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How States, Markets and Globalization Shape the News

The French and US National Press, 1965–97

■ *Rodney Benson and Daniel C. Hallin*

ABSTRACT

■ This article presents a comparative content analysis of the US and French national press in the 1960s and 1990s to test hypotheses about the influence of media structure on journalistic discourse. The US and French press are presented as strongly contrasting models, with the US press more commercialized, and the French press more closely tied to the political field. Using a variety of story- and paragraph-level content indicators, this study shows that the French press (*Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*) offers relatively more critical coverage, a greater representation of civil society viewpoints, a stronger emphasis on both the ideological and strategic ‘game’ aspects of politics, and a higher proportion of interpretation and opinion mixed with factual reporting. Representing the US national press, *The New York Times* is shown to ‘index’ its coverage more closely to political elite viewpoints. Despite globalizing pressures, French–US differences have not diminished over time. ■

Key Words content analysis, France, international comparative research, sociology of news, United States

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Market forces and governmental policies are routinely credited with shaping the news provided to citizens in democratic societies, both in facilitating and limiting a wide-ranging critical public debate. Such claims, though reasonable, are limited in two important ways. First, most studies are grounded in a single national context; there is generally not enough variation to adequately identify distinct state and market effects. Second, too few studies offer systematic analysis of news discourse, and even when news content is examined, it is rarely joined to hypothesized effects of media system characteristics. In this article, we attempt to address both of these problems via a systematic content analysis of the press in the United States and France – two national media systems that present sharp contrasts in their relation to the market and state.

National press in the US and France

According to a variety of indicators, the American news media system is more commercialized than its French counterpart. Advertising expenditures as a percentage of gross domestic product are more than twice as high in the US as in France – about 1.4 percent vs 0.6 percent of GDP, respectively.¹ Compared to the American average of nearly 80 percent, French national daily newspapers earn just over 50 percent of their revenues from advertising (Baker, 1994; Devillard et al., 2001). Many of the leading French dailies, such as *Libération* and *Le Monde*, earned as little as 20 or 30 percent of their revenues from advertising during the 1990s; the conservative *Le Figaro* is the only major French newspaper approaching the American advertising average (Albert, 1998: 83).

Another major difference is that French media companies are less likely than American companies to be traded on the stock market. Public ownership of stock in media companies in France has been hindered by a 1986 law that limits the amount of foreign investment, as well as a provision that specifically prohibits a newspaper company from being publicly listed (Benson, 2005). Lacking significant advertising revenues as well as stockholder pressures, French newspaper companies tend to be less profitable and less profit driven than their American counterparts. Socpresse, the owner of *Le Figaro*, with a recent net income/total revenues ratio of 8.8 percent, has been considered the best performer among French newspaper companies (*La Tribune*, 1999). In contrast, since 2000, net income as a percentage of annual sales (a more conservative measure) has ranged from 13.1 to 27.6 percent at Gannett (owner of *USA Today*) and from 9.4 to 14.7 percent at the New York Times Co. (Hoover's Online Company Profiles, 2004).

On the other hand, the French media have a closer relationship to the 'political field' (Bourdieu, 2005; Darras, 2005; Benson, 2005) than US media. Historically, the party press has been strong and both journalists and media owners have frequently had close political connections (Neveu, 2001: 14). Moreover, France has 'a political culture and system where the ethos and practice of statism have been historically well entrenched [and] it is scarcely surprising that the state has played – and continues to play – a key role in matters concerning the press' (Kuhn, 1995: 49). This is manifested in both 'restrictive and 'enabling' policies in the country.² France has hate speech laws, personal privacy laws that can apply criminal penalties against journalists and a 'right of reply' (de Tarlé, 1980; Derieux, 2001). In the US, by contrast, the legal tradition of First Amendment supremacy strongly limits such forms of regulation. The French state also plays an active 'enabling' role: subsidies are provided to politically oriented newspapers with low advertising receipts and circulation, and the French state also provides general subsidies to all newspapers, such as reimbursements for telephone and fax expenditures, postal shipping, etc., and preferential tax rates to journalists as individuals (Charon, 2005). State aid to the press in the US, by contrast, is quite limited, mostly restricted to subsidized postal rates (Starr, 2004).

Differing relations to the economic and political fields have formed distinctive journalistic traditions in France and the US. Since at least the mid-19th century, American journalism has been more information and fact oriented than the French press (Ferenczi, 1993; Chalaby, 1996), and by the 1920s, this informational approach had become firmly joined to an 'objective', neutral style of writing (Schudson, 1978). In France, by contrast, even as newspapers severed direct links to parties (the party press enjoyed a revival in France after the Second World War and then declined), they remained partisan actors rather than simple observers of the political game.

