. However, for my purposes of analyzing media ownership power, I want to recuperate and privilege the notion of “power to” or capacity – while certainly not abandoning the question of “power over” or domination.

I want to put the focus on “Power to” because it returns us squarely to the key question of the social generation of agency, both at the organizational or institutional level and at the individual level. It provides an antidote to popular conceptions of the media owner as charismatic or amoral unmoved mover.

As a first attempt to locate this kind of “power to” or capacity power, last spring my graduate course on sociology of news combed through Washington Post publisher Katherine Graham’s autobiography *Personal History* to identify the specific ways in which she or her predecessors (her father Eugene Meyer, then her husband Phil Graham) enacted the role of publisher.

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

We came up with a list of 24 ways. I supplemented this list from the interviews I conducted during 2011 and 2012 with publishers, other business managers, editors, and reporters at a range of types of news organizations including those already mentioned as well as the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, ABC News, C-Span, Democracy Now!, various other small online non-profit startups, and local public media.

Despite the seeming diversity of particular strategies and practices, ownership practices tend to group into six broad categories: profit expectations, market adjustment, resource allocation, public service, political instrumentalism, and business instrumentalism.

First, the owner has power in setting profit expectations. How much profit does he or she think is adequate, ideal? The private owner gets to decide this. The private owner can also cede this power by allowing the company to go “public” – that is to sell shares on the stock market.

In *Personal History*, Graham actually expresses regrets about her decision to let the Washington Post “go public.” In theory, going public provides the company with more resources to invest; it also encourages a financial discipline to make the company less wasteful, more efficient. But once the company is publicly traded, ownership cedes in a very real sense to stockholders or to Wall Street.

The Grahams and Sulzbergers have tried to limit total control by Wall Street by setting up a dual stock structure. The family controls voting shares, while non-voting shares are sold to the public. As long as the family agrees to live with the threat of declining share prices, the company can effectively say no to Wall Street demands; this

ownership structure does make a difference, though in recent years the two families have responded somewhat differently to increasing financial pressures.

Second, the publisher is responsible for market adjustment. The publisher appoints people to take charge of marketing, business, design, etc. – all in the service of meeting profit expectations and in maximizing reach to a designated target audience.

As I will note in a moment, this kind of market adjustment is very close to what field theory refers to when it speaks of homologous circuits of production and reception. But it is important to emphasize that this adjustment requires a certain feel for the game – and if some publishers have it more than others, this may be a major source of their power.

In my view, Murdoch's genius – if that is what one wants to call it – lies more in the realm of the circus ringmaster than in the realm of the political kingmaker. The ringmaster has a sense of what the audience wants.

We get a sense of Murdoch as ringmaster in this anecdote from Sarah Ellison's book about Murdoch's takeover of the *Wall Street Journal*. Murdoch and his News Corp. executives are flying back from some meeting on the company private jet. Ellison writes:

When Murdoch occasionally lost interest [in the conversation], he turned toward the television and turned the volume up so he could hear a bit better. As [Fox commentator Bill] O'Reilly bellowed from the screen, Murdoch's guests looked at one another, sometimes smirking at the bellicose host. Murdoch, seemingly unaware, turned away from the show to comment on it: "Has a good rhythm, doesn't it?"

Third, the publisher makes key decisions about how many resource allocation: how much to invest, whether in marketing or in editorial, and if in editorial, which kinds of reporting, how much money for travel, how much time for in-depth reports, etc. Recent shutdowns of foreign bureaus are thus a reversal of allocation decisions made decades ago. In fact, this may be a key difference between more profit-driven and less-profit driven media organizations.

To the extent that companies like Gannett place a higher priority in keeping costs low in order to return more value to shareholders, they put fewer resources into the editorial side.

As one reporter at a Gannett newspaper told me<sup>14</sup>:

“It’s not that Gannett doesn’t care about quality – they want quality, but quality that costs as little as possible” – meaning, less money for travel, less time, fewer reporters. This may not mean the end of quality work, but there will be less of it.”

Conversely, because they forgo profits, non-profit media can invest a higher proportion of their revenues in reporting. For example, the non-profit Voice of San Diego has only 20 staff, but two-thirds of them are full-time investigative reporters – and that gives them more investigative reporters than the commercial *San Diego Union-Tribune* with its more than 200 total staff.

