

# COMPARATIVE NEWS MEDIA SYSTEMS: NEW DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH

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Long hampered by American chauvinism, comparative research on news media is finally coming out of its long slumber. Presuming the inferiority of journalism as practiced anywhere other than in the land of Watergate and the Pentagon Papers, U.S. researchers for many years were little inclined to explore conditions elsewhere. More surprisingly, this U.S.-centric worldview was often embraced by legions of Europeans and others who rejected their own journalistic traditions in favor of an American ideal that was often ill-suited to their own country (Mancini 2000). Promoted by the State Department and private foundations (Wrenn 2008), U.S. notions of a market-driven “free press” were also long reinforced by the classic textbook, *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956). *Four Theories* celebrated the U.S. and U.K. “liberal” and “social responsibility” models, reviled the “authoritarian” and “Soviet-communist” alternatives, and simply ignored the possibility of anything in between. In short, one had to choose: the “American Way,” or the Highway (to the Gulag). Clearly, this stark dichotomy effectively removed from view the range of western European democratic press traditions, as well as the diverse panoply of non-western media.

Fortunately, in recent years, a growing tide of cross-national comparative research has begun to challenge this American-centric narrative. After the pioneering essay by Blumler and Gurevitch (1975), new journals emerged, such as the *European Journal of Sociology* and the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, which emphasized comparative research. Important anthologies were edited by Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren (1992) and Curran and Park (2000), the latter attempting to more fully incorporate non-western media, and important comparative case studies were conducted by Alexander (1981), Hallin and Mancini (1984), Chalaby (1996), Asard and Bennett (1997), Esser (1998, 1999), Benson (2000), Ferree et al. (2002),

Deuze (2002), Donsbach and Patterson (2004), Strömback and Dimitrova (2006), among many others. In 2004, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems* presented a landmark synthesis of this emerging research field, replacing the American-centric normative approach of *Four Theories* with an original framework for open-ended empirical research.

In a very short period of time, *Comparing Media Systems* has become an essential point of reference for comparative news media research, but as Hallin and Mancini themselves concede, it is far from the last word. Their classification of national media systems into broader regional political/journalistic “models” – a North Atlantic “liberal” model, a Northern European “democratic corporatist” model, and a southern European “polarized pluralist” model – is admittedly not fully able to capture the diversity of media within and across each model. Likewise, their identification of four key factors shaping news production (to be discussed below), while immensely useful, needs to be interrogated in relation to other theoretical traditions, such as the sociology of news, new institutionalism, and field theory. Finally, important questions scarcely explored by Hallin and Mancini, are now arguably the most crucial: first, the extent to which even an “expanded” understanding of western media (beyond the American paradigm) is adequate to fully account for the wide variety of media found in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe, and second, whether the internet is dissolving or exacerbating or creating new kinds of cross-national differences.

These are of course big questions, and I do not intend to settle them in this chapter. Instead, I will focus on the challenge of employing comparative research for testing hypotheses about the effects of system-level variables on news content and form, and limit myself to a few concluding remarks about the “new frontiers” of research on non-western media and internet journalism. In my view, comparative research needs to be more self-conscious about seeking out national cases that vary on system-level variables (such as concentration of ownership, political party system, specific media policies, etc.) rather than on the basis of regional or topical interest. Because the French and U.S. news media differ so systematically – in their relations to political and economic power, and in their journalistic professional traditions – many communication scholars and sociologists have found this comparison to be especially fruitful in theory-building (see, e.g., Alexander 1981; Lemieux and Schmalzbauer 2000; Brossard et al. 2004; Starr 2004). For this reason, my own research has focused on French-American comparisons, and I will draw upon some of my recent findings to illustrate the theory-building potential (and limitations) of comparative research.

