

Debate on anti-Semitism lacks substance

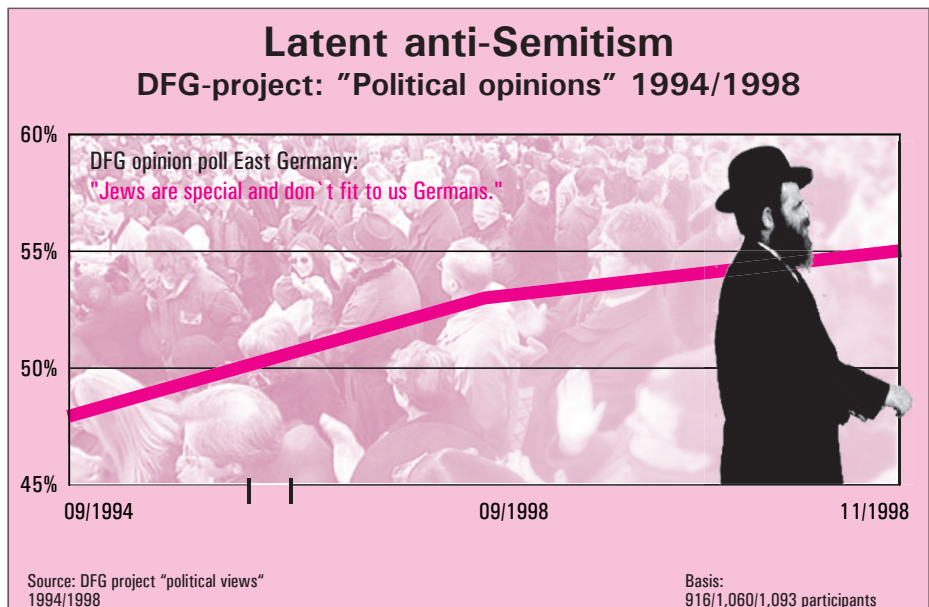
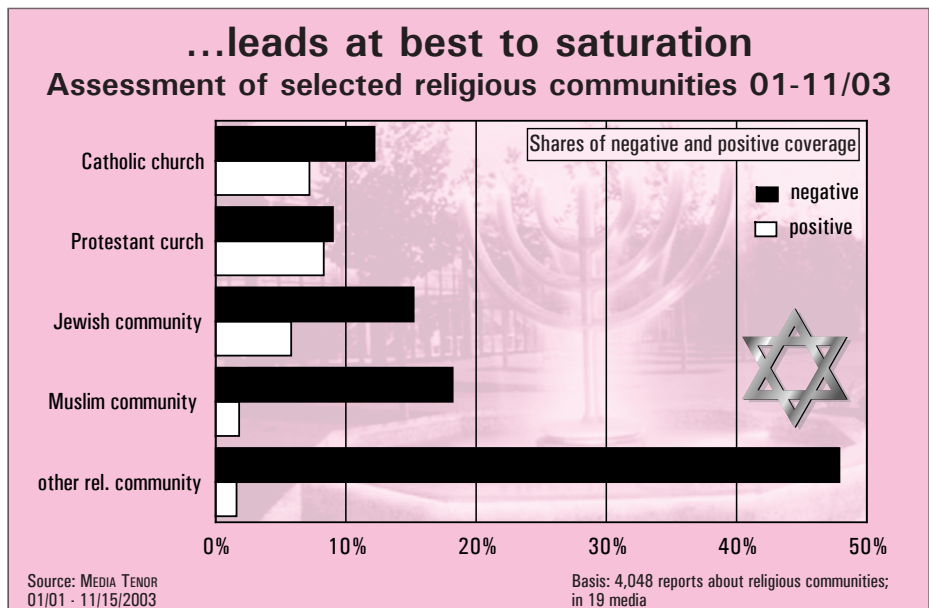
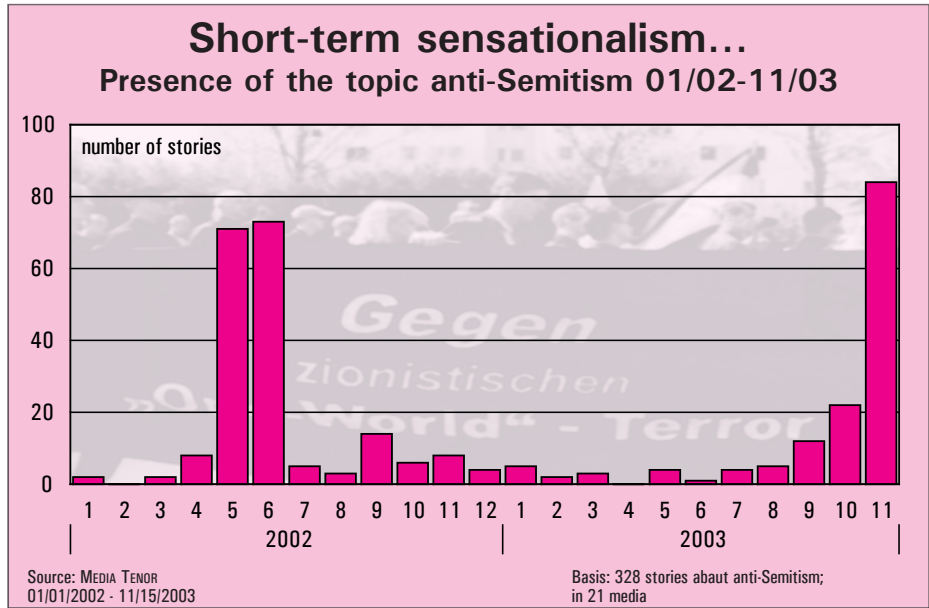
Long-term media analysis of coverage on anti-Semitism, Israel and religious communities 1999-2003

