

Book Review

Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison

By Rodney Benson

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Commercial pressures influence journalistic production in industrialized nations, sometimes stifling ideological diversity in the news and promoting dramatized, “consumer friendly” news output. At the same time, the civic logic that the public has a right to in-depth and multi-perspectival information backs journalistic production. The central premise of Rodney Benson’s meticulously researched *Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison* is that immigration news coverage in both France and the United States can best be understood through a systematic analysis of journalistic ownership, funding, the composition of audiences, and journalistic practice.

Following the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Benson conceives journalism as a “field” of culture production that has limited autonomy from both the state and the market. As a site of social struggle, the journalistic field is organized around a fundamental opposition between a civic, nonmarket pole and a commercial, market pole. The objects of Benson’s analysis are the structural transformations (and continuities) of the journalistic fields in France and the United States, in relation to the degree of influence that market pressures and civil society have in shaping the content and characteristics of news. What follows is a cogent analysis of the two journalistic fields, with focus on field position (in terms of the field’s proximity to market/commercial and non-market/civic poles); field logic (in terms of dominant news practices and formats); and field structure (distinctions within the field between news workers and their audiences based on class habitus). Benson applies this framework of fields to explain differences in journalistic output on immigration, connecting field position, structure, and logic to differences in the form and content of immigration news output.

The structural homologies between journalistic field position and news format are more clearly demonstrated in the French case, where journalistic proximity to the non-market (“civic”) pole shapes news output, in the form of ideologically diverse analysis of debate of ideas, presented in a multi-genre, multi-perspectival format. The most prominent frames in the French case are easily explained by

the journalistic field's proximity to the civic pole; in France, immigration news tends to emphasize humanitarian concerns surrounding immigrant rights and, increasingly more so, themes of national and cultural cohesion. The American emphasis on investigative news and personalized narrative, Benson suggests, is the result of the journalistic field's proximity to the market pole, but that finding is not always clearly supported. With regard to the American case, one has the sense that dominant news practices and formats cannot be explained entirely by field position and field structure. Furthermore, the overall argument often reads as though the "field logic"—which encompasses news practices and formats—is both an explanatory factor and an object of explanation.

Benson convincingly argues for the importance of habitus in shaping the frames that show up in French and American immigration coverage, which only bolsters his use and extension of Bourdieu's work on cultural distinction, fields of power, and practice. Within the American media, the attention given to immigration restriction advocates is markedly lower and less positive than that given to immigrant rights advocates. Benson attributes this media trend to a habitus gap between the leading immigration "restrictionists" and the journalists covering immigration news; immigration reporters have substantially higher education levels than immigration restriction activists, and they tend to be younger, more cosmopolitan, and more likely to reside in urban areas than restriction activists. Benson convincingly argues that the habitus of working journalists shapes the increasing prominence of humanitarian frames in coverage of immigration in the United States.

Although the focus of most of this book is on print journalism and newspaper coverage of immigration, Benson presents a compelling comparison between the format and frames used in television news coverage and newspaper coverage. In the highly commercialized realm of television news coverage in the United States, market pressures seem to influence the appearance of dramatized, emotional coverage of immigration. This trend accords with the commercial imperative to present news in consumer-friendly formats. With the exception of PBS, most television news outlets in the United States fail to offer in-depth treatment of prominent news issues, with immigration as no exception. French news channels, like the newspapers, are less commercially dominated and more likely to be subsidized by the state. As a result, French news stations are more likely to present an array of opinions on immigration from members of diverse civic groups. Though Benson does acknowledge that an increasing proportion of consumers in both France and the United States are reading and viewing the news via online outlets, he stops short of analyzing potential differences among newspaper, television, and online sources.

What is most impressive about Benson's research is the way he adapts Bourdieu's field concept, framing the field of journalistic production as a site of struggle between the pressures of the market and civil society. Proximity to the market and civic poles seems to be the single most important factor predicting both the format and framing of immigration news coverage. Benson uses this framework to both debunk and confirm dominant political and economic theories of the press. Benson's findings challenge the liberal assumption

that state intervention in the press will limit the amount of criticism leveled at the government and the major political parties in power. In France, where the journalistic field is subject to more state intervention, news coverage contains more critical statements than American news. Benson also assesses a political economy model of news production, which suggests that excessive commercialism will narrow the diversity of frames and viewpoints presented in the news, mainly because corporate advertisers generally discourage attention to marginal speakers and discourses. He does find evidence to support this model, because increasing commercialization in the United States has led to an ideological narrowing of the news. In drawing these conclusions, Benson makes a strong case for the indispensability of the field framework for assessing journalistic, and for that matter all, cultural production.