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Rodney Benson¹

Abstract

This article measures and explains criticism in U.S. and French national newspapers during the 1990s and 2000s. Criticism is operationalized in terms of discrete critical statements directed at governmental, political party, business, civil society, and foreign/international organizations or officials; such critical statements, which take various forms—administrative, character, truth, ideology, policy, and strategy—offer a more comprehensive measure of criticism on a day-to-day basis than the occasional in-depth investigative report. While state intervention is often argued to have a censoring effect, this study finds that the more “statist” French press presents a greater density of criticisms than the U.S. press. French newspapers that receive the highest direct subsidies are not less critical of the government or dominant party than other French (or U.S.) newspapers. French newspapers exhibit a slightly higher degree of political parallelism, but in both countries newspapers tend to aim the greatest amount of criticism toward the party in power, whether Left or Right. Relatively higher French criticism is also facilitated by a distinctive French journalistic cultural form, the “debate ensemble,” that, in contrast to U.S. “dramatic narrative,” organizes the news as a clash of critical opposing viewpoints.

Keywords

comparative research, democracy, journalism, newspapers, North America, Western Europe

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The press is often accused of being inadequately critical of political and economic power (see, e.g., Bennett et al. 2007; McChesney 1999; Sparrow 1999). But what exactly is meant by “critical” news coverage? How can one go beyond the anecdotal to systematically measure criticisms in news coverage? And what are the key structural factors—economic, political, and journalistic—that produce greater or lesser amounts of criticism of the powers that be? Building on previous cross-national comparative studies of news media (Benson and Hallin 2007; Ferree et al. 2002; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2006), this study compares immigration news coverage in France and the United States during the 1990s and 2000s as a comparative case study of “critical” journalism in action.

While previous analyses of critical journalism have focused on “investigative reporting” (see Chalaby 2004; Ettema and Glasser 1998; Marchetti 2000; Schudson 2008: 14–16; Waisbord 2000), this kind of reporting is relatively rare, even in the United States (Greenwald and Bernt 2000); if investigative reporting is the only indicator of criticism, then on a day-to-day basis few if any newspapers could be fairly characterized as critical. I argue that the press also performs an important critical role by publishing substantive critical statements about government, political parties, businesses, and other powerful organizations, and in this study I develop a template for classifying and measuring the amount of such criticism in the U.S. and French press. Critical statements, uttered by either journalists or their “sources” (spokespersons for various organizations or unaffiliated individuals), are sometimes dismissed as evidence of excessive negativity in the press, yet assuming that they remain within the bounds of “civility” (Wessler 2008: 8), such statements are also clearly an important part of what Habermas (1989) means by “rational-critical” debate. While they may or may not be linked to investigative reporting per se, such critical statements perform an important “signaling” function of their own by calling attention to incoherent policy planning, ideological mystification, ineffective administration, or misleading information, thus raising questions and concerns that may prompt further private or public inquiries.

A French–American comparison is also useful for theory building in the sociology of news because the news media in the two countries substantially differ in their relations to the state and market (Albert 1990/2004; Benson 2005). Moreover, as I explain below, the “form of news” (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001) differs in France and America, expressing distinct conceptions of what is news and how it ought to be presented. Because the French and American presses systematically differ in these ways—in their relations to political and economic power and in their professional logics—we have good reason to suspect that the amount and types of critical statements will also differ in systematic ways.

Immigration news provides an appropriate comparative case study, given similarities in both the actual immigration phenomena and the political contestation and discourse surrounding it in the two countries. France and the United States both have long been major immigrant-receiving countries. The foreign-born population of France has often made up a higher proportion of the national population than in the United States, and an estimated one-third or more of French citizens have at least one

non-French-origin grandparent (Horowitz 1992: 5). Although there are of course broad historical differences between the two countries, since the 1960s the magnitude of immigration flows and the relative importance of non-European immigrants have been quite similar.¹ Despite America's reputation as a "land of immigration," its citizens have always been ambivalent about newcomers, no less than the French (Dionne 2008; Fetzer 2000). In both cases, immigration policy has been hotly contested by a range of social actors—political parties, associations, businesses, labor unions, and academic experts—and their respective immigration public debates have been dominated by similar themes (fiscal and jobs threats, economic benefits, national culture and diversity, illegal immigration, etc.; Bonnafous 1991; Chavez 2001; Gastaut 2000; Schain 2008).

To test the effects of both macro-field-level variables as well as media-outlet-specific variables, a cross-section of leading national newspapers is examined for each national case. For France, newspapers included in the study are *Libération*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *La Croix*, *L'Humanité*, *Les Echos*, and the national edition of *Le Parisien (Aujourd'hui en France)*; for the United States, newspapers examined are 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*. These newspapers represent fairly comparable samples of the most prominent elite, financial, and popular newspapers in each country, with direct or indirect national reach. They also represent roughly equivalent cross-sections of French and U.S. class-segmented newspaper reading audiences (see Table 1),² thus facilitating a relational, "system to system" comparison (Bourdieu 1998: 6).

In the remainder of this article, I present hypotheses related to criticism-inhibiting or -inducing factors (political, economic, journalistic) as they pertain to the French and U.S. cases, describe the indicators used to measure criticism, and then present and explain my findings.

Factors Shaping Degree and Types of Criticism

Business advertising funding is sometimes portrayed as a guarantor of press "independence" from the state (Eveno 2003; Picard 2005: 341) and thus as a factor likely to increase journalistic criticism of government and the party in power. It is also argued that advertising discourages partisan position taking or criticisms that might risk alienating some audiences (Baker 1994: 70); thus, advertising-supported newspapers should be more "objective" and balanced in their criticisms.