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<sup>14</sup> All individuals quoted in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, were interviewed by the author in person or by telephone between March 2011 and August 2012.

Fourth, the publisher makes decision about how and when normative commitments to public service will be met. Ideally, these decisions are consistent with profit and marketing goals. If and when public service will be pursued over and against business goals, the publisher has to make that decision and give the green light.

Fifth and sixth, we enter the realm of what are usually presented as abuses of publisher power: business instrumentalism and political instrumentalism.

An example of business instrumentalism would be Disney-owned ABC News running a disproportionately high number of positive feature items about the latest Disney movies.

In her autobiography *Personal History*, Katherine Graham mentioned several instances of political instrumentalism by Phil Graham, her husband and predecessor as publisher. Phil Graham saw himself as a political kingmaker. He was the key negotiator in assuring Lyndon Johnson the vice presidential spot on the Kennedy ticket in 1960. He also used the newspaper's news and editorial pages to promote political causes he cared about. In retrospect, Katherine Graham viewed this kind of political instrumentalism as an abuse of the past that was not in keeping with contemporary standards of journalistic ethics and professionalism.

But of course, such practices have not disappeared: this is a big part of the critique of Murdoch. And one might offer the same critique of Arianna Huffington and various other left-leaning media. Especially on the editorial pages, publishers exert their authority over content. When I was sitting in the editorial page editor's office at the *Christian Science Monitor*, the church representative called to veto one of the editorial cartoons the

editor was considering using. No reasons were given, but if there was any link to Christian Science theology, it wasn't obvious.

But here one might also make a valid distinction between open and clandestine political instrumentalism – declaring one's partisan allegiances openly vs. trying to subtly use news or editorials to advance political candidates or causes.

Having listed such concrete actions, I still do not think this is an adequate account of media owner or ownership power. For the most part – with the exception of my brief discussion of the dual stock ownership structure – it is still too voluntaristic. It doesn't answer the question of where this capacity to act comes from. It doesn't address the question of how strategies follow from structures.

### **Ownership Power as Capacity to Act: How Strategies Follow Structures**

#### *Field Logics*

Drawing on the language of field theory, we begin with a conception of society as composed of fields, or semi-autonomous social worlds with their own distinctive logics of action and standards of excellence and virtue – such as the market, religious, civic-associational, scientific, and arts fields.<sup>15</sup>

Again, each of these fields – in principle – operates according to its own unique logic of action. So the first potential structuring principle is that the existence of a diversity of semi-autonomous fields produces at least the possibility of a diversity of forms of media ownership.

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<sup>15</sup> For general elaborations of field theory, see Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); John Martin, "What is Field Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 1 (2003): 1-49; and Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

In this sense, ownership is causally significant to the extent that it can bring other institutional logics to bear on media performance.

We thus would expect that a media organization owned by a church – such as the *Christian Science Monitor* – would be distinctive in some way, because of its church ownership. As *Monitor* managing editor Marshall Ingwerson told me about the Christian Science church’s attitude about the newspaper:

“They care about the mission of the *Monitor*. Again, not because it’s a religious paper or that they want it to be but because more people encounter the name Christian Science on our nameplate or website more than anywhere else. So they want it to be something to be proud of. And I think they feel, as we do, that the charter of the paper was to injure no man and bless all mankind through the practice of journalism with integrity... There is a charter to basically do good at some civic level ...”

Concretely, this means that the *Monitor* continues to invest more resources in in-depth social issue and international reporting than most other media outlets. The newspaper also consciously avoids sensationalism.

Likewise, we would expect a media organization owned by a non-profit foundation – such as is the case with many of today’s online startups – to have a different logic from profit-driven commercial media.

The *San Francisco Public Press* is owned by a non-profit arts foundation. This ownership and funding model undergirds its staunch opposition to the traditional market-



driven model of journalism. Executive editor Michael Stoll firmly rejected reliance on advertising funding of the news. He told me:

“I say good riddance. It was a bad marriage to begin with and it skewed coverage. And it foreclosed discussion of people and communities who were not targets of advertising. Sometimes it worked at producing good journalism, oftentimes it didn’t.”

For example, SF Public Press has conducted investigations on Macy’s Department store – the kind of coverage that the Dept.-store dependent *San Francisco Examiner* would never have done.

Now, to what extent can such autonomous ownership field logics actually introduce a new level of pluralism inside the journalistic field? We need much more research on this question, but there is reason to doubt the capacity of civil society-owned media to dramatically transform journalistic practice across the field.