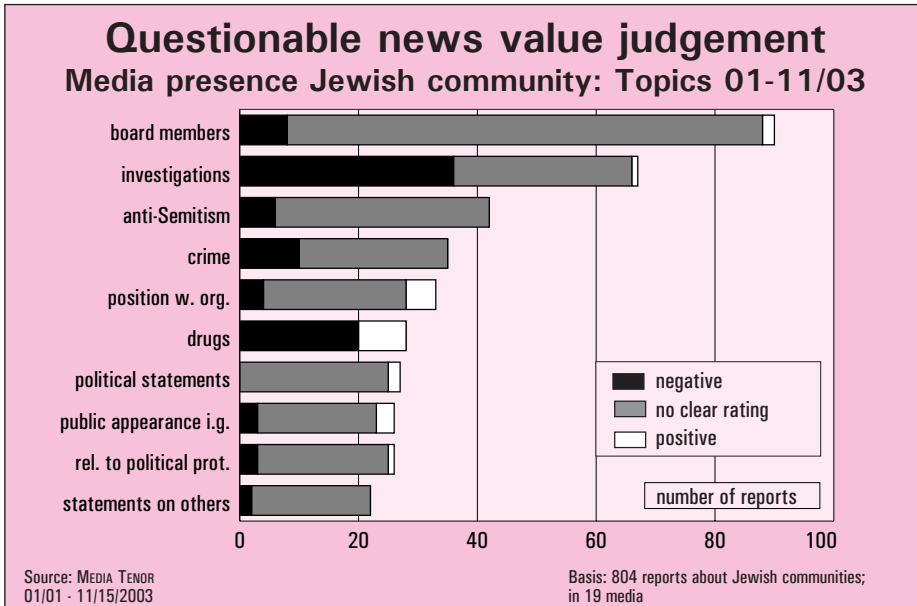
Is there another topic that national media in Germany treat quite as carelessly as real or purported anti-Semitism? After ten years of continuous media analysis, and against the backdrop of the debate on the speech by CDU parliamentarian Hohmann, the observer is hard pressed to see anything reassuring in media reporting.