There are some positive signs that journalists are paying increasing attention to this research (see, e.g., Nordensen 2007), providing them with new ideas about reporting practices and ways to resist excessive market or governmental pressures. Moreover, to the extent that publics and policy-makers can understand better the factors that shape journalistic production, they are in a better position to demand changes that will help journalism better serve the needs of democratic societies. Comparative research is now poised, more than ever, to honestly and directly answer such questions.

### Reconceptualizing the sociology of news

Institutional and organizational scholars (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell 1991) have posited that contemporary societies are composed of a number of competing and semi-autonomous institutional orders or “fields.” Journalism is clearly a “field” in most if not all western democratic nation-states in that it has developed some limited amount of autonomy from the state and the capitalist market and that it is an arena of contestation and struggle operating according to “rules of the game” consciously or unconsciously enacted by actors in the field. Such a structural conception of journalism suggests that news content will be shaped first of all by the journalistic field’s positioning vis-à-vis other powerful fields, chiefly the political and economic fields, and second of all, by factors internal to the field itself, such as historically-shaped cultural logics of practice and social class differentiation. This “field-level” conceptualization of journalism – simultaneously analyzing political, economic, and internal “journalistic field” constraints on the production of news – builds upon the classic sociology of news while offering a more parsimonious and comprehensive systems-level framework that will be especially useful for cross-national comparative research.<sup>1</sup>

The first type of structural constraint is political. It is hypothesized that the state powerfully constrains (or enables) the diversity of voices and views in the press, as well as the amount and types of criticism and critical reporting, through its power to regulate or subsidize the media, provide official information to the press, and shape the system of parties and elections (Kuhn 1995; Starr 2004); in Bourdieu’s terms, this factor concerns the journalistic field’s relation to the “political field” (Bourdieu 2005).

The second type of structural constraint is commercial, or in Bourdieu’s terms, the journalistic field’s relation to the economic field. Such economic influences are often portrayed as a unitary phenomenon when in fact they encompass different, potentially conflicting elements. At least four distinct kinds of economic pressures can be identified: concentration of ownership (Klinenberg 2007; Baker 2007), profit pressures related to type of ownership (Cranberg et al. 2001), type of funding such as advertising versus paying audiences (Baker 1994; or type of advertising, see Benson 2003), and level and intensity of market competition, which may be closely related with non-economic forms of competition among journalists, as discussed below.

A third claim is that while economic and political factors establish the broad context for press performance, it is journalistic norms and practices historically emerging out of a particular national journalistic field that directly shape news content and form (Bourdieu 1998, 2005). As Bourdieu (1998: 39) insists, a field is a “microcosm with its own laws . . . [which is to say] that what happens in it cannot be understood by looking only at external factors.” A field’s “rules of the game” are established when the field is founded, and once “routinized” tend to persist over time. Field internal “logics” may thus tend to persist even when conditions external to the field change. Field logics may be expressed in a number of ways, in taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes “news” and the purpose of journalism, the relationship between fact and opinion, modes of news story construction and sourcing practices, or dominant genres

and news design formats. Journalistic fields may also differ cross-nationally in class stratification and organizational ecology, specifically in their degree of concentration or fragmentation, which can affect the amount and types of information flows and the level and intensity of competition, both economic and professional.

This framework of three broad types of structural forces shaping the production of news – political, economic, and journalistic fields – should not be taken as precluding the possibility of other fields shaping the news; in some nation-states and under certain historical conditions, the religious, social scientific, or civil society associational fields may exert significant influences. In order to understand any given case of news coverage, all of these fields and their leading individual or organizational actors need to be taken into account. This framework overlaps to a certain degree with Hallin and Mancini’s “four factor” model, though again I believe that the three factors I have outlined offer a broader model for comparative research as it seeks to analyze media outside of western Europe and North America. Hallin and Mancini identify four relevant “dimensions” of media systems: (1) historical development of a strong or weak mass circulation press, (2) political parallelism or the extent to which the media system reflects the major political currents, (3) journalistic professional training and tradition, and (4) type and extent of state intervention in the media sector.

