

Rodney Benson, **Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison**, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 213 pp., \$26.99 (paperback).

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In an article that appeared in this journal last year, Frank Esser observed “the gradual emergence of comparative communications as a recognized subdiscipline, comparable to *comparative politics* in political science” (2013, p. 114). The contours of this subdiscipline are still taking shape as other communication subdisciplines—for example, media sociology, global media studies, critical and cultural studies, and the like—have fashioned their own comparativist research projects. In his newest book, **Shaping Immigration News**, Rodney Benson offers a comparison of French and U.S. immigration news that is modest in the scope of its analysis but ambitious, and even exemplary, in demonstrating what comparative communications is capable of methodologically.

Benson, an associate professor in New York University’s Department of Media, Culture, and Communication, alternately draws upon and departs from the subfield with which he is most frequently affiliated (media sociology) as well as his theoretical influences (namely, Bourdieu’s field theory¹). The places where Benson departs from Bourdieu are perhaps the most instructive for comparative communication researchers seeking to apply field theory to their own investigations. Bourdieu has argued that journalistic fields are weakly institutionalized: that, like other fields comprised primarily of symbolic production such as art and literature (although not quite to the same extent), the field of journalism is relatively autonomous from political and economic demands, unlike the fields of politics and economics, which are heteronomous within fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993). Put simply, per Bourdieu, journalistic practice isn’t determined by economic and political forces; rather, it has its own animating and evaluative conventions.

Benson disagrees, observing that “this basic dichotomy [between autonomous cultural production and heteronomous political and economic processes] is inadequate to explain the complex dynamics of the ongoing journalistic mediation of public discourse” (p. 13). Unlike Bourdieu, Benson conceives “of the journalistic field as organized around a basic opposition between two heteronomous poles—a civic, nonmarket pole and a market pole” (p. 13). The division of journalistic fields into market and nonmarket poles is not uncommon of typologies within comparative communication research (see Curran & Park, 2000), but Benson incisively acknowledges that these poles can be conceptually fuzzy. He writes:

[In both the United States and France], a hybrid space exists in which the seemingly opposed civic and market logics are brought together. In the United States, civic ends

¹ Benson is the co-editor, with Erik Neveu, of *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Polity, 2005).

have been financed by profit-driven news companies whose owners nevertheless retain a public service orientation. In France, some subsidized, public service-oriented newspapers have worked hard to expand their audiences and revenues. It is generally in this hybrid space that we find the forms of professional practice richest in the symbolic capital of prestige. . . . Contra Bourdieu, this "autonomous" journalism is not strictly opposed to the market but rather represents a variety of fragile, ongoing attempts to balance market and civic demands. (p. 37)

According to Benson's analysis, these hybrid spaces that give rise to autonomous journalism (e.g., *The New York Times* or *Le Monde*) are the exceptions that illustrate the rule. By systematically analyzing the position, logic, and structure of the journalistic fields of the two nations and conducting a frame analysis of news content, Benson's research does affirm that "commercialism is inversely related to ideological diversity in the news" (p. 20). This reviewer wonders whether an expansion of Benson's scope—news magazines and cable news, two sites of pitched ideological diversity within commercial media, were omitted—would have modified or moderated this conclusion. Curiously, while the more nonmarket-oriented French news yielded greater frame diversity than the market-oriented American news, this cross-national gap closed significantly between the 1970s and 2000s, a time of intensifying commercialization within the American press.

One of the factors that contributes to the more multiperspectival nature of the French press, according to Benson's analysis, is an "aspect of news largely ignored by Bourdieu and other field researchers"—that of the news "form," which Benson defines as "the presentation and organization of news, both externally (in the mix of genres on the page) and internally (in the discursive structural composition of articles)" (p. 48). In the United States, news is characterized by a dramatic narrative form, while in France a debate ensemble form, in which disparate viewpoints are emphasized, is more common. This difference in news form sometimes actually leads to cross-national commonalities. For example, the humanitarian frame is common in both France and the United States, but for different reasons. In France, this particular frame fits well with a form that gives voice to "diverse civil society voices," whereas in the United States it is linked "to the demands of narrative story telling" (p. 122). Finally, the difference in news form can even explain why U.S. journalism lends itself to "morally charged investigative reporting" (p. 170), whereas the French debate ensemble form is less disposed to this kind of single-minded investigative journalism.

To summarize, the civic-oriented field of French journalism is more likely than its U.S. counterpart to give a multiperspectival presentation of the news, while the market-oriented field of U.S. journalism possesses more of the material resources and formal imperatives that drive investigative journalism. Interestingly, in an example of where his research defies the common critiques of the state and market, Benson finds that, in general, French newspapers that receive state subsidies are not significantly less likely to criticize the government than their U.S. counterparts, and U.S. newspapers that rely upon advertising revenue are not significantly less likely to criticize business than their French counterparts.

At a time when many scholars are giving lip service to multimethodological approaches, Benson's process deftly blends quantitative analyses of content and institutional variables with qualitative methods

(including more than 80 interviews with journalists and activists, as well as analyses of the position, logic, and structure of the French and U.S. journalistic fields). This methodological dualism both reflects the two broad ideals of Habermas's public sphere—the "broad inclusion and diverse representation" (quantity) and "the extent to which public discourse is reasoned and critical" (quality) (p. 18)—and projects the descriptive and explanatory power, respectively, of Benson's findings.

Benson doesn't simply synthesize methods, however. He also demonstrates methodological ingenuity within some of the methods he deploys. One example can be found in the content analysis, where he pushes beyond an examination of topical frames to more meaningful indicators of ideological diversity (e.g., frame and speaker diversity and an adaptation of the Herfindahl index, which measures market concentration), as well as various types of criticism and news images. This more nuanced approach might have been motivated, at least in part, by his tight topical focus on immigration news (i.e., there isn't exactly a plethora of discrete subtopical frames within the issue). Benson's methodological innovations represent an instrumentalization of field theory's underlying epistemology and, through this effort, he has made a valuable methodological contribution that other comparative researchers would be wise to emulate and elaborate.

In his aforementioned article, Esser asserts that the "purpose of comparative research is to describe (and understand), to explain, and to predict" (2013, p. 117). *Shaping Immigration News* thoroughly accomplishes the first two of these objectives. As Esser observes, several of the two-country comparisons in recent years have been "theoretically and methodologically original and sophisticated," but a pairwise comparison ultimately provides a "limited ability to generalize" (2013, p. 114). Benson appears to acknowledge these strengths and limitations of his chosen approach and avoids sweeping generalizations even while he makes thoughtful recommendations for reform based upon his conclusions. After all, as Benson states at the beginning of his book, offering a significant addendum to Esser's list of objectives, "an important purpose of comparative research, in my view, is to draw lessons that might actually be used to make journalism and political communication better" (p. 20). It is this spirit, through which Benson's scholarly curiosity is infused with civil concern, that makes his analysis so cogent and compelling and, ultimately, as critical and multiperspectival as the news he'd like to see.

References

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