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Analysis of National Media Systems.

- A. The country that I have chosen for this research project is France, which has a democratic political system. The RPR party, of which Jacques Chirac is leader and President of France, operates under democratic principles. In regard to the media, democratic countries tend to maintain "a relevant distance from the production and distribution of information."¹ The French press enjoys the freedom that many countries in this genre are accorded; media outlets can be privately owned, free expression. In France, because of its democratic political system, the media is able not only to write what the government wants to hear/read but what is true. And they can do this without any fear of criticism or censorship from the government. This, in itself, is the essence of the relationship that exists between the political system and the media: a democratic system in which the government respects the role of the media and vice versa, and freedom of expression is acknowledged. Of course, when juxtaposed to authoritarian governments which repress freedom of the media, governments such as France are exalted. Perhaps, the underlying differences between these political systems provide the basis on which freedom in France can be appreciated. Also, the media can criticize the political organization and (or) policies of President

¹ Silverblatt Art, & Nikolai Zlobin (2003), *International Communications: A media Literacy Approach*. Chapter 6.

Chirac's party. For example, in the Nov 21st issue of *The News*, the president's progress of the party funding was scrutinized by the media for the French public.² In this regard, the media is portrayed as primarily serving the audiences & advertisers instead of perpetuating government propaganda- as would have been the case in an authoritarian government.

The French definition of freedom of press is very similar to that of other democratic political entities, such as the U.S. The only difference, perhaps, lies in the fact that the French, as told by Barbrook, interpret their rights basing on the principles of natural rights expressed in the Revolutionary Declarations of 1789 and 1793, and the Press Law of 1881 which allowed private ownership of printing presses. This model is described as "ahistorical and abstract" because it is derived from discussions of particular periods or phenomena in French media. According to Hugh Dauncey, "the common thread running through the analyses of different periods of French media is of course the issue of the individual's right to a combination of participation and democracy within the media."³ Jean-Pierre Chamoux presents the way in which freedom of expression (*liberte individuelle*) has progressively become the subject of legislation. The government has little or no influence in the media since most of the media outlets are privately owned. The impartial private media ownership systems allow for diverse news writing.

² http://www.french-news.com/174ps/174_nws_fa.htm 11/21/2003 The President's Progress, by Frank Morcom.

³ Richard Barbrook, *Media Freedom. The Contradictions of Communications in the Age of Modernity*, London and Boulder Co.: Pluto Press, 1995. 218 pp. ISBN 0-7453-0943-7 and Jean-Pierre Chamoux, *Droit de la Communication*, Paris: PUF, Collection Que Sais-Je? 1994, 127 pp. ISBN 2-13-046486-6. by Hugh Dauncey. <http://www.wjfms.ncl.ac.uk/Rbarb.html>

Privately-owned newspapers include *The Tocqueville Connection*, which is aimed at furthering Franco-American relations. It is "free of all political interference, or control by public & private interest groups seeking to promote a particular ideology, cause, or national position. Other privately-owned forms of print are *La Croix*, *Le Midi Libre*, *Le Monde*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Iraq Digest*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Le Tribune*, & *Le Courrier International*. The private newspapers have pervaded coverage of global issues as demonstrated in the articles mentioned. However, this does not rule out the fact that certain privately-owned newspapers promote government interests, perhaps due to funding. Public Newspapers like *La Republique*, and *Le Bien Public*, opening serve the interests of the French government.