Since the 1960s, both endogenous and exogenous forces of change (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) affecting media systems worldwide give some reason to believe that distinctions between press 'models' have diminished. The experience of France is no different. During the 1980s, the state monopoly over television was ended, and many French observers believe that the privatization of the main public channel, TF 1, radically transformed print as well as television news (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998). Likewise, French journalists have become increasingly aware of American news 'legends' like Watergate (Schudson, 1992) as well as such news organizations as CNN International, *The Wall Street Journal* and the *International Herald Tribune*. *Le Monde* began publishing a weekly insert from *The New York Times* in 2000.

How state, market, and globalization shape news content: hypotheses

Given the foregoing differences and recent changes in the French and American national media systems, the sociology of news suggests the following, sometimes competing, hypotheses about their respective political news coverage:

H1: It is a common assumption in liberal media theory that state intervention in media markets is likely to have censoring or inhibiting effects on the news (e.g. de Talaré, 1980; Eisendrath, 1982; Shoemaker and Reese, 1991).³ Because the French state more closely regulates and subsidizes the press, and because the French press is more closely tied to political actors, we might expect the French press to play less of a 'watchdog' role in political coverage, that is, for French newspaper coverage to be less critical of government than US newspaper coverage.

H2a: Government officials have been shown to have privileged access to journalists and as a result the news tends to be 'indexed' to the viewpoints of elite governmental and party officials (Bennett, 1990). Because of greater state intervention and closer relations between the media and the political field, we might expect this 'indexing' effect to be stronger in France than in the US, with a narrower range of viewpoints – specifically more state and party elites and fewer civil society voices – in the French than in the US press.

H2b: On the other hand, the critical political economy literature posits that commercial pressures narrow the range of voices represented in the news (McChesney, 1999; Baker, 1994). Because the French press is less heavily commercialized than the US press, we thus might expect French political news coverage to give voice to a wider range of social actors.

H3: Due to the closer relationship between the press and the political field in France, and the more commercialized character of the American press, French and American journalistic styles should also differ (Chalaby, 1996; Benson, 2002; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Fact-based discourses should be more prevalent in the US press and interpretive/evaluative discourses more common in the French press; likewise, the French press should be more ideologically focused.

H4: However, due to globalizing pressures since the 1960s, we may expect that these differences in journalistic content and style will have diminished between the 1960s and 1990s, and that there will be convergence toward the American model (Charon, 1990; cf. Bertrand, 1995).

Methodology

Two French national newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*) and one American national newspaper (*The New York Times*) were chosen to represent the two

national media systems. The selection of two papers to represent the French case seemed necessary because of the more heterogeneous and politically plural character of the French press.⁴ These elite newspapers are not representative of all newspapers in each country; but they do occupy similar positions of prestige and influence in each society, making them suitable for a controlled comparative analysis.

We randomly selected dates from the mid-1960s (1965, 1966, 1967) and from the mid-1990s (1995, 1996, 1997) from which we then coded articles concerning domestic politics, whether national or local. The sample included 318 stories from *Le Monde*, 308 from *Le Figaro* and 358 from *The New York Times*. Because dates were selected randomly over large periods of time, particular events are unlikely to bias the results of the study.

Articles appearing in a special editorial or opinion page were omitted from our sample, as our intent was to focus on news reporting by journalists. Even so, selection procedures were complicated by cross-national differences in newspaper 'form' (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001). French newspapers often publish guest opinion articles as well as official editorials on their front pages. It seemed appropriate to compare articles appearing in the same general locations (front page, domestic and international news).⁵ We thus decided to keep labeled news analyses, commentaries and chronicles (brief, often humorous essays usually dealing with politics) in the sample, especially since these genres occupy an ambiguous middle ground between information and opinion. Excluded from our sample were editorials expressing the official view of the newspaper, even those appearing on the front page, as well as non-journalist authored commentaries and transcripts of interviews with officials or experts.

Three variables were measured at the level of the story as a whole: dominant schema, tone and topic. Within each article, every paragraph was coded for two main variables: primary function and primary viewpoint.

Both 'schema' and 'tone' were operationalized in a similar fashion to Patterson (1994) and attempted to measure the overall manner in which the story was reported by the journalist. Schema refers to the general lens through which politics is approached, which we classified according to three general types: political game, policy and ideology. By political game, we mean a focus on the behind-the-scenes strategies of politicians (Patterson, 1994: 57-8). Our policy and ideology schemas would both be components of Patterson's (1994: 59) broader 'governing schema'. We coded a story as having a policy schema when it focused more on means than ends (which policy to best achieve a given goal) and as having an ideology schema when it centered on fundamental values or on broad themes that transcended particular policies.