The American press is among the democratic industrialized world's most advertising dependent, and the French press is among the least. In an international comparison compiled by the World Association of Newspapers (2007: 8), U.S. newspapers were at the top of the list with 87 percent of revenues earned from advertising (averaging 2002 and 2004) and French newspapers were near the bottom, at 39 percent (averaging 2002 and 2003), percentages that are roughly consistent with their respective long-term averages (Albert 1990: 81; Baker 1994: 16; Mathien 2003: 92). There is of course

Table 1. French and U.S. National Newspaper Readership Composition, Advertising Funding, and Mean Total Critical Statements in Immigration News Coverage

Media Outlet	n Article Ensembles	Average Article Ensemble Words	High Income Readership (Index of Parity with General Public)	Higher Education (Index of Parity with General Public)	% of Revenues from Advertising	Total Criticisms per Article Ensemble	Total Criticisms per 1,000 Words
<i>L'Humanité</i>	63	1,731	92	120	11	4.68	2.71
<i>La Croix</i>	56	2,209	321	169	8	3.86	1.75
<i>Libération</i>	94	3,077	328	219	20	7.20 ^a	2.34
<i>Le Monde</i>	109	2,363	379	223	45	5.80 ^a	2.45
<i>Le Figaro</i>	97	2,347	413	176	70	5.72 ^a	2.44
<i>Les Echos</i>	45	1,237	590	235	70 (est.)	2.02	1.64
<i>Le Parisien</i>	47	1,784	118	85	28	3.28	1.84
French total	511	2,107				4.65	2.17
<i>CS Monitor</i>	56	1,352	310	346	12	2.38	1.76
<i>LA Times</i>	141	2,110	206	179	80	2.40 ^a	1.14
<i>NY Times</i>	93	1,938	253	250	65	3.51 ^a	1.81
<i>Wash. Post</i>	108	1,459	276	213	61	2.17 ^a	1.49
<i>WS Journal</i>	62	1,616	290	261	69	1.08	0.67
<i>USA Today</i>	48	1,379	193	154	75	1.73	1.25
<i>Daily News</i>	69	573	149	95	53	0.86	1.49
U.S. total	577	1,490				2.02	1.37
<i>NY Post</i>	71	509	184	128	50 (est.)	0.63	1.25

Note: See the notes 2-5 for sources for audience demographics and advertising funding. Due to rounding, frequencies may not exactly add up to totals.

a. Mean total criticisms were derived from combined total of 1990s and 2000s samples for these media outlets. All other means are only for 2002-6.

variation within national cases. While *Le Figaro* and *Les Echos* approach the American average, the other major French national newspapers earn far less: 8 percent for *La Croix*, 11 percent for *L'Humanité*, 20 percent for *Libération*, 28 percent for *Le Parisien*, and 45 percent for *Le Monde* (Albert 1990: 81).³ The leading U.S. national “elite” newspapers do not vary all that much—during 2006, ranging from 60 to 80 percent in revenues from advertising—with the exception of the church-subsidized *Christian Science Monitor*, which earns just 12 percent of its total revenues from advertising.⁴ Given their less “desirable” audience demographics, popular newspapers tend to attract lesser advertising expenditures (Charon 2005: 56), suggesting that the *Daily News* and *New York Post* are slightly below the American norm (see Table 1).⁵

State intervention in the media is often argued to inhibit press criticism of government and governing political parties (de Tarlé 1980; Shoemaker and Reese 1991). Such censoring effects are certainly plausible in relation to restrictive laws governing libel or access to information. The French state is more likely than the U.S. government to intervene in an overtly “restraining” manner. Neither truth nor absence of malice is

a defense from criminal prosecution if journalists publish restricted government information, violate personal privacy laws, or engage in defamation (e.g., “excessive criticism” of political officials), although the application of these laws has varied according to the administration and party in power (Charon 2005; Freiberg 1981). In the United States, state regulation of the print press has been primarily mediated via federal court interpretations of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, a legacy that especially since landmark decisions of the 1960s has provided the U.S. press with “virtually unlimited discretion to report on and to *criticize* the government” (Kirtley 2005: 279–80, emphasis added).

Some scholars also insist that even ostensibly positive state interventions, such as the press subsidies available in many European countries, can dampen press criticism of government (see, e.g., Dennis 2004; Murschetz 1998). Although the U.S. media have periodically benefited from government support, including postal subsidies, the amount of such aid is generally less than in Western Europe (Starr 2004). In the French case, de Tarlé (1980: 146) has argued that press subsidies make newspapers “feel indebted to a government that has been so generous to them” and thus serve as a “soft” control (also see Charon 1991: 118–22). All French newspapers receive general subsidies, which amounted to 12.5 percent of total revenues in 2000 (Mathien 2003: 146). However, a handful of national newspapers with low advertising revenues and low circulation receive additional small subsidies in defense of “ideological pluralism”; during the period examined in this study, the chief recipients of these extra government payments were the Catholic *La Croix* and the communist-heritage *L’Humanité* (Albert 2004: 105).⁶

The overall structure of the political system and its relation to media organizations should affect the amount and the specific targets of criticism appearing in the press. Because of France’s multiparty parliamentary system and a historical tradition of a politicized press, French newspapers are said to exhibit a relatively high degree of “political parallelism” (Hallin and Mancini 2004), meaning that newspaper identities and readerships tend to be differentiated along partisan or ideological lines. On the other hand, due to an ideologically narrow two-party political system and a historical tradition of nonpartisan, “objective” journalism (at least since the 1920s), the degree of political parallelism is believed to be much lower in the U.S. press (even if it seems to be increasing in recent years, especially in cable TV news; see Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008).

