

# Europe – a quantité négligeable

## Coverage on Europe in German newspapers and TV news 1998 – 2004

European integration has not quite arrived at the editors' doorsteps. Never since 1998 has coverage on the European Union made up more than 9 percent of total coverage in the seven prime time news programs and the five national newspapers analyzed. On average it was as low as 5.5 percent throughout the seven years.

The EU or one of its institutions are the focus of 4.4 percent of coverage – mostly portrayed from a German perspective. In another 1.1 percent German politics dominates, however with a reference to European integration. As a comparison: The federal budget or taxation policies of the federal government generally receive 4 to 5 percent of coverage each, the issue of employment in Germany about 5 to 7 percent.

Thus, European topics only attract selective, short-lived attention, primarily in the context of outstanding occasions: 1998, when the European monetary union was finalized and 1999 when the EU financial scandal was uncovered; at the end of 2000 around the resolutions on EU enlargement, which received less consideration, however, than the discovery of BSE in Germany a few months later; at the end of 2001 with the upcoming intro-

duction of the EURO and 1999/2004 around the European parliamentary elections. Coverage is therefore not sustained, but rather event-related.

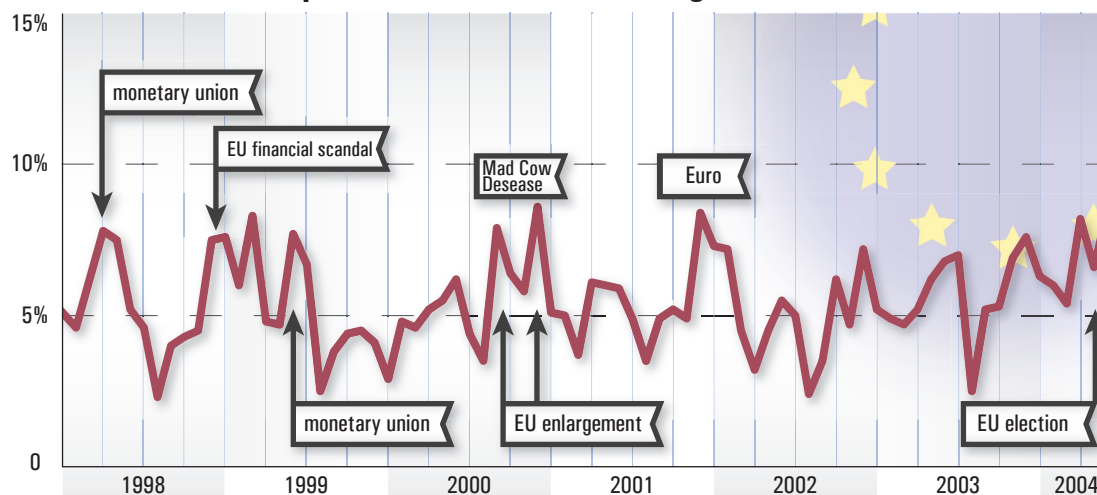
Keen followers of European integration are best served by the **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung**. The **Süddeutsche Zeitung** has been increasing its share of coverage on European politics in the past few years and now also reports to a significant extent. In the **Frankfurter Rundschau** and **Welt**, however, Europe only plays a minor role. The share of European politics with respect to their total coverage is comparable to that in the news programs of the public TV stations **ARD** and **ZDF**. The tabloid **Bild** and news programs of private television stations ignore the EU almost entirely, often attributing much less than 4 percent to coverage on Europe (comp. **graph 2**).

But national broadsheets not only provide more frequent, but also more in-depth reporting on Europe than television news. The **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung**, in particular, puts European topics in a comprehensive context, while TV news programs only take up isolated events. This often results in routine coverage before, during and after EU summits: the handshaking of summit participants and publication of the final communiqué. Background reporting is virtually non-existent on private television, while public TV relegates it into political magazine programs.

