

## Media Property: New Explorations in Media and Communication Studies

### *Introduction*

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This Special Section explores the concept of property as a central theme in media and communication studies, emphasizing its role as a social institution that regulates power, access, and rights in relation to media and communication assets. Despite property being fundamental to capitalist societies, its analysis within the field has often been limited to specific subfields such as political economy, media sociology, and media industry studies. Building on existing categorizations, this Special Section connects property in the media to contemporary societal and economic transformations, examines diverse media ownership structures and their implications for public interest, and analyzes the discursive construction and legitimization of property and wealth in media narratives. By addressing key developments such as media concentration, feminist political economy perspectives, and the monopolization of global internet corporations, this issue broadens the scope of property research in communication studies and highlights its relevance across the discipline.

*Keywords: media property, media and communication studies, private property, media ownership, political economy of the media*

This Special Section is concerned with property from the perspective of media and communication studies. We understand property as a social institution and practice that regulates the power of disposal and rights of exclusion concerning things. In capitalist societies, this concept tends to be narrowed to private control, that is, private property (Macpherson, 1978). We use the term “property” instead of the more commonly used “ownership” to emphasize that ownership, beyond individual or organizational control, assumes a structural form in modern capitalist societies. This structural form stabilizes, perpetuates, and justifies practices of owning and controlling, thereby confronting social action as an institutional fact.

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Although property is a fundamental institution in capitalist societies, it is often sidelined in much of media and communication studies (Pickard, 2018; Sjøvaag & Ohlsson, 2019). To be sure, various scholars and traditions within media and communication studies engage with property in its various forms and functions, but this engagement is mostly limited to subfields such as the political economy of media, media sociology, and media industry studies. Beyond these areas, attention to property remains rather limited. Theine and Sevignani (2024a) explore this literature and identify four main ways property has been addressed in media and communication studies: a) assessing ownership concentration across multiple dimensions, b) analyzing different types of ownership and their relation to the public sphere, c) examining ownership power and capitalism, and d) investigating ownership practices and functional equivalents.

Building on this categorization by Theine and Sevignani (2024a), this Special Section aims to strengthen the research focus on property within media and communication studies. Specifically, the contributions in this Special Section connect property in the media to ongoing transformations in the economic and societal realms, offer in-depth perspectives on different media ownership structures and their implications for public interest, and analyze the discursive construction and legitimization of property and wealth in the media sphere. In this way, these contributions provide important examples of contemporary research engaging with property in the field of media and communication. Additionally, we hope this Special Section serves as a timely inspiration for future research exploring property across different media and communication subfields.

Hence, this Special Section reposes the property question within media and communication studies. It connects to and extends approaches that position media property as a central theme, such as the political economy of media and communication (Fuchs, 2020; Jin, 2018; Knoche, 2015; McChesney, 2013; Mosco, 2009; Wasko, Murdock, & Sousa, 2011; Winseck, 2017). It builds on research into media concentration and ownership at various levels (e.g., Birkinbine, Gómez, & Wasko, 2016; Noam, 2016), extends the analysis of media owners' influence on content (e.g., Benson, 2018; Benson, Neff, & Hessérus, 2018), and considers how the ongoing monopolization of global internet corporations is transforming ownership structures and media environments (e.g., Lai & Flensburg, 2021; Nechushtai, 2018; Schiffrin, 2021). Additionally, this Special Section solidifies the interconnection between commodification, tabloidization, and commercialization with ownership issues (e.g., Pickard, 2018), connects to the feminist political economy of communication approach (Byerly, 2014; Thiele, 2023), and strengthens the focus on the discursive and public legitimization of property and wealth (Rieder & Theine, 2019; Smith Ochoa, 2020).

Beyond the immediate realm of media and communication, this Special Section builds on several recent advances within the social sciences about property, economic inequality, and societal transformations under neoliberal economic policies. A key finding in this regard is the vast increase in economic inequality across various countries, driven by widespread privatization, deregulation, and the neoliberalization of politics, which align broadly with the interests of the powerful (Gilens & Page, 2014; Sayer, 2015). Moreover, monopoly and oligopoly prevail in many leading sectors of the economy, signifying that powerful corporations increasingly dominate political, social, and cultural spheres (Khan & Vaheesan, 2017; Stiglitz, 2015). The role of (intellectual) property in the digital and knowledge-based economy is politically and juridically contested, as powerful actors pursue strategies of appropriation, closure, and valuation to create

de facto private property even without political or legal legitimacy (e.g., de facto property in data within surveillance-driven business models).

