

Book Review

The International Journal of Press/Politics
1-3

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

ijpp.sagepub.com



Rodney Benson

Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

xiv+281 pp.

\$95, £60 ISBN 978 0 521 88767 0 Hardback

\$29.99, £19.99 ISBN 978 0 521 715676 Paperback (2014)

Reviewed by: Raymond Kuhn, *Queen Mary University of London, UK*

DOI: 10.1177/1940161215584270

A comparative study of news media coverage (newspaper and television) of the issue of immigration in France and the United States ranging from the early 1970s up to 2006, this book is conceptually sophisticated, methodologically rigorous, and analytically cogent. The work is multi-layered and makes an important contribution to different debates in political communication. Despite the book's title, its central arguments can be appreciated by readers who have no special interest in the issue of immigration news per se.

First, there is the book's theoretical innovation. In showing how news media contribute to the shaping of public debate, Benson draws on the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. The author's aim, however, is not simply to apply Bourdieu's conceptual approach to the chosen field of enquiry but rather to challenge and refashion Bourdieu's framework for his own analytic purposes. Benson does this at length in chapter 2 through the development of his own field model. Here the author provides a detailed comparative analysis of the French and U.S. journalistic fields, with a focus on three distinct levels. These are field *position* (relative "proximity" to either non-market or market power, as mediated by the state), field *logic* (dominant news practices and formats, which are hybrid translations or refractions of external field influences), and field *structure* (distinctions inside the field, related to class habitus of news workers and news audiences; hierarchically organized differences across media outlets, news desks, or beats; and the organizational ecology of competition). This analytic framework allows Benson to highlight important elements of commonality across the two national systems (e.g., the class composition of audiences, the growing influence of market logics on journalism from the 1980s onward) and of difference (e.g., narrative is the dominant logic of journalistic practice in the United States, whereas the debate ensemble format dominates in France). Media history, ownership configuration, journalistic practices, the relations between media and the state, news

formats, and media financing are just a few of the topics covered in this detailed and wide-ranging overview of the respective national journalistic fields.

Second, the book makes an important case-study contribution to the literature on news frames, with the unpacking of immigration news coverage in the two countries underpinned by a strong analytic focus on framing. The research corpus is examined in terms of ten broad immigration frames. Three of these portray immigrants as victims (the “global economy” frame, the “humanitarian” frame, and the “racism/xenophobia” frame), three portray them as heroes (the “cultural diversity” frame, the “integration” frame, and the “good worker” frame), and four portray immigrants as a threat (the “jobs” frame, the “public order” frame, the “fiscal” frame, and the “national cohesion” frame). Chapters 3 and 4 of the book consist of detailed analytic investigations of the framing of immigration news in the United States and France. These are followed by an unusually short chapter that looks at explanations for continuity and change in news framing in both systems during peak years of media attention to the immigration issue across the chosen time period.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Benson finds that no single frame has completely dominated the news in either media system, though he argues that the humanitarian and public order frames have tended to predominate in both countries. Yet Benson also points to differences between the U.S. and French media in the emphasis placed on different frames: for example, he contends that France has not followed America’s lead in economic and cultural framing of the immigration issue. Moreover, although the author points to some elements of convergence over the years, he argues that “even in the contemporary period of global hypercommercialism and supposed cross-national convergence and homogenization, the French and U.S. news media continue to be marked by distinctive styles, formats, and content” (p. 20). While French and American frames of immigration exhibit both similarities and differences, what they do not demonstrate—with a few exceptions—is convergence. Benson thus takes issue with the many academic commentators who, in recent years, have argued that Western media systems are all converging toward an American liberal model of political communication.

Third, the book addresses the issue of what constitutes the concrete elements of multi-perspectival news; elements that would allow the media to fulfill their information and communication functions adequately in the public sphere. Here, the author is concerned with pluralism in terms of the breadth of coverage of ideas (ideological) and access provided to sources (institutional), using the standard dualism of internal and external pluralism as organizing categories. In terms of internal pluralism, Benson finds that, contrary to conventional wisdom, French newspapers are at least as broadly balanced and internally pluralist as their American counterparts, and indeed usually more so. In terms of external pluralism, the differences between the two national press systems are small, with slightly more pluralism again to be found on the French side. Counterintuitively, the author argues, state intervention in promoting press freedom (e.g., through public subsidy) helps rather than hinders the pluralism of the French press. Moreover, in terms of press criticism of political elites, Benson argues that French newspapers in general are not less critical of government and the party in

power than the U.S. press; in fact, the opposite is generally true, with French journalism more characterized by the critical clash of ideas (p. 170). It is this greater concern with ideas and ideological diversity on the French side that helps to make room for the utilization of a broader range of frames by the French press as compared with its U.S. counterpart, where an emphasis on personalized, narrative news frequently determines framing.

Finally, the book has a strong normative *leitmotif* that is occasionally made explicit by the author: the desirability of a significant publicly subsidized component of the national media system. The book thus throws down a challenge to those who believe that a liberal market approach to the organization of news media inevitably produces the broadest range of news content. If, as Benson claims with regard to the high-prestige national newspapers examined in his study, competition seems to homogenize more than differentiate in terms of content, then a simple reliance on market forces will narrow rather than extend the media's representation of political and policy debates. Benson is in contrast very positive about the benefits of publicly funded media as being positioned to show more in-depth, reasoned, ideologically diverse, and critical news coverage than their commercial counterparts. In the final section of the book, titled "The Way Forward: Implications for Reform," it is scarcely surprising therefore that the author's first recommendation focuses on the need to expand and strengthen public media.

Aimed mainly at a readership of graduate students and academic researchers, this book is an excellent combination of theoretical insights, empirical findings, and normative recommendations. It does not just say a lot about the current state of journalism in each country; in comparing and contrasting journalistic output in two highly developed media systems, the book highlights the respective strengths and deficiencies of this output in terms of its contribution to democratic debate. Because of the sheer amount of empirical material presented (frame analysis, content analysis, statistical data), the book is not always an easy read. However, it is certainly an intellectually rewarding one.