

Transatlantic trenches

Coverage of George W. Bush in Germany

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A critical stance towards the US dominates German public opinion. International opinion polls show that negative attitudes and mistrust prevail. An analysis of the German media coverage on the US offers some explanations: As long as German journalists continue to reduce their news selection of events in the United States to examples in which the actions of the US government are difficult to comprehend, the polling results are not surprising. The question remains: Can one limit the US to what is shown on German TV?

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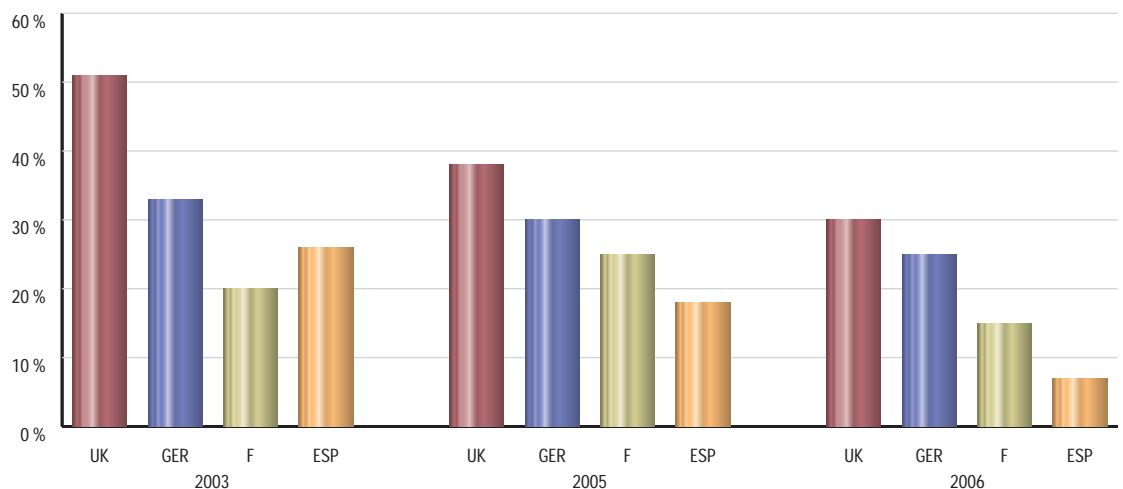
Trust in the US President has dropped significantly in the past few years. The Pew Research Center notes that in 2005, only 30% of Germans interviewed placed their confidence in the US President. In 2006, this number fell further to 25% (**chart 1**). From the perspective of media research, the question poses itself of whether or not this negative public opinion can be explained by the agenda setting function of the mass media.

Growing media consumption

In today's society there is no lack of media content. However, it is crucial to have access to the right information at the right time. Studies on images and the functioning of the mass media in Germany (Ridder/Engel, 2005) have identified an average media consumption of exactly ten hours per day in 2005. Compared with 2000, this means an increase of more than 90 minutes. People thus devote most of their lifetime – aside from sleeping and working – to media consumption. In the past 30 years alone, this number has more than doubled; the transformation process in society towards the “information and media society” has therefore taken place long ago.

This shows how important it is to analyze the media's contribution to political communication. After all, 65% of interviewees said in 2005 that politics

1) Trust in the international leadership qualities of George W. Bush



Source: The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 06/13/2007, „Now I am going to read a list of political leaders. For each, tell me how much confidence you have in each leader to do the right thing regarding world affairs – a lot of confidence, some confidence, not too much confidence, or no confidence at all.“ (* 2001 without data for Spain)

was too complicated to understand; 73% pointed to the role of the media to make it easier to comprehend (Ridder/Engel, 2005).

Latent negativism?

Looking through this media “window”, what do we learn about American politics in German news? MEDIA TENOR follows the coverage on the United States in German opinion-leading media. All statements on US protagonists are recorded sentence by sentence and analyzed with respect to the topics addressed as well as the tonality of coverage.

Chart 3 illustrates the total assessment of coverage on George W. Bush and the US Administration as a whole in the nightly news programs **ARD Tagesthemen** and **ZDF heute journal**.

Since his second term began in January 2005, basic negativism shaped the image of the US in the two German news programs (**chart 2**): In the 4th quarter 2005, each positive or neutral statement on Bush was juxtaposed with four negative ones. The same pattern could also be observed towards the end of 2006. The fundamental view of the US President through our “window to the world” is thus shaped by negative headlines. The media image of his Administration, too, is covered in a predominantly negative way.

Middle East remains image factor number one

“Basic negativism shaped the image of the US in the two German news programs of ARD and ZDF.”