Whether in the ARD or ZDF, BILD or SÜD-DEUTSCHE ZEITUNG, SPIEGEL or STERN, journalists continue to exploit and sensationalize their coverage on the historic responsibilities of Germans, on religious communities in general and the Jewish community and Israel, in particular. Clichés seem to play a far more important role in news selection and evaluation than a journalistic predilection for research, reporting the news and putting events into a clear context. The victims are once again the very same people for whom the media hype was purportedly intended: the Jewish religious community.

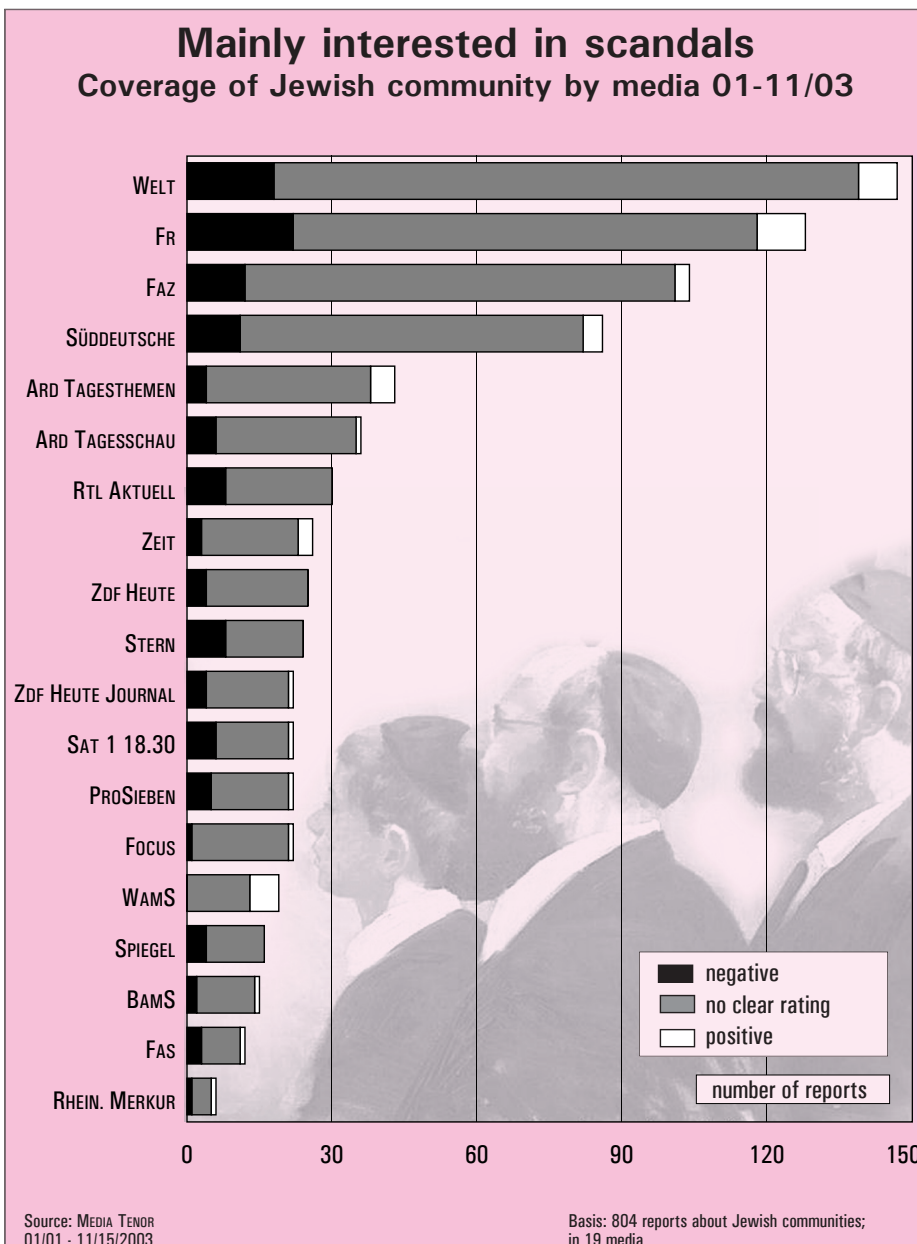
Anti-Semitism as a pretext

The above graph shows how shallow this debate really is: Journalists who paid such great attention to the topic in May/June 2002 and in November 2003 should also put up with the question why they basically ignored it for the entire time in between? Jewish graveyards are desecrated every week. Short-term sensationalist reporting does not increase public awareness, so much as tax audience interest. The middle graph on this page points to the consequences: On balance, the Jewish community is portrayed even more negatively than the two main Christian churches. Others, such as the representatives of Islam, are mainly presented as cells for terrorist activities in the German opinion forming media. But this cannot really be a consolation for Paul Spiegel, Head of the Jewish Council in Germany. Every opinion poll since the end of World War II proves that the share of people holding latent anti-Semitic opinions has been between 16% and 50% of the German population, depending on how such anti-Semitic opinions are defined. This is determined, for example, by whether an statement such as "Jews are different and do not belong to us", which was shared by 50% of adolescents in East Germany in 1998, would be con-





