

PUBLIC FUNDING AND JOURNALISTIC INDEPENDENCE: WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US?

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Can government help promote and expand quality journalism? Too often in the United States, skeptics dismiss government involvement in breathtakingly sweeping terms without recourse to any real evidence. Typical of the genre is this online posting in response to the limited government support advocated by former *Washington Post* editor Leonard Downie Jr. and journalism historian Michael Schudson (in their recent report “The Reconstruction of American Journalism”)¹: “How many independent government-subsidized [or] funded news sources are there in the world? Somewhere between zero and none. Letting the government control the media is the first step toward a dictatorship.” But is this true? What happens when government helps support the media? Is democracy threatened? Does the independence or quality of journalism decline? Well, actually, no, as even a brief review of the research on western European public media, both print and broadcast, will show.

Newspapers in France have received significant press subsidies (among the highest in Europe) of one type or another since the end of World War II. These subsidies amount to about 13 percent of newspapers’ total revenues, and yet my own research shows that French newspapers are at least as or more critical than their U.S. counterparts. I selected seven of the leading general interest, popular, and financial newspapers in France (*Libération*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *La Croix*, *L’Humanité*, *Les Echos*, and *Aujourd’hui en France*, the national edition of *Le Parisien*) and eight of their counterparts in the United States (the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *USA Today*, the *New York Daily News*, and the *New York Post*) and analyzed their news coverage of the immigration issue during peak media attention years in the 1990s and 2000s. Immigration coverage provides a good case study because immigration has been a major issue provoking lively debate within and between the

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major political parties in both countries. I defined criticism as substantive critical statements, either from journalist-authors or the sources they quote, about government, political parties, businesses, and other powerful organizations. These kinds of critical statements perform an important “signaling” function by calling attention to incoherent policy planning, ideological mystification, ineffective administration, or misleading information.

In raw terms, French press coverage of immigration offers on average more than twice as many critical statements as U.S. coverage. And even when I controlled for length of news articles, the French press was more critical, offering more criticisms per 1,000 words. Some French newspapers, such as the Catholic *La Croix* and the communist *L’Humanité* (not officially affiliated with the party) receive extra subsidies for “ideological pluralism.” (In the past, the left-leaning *Libération* and the far-right *Présent*, the paper sympathetic to Le Pen’s National Front party, have also received these extra subsidies. The justification is that the market alone should not decide which ideas are able to circulate in the public sphere, but that citizens need to have access to a wide range of voices and viewpoints.) Are these extrasubsidized newspapers less critical than other newspapers? In fact, no. *L’Humanité* is the single most critical newspaper in the study, and there is no statistical difference between *La Croix* and most other newspapers in France.² While some French newspapers tended to be relatively more partisan in their criticisms, as a whole both the French press and the American press shared a tendency to aim the greatest amount of criticism at the party in power. This research confirms the findings of a previous study I conducted with political scientist Daniel Hallin, comparing a random sample of political news during the 1960s and 1990s in *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* with the *New York Times*. Using different measures (such as overall critical tone and predominance of political “scandals” in political coverage), we found that the French newspapers were as critical as or more critical than the *Times*.

This study along with another article based on my immigration news sample (also extending to the 1970s and 1980s) show that French newspapers, taken one by one, tend to be more “multiperspectival” than the U.S. press, making room for a wider range of viewpoints (issue frames) and voices (cited sources), notably including a greater proportion of diverse civil society groups.³ Ideological diversity in news content matters greatly: audience research has shown that citizens who are exposed to multiple, conflicting interpretations of issues will come to think about politics in “more complex and original ways” and thus will be better able to perform their civic duties.⁴ But these findings of the high level of independence, ideological diversity, and in-depth coverage by public media do not only hold for France.

For example, media researchers Jesper Strömbäck and Daniela Dimitrova compared Swedish and U.S. news coverage of elections and found that

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whereas the U.S. coverage tended to focus on the “horse race” and political strategies, the coverage of publicly funded Swedish newspapers tended to be more “issue-oriented, providing more interpretive reporting.”⁵ In a comparative study of election news coverage by national private and public television channels in Germany, the UK, and France, and national private channels in the United States, German media scholar Frank Esser found “more extensive [election] coverage on public than commercial channels” in all of the European countries. He also reports that French public channel France 2’s coverage was the most likely to focus on policy substance, and that “the toughest candidate interviews aired on the British channels,” including the public BBC.⁶ (U.S. journalists, on the other hand, evinced the most “skeptical, power-distant” tone, in part to compensate for having so little access to tightly managed political candidates, and tended to compress candidates’ soundbites more severely than the European journalists.) During the Iraq war which involved significant British involvement, the “BBC was more likely to be accused of being an enemy of the state than a patriotic cheerleader.”⁷ In fact, a number of studies have demonstrated the consistently superior quality and independence of the “state-owned” BBC.⁸