Dimension 1 is one type of commercial constraint, but as noted there are others that could be relevant to explaining cross-national differences in news content. Dimensions 2 and 4 are both types of political constraints, and Dimension 3 is one aspect of journalistic field dynamics that as noted could also include the class characteristics of journalists and their audiences (see Bourdieu 1984; Benson 2006, 2009a; Hovden 2008), enduring cultural logics of practice, and organizational ecologies of both economic and symbolic (prestige) competition.

Having identified the potential universe of influences on the news, the crucial question then becomes: How do these factors shape the news in ways relevant to various democratic aspirations? In what ways do they contribute to journalistic content that is more or less ideologically diverse, more or less critical, more or less reasoned? Based on previous and emerging research, I offer six partially competing hypotheses about the ways in which these three structural factors – economic field, political field, and journalistic field – may work together or at cross-currents to produce variable effects on the production of news.

### **Commercial, political and field effects: some hypotheses**

- 1 Greater dependence on advertising is likely to contribute to more positive (and less negative) coverage of business, more critical (or sparse) coverage of labor unions, as well as a pro-consumerist depoliticization and ideological narrowing of the news (Tasini 1990; Baker 1994).
- 2 Government regulations, particularly via legal definitions of defamation and libel, may crucially shape patterns of news coverage. In particular, we might suppose that more restrictive defamation and libel laws will contribute to lesser public discussion of the private lives of government or other officials (Saguy 2003: 93), and perhaps

- less critical and cynical coverage. Likewise, stricter laws and regulations concerning journalistic access to confidential government information are likely to contribute to fewer revelations about governmental corruption or mismanagement.
- 3 Depending on the specific policy and kind of subsidy, the state as “enabler” could actually contribute to a range of media “public goods” (Baker 2002), a broader representation of groups and ideologies in the news, greater attention to government and political life in general, and more sustained, in-depth debate of issues (Curran 1991; see also Murschetz 1998).
  - 4 Such subsidies, however, also may place particular news outlets and the media system as a whole in the uncomfortable position of financial dependency on the government. For this reason, other scholars (de Tarlé 1980: 146) suggest that state “enabling” intervention has a chilling effect on news coverage of politics, or at least, the party or leaders in power.
  - 5 Field-specific cultural logics will generally express and reinforce extra-field influences. However, to the extent that such field logics are “path dependent” (Powell 1991) and subject to “cultural inertia”, thus tending to perpetuate the political and economic constraints at the time the field was first formed, the congruence between internal field logics and external forces may vary, especially during periods of rapid societal change. Field cultural logics will also tend to exert relatively uniform effects across the field, smoothing out to a certain degree differences among media outlets based on their ownership, funding, or audience composition.
  - 6 Finally, the internal organizational ecology of fields may play a role in encouraging or discouraging the kind of direct competition that leads to more sensationalistic or dramatized news coverage. For instance, Esser (1999) finds that national press coverage of politics is more “tabloidized” (defined here as more cynical toward politicians and more scandal-oriented) in the United Kingdom than in Germany, in part because of the U.K.’s more direct and intense competition among national newspapers as opposed to Germany’s regionally-based press.

### **Comparative research as hypothesis testing: French-U.S. comparisons**

Of course, this list is far from exhaustive, and others might produce a different set of hypotheses. Yet any attempt to systematically link media system characteristics and news content would be a significant improvement on the all-too-frequent framing study with methodological sophistication to spare but which ignores system-level causal linkages (see my specific critiques in Benson 2004).

Given the complexity and multiplicity of factors involved, it is certainly fair to say that news discourses are over-determined. In other words, since multiple factors often push the media in the same direction (e.g., both state and commercial factors potentially contributing to ideological narrowing), it simply may not be possible to identify the one or two most important factors. Gamson and Modigliani (1989: 5) even challenge the appropriateness of “the language of dependent and independent variables” for a constructionist account of media discourse, instead favoring what they term a “value-added process.” I share their uneasiness over a strictly linear regression

approach that would ignore how forces shaping news production are often intertwined and inter-related. Nevertheless, the simple lumping together of factors as encouraged by such a value-added model offers little hope of any insight into cross-national variations.