sidered anti-Semitic or not. But whether it is 16% or 50%: The opposite graph demonstrates how low the media's interest in real information is. When in 2003, the content structure of coverage on the Jewish community was dominated by topics like court cases, criminal acts against Jews and drug criminality, it is not surprising that Germans are not particularly open towards representatives of the Jewish community. Of course, it would not be reasonable to downplay coverage of Michel Friedman, the former vice president of the German Jewish Council who was incriminated in scandals around drug abuse and human trafficking. But if, after eleven months of coverage on the Jewish community, the balance turns out to be an equation Friedman = Jewish community, one can ask the responsible editors to point out the difference between their news selection and the type of blatant anti-Semitism they blame others for.



Television especially one-sided

The graphs on this page point out how selected editorial staffs did and did not try to paint a diverse image of the Jewish community. Aside from the ARD TAGESTHEMEN, television journalists primarily focused on scandals. More often than not, time is too short to really explain the underlying issues and search for the causes of the transgression in question – after all significant air-time must be left for the long-standing German pop-celebrity Dieter Bohlen or Formula 1 races.

How long will it take until network chiefs and chief editors realize that providing half of the information often turns out to be more misleading than no information at all? Even the news magazine SPIEGEL does not fare much better, although it is always so proud of leaving enough room for giving the whole picture. The few news stories of the year 2003 hardly allow their readers to appraise the value of the Jewish community. How can one expect that people discard anti-Semitic attitudes, when the purported news magazine only restates the old, worn-out clichés?

Reduced to money

The top graph at page 42 shows that, in the past few years, the German opinion

forming media have made their own contribution to reinforcing blatant prejudices. Several years ago, in the context of compensation for Jewish forced laborers during the Third Reich, there was a chance to educate the audience with the help of facts.