These developments in coverage on the US are without doubt primarily due to the Bush Administration’s involvement in the Middle East as well as the events in the worldwide fight against terrorism. The latter include torture cases in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and the interrogation methods by the US secret service known as the “CIA affair”.

Chart 3 shows which topics **ARD** and **ZDF** primarily focus on when covering US protagonists. The United States is mainly portrayed in its role as a global political superpower. Issues around international politics dominate the entire period of analysis.

Considering the continuously negative portrayal of US political leadership in the analyzed German news programs, the German people’s attitude towards their transatlantic partner can be interpreted as an effect of biased news selection.

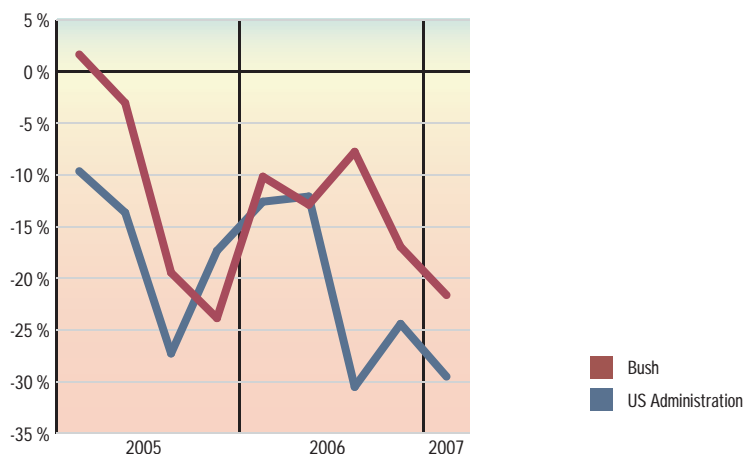
Nonetheless, one has to note that a large part of the negative coverage takes place on factual grounds. Moreover, during his state visit to Germany in February 2005, the President missed the opportunity to direct the journalists’ topical agenda towards possible success stories in his self-declared “war against terrorism”. In subsequent months his media image deteriorated severely (**chart 2**).

Potential not fully tapped

Still, from the Middle East – particularly from Iraq – positive news could have been communicated. With



2) Media image of Bush/US government



Basis: A total of 6,654 statements by/about Bush as well as the US government in ARD Tagesthemen and ZDF heute journal
Time period: 01/2005 - 03/2007

Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Iraq's first democratically elected Prime Minister was appointed in April 2005. The first democratic constitution followed in October of that year – a milestone in the history of the country.

The same happened in Afghanistan, the second hot spot of US foreign policy. For the first time in 36 years, its citizens elected a parliament in September 2005. Yet, such success stories were obviously not associated with the US government. What is more: Roughly 40% Germans interviewed by Pew Research in 2006 were of the opinion that the US commitment in Iraq was a great danger for world peace. Only 25% considered North Korea's threats to be dangerous.

Perception follows media coverage

Today there is no doubt among media researchers that self-reinforcing coverage can have a sustainable impact on the recipients' perception: "The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about," remarked Bernhard Cohen as early as in the 1960s (Cohen, 1963).

How important an issue becomes for the public thus depends strongly on whether and how the media cover it. Media coverage not only has an impact on its perceived salience, but also provides cognitive

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evaluation patterns that the public adopts. Therefore, the ranking of topics and their media assessment is the instrument by which media analysts can measure media effects on the agenda of public opinion: "Agenda setting is detailing a second level of effects that examines how media coverage affects both what the public thinks about and how the public thinks about it." (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs/Shaw/Weaver)

