

# Guilty by association

## The media image of the U.S. in German TV news 2002 – 2005

Research Links:  
<http://www.zdf.de/ZDFde/inhalt/7/0,1872,2265287,00.html>  
<http://news.ft.com/cms/s/9d3b32bc-bfe8-11d9-b376-00000e2511c8.html>  
<http://www.travelagentcentral.com/travelagentcentral/article/articleDetail.jsp?id=158388>  
 The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Transatlantic Trends [www.transatlantictrends.org](http://www.transatlantictrends.org)  
 The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press <http://people-press.org/HarrisInteractive>  
<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/>  
 The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations <http://www.c CFR.org/>  
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 Thomas legislative information on the internet <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

George W. Bush at least begins to see the light: This is the impression the Germans got from the media coverage of Bush's visit to the Old Continent and to Germany in February. According to the regular **Politbarometer** poll of Forschungsgruppe Wahlen about 71% of the respondents regard the German-U.S. relations as positive, up from 32% in February 2003. But for the German public this has nothing to do with a changed opinion about the president himself. On the contrary: the image of the President has not improved notably. Germans rate George W. Bush on the average with -2,5, which cannot really be compared with the worst rating of an "important" German politician – the -0,7 of Hans Eichel. Even worse for the President is the circumstance, that the bad image of his administrations rubs off on other American protagonists, from companies to religious organisations and even the media.

Over the last 39 months the overall media image of the U.S. in German TV was rather negative: 18.1% of all reports showed a critical tone, only 3.2% had a positive message. Although overall foreign coverage in seven German main evening TV news was markedly more negative, with a share of 37% of negative news, there was actually less positive news on U.S. protagonists than in respect to all other protagonists from foreign countries, who on average received a share of 3.6% of positive stories. Negativism of for-

eign coverage is driven by stories of conflicts, wars, accidents and crime – all of which are American topics par excellence.

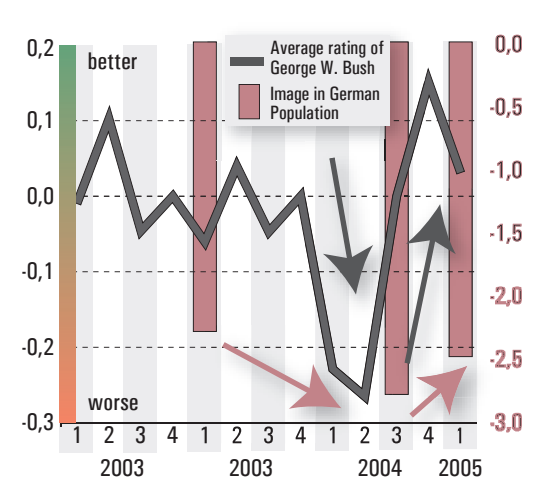
### Collateral Damage

George W. Bush's image in German TV shows only short phases of approval (cf. **Medien Tenor** No. 144, p. 36-41). The sympathy expressed by the Germans after the attacks of 9/11 did neither really include the President. The uncomfortable feeling of the public and the marked distance of the media towards the official politics of the Bush administration remained a latent defect of the German-American relations until the late Summer of 2002. Facing an imminent defeat in the upcoming federal elections, the incumbent, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, decided to focus on the Iraq issue as his unique selling proposition towards the German public.

The general opposition in Germany towards the military solution of the Iraq weapons crisis shows up in the growing criticism of U.S. protagonists in the second half of 2003, when a continuous flow of bad news from the occupied country underpinned the impression of a flawed victory. In the first half of 2004 this general trend led to the worst rating of George W. Bush since his first appearance on German TV screens. The confession of the non-existence of Iraqi WMD and the breaking of the news from Abu Ghraib worked as a vindication of the long-standing accusations, that have been voiced against the President from the first months of the escalating Iraq crisis. Even when the media coverage of George W. Bush took a more positive turn in the wake of his re-elec-

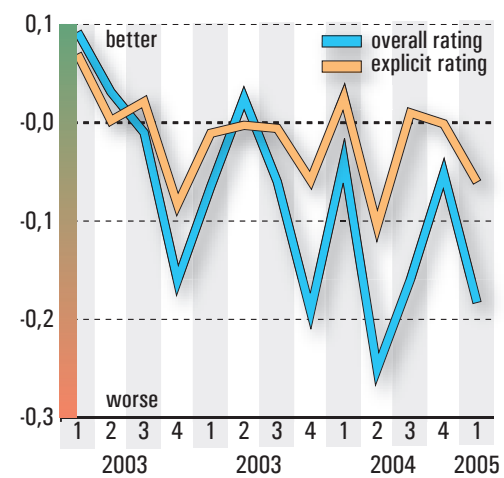
"The US is losing billions of dollars as international tourists are deterred from visiting the US because of a tarnished image overseas and more bureaucratic visa policies,..."  
 FT, 09.05.2005

## Media rating and public image of George W. Bush in Germany – media rating of all U.S. protagonists in German TV news 01/2002 – 03/2005