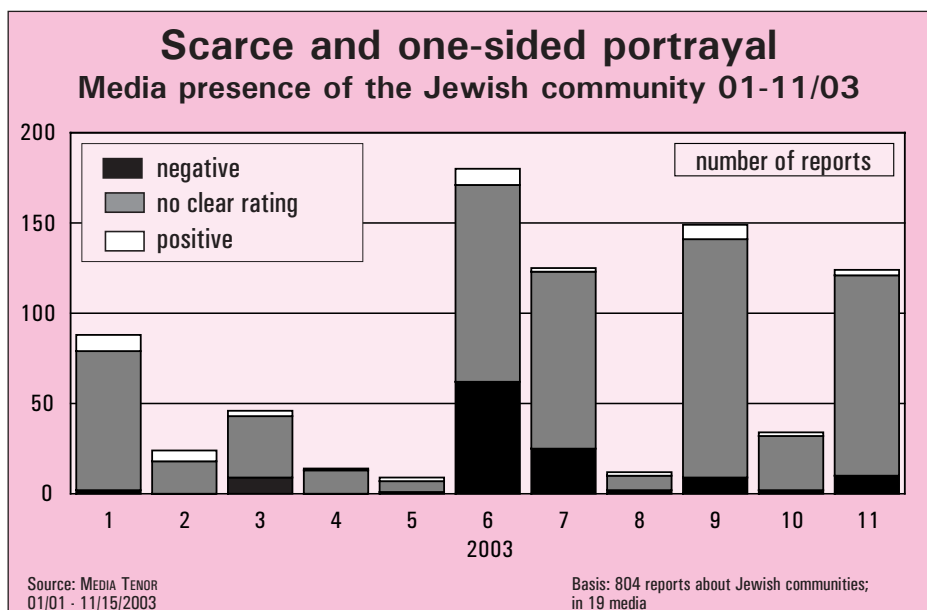
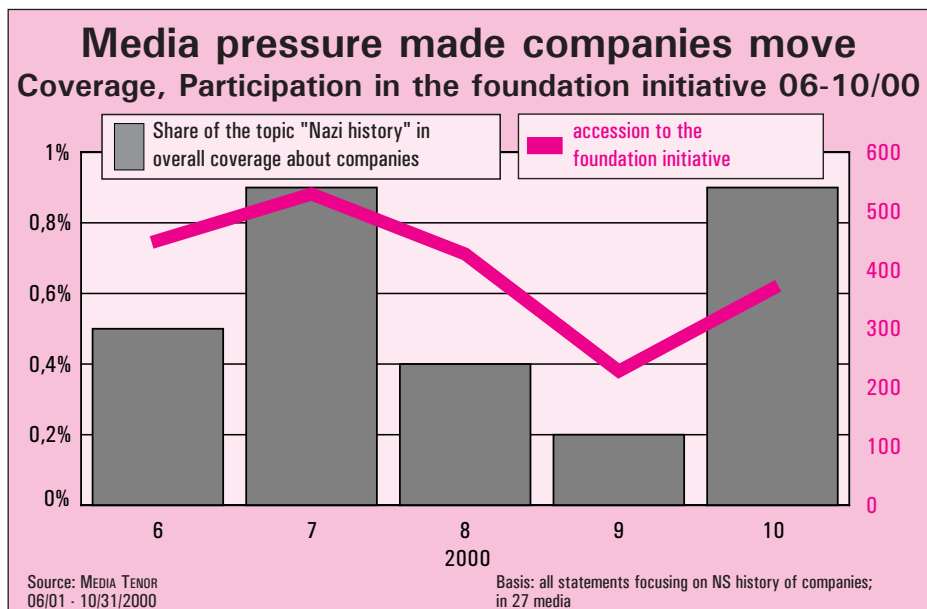
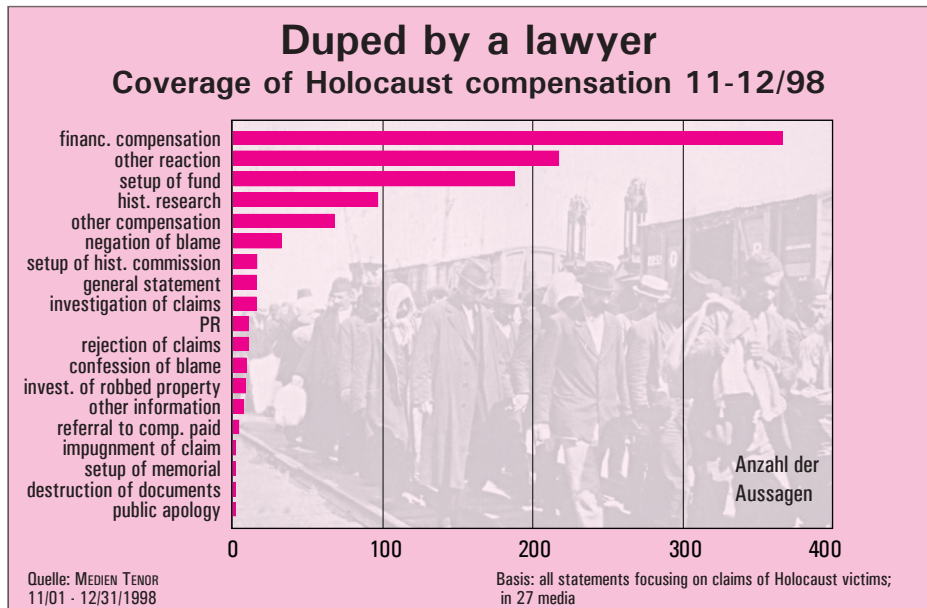
But once again, journalists were outwitted by a lawyer. Portraying it as an issue of money, a complex story was reduced to its financial side. Still, two questions remained unanswered:

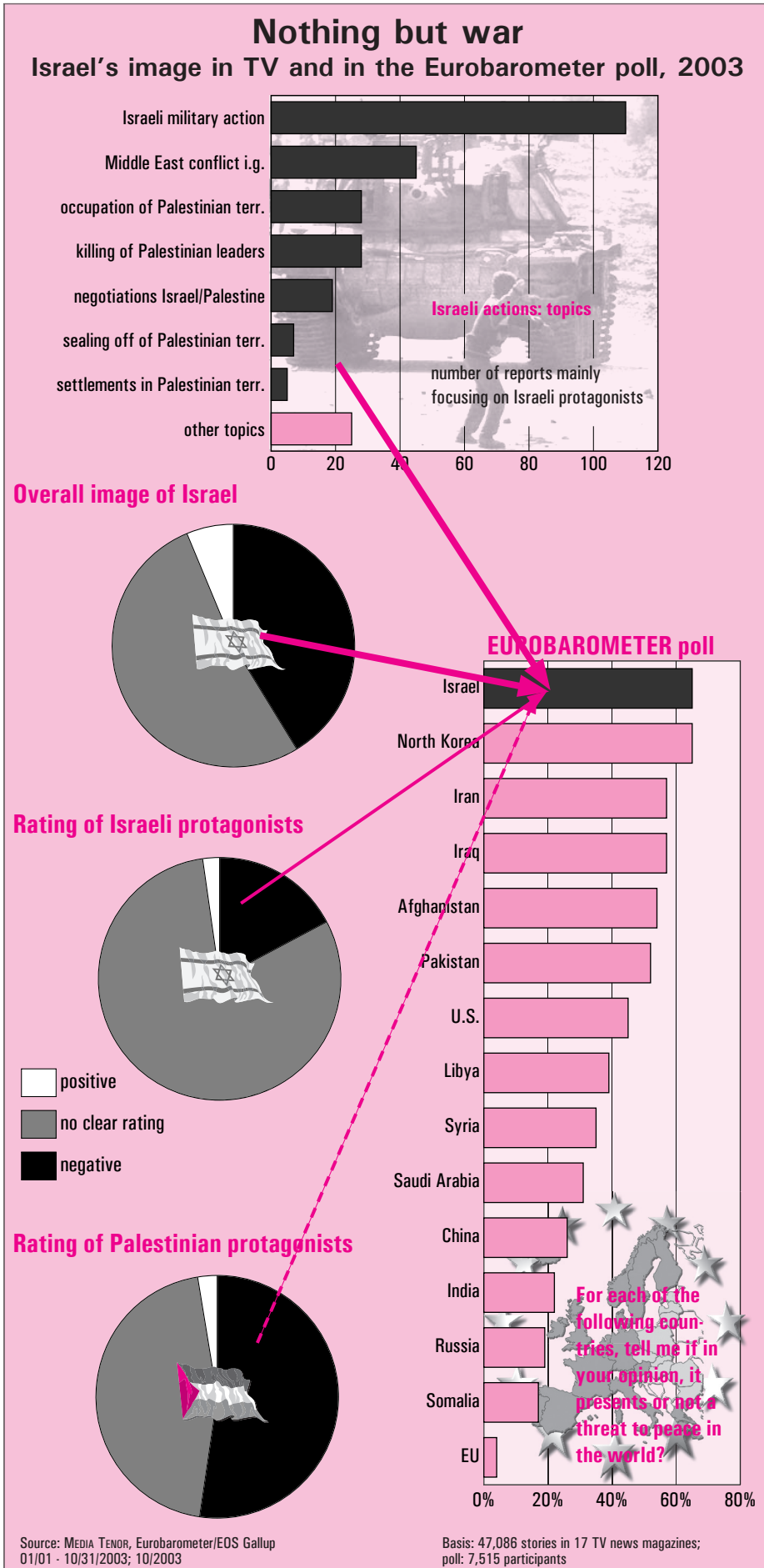
1. How could it be that, after the German government had paid 104 billion marks, in 1996 there were still individuals who had not received a single penny in compensation?
2. What was the economic 'advantage' that companies during the Third Reich had from replacing employees drafted into the army by forced labor?