Comparative research, at least initially, may be less able to resolve questions about causality than to punch holes in the existing assumptions.<sup>2</sup> But this alone would be an impressive step forward. Let us consider just a few of the preceding hypotheses. What can comparative research tell us? Given that the French and U.S. media present in many ways opposite “ideal” types, and since this is my own area of research expertise, several of my examples will derive from this case study comparison. Within-country comparisons (across media outlets, differing in various characteristics) will also be used to contextualize and qualify cross-national findings.

Dependence on advertising funding varies significantly across national media systems. Is it true that media outlets that are more dependent on advertising will be less ideologically diverse or less critical of business? The French national press receives about half as much of its revenues from advertising as does the U.S. press. My case study comparison of immigration news coverage in seven U.S. newspapers and seven French newspapers shows that the French national press is in fact the more ideologically diverse, both at the level of the individual newspaper and across the media system as a whole (Benson 2009a); another study (Benson and Hallin 2007) that analyzed random samples of political news articles in the 1960s and 1990s likewise showed that *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* offered a wider range of civil society viewpoints than the *New York Times* (see Välvirronen and Kunelius 2008 for an extension of this research to include the “democratic corporatist” media system in Finland). An earlier comparison of Italian national public television and the U.S. national commercial networks likewise found a broader representation of diverse political and civil society viewpoints in the Italian media (Hallin and Mancini 1984). Certainly, political system factors – for instance, the existence of multi-party systems and the use of state subsidies to support ideological diversity, especially in the case of France – help explain these cross-national differences. Advertising’s “value-added” negative causal influence, however, seems to be demonstrated by the fact that the most ideologically diverse newspapers in each country in my immigration news study tended to be among those least dependent on advertising: in the U.S. case, the *Christian Science Monitor* (just 10 percent of revenues from advertising); and in France, *Libération* (just 20 percent of revenues) (Benson 2009a).

What about critical coverage of business? Is coverage of business more critical in news media systems that rely less on advertising? French-U.S. comparisons, at least, offer little evidence that this is the case. In another article drawing on my immigration news case study (Benson 2009b), I find that critical statements, either by journalists or the sources they quote, directed at business are rare in both the French and U.S. press, appearing in just 5 percent of French news stories and 7 percent of U.S. stories. Business criticism is higher than average at less advertising dependent outlets like the communist *L’Humanité* (not surprisingly!), the left-leaning *Libération*, and again, in the U.S., the *Christian Science Monitor*, but it is also relatively high at the *New York*

*Times* (just as high as at the *Monitor*, and higher than at most French newspapers), so advertising cannot be the entire story. Obviously, journalists are not so mechanically controlled by a dollop more or less of advertising; it may be that across most capitalist societies, powerful businesses will tend to be absent from the news, thus precluding critical coverage, except during relatively rare moments of crisis or scandal (Davis 2002). Moreover, the amount and intensity of business criticism may vary by issue. But that is just the point. Mechanistic claims – about advertising, or ownership, and the like – are frequently made both in scholarly and popularly venues. Cross-national research, because it allows for variation across multiple dimensions, helps us test and sort out the complex, overlapping, or contradictory avenues of influence on journalistic production.

Critical coverage of government, on the other hand, has often been assumed to be inversely related to the degree of state intervention in the media sector. Given the relatively higher degree of state intervention in the French media system, a French-U.S. comparison is illustrative. It does seem to be the case that there is more investigative reporting in the United States than in France (Chalaby 2004), though it is important to emphasize that the amount of investigative reporting is relatively low even in the U.S. In my immigration case study, using a generous indicator of “investigative reporting,” only about 5 percent of U.S. news coverage could be considered to fall into this category (compared to about 2 percent in the French sample). However, using the indicator of frequency of critical statements about government, or of dominant parties of the left or right, the French press was at least as or more critical than the U.S. press (Benson 2009b).

