

Flagging Interest - but the Crisis Continues

Media Image of the EU in the Run-Up to the German Presidency of the European Council

The European Union went through 2006 without any major agitation, but the tone of coverage remained as critical as in the previous years. Only the expectations from the German presidency in the first half of 2007 gave rise to some positive reporting – hopes that might be frustrated quite easily.

Media coverage of the European Union varied heavily in terms of volume: While most of the time European affairs play a minor role, some extraordinary events have provided outstanding coverage for the European Union. But only in very few instances did high awareness coincide with positive coverage. Thus from a long-time high, reached on the occasion of the European enlargement in May 2005, the rating of European institutions quickly turned negative again when the new Commission of José Manuel Barroso ran into strong opposition from the EU Parliament.

In contrast to previous years, 2006 was a year without major scandals or radical political measures on the pan-European level. The EU was sidelined in 2006 – even in European countries. The lack of positive messages cements the negative impression of Europeans about their Union. The latest Harris poll shows that the disillusionment with Europe reached new heights in 2007. 52% of the British feel that life in their country has gotten worse since their country joined the EU, as did 50% of French and 44% of Germans.

Europe is not on the screens

In prime-time TV worldwide the EU figured prominently in about only 1 in 100 reports in 2006 (graph

1) Reference to the European Union as protagonist



Source: Media Tenor, TV news 01-11/2006

Basis: 46.382/25.862/7.908/24.316 news stories in 16 TV news shows

1). As a location of events or as main protagonist in the focus of reporting, The European Union was of little interest. Also, the media often referred to the European Union only in passing. One main reason for this is the fact that domestic protagonists shape the national public agenda. Consequently, international events and EU affairs are “framed” in a national perspective. Only when national politicians address EU affairs or when EU actions have a direct impact on the domestic political debate, does the opportunity arise for EU coverage.

There is a clear divide between European and “Anglo-Saxon” news outlets. Despite its growing international importance, the European Union is virtually non-existent in American network TV news, with only 0.1% of more than 24,000 news stories focusing on the EU or its institutions as main protagonists. Although this figure has to be interpreted in the context of the rather patchy international coverage by U.S. network news, it gives an indication of the low importance given to European activities on the other side of the Atlantic.

British news do not show notably more interest in European affairs, thus preserving the hostility of the British public by withholding information. On the other hand, reporting about the EU was not really strong in Germany and Switzerland, with about 1 in 100 stories focusing on the EU as a main protagonist of a news story. Simple references to the EU as opposed to putting the main focus on it occurred more often, but varied widely between the different media outlets.

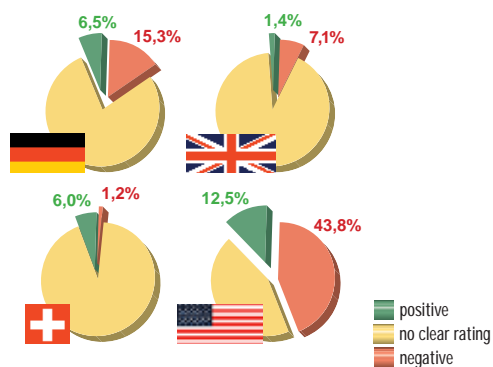
In German media the share of news stories describing at least one EU institution in the second half of 2006 ranged from 0.8% in **Super Illu** to 13.3% in

as protagonist



1,1 0,1 0,3 1,4 in %

2) Rating of the EU as main protagonist



Share of all reports

Source: TV news
01/2006 – 11/2006

Basis: 619/70/86/16 news stories
in 16 TV news shows

the **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung**. Discussion of EU affairs was notably lower in TV news, with private TV news mentioning EU institutions in about 1.6-2.9% and public TV news in 5-6.2%. The European Union thus emerges rather as an elite issue even in Germany.

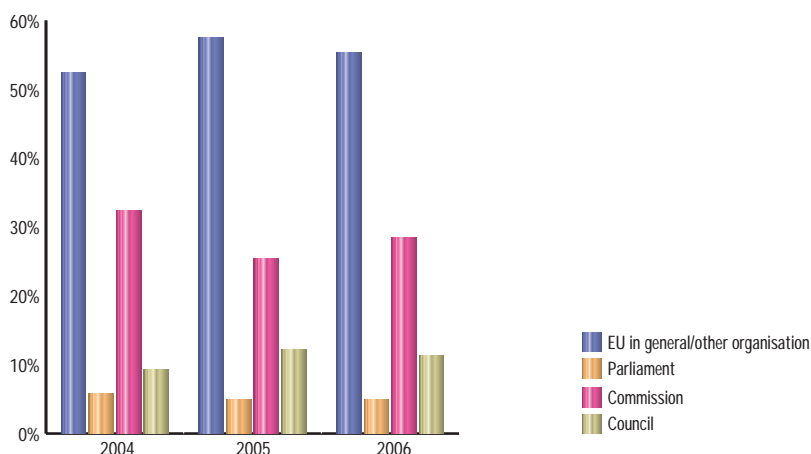
Negative messages dominate coverage

Nevertheless, these findings about the volume of reporting do not endorse the claim that more coverage leads to a more positive tone. Quite to the contrary: News selection is dominated by the news values negativism, conflict and status. Conflicts between EU institutions, fraud and publicity events like EU summits naturally get more awareness than everyday procedures in the EU political process.