Average media rating/public image of George W. Bush in Germany

Source: Media Tenor, 01.01.2002 – 31.03.2005  
 Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 22. – 24.02.2005



Average rating of U.S. protagonists in Germany

Basis: 1,606/ 14,702 stories in 7 German TV- news programmes  
 1.268 randomly selected voters in Germany

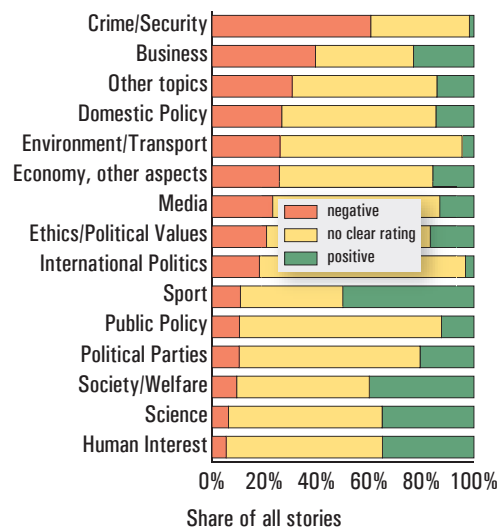
tion, this trend could emerge as rather short-lived. The overall damage to the reputation of the President turns out to be more permanent. Even after more than nine months after reaching the bottom point in the news has the public image of the President not really recovered.

Even worse is the continuous flow of negative news about U.S. protagonists in general. In the first quarter of 2005 the average rating of American institutions and figures deteriorated again. In the last six months the general distance towards what is associated with being American encompassed all segments of the public sphere. For almost all groups of society negative reports outweighed positive stories – over a period of more than three years. The undeniable success story of American business in the Era of Bush jr. does not feature prominently on German TV (cf. **Medien Tenor** No. 149, p. 114f.). Only American artists and sports stars achieved an overall positive image, although even they are prone to a deep fall, as the huge interest in the case against Michael Jackson proves. The disillusionment with the American role model of the last 60 years is exemplified by the media coverage of the conflict about the fate of Terry Schiavo. Virtually every protagonist in this drama was portrayed stark negative, creating the impression of a typical American problem – rather than describing merely a dilemma of modern medicine.

**Primacy of politics**

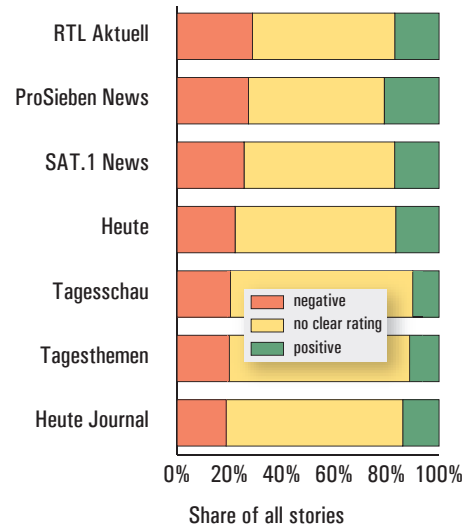
Nevertheless issues of war and peace dominate the TV coverage: More than 50% of all news stories in public TV news referring to American protagonists

**Rating of US protagonists in German TV news shows: The topics**



Source: Media Tenor, 01.01.2002 – 31.03.2005 Basis: 14.702 stories in 7 German TV news programmes focusing on U.S. protagonists

**Rating of US protagonists in German TV news shows: The programmes**



Source: Media Tenor, 01.01.2002 – 31.03.2005 Basis: 14.702 stories in 7 German TV news programmes focusing on U.S. protagonists

focus on the government, and the field of international politics is featured in more than 1/3 of all stories. Even issues of crime and domestic security seem to be addressed with traditionally high awareness. With more than 10% of all reports crime stories from America have a higher share than in the average of foreign coverage. The topics with a positive coverage – sports, science and culture – together account for only 22% of all stories. The critical view on American affairs is not limited to the public TV stations; actually the share of critical reports is even higher in the private news programmes of **RTL**, **ProSieben** and **SAT.1**, although in these shows the share of positive stories is higher, too. As positive news in the last years originated primarily in the entertainment and human interest segments of coverage, the marked polarisation of private TV news masks an even more critical coverage of the U.S. government, than is given in **ARD** and **ZDF**.

**Transatlantic rift**

The deterioration of the media image of the U.S. in the last years could indicate a growing alienation between Europe and the New World. Flagging tourist visits to America could be the first sign of a vicious circle aggravating the estrangement. ck

**Basis:**

**Media:** ARD Tagesschau, Tagesthemen (incl. Bericht aus Berlin), ZDF Heute, Heute Journal, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 18:30 News, ProSieben News

**Period of Analysis:** 01.01.2002 – 31.03.2005

**Analysis:** Examination of all news stories focusing on U.S. protagonists

“The message this sends is obvious: ‘Good German’ capital works to the social advancement of the country’s workforce while it is foreign, specifically (Jewish-) American capital that destroys jobs.”  
 WSJ, 11.05.2005 on Müntefering’s criticism of private equity investors