Finally, how might the cultural logic of journalistic fields offer additional explanatory power for differences in news form and content? In answering such a question, I hope to go beyond what has been done so often in the past, that is, to simply assert the primacy of “cultural” practices without also considering additional contextual factors, such as the aforementioned political and commercial influences, that may also be shaping the news. At the same time, I also want to search for evidence that might show that such practices are not simply “mechanisms,” that is, means through which external political and economic forces shape the news, but rather are semi-independent causal factors in their own right.

The “form of news” (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001), I would like to suggest, is a key means through which the internal logics of journalistic fields are expressed. The journalistic form of “dramatic narrative” has been highlighted by Darnton (1975), Schudson (1995) and Pedelty (1995), among others. There is no reason to assume, however, that narrative is necessarily a “universal” characteristic of journalistic practice. Ferree et al. (2002) show that German journalists are significantly less likely than U.S. journalists to construct their news articles as “narratives,” instead preferring to focus on reasoned debate among elites; likewise Hallin and Mancini (1984) found that Italian television journalists emphasized the presentation of opposing party viewpoints rather than personalized narratives. In France, there seems to be a similar emphasis on journalism as polemical “debate” rather than personalized narrative (Benson 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Boudana 2008). French debate oriented news is enabled

by a distinct journalistic format – the “debate ensemble” – which is given various labels by newspapers (“événement” [today’s big news] at *Libération*, “le fait du jour” [fact of the day] at *Le Parisien*, etc.) The debate ensemble format packages one or more of the page one news stories of the day into collections of related articles of various genres – breaking news, analyses, transcripts of interviews, background context articles, editorials, guest commentaries, and simple lists of quotes (often headlined “reactions”) from various officials, activists, experts, or ordinary citizens. In contrast, a page one news story in an American newspaper tends to be packaged as a single and often lengthy article authored by one or two journalists (though of course, there are exceptions when the “news” is extraordinary), and rarely mixes genres on the same page.

Dramatic narrative would seem to be highly compatible with investigative reporting, thus offering an additional explanation of its relatively greater prominence in the United States. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to suppose as Wessler (2008:8) hypothesizes, that narrative-driven formats actually “restrict the room for deliberative exchange of ideas.” At the qualitative level, the virtual absence of narrative-driven articles in the French immigration coverage as opposed to the overwhelming predominance of narrative-inflected articles in the U.S. coverage offers an additional explanation both for relatively greater ideological diversity and greater density of critical statements.

### Future challenges

It is important to acknowledge that two-country case study comparisons are limited in their capacity to definitively sort out the explanatory power of causal factors which are sure to over-determine any given national-level outcome. For this reason, another important approach not discussed in this chapter are ambitious multi-country studies, such as Shoemaker and Cohen’s recent *News around the World* (2006), though these kinds of studies sometimes attain scope at the sacrifice of contextual nuancing and depth. The best of both approaches might be combined via carefully designed multi-country comparisons that hold constant certain variables (e.g., level of advertising, or ownership concentration) in order to test more effectively for others (such as the effects of libel or other government policies); in order not to lose sight of contextual, historical factors, however, it might be advisable to keep the number of nation-states to a manageable number (i.e., three to ten).

As I noted at the outset, two crucial challenges remain. The first is to extend comparative news media research beyond Europe and North America. Building on the legacy of Curran and Park’s *De-westernizing Media Studies* (2000), there have been a number of worthwhile recent studies of news media in the Arab world (Ayish 2005), Mexico (Hughes 2006), Indonesia (Hanitzsch 2006), India (Rajagopal 2001), Japan (Freeman 2000, Krauss 2000), and elsewhere. While some of this work is explicitly comparative, much of it is not: the “comparisons” in these cases will have to be made by the reader, or even better, by the scholar who can put them to use via creative syntheses of these case studies.



