

Comparing Mass Media in Europe and the United States

The media support democratic norms differently.

by Daniel C. Hallin

Newspapers, television, and other mass media inevitably reflect the political traditions of their countries. In this article communication scholar Daniel Hallin explores how European newspapers and television explicitly support a diversity of political (ideological) viewpoints in their countries, while the U.S. media typically seek to be more objective in the reporting of news.

In 1976 a new newspaper, *La Repubblica*, debuted in Italy. It was an innovative paper in many ways, more market-driven than the traditional Italian press, which spoke, as a top political reporter once expressed it, to 1,500 readers, the movers and shakers of Italian politics. It was more newsy, with an agenda that expanded beyond the traditional narrow focus of the Italian press on party politics, and more accessible, modifying the cryptic insider language that traditionally dominated the Italian press, and, for example, introducing letters to the editor and seeking women readers. It soon became the top-selling Italian paper.

In another way, though, *La Repubblica* was very much in the tradition of Italian journalism. As its founder said in his first editorial, “it doesn’t pretend to follow an illusory political neutrality, but declares explicitly that it has taken a side in the political battle. It is made by men who belong to the vast arc of the Italian left.” Like the rest of the Italian press and broadcasting, *La Repubblica* reported the world from a distinct political point of view.

Twenty years later the Fox News Channel debuted on cable television in the United States. Fox News continued a trend that had begun in the 1980s toward more market-driven forms of television news: more sensational, more personality-driven, and more oriented toward opinion and commentary than strictly reporting the news. And like *La Repubblica*, it announced a political identity, though expressed in very different terms. “For 3 out of 4 Americans who believe the news is biased,” Fox said in a 1997 advertisement, “we present something quite rare: a news network dedicated to providing fair and balanced coverage.” Fox News was innovative above all in the fact that it appealed to its audience on the basis of a distinct political

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perspective, differentiating itself from its rivals on the basis of its conservative, Republican slant. Consistent with American journalistic culture, however, it expressed this identity by proclaiming that it would be the only news source to provide exactly the political neutrality *La Repubblica* eschewed.

It is common today to talk about the creation of a global media culture, mainly based on the American model, which would overwhelm national differences in media systems. In many ways, this is correct. *La Repubblica* is but one example of a general shift in European media toward more market-driven forms of journalism that first emerged in the United States. But as the example of Fox suggests, change isn't only going one way. Fox is one example of a general trend in American media toward the reemergence of partisan journalism—long characteristic of European media systems, but mostly absent in the

United States through the twentieth century. Partisan talk radio and Internet bloggers also reflect this trend. And considerable diversity remains among media systems, even in countries as similar as the United States and those of Western Europe.

Key Differences

Politics and the Media. Political differentiation of the media is one of the most important differences among media systems and is something that generally divides the United States (and Canada) from most of Europe. Ask a European to give you an overview of the press, and the first thing you are likely to get is a map of its political diversity: the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* is right of center, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* left of center, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* far left, the *Bild* far right. At one time, many European newspapers were connected to political parties or to other organized social groups—trade unions, for instance, or churches—whose views they represented in the public sphere. These kinds of papers remained important through the 1970s, but have mostly died out since then. Most national newspapers in Europe, however—and many broadcast stations as well—still have at least general political tendencies, which are reflected in their content, in the kinds of journalists they employ, and in the political orientations of their audiences.

The United States had a strong partisan press in the nineteenth century, but it died out in the twentieth century, partly because of shifts in political culture—there was a strong reaction against political parties in the Progressive era, an important period in the forma-

tion of journalistic culture—and partly because of media economics. The American press, unlike that in most of Europe, is primarily a local, monopoly press. In the midtwentieth century, competition among a dwindling number of papers in each city led their owners to avoid identification with particular political orientations. It is no accident that it is in the electronic media, with their increasingly fragmented national audiences, that partisanship is reemerging in American media. In this context, product differentiation becomes a viable market strategy. The reemergence of partisan media also comes at a time when partisan competition is closer and more passionate than it has been in many years in the United States.

The Newspaper. Another important difference among media systems lies in the culture of newspaper reading—or lack thereof. Here the biggest difference is between northern and southern Europe, and North America falls in a middle position. *La Repubblica* may have been more market-oriented than earlier Italian papers, but an average American reader would find it difficult—sophisticated in its writing style and demanding in the level of political and cultural knowledge it assumes. The newspaper has never been a mass medium in Italy or anywhere else in southern Europe. It has always been oriented to an elite audience engaged in the political world. This audience has expanded modestly since the 1970s. But by the time a more market-oriented press began to emerge in southern Europe, electronic mass media were already a reality, and the day of the mass newspaper had passed.

