

A surprising selling point

Interview with Kai Diekmann, chief editor of the German tabloid BILD



MT: Although **BILD** did not manage to overtake the **Spiegel** in the 2005 quotation ranking, the opinion making power of your newspaper was the competition authorities' main argument for preventing the merger of your publishing house Springer and the broadcasting corporation ProSiebenSAT.1. Why is it that, in Germany, the **BILD**'s opinion doesn't always hold sway, for example the fact that the national coach of the soccer team, Jürgen Klinsmann, is still in office?

Kai Diekmann: The reason maybe in the stars or the curvature of the earth. But truth be told, there is probably a difference between the power to make opinion and the power to make changes. However, competition regulators and self-appointed experts often tend to overlook this fact.

MT: Is this also one of the reasons why in 2006, other media have hardly been quoting from your paper in reference to its core issues – the employment market and healthcare?

Diekmann: Politics is currently providing new topics on a daily basis – be it taxes, minimum wage, the healthcare premium, retirement age, politicians pay or the reform of the federal system. Right now, journalistic achievements are not defined by agenda-setting, but by the quality of presentation – we explain difficult facts, deepen discussions and show the pros and cons.

MT: What political issues do you want to secure **BILD**'s agenda-setting-role with?

Diekmann: Why should we try to secure what we already have securely? Our opinion leadership is completely independent from whether or not we get the news first. Most recently the **Süddeutsche Zeitung** reported on a scandalous deportation procedure in Rhineland-Palatinate. Reaction of politics: zero. Only after we took up the issue, it grew into something bigger. Only what is in the **BILD** becomes a national debate.

MT: From time to time one gets the impression that **BILD** has a hard time setting an agenda against the new government. In 2004, your suit against the federal government and the alleged "retirement liars" (politicians who had claimed that the state-funded pension scheme was safe, ed.) would have been picked up by all the media. Yet so far, it hasn't made many headlines. This is despite the fact that you are only following the logic of previous stunts, such as the one with the Teuro (German pun on alleged price hikes with the introduction of the Euro, ed.); except now, you are finally being consistent in that you not only pose as "the ordinary guy's advocate", but also pay to support his interests.

Diekmann: We did not sue the current government, but went to court against those who are responsible for the retirement fraud because of inaction and false promises. In any event, the suit is only a sign that we are willing to find new ways, in order to create awareness for grievances.

MT: What issues do you want to raise in order to become Germany's first address for exclusive business news?

Most frequently quoted media in 2005



Number of quotes: * general – quotes that do not mention a particular program; ** of which WSJ US Ed.: 406, WSJ Eur.Ed.:255

Source: Media Tenor 01/01 – 12/31/2005

Basis: overall 44,655 quotes in 39 media

Diekmann: The fact that Germany's most important banker, Joseph Ackermann, chose **BILD** as a forum for the annual general meeting of Deutsche Bank, is surely a clear sign for our importance in business – just as the fact that we were able to publish interviews with the CEOs of almost all Dax-listed companies in the past year. In any case, questions around business locations, the importance of entrepreneurship or the distortions of executive compensation schemes will have a great potential for debate in the future.

MT: Why has **BILD** not been backing the side of SAP employees, who intend to establish a workers' council? The issue is of great relevance far beyond the DAX-30-companies.

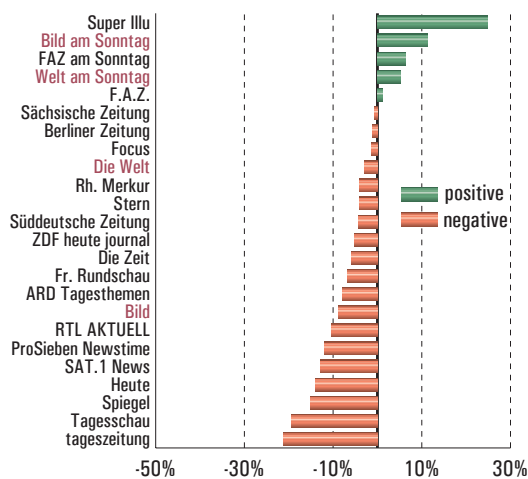
Diekmann: We are independent and neither the mouthpiece of the employees nor of the employers. The arguments at SAP are of an internal nature, and incidentally not of the greatest interest to our readers.

MT: The issue could be politically explosive, since none of the two big parties has had the courage to finally correct a law that violates every principle of democracy and self-determination.

Diekmann: I do not understand this question. In my opinion, the Works Council Constitution Act is very well in accordance with democracy and self-determination.

MT: Beyond politics and business, you have broken through the awareness threshold with a number of different bible projects. Is this a form of buying indulgences à la Diekmann? In a sense, for each crass headline out comes a new bible edition?

Comparative assessment of companies and industry sectors



Balance of assessments

Source: Media Tenor
01/01/2004 – 06/30/2005

Basis: 458,712 reports about
companies and industries

Diekmann: As long as I'm the judge of what is crass – sure. But in all earnestness: It is our goal to also offer topics to the broader public that are normally not expected from a tabloid. After all, this ability to surprise is one of **BILD**'s unique selling points.

MT: Why Immendorff, of all people? (**BILD** co-produced a bible edition with illustrations by the controversial modern artist Jörg Immendorff, ed.) Did you intend to put a bee in the bonnet of Cardinal Lehmann?

Diekmann: We wanted a bible edition, in which a leading contemporary artist deals with the Holy Scripture and shows his very personal approach to it. Since Jörg Immendorff has once before painted a picture for our yearly campaign "Ein Bild von **BILD**" (a picture from **BILD**), we continued our collaboration with him.

MT: With "Wir sind Papst" (we are Pope), you have mastered the high art of headline-writing. Nevertheless, **BILD** was summoned in front of the Press Council for it. Do you want to open a branch office there?

Diekmann: "Wir sind Papst" was brought before the Press Council with the explanation that the plural violated the rule of true coverage, since not all readers had become Pope. The quality of many complaints is of this kind. When Angela Merkel was elected to be the first female German chancellor, we greeted her with the headline: "Miss Germany". This brought us before the Press Council, because, according to the complainants, the election had not been a beauty contest.

MT: He who lives by the sword dies by the sword. Yet the number of personal attacks on you has become considerable. How do you deal with that?

Diekmann: I take it as a proof of success, since this is only the consequence of **BILD**'s position in public debate. That used to be different in the past. But with **BILD** being an opinion leader, the focus of public attention naturally rests on me. I just have to live with it.

MT: What is your wish from commentators on the media in the year 2006?

Diekmann: Work cleanly and sometimes even maintain a minimum of fairness towards **BILD**. When we covered the immediate danger of the potential decapitation of Susanne Osthoff, who had been kidnapped in Iraq, with the headline "Will she be decapitated?", the **taz**, **Süddeutsche Zeitung** or **Zeit Online** made a big thing about this alleged violation of basic press ethics. Now the Press Council has rejected all 32 complaints, but the self-righteous remain silent. At best they hide it in a three-line news brief somewhere. That is unprofessional and pathetic.