A great deal of this research on the “developing world” demonstrates the ways in which European and North American news models have shaped local practice. For example, Silvio Waisbord’s *Watchdog Journalism in South America* (2000) finds much of South American journalism to be a “hybrid” of Anglo-American and French/Spanish traditions. However, Waisbord also emphasizes local influences, and indeed, one must be careful not to simply “apply” western models, either empirical (e.g., Hallin and Mancini 2004) or democratic normative (Jürgen Habermas’s “discursive” model, among others, as elaborated in Ferree et al. 2002), onto non-western societies. Without going to the extremes of an absolute relativism, it is crucial that one attempt to acknowledge and understand the difference of the “Other” rather than too quickly eliding it (Silverstone 2007). At the same time, comparative research would be impossible if we gave up on the possibility of attaining some level of cross-cultural understanding and some level of impartial knowledge of empirical similarities and differences. In order to keep the number of potential causal variables manageable, however, it would seem advisable to compare media systems that share cultural and linguistic traditions. This principle means that comparisons of western and non-western media should be undertaken with care (with the purpose of the comparison clearly specified), and certainly cases should be selected to carefully control for as many factors as possible.

Finally, the project of comparative research as outlined in this article obviously presumes the continuing importance of the nation-state. I am willing to defend that choice; the nation-state is not going to disappear any time soon (Morris and Waisbord 2001). At the same time, globalization and internet communication networks may be accelerating the integration of what Joseph Straubhaar (1998) has called “geo-linguistic” global markets. The internet may be reshaping journalism primarily through its effects on the “ecology” of competition and information flows within and across national journalistic fields. That is, by breaking down barriers of space and time, and making diverse types of media equally available anywhere via a single medium, the internet in some ways “centralizes” formerly fragmented media fields. Paradoxically, this American-led technology could thus serve as a Europeanizing rather than Americanizing force for global journalistic convergence (contra Hallin and Mancini 2004). Barnhurst and Nerone (2001: 294) observe that online media are breaking down local information monopolies that were crucial in establishing American-style non-partisan media (since a single urban newspaper had to appeal to audiences across partisan divides). For example, now that residents of Portland, Oregon can (and increasingly do) access the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and London’s *Guardian* (Thurman 2007; see also Reese et al. 2007) just as easily as their hometown newspaper website, ideological differences among leading media outlets – within a given “geo-linguistic” global circuit – may become more distinct as a means of developing and maintaining loyal audiences. Globalization and the internet may or may not be leading to significant cross-national convergence; in my reading of the literature, it is the continuing differences rather than the emerging similarities that seem striking (see, e.g., van der Wurff 2005). Certainly the process is uneven, and we cannot presume that convergence will necessarily be towards the “American Way.” As good comparativists, we simply have to put the question to the test.

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## Notes

- 1 While the sociology of news has been hampered by its myopic focus on the United States and the United Kingdom (but see Neveu [2004] and Brin, Charron and de Bonville [2004] for broader analyses that take into account French, Canadian, and other European cases and theorizing), there have been several notable attempts to identify the key "types" of factors that shape the news, including Gans (1979), Gitlin (1980: 249–51), Shoemaker and Reese (1991), and Schudson (2000). See Benson (2004) for a critique of these typologies, in which I argue that they tend to either focus too much on the micro-

level (individual journalists, individual news organizations) or the broad societal level (political culture, ideology, or political economy in which “political” and “economic” logics are not kept analytically distinct), missing entirely the mezzo-level “fields” in which social action takes shape.

- 2 For more extensive discussions of the virtues and limits of comparative methodology, see Blumler et al. (1992), Hallin and Mancini (2004, especially chapter one), Wirth and Kolb (2004), and Livingstone (2003).