

Growing deficits in political coverage at ARD and ZDF

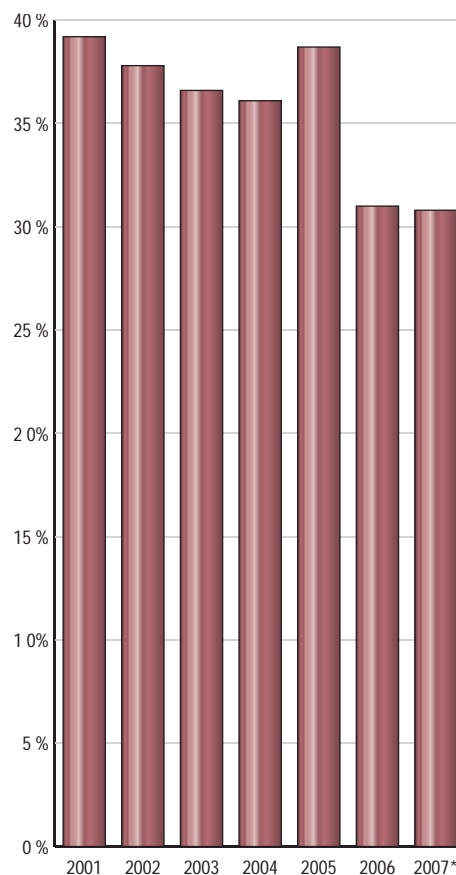
How the political coverage of the German national media changes the understanding of democracy

What do the people think when they hear the word “democracy” or even use it themselves? The answer depends on the region in which the question is asked. In Dubai people tend to associate something different with it than in Johannesburg, Berlin, New York, Moscow or Singapore. Depending on the level of education, each individual will relate his or her own everyday life to different “ideal forms” of democracy, whether from antiquity, England or Iceland. However, everywhere in the world, people share the skepticism about whether the events in the run-up to, as well as during the past two US presidential elections have contributed to the role model of the separation of powers and the involvement of the greatest number of people in the fate of their own society. Instead, people talk of media democracy, check-

book democracy, xy democracy: all are variations on trying to find an answer for the question why, of all countries, those with a decade- or century-long tradition of elections, now produce the greatest numbers of nonvoters. On the other side it is baffling to see the positive basic attitude that Arab TV stations, in particular, have demonstrated towards the first free elections in Iraq three years ago. They thus created a stimulus in those regions, where the separation of power and democratic participation is not yet so pronounced.

Thomas E. Patterson, in his extensive study “The Vanishing Voter” for the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University, put it this way: “No stone should be left unturned in the effort to bring Americans back to the polls. For if they cannot be encouraged to participate more fully, the nation will face the far greater challenge of how to maintain self-government when citizens don’t vote”. In the past 15 years, the downward trend in voter turnouts could neither be stopped in the US, nor in England or Germany. Quite to the contrary. Not only do voters increasingly refuse to fulfil their intended role, but the reputation of politics in general and politicians in particular could hardly be worse.

1) Share of news stories with politicians as main protagonists in ARD and ZDF



Share in all news stories
Basis: 179,780 news stories in ARD and ZDF newscasts
Time period: 1.1.2001 - 10.6.2007



Advantage for the individual not an issue

What could be the reasons for this retreat from democratic participation? If you wanted to measure the success of a society by the economic success of each individual, approval ratings would have to be much higher, especially in the established democracies. Never before was general prosperity greater and, through taxes, education etc., more widely distributed than in the 21st century. The same is true for the opportunities of all members of society not to be determined by their background for all their lives. Borders were never as easy to cross as in 2007, both between classes and countries.

All forms of government have in common that their success or failure can be measured by the extent to which citizens feel represented by those to whom they delegated power, consciously or unconsciously. When the 'connection' between those who govern and who are governed is fragile, revolution used to be a common answer; today there is at least the threat of self-imposed exile from society. The first graph shows that in Germany, **ARD** and **ZDF** have reduced the share of all information on politics by 20%. Less than a third of all statements in news programs like **Tagesthemen** or **Heute Journal** deal with those who administrate the official functions delegated to them by the voters.