This corresponds to analyses of Dutch media coverage, according to which television employs "episodical frames" in its coverage, reporting on

Research Links:  
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<http://www.brusselsreporter.org/guide/insidegerman.pdf>

**Graph 1:**  
**Presence of the European Union in media coverage, 1998 - 2004**

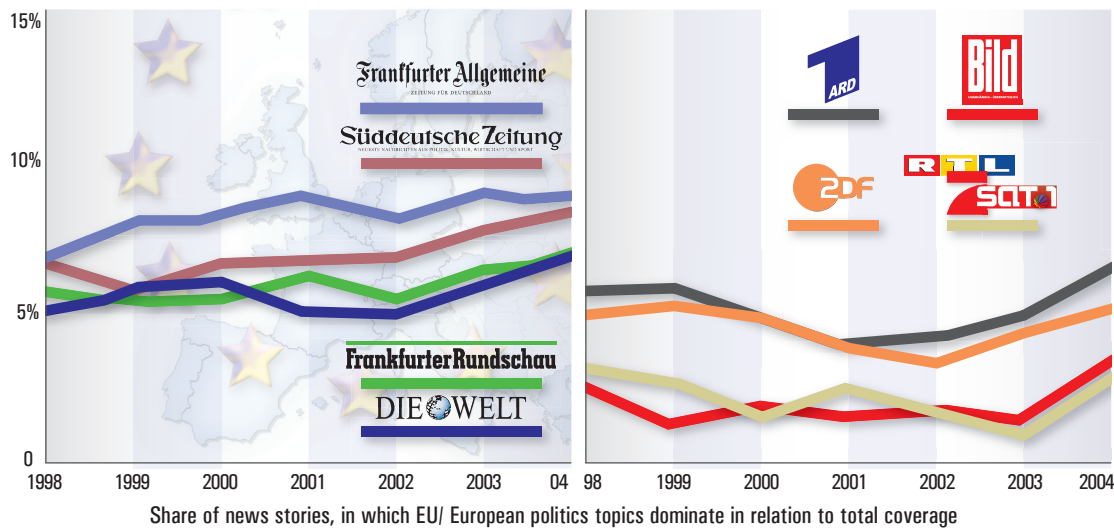


Source: Media Tenor  
 01/01/1998 – 12/31/2004

Basis: 721,408 reports  
 in 5 print media and 7 TV media

“Throughout routine periods ... coverage of European affairs remained ephemeral.”  
 Semetko/  
 Valkenburg, 2000

**Graph 2:**  
**Presence of the EU in different media, 1998 – 2004**



Source: Media Tenor  
01/01/1998 – 12/31/2004

Basis: 721,408 reports  
in 5 print media and 7 TV media

isolated, singular events, while broadsheets use “thematic frames”, providing some background as well (comp. Semetko/Valkenburg 2000).

The presence of European topics in the coverage of the German media reflects to a certain extent the manpower of editorial teams on the spot. Of the roughly 1000 journalists that are accredited correspondents at the EU, no more than 140 are from Germany, and many newspapers do not have their own correspondents in Brussels or Strasbourg. But the lack of manpower in the European bureaus is not the only reason for the low level of EU reporting. At the Berlin convention “Communication without borders in the new Europe”, organized by the German Journalist Association (DJV) in October 2004, many journalists discussed their difficulties in pitching European topics to their editors back home. The frequent confusion of “responsibility within the editorial teams turned out to be one of the hurdles for European topics. Often they are dealt with by the foreign affairs desk, though they actually belong to domestic politics” (Witt-Barthel 2004, p. 27). Yet, in the foreign affairs desk they compete with news from New York, Moscow, Beijing and the rest of the world. Moreover, most editors continue to view EU matters as rather dry and boring stuff. At the other end of the extreme, the EU is relegated onto the opinion pages (comp. Gerhards 1993), where the commentators can gleefully make fun of Brussels bureaucracy: the codification of the maximum level of bend in the Euro banana, the

circumference of EU standard almonds, the dimensions of the Euro cucumber or the European-norm tractor seat.

