



**Shaping Immigration News: A French–American Comparison.**

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In *Shaping Immigration News: A French–American Comparison*, Rodney Benson focuses on the following questions: What factors influence the shaping of immigration news in France and the United States? What social conditions contribute to the production of journalistic knowledge in France and the United States? To elaborate on these questions, Benson makes the case that “immigration is an especially multifaceted and complex social phenomenon” (p. 2), through a thorough analysis of the French and American journalistic fields. His detailed book draws on a rich literature review to challenge the liberal and political economist assumptions about state intervention and market power. For Benson, the liberal assumption that state intervention threatens journalists’ autonomy and independence, and the political economist idea that the existence of a commercial media logic makes news sensational and superficial, are not universally applicable.

With delicate precision, Benson draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory in order to explore the forces that interact within the coverage of immigration news in both countries. Using a framing analysis to structure his research, he concludes that in the peak years of media attention to immigration in both countries (since the 1960s), the coverage of immigration has revolved around emotional frames, such as the humanitarian story and public order. Moreover, Benson notes that position (the proximity to market or non-market forces), logic (the format of news), and structure (the class habitus of journalists and news audiences) are the principal determinants of the patterns of immigration news in France and the United States. Methodologically, he uses a comparative analysis and builds on the previous works of French sociologists Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot. To support his claims, Benson samples and analyzes “texts and transcripts of national-agenda-setting newspapers and national television news” (p. 10). His French sample includes *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, France 2 Television, and TF1, whereas the American corpus encompasses the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and “the main evening news programs” for ABC, NBC, and CBS (p. 10). However, for research diversity purposes, Benson includes public channels—the French public channel Arte, the American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)—and elite, mass-market, and financial newspapers (e.g., *Les Echos*, *La Croix*, and *Le Parisien* in France, and the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *USA Today* in the United States). To make sense of such a substantial sample, he utilizes a content analysis, illustrated by graphs and tables, that either represent the percentage of framing occurrences over the sampled time period, levels and targets of criticism, levels of diversity, or topical depictions on television. This book offers significant theories and interpretations for policymakers, scholars of a wide range of disciplines, and concerned citizens.

Benson's book follows a logical pattern. In Chapter 1, he critiques Bourdieu's idea that economic and political powers are the only heteronomous poles that can influence institutional structures, arguing in a subsequent chapter that such an idea "falls short of capturing the complexity of forms of journalism and their contributions to democracy" (p. 200). Inspired by the results of his analysis, Benson insists there are other external forces that contribute to the production of journalistic knowledge, namely social factors. In light of his critique, in Chapter 2 he offers a substantial historical background of both the French and American journalistic fields to situate the position, logic, and structure of each with respect to immigration news. For Benson, "if French and American journalism continue to be different ... it is because the states in these respective societies maintain different mixes of policies that enable or constrain different types of journalism" (p. 34). In fact, the history of both journalistic fields reveals that France and the United States are built on divergent political and cultural structures and ideas. By different types of journalism, Benson alludes to the French "debate ensemble" format driven by policies of civic logics, which he contrasts with the narrative and personalized American format that is influenced by market logics and laissez-faire policies.

Benson's analysis gets more interesting in the subsequent chapters, when he highlights the several differences and similarities that inform the production of journalistic knowledge in France and the United States by focusing on levels of diversity and political criticism. In Chapter 6, Benson provides evidence that state intervention does not always jeopardize or reduce journalists' autonomy, arguing that France is a "powerful counterexample" (p. 152) to that idea. In that same chapter, he argues that commercial newspapers are not always less multiperspectival, as political economists would argue, insofar as there are instances in which some French and American news organizations challenge that view. For example, Benson's findings show that *Le Figaro*, a newspaper whose revenues were, and still are, mostly generated by advertising (Kuhn, 1995, p. 39), and *Libération* were "amongst the most multi perspectival," along with the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, which "had greater speaker diversity than the *Monitor*" (p. 152). In a similar vein, Benson assesses levels of criticism in French and American news outlets to counter the same assumptions in Chapter 7. He finds that even highly subsidized French newspapers can be very critical of government policies despite their respective left and right biases.

