

How to destroy an ideal

Case Study: The media image of the EU 01/2003 – 06/2004

Research Links:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives_en.htm
www.epwahl.de/
www.europa-digital.de

The European elections present a welcome opportunity for journalists to lament the decline of support for the European Union in the 25 member countries. Especially in Germany, the approval ratings for EU membership have declined from the early 90s. But the media contributed strongly to this development. By focusing on the executive branch and framing the Union in the context of national politics, media coverage accelerates the devaluation of the ideal of European unification.

On June 13 came the moment of truth for Europe. 43,5% of Germans went to vote in the European elections, less than 1999, when 45,2% of German voters bothered to go to the ballot box – well below the European average in both years. Interestingly, the three-month Eurobarometer poll shows more interest: According to the spring of 2004 edition, 36% of Germans have a positive attitude towards the European Union, only 19% take a negative stance. Even more interesting: 45% of the respondents think that Germany has more advantages than disadvantages from EU membership. Obviously it is – for the time being – not politically correct to voice rejection of the EU publicly.

The media reaction was uniform: the politicians, the parties and the European parliamentarians are to blame. The media on the other hand professes staunch support of the European Community. A cur-

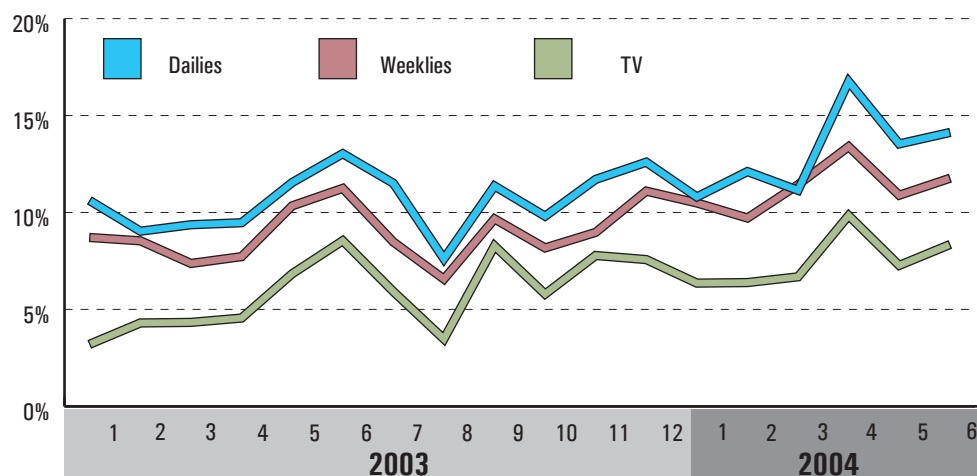
sory glance at the headlines from the beginning of May supports this claim, but is deceptive. Most journalists welcomed the enlargement of the European Union. Official statements and celebrations figured prominently in TV news. Some examples: “Europe celebrates its enlargement and the unity between East and West attained today. With folk festivals, firework, concerts, and many other events new and old members greeted the Union of the 25,” German **Tagesschau** on May 1. **Gazeta Wyborcza** in Poland titled: “Welcome Union”, also on the British Isles the **Daily Telegraph** came out in favour of EU “expansion”: “Welcome back to the free family of Europe”. But this is the picture painted on holidays – on weekdays, media coverage of the European Union is rather different. The long-term media analysis of **Media Tenor** shows alarming patterns.

EU at the margin of media coverage

In German media only 9.7% of all news stories had a reference to the EU during the last 18 months. In TV news awareness of the EU was even lower: In the long run only 6.4% of all news stories referred to the EU or its institutions. Only in April – prior to the accession of 10 new member states and in the run-up to the next European election, this share rose to 9.8% – only to drop to 8.3% again in June.

Even these results flatter the media, because the EU and its institutions appeared rather seldom at the centre of reporting. Over the period of 18 months only 3.4% of all news stories focused on European institutions or the EU in general. In TV news and current affairs programmes, the respective share was as

Reference to the European Union in German media: Comparison of daily press, TV news/current affairs programmes and weekly press, 01/2003 – 06/2004



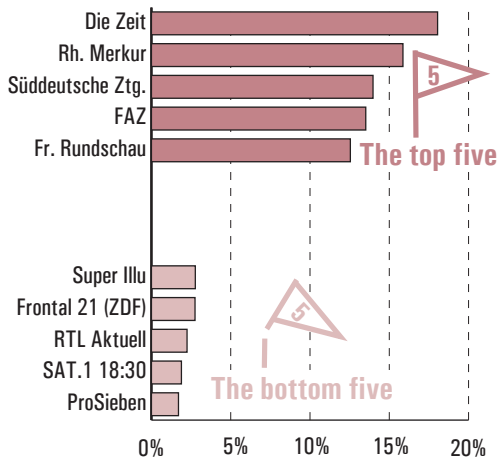
Share of all stories making reference to the EU, EU institutions or the EU economy for at least 5 lines/seconds

Source: Medien Tenor
 01.01.2003 – 30.06.2004

Basis: 364,812 stories in 7 German dailies, 19 TV programmes and 9 weeklies

Only in the run-up to EU enlargement did awareness in the print media rise to a sustainable level.