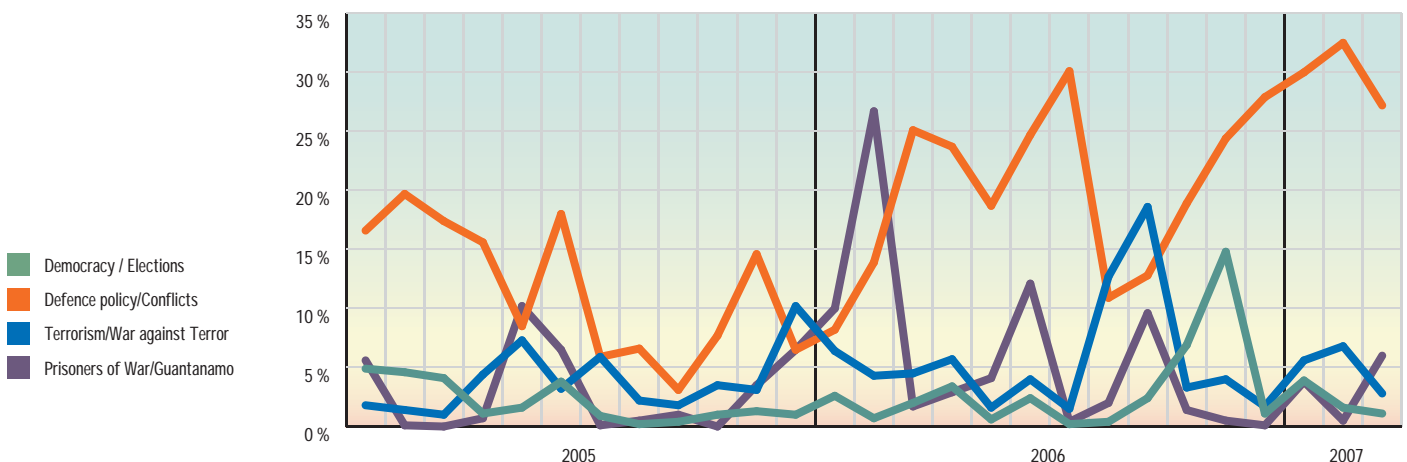
As to the perception of the United States – in particular President Bush – it turns out that the topical agenda of the years 2005/2006 was primarily shaped by international conflicts, whether in Iraq or Iran. In addition, the tone was basically negative. This agenda setting effect does have consequences for the international community of states. The dwindling support for a joint fight against worldwide terrorism as well as the general rejection of the conventional nation

building-process, which is also reflected by the Pew Research study, may be due to the fact that media coverage focuses more on failures than on success stories.

According to the most recent Pew study, public approval of the United States continues to drop:

Two out of three Germans now have a negative image of the US (chart 4). They are therefore in good "Old European" company. Yet even the French, who are traditionally on the skeptical side, have a slightly more positive attitude. Another interesting comparison: Germans were more critical of the US in 2007

3) Topical structure of coverage on the US

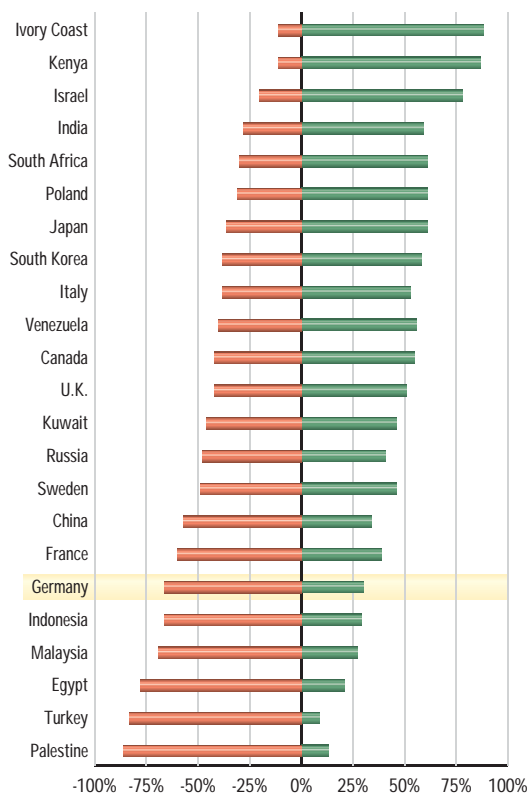


Basis: A total of 36,695 statements by/about Bush and the US government in ARD Tagesthemen and ZDF heute journal
Time period: 01/2005 - 03/2007



than Venezuelans, in which the purportedly greatest antagonist of the US government, Hugo Chavez, resides.

4) Assessment of the US compared across countries



Assessment of the US, in % of those interviewed in each country
Source: Opinion survey by the PEW Research Center in 47 countries, 2007

Simultaneously, the US is being framed as a weakened international superpower, an image that seems to expand to other international institutions in the medium term. According to an opinion survey by Transatlantic Trends in 2006, European approval of the – US-led – NATO decreased from 69% in 2002 to 55% in 2006. The strongest decline could be observed in those countries that had traditionally been strong proponents of the NATO: Germany, Italy, Poland and Turkey. (sj)

Basis:

Media: ARD Tagesthemen, ZDF heute journal

Period of analysis: 01/2005 - 03/2007

Analysis: All statements by or about US protagonists. Statements are information units that are defined as a relationship between the subject of reference (that is the protagonist the statement refers to), the topic (as regards the content), and the bias of the portrayal and its sources. A change in the subject of reference, topic, bias or source is registered as a new statement.

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Open questions

In the first quarter of 2007, the media image of the US continued to with its downward trend. What impact will this have on public opinion?

Will the departing President be able to set the course for a turnaround during his last months in office?

How is coverage of US politics in the Middle East developing?
Will reports continue to focus on failures?