Whatever the ownership field origin, any attempt to shape journalistic practice will be mediated by two other field-level factors – first, by the pre-existing professional logic of the journalistic field, and second, by the dominant field logic in any given nation-state.

Stephen Ostertag and Gaye Tuchman, in a recent article entitled “When Innovation Meets Legacy,” offer an ironic tale of startup success. A non-journalist starts a blog to report on news ignored by the local newspaper. It attracts attention and eventually foundation support. What the foundations want as a condition for support is

proof of its competence and seriousness: the only proof they will accept is that it hire ex-mainstream journalists as editors, that it adopt mainstream news conventions, and that ultimately it become almost identical to the kind of news the blog originally sought to challenge or at least supplement.<sup>16</sup> I also discovered a similar embrace of traditional professional values at two of the leading news start-ups: the Voice of San Diego and MinnPost.

But in slight contrast to Ostertag and Tuchman, my research suggests that foundation support is not simply or only facilitating a return to the old business and professional models. In fact, the journalists who work at these start-ups are passionate about their work and see themselves as developing or redeveloping a “purer” model of investigative, analytical, and explanatory journalism than was previously possible under the old purely commercial, advertising-funded model. So while the non-profit sector is not doing as much as it might to develop a range of alternative forms of journalism or alternative forms of citizen communication, it is reinvigorating the commitment to public service writ large – building on the notion of public service as it has developed in a particular national context.

Thus, another element of field structuring of ownership becomes clearly visible only through cross-national comparison. Ostertag and Tuchman specifically note how foundation support in the U.S. is fully consistent with the “North Atlantic” or “Liberal” model of professional as well as highly-commercialized journalism identified by Dan

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Ostertag and Gaye Tuchman, “When Innovation Meets Legacy,” *Information, Community & Society*, 15, no. 6 (2012), 909-931.

Hallin and Paolo Mancini.<sup>17</sup> The persistence and maintenance of this particular type of journalistic field logic can only be fully explained in reference to national field hierarchy. Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot point to the existence of field hierarchies (though they themselves do not use the language of fields) in their observation that while both France and the United States have market and civic solidarity logics in their national cultural repertoires – the two societies are different to the extent that the market logic is dominant in the U.S. whereas the civic solidarity logic is dominant in France.<sup>18</sup> However, this is not simply a matter of semiotics – such cross-national differences have to be institutionally secured. In other words, civic solidarity is stronger in France than in the United States because of France’s much more robust public sector, in health care, in education, in research, in the arts, in journalism, often explicitly oriented toward supplementing or countering the market.

In this case, one may find that the field-specific form of ownership is trumped by the dominant field. In the United States, even media organizations owned by churches or other non-profit associations will adopt a market logic. In the United States, the foundation world is closely tied to business. While they are non-profit, many if not most foundations see themselves as supporting rather than providing any critique or counterpart to market-based media. For instance, at one foundation event I attended, media guru Jeff Jarvis argued that foundation support should only be seen as short-term help “while we figure out which financial models work.” Likewise, Charlie Firestone of

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<sup>17</sup> See Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot, eds., *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

the Aspen Institute told me that foundations are interested in “innovative strategy or eventual sustainability” – meaning market sustainability.

And given the dominance of market logic in the U.S. journalistic field, even those media outlets that are self-consciously trying to do something different ultimately have to play by the rules of the market. As Marshall Ingwerson of the *Christian Science Monitor* told me, somewhat ironically recounting the lessons he had learned from attending a seminar on media management sponsored by the Sulzberger family:

“We have to find a business model that works – we have to – this is the word I hated but in the last 5 years has become universal. We have to monetize. How do we monetize what do we? Same as everybody else.”

In France or Sweden, on the other hand, because the field of power is not so dominated by market logic, media outlets may operate to a greater extent according to a non-market logic.

*Social Location of Media Outlet, Owner/Managers, Journalists, and Audience*

Outside of field-shaped organizational “forms of ownership,” a particular media firm is also shaped by its social structural position in the field. Thus a second structuring principle refers to the social class position (composed of a particular volume and mix of cultural and economic capital) of the owner, manager, journalists, and primary audiences of a particular media outlet. This may help explain differences among media outlets that otherwise share a similar media ownership form.