Missing from this discussion of economic and political constraints, however, are the ways in which journalistic practice itself promotes or discourages criticism. Like other fields of cultural production, the journalistic field maintains a certain degree of “autonomy” from external pressures and thus is endowed with “its own *nomos*, its own law of functioning, without being completely independent of the external laws” (Bourdieu 2005: 33). The “form of news” (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001) is a key means through which this internal logic is expressed. The journalistic form of “dramatic narrative” has been highlighted by Darnton (1975), Schudson (1995), and Pedelty (1995), among others. U.S. journalists covering immigration also talk about their work in

narrative terms. For instance, Nina Bernstein, the chief metropolitan immigration reporter of the *New York Times*, argues that for a complex issue such as immigration, “showing the human-ness [of the immigrant] becomes very important . . . this human narrative becomes the way to connect with the reader”;⁷ former *Times* immigration reporter Mirra Ojito likewise has remarked that she believes it to be “hugely important” for immigration articles to “weave in the narrative of one or several persons.”⁸

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, as in the United States. In France, there seems to be a similar emphasis on journalism as polemical “debate” rather than personalized narrative (Albert 2004: 50; Boudana 2009). 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 1 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 1 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). Dramatic narrative is highly compatible with investigative reporting (Ettema and Glasser 1998), which represents a form of criticism based on the careful gathering of damning facts. On the other hand, it is quite likely that narrative-driven formats focusing on “persons” and “personal attributes” ultimately “restrict the room for deliberative exchange of ideas” (Wessler 2008: 8), including explicit critical evaluations that hold the major parties and their elected officials accountable.

In sum, given French–American differences in state regulations and laws, political systems, funding, and journalistic practices, I offer the following partially competing hypotheses in relation to critical news content:

Hypothesis 1: Because of the dominance of the criticism-enabling debate ensemble format of French news and the criticism-inhibiting narrative format of U.S. news, there should be relatively more critical statements overall in the French press. In addition, the French debate format should promote more substantive issue-based criticisms (truth, ideology, policy), whereas the U.S. personalized narrative approach will be more likely to emphasize character and administrative criticisms (see the method section).

Hypothesis 2: On the other hand, because of relatively greater state intervention (both “hard” and “soft”) and lesser advertising (the abundance of which

purportedly promotes press “independence”), the French press ought to be *less* critical of government in general and especially of the political party in power. In particular, French newspapers *L’Humanité* and *La Croix*, which receive direct subsidies, should be the *least* critical of government and especially the party in power of all the newspapers. However, those French newspapers that earn the majority of their revenues from advertising—*Le Figaro* and *Les Echos*—should be more critical of government and the party in power than other French newspapers.

Hypothesis 3: Because of the supposedly greater political parallelism of the French press, French newspapers will be clearly distinguishable according to the “target” of their criticisms, with some newspapers primarily criticizing the Left and other newspapers primarily criticizing the Right; on the other hand, because of a historical tradition of “objective” journalism in the United States, no such discernible pattern will be evident among U.S. newspapers. To the extent that advertising funding discourages partisanship, the most advertising-dependent outlets in France (*Le Figaro*, *Les Echos*) will also be the least partisan in their targeting of criticism; likewise, the least advertising-dependent outlet in the United States (*Christian Science Monitor*) should be the most partisan.

Method

This study compares immigration news coverage in the leading French and U.S. national newspapers (see Table 1) during the 1990s (1991 in France, 1994 in the U.S.) and 2000s (2002, 2004, and the first half of 2006 in both countries), periods of heavy media coverage of immigration in both countries. During such periods of peak media attention, the maximum potential for a lively and wide-ranging public debate is likely to be reached. Only page 1 articles or “ensembles” (collections of multiple related articles, including related “jump” articles inside) were included in the sample and coded.⁹ In deciding which articles to count as pertaining to the topic of immigration, I follow other recent prominent French and U.S. studies (e.g., Bonnafous 1991; Chavez 2001), which included all articles focused on broad immigration trends, policy making and politics, or individual immigrants defined as those who come to a country with the intention of staying to live and work as well as their immediate descendants (at minimum, second or third generation).

Criticism is measured by the frequency of various types of “critical statements” in news articles. Critical statements are classified according to their *target* (government in general; the dominant “Left” political parties, i.e., U.S. Democrats and French Socialists, in or out of government office; the dominant “Right” parties, i.e., U.S. Republicans and French UMP leaders in or out of government; minor political parties or civil society organizations; business; and foreign or international organizations) as well as their *substantive focus* (administrative, character, truth, ideology, policy, and strategy). Criticisms were also coded according to whether they were from “sources” or in the journalistic authorial voice (data not shown in tables). Source and journalist criticisms generally followed the same patterns, so they are not reported separately.¹⁰

Administrative criticism refers to failure (whether through corruption, incompetence, or mismanagement) in the execution of legal or administrative responsibilities. Truth criticism attempts to “set the record straight,” usually offering evidence to demonstrate the falsity of claims. Character criticisms are “ad hominem” attacks on the personal characteristics of powerful individuals in public life, for example, that they are arrogant, insensitive, immoral, hypocritical, and so on. Policy criticism concerns the logical coherence, feasibility, or empirical justification or evidence supporting any proposed policy; it might also call attention to a past or ongoing policy’s failure to achieve its stated aims (in contrast to administrative criticism, which would focus on improper implementation or deviation from legally mandated procedures). Ideology criticism focuses more on ultimate ends rather than the best means to a given end and is conceptually broader than policy criticism. It would encompass criticisms of fascism, racism, sexism, and other worldviews portrayed as objectionable in and of themselves. Strategy criticisms are negative assessments of the effectiveness of a particular idea or action for the attainment of desired political (partisan) ends; they may also encompass normative criticisms of overt or covert political strategies as “too negative,” “dirty,” or in some other way morally objectionable.

To be coded, critical statements also had to have a clear target in the form of an organization or an individual clearly linked to an organization. Criticisms of unaffiliated individuals or broad categories of individuals (immigrants, Latinos, etc.) were not included in this study, nor were vague criticisms of society or the broader culture. My purpose in analyzing criticism is not to assess the overall negativity of the press but rather the extent to which it offered specific criticisms of the dominant governing (and challenging) political and economic institutional actors.