Media shape the image of the representatives

The media usually stand between citizens and their representatives. They communicate to the voters what is happening or not happening in Bitburg, Berlin and Brussels. Their reports and images decide what each individual in the North, South, West and East does or does not learn about the parliament, ministries, panels, and committees. The essence of representative democracy seems to be the "communicated democracy". If this diagnosis is correct, one has to analyze the communication of politics in the Federal Republic of Germany in more detail first, before even starting to discuss disenchantment with politics or even democracy fatigue.

Since **MEDIA TENOR**'s foundation in 1994, we have discussed this issue many times. The bottom line is that, in a representative democracy, society has to supply the sovereign with the necessary information in a timely fashion, so that voters can pass on their mandates to representatives in regular elections. Otherwise one should either delete the term "popular sovereignty" altogether, or ask the supposedly sovereign people in a public discourse for a decision: Would they want to formally agree to changing the

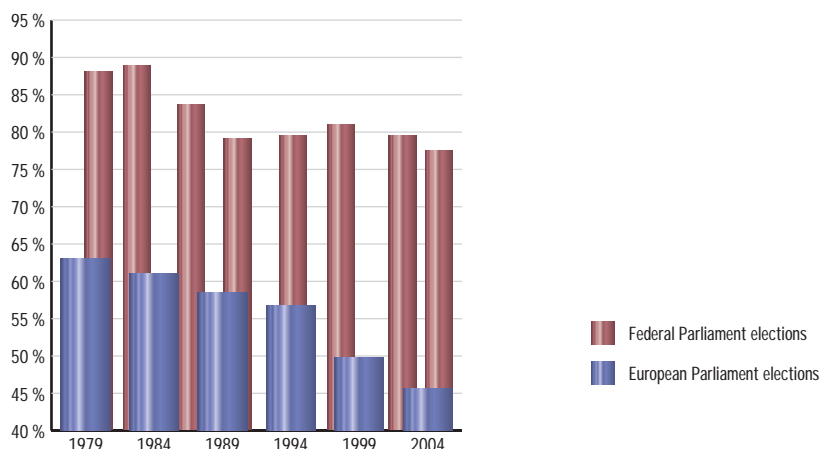
name of their government from representative democracy to oligarchy? After all, this is what has happened in reality.

Schmidt and Barzel united in TV criticism

Yet despite all tangible evidence and studies, the responsible TV executives resist these arguments as if they had nothing to do with the disenchantment with politics: Only few days before Gerhard Schröder's attempt to manipulate the media one more time to suit his goals – the SPD had suffered a great defeat in North Rhine-Westphalia and he started a, constitutionally questionable, sham motion of no-confidence – a joint opinion piece was published in the **FAZ** by two politicians, who had not been the closest of friends during their time in office: In May 2005, Rainer Barzel and Helmut Schmidt considered the situation in Germany to be so critical that they wrote an appeal against the media-induced demise of parliamentary democracy. In the same publication, the former chief editor of the ZDF, Reinhard Appel, brushed off the warnings as a cheap PR stunt: Both Barzel and Schmidt, he wrote in a letter to the editor, had used television for their purposes during their time in office.

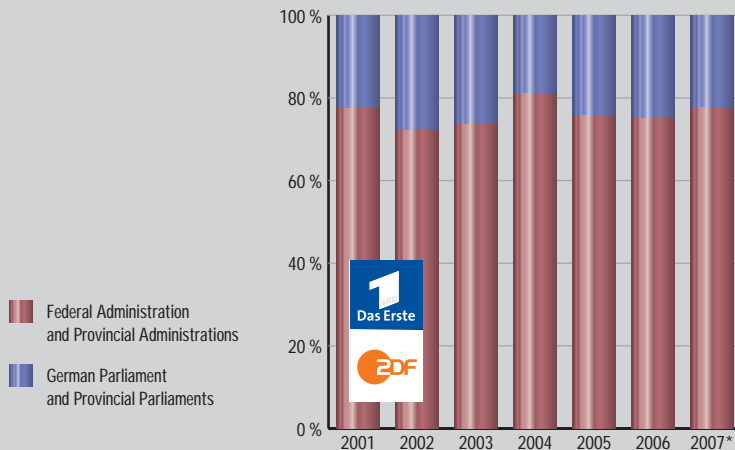
Readers were surprised: Do the German TV stations really want to go on like this forever? Has none of their executives ever seen Titanic, in which the music entertained the guests acceptably until the end? Apart from the CDU, all parties would now wish they had the share of voters that the 'party' of