Finally, this Special Section is based on and inspired by the work of the German-speaking Network for Critical Communications Research (see: <https://krikowi.net>; Tröger & van den Ecker, 2023). In particular, the conference *Property, Media, and the Public Sphere*, held in May 2022 in Vienna, sparked significant interest in questions of property within communication and media studies (see Güney, Hille, Pfeiffer, Porak, & Theine, (2023) for a collection of articles based on the conference). This interest was further developed in the special issue *Media Transformation and the Challenge of Property* in the European Journal of Communication (see Theine & Sevignani, 2024b).

### **Outline of the Special Section**

As discussed above, property in media and communication studies has been researched through various approaches. The contributions in this Special Section pick up and contribute to the following threads in property research: First, the interconnection between contemporary economic and societal transformations and property in the media; second, the impact of different media ownership structures on journalistic priorities and public interest; and third, the discursive construction and legitimization of property and wealth in the media sphere.

The first focus, comprising three studies, analyzes how fundamental and large-scale transformations in the economic and societal realm are interconnected with and re-structure property as a central institution of media and communication relations. The first article, titled "Toward Media Environment Capture: A Theoretical Contribution on the Influence of Big Tech on News Media" by Sebastian Sevignani, Hendrik Theine, and Mandy Tröger, explores how the growing dominance of Big Tech companies in the economy and society is increasingly extending toward media and journalism—an unfolding tendency conceptualized by the authors as media environment capture. The study highlights how Big Tech's influence extends beyond ownership of media outlets to capturing entire information environments. This process of privatizing the public sphere raises critical questions about property, as it transforms public communication spaces into private domains controlled by a few dominant actors.

The second article, "The Internet of Things Presents: A Case Study on Ensuring Legitimacy for Building Data Supply Routes in Surveillance Capitalism," by Nils S. Borchers engages with the rise of surveillance capitalism as a third large-scale contemporary economic and societal reconfiguration. Instead of focusing on well-known examples such as Google, the article assesses a case with less-considered characteristics: the born-analog company Bosch and how it struggles to ensure legitimacy for large-scale data dispossession. The study highlights how Bosch employs strategies of seductive surveillance and privacy washing to make its data extraction practices invisible. By analyzing how data—a key resource in digital media capitalism that is not yet legally ownable—are captured, appropriated, and legitimized, the article critically examines how surveillance capitalism transforms ownership models and property relations in the digital era.

The third article, titled "Structural Masculinism and Women's Media Ownership in the Context of Authoritarian Populism: A Feminist Political Economy of Communication Perspective" by Marlene Radl, Burge Çelik, Mojca Pajnik, and Birgit Sauer engages with another contemporary economic and societal shift, namely the rise of masculinist authoritarian populism. The authors use the feminist political economy of communication approach to analyze how gendered media ownership structures intersect with authoritarian-populist politics in Austria, Slovenia, and Turkey. This study demonstrates how structural masculinism and patriarchal family business models, coupled with ownership concentration and clientelist ties, create conditions for media control by masculinist authoritarian populists. By highlighting the gendered nature of media ownership, the article provides critical insights into how property and power intersect to shape media systems and societal narratives.

The second focus of this Special Section, comprising two studies, aims to systematize how different ownership structures—for example, private, public, and civil society—shape journalistic priorities and the representation of public interest. The article "Does Media Ownership Matter for Journalistic Content? A Systematic Scoping Review of Empirical Studies" by Hendrik Theine, Julia Bartsch, and Mandy Tröger provides a systematic review of 56 empirical studies, demonstrating that media ownership significantly influences journalistic content. It highlights how private sector ownership dominates research focus, while public and civil society ownership models remain underexplored, along with the underrepresentation of public interest perspectives.

The article "Examining the Journalism Philanthropy Model: A Literature Review" by Louisa Lincoln strengthens the focus on civil society ownership by examining the growing influence of philanthropy-supported journalism as an alternative to commercial media, particularly amid the decline of local news. It explores the opportunities of this ownership and funding model to address gaps left by market-driven journalism while raising concerns about potential donor influence on editorial independence and public interest alignment.

All articles in this Special Section have focused primarily on the "material" side of property in media and communication. The final article in this Special Section, "The Past, the Present, the Future: Self-Portrayals of Wealthy Business Owners in the Media" by Stefan Wallaschek and Nora Waitkus, expands the view beyond the media and communication industry and turns to the question of how property and wealth are discursively constructed and legitimized in the media. In line with the recent growing interest in better understanding how the ideological legitimization of unequal property and wealth relations (e.g., Piketty, 2020) is mediated by the media (e.g., Dammerer, Hubmann, & Theine, 2023; Kantola & Vesa, 2023; Vikström, 2024), they reveal how wealthy business owners use temporal self-narratives to naturalize wealth accumulation and intergenerational property transfers. By framing wealth as a product of hard work and family legacy, this article contributes to understanding how discursive strategies, diffused by media, reinforce systems of inequality and legitimize private property within the public sphere.

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