

Cultural Identity in an Era of Globalization: Contrasting State Media Policies in the United States and France

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Abstract

Contrasting French and American Internet policies provides a needed corrective to the ethnocentrism that is all too common in US policy-making circles. Such a contrast can generate a broader set of policy options, options which may enhance otherwise under-valued social goals in the United States.

Introduction

Consider a bottle of Orangina soft drink. This modest object lies at the center of an international conflict, a conflict having economic, political, and cultural implications. Orangina is produced by a French company, Pernod Ricard SA. For the French, Orangina is most importantly a cultural sign. The distinctive shape of the bottle, the aesthetic detail of the textured surface, and the bit of pulp in the beverage are distinguishing markers of French taste and sophistication, meanings important enough to protect by government action. From an American perspective, Orangina is simply a commodity, a soft drink, a product whose meaning and value should be set by the market, unfettered from government control.

These competing understandings collided when Pernod Ricard SA agreed to sell Orangina to Coca-Cola for \$825 million in April 1997 (Willman and Lui, 1999). Coca Cola's management see themselves as beneficent foreign investors while regulators in France view them as ugly Americans bent on Coca-Cola-nizing the planet. Coke is probably the perfect foil for French regulators. It is the best-known brand on the planet, its slogans, "Always Coca Cola" and "Satisfaction within Arm's Reach" are not merely metaphoric but have substantial material underpinnings, Coke is literally within arm's reach of a great percentage of the world's population. Coke's presence is made larger by its solid relationships with other American corporations whose brands have a dominant global presence, including McDonald's, Wal-Mart, and Disney.

A successful brand, like Coke, lies at the intersection of personal identity and impersonal commodities, combining a particular local experience with an abstract global logic. A bottle of Orangina is one of the innumerable, mundane features of

everyday life through which broad social transformations are expressed.

The French traditionally understand media products as a central means through which people develop and express their identities. In contrast, the United States regulates the media primarily as an economic commodity; consequently these countries have distinctly different media regimes. Our era is marked by rapid technological advance, media convergence, and capital transformation. Now, increasingly dense technological webs create novel global arenas in which these philosophies clash. These arenas, like the cyberspace frontier, remain under-regulated and under-theorized, although they have profound implications for our economic prospects, sense of national identity, and forms of political power. Understandings and assumptions we take for granted in the United States, for good or bad, are revealed in contrast with the French experience. This contrast of values and policies should expand the range of social possibilities we can imagine and hope for.

Since at least the end of W.W. II, free markets, rapid technological change, and intense individualism are values consonant with America's position as the dominant global power. French values have tended to emphasize centralization, state power, elite control--especially with regard to technology, and a philosophical and political questioning of modernity.

French media policy is an expression of these values. French bureaucrats view the nation as a socioeconomic unity characterized by uniform provision of services such as mail, telephone, roads, schools, and so on. Providing these services is a moral mission predicated on republican ideals of egalitarianism and national independence (Feenberg, 1995, p. 171). Even before World War I, a conscious tension had broken out between those in Europe, particularly in France, dedicated to the proposition that films were a creative, artistic force capable of rejuvenating and reinforcing national identity and tycoons emerging in the US who understood that the audience--its size, composition and tastes--were the key to success in what stood to become a major national industry.

By the end of October 1998, the Washington Post published a series of articles on 'The Global Reach of U.S. Cultural Power,' revealing that America's exports of cultural materials of all kinds had for the first time surpassed aerospace to become the nation's number one foreign exchange earner, of all the items involved--learning materials, software, fashion, imagery--none was more significant in its impact than Hollywood's output of film and television products (Ellwood, 1999).

The image industry is a blend of economics and culture, and France has traditionally protected its domestic culture industry by restricting American economic imports. Last year no American TV series was shown in prime time; these programming hours contained locally produced quiz shows and soap operas and a French knock off version of Baywatch called St Tropez. At other time periods, the television is filled with American imports; dubbed versions of Little House on the Prairie, Hogan's Heroes, and Cheers (Tagliabue, 1999).