Findings

Overall Amount and Types of Criticism

In raw terms, French press coverage of immigration offers on average more than twice as many critical statements as U.S. coverage. Drawing on samples for both the 1990s and 2000s (see Table 1), French page 1 articles averaged 4.65 critical statements,¹¹ while U.S. articles averaged 2.02 critical statements ($p < .001$, t -test for equality of means).¹² Greater raw criticism is probably related in part to lengthier page 1 news coverage in the French press: page 1 articles (combined with related inside articles) average a total of 2,107 words in French newspapers, compared to 1,490 words in U.S. newspapers (see Table 1). This is an important finding in its own right: French page 1 articles tend to treat the news in greater depth and to include a greater number of critical statements about organized political actors. Moreover, French news coverage was much more likely to be in the form of an “article ensemble”: 70 percent of French page 1 coverage consisted of article ensembles versus 19 percent of U.S. page 1 coverage, and there was little variation across media outlets within nation-states (data not shown in tables).

However, even when total article/article ensemble word length is controlled for, the French press is still significantly more critical—thus also offering greater “critical density.” French news coverage as a whole averaged 2.17 criticisms per one thousand words versus 1.37 criticisms per one thousand words in the United States ($p < .001$, t -test for equality of means)—in other words, nearly 60 percent more criticisms.¹³ Each of the “big three” French newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*) had significantly higher critical density than their “big three” U.S. counterparts (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*; $p < .001$ for the *Post* and *LA Times*, $p < .05$ for the *New York Times*).¹⁴ For just the 2002–6 period, the French–U.S. gap was slightly less, 1.89 versus 1.33 criticisms per one thousand words, but still easily statistically significant ($p < .001$).¹⁵ In the remainder of this article, only article-length-adjusted criticisms are reported and analyzed.

Greater criticism in French newspapers is *not* primarily due to the slightly greater tendency for French news to include commentary in the journalistic authorial voice (see, e.g., Benson and Hallin 2007). For the combined 1990s and 2000s samples, 21 percent of critical statements in the French sample were in the “journalistic voice” versus 13 percent in the U.S. sample.¹⁶ However, even when journalist criticisms are excluded, the difference in French and U.S. mean “source” criticisms (1.72 vs. 1.19 source criticisms per one thousand words in all genres of articles) remains large and statistically significant ($p < .001$). Likewise, when article ensembles including journalistic commentaries (editorial or op-ed essays) were excluded from both samples, the French “advantage” remained robust (2.03 vs. 1.28 total criticisms per one thousand words, and 1.72 vs. 1.17 source criticisms per one thousand words, in France and the United States, respectively; both differences $p < .001$; data not shown in tables).

These findings strongly support Hypothesis 1’s prediction that the French press will be more critical than the U.S. press.

Given the “debate of ideas” orientation of the French press and the personalized “narrative” thrust of the U.S. press, Hypothesis 1 also predicted that substantive issue criticisms (truth, ideology, and policy criticisms) would be relatively more common in the French press while character and administrative criticisms would be relatively more common in the U.S. press. In fact, all forms of criticism but one (administrative) were as common or more common in the French press than in the U.S. press (see Table 2a).

For the combined 1990s and 2000s samples, the French press presented four times as many ideology criticisms (0.40 vs. 0.10 criticisms per one thousand words in the United States) and twice as many strategy criticisms (0.36 vs. 0.18 in the United States) and substantially more policy criticisms (1.05 vs. 0.70 in the United States; all significant differences at $p < .001$). The French newspapers also offered slightly more character (0.07 vs. 0.06) and truth (0.08 vs. 0.06) criticisms, though only the latter was statistically significant ($p = .02$). In contrast, the U.S. press presented more administrative criticisms (0.28 vs. 0.22; $p = .002$).

Thus, the second part of Hypothesis 1 is also mostly supported. French news and opinion formats make room for substantially more ideology and policy criticisms and

Table 2a. Mean Standardized Critical Statements (per One Thousand Words) by Substantive Focus in French and U.S. Immigration Coverage, 1990s and 2002–6

Media Outlet	n 1,000 Word Units							Total
		Administrative	Character	Truth	Ideology	Policy	Strategy	
France	1,147	0.22	0.07	0.08	0.40	1.05	0.36	2.17
% of total		10	3	4	18	48	17	
United States	917	0.28	0.06	0.06	0.10	0.70	0.18	1.37
% of total		20	4	4	7	51	13	

Note: Due to rounding, frequencies or percentages may not exactly add up to totals.

perhaps slightly more truth criticisms (though it must be emphasized that the overall amount of truth criticisms is very low in both France and the United States). Conversely, U.S.-style personalized narrative formats may contribute to greater density of administrative criticisms but do not lead to any greater density of character criticisms in the U.S. immigration coverage.

Criticism of Government and the Party in Power

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the French press would be less critical of the party in power and of government in general than the U.S. press. Table 2b shows standardized critical statements according to the target of criticism.¹⁷ During the 2002–6 period, when the Right was in power in both the United States and France (except for a short period of “cohabitation” in France during the spring of 2002), the French press averaged 0.81 anti-Right criticisms per one thousand words versus 0.50 anti-Right criticisms in the U.S. press ($p < .001$). The U.S. press tended to present slightly more critical statements about government in general (meaning criticisms aimed at non-politically appointed civil service officials, subcabinet-level agencies, legislative committees, or initiatives involving both dominant Left and Right parties)—0.62 versus 0.46 in the French coverage ($p < .01$). Combined criticisms of government and the dominant Right during the 2000s were thus 1.27 in the French coverage versus 1.12 in the U.S. press ($p < .05$). When only the three leading newspapers are compared in each country (*Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *Le Figaro* in France and the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*), as shown in Table 3, the two countries are about the same, with 1.11 combined criticisms (per one thousand words) of government and the party in power in the French press and 1.16 criticisms in the U.S. press (difference not statistically significant).

