

Democracy in Closed Session

The role of Parliaments in Foreign and Domestic Coverage

Research Links

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/6744581.stm



Tony Blair

Public discontent with democracy has many causes. If the activity of the executive branch, party struggles, coalition strategies and horse trading dominate political coverage, then trust in parliamentary systems will diminish. Even in national news, parliaments are eclipsed by the governments and their supporting parties; but in foreign news, the picture is even more damaging. An international comparison shows that in no country has TV news dedicated more than 4% of their reports about political protagonists to parliaments (chart 1).

Not only media experts, but even protagonists themselves have discerned a growing damage to political systems in the Western world by the news media. The latest well-known critic of the role of the media was Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, who in his Reuter address on June 12, 2007 compared the news media to a "feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits". Moreover, the once famous master of spin voiced more profound insights: "The audience needs to be arrested, held and their emotions engaged. Something that is interesting is less powerful than something that makes you angry or shocked." The accelerating trend to personalize political and business reporting has placed issues on the back burner. Parliaments lose in the competition for awareness to governments and

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party leaders, as journalists prefer sound bites from "movers and shakers" to in-depth reporting about the work of parliaments.

Fixation with governments and subordinates

A comparison of domestic coverage in German, British, US TV news and the main news on Arab satellite TV, shows the grade of fixation with governments and their subordinated branches, like the military and the police (chart 2). The share of government-focused reporting varies from 15.8% in Germany to 34.7% in the US.

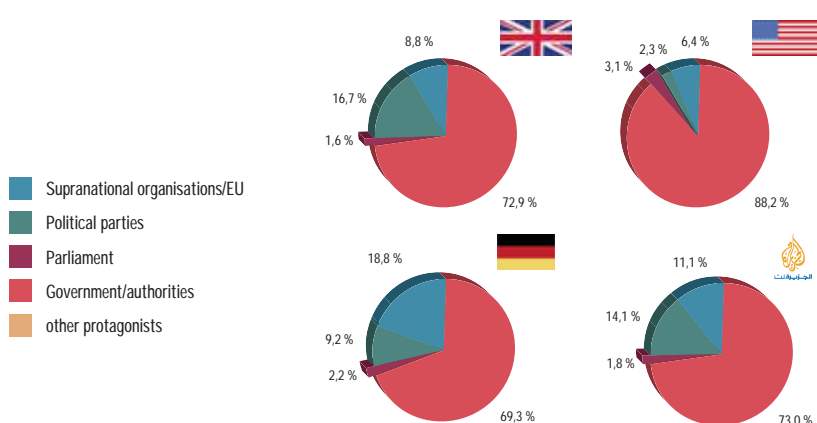
The Arab TV channels that display a more trans-national world view, dedicating less coverage to the domestic affairs of their home countries Qatar, Iran or Lebanon, nevertheless are similarly focused on the respective governments as the US network news.

Among the different countries, only the US Congress managed to grab a notable share of reporting – partly because of the mid-term elections, but also because of the antagonistic relationship between Congress and the President. This increased controversy, which is also well observed by foreign TV news in other countries, adds in a significant way to the newsworthiness of US Parliament activities.

Power struggle between parties dominates

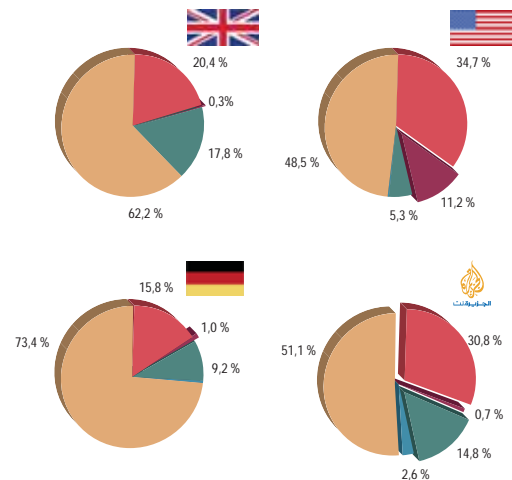
Without this benefit of controversy, the German

1) Political Protagonists in Foreign News



Share of all stories focusing on political protagonists
Basis: 9,720 / 9,614 / 21,670 / 33,270 news stories
in foreign TV coverage in the respective countries
Time period: 03/2006-02/2007

2) Overall Protagonist Structure in Domestic News



Share of all stories
Basis: 16,613 / 16,990 / 28,714 / 9,728 news stories
in domestic TV coverage in the respective countries
Time period: 03/2006-02/2007

and British Parliaments, on the other hand, are overshadowed not only by their national governments but also by political parties. Statements from party leaders and the exponents of party wings are much more likely to appear in the news than reports from plenary sessions and the activities of parliamentary committees. The political process is therefore framed as dominated by the power struggle between the political parties – either between the governing coalition and the opposition parties, or between the partners of the governing coalition. Social or economic problems and the concrete steps leading to their solution, play a much smaller role for the media. Reporting routines lead to the production of news that focus on party politicians offering critical remarks on the statements of their opposing numbers.