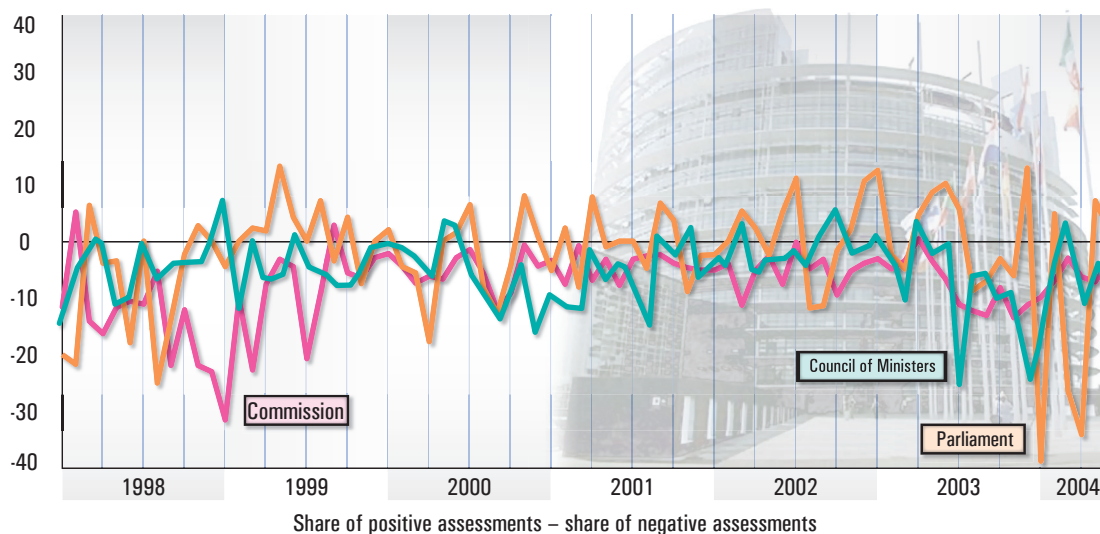
**The Parliament – rarely and negatively present**

Thus, media coverage on Europe is rare, primarily event-related, low on background and generally related from a national perspective. But actually who receives a platform in this reporting? Which of the European institutions is portrayed most frequently, thereby appearing as the main protagonist in European politics in the eyes of the public? To come to the point: It is not the European Parliament. Instead, the same pattern already present in reporting on national politics also applies to EU coverage – a strong dominance of the executive. While the European Parliament generally plays a central role in barely 5 percent of EU coverage, this is true for the Commission in 35 to 45 percent of cases. Even the Council of Ministers, with about 15 percent of overall EU coverage, is more visible than the Parliament (comp. **graph 3**).

Media interest in the European Parliament only rises during the election months. But even then it does not reach the same prominence as the European Commission. For the European Parliament, the lack of presence has consequences. From the citizens’ point of view, European elections are in fact nothing but “second class elections”. Schulz and Blumler have shown that, according to polling data, the mere contact of citizens with media

“The development of a European public sphere lags in two ways behind the process of transferring competencies, controls and resources...onto the supranational constellation EU. Firstly, the focus of attention in the mass mediated public continues to be on what happens in the nation states; the media primarily report from national arenas... and not from the supranational arena in Brussels. Secondly, when they do report from Brussels, this happens from the perspective of a distinct nation state interest, with no or only a weak relation to a common European interest.”  
Gerhards, 1993

**Graph 3:**  
**Evaluation of the European institutions in media coverage**



Source: Media Tenor  
01/01/1998 – 12/31/2004

Basis: 45,456 descriptions of the EU-Parliament, the Commission and the Council of Ministers in 5 print media and 7 TV media

“Chief editors that keep their eyes on circulation or ratings mostly have a problem with dull European issues. Differentiated background coverage does not sell...If it does, it mostly deals with the usual indignation topics: Lazy, aloof and overpaid bureaucrats squander our billions, live in clover and help out the agro-mafia.”  
Seeman/Froitzheim, 2004

coverage on the European Parliament already led to a higher turnout (1994, S. 216).