In northern Europe, by contrast, strong traditions of newspaper reading developed at the end of the nineteenth century, partly because of the strong connection between newspapers and



communities, not only local communities but also the kinds of ideological and socioeconomic communities that once had their own presses in that part of Europe. Still today, more than 700 newspapers are sold per 1,000 people in Norway, as opposed to about 120 in Italy (and about 260 in the United States).

Government Regulation and Subsidies. Another important difference has to do with the role of the state. The most obvious difference here is the strong role of public broadcasting in Europe, compared with its very marginal role in the United States. Broadcasting was exclusively a public utility in most of Europe until the 1980s, and even if commercial media have expanded dramatically since that time, public television still captures 30% to 40% of the audience or more across most of Western Europe, as opposed to 2% in the United States. More generally, Europeans have long seen the media as a social institution for which the state had a positive responsibility; many, for example, have state subsidies to the newspaper industry, which are intended to keep a moderate degree of pluralism alive in the press.

The U.S. government subsidized newspapers quite heavily in the first half of the nineteenth century. But since that time, the dominant philosophical tradition—connected, of course, with the evolving interpretation of the First Amendment—has emphasized the idea that press freedom means minimal state involvement with the private operation of the press. That difference in philosophical traditions is also reflected in many differences in media regulation between the United States and Europe. Most European countries, for example, have substantial regulation of communication in election campaigns; many ban paid political advertising and grant free air time to political parties instead.

Journalism as a Profession. There are also many interesting differences in the development of journalism as a profession in Western democracies. In southern Europe, journalism evolved as a kind of adjunct of the worlds of politics and of literature, and has remained less professionalized. This does not at all mean that journalists in southern Europe have been poorly educated or are bad at what they do—the quality of writing and of political analysis is often very high indeed in southern European media. But journalism has had less autonomy from the world of politics and less consensus on its own standards of practice. The Italian journalists union, for instance, first devised a code of ethics in the 1990s and still can't get Italian journalists—with their wide-ranging political perspectives—to agree on it.

In both North America and northern Europe, by contrast, journalistic codes of ethics have been around since at least the early twentieth century, and consensus on them is relatively high. Journalists there have been able to bridge political differences to agree on common standards of practice.

Journalistic professionalism in Northern Europe is different from that in the United States in some ways. It has traditionally placed less emphasis on separation

of news and commentary, since the role of the press has been seen in terms of expressing a point of view. It is also more formally organized. Most northern European countries have Press Councils, for instance, which don't exist in the commercialized context of American media (or the politicized context of southern European media). At times, too, journalistic autonomy—an important component of professionalism—is more formalized in Europe, with some countries having laws intended to protect “internal press freedom” (the rights of journalists vis-à-vis media owners), and some media at least partly controlled by associations of journalists (e.g., *Le Monde* and *Libération* in France).

The Media and Democracy

Is it possible to say which media system is most conducive to a healthy democracy? Probably not. Political systems are differently organized in different countries, and each media system serves the particular kind of democracy in which it evolved. Italian democracy, for instance, has for most of the post-World War II period been based on a process of bargaining among the leaders of diverse political factions, and newspapers have served effectively to facilitate that process of bargaining. Each

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FOR DISCUSSION

How are newspapers in Europe and the United States different in their approaches to reporting about politics and political news?

Why do European countries have such a strong tradition of public broadcasting on television? Why do these same countries also provide financial support to commercial newspapers?

Compare the benefits and drawbacks to “market-driven” journalism. In your opinion, does this kind of journalism support or undercut democracy?

What are the key elements of a free press in a democratic society?

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system also has advantages and disadvantages. The American press, for instance, has always been impressive as a gatherer of information, and European journalists look with admiration at the strong professional norms American journalists have developed for investigative reporting. On the other hand, the political diversity of the European press is appealing, as is the strength of public broadcasting, which still delivers at least a full half hour of

high-quality news in prime time in most countries.

Media systems around the world are in rapid flux today, as changes in technology and market structure disrupt media institutions that had evolved over many decades. This makes it particularly relevant to pay attention to the variety of media institutions that have evolved in different parts of the world: We may well need to try solutions or confront issues that are new to us but familiar in other media systems.

For Further Reading

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