This is reflected in the overall negative reporting in most of the media outlets analysed by MEDIA TENOR. While German TV reports much more intensively about the EU than TV news from the other countries observed, rating of the European Union and its institutions was even more negative (**graph 2**). With the exception of Swiss TV, negative reports outnumber positive stories by a ratio ranging from 2/1 in Germany to 5/1 in the UK. Whereas intensive media coverage offers a chance to communicate own positions and counteract negative stories originating from political antagonists, a low level of reporting leads to a much more polarised image.

These findings are backed up by **Media Tenor's** research on the characteristics of international news

3) Visibility of the European Commissioners



Share of all reports

Source: German TV and
print media, 01/2004 – 12/2006

Basis: 74.525 reports (at least 5 lines/seconds)
on the EU and its organisations

coverage. Generally speaking, violent conflicts, accidents, crime and natural disasters dominate the picture the media paint of the world beyond the national borders. This holds true for EU coverage as well.

Parliamentary communication gap

On a national level and in regard to the European Union, news reports focus on the executive – the national government or the European Commission. This “executive bias” of the media results from the priority access to government enjoyed by journalists. The news demand of journalists is met by the elements of symbolic politics, press conferences and informal contacts utilized by the European Commission.

The European Parliament has been much less successful in communicating its agenda. With its focus on the “makers and shakers”, the media play down the role of the Parliament and other institutions. Thus in German TV news over the last two years almost 30% of all reports about the EU or its institutions, that ran for at least five seconds, dealt with the European Commission, while only 5% of all reports addressed the European Parliament and 11% focused on the European Council (**graph 3**).

The fortunes of these three main protagonists in EU reporting have been mixed over the last years. All of them have experienced uninterrupted negative reporting since January 2004, with the exception of reports on the Parliament which turned positive in the fourth quarter of 2004. The rejection of Barroso's first Commission proposal was assessed as

a major success for the Europeans legislative body. But the ratings turned negative very soon, when the referenda in The Netherlands and France stopped the European Constitution in its tracks. While the Parliament and the Commission have not been affected as strongly by these events as the European Council, the referenda nevertheless signified the end of positive reporting, a situation that still exists today.

Domestic frames

The framing of European affairs in a national context was again in evidence in the second half of 2006, as the German Presidency of the European Council approached. The Council was the only European institution with a positive media image, and this mainly originated from the expectations and self-praise of leading German politicians.

The pan-European institutions on the other hand cannot profit from this national bias. Reporting about the European Parliament nevertheless remained overall negative in Germany throughout the years 2005 and 2006. The media generally deplore the limited powers of the Parliament, while at the same time very readily taking up criticism from domestic politicians. Reporting about the Parliament in German media over the last three years focused on economic affairs and the further development of the Union (graph 4). On all these issues the Parliament was evaluated rather critically and only in matters of employment policy could Parliament at least score with the media. International affairs were rather low on

the Parliament’s agenda, with journalists perceiving them to be more the domain of the European Council and the Commission.

Little support for the Commission

The evaluation of the European Commission for some time provided a mirror image of the view of the Parliament. While the evaluation of the European Commission suffered notably in 2004, criticism remained rather moderate throughout 2006 but went up again in the last quarter of 2006. Reporting lately focused very much on individual commissioners. Here again a national point of view evolved as a significant news value, like when German media got agitated about some scandal photographs of Industrial Commissioner Guenter Verheugen, who hails from Germany.

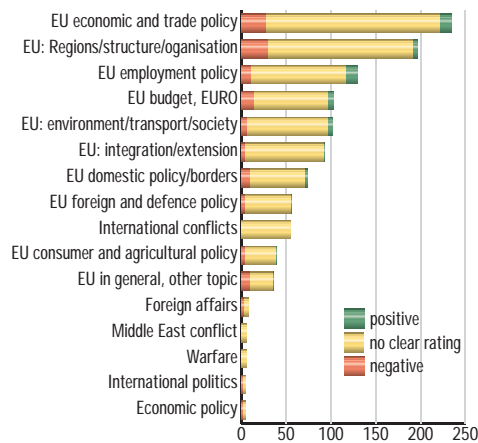
But contrary to the news structures on a national level, the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso received less media coverage than the “foreign secretary” of the European Commission, Xavier Solana. Reports about these two representatives accounted for almost 1/3 of the coverage of the European Commission – including Solana as Secretary General.