The argument that the European Parliament is, in fact, less significant than the European Commission or the Council of Ministers can no longer be sustained. Since the first elections in 1979 and 1984, the European Parliament has been gaining in importance, particularly with the increase of competencies in the 1987 Single European Act. Today a majority of European laws and directives require the approval of the European Parliament. Not even the European Commission can be appointed without its authorization. At the end of 2004, for example, the Parliament prevailed over a serious power struggle around proposed Commissioners in the Barroso Commission.

The media do not differ significantly from one another in their ignorance of the European Parliament, in contrast to the amount of overall coverage on the European Union. All of them marginalize it. In the newspapers, only 5 percent of the total EU coverage relates to the European Parliament. The situation is similar in television news, however with more noticeable variations. While it was visible in the election years 1999 and 2004, it practically played no role whatsoever in non-election years. Even peak periods, such as the increased reporting by private television and the tabloid *Bild* in 2004, cannot be explained with a sudden interest in the political workings of the Parliament. Instead, the parliamentarians made headlines because of their compensation pack-

ages. In spring 2004, the Parliament was more heavily criticized than at any time in the preceding six and a half years analyzed: The share of negative assessments was almost 40 percentage points higher than the share of (practically non-existent) positive statements. On average, 10 to 15 percent negative assessments are faced with 7 percent positive ones. In other words: As a general rule, the media only rarely see an occasion for reporting positively on the work of EU parliamentarians. The Parliament shares this “fate” with the Council of Ministers and the European Commission. Parallel to national coverage, negativism as a news selection criterion continues to be strong.

However, the judgmental portrayal is more differentiated in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* than the *Bild-Zeitung*. The prime time news programs of *ARD* and *ZDF* were rather reserved about assessing the European institutions, while their political magazines – whether *Fakt (MDR)* or *Kontraste (SFB)* – basically had nothing good to say about the EU.

**European election – less important than the European Cup**

If in “normal times” the media only rarely report on the European Union, one should presume that the European elections would at least make it onto their agenda. Especially before the elections one could expect – at least from public television – that the media a) inform about topics that are relevant, thereby creating interest in the election and show-

**Sources:**

- Erbring, Lutz (Hrsg.) (1995): Kommunikationsraum Europa. Konstanz
- Gerhards, Jürgen (1993): Westeuropäische Integration und die Schwierigkeiten der Entstehung einer europäischen Öffentlichkeit. FS III 92-101. Berlin

ing alternatives; that they b) vet the democratic process and c) provide space and airtime to the different protagonists' ideas on the continuation of European integration. In short: They should fulfil their function of providing information, articulation, control and platforms for public discourse.

Yet, the coverage does not meet that expectation. It is true that reporting on European integration rose during election years – European elections therefore do seem to have a catalyzing effect on the public perception of the topic "Europe". But the European elections themselves are still not part of that coverage (comp. **graph 4**). Only in the last 14 days before the opening of the polling stations did more than one percent of the total coverage in television news programs and newspapers relate to the elections. Before the 2004 European elections, even public television aired more pieces on the European Soccer Championships (which only started on June 12th) than on the European parliamentary elections. In April and May, the election was still non-existent for the media. When television did cover the campaign, it rarely appeared in top positions and almost never led the news (comp. Peter 2004, p. 148).

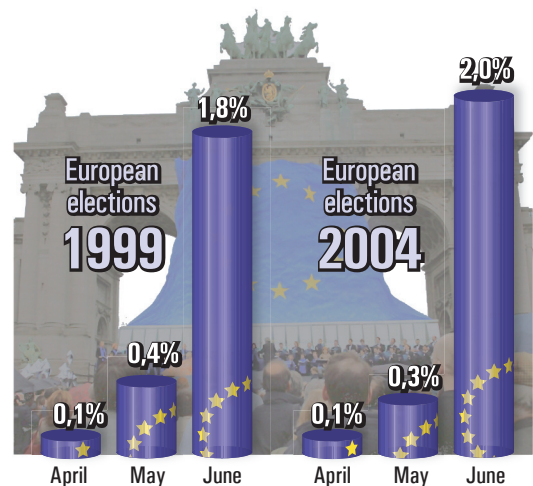
Thus, the media do not portray European elections as a transnational, European event, but merely provide the backdrop for federal and state politicians. European topics only receive a chance to make it onto the media agenda when national politicians comment on them or when they have a direct impact on the national political discussion. Otherwise they sink out of sight – and with them the European politicians in Strasbourg.