Tone attempts to capture the journalistic authorial voice vis-a-vis politics in general or particular actors (neutral, positive, negative, mixed

or partisan, a category we used in the French case for a polemical tone not found in the US case). Here, as elsewhere, in order to maintain coding reliability we tried to code for 'manifest' rather than 'latent' meaning (see Hallin, 1994: 82). In other words, articles simply presenting facts – even if the facts taken together may have presented a negative impression – were generally coded neutral. In order for a story to be coded 'mixed' at least some explicitly negative *journalistic* comments about politicians, policies or politics in general needed to be found; stories were coded negative or partisan only when such negative passages clearly dominated the story.

We also coded each paragraph for the primary journalistic function it served. We coded for four main journalistic functions: reporting current facts or statements, giving background information, giving interpretation and giving opinion, with a number of subcategories under each. We conceive of the four major categories as a kind of ordinal variable, with the political voice of the journalist becoming more active and more prominent from the lowest (reporting) to the highest (opinion) category. Paragraphs coded as 'report current fact' are empirical statements, generally unadorned with any adjectives or adverbs indicating speculation or normative judgment, for example: 'the Senate voted overwhelming today to deny Federal benefits to married people of the same sex and to permit states to ignore such marriages sanctioned in other states. The bill now goes to the White House for President Clinton's promised signature' (*The New York Times*, 11 September 1996: 1). Reasonable people could disagree over what constitutes an 'overwhelming' vote (in this case, it was 85–14), as well as the most salient aspects of the legislation. But relatively speaking, this discourse is clearly 'fact-centered' (Chalaby, 1996).

'Background information' is distinguished from current facts primarily on a temporal basis, e.g. an election-day story that referred to statements made by the candidates during a debate two weeks earlier. Interpretation is a kind of empirical discourse, but goes beyond current facts, setting or historical context to speculate on such things as significance, outcomes and motives. By opinion, we mean essentially the exercise of judgment, either normative (what is good or bad) or empirical (what is true or false).

Our coding scheme is not intended to suggest that fact-centered reporting is literally 'objective' and contains neither interpretation nor value judgments. No information can be conveyed without framing, and ideological assumptions are often embedded most deeply in the selection, presentation and emphasis of 'facts'. Our focus is on distinct types of journalistic discourse, all of which may serve ideological functions, but are of interest in their own right as modes of public address, establishing various kinds of relationships between press and citizenry.

Viewpoint, likewise, was operationalized narrowly. For our purposes, a paragraph offered a viewpoint if (1) any social actors were quoted or paraphrased or (2) the journalist-author offered interpretations or opinions. Viewpoints were classified according to a range of state and non-state organizations and individuals. Our broad categories and subtypes were the following: journalist (author); executive/judicial (president, prime minister, cabinet members, other government officials, police, judiciary); legislative, political party (party leader, party activist or member); civil society (trade union representative, social movement or interest group, academic, other expert, church official, media); business (employer organization, business enterprise); ordinary citizens; and foreign actors.

One cross-national difference in news form complicated this analysis. While American news paragraphs are often only a single sentence, French news paragraphs are significantly longer, and as a result, often include multiple viewpoints and functions. Where paragraphs had multiple functions, we coded for the 'highest' function in our ordinal scale, and for the viewpoint corresponding to that function – that is, for a journalist viewpoint when coding functions higher than 'report fact or statement'.

For the purposes of testing the hypotheses presented in this article, we offer the following operationalization of our content codes.

In Hypothesis 1, we posited that political coverage would be more critical in the US than the French press. Therefore, we should expect more American than French stories to adopt a negative tone toward political actors, and that conversely, French stories should be more likely to adopt a generally 'positive' tone; likewise, US stories should be more likely than French articles to have a topical focus on political scandals.

In Hypotheses 2a and 2b, we suggested that the more politically dominated French press or the more commercialized US press, for competing reasons, might be expected to give voice to a narrower range of viewpoints in the news. Because the French press is dominated to a greater extent by the political field, we might expect that government and other political leaders will be relatively more prominent in French political news coverage. Conversely, since commercialism is said to hinder citizen mobilization (Lemert, 1984) as well as intellectual discussion (McManus, 1994; Champagne and Marchetti, 2005), we might expect the less commercialized French press to feature a higher proportion of viewpoints from the relative margins, such as trade unions, social movement organizations, academics and foreign sources.