Likewise, during the early 1990s, when the “Left” was in power in both countries (see Table 3), the leading French newspapers were significantly more critical than their U.S. counterparts of the dominant Left party and government leaders (1.45 vs. 0.23 criticisms per one thousand words, $p < .001$), while the leading U.S. newspapers were relatively more critical of government in general (1.14 vs. 0.40 criticisms, $p < .001$). However, when Left and general government criticisms are combined, the leading

Table 2b. Mean Standardized Critical Statements (per One Thousand Words) by Target in French and U.S. Immigration Coverage, 2002–6

Media Outlet	n 1,000 Word Units	Government			Dominant		Dominant		All		Total
		%	%	%	Left	%	Right	%	Other	%	
<i>L'Humanité</i>	109	0.72	27	0.15	6	1.49	55	0.35	13	2.71	
<i>La Croix</i>	124	0.73	42	0.04	2	0.36	21	0.62	35	1.75	
<i>Libération</i>	192	0.39	19	0.18	9	0.97	47	0.53	26	2.06	
<i>Le Monde</i>	150	0.31	17	0.17	9	0.87	47	0.51	27	1.86	
<i>Le Figaro</i>	138	0.29	21	0.20	14	0.49	35	0.41	29	1.39	
<i>Les Echos</i>	56	0.28	17	0.02	1	0.75	46	0.58	35	1.64	
<i>Le Parisien</i>	84	0.53	29	0.12	7	0.72	39	0.48	26	1.84	
France	853	0.46	24	0.13	7	0.81	43	0.50	26	1.89	
<i>CS Monitor</i>	76	0.81	46	0.03	2	0.65	37	0.28	16	1.76	
<i>LA Times</i>	182	0.41	35	0.08	7	0.55	47	0.13	11	1.16	
<i>NYTimes</i>	133	0.67	41	0.05	3	0.72	44	0.19	12	1.62	
<i>Wash. Post</i>	119	0.72	54	0.10	7	0.40	30	0.12	9	1.34	
<i>WS Journal</i>	100	0.48	72	0.03	4	0.09	13	0.07	10	0.67	
<i>USA Today</i>	66	0.76	61	0.05	4	0.39	31	0.06	5	1.25	
<i>Daily News</i>	40	0.46	31	0.05	3	0.71	48	0.28	19	1.49	
U.S.	716	0.62	47	0.06	5	0.50	38	0.16	12	1.33	
<i>NY Post</i>	36	0.69	55	0.22	18	0.28	22	0.06	5	1.25	

Note: Due to rounding, frequencies or percentages may not exactly add up to totals.

French newspapers were overall more critical (1.85 criticisms vs. 1.37 in the United States, $p < .05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2's prediction that the French press would be *less* critical of the government and the party in power (whether "Right" or "Left") is clearly refuted. During both the 1990s and the 2000s, the French press is more critical of the party in power, and even when government and the party in power are combined, the French press is at least as critical or more critical than the U.S. press.

Hypothesis 2 also predicted that those newspapers that receive the most direct subsidies—specifically *L'Humanité* and *La Croix*—would be the least critical of the party in power and government in general. In fact, for the period 2002–6 (see Table 2b), *L'Humanité* (with 2.21 critical statements per one thousand words) is significantly more critical of the government and the (Right) party in power than all French or U.S. newspapers in the study ($p \leq .001$ vs. all other newspapers, with the exception of the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Daily News*, $p < .05$). For its part, *La Croix* is less critical of the Right than some French newspapers ($p \leq .001$ difference with *Libération* and *L'Humanité* and $p < .05$ with *Le Monde*, but all other differences *ns*). However, when criticisms of government and the Right are combined, *La Croix* differs statistically only from *L'Humanité* ($p < .001$). In sum, there is not clear evidence that the state-subsidized *La Croix* and *L'Humanité* are substantially less critical than their

Table 3. Mean Standardized Critical Statements (per One Thousand Words) by Target in Leading French Newspapers, 1990s vs. 2002–6

Target	French Total		U.S. Total	
	1991 (n = 296)	% of Total	1994 (n = 95)	% of Total
Government	0.40	12	1.14	65
Dominant Left	1.45	43	0.23	13
Dominant Right	1.18	35	0.22	13
All other	0.38	11	0.17	10
Total	3.41		1.76	
	2002–6 (n = 480)		2002–6 (n = 434)	
Government	0.33	19	0.60	44
Dominant Left	0.18	10	0.08	6
Dominant Right	0.78	44	0.56	41
All other	0.48	27	0.15	11
Total	1.77		1.37	

Note: *n* values are for one-thousand-word units. Due to rounding, frequencies or percentages may not exactly add up to totals.

French peers, and in fact there is strong evidence to suggest that *L'Humanité* is more critical on average than its peers.

Finally, Hypothesis 2 predicted that the most advertising-dependent French newspapers—*Le Figaro* and *Les Echos*—would be more critical of government and the party in power. During the 2002–6 period, *Le Figaro* was less critical than the less advertising-dependent *Libération* ($p < .05$) and *L'Humanité* ($p < .001$); compared to all other French newspapers, there was no statistical difference. On the other hand, during 1991, when compared to the other two leading national newspapers, *Le Figaro* presented heavier criticism of the Left and the government combined, 2.33 criticisms per one thousand words versus 1.66 for *Le Monde* and 1.56 for *Libération* (not shown in tables; $p < .05$). Rather than a case of advertising ensuring independence, *Le Figaro's* pattern of criticism indicates a more partisan logic at work (see below). *Les Echos* is no more critical of government and the Right than other newspapers during the 2002–2006 period (*ns* for all comparisons, except with *L'Humanité*, which was more critical than *Les Echos*).

Partisan Identification and Criticism

Hypothesis 3 predicted that due to supposedly greater “political parallelism” (Hallin and Mancini 2004), the more openly partisan newspapers of France will be more likely to aim their criticisms at their avowed political opponents, whether Right or Left, whereas in the United States no such partisan patterns of criticism will exist.

In France, between 2002 and 2006, *L'Humanité* was significantly more critical of the Right than all other French newspapers, including *Libération* ($p < .05$); *Libération*, for its part, was significantly more critical of the Right than *Le Figaro* ($p < .05$) and *La Croix* ($p < .005$), but not other French newspapers. Conversely, during the 1990s when the Left was in power, *Le Figaro* was significantly more likely to criticize the Left than either *Libération* ($p < .005$) or *Le Monde* ($p < .05$).

