



## Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison, by Rodney Benson

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*Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison*, by Rodney Benson. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 280 pp. \$85.50 hardcover.

*Reviewed by* ABBY JONES

In his latest book, *Shaping Immigration News*, Rodney Benson continues his longstanding pattern of valuably producing research that answers an immediate question facing scholars in several fields, including communication, sociology, and international affairs, while at the same time pushing the burgeoning fields of comparative communication and media globalization studies forward in theoretical and methodological ways. Through providing readers with not only a content analysis of U.S. and French media coverage of this global policy issue, but also investigating the structural differences in the media and political systems that lead to these differences, Benson is able to bridge the often divergent spheres of study. In addition, as in much of his past writing, Benson helps his readers expand beyond their preconceived domestic notions and embrace the international environment.

It is in the opening pages of the book where readers, particularly those looking for Benson to once again stretch boundaries, can find his most useful insight. From the start, Benson shares his concerns about the tendency of immigration scholars to ignore the role of the media in “the shaping of public debate.” Instead, he believes they “emphasize broad macro-societal factors,” leading to an incorrect assumption that journalism is simply a reflection of, rather than influence on, society (p. 12).

To help remedy this problem, the author carries most of his readers into a new arena of examining the media through the lens of the “field”—the mezzo-level organizational and professional space inside of which external constraints are mediated” (p. 12). However, while Benson offers readers an explanation of Bourdieu’s conception of “field” as one where there is a dichotomous relationship between economic and cultural forms of power, the author believes this “dichotomy is inadequate to explain the complex dynamics of the ongoing journalistic mediation of public discourse, especially as these processes differ cross-nationally” (p. 13).

Consequently, instead of employing this dichotomous model of field, Benson provides readers and, importantly, future researchers with a threefold approach to examining the journalism field. First, he demonstrates to readers how political power and economic power should not be seen as either reliably working for or against each other. In using dichotomous examples such as deregulation and laws that help unions organize, Benson warns against assumptions that “the game is rigged” consistently in favor of one side or the other (p. 13). Second, the author tells the reader to be cautious of the conceptual separation of cultural and economic power. Third, in one of his largest contributions to the discipline, Benson challenges Bourdieu’s view of heteronomous power as destructive, instead “conceiv[ing] of the journalistic field as organized around the basic opposition between two heteronomous poles—a civic nonmarket pole and a market pole” (p. 13). Most interestingly, the author argues that, counter to what is often thought, it can be “the product of proximity rather than distance” to these poles that can determine the value of the journalistic product (p. 13).

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In citing examples such as mobilizing and deliberative journalism, which are often supported by governments, nonprofits, or political parties, he argues that autonomy is not the sole factor in producing “quality” journalism.

Clearly not afraid of being vocal in a contentious field, Benson adds to his new insight on the writing of Bourdieu by explaining that beyond its “external” relationship to the heteronomous field, in terms of receiving “symbolic and financial resources,” the production of news is also guided by its own internal logic and structure. This arrangement involves “the structural organizational ecology of the field . . . [including] the relative directness and intensity of competition among journalists and media outlets” (p. 14). It is in comparing the different relationship of the journalistic fields in the United States and France “to political, market, and civic power” that Benson believes we can begin to understand the “distinctive logics of practice” (p. 15).

Benson uses Chapter 2 to expand on the “field position-logic-structure model” and illuminate its significance in the two studied countries. This involves the interviews with journalists from both nations who provide deeper insight into the environments. Chapters 3 and 4 individually analyze the coverage of the nations, while Chapter 5 places these empirical findings into the context “of social structural and discursive continuity and change” (p. 125), which allows the reader insight into the countries’ similarities and differences over time. Chapters 6 and 7, respectively, investigate the “multiperspectival” and “critical” character of the newspapers in both countries, and Chapter 8 particularly looks at the television coverage and asks that age old communication question—“Does the Medium Matter?”

In the final chapter Benson not only offers the typical synthesis of the research and suggestions for future research, but quite usefully places the findings concerning the diverging media systems in the context of the larger communication field. This includes pointing out that in his longitudinal data it was “far from self-evident . . . that Hallin and Mancini’s ‘liberal’ model is prevailing,” particularly in France where the narrative model of journalism has not truly taken hold (p. 199). In addition, counter to several past studies (e.g., Barnhurst, 2002; Cooke 2005), Benson sees “little evidence of television’s influence on newspapers” (p. 199).

Similar to many comparative political communication scholars, Benson employs mixed methods in his research. This includes insightful narratives on immigration coverage from journalists, activists, scholars, and politicians and a substantive content analysis of the television and newspaper coverage over the past 40 years. Yet, even with this breadth of empirical data that is often lacking in comparative research, and even more in studies of media globalization, the author is humble in discussing the limitations of his study. He also beneficially theorizes about why his results differ from some of those from other researchers, including variances in the coding schemes and data availability.

Although it may not be the author’s original intention, at a time when there is great debate in the academic and journalism worlds concerning the hyper-dramatic nature of the news environment, in which financial pressures have often transformed the primary goal of news from the provision of information to a creation of audience-pleasing infotainment, Benson productively adds to the discourse. In Chapter 9 he discusses how it is not necessary, in terms of its survival or success, for the U.S. press to “disempower activism by ignoring its organizational infrastructure, downplaying its substantive demands, dismissing structural arguments as inauthentic, and emphasizing instead personalities, personal histories, and the threat of disorder” (p. 201). Having found that the French case demonstrated a consistent and “celebrated” linkage of “individual problems to civil society activism,”

Benson connects this book to the work of others and his own from the past to argue this negativism found in the U.S. press coverage is not inevitable.

If there is a weakness in Benson's work it is that, while the subject matter has wide appeal, the reader can get mired in the intricacy of the theoretical writing. Yet, in many ways this is a result of Benson's desire to cover too much, rather than too little, in the book. It can only be hoped that he will use this exploration of "field" theory to undertake greater comparative investigations and expand on how he sees the academic arenas fit together.

Like a great deal of Benson's past work, the largest contribution of his newest book is its ability to add to the theoretical underpinnings of varying communication disciplines and challenge others to examine media coverage of political communication in a comparative way. As leading comparativist Frank Esser said, "cross-national research has reached a stage where those engaging in it should take comparative analysis seriously" (2013, p. 123), and Benson surely takes his readers on an important journey in this direction.

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