2) Voter turnouts



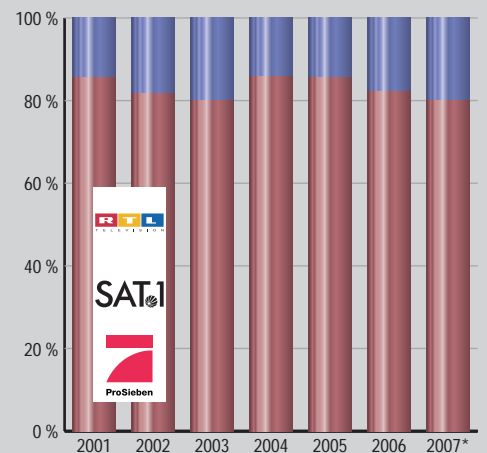
Source German parliamentary elections: www.bpb.de/wissen
Source European elections: www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2004

3) Governments and parliaments as main protagonists in ARD and ZDF



Share in all news stories on these protagonists
Basis: 17,000 news stories in German TV news
Time period: 1.1.2001 - 10.6.2007

4) Governments and parliaments as main protagonists in RTL, SAT1 and ProSieben



Share in all news stories on these protagonists
Basis: 17,000 news stories in German TV news
Time period: 1.1.2001 - 10.6.2007

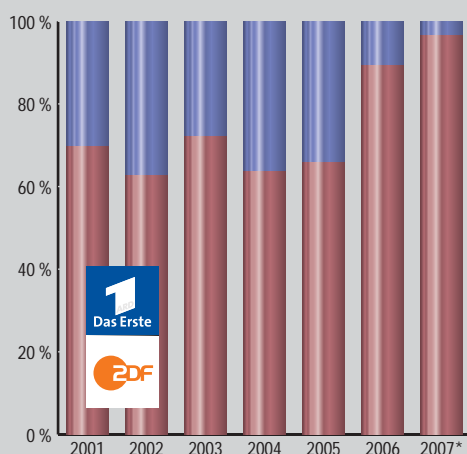
nonvoters achieves election after election. Since abstention rates are similarly high in other countries, channels like the **BBC**, **SABC** or Czech public TV regularly undergo a self-critical status quo analysis. Only at **ARD** and **ZDF** executives are of the opinion that others are responsible for the disenchantment with politics. Their political coverage, they claim, is the best one can think of.

The state is more than show

What happened to the analyses that were printed when Barzel and Schmidt were active politicians? On May 9th, 1977, the **FAZ** published a text titled “The State as a Show” by Dieter Wenz, which addressed the phenomenon of the “spectacle state”: “Politics is currently made according to the method

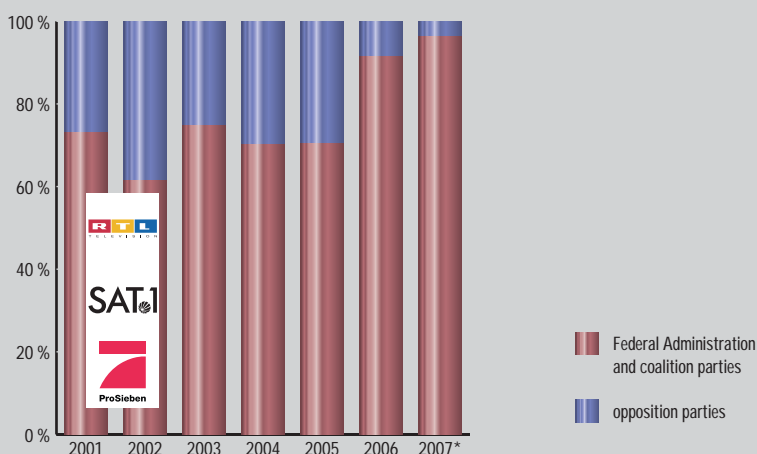


5) Government and opposition as main protagonists in ARD and ZDF



Share in all news stories on these protagonists
Basis: 27,602 news stories in German TV news
Time period: 1.1.2001 - 10.6.2007

6) Government and opposition as main protagonists in RTL, SAT1 and ProSieben



Share in all news stories on these protagonists
Basis: 27,602 news stories in German TV news
Time period: 1.1.2001 - 10.6.2007

of market analysis – concise meaning short text, lots of color meaning lots of images. The collage.” The reaction among those concerned in the TV world, which was not yet threatened by private TV? Nothing, nada, zippo, bupkis.