Both issues offered more than enough opportunities for asking many penetrating questions of the people involved. Not only in order to clarify the outstanding claims for compensation, but also to discuss the supposedly apolitical role of economic activity. However, this would not only have required journalists beyond the cultural desks to give up well-kept prejudices on companies, but it would also have pushed managers to learn that greed is not always good.

But the opportunities were lost and it became obvious that the one-sided approach of the media had an effect: The share of those who were prepared to identify with clearly anti-Semitic statements grew to unprecedented levels. Most alarming is that more than half of the adolescents interviewed gave the same answers as those over 60. The polling results were also a proof that it is wrong to always point the finger at the residual effects of old propaganda.

After all, 60 years after the Holocaust the specter of anti-Semitism also emerges among age groups who have likely never had much contact with representatives from the Jewish religious community. On the other side, the intensity of coverage showed that this forced companies to take action and join the compensation fund.





Israel coverage adds the rest

Only half of the current anti-Semitism debate, however, can be explained by the scarce and one-sided coverage on the Jewish religious community as well as that on the Holocaust and resulting claims for compensation. The other half must be attributed to news selection on the events in Israel. Ever since the power shift away from the more social democratically inclined Labor Party, the selection of topics has become even more one-sided. While under Shimon Peres or Ehud Barak at least some topics aside from terror and the use of violence were occasionally covered, the reporting turned more one-dimensional when Benjamin Natanjahu, and particularly Ariel Sharon, representatives of the Likud, took charge. Comparisons between the military regime of Adolf Hitler and the Israeli government, a popular theme of the Left since 1968, appeared to be on the rise as a basis for the selection of topics that are supposed to 'inform' on life in Israel.

In view of such blatant reduction, who would be surprised when the people react to this media image of the world? In an Eurobarometer opinion poll, 65 percent of those interviewed in Germany considered Israel to be a threat for world peace, ahead of the dictators in North Korea, Iran or Syria, and ahead of dubious rulers in China or Russia. Do editors now want to wash their hands of the entire situation? IS

Basis

Media: BILD, BERLINER ZEITUNG, DIE WELT, FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG, FRANKFURTER RUNDschau, SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG, TAGESZEITUNG; DIE ZEIT, FOCUS, RHEINISCHER MERKUR, SPIEGEL, STERN, BILD AM SONNTAG, FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE SONNTAGSZEITUNG, WELT AM SONNTAG, since 01/2003: SUPER ILLU; ARD TAGESSchau and TAGESTHEMEN/BERICHT AUS BERLIN, ZDF HEUTE and HEUTE JOURNAL, BERLIN DIREKT, RTL AKTUELL, SAT.1 18:30, ProSieben Nachrichten, since 01/2003: FAKT, KONTRASTE, MONITOR, PANORAMA, PLUSMINUS, REPORT (BAYERISCHER RUNDFUNK and SÜDWEStFUNK), FRONTAL 21, WiSo

Time: 11/01/1998 - 10/15/2003

Analysis: 47,098 stories about Israel in the analyzed TV media; 328 stories about anti-Semitism in 19 media; 4,048 reports about religious communities in 19 media; all statements about the Nazi history of companies in 27 media