In Hypothesis 3, we argued that historic differences in press traditions would produce distinctive journalistic writing styles and narrative schemas. Reflecting the French political/literary journalistic tradition, French stories would thus be expected to feature a relatively higher proportion of

interpretation and opinion. Conversely, we should find that the political game schema is more common in the American than the French press, and that ideological schemas are relatively more common in the French press.

Hypothesis 4 suggested that differences in French and US news content and writing style would diminish between the 1960s and 1990s. This homogenizing tendency should lead to a French–US convergence not only in writing styles and schemas, but in tone, topics and institutional diversity of viewpoints.

Findings: political news in France and the US

Critical coverage

Despite its closer proximity to the political field, we did not find the French press to be less critical of government and politicians than the US press; in fact, it was actually more critical by several indicators. If we limit the analysis to stories focused on major governing institutions,⁶ 16.3 percent of French stories and 7.4 percent of American stories during the 1960s adopted a critical tone (negative, mixed or partisan) ($p < .05$). In the 1990s, 22.5 percent of French and 3.6 percent of US stories adopted a critical tone ($p < .001$). In our analysis of topical focuses of stories, we also find that scandals make up a higher proportion of French than American stories: 4.5 percent vs 0.5 percent in the 1960s ($p < .01$), and 10.1 percent vs 5.8 percent for the 1990s (NS).⁷ A fuller analysis of critical reporting would of course have to include many other dimensions, but our data cast clear doubt on the hypothesis that proximity to the political field would make the French press less critical of governing institutions and authorities.

Counteracting the 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 a participant in the public sphere. This is manifested in the fact that French papers are not only more likely to take a negative, mixed or partisan tone, but also a positive one (7.8 vs 0.7 percent for the US during the 1990s), while the American press is more often neutral in tone (see Table 1).⁸ During both the 1960s and 1990s, more than 90 percent of articles in *The New York Times* adopt a neutral tone, compared to about only 70 percent of articles in the French dailies. The French press is thus more politically engaged and involved than the commercial American press, and this seems to result in levels of critical coverage at least as high as those produced by American ‘watchdog’ journalism.

Table 1 Tone of French and US political news stories, 1960s and 1990s (percentage of stories)

	<i>France</i>	<i>US</i>
1960s	(N = 281)	(N = 215)
Neutral	75.8	94.9
Positive	7.1	0.5
Negative	3.9	2.8
Mixed	10.0	1.9
Partisan	3.2	–
1990s	(N = 335)	(N = 137)
Neutral	66.6	96.4
Positive	7.8	0.7
Negative	4.8	2.9
Mixed	10.7	–
Partisan	9.9	–

Diversity of viewpoints

Hypothesis 2a, which posited that the French press would ‘index’ its coverage more closely to political elites, is not supported by our data on viewpoints represented in French and US newspapers (see Table 2). The executive and judicial branches as a whole attain nearly identical proportions in each country, rising from around 34 percent in the 1960s to 39 percent in the 1990s.⁹ Political parties appear relatively more often in the French press (13.8 vs 6 percent in the US for the 1960s, 17.9 vs 10.6 percent for the 1990s), while legislators are much more visible in the US press (22.1 vs 4.3 percent in France for the 1960s, and 20.6 vs 6.5 percent for the 1990s). If we add both legislators and party leaders to state officials in order to account for all political elites, we find the following: political elites make up 52.3 percent of all viewpoints presented in the French press vs 63 percent for the US press during the 1960s ($p < .001$), and 63.7 vs 69.6 percent, respectively, for the 1990s ($p < .05$). In sum, *The New York Times* political news coverage, during both the 1960s and 1990s, is significantly more likely than either *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro* to index its coverage to government and political elites.

Hypothesis 2b, in contrast to Hypothesis 2a, predicted that because of less commercialization in the French press we would find a wider representation of viewpoints. For the most part, our data support this hypothesis. Civil society as a whole – by which we mean collective actors apart from

Table 2 Viewpoints represented in French and US political news stories, 1960s and 1990s (percentage of paragraphs)

	<i>France</i>	<i>US</i>
1960s		
Journalists	38.1 ^a	10.2 ^a
Executive/judicial	34.2 ^b	34.9 ^b
Legislative	4.3	22.1
Party leaders, activists	13.8	6.0
Civil society	31.3	23.3
Trade union	15.7	2.8
Social movement/interest group	5.2	13.4
Academic	1.3	1.1
Other experts	1.1	2.4
Religious	0.2	2.7
Other media	7.8	0.9
Business	1.3	5.8
Ordinary citizens	2.3	1.6
Foreign actors	7.1	1.1
Other	5.8	5.1
1990s		
Journalists	32.6 ^a	11.5 ^a
Executive/judicial	39.3 ^b	38.4 ^b
Legislative	6.5	20.6
Party leaders, activists	17.9	10.6
Civil society	19.1	12.7
Trade union	4.4	0.6
Social movement/interest group	2.8	5.4
Academic	6.1	2.8
Other experts	2.1	2.5
Religious	1.1	1.4
Other media	2.7	–
Business	4.1	3.6
Ordinary citizens	5.6	5.6
Foreign actors	3.9	0.5
Other	3.7	8.0

^a Percentage of all paragraphs. For 1960s, France $N = 1420$, US $N = 1745$; for 1990s, France $N = 1515$, US $N = 1444$.