Eleven years later, in the weekly **ZEIT** from March 11, 1988, Cordt Schnibben dared to utterly pan the news that **ARD Tagesschau** and **Tagesthem** had on offer. Under the headline “Then from Frankfurt, the Weather Chart”, he regarded TV journalism as being in a process of creeping disintegration: “Civil servants of news are at work here, and that has its advantages: They are experienced, punctual, precise and work to rule. Even on the day of the apocalypse the news machine of the **Tagesschau** would operate smoothly.” Reaction on the sides of the **ARD**?

Four months before, in the **ZEIT** from December 11th, 1987, Nina Grunenberg had undisputedly described the close proximity between political journalists and government: “Whenever a government lost the following of the press, whenever the journalists’ interest weakened, its downfall was not a long time coming, any more. The CDU learned that in 1966 at the transition from the government Erhard to the “Grande Coalition”, then again in 1969 – and the SPD has known this, too, since the media broke their friendship at the end of government Schmidt.”

There was yet another article published in the **ZEIT**, from the same year and from an author, who cannot be suspected to endanger or even belittle the

journalistic cause: Journalism professor Siegfried Weischenberg wrote on March 27th, 1988, under the headline “Servants of the System” on the dangers for democracy when journalists did not perform their task, any more, to educate the sovereign on the status quo of the res publica. “In a world of information floods, a communication world of open and secret seducers, people look more than ever for guidance. More than anything they miss credible information. Excessive professional demands on the journalists makes them just as suspicious as the far too obvious complicity of the controllers with the powerful.”

Neil Postman has arrived in Europe

Such observations had long been made on the other side of the Atlantic. Neil Postman has summarized them most strikingly in his book “Amusing Ourselves to Death”. Yet sustained reactions in the US? Nothing, nada, zippo, bupkis. Maybe the reason for this was that people continued to pick out individual examples from media coverage, which the responsible TV executives could then skillfully confront with counter-examples. They were not aware of the fact that the weakening protest had nothing to do with a weakening of the argument, but rather with a calculated power game. After all, those who stand up against television receive the maximum penalty: banishment from the screen. Since this is equivalent to political death, no one should be surprised about the fact that none of the top-class members in the

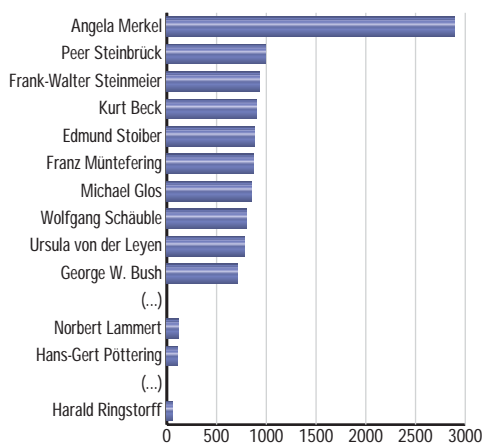
governing body of the public German TV stations is demanding a real change of course.

In order to provide new impetus for the debate and lift it out of the dilemma of individual examples, this article uses five indicators to illustrate why the provision of news is not arbitrary. On the contrary, it offers explanations for why more and more people turn away from this kind of political coverage, and finally turn their back on their own democracy. The examples from Germany – two TV stations that are primarily funded through a broadcasting fee – have been chosen on purpose, in order to show that the quality of political coverage is obviously not a question of budgeting.