Of the other commissioners, only nine achieved more than 100 reports in 15 German opinion-leading TV and print media (graph 5). On the basis of this coverage the activities of most of the European Commissioners could not be noticed by the public in Germany. But even worse, out of the 26 persons



Javier Solana, most visible European Commissioner

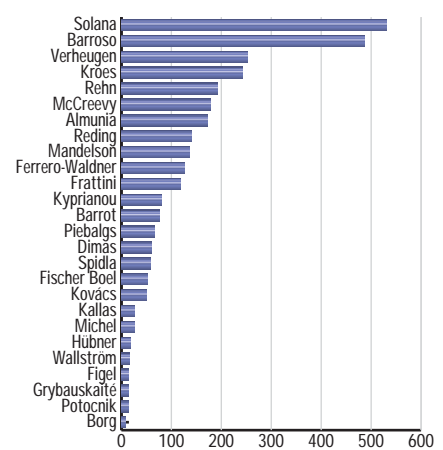
4) Rating of the European Parliament



Number of reports focusing on the respective issues

Source: German TV and print media, 01/2004 – 12/2006 Basis: 1.186 reports (at least 5 lines/seconds) about the European Parliament

5) Visibility of the European Commissioners



Number of reports about European Commissioners

Source: German TV and print media, 01/2004 – 12/2006 Basis: 3.162 reports (at least 5 lines/seconds) about European Commissioners

whose media image has been analysed, only four experienced favourable media reports, while 16 have been criticized more or less severely (**graph 6**).

Barroso without luck

The media image of the President of the European Commission was especially affected by a poor start. The rejection of his first tableau of Commissioners by the European Parliament developed into a key event, shaping the subsequent perception of his activities by the media. In the last two years, José Manuel Barroso has been framed by the media as a weak Commission President who is unable to implement his ambitious plans.

Media reporting has accordingly been most critical with regard to the main aspects of his media presence: The structure and organisation of the Union. On the other hand, reporting about José Manuel Barroso was most positive with respect of economic and trade issues, although in this field too he had to cope with significant negative reporting over the last three years.

Javier Solana, on the other hand fared much better, although the impact of the European Union's foreign policy initiatives was rather limited. Generally speaking, ministers in charge of foreign affairs profit from news routines, despite the gruesome nature of international news. Habitual reporting about state visits and international conferences provides ongoing coverage, propelling the foreign secretary beyond the awareness threshold. As a spokesman for the Euro-

pean Union, a significant share of his coverage was formed by his own quotes, while at the same time criticism from national politicians was muted.

Moving backwards

The standstill of European integration, which had hitherto been defined as the main goal of European politics, is well reflected in the media reporting of recent years. The ongoing unenthusiastic reporting about European affairs has further eroded the support of the Union in the European public. Routine politics and reporting have affected the overall perception of European politics. Most of the public views European integration no longer as an opportunity to overcome the limits of national politics, but simply as an outgrowth of the deficiencies of national politics in the European sphere.

Thus in January 2007, 40% of Germans thought their country had reaped more disadvantages than benefits from its 50 years of membership of the EC and EU. A slight minority of 48% saw an excess of benefits. Even more marked were the opinions on the EURO, with a solid majority of 62% proclaiming the common currency as harmful overall, up from 45% in 2001. These results suggest that the drivers of European politics would rather start again from scratch than continue with the current political line or even try to revive the European Constitution. (ck)

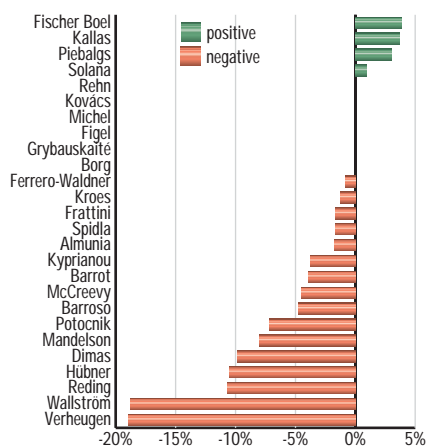
Research Link:

<http://www.infratest-dimap.de/download/dt0701.pdf>

<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/index.asp>

http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/datatables/FinancialTimes_03142007.pdf

6) Rating of European Commissioners



Share of positive - share of negative reports

Source: German TV and print media, 01/2004 – 12/2006

Basis: 3.162 reports (at least 5 lines/seconds) about European Commissioners

Basis:

International Comparison

Germany: ARD Tagesschau und Tagesthemen, ZDF Heute und Heute Journal, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 News, ProSieben Newstime

UK: BBC 1 News (18:00), BBC 1 Ten o'clock News, ITV Evening News, ITV News at 10:30, BBC 2 Newsnight **CH:** SF DRS Tagesschau **USA:** ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox evening news

Period of analysis: 01/01 – 30/11/2006

German Long-Time Comparison

Dailies: Bild-Zeitung, Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung **TV:** ARD Tagesschau und Tagesthemen, ZDF Heute und Heute Journal, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 News, ProSieben Newstime **Weeklies:** Focus, Spiegel

Period of analysis: 01/01/2004 – 12/10/2006