Furthermore, Benson stresses there are discrepancies between television news and newspapers' coverage of immigration. For that purpose, in Chapter 8 he focuses on television news coverage of immigration and looks at the topical depictions of French and U.S. television images. His analysis reveals that French television does not use the debate ensemble format on television news, but rather the American narrative format. Also, not every American television outlet follows the narrative, sensationalist, and personalized format that prevails in newspapers—some, such as PBS, offer an in-depth and more analytical approach to television news.

In the final chapter, Benson wraps up his argument by providing recommendations that might help democracy thrive. For him, an expansion of public media and the exercise of self-reflexivity could be an effective remedy. Benson calls for journalists,

and especially American journalists, to “be more self-reflexive and self-critical of the disadvantages as well as advantages of the narrative form of news” (pp. 208–209). With respect to the expansion of public media, he contends that to strengthen quality journalism, “journalists ... should support the efforts of progressive media policy reform groups like Free Press” (p. 208), even though such an initiative might lead to a change in structures of power.

Overall, Benson’s findings are strong and significant, as they provide evidence for his critiques of Bourdieu, as well as liberal and political economy assumptions. Indeed, the production of journalistic knowledge is not only informed by market or political forces, but also by the non-market forces that constitute the basis of Benson’s results. His thorough content analysis and interpretation of news outlets allows us to get an insight into the mindset of French and American journalists, which are not convergent but often similar. Drawing on Benson’s findings, one could argue that French journalists see themselves as intellectuals and activists, whereas American journalists think of themselves as narrators and investigators. What is more, Benson’s analysis is rich, for it is associated with larger issues of democracy in both countries. By qualitatively evaluating the prevalence of specific criticism of the ruling government in each country, Benson enables us to penetrate the mechanism of media policies and democracy in both France and the United States. His findings are even stronger, as they classify different types of criticism into “administrative criticism ... truth criticism ... [and] character criticism” (p. 159), to mention only a few. Such levels of criticism support the assertion that a critical and diverse news media allows for a healthy democracy, as citizens get to build on different perspectives for substantial public political debate. Given that the purpose of cultural studies is attempting “to diagnose human meanings” (Carey, 1989, p. 56), or in this case the meanings of the texts, Benson’s assessment of democracy gives way to a cultural studies approach to immigration news, allowing one to reflect critically on the construction of the texts and the underlying discourses within news coverage.

Benson’s findings also provide evidence for the underlying assumption that journalism is a complex activity performed differently throughout the world, even though only French and American journalistic fields inform his analysis. His account of cross-national differences across French and American journalistic fields backs up that assumption. When addressing multiperspectival news, Benson stresses that the variety of types of media outlets correlates with the level of pluralism. As we go from religious-sponsored to advertising-supported newspapers, levels of pluralism fluctuate. Furthermore, picturing different tendencies across French and American news outlets is important, for it shows structural differences for television news and newspapers. Such an analysis reveals that television news “is generally less multi perspectival than newspapers’ coverage” (p. 194).

Although most of Benson’s work is coherent, there are some parts that could use some polishing. For instance, in Chapter 8 he raises the question of medium effects. Underscoring the importance of the nature of a medium to its coverage of immigration news, he notes that television news does not always follow the same format as newspapers (debate ensemble or narrative) in the coverage of immigration in both France

and the United States. While his findings that television news is geared more toward the narrative format are relevant as they are evidence of exceptions between media forms, Benson's analysis of images and their proprieties is too cursory. It does not resonate with the rest of the argument, inasmuch as he fails to elaborate on the correlation between an image's proprieties and ideas of diversity of coverage. The assessment of television images could have been significant to the overall argument regarding the challenge of liberal and political economist assumptions.

This critique aside, this book is a sophisticated and important piece of scholarship that not only provides insight into the production of journalistic knowledge in France and the United States—as well as a picture of both fields with respect to immigration news coverage—but also makes a weighty contribution to the academic literature on media, cultural studies, communication studies, and sociology. By developing his argument in a logical and highly detailed fashion, Benson calls for an understanding of the complexity of the production of journalistic knowledge. This book is useful to anyone interested in international comparative analysis, or to students who are intrigued by the greater European–American dichotomy in news coverage. This book could also benefit researchers interested in unpacking underlying ideologies through discourse analysis of texts and images, as well as researchers whose field of interest is reception studies.

### References

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