^b Percentage of paragraphs not reflecting journalist's viewpoint (including all sources listed below executive/judicial). For 1960s, France $N = 879$, US $N = 1567$; for 1990s, France $N = 1021$, US $N = 1278$.

both the state and the market – is more visible in the French than the American press, 31.3 vs 23.3 percent in the 1960s ($p < .001$), and 19.1 vs 12.7 percent in the 1990s ($p < .01$). This finding ought to be of interest to the ongoing scholarly debate about the relative support for civil society in the US and European press (see, for example, Padioleau [1985], Brossard et al. [2004] and Ferree et al. [2002], who see the US press as more inclusive, as opposed to, for example, Hallin and Mancini [1984] and Benson [2000], who find greater civil society inclusiveness in European press systems).

Trade unions, especially, are better represented in the French than the American press, 15.7 vs 2.8 percent in the 1960s ($p < .001$), and 4.4 vs 0.6 percent in the 1990s ($p < .001$). If we count academics as part of civil society, they too are more visible in the French press, especially in the 1990s (6.1 percent of all viewpoints vs 2.8 percent in the US, $p < .001$), as are media voices (2.7 percent in France vs 0.0 percent in the US during the 1990s). By media, we mean journalistic viewpoints in addition to the authorial voice. For instance, separate articles in the 12 September 1996 edition of *Le Monde* cited the satirical-political weeklies *Charlie-Hebdo* and *Le Canard enchaîné*. In contrast, social movement and interest group organizations are more common in the US than the French press during both periods, although the difference is significantly wider in the 1960s (13.4 vs 5.2 percent, $p < .001$) than in the 1990s (5.4 vs 2.8 percent, $p < .01$). When all organized actors in civil society are included, the French press is clearly more inclusive.

Foreign viewpoints, expressed in 3.9 percent of French political news paragraphs in the 1990s sample, were virtually invisible in national political coverage in *The New York Times* (just 0.5 percent).

Writing styles and narrative schemas

Hypothesis 3 predicted that distinctive national press traditions would be reflected in different writing styles and narrative schemas: a higher proportion of interpretation and opinion in French news stories vs a relatively greater prevalence of factual reporting in US articles; a greater focus on ideology in the French press vs a greater emphasis on the political game in the US press.

Table 3 shows the results of the paragraph by paragraph analysis of journalistic function. During both the 1960s and 1990s, about 12 percent of French vs 5 percent of US paragraphs offer interpretation ($p < .001$). Given the American press's purported tendency to focus on personalities and political strategies, it seems surprising that interpretations of motives also appear relatively more frequently in the French press: 1.7 vs 0.6 percent, respectively, during the 1960s ($p < .001$), and 2.3 vs 0.7 percent

Table 3 Paragraph functions in French and US political news stories, 1960s and 1990s (percentage of all paragraphs)^a

	<i>France</i>	<i>US</i>
1960s	(N = 2112)	(N = 3671)
Reporting and description	73.3	90.3
Report current fact	31.8	46.5
Quote or paraphrase	39.8	42.8
Background	6.9	5.0
Interpretation	12.4	4.5
Assess significance or result	8.6	3.4
Assess motive	1.7	0.6
Note omission	1.3	0.3
Opinion	7.4	0.2
Judgement of factual accuracy	0.8	0.1
Policy judgment or advocacy	4.9	0.1
1990s	(N = 2375)	(N = 2698)
Reporting and description	70.6	90.4
Report current fact	25.9	42.3
Quote or paraphrase	42.9	47.4
Background	11.5	3.6
Interpretation	12.0	5.4
Assess significance or result	7.7	4.2
Assess motive	2.3	0.7
Note omission	1.1	0.1
Opinion	5.9	0.7
Judgement of factual accuracy	1.1	0.4
Policy judgment or advocacy	3.3	0.1

^a Only selected subcategories of reporting and description, interpretation and opinion are shown. Paragraph Ns are higher than in Table 2 because most paragraphs coded 'report current fact' or 'provide description' (not shown) were not coded for viewpoint.

during the 1990s ($p < .001$). This would seem to contradict Carey's (1986) argument that American journalists explain in terms of 'motives' (intentions of agents) rather than 'causes' (broad social forces) – though the latter is of course uncommon as well. An interpretation that calls attention to what officials are not saying ('note omission') is rare in both cases, but also higher in the French press (1.1 percent vs 0.1 percent in the US sample for the 1990s).