However, the political parallelism of the French press should not be overstated. During the 2002–6 period when the Right was in power, all of the French newspapers, including *Le Figaro*, offered more criticisms of the Right than of the Left. During the 1990s when the Left was in power (data not shown in tables), *Le Figaro* (1.93 criticisms per one thousand words vs. 1.20 criticisms of the Right) and *Libération* (1.14 vs. 1.03) were both more critical of the Left than of the Right, while *Le Monde* was almost perfectly evenhanded (1.29 Left criticisms vs. 1.30 Right criticisms). There are thus partisan distinctions among French newspapers, but these do not extend to the point of completely one-sided coverage, regardless of which party is in power.

Among the U.S. newspapers, the *New York Post*, owned by the conservative media baron Rupert Murdoch, was the most likely to present criticisms of the Left (0.22 criticisms per one thousand words vs. a U.S. average of 0.06 for the 2002–6 period; difference with the remainder of the U.S. journalistic field significant at $p < .005$) and perhaps less likely than average to present criticisms of the Right (0.28 vs. a U.S. average, for the other seven newspapers, of 0.50; nonsignificant difference with the rest of the field). Otherwise, there were no substantial (or statistically significant) differences in the partisan direction of criticism among U.S. newspapers. Similar to the French press, all U.S. newspapers (including the *New York Post*) tended to be more critical of the party in power than the party out of power.¹⁸

Finally, is there any evidence that more advertising-dependent newspapers are less partisan than less advertising-dependent newspapers? In the French case, in fact, one advertising-dependent newspaper, *Le Figaro*, was among the most partisan, while the other advertising-dependent newspaper, *Les Echos*, was indistinguishable from the remaining French newspapers. In the United States, the only national newspaper that does not substantially rely on advertising, the *Christian Science Monitor*, was not significantly more partisan than its peers, sharing the general U.S. tendency to criticize the government and the party in power.

In sum, Hypothesis 3 is partially upheld. At least some French newspapers could be distinguished from their counterparts according to the partisan “tilt” of their criticisms (especially *L'Humanité*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération*); this was not the case in the United States. But this French partisan fragmentation was not so prominent that it overcame the general tendency of all newspapers to aim greater criticism toward the party in power, whomever that might be, rather than the party out of power.

Rather than simply portraying the French press as “partisan” and the U.S. press as “nonpartisan,” it would be more accurate to say that the French press was more “engaged” with partisan politics than the U.S. press and more likely to hold one or the

other of the dominant parties accountable for their words and actions. In contrast, U.S. journalists were primarily critical of government as a bureaucratic institution, both reflecting and perhaps helping to reproduce antistatist attitudes. These findings contribute to the ongoing debate about the disadvantages as well as advantages of the U.S. model of journalistic “objectivity” (Cunningham 2003).

Conclusion

In sum, this research finds that despite greater state intervention in the French case, the French press as a whole presents a greater number of both raw and standardized criticisms than the U.S. press, especially ideology, policy, and strategy criticisms. This higher “density” of French criticism—exhibited across the entire French journalistic field—seems to be shaped at least in part by the “debate ensemble” news format that is widely used in the French press and only rarely in the U.S. press.

French newspapers in general are not less critical of government and the party in power than the U.S. press; in fact, the opposite is generally true. The individual newspapers that receive the highest direct subsidies are not substantially less critical of the government or dominant party than other French newspapers or than U.S. newspapers; in fact, one of the most critical newspapers in the study is the state-subsidized *L'Humanité*. On the other hand, newspapers whose “independence” is secured via advertising are not significantly more critical of government and dominant parties than lesser-advertising-funded newspapers.

Finally, the degree of political parallelism in the French press is slightly more pronounced than that of the U.S. press. While the U.S. press overall is less politically fragmented, this slight difference cannot be solely attributed to advertising: The most advertising-dependent French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, is among the more partisan in France.

How can it be that tougher French state regulations as well as the soft power of its state subsidies do not dampen the amount of criticism in the press, as the U.S. First Amendment absolutists would probably predict? It may be that this “kept” French press is a watchdog that barks so much only to hide the fact that it would rarely actually bite (though again, the willingness of the U.S. press to “bite” should not be exaggerated). Smaller reporting staffs and lesser resources in France may also explain in part the greater tendency to structure news reports around arguments and counterarguments of competing political groups (similar to U.S. cable news): it is simply cheaper and easier to construct news as a debate of prepackaged ideas, however critical, than as a dramatic narrative painstakingly constructed by journalists. More positively, a French journalism of critical debate has surely been influenced by a more ideas-driven, critical political culture, continually reproduced by the relatively strong French education and academic fields (see, e.g., Chaplin 2007; Clark 1987). “Narrative” and “debate” journalistic practices should also be understood as “refractions” of external political and economic field influences on the French and U.S. journalistic fields. U.S. narrative journalism, as a form of serious (or light) entertainment, emerges in the context of advertiser pressures to

attract the largest possible (high-consuming) audiences. French debate journalism, substantially funded by the state, serves the interests of political elites in a pluralist democracy seeking a relatively open forum through which to articulate their positions and mobilize their supporters. For these reasons, paradoxically, a “differenciated” journalistic field (i.e., less autonomous from political “tendencies” and the state), such as the one that exists in France, may actually be the most effective in facilitating a clash of opposing viewpoints and criticisms (Alexander 1981: 35).

While this study has highlighted cross-national differences, it is important to acknowledge French–U.S. journalistic similarities as well. Newspapers in both countries tend to aim more criticism at the party in power than the party out of power. While French newspapers generally aimed more criticism than U.S. newspapers at the government and party in power combined, the difference in this regard was not as wide as for the total amount of criticisms. While the U.S. press was more likely to offer administrative criticisms and the French press was more likely to emphasize ideology criticisms, a rough majority of all criticisms presented in each country’s press were policy criticisms (see percentages of all criticisms, presented in Table 2a).