This television landscape is rapidly changing as government restrictions drop away and economic forces are given more leeway. The European television market was first opened up in the 1980's, as state broadcasting monopolies crumbled and commercial channels sprang up. Now the long-expected shake out of an industry made up of dozens of struggling private and commercial channels has begun in earnest. Europe seems to be charging into a future very much like America's present, in which the TV industry is dominated by a handful of huge conglomerates. "It's a long road, and it will require a tremendous amount of money, but it will happen," forecasted Marc Andre Feffer, deputy chairman and chief executive at Canal Plus, the largest French television network (Tagliabue, 1999). Europeans, especially the artists who require significant capital investments to produce their work, have deep concerns about the more intensive commodification of media culture. Costa Gravas, the Greek filmmaker who resides in France warned that, "French teenagers already know more about the American justice system than their own. They have probably never seen a French living room, no less a French courtroom on TV. They will have lost their souls completely in 15 years time if there is no protection. It is not that they will become Americans. They will become nothing, not even themselves. They will be tourists in their own country. It is my view, and that of most Europeans, as different as we are, that are souls are not for sale. Culture, whether cinema or genetic information should not be up for negotiation" (Cresson, 1995, p. 28).

This is exactly what right-and left-wing governments in a country like France fear most: that Hollywood will come between the state and the coming generations in its custody in public schools, implanting alien values and weakening the sense of identity transmitted by the traditional cultural authorities. As Edith Cresson, former Socialist Prime Minister declared "There is, perhaps most menacingly for Europe, the threat to identity, the threat that the uniqueness of diverse cultures will be excluded from a global system built in the image of such American giants as Microsoft or Disney" (Cresson, 1995, p.26).

France also has a distinctive way of grappling with policy challenges posed by new interactive media. Interactive media in France are primarily initiatives of the national phone service. The most important French form of interactive media is Minitel, developed in the early 1980s by the government to ensure the place of France in the information age. Minitel was less a service to commerce or consumers than a link in the chain of national identity. As such, it was intended to reach every French household as part of the infrastructure of national unity, just like the telephone and the mails.

Minitel was the only successful Videotext system in the world, succeeding where government run systems in Britain, Quebec, and numerous private initiatives around the globe failed. Minitel succeeded because the government fully subsidized household terminals, these terminals were friendly and easy for ordinary people to use, and because the system was decentralized: it was open to experimentation and the

development of new uses by many, many companies. After 1983, the text screens of Minitel became a useful everyday tool, like TV for most people in France.

At a time when Internet users still had to master complicated computers, electronic shopping on the closed, hacker-free Minitel network was a breeze. Today, more than 35 million French subscribers regularly dial into the network via archaic terminals, securely purchasing billions of dollars of goods annually from its 25,000 vendors. Hatched in top French laboratories nearly two decades ago, Minitel foreshadowed modern Internet culture, with its pornography eruptions, censorship battles and well-trafficked chat rooms for messages and on-line flirtation.

The success of an older Minitel technology has delayed the adoption of newer Internet technologies. French consumers are wedded to their old system. The French fail to see why they should shell out hefty sums for PCs, phone connections and access to surf an Internet that offers little French language content and even less security for financial transactions. The upshot: Only about three percent of the French population uses the Internet, compared with about twenty percent in the U.S. and nine percent in the U.K. and Germany (Strassel, 1998).

How different American Internet values are was made clear when Forbes business columnist Julie Pitta criticized the French approach, "You've got to understand France. The place is run by a bunch of control freaks. If they can't control something, they try to ban it. Not only was the Internet, with its easy open access a danger to Minitel, which yields \$1 billion a year in revenue to the government, it also promised to democratize information. Horrors" (Pitta, 1997). French control efforts at times have been excessive. Jacques Taubon, justice minister under a conservative government, proposed that Web pages downloaded in English would be criminalized.

Even positive French moves toward the Internet have been suspect. On Bastille Day at a research center photo opportunity designed to popularize the Internet, President Jacques Chirac launched a Web page. His gesture was undercut when he picked up the mouse and had to ask his hosts what it was. His question dramatized his distance from computer technology every bit as much as George Bush's befuddlement of super market scanners demonstrated Bush's distance from the realities of the average American grocery shopper.