Evaluative or normative discourse in the journalistic voice, what we term simply 'opinion' here, also appears more often in French than in US

articles. During the 1960s, 7.4 percent of French paragraphs offer opinions, a figure that falls slightly to 5.9 percent during the 1990s. During both periods, less than 1 percent of US paragraphs present overt journalistic opinions ($p < .001$ for US/France differences). Journalistic assessments of the accuracy of others' statements or conclusions about disputed facts are relatively rare in both the French and US press, appearing in 1 percent or less of all stories in both cases. Not surprisingly, though, given the more empirical character of US news discourse, this accounts for most of the cases coded for opinion in *The New York Times*. What most distinguishes the French and US press is the more frequent French tendency to close a story by offering sharp judgments about a government action or policy, as in one story in *Le Monde* (25 July 1995) about relocations from housing projects, which cited a particular family whose history, the journalist writes, 'illustrates both the fruits harvested by a solution of forced relocation as well as its inanity'. Interpretation and opinion in French news stories seem to be linked to the structuring of news stories as essays that build to a conclusion, in contrast to the 'inverted pyramid' American style in which a summary lead is followed by information presented in decreasing order of importance.

To put this comparison in context, however, it should be noted that basic reporting (facts and statements of others) and description are the dominant functions of *both* the French (about 70 percent of all paragraphs) and the American press (90 percent of all paragraphs), with the overall proportions remaining almost identical during the 1960s and 1990s. Most of this difference in magnitude is due to the greater prevalence in US articles of paragraphs that only report current facts (42.3 percent vs 25.9 percent for France for the 1990s). Similar proportions of US and French political stories quote or paraphrase others' viewpoints – 47.4 vs 42.9 percent, respectively, for the 1990s. The French press provides more background than the American press, with 11.5 percent of paragraphs in the 1990s, vs 3.6 percent in *The New York Times* ($p < .001$).

Our data on narrative schemas, however, do not support the predicted effect of national journalistic traditions (see Table 4). As noted, a greater focus on the 'political game' has been linked to the non-partisan, even anti-politics, approach of the American press. However, during both the 1960s and 1990s, French political news articles are twice as likely to feature a political game schema as American articles (21.2 vs 12.2 percent during the 1990s). Party intrigue is, in fact, very much a staple of French political news.

At the same time, supporting our prediction, the French press is also more ideological than the US press. Six percent of French stories during the 1960s and 9 percent during the 1990s adopt an ideology schema, vs none in the US during either period. Finally, policy schemas are the most common

Table 4 Schemas in French and US political news stories, 1960s and 1990s (percentage of stories)

	<i>France</i>	<i>US</i>
1960s	(<i>N</i> = 270)	(<i>N</i> = 179)
Ideology	6.3	–
Policy	54.8	67.6
Political game	24.4	10.1
Other	14.4	22.3
1990s	(<i>N</i> = 326)	(<i>N</i> = 98)
Ideology	9.5	–
Policy	57.4	85.7
Political game	21.2	12.2
Other	12.0	2.0

schemas identified in both the French and US press, making up well over half of all French stories, and rising from 68 to 86 percent of US stories.¹⁰

Cross-national convergence?

Our fourth and final hypothesis predicted French–US convergence in news content and style.

Over the three-decade time period, the French press largely maintains or increases its relatively greater propensity to offer critical news coverage of politics. The percentage of stories with a negative or mixed tone increases slightly in France, from 13.9 to 15.5 percent, while the percentage drops in the US (from 4.7 to 2.9 percent). Even more dramatic is the increase in partisan tone of the French press (from 3.2 to 9.9 percent of all stories), while during both periods there is a total absence of partisan stories in the US press. This trend seems exactly the opposite of what one might expect given the increasing commercialization and supposed American-style professionalization of the French media during this period. Political scandal stories increase in both the French and US press, from 4.5 to 10.1 percent ($p < .05$) and 0.5 to 5.8 percent ($p < .01$), respectively, but the US–French gap stays about the same.