Why such similarities? It must be remembered that France and the United States are industrialized Western democracies with a long shared history. French publishers and journalists have long looked to their U.S. colleagues for ideas and inspiration, and occasionally U.S. journalists have done the same (see, e.g., Behr 1993; Ferenczi 1993). In addition, the perceived need to maintain a certain credibility with audiences and sources alike—for example, focusing on policy over character or tempering partisan impulses—may serve to unite the most prominent “mainstream” newspapers across all democratic societies (see, e.g., Juhem 1999). While state policies and commercialism differ in France and the United States, these differences are more of degree rather than fundamental type: Both countries are democracies (thus reigning in state abuses of power), and both countries are fully integrated into the world capitalist economy. U.S.–French similarities may also be the result of homogenizing pressures, related to increasing commercialization and secularization across Western nation-states (see Hallin and Mancini 2004: 254), that could lessen the interest in or perceived need for a criticism-oriented press. In this study, the French–U.S. gap narrows considerably between the 1990s and the 2000s due to a small drop in U.S. criticism and a much larger drop in French criticism. Future research could compare coverage over a longer period of time to confirm whether there is such a trend toward lower amounts of criticism. Regardless, the finding that the U.S. press is clearly *not* more critical than the French press (let alone that the French press is in many ways more critical) should be a significant and surprising finding for many scholars and journalists—at least those in the United States.

Are there ways in which the methodological choices in this study “biased” the results? Could the focus on “big” news starting on page 1, during years when journalistic attention to immigration was especially high, overstate the overall prevalence of criticism in the press? While “lifestyle” news is no doubt less critical in both France and the United States, there is no reason to believe that political or social problem news (the

focus of this study) will be less critical inside the newspaper than on page 1. To the extent that the study focuses on news articles rather than editorials or guest commentaries, it could be the case that the amount of certain kinds of criticism—in particular, the kind of sustained argumentation needed to effectively dispute “truth” claims—would be higher if one were to more systematically analyze the opinion pages. While “policy” criticisms were raised most often in both the French and U.S. immigration coverage, it is possible that other types of criticisms could predominate for other topics or types of coverage, for example, “character” criticisms in a sex scandal, “administrative” criticisms in relation to official investigations of government corruption, or “strategy” criticisms during a political campaign. It is not self-evident that the overall level of criticism would be higher or lower for other “social problems” addressed by national and local governments, but additional case studies or random sample studies should be conducted to help confirm this study’s generalizability. This study’s finding of a simultaneously greater focus on ideology and political strategy in France than in the United States accords with previous research, based on a large random sample of political news from the 1960s and 1990s (Benson and Hallin 2007).

In sum, fully delineating the causal mechanisms at work in facilitating or inhibiting press criticism of government and other organized political actors will require further research to allow for additional variation across issues, nation-states, types of media outlets, and time periods. Future research could also seek to analyze, both quantitatively and qualitatively, other aspects of criticisms, such as their depth, intelligence, and civility (or harshness).¹⁹ This study is simply an attempt to develop new ways of classifying and measuring journalistic criticism while filling in one piece of a very complex empirical puzzle.

Notes

1. In 1975, the French foreign-born proportion of the population was 9.2 percent, increasing to 9.6 percent by 1999. In contrast, the U.S. foreign-born population rose steadily from 4.7 percent in 1970 to 7.9 percent in 1990, overtaking the French percentage only in 2000, with 11.1 percent (see Fetzer 2000: 161, 165–66; Migration Policy Institute [MPI] 2009). In both the United States and France, since the 1960s, the majority of immigrants have come from non-European countries: in France, from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and southeast Asia and China; in the United States, chiefly from Mexico and the rest of Latin America, but also from Asia (Weil 1991: 558–60; MPI 2009)
2. Audience composition data are from 2004 (for *USA Today*) and 2006 U.S. Audit Bureau of Circulations Reader Profiles, Scarborough Co. (courtesy of Kristi Brumlevee) and National Newspaper Association (courtesy of William Johnson), and 2006 TNS-SOFRES—EPIQ French Newspaper Audience Composition Reports. *Christian Science Monitor* data are from roughly comparable MRI (Mediamark Research & Intelligence) data, provided to the author by *Christian Science Monitor*. Index of Parity is calculated to compare newspaper audiences in each country relative to the general population of that country (100 = parity with general adult population): (Household) *High Income* = € 60,000+ in France / \$100,000+ in the United States; *Higher Education* = college degree or higher in U.S.; any “*enseignement supérieur*” (education beyond the attainment of the high school “bac,” which is a more advanced level of education than the U.S. high school degree) in France.

3. French figures are for 1990. More recent, scattered data sources suggest little change. For example, Charon (2005) reports that *Le Figaro* earns nearly 80 percent of its revenues from advertising. Albert (2004: 98) reports that in 2002 *Les Echos* published the highest number of pages of advertising among French newspapers, more even than *Le Figaro*, which suggests that *Les Echos's* reliance and *Le Figaro's* reliance on advertising funding are roughly comparable.
4. U.S. advertising revenues (as a percentage of total revenues), reported for each newspaper in Table 1, are derived from newspaper companies' publicly available reports (2006 data); *Christian Science Monitor* data are derived from a personal e-mail communication to the author from Susan Hackney, marketing director, *Christian Science Monitor*, June 23, 2008.
5. According to the *International Directory of Company Histories* (vol. 32, St. James Press, 2000), as posted on <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/New-York-Daily-News-Company-History.html> (accessed October 8, 2008), the *Daily News* earned 53 percent of its revenues from advertising in 1997. Given the similar circulations and purchase prices of the highly competitive and both scarcely profitable *Daily News* and *New York Post*, it is likely that the *Post's* advertising revenues are about the same.
6. In 2000, *L'Humanité* formally separated itself from the PCF (French Communist Party) and allowed outside investors, which have included such major French media companies as TF1 (the leading commercial television channel) and Lagardère (see Eveno 2004). *La Croix* ("the Cross") is a general interest newspaper published by Bayard Presse and, while generally supportive of church positions, is not officially affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.
7. Nina Bernstein, telephone interview, July 14, 2008.
8. Remarks by Mirta Ojito delivered February 6, 2008, Barnard College Migration Series, New York.
9. Because fewer articles are featured on page 1 in the U.S. popular tabloids (*Daily News*, *New York Post*) and in both the French and U.S. financial newspapers (*Wall Street Journal*, *Les Echos*—fewer non-business-related stories, in these cases), the samples for these media outlets also included the first few inside pages.
10. Each news article was coded by one of three independent coders, including the author, after a period of training and test coding. Raw numbers of criticisms were counted (a ratio variable) and coded according to speaker, target, and type. To calculate intercoder reliability, a random subsample of 6 percent of the total sample was coded by all three coders. In this subsample, the total number of criticisms in a given article/article ensemble ranged from zero to twenty-one. Pearson's R for total criticisms was .804 ($p < .001$). Holsti's reliability coefficient was also calculated for presence/absence of the form of criticism as well as for the precise agreement (within one) of the raw number of criticisms. The reliability coefficient for presence/absence of "unspecified" (speaker) criticism was .76; the coefficient for raw agreement, within one criticism, was .96. The reliability coefficient for presence/absence of types of criticism (administrative, character, truth, ideology, policy, and strategy) ranged from .76 to .94 and averaged .85; the coefficient for raw agreement, within one criticism, ranged from .79 to 1.00 and averaged .92. The reliability coefficient for presence/absence of targets of criticism (government, Right, Left, minor parties/civil society, business, and foreign) ranged from .72 to .96 and averaged .89; the coefficient for raw agreement, within one criticism, ranged from .80 to .98 and averaged .92.