Are European public media able to perform their democratic roles because of—or in spite of—government support? One study that looked at Swedish news reporting of local politics over time found that coverage actually became more critical beginning in the 1970s, around the time that government subsidies were enacted.⁹ Of course, other factors have played a role, such as an increasing drive worldwide by journalists to “professionalize” during this time period. Yet when Norwegian researcher Erling Siversten directly compared subsidized and nonsubsidized newspapers in Norway, he found that “journalists working in subsidized newspapers produce far more original news stories than journalists in non-subsidized newspapers,”¹⁰ paralleling my findings of high-quality journalism even among the most highly subsidized French newspapers.

How can this be? Why would state support correlate with higher-quality journalism, or even more “critical” journalism, as my own research on French and American journalism has shown? While other factors may be at work, I argue that there is an elective affinity between funding sources and styles of journalism. U.S. narrative journalism, as a form of entertainment, has emerged in the context of advertiser pressures to attract the largest possible (high-consuming) audiences. Narrative-driven formats focusing on persons and their personal attributes ultimately restrict the room for deliberative exchange of ideas,¹¹ including explicit critical evaluations that hold the major parties and their elected officials accountable. French (and other European) debate-oriented journalism, funded in part by the state, serves the interests of political elites in a pluralist democracy seeking a relatively

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open forum through which to articulate their positions, criticize their opponents, and mobilize their supporters. Counteracting any negative influence of state intervention in media markets is the fact that the French press has traditionally seen itself not as a neutral observer but as an active participant in the public sphere. For these reasons, paradoxically, less politically “autonomous” journalistic fields, such as those that exist in France and other western European democracies, may actually be the most effective in facilitating a clash of opposing viewpoints and criticisms.

It also needs to be kept in mind that the alternative to government-facilitated public support for media is not a blank check providing no-strings-attached “independence,” but rather alternative forms of dependence. Advertising support, generally from large business corporations, is just as or more problematic as state funding. Research has documented the ways in which advertising funding tends to dampen, to say the least, critical reporting of business.¹² But given that businesses also want to assure good relations with government and diverse consumer publics, they also tend to push (subtly or not so subtly) for news that will avoid causing offense or disturbing the status quo. Philo Wasburn, a Purdue University sociologist, found little difference in the amount of critical news items (less than 6 percent for all of them) in the top-of-the-hour radio newscasts of CBS, CNN, and AP versus NPR, BBC, and the official broadcasting organization of the United States, the Voice of America; further, he found the contents of the three U.S. commercial newscasts to be highly similar, especially in their narrow “ethnocentric view of the world.”¹³ In a classic 1980s international comparison of national television news programs, British media scholar Jay Blumler and colleagues found that “broadcasting systems which are most dependent on advertising also schedule the narrowest range of programming.” Recent research comparing public and privately owned television news in Denmark, Finland, the U.K., and the U.S. by senior scholars James Curran, Shanto Iyengar, Anker Brink Lund, and Inka Salovaara-Moring, has confirmed and extended these findings, showing that “public service television gives greater attention to public affairs and international news, and thereby fosters greater [public] knowledge in these areas, than the market model.” In this sophisticated study which combines content analysis with survey research, Curran and colleagues also found that public service television “encourages higher levels of news consumption and contributes to a smaller within-nation gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged.”¹⁴

These findings should not be all that surprising—they certainly aren’t to Europeans—but in the United States, an absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (“Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press . . .”) has blinded journalists from seeing ways in which government can be their ally. No one, to my

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knowledge, is advocating increased government censorship of the press. The issue is not censorship, it is “market failure,” as the late, highly respected University of Pennsylvania legal scholar C. Edwin Baker emphasized. In fact, laissez-faire ideology to the contrary, media markets do not work perfectly and tend to systematically ignore or downplay viewpoints and criticisms from the poor, minorities, and international voices, as well as critical examinations of deep-seated structural problems. The commercial marketplace is rarely if ever equivalent to the broadest possible intellectual marketplace of ideas. And if markets fail to provide the media we need, then it falls on the broader citizenry, on behalf of which democratically elected governments are supposed to act, to restore the democratic balance. In the United States, a modest first step would be to simply expand our already high-quality but woefully underfunded public television and radio system. Public broadcasting revenues in the United States on a per capita basis are about one-tenth of those in France and one-twentieth of those in Denmark, the UK, and Switzerland.¹⁵