Amplifier foreign coverage

What holds true for domestic reporting is even more marked in international coverage. While foreign news generally focuses on the hot spots of the world, highlighting war and civil strife, the overall tone of reporting is even more negative than domestic news. In this environment, few parliaments receive awareness outside their national borders. In the year between March 2006 and February 2007, the US Congress and the Iraqi Parliament attracted the majority of reports in international TV news. While

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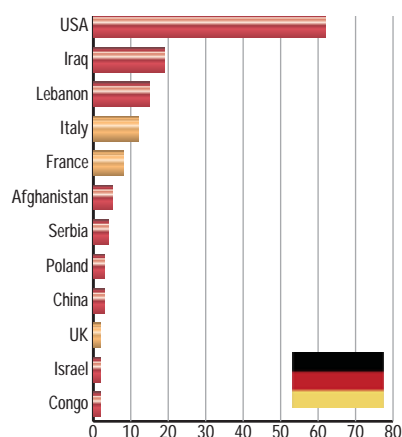
US network news concentrated their reporting on the role of the Iraqi Parliament in the fight against the insurgents, British and German news highlighted the growing opposition towards President George W. Bush in the run-up to, and after, the mid-term elections in the US.

While Arab TV addressed a larger number of foreign parliaments, mostly on account of its transnational nature, among “Western” programmes only German TV reported more intensively about parliamentary activities in a larger number of countries. Nevertheless, news selection in this field is obviously driven by a focus on the extraordinary: The Chinese National People’s Congress that convenes normally once a year generated even more reports in German TV news than the British Parliament (**chart 3**).

Parliamentary activity is not portrayed as a success story: the share of negative news remains below the level in foreign coverage. Most of the news focused on parliaments’ dealings with policy issues or related to the relationship between parliaments and governments. The growing power of the US Congress after the mid-term elections was accordingly billed as a success in German and British news. When TV news addressed the efficiency of parliamentary work, negative reports prevailed. Even when parliaments are portrayed in a positive way, it normally refers to the power-struggle frame of reporting, while parliamen-

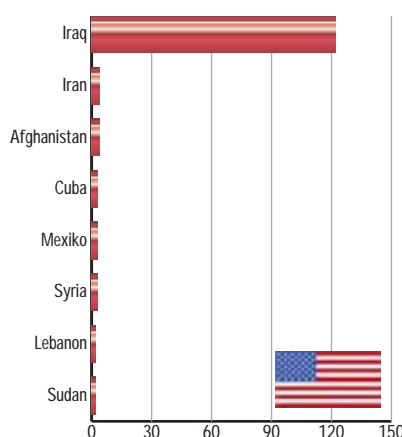


3) German Foreign News Visibility of Parliaments



Number of stories
Basis: 152 news stories in German foreign TV coverage
Time period: 03/2006 - 02/2007

4) UK Foreign News Visibility of Parliaments



Number of stories
Basis: 159 news stories in UK foreign TV coverage
Time period: 03/2006 - 02/2007



tary process is primarily characterized as inefficient and not leading to real solutions.

Personality focus undermines public trust

The focus on personality therefore undermines public trust in politics in several ways. While the parliamentary process is marginalized, the small number of political “heroes” is forced to act under the permanent threat of losing support from the media. Their policies accordingly put more stress on show than on substance. The disappearance of parliaments from the news, both domestically and in international reports, therefore evolves as a main driver of

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the growing discontent with politics, which is evident from the phenomenon of the “vanishing voter”.

The vanishing of parliamentary democracy is thus caused by the interaction of the political system with the media. While parliamentarians are elected with a view on their party affiliation and not on account of their personality, on a national level the dominance of the party frame emerges as the main cause for this development.

On an international level, the picture is slightly different. Especially on the level of the European Union, co-operation between national parliaments has taken place in such an esoteric environment, that most journalists did not even notice it at all.

At the recent I.P.A.COO Conference of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik on 50 years of inter-parliamentary cooperation, where MEDIA TENOR presented the results of this study, a whole range of parliamentary activities were discussed in depth, which hitherto have escaped public attention. As long as parliamentarians remain happy to cooperate in a closed session, the media trend towards the marginalisation of parliaments will continue. (ck)

Basis

Media Set: Germany: ARD Tagesschau / Tagesthemen, ZDF Heute / 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 (22:30), BBC 2 Newsnight; **USA:** ABC, CBS and NBC news, Fox Special Report with Brit Hume **Arab Satellite TV:** Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Al-Manar news

Period of analysis: 03/2006-02/2007

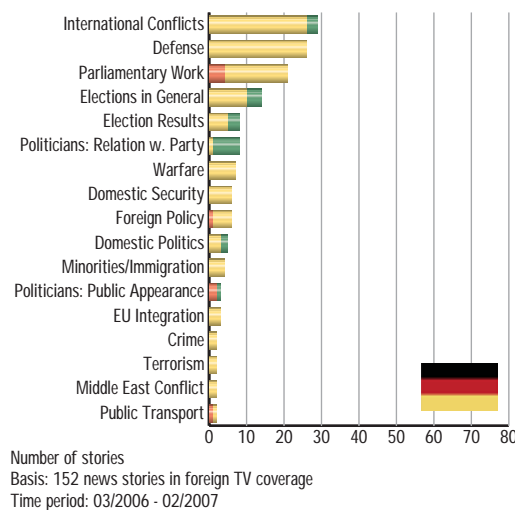
Analysis: Evaluation of news content on story level, analysis of tone refers to the main protagonist

Open Questions

How can parliamentary procedures be arranged in a more media-friendly way?

Can top politicians turn their back on the media?

5) German Foreign News Issues-related rating of Parliaments



6) Arab Foreign News Issues-related rating of Parliaments