Although the terms *laissez-faire* and *entrepreneur* are French, French interactive media policies support a much more interventionist role for the government than for example, Al Gore could imagine. For example, socialist Prime minister Lionel Jospin, endorsing the Internet as a crucial business and cultural tool for a "responsible information society" and pledging more than 1 billion French francs (165 million dollars) to wire schools, train teachers, support innovative companies, and help make books, newspapers, and artworks available on the Internet (Guissani, 1999).

Indeed, the contrast between French and American Internet policies provides a needed corrective to the ethnocentrism that is all too common in US policy-making circles. Such a contrast can generate a broader set of policy options, options which

may enhance otherwise under-valued social goals in the United States.

Universal Access

In stark contrast to the United States experience, where market forces are trusted to provide media access, both the rhetoric and government actions in France are more active in fulfilling a national mission of providing access as Edith Cresson stressed, "Access to all is key. The aim must be to guarantee the right of access to infrastructure to everyone regardless of age, place, gender or race" (Cresson, 1995, p.27). Minitel was successful in part because access was universal. In the United States less than half the population has Internet access, and even cable television, a much more mature media system, is seen by only sixty percent of the population. Clearly, market driven access will disenfranchise a large segment of the population from participating in the politically important public dialogue that takes place on the Internet.

Cultural Subsidies

French policy is not limited to providing passive access to media consumption, and to a much greater extent than in the United States, media production is also subsidized. Jack Lang, former minister of culture pleaded, "Don't we need public institutions to keep civilization alive? Art and culture can't be created like widgets. It takes time to create; it takes time for a new artist to reach his public. The disappearance of cultural forms is the great risk today. Diversity threatens to be replaced by an international mass culture without roots, soul, color or taste" (Pitta, 1997, p. 58).

Intellectual property

In the Anglo-American legal tradition, intellectual property is a right linked to an individual's labor, and like an individual's labor can be transferred in the marketplace for income. European tradition understands property rights to be fundamental and nontransferable, as a central way in which people develop and express their identities. For example, the French disallow the patenting of DNA discoveries, believing them to be the heritage of all humanity. As intellectual property becomes both more economically vital and more globally ephemeral, intellectual property right disputes will become increasingly contentious.

Privacy Rights

France, and the European Union as a whole, has strong privacy rights, databases are licensed, informed consent of particular uses. In America those who collect information own it, and are relatively unconstrained from using it as they see fit. For example, medical information does not belong to or is owned by patients, but by the doctors and insurance companies who process medical transactions.

Where Do We Go From Here?

French attempts to craft distinctive media policies are under heavy pressure, as the country adjusts to the rationalizing, globalizing economic forces of the information age. But the movement toward a digital global village is far from being straightforward, clean, and inevitable. Technological evolution does not follow a predestined track. The social possibilities we can imagine in the United States can be broadened and enriched by a deeper understanding of the French experience, perhaps correcting the myopia of an all-too-common ethnocentricity that typical of US media policy making.

Coca-Cola's initial efforts to buy Orangina were rebuffed by the French judicial system, the latest Coca-Cola proposal is still under review. Coca-Cola's latest experience in Europe provides a cautionary tale and an apt conclusion for this article.

Recently, 31 school children in northern Belgium developed nausea. An unlucky conjunction of many elements: a scandal hungry media, inexperienced European Union health regulators who were seeking to make a name for themselves, a consumer population still anxious in the wake of Mad cow disease, and a stack of wooden pallets used to ship Coke from the company's plant in Dunkirk, France--pallets that happened to be tainted by mold-killing fungicide, transformed the stomachaches of the Belgian schoolchildren (Ignatius, 1999, A19). They were no longer merely of local importance, their chills and shudders echoed, amplified into hysteria across Europe. Coca-Cola's missteps and awkward reactions to this over dramatized situation were done so badly that Coke's vaunted brand image was tarnished. Tarnished enough that Coke left a bad taste in the mouths of Wall Street investors as well, and Coke shares on the New York Stock Exchange lost substantial value. Even the most powerful global actors are subject to complicated local conditions, and our future seems certain to be messy, unpredictable, and conflict-prone.

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