11. Any reference to French or U.S. news articles should be assumed to include multiple-article “ensembles” as well as single articles.
12. To preserve a rough symmetry in the national samples, seven U.S. newspapers are compared to the seven French newspapers for the 2002–6 period; *New York Post* data are shown but are not included in the national averages. So that newspapers with larger sample sizes do not dominate the analyses, reported national averages equally weigh all of the media outlets. Because much U.S. coverage in 1994 concerned local politics (especially California) where the “Right” was in power, the U.S. 1990s sample in Table 3 only includes nationally-focused news coverage. Statistical significance tests are based on raw totals of all articles in each country or media outlet.
13. Adjustments in *t*-test calculations sometimes necessary for ratio variables (standardizing criticisms per article according to word length) have not been made. However, given the large *n* values for most comparisons, it is highly unlikely that such adjustments would suggest insignificant findings.
14. Statistical significance for between-media-outlet differences was calculated using Tukey’s post hoc ANOVA tests. Differences with the *New York Times* were significant at $p = .011$ for *Le Monde*, $p = .022$ for *Le Figaro*, and $p = .080$ for *Libération*.
15. The *Wall Street Journal* is the least critical newspaper in the sample. This could be due to its general emphasis, as a business newspaper, on economic aspects of immigration rather than political conflict; however, the French financial newspaper *Les Echos* should have the same basic constraints and yet was more critical than the *Journal* (1.64 vs. 0.67 criticisms per one thousand words, $p < .05$). On the other hand, it does appear that a particular feature of the *Wall Street Journal*’s design format contributes to its lesser degree of criticism. During the time of this study, non-business-related page 1 articles in the *Journal* (i.e., most immigration stories) were often light, lengthy features not pegged to any particular news event (the so-called “middle column” articles). When only these kind of “journalistic field” generated articles are considered, the *Journal* was by far the least critical newspaper in both national samples (0.26 criticisms per one thousand words). However, when only “political field” generated articles (press conferences, legislative debates, executive orders, etc.) are compared, the *Journal* was still less critical than most other newspapers (1.49 criticisms per one thousand words), but less substantially so.
16. However, U.S. articles were more likely to attribute criticisms to broad “unspecified” categories of sources such as experts or political analysts, which could be interpreted as a veiled form of journalistic criticism.
17. “All other” includes business, minor parties/civil society organizations, and foreign. There is very little criticism of business across the spectrum of the French and U.S. national press (average of 0.04 criticisms per one thousand words in the French press and 0.07 criticisms per one thousand words in the U.S. press). This finding may be further proof of business’s generalized success in making itself largely invisible outside of the mostly sympathetic “business pages” (Davis 2002: 50–52)—except, perhaps, during global economic crises. Criticisms of minor parties/civil society were higher in France than in the United States (0.24 vs. 0.06), as were criticisms of foreign (0.22 vs. 0.04). Relatively higher French criticism of foreign and international organizations could be related in part to the significant power exerted by neighboring states and the European Union structure as a whole in setting immigration policies. Greater criticisms of marginal parties and civil society in France

could also be related to the ongoing political machinations of Jean-Marie Le Pen's anti-immigrant National Front party. However, the U.S. press has had its own potential opportunities to present foreign and civil society criticisms (e.g., of Mexico's economic policies or its failure to police its borders, or of immigration restrictionist organizations that range from the well-funded Federation for American Immigration Reform to the smaller but much more extremist Minutemen, a vigilante border patrol group), but simply did not to the same extent.

18. In both countries, as is evident in Table 3, the relative proportion of Right to Left criticisms (when the Right is in power) is higher than the proportion of Left to Right criticisms (when the Left is in power). Factors specific to the politics of immigration may be at work in producing this finding—especially the extent to which the Right, in both countries, has tended to assume the mantle of anti-immigration policies in recent years, versus a less polarized situation during the early 1990s when the Left as well as the Right embraced more restrictive immigration policies.
19. For instance, in a study of French coverage of the 2004 U.S. presidential election, Paul Adams (2007: 109) draws this contrast between the positive “strategic” criticisms of John Kerry and the character, ideological, and policy criticisms of George Bush: “Kerry was criticized on tactical grounds for not fighting hard enough or well enough . . . and Bush was criticized, in contrast, on the basis of his attitudes, beliefs, and policies. The pertinent distinction was between strategic errors on one hand and dangerous stupidity or cupidity on the other.” For space reasons, an analysis of types of criticism classified by “harshness” is not presented in this article.

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