One possibility of this circuit of power and cultural meaning is described by Pierre Bourdieu in his essay “The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field”<sup>19</sup>:

“.... The direct producer-client relationship is mediated by the relationship between the producers... Ultimately, the readers of *L'Express* may be to the readers of *Le Nouvel Observateur* what the journalists of *Le Nouvel Observateur* are to the journalists of *L'Express*. This is not at all because the producers of each magazine are adjusting to their respective readerships, but because there is a homology between the space of the microcosms of production and the encompassing social space.”

In other words, the circuit of production runs parallel to the system of reception. Bourdieu's portrait is of a system that almost runs itself. But in fact, the production-reception homology – the finding of an audience geared toward what you produce – is not guaranteed. It has to be produced and this is one of the key powers exercised by the owner. No doubt production-reception homologies are probably managed most effectively when the owner or at least the manager shares social properties with the target audience. If one looked closely, one would probably find a tendency toward certain kinds of social properties among managers and editors at various media outlets that accord roughly with those of their target audiences.

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field,” in R. Benson and E. Neveu, *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).

One would find differences between the top editors at the *New York Times* versus those at the *Wall Street Journal*, especially post-Murdoch, in terms of their capital composition and biographical trajectories. There might be a thread of closer identification with economic capital at the WSJ than at the NYT, as well as slightly different kinds of educational or professional trajectories or social origins. To the extent that the WSJ organization *pre*-Murdoch had become not all that different from that of the *New York Times* (outside of the editorial pages), it may have been the case that stagnant circulation at the WSJ was at least partially a symptom of a production-reception mismatch – which Murdoch has now more or less corrected. Likewise, at tabloid newspapers like the *Daily News* and the *New York Post*, the top editors often have working class background and do not have college degrees – this is the case with both of the current editors at the *Daily News* and at the *New York Post*, both of them also former Fleet Street editors.

Harmonization of structural homologies also draws on the professional habitus that is produced through management or journalistic education and training, so I do not think we ought to reduce this entirely to unconscious social structuring. However, it may be that extreme cases of habitus mismatch create a dissonance in production-reception homologies that ultimately contribute to economic failure for the media outlets concerned.

Returning to my “Katherine Graham list” of six publishing tasks, it is a fair question whether most of these ultimately come back to the concrete task of market adjustment. For instance, public service, as many of my informants emphasized, is a brand.

Speaking of the *New York Times*, the Aspen Institute's Charlie Firestone said: "the foreign reporting...it's all the brand. What makes them money is their brand, and their brand is made up of different elements, and one is that they are the paper of record and they do international reporting, and they do some investigative reporting." In fact, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr. embraces the link to the market. His motto, which I heard him utter at a 2011 Columbia University event where he announced his new online subscription plan, clearly embraces the language of branding: "Quality journalism for quality audiences."

Firestone offered the same analysis of supposedly non-commercial news outlets like NPR and PBS:

"In order to get audience contributions they need an audience. So they're not totally counter-programming against audience expectations and desires ... I think it's fair to say they know that Car Talk is a big revenue generator and others might not be, you know? So they have to factor that in when they program. So yeah, you do want to be around in order to serve the markets that the for-profit companies are not serving—or the audiences that they're not serving. But there is even a market in the non-profit sector. There are some market forces there."

Likewise, at the non-profit MinnPost, publisher Joel Kramer was proud of the quality of the in-depth news and analysis provided on his site by experienced journalists.

But he quickly explained this public service orientation in relation to his website's "branding."

"We are a destination site, our goal is to get people to read MinnPost and offer to our target audience, which is highly engaged citizens who care about public policy and politics – our goal is to get them to keep coming back and reading stuff on the site ... We are focusing on the subset of the newspaper audience that's most interested in news ... And that clearly separates us from more mass audience publications ... A big part of our branding is the very experienced people who came to us after 20 or 30 year careers at the *Star Tribune* or the *Pioneer Press*..."

In similar fashion, political instrumentalization (using a media outlet to promote certain politicians and political causes) can be linked to market adjustment. For example, in the case of Fox or MSNBC, the openly partisan character of these media outlets is part of their brand; it contributes to rather than detracts from the construction and maintenance of a production-reception homology.

### *Reflexivity*

A third and final form of media ownership power or potential power is reflexivity, either practical (linked to market adjustment) or critical (potentially transformative). Similar to market adjustment, this power may be either unconsciously socially or professionally produced. As with market adjustment, it is likeliest to be strongest when it draws on both social and professional formation.



