

Book review: Rodney Benson *Shaping immigration news: A French-American comparison*

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Rodney Benson

Shaping immigration news: A French-American comparison

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 296 pp. ISBN 9780521887670

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In *Shaping Immigration News*, Rodney Benson makes a convincing argument that immigration news, dealing with a substantially important topic that is also a hot-button political issue of considerable popular interest, provides a useful case through which to understand how media operate in different countries, what they produce, and what that means for democracy. His aims are multiple: first, to map the characteristics of the French and US journalistic field; second, to analyze immigration news in a sample of key periods in each country since the 1970s in terms of what frames have dominated, who are given voice in the coverage, how critical it is of different forms of power, how the coverage differs from news organization to news organization and between newspapers and television, and how it has changed over time; third, to explain why these differences exist; and fourth, to determine what the coverage means for democracy in the two countries. He largely succeeds with his ambitious agenda. Where the book falls short in places, it is from wanting to do too much, never from doing too little.

Shaping Immigration News consists basically of two components, interweaved throughout the book. One component, the ‘immigration news’ part, consists of Benson’s extensive and impressive comparative content analysis of news coverage of immigration in France and the United States from the early 1970s to the mid-2000s, including in each country a sample of several leading national newspapers of record as well as smaller nationally distributed newspapers plus a range of television news programs spanning both channels aiming for a mass audience and more niche channels. It is a robust sample both in terms of outlets (where television is too often left out) and in terms of time frame. A detailed analysis of this coverage in terms of what the dominant frames are, who the quoted sources are, how many different perspectives on immigration are included, and whether the coverage includes critical perspectives, takes up the bulk of Chapters 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8. These chapters provide both interesting substantial insights into similarities and differences in how immigration is covered in France and the United States and a set of conceptual and methodological tools that can usefully be deployed elsewhere, focused on other issues, dealing with other countries.

The other component, the ‘shaping’ part, consists of Benson’s analysis of the ways in which the French and US media systems differ and how this in turn influence what is covered and how it is covered. Here, empirically documented differences in coverage are directly coupled analytically with analysis of cross-national differences in how news media operate, an important link often absent from comparative media system-analysis. This part of the book is framed primarily in the field theoretical terms originally developed by Pierre Bourdieu (a terminology that Benson has already done much to introduce into English-language journalism studies). Chapter 2 outlines the positions, logics, and structures that Benson argues are characteristic of the French and US journalistic fields, combining interviews with key journalists, secondary sources, and scholarly work in French and English. Later chapters draw on this analysis to account for differences and

similarities in immigration coverage in the two countries: Chapter 5 deals with change over time and Chapter 9 returns to the question of how different field positions, logics, and structures help explain the differences in French and US news content. While Benson's field theoretical approach with its clear conceptualization of the internal differentiation characteristic of most media systems has advantages over, for example, institutionalist theories that – with their orientation toward cross-organizational norms and routines – may exaggerate the internal homogeneity of media systems, this part of the book, while rich, comes across as a bit less fully articulated than the comparative content analysis. In places, the theoretical framework, for all its qualities, seems in danger of getting in the way of the empirical work. It is not clear, for example, that Bourdieu's reductionist notion of fields as positioned between the two poles of market power and nonmarket power – surely there can be more forms of power? – enrich the analysis.

Why should we care about the kinds of differences in coverage and media systems that *Shaping Immigration News* focuses on? As Benson puts it, the test for journalism as a part of democracy is how well it helps citizens and policymakers understand the causes and consequences of matters of public importance, such as immigration. The main thrust of his comparative analysis is clear – French and US immigration coverage has many similarities, but also significant differences that translate into democratic strengths and weaknesses. US journalism to a larger extent than French journalism plays the 'watch-dog' role associated with journalism in what Benson calls an 'elitist' theory of democracy, pursuing independent investigative journalism (though he notes that enterprise reporting is quite rare in both countries). French journalism, on the other hand, performs better when it comes to 'deliberative' and 'pluralist' theories of democracy, providing a forum both for direct engagement between different points of view and a demonstrably more diverse range of sources from politics and civil society. Benson argues this is so because the French journalistic field is less dominated by market forces than the US journalistic field. Different systems have different democratic virtues and vices, and these are in turn convincingly shown to be rooted in inherited social structures.

Overall, *Shaping Immigration News* is a very ambitious and successful book. It makes a real contribution to comparative content analysis through an impressive empirical analysis of 40 years of coverage across countries, organizations, and platforms and couples it effectively with an interesting comparative analysis of national media systems that allow Benson to advance our understanding not only of news content and different journalistic fields, but also what combination of forces may facilitate journalism's role in democracy. I warmly recommend his book to scholars interested in content analysis, comparative media research, and in media sociology more generally.