1st example: Democracy thrives on diversity

Karl Popper praised democracy, because it only bestows power temporarily. Nothing has changed about the rules of the game, of course. Yet a look at media coverage on those running for office since 2001 illustrates that media presence alone can determine the chances of incumbents to stay in office, as long as there is significantly less information on the alternatives. “The Tyranny of the Status Quo” was a headline in the **FAZ** at the beginning of the eighties, which, taking the example of Eurosclerosis, discussed the inflexibility of economic policies. After 15 years of continuous media content analysis, this observation can be extended to the question of whether or not the persons and parties on the ballot receive a fair chance to be seen and heard. At **ARD** and **ZDF**, the parliament continues to play only a marginal

7) Focus on individuals



Number of passages
Basis: 97,963 passages (at least 5 seconds) on politicians
in German TV news / time period: 01 - 05/2007

role, and opposition parties are practically banished from the TV news screen, in particular in times of the Grande Coalition: Diversity is not on demand at **ARD** and **ZDF**. The fact that private TV stations are no viable alternative does not make it any better for the voter (see **charts 2** and **3**). In this constellation, Angela Merkel does not need to worry about being voted out of office, since journalists do not even provide her competitors with the foundation for successfully winning over public opinion: visibility.

This news bias towards the incumbents is indefensible for a variety of reasons: For once, it acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Neither the German nor the failed European constitution prescribe the two party system. As long as the parliament and opposition parties are cut from the media agenda, it logically follows from media effect theory that the Greens and Liberals have very low chances to take the necessary step beyond the awareness threshold.

Journalists have more power than the constitution originally granted them. Yet their coverage has little resemblance with reporting on the development of society or even the process of the democratic building of political consensus. Quite the contrary: Without having a constitutionally legitimized mandate, journalists take over the role of the director in the staging of democracy: they decide who may perform – and who may not...

2nd example: Democracy thrives on discourse

Aside from the practical aspects of politics, such as functioning schools, hospitals, armies, etc., de-



Hans-Gert Pötering

mocracy needs the tangible idea of representation. In contrast to a common claim by the media, party platforms are indeed as different from one another as society is pluralistic.

This requires, however, that the different positions are fairly and impartially portrayed from a neutral perspective, so that those who are in the minority through a legislative period can at least get a sense of being listened to. Instead, the portrayal of politics has been more and more reduced to the portrayal of arguments for the sake of arguments, rather than a fact-oriented presentation of different positions – which are entirely natural in the quest for the best result.

In fact, political coverage in topical journalism has an extreme overhang of negative assessments: When candidate A suggests something, editors think of themselves as particularly smart when they go to candidates B and C, in order to question them about candidate A. If B and C said something about the issue at hand, they would run the risk of not being quoted. Thus they use a strongly disqualifying statement on competitor A and get into the news with exactly that quote. The fact that they have different positions on the issue has few chances to get on air, since it is allegedly too complex for the voter. Should they even agree with A, they have even fewer chances, because there is no argument. The perception of the democratic building of political consensus thus equals that of the children's quarrels in the kindergarten, when they fight about candy. To watch their children do this already is no fun for their parents. Yet how much more repulsive must it be for the audiences of TV

news, when they see their own representatives exhibit a debating style that is on the level of bed-wetters.

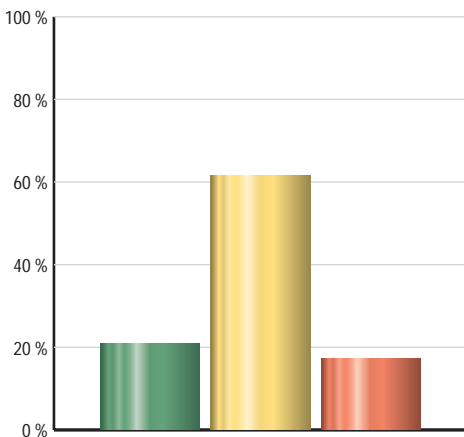
All those who defend this kind of political coverage must accept the question from their colleagues at the business desks, what the added informational value of statements by the immediate competitor is. After all, no correspondent in Detroit would, after Ford has launched a new product, immediately run to Chrysler or General Motors, in order to ask the sales manager for a quote on Ford's product innovation. In business, the journalist rather interviews analysts, market researchers or consumers, in order to get quotes. Correspondingly, coverage on companies is more neutral compared to that of parties: on balance, the overhang of positive news is 10% - in contrast to the 20 to 30% negative balance of political coverage (charts 8 and 9).