In regard to factors that are likely to affect freedom of press, the democratic nature perpetuates uncensored print. More over, the journalists can openly criticize the policies of the government with no fear of repression or other restrictions. In France, the government can interfere with the media but the frequency of which can be curtailed by the media owners. Geographically, France is surrounded by Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and Germany. Perhaps, it is this factor that influences France's international news coverage and interest in the political happenings of her neighbors. In *The News*, an article on Belgium was featured, which is a sign of the strong ties between these countries. The business community affects press freedom, in that they provide funding for most of the print media in France considering that they (majority) are privately-owned. And because of this, they may wish to promote their interests through media, thereby curtailing the audience's rights to

receive unbiased information. For instance, *Le Monde* represents ideologies or perspectives of the intellectual and middle-class audience. The diverse audience dictates the diversity of news coverage in a bid to avoid conflict. As far as cultural considerations are concerned, France has a wide influx of minorities from different parts of the world: Algerians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Spaniards, Italians, and others. Despite their minority existence, the French public has found itself catering to their interests too- as a means of avoiding political unrest. Nevertheless, this is not to say that France is devoid of biases against these minority groups. Relatively, the French unlike Americans have a rather slow lifestyle which in turn determines the presentation of media messages. The pyramid method is not very relevant for the French lifestyle. Perhaps, it is for this reason that Newspapers are the major source of news for the people.

Conversely, in a country where the media is allowed access to delicate information concerning government policies, not to mention entitlement to opinions presented to the audience, the political system that encourages free speech is reflected. In France, the media industry is mostly privately-owned as opposed to China's state ownership system in which Journalistic writings are prone to censorship by the government. In other words, the French government exercises a laissez-faire policy when it comes to information to the diverse audience. Perhaps, this explains why French movies promoted by Vivendi are able to pervade the international film mainstream as opposed to media owners in authoritarian countries.

B. In The News, top priority is given to National News where by certain programs are hailed or criticized. For instance, in the 11/21/2003 issue of The News, the poor health conditions/services and facilities were of major importance as seen through its location on the front page. This was preceded in importance by the not-very-encouraging report on the political progress of President Jacques Chirac's party (RPR). Still on the same page was a feature on Europe in general, which provided a brief report on the Inter-Governmental Conference(IGC) that took place in Rome to discuss the finalizing of the new EU constitution. On the global scale, there were stories about the war in Iraq. From this analysis, it can be deciphered that The News gives more priority to National than global news.

C. Geographically speaking, France is a fairly large country compared to some of its neighbors, i.e. Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium. Because of its proximity to Switzerland and Belgium especially, the French media often provides coverage of regional news involving affairs of these countries. For instance, because of the influx of French guest workers in Geneva, it becomes crucial to cover news in that region, in the interest of the French citizens. Besides, this is made easier by the commonality of language and political structure, though Switzerland enjoys a more stable political existence. As far as Italy is concerned, the importance of the Italian language has pervaded the French media. This has been aided by the presence of the Italian minority in France. In The News, a section of Regional news covered a story about Belgium. Economically, these countries rely on each other. As evident, the French unemployment rate is sugar-coated by the

availability of job opportunities in Switzerland. Amongst France and her neighbors, there's relative peace since there are no territorial disputes- if they exist, then they are so minor that they do not warrant mentioning in International media. Culturally, no culture is independent of the other: In France, there have been intermarriages between the French and the minority groups, and so it is irrational to treat them any different from the rest. This has been, and still is, the bone of contention in France. In Switzerland, despite the use of French as the official language (especially in Geneva), German, Italian and Spanish are spoken as well. In this way, media in this region serves a diverse culture. The climate favors journalistic activities which perhaps accounts for the wide range of national and regional news covered. France both industrial and agricultural and so Front page news usually comprises weather information as well as stock exchange news. During the winter, television viewer ship is popular and in the summer, newspapers are the major means of information. On issues concerning availability of resources, France is a technologically advanced country along with her neighbors. Because the relationship between the countries in this region is relatively peaceful, the sharing of resources is not uncommon. There's an abundance of trained personnel to oversee the proper passage of information. This facilitates the distribution of information across borders; it is not uncommon to find pieces of French media in Switzerland. In fact, the Swiss audience seems to be largely influenced by the French media.