To be sure, safeguards need to be in place to protect journalists from attempts at manipulation or influence peddling. Inside corporate-owned newsrooms, as profit pressures have increased, informal “walls” protecting the editorial side from business interference have tumbled at most media outlets. Even so, top editors and reporters working under corporate CEOs have continued to fight—and even publicly resign in protest if need be—to maintain professional standards of excellence and independence. The same professional values also guide journalists who work at entirely publicly funded media outlets like the BBC, or partially publicly funded newspapers like *Le Monde*. In fact, compared to commercial media, the “walls” protecting public media are often made of firmer stuff, such as independent oversight boards and multiyear advance funding to assure that no publicly funded media outlet will suffer from political pressure or funding loss because of critical news coverage. Whereas public media like the BBC often criticize the government, how often do even the best U.S. newspapers such as the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* criticize their publishers, their major shareholders, or their leading advertisers? European public funding is often awarded based on content-neutral criteria, as is the case with the aforementioned French “press pluralism” subsidies, which go only to general interest newspapers with low advertising revenues and relatively low circulations: using these criteria, newspapers on both the left and right have been supported over the years. Partly as a result of such affirmative policies, news media across western Europe help promote a more wide-ranging public debate, with the result that citizen knowledge and involvement in politics is noticeably higher than in the United States

It may be tempting to quickly dismiss European ways as products of vastly

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different civilizations: it may work in Europe, so this common argument goes, but it could never work here. But why not? Certainly, America will adopt its own unique policies, just as approaches vary across European and other democracies. Decisions about the role of the state and the market, however, are unavoidable. And the history of American media, as numerous historians have shown, has been shaped by political struggles (not predetermined by “culture”) to decide how and under what conditions media should be oriented toward serving civic or commercial needs. The current economic crisis is clearly a critical juncture providing an opportunity for news media to move in new directions, without of course, abandoning all that is worthwhile from the past.

Is the role of the state moot in the age of the Internet? While it is surely true that the social organization of news media and their relations with diverse publics are complicated by the Internet, it is highly debatable whether this has led to a postmodern disintegration or dispersal of power as some philosophers have argued. And while the Internet surely enables new forms of democratic public engagement, there is already considerable empirical evidence that old commercial media patterns are reappearing or even being accentuated on the Web, such as the continued dominance of a handful of large media conglomerates, homogeneous or ideologically narrow news coverage, and scoop-driven sensationalism. The title of one recent study of the Internet’s effects on journalism sums up an all-too-frequent outcome: *New Media, Old News*.¹⁶

Finally, let me be clear about what I hope will be the ultimate shape of the U.S. media system: even given the demonstrated virtues of European public media, I am not proposing that we run out and start subsidizing all the newspapers, nor would I suggest that public media can or should replace private enterprises. My point is simply that government involvement with the media does not inevitably lead to “dictatorship”—in fact, far from it! In the best-case scenario, media in any country should be funded from a variety of sources: paying or donating audiences, advertisers, foundations and other civic organizations, and citizen contributions via government. The more, the better. If public media have their blind spots, so do commercial media. That’s why it’s important to have both. Countering First Amendment fundamentalists’ rejection of any and all public media, the consensus of research shows that government can be a positive, indeed an essential, part of the mix.

also Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010).

21. For a fuller discussion of these goals, their purpose, and how they might be translated into specific standards for different media and genres, see Williams and Delli Carpini, *After the News*.

22. See <http://newsbusters.org/node/9457>.

30. *Public Funding and Journalistic Independence: What Does Research Tell Us?* by Rodney Benson

1. Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson, "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, published online October 19, 2009. This report was endorsed in a *CJR* editorial, "A Helping Hand: The Case for (Smart) Government Support of Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2009. For other positive evaluations of targeted government support of U.S. journalism, see Geneva Overholser and Geoffrey Cowan, "Free Press, with Profits," *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 2009; Bree Nordenson, "The Uncle Sam Solution," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 2007; and Victor Pickard, Josh Stearns, and Craig Aaron, "Saving the News: Toward a National Journalism Strategy," Free Press Policy Report, Washington, DC, 2009. Matthew Powers, an NYU PhD student, provided research assistance for this chapter.