### Europeanizing the public

In a survey among German journalists at the beginning of the nineties, 47 percent of the editors interviewed said that it was not their job to promote the emergence of a European sense of community (comp. Schönbach 1995, p. 27). The standpoint as such cannot be argued with. Still, one should expect from the media that they cover relevant issues and offer the people a chance to find out about world events, in order to then form their own opinions. When it comes to Europe, they basically fail to do so.

European integration and the central European protagonists are only rarely the focus of reporting. Brussels and Strasbourg remain minor political venues. When the EU is covered, the spotlight is on the executive. The Parliament hardly appears. European parliamentarians play their walk-on roles and are evaluated more negatively than federal and state politicians, who voice their

**Graph 4: Presence of the European elections '99/'04**



Share of news stories on European election in relation to total coverage

Source: Media Tenor  
04/01 – 06/30/1999/2004

Basis: all reports  
in 5 print media and 7 TV media

opinions on Europe. It is hard to bring Europe to most editors' attention, unless it is about scandals or problematic cases. There are reasons for doubt that this coverage adequately reflects politics in Brussels and Strasbourg. And even if the image was true to the facts, we would have to get more, not less information about it – so the swamp could be drained... The media also see European politics mainly from a national perspective. In Germany, a Europeanized national public is therefore far from reality. Ret.

The complete study will be published in June 2005 under the title:

Frank Brettschneider, Markus Rettich: Europa – (k)ein Thema für die Medien? In: Tenscher, Jens (Hrsg.): Wahlkampf um Europa. Analysen aus Anlass der Wahlen zum Europäischen Parlament 2004. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

### Basis:

**Medien:** Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Bild; ARD Tagesschau/Tagesthemen, ZDF Heute/Heute Journal, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 18:30/News, ProSieben News

**Time:** 01/01/1998 – 12/31/2004

**Analysis:** 721,408 news stories; politics and business section (print media), all stories (TV news); all descriptions of the European Union or EU institutions (at least 5 lines/seconds)

Hagen, Lutz M. (Hrsg.) (2004): Europäische Union und mediale Öffentlichkeit. Theoretische Perspektiven und empirische Befunde zur Rolle der Medien im europäischen Einigungsprozess. Köln  
Niedermayer, Oskar/Schmitt, Hermann (Hrsg.) (1994): Wahlen und Europäische Einigung. Opladen  
Peter, Jochen (2004): Kaum vorhanden, thematisch homogen und eher negativ – Die alltägliche Fernsehberichterstattung über die Europäische Union im internationalen Vergleich. In: Hagen (2004): 146-161  
Schönbach, Klaus (1995): Der Beitrag der Medien zu Europa. Rezeption und Wirkung. In: Erbring (1995): 27-38  
Schulz, Winfried/ Blumler, Jay G. (1994): Die Bedeutung der Kampagnen für das Europa-Engagement der Bürger. Eine Mehrebenen-Analyse. In: Niedermayer/ Schmitt (1994): 199-223  
Seemann, Wolfgang M./ Fritzsche, Ulf J. (2004): Herausforderung Europa. Warum sich die Medien mit der Europäischen Union so schwer tun. In: BJVreport 2/2004. 20-23  
Semetko, Holli A./ Valkenburg, Patti M. (2000): Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News. In: Journal of Communication 50. 93-109  
Witt-Barthel, Annegret (2004): Europa eine Seele geben. In: journalist 11/2004. 26-28.