D. The ethnic composition of France can best be described as mixed because of the minority groups. These minorities include but are not

limited to: Moroccans, Algerians, Italians, Tunisians, Spanish, Senegalese, and others. Immigration into France has been made easier by the terms of the European Union that allows guest workers from former colonies / Franco-phone countries. All these migrate to France in search of better living standards from their countries- most are from Africa. These immigrants are not welcomed into the French culture but rather greeted with disdain and pity, as another drain on the French resources. Mostly, the media represents the dominant ethnic group- which happens to be the French whites. Perhaps, this perpetuates the racist ideologies inhibited by the white audience against their African and Arab counterparts. There seem to be mounting tensions between the French and the African and Arabs- more specifically the Algerians; in this case, media messages about this group of people are often (if not always) biased, considering that the Editors are French citizens. The hatred has been intensified by the growing levels of unemployment in which the Africans & Arabs are accused of "stealing" the available jobs. In France, for instance, the African-Arabs are referred to as *harki*⁴ or *pieds-noirs* (black feet), which are all very racist derogatory terms. This has fueled conflict between the French and the African-Arab immigrants.

- E. Religiously, France seems to practice religious pluralism, as evident in the practice of Catholicism, Islam, and protestant practices. There's no official religion although Christianity is widely

⁴ Harki refers to the Algerians who betrayed their country during the 1960 war of Independence, when they fought with the French against their fellow Arabs. Hatred against the Algerians in France has been intensified by the fact that the government feels that it owes them so much. They are entitled to better jobs than the French citizens.

practiced, particularly Catholicism. It could be plausibly argued that Catholicism is the official religion albeit the fact that the government is careful not to stress it; there's a separation between the church and the state. In other words, no religion is deemed superior to the other. Meanwhile, this calls for great caution within the media; they must avoid remarks that may be offensive to certain religious groups. Islam is mainly practiced by the African immigrants like Algerians and Senegalese but due to intermarriages, there are some French Muslims.

F. In French schools and universities, the study and understanding of the French language is emphasized. Apparently, the Chirac government is afraid that the French language is being threatened by the popularity of English. It is no wonder that only about 40% of the French population can speak English; even those who can speak English may be adamant to speak it unless under dire circumstances. This limits their ability to read international print. It is for this reason that they mostly depend on the radio and French newspapers for international news; this is very limited. On the other hand, technological and Business studies are emphasized, which encourages media research.

G. As far as the system of media ethics is concerned, the French media is more subjective than objective. There's no absolute truth; the audience is given the chance to interpret the media messages according to their own understanding. This is juxtaposed to the situation in Iran where the media is not used to inform the people but rather to maintain control over them; objectivity is the weapon for

this. In France, due to limited job opportunities, corruption (bribery) is a common practice as journalists seek to obtain significant news to advance their careers. Unlike France, the U.S deems this practice as unethical. On the issue of privacy, the French are more likely to leave the celebrities out of the spotlight than Americans; in France, it is unlawful to thrust people into the limelight for trivial reasons. Also, the celebrity status is not as 'worshipped' in France as it is in the U.S. No wonder American celebrities like Johnny Depp, seek solitude in the cities of France.

II. In the film *Criminel amants* (criminal lovers), the characters, played by young college students, commit murder and seek refuge in the woods where they are captured by someone who is supposedly aware of their crime. The unfolding of the plot is quite slow, which gives us a glimpse at the French lifestyle. The over-riding theme in this film, of course, is the power of love-driving one to commit murder; the boyfriend kills another classmate because his girlfriend tells him to. Even at the end, when they are rounded up by the police, the boyfriend covers for the girl and urges her to run so that she is not caught. Unfortunately, she is killed. This alternatively plays on the tragic emotions that are evoked in the viewer. Noticeably, although the use of vulgar language is employed (seeing as it is an adult movie), the sex scenes between the characters are minimized. The director focuses on the crime rather than the romance. In this case, it seems the director was trying to move away from the stereotype of Paris being a city of love by actually contrasting it with death, murder and crime. It generated a new perspective into the French lifestyle.