As for diversity of viewpoints, the major differences between the French and US press are maintained between the 1960s and 1990s: greater indexing to political officials in the US press, more civil society and foreign viewpoints in the French press. However, civil society viewpoints decline sharply in both cases: from 31.3 percent to 19.1 percent in France

($p < .001$), and from 23.3 percent to 12.7 percent in the US ($p < .001$). Most of this decline can be attributed to a sharp drop in labor union viewpoints (in both cases), social movements and protestors (in the US) and other media (in France). Likewise, foreign perspectives decline in both cases. With the simultaneous rise of ordinary citizen viewpoints to an identical 5.6 percent of all paragraphs, a similar 'populist' impulse seems to have been at work in both the French and American press, which we would view as more commercially than politically motivated. At the same time, however, the proportion of political elite viewpoints (government, legislature, party) in both national press systems *increases* from 52.3 to 63.7 percent in the French press ($p < .001$) as it does also in *The New York Times*, from 63 to 69.6 percent ($p < .05$).

In terms of the basic stylistic differences in French and American print journalism, what little convergence we do find comes from both directions. The French press becomes slightly less interpretive and opinionated, but the US press also becomes slightly more so.¹¹ Between the 1960s and 1990s, the total proportion of paragraphs devoted to either interpretation or opinion falls from 19.8 to 17.9 percent for the French press ($p < .05$), and rises from 4.7 to 6.1 percent in the US press ($p < .05$). While there is convergence in the use of the political game schema between the 1960s and 1990s, this likewise derives from a slight decrease on the French side, from 24.4 to 21.2 percent, and a slight increase on the US side, from 10.1 to 12.2 percent. But contrary to any expectations of commercialization or Americanization diminishing open expressions of ideology, the proportion of French stories adopting the ideology schema rises from 6.3 to 9.5 percent.

Conclusion

Because the French and American national press represent distinct national models, a comparison of political news coverage in representative publications from each country allows us to assess a number of the dominant assumptions in the sociology of news.

Contrary to the assumption that proximity to the political field inhibits critical news coverage of politics and government, critical coverage as indicated by a negative or partisan tone in stories as well as the prevalence of political scandals is higher in the French press. Neither does proximity to the political field correlate with a greater reliance on political elite sources in the French press. Indeed, confirming the political economy literature, we find that the more commercialized American press offers a narrower range of viewpoints as indicated by lesser representation of civil society. Against expectations of powerful forces for homogenization, we

find that French–American press differences in writing style, narrative schema, level of criticism and viewpoints represented do not diminish significantly between the 1960s and 1990s. Moreover, despite being more attuned to ideology, the French press is also more focused on the ‘political game’ than the American press, which contradicts the usual assumption that a game schema is due to a disengagement rather than engagement with politics. These findings upset many of the standard expectations, but the question remains: Why?

First of all, why greater criticism and use of the political game schema in the French press?

One explanation may be that in a democracy, press legitimacy can only be maintained in the face of significant state intervention via the adoption of a more critical tone. The greater prevalence of the political game schema in French coverage could be explained simply because it is a relatively safe form of criticism. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that investigative reporting, per se, is probably not higher in France than the US (see, for example, Hunter, 1997; Chalaby, 2004).¹² Thus, one way to interpret our finding would be to say that the French press is more critical, but not necessarily more adversarial.

Another explanation would be to look more closely at the structure of the newspaper market in the French and American cases. In a comparison of the German and British press, Esser (1999) finds that the British press offers more sensationalized and critical coverage of politics than the German press. He explains this finding in part by noting that whereas the German press is fragmented regionally (creating local monopolies) and primarily subscription-based, the British press is national in scope and is forced to compete nationally for readers, who are reached primarily via daily sales rather than subscriptions. In order to succeed and attract readers in such a market, the British press is forced to cover politics in a highly critical, sensational fashion. Although the American journalistic field has become more nationalized since the 1960s (Schudson, 1995), reliance on direct daily sales and the level of direct competition among the leading national newspapers – *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal* – are significantly lower than among the three major national French dailies: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Libération*. In a centralized, intensely competitive journalistic field, as in France, it is easy to see how dramatized news about the political game or the latest scandal play a role in each newspaper’s daily struggle to attract readers.

The structure of the journalistic field in the context of generally increasing commercialism may also help explain why stories with a partisan tone and ideological schema not only are more common in the French

than the US press, but why partisanship and focus on ideology increase rather than decrease in the French press between the 1960s and the 1990s. Just as US cable news networks in an increasingly competitive market differentiate themselves ideologically as much as stylistically, it may be that increasing commercialism in a centralized national French press field only serves to intensify partisanship and ideology as a means of product differentiation (see also Waisbord [2000] and Rajagopal [2001] for demonstrations that commercialization and ideological or religious polarization are not necessarily opposed).