In other words, either through a life trajectory exposing the owner/manager to a variety of fields, through an ongoing tension between the habitus of the owner and that of his employees/audiences, or through self-conscious theoretical acquisition, the media owner may accumulate the power of critical reflexivity.

This is a socially produced power as well, but it is a power that may actually transform existing social relations instead of reinforcing or reproducing them. A critically reflexive owner or manager may be more motivated to challenge audience's preconceptions, to break out of the self-reinforcing cycle of homology.

Likewise, a self-reflexive owner/manager may keep certain issues off the agenda (as in consciously deciding not to pander to audience appetites for sensationalized news). But the capacity to act on this reflexive orientation requires a certain margin of financial security: during a period of financial crisis, this reflexive knowledge will be especially difficult to act upon. Or, it requires a certain distance from financial reality: I found the greatest desire to push against audience demands at the smallest non-profits that were the furthest from any possibility of market sustainability – that is, those at the margins of the field with effectively nothing to lose.

The difficulty in instituting critical reflexive management is that it is fundamentally against the market, which as Walter Lippmann also recognized nearly 100 years ago, is mostly about pandering to the audience's pre-existing stereotypes. A reformist owner or manager may consciously attempt to challenge the preconceptions of his/her audience. Eventually, this will dissipate his audience.

Will non-profit foundations step in and fill the void? As we have seen, not only is foundation support not all that substantial it also comes with significant strings attached.

Almost without exception, the foundations see themselves as market adjustment agents rather than counter-market agents much less agents of critical reflexivity.

Thus, even in the case of reflexivity, we see how structure shapes strategy. Critical reflexivity requires support against the market and this ultimately may mean support from the democratic state.

### **Lessons for Policy and Practice?**

Following on these preliminary findings, I conclude with a few reflections on policy and practice.

First, there may be a need to make greater use of the potential of online networking technologies. If each media outlet is produced to produce a structural homology and people tend to go to the media that support their pre-existing viewpoints, there still remains the possibility of reintroducing serendipity into the network. For example, media outlets could develop more their capacity to link to a wide range of media outlets, not only those that accord with the habitus of their audiences (for example, the nytimes.com's BlogRunner, etc.)

Second, instead of always hoping for market "sustainability" we need to explicitly acknowledge the need for public subsidies in support of media that provide quality information, analysis, critique to audiences outside the dominant structures of homology – audiences that circuits of power don't care whether or not they reach. In fact, research is showing that widely available, and accessibly produced quality public media substantially improve citizen knowledge of public affairs. At the highest levels of education and income, there is little difference between public affairs knowledge in the

U.S. and western Europe – the difference lies in the bottom quartile where at that social level western European citizens are much more knowledgeable than their U.S. counterparts.<sup>20</sup> Universal public media have to be universally funded, there's no way around it. Short of that, we have to figure out ways to encourage foundations and other non-profit funders to take more risks and to provide long-term funding of media outlets that will never be sustainable in market terms but nevertheless deserve long-term operational support.

Finally, as John Dewey argued, education of the public beginning as early as primary school is still important, and as Neil Postman emphasized, this education should address media literacy. But in my view we need to go beyond media literacy per se to consistently expose the relationships between interests and ideas and thus to teach a sort of everyday critical epistemology. Audiences who break out of their naturalized worldviews will be more likely to want denaturalizing media. In this way, a cycle of reflexivity could gradually replace the cycle of homology.

In sum, how does media ownership matter? Powerful organizations and individuals have some degree of discretion and maneuver. Their strategies make a difference. Opportunities may or may not be seized to locate a new market niche. Market adjustments may fail and media outlets may disappear. Risks to invest in public service may or may not be taken. Political causes may or may not be embraced or effectively promoted. At the same time, it is clear that these strategies take shape within structures that tend to favor some types of action over others. In the United States, the game is still

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<sup>20</sup>See James Curran, Shanto Iyengar, Anker Brink Lund, and Inka Salovaara-Moring, "Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study," *European Journal of Communication* 24, no. 5 (2009): 5-26.

rigged – for both profit and non-profit oriented actors – toward high-end consumers and policy influentials. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for any form of media ownership or any media owner, no matter how well-intentioned, to play the game in any other way until we change the rules of the game.