Example 3: Democracy thrives on content

One aspect of democracy has not changed since the Greeks: Popular sovereignty must prove itself over monarchy or oligarchy by considering the needs of all members of society. Whether in the area of education, taxes, the environment, youth, pensions, security – things have become increasingly complex over the centuries and with the growing importance of the individual.

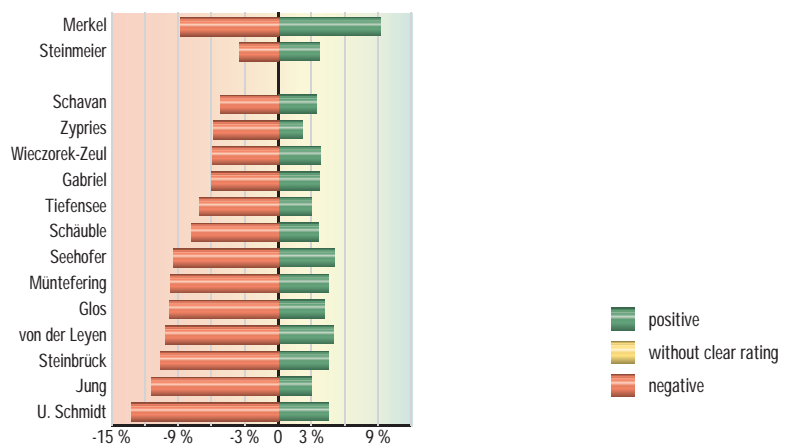
Correspondingly, the media as a mirror of the process should reflect this pluralism in such a way that anyone can understand it. The yellow press within its genre, and the specialized media for experts; the sovereign then enjoys the freedom at the newsstand to

8) Assessment of companies, industries and managers



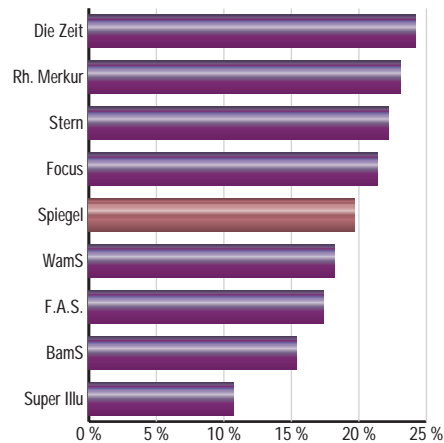
Share in all news stories on these protagonists
Basis: 135,768 news stories on companies, industries and managers
Time period: 01 - 05/2007

9) Assessment of the Chancellor and cabinet members



Share in all statements
Basis: 240,767 statements in 31 media outlets
Time period: 12/2005 - 12/2006

10) Ranking of factual policy statements in political coverage 2006



Share in all statements
Basis: A total of 867,162 statements on political protagonists on a federal, regional and local level; time period: 1.1. - 31.12.2006

pick the type that suits him best. **Chart 10**, however, documents the exact opposite for the portrayal of factual politics in the German weeklies. Of all years, the media that are supposed to specialize in background information provided particularly little of it in a year without federal elections. The share of factual information on politicians was less than 25%, and, for lack of the appropriate amount, those interested could not form an opinion about their representatives' positions on schools, hospitals or security forces. Instead, the responsible editors at Spiegel, FAS or Super Illu decided that, in the context of the preparations for the EU Presidency, finalization of health reform etc., the German people were more interested in opinion polling results than in positions on the issue. Yet 15 years of continuous media analysis has shown that, in the end, these polls do nothing but reflect what has been covered by the media, anyway. We therefore encounter the method of the self-fulfilling prophecy for the second time around: people receive very little factual information about the persons running for the most significant office in their society, and are then asked whether or not they regard party platforms and factual issues as important. And in the rare occasions that factual positions are part of the discussion, they are, more often than not, associated with the unproven assertion: "Party platforms are all the same, anyway."

Example 4: Democracy thrives on control

Popper was content with the idea that those who abuse the power lent to them temporarily can be de-



prived of it every four years. Still, the founding fathers have actually had a more ambitious goal with the separation of powers: the executive should not only be controlled every four or five years, but permanently give an account of its performance (or lack of it) in front of the parliament.