2. Rodney Benson, "What Makes for a Critical Press? A Case Study of French and U.S. Immigration News Coverage," *Press/Politics* 15, no. 3 (2010): 3–24. See also Michael Schudson and Julia Sonnevend, "French Connections," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 2010).

3. See Rodney Benson and Daniel C. Hallin, "How States, Markets, and Globalization Shape the News: The French and U.S. National Press, 1965–1997," *European Journal of Communication* 22, no. 1 (2007): 27–48; and Rodney Benson, "What Makes News More Multiperspectival? A Field Analysis," *Poetics* 37 (2009): 402–18.

4. Benson, 2009, 402.

5. Jesper Strömbäck and Daniela V. Dimitrova, "Political and Media Systems Matter: A Comparison of Election News Coverage in Sweden and the United States," *Press/Politics* 11, no. 4 (2006): 131–47.

6. See esp. 412, 416, and 422–425, in Frank Esser, "Dimensions of Political News Cultures: Sound Bite and Image Bite News in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States," *Press/Politics* 13, 4 (2008): 401–28.

7. Lori Robertson, "The British Invasion: Many Americans Searching for a Different View of the War in Iraq Turned to the British Broadcasting Corp.," *American Journalism Review* 25 (2003).

8. See, e.g., Jeremy Tunstall, "The BBC and UK Public Service Broadcasting," in Petros Iosofidis, ed., *Reinventing Public Service Communication* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "'Americanization' Reconsidered: U.K.-U.S. Campaign Communication Comparisons Across Time," in W.L. Bennett and R.M. Entman, eds., *Mediated Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 390–97.

9. Mats Ekström, Bengt Johansson, and Larsåke Larsson, "Journalism and Local Politics: A Study of Scrutiny and Accountability in Swedish Journalism," *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 292–311.

10. Cited on p. 111 in Eli Skogerbo, "The Press Subsidy System in Norway: Controversial Past, Unpredictable Future?" *European Journal of Communication* 12, no. 1 (1997): 99–118.

11. See Hartmut Wessler, "Investigating Deliberativeness Comparatively," *Political Communication* 25 (2008): 1–22.

12. See, e.g., Ronald K.L. Collins, *Dictating Content: How Advertising Pressure Can Corrupt a Free Press* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Commercialism, 1992); and Aeron Davis, *Public Relations Democracy* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002). James T. Hamilton, in *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), reports strong anecdotal evidence that media companies use their news media to promote (or censor) coverage according to their corporate self-interests (145–48).

13. Philo C. Wasburn, "Democracy and Media Ownership: A Comparison of Commercial, Public and Government Broadcast News," *Media, Culture & Society* 17 (1995): 647–76; esp. 653, 662–65.

14. See p. 351 in Jay G. Blumler, Malcolm Brynjin, and T.J. Nossiter, "Broadcasting Finance and Programme Quality: An International Review," *European Journal of Communication* 1, no. 3 (1986): 343–64; and p. 22 in James Curran, Shanto Iyengar, Anker Brink Lund, and Inka Salovaara-Moring, "Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study," *European Journal of Communication* 24, no. 5 (2009): 5–26.

15. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 42. See also Free Press, "Changing Media: Public Interest Policies for the Digital Age," available at http://freepress.net/files/changing_media.pdf.

16. Nancy Fenton, ed., *New Media, Old News* (London: Sage, 2010).

31. *The Future of Journalism: Addressing Pervasive Market Failure with Public Policy* by Mark Cooper

1. Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism* (New York: Nation Books, 2009).

2. See, e.g., Federal Trade Commission, "Potential Policy Recommendations to Support the Reinvention of Journalism."

3. The hyperbolic attacks from the Progress and Freedom Foundation are a good indicator of the success that the McChesney and Nichols piece is having, as is the inclusion of this view in "official" fora.

4. Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Roaring Nineties: A New History of the World's Most Prosperous Decade* (New York: Norton, 2003).

5. Mark S. Fowler and Daniel L. Brenner, "A Marketplace Approach to Broadcast Regulation," *Texas Law Review* 60 (1982).

6. A flood of books carries the critique, but the key is to recognize that the cornerstone of market fundamentalism—the efficient market hypothesis—is flawed (see for example, George Cooper, *The Origin of Financial Crises: Central Banks, Credit Bubbles and the Efficient Market Fallacy* [New York: Vintage, 2008]; John Cassidy, *How Markets Fail: The Logic of Economic Calamities* [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2009]; Robert Pollin, *Contours of Descent* [New York: Verso, 2005]; Justin Fox, *The Myth of the Rational Market* [New York: Harper, 2009] and