Second, why is there slightly *less* indexing to the viewpoints of political elites in a French press dominated by the political field than in the more commercialized US press? Interestingly, reliance on political elite sources increases in both the French and US press between the 1960s and 1990s, a period of increasing commercialization in both societies. This suggests that a commercialized press is forced to move closer to the state in order to maintain its legitimacy and authority. Alternatively, state support for the press across Europe is justified as a measure to promote political pluralism, and it may be that in fact it does have this effect in France. We should also draw attention to relative similarity in the 'indexing' effect in the French and US press. Our findings could thus be interpreted as showing that the State's power as 'primary definer' varies little from one democratic society to another regardless of the precise level of state intervention – up to a point of course.

Finally, how do we explain the maintenance of distinct journalistic styles in the French and American press, particularly the significantly greater presence of interpretation and opinion in the French press than in its American counterpart?

One explanation is that journalistic professional practices are limited by the political culture and system in which they operate (Mancini, 2000). Thus, even if American journalistic ideals have influenced French journalism – as they clearly have – the French political system makes it impossible for French journalists to put such ideals into practice. Although much has changed in France between the 1960s and the 1990s, its multi-party system has not only been maintained but strengthened (direct government subsidies to parties, both large and small, were only instituted in 1988). A second supplementary, not competing, explanation for maintenance of a French 'difference' is that once established, journalistic professional traditions exert a form of cultural inertia. Professional practices persist to the extent that they are taken for granted and become part of the implicit 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 2005).

Of course, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of a single cross-national case study measuring only one type of news. If political

coverage itself remains largely unchanged, it may be that the place occupied by political news in the overall mix of news is shifting. This is the conclusion of at least one US study (Rosenstiel et al., 1998), which finds a sharp increase between the 1970s and the 1990s in 'soft' news over traditional 'hard' political news, that is, more lifestyle, entertainment and human-interest stories.

It may also be that news content is being transformed in both France and the US, but that the findings of this study do not show this because such change is unlikely to be generated at the top, i.e. among the elite, establishment newspapers.¹³ Nevertheless, we would insist that given the agenda-setting and legitimating role of the elite press, a status report of changes (or lack thereof) in such leading newspapers is important in its own right.

We also do not claim that our indicators are able to measure fully such complex aspects of content as ideological diversity or criticism. As noted, we do not measure the amount or type of critical investigative journalism. Nor do we measure ideological diversity directly, as one might do with framing analysis. We thus hope that future studies will not only refine our indicators but create new ones.

Notes

1. This figure is for 2003 and is calculated from data provided by ZenithOptimedia and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Benson, 2005: 88; see also Kuhn, 1995: 37).
2. Neveu (2001: 14) writes, 'the permeability of the French press to politics is illustrated by the effectiveness of tactics of repression, corruption, and influence deployed by governments.'
3. Expressing a 'liberal' perspective in line with the current management of *Le Monde*, historian Patrick Eveno (2001: 18–19) notes that the 'weight of politics on the French press and on its content [has been] heavier than in most of the western democracies' and then argues that true press 'independence' can only be guaranteed by economic profitability. Charon (1991: 68), in a less polemical vein, has written: 'if the role of the State in the [French] press system is essentially economic . . . it could have, at a given moment, even in a hidden way, political repercussions'.
4. In a longer version of this article (Benson and Hallin, 2005), we explore differences between the two French papers as a further test of the hypotheses presented here, since *Le Figaro* is more commercialized than *Le Monde*. In general, however, *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* were far more similar to one another than to *The New York Times*.
5. Thus we included some articles by journalists that began on the front page of the French papers and continued to an opinion type section like the 'Horizons-débat' section of *Le Monde*.

6. We excluded political parties from this analysis, since much of the critical coverage in the French press in the 1990s focused on the National Front, a far-right party with no US equivalent.
7. We coded for a wide range of topic areas, but only report the data on political scandals here.
8. Figures in Table 1 show the tone of all stories, not only those focused on governing institutions.
9. These figures are percentages of paragraphs in which a viewpoint other than that of the journalist is represented. About a third of paragraphs in the French papers and about 10 percent in the US papers represented the viewpoint of the journalist.
10. While we presented partisan tone as one aspect of critical coverage, it could also be interpreted as an indicator of the French political/literary press tradition. During both the 1960s and 1990s, an openly partisan tone is far more likely to appear in French stories than in American stories (see Table 1).
11. Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) similarly found an increase over time in interpretation in the US press.
12. France does have a long tradition of a satirical press, most notably *Le Canard enchaîné*, which has sometimes engaged in notable investigative reporting (see Martin, 2001).
13. Our thanks to François Demers, Université Laval à Québec, and Michael Palmer, Université Paris 3, for raising this point.

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