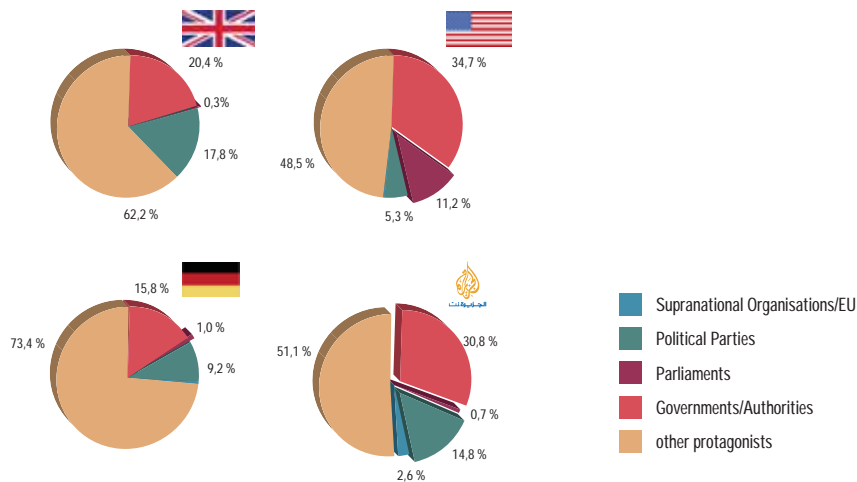
Looking at the charts on the previous pages, depicting the portrayal of the parliament and its president, it becomes obvious that the media are not interested in this idea, any more. That seems to be the only explanation for the fact that, in Germany, the ratio of coverage on the government versus parliament is nine to one. 90% of information on what the government plans and does (or does not) is accompanied with 10% of coverage on the work of the parliament.

Taking a closer look at the charts one can even see that these 10% do not apply in the sense of control, because the lion share of parliamentary coverage is taken up by speeches of government members. Moreover, TV journalists, in particular, reduce the home of democracy to a country fair, where the loudest screamers always get the best quotes.

Here, the supposed news principle of the 2nd example also applies: not the most competent speaker is awarded with an excerpt of his speech broadcast in the prime time newscast, thereby becoming visible to his audience, but the one with the lowest inhibitions to defame the political opponent.

The element that brings democracy to life – diversity – remains invisible, and simple-mindedness is cemented. Television is purportedly dependent on

11) Protagonists in domestic news 03/2006-02/2007



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

well-known faces, therefore it always features the same politicians, who then become likely to accumulate the most appointments. In the so-called media democracy, those same politicians are most likely to be covered at all – and again we have come full circle and returned to the dangerous concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

5th example: Democracy thrives on competition

To have the choice means having alternatives. The founding fathers in the United States, England or Germany were certainly thinking primarily of local rulers as opposed to competing political concepts, when they came up with their different federalist models of government, yet, in retrospect, many a president will be thankful for having been able to position himself with measures he implemented in his home state or Land. Politics on the local and regional level acts as a model, in order to then receive the mandate by the electorate to introduce the same policies for the whole country. However, the share of political information on the German Länder has been decreasing for years now. The MEDIA TENOR long-term analysis has shown, taking the example of Germany, how politics is more and more being portrayed from the perspective of the capitol.

In public conscience, power relations are therefore slowly but surely shifted towards Berlin; people are less aware of regional and local politics and have no opportunities to experience different concepts. Since this level of policy-making has increasingly been

shaken off the agenda, the media now portray politics as a competition between potency and impotence – after all, no one in the opposition gets a chance to prove that his suggestions could work.

When at a university, hospital or company a central part breaks off, the alarms go off. Weaknesses in the infrastructure are unsustainable in the long run. Accordingly, there are numerous cracks in the house of our democracy, and the sovereign has reacted with voting abstention. The party of non-voters has now grown to be the strongest one in all the Western democracies – naturally without raising much awareness within the media. The Achilles' heel of an open society is passivity, the ill-conceived tolerance towards a creeping demise of political culture. In contrast to television content, democracy relies on the contribution of all involved. rs