Reference to the EU or EU institutions, 01/2003 – 06/2004



Share of all stories

Source: Medien Tenor 01.01.2003 – 30.06.2004 Basis: 364,812 stories in 7 German dailies, 19 TV programmes and 9 weeklies

low as 2.4%, and even in April 2004 before EU enlargement, was only 3.1%. These results are indicative of the prevalent “national frame” in reporting about European affairs. Domestic protagonists shape the national public agenda. Only when national politicians address EU affairs or when EU actions have a direct impact on domestic political debate, does this give rise to an opportunity for EU coverage. Consequently the European Union and its institutions have no developed independent media presence in the relevant national media outlets.

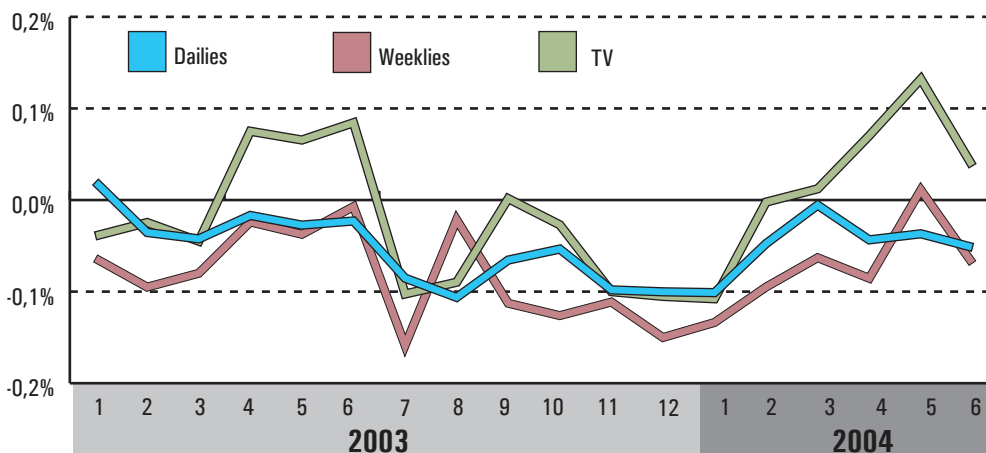
These general figures conceal amazing differences between the media. Whereas weekly media like **Die Zeit** or **Rheinischer Merkur** examine European perspectives in more than 15% of all their reports, the private TV news from **RTL**, **SAT.1** or **ProSieben** virtually ignore the EU in their reporting, with a share of EU references ranging from 1.7 to 2.2%.

Negativism abounds

Rating of the EU and of EU institutions was consistently negative throughout the last 18 months. Overall 12.2% of all descriptions were negative, only 7.5% positive. Only in one month, in January 2003, did the EU enjoy positive coverage. Evaluation of the EU on TV was on balance more positive – but also more volatile, which is of course a consequence of the discontinuous coverage. In seven of the 18 months analysed, the tone towards the EU was positive but not enthusiastic. Even in May 2004, a month dominated by the accession ceremonies, only one in five news stories showed a positive tendency, the share of critical reports remained with 7.7% rather high.

These facts constitute no special anti-EU bias amongst German journalists – they are indicative of the routine patterns of journalistic news production. With regard to their evaluation, EU organs and politicians suffer the normal fate of politicians in the media. Public debate is shaped by the dramaturgy of antagonistic discussion and critical exchange. Consequently negative comment from political competitors and the journalists dominates the rating of political actors – on the national and international level. News selection is dominated by the news values of nega-

Evaluation of the European Union and EU institutions in German media: Comparison of daily press, TV programmes and weekly press, 2003 – 2004



Average rating

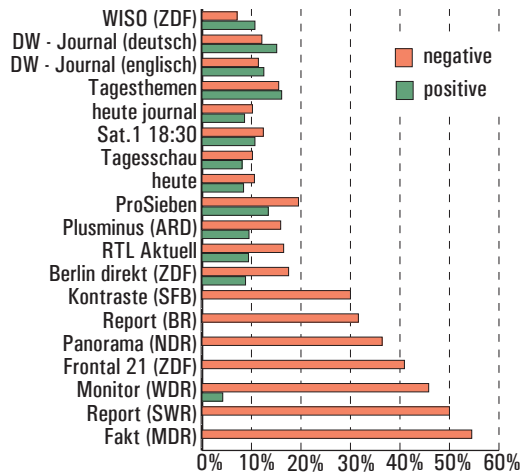
Source: Medien Tenor 01.01.2003 – 30.06.2004

Basis: 56,328 reports (at least 5 lines/seconds) about the EU/EU institutions in 7 German dailies, 19 TV programmes and 9 weeklies

No enthusiasm for European enlargement in the daily press

Nothing positive about the European Union in Kontraste, Report, Panorama, Frontal 21 and Fakt

Rating of EU institutions/ EU in TV news/current affairs programmes



Share of positive/negative reports with at least 5 seconds

Source: Medien Tenor Basis: 9,164 reports (at least 5 seconds) about the EU/EU institutions in 19 TV programmes 01.01.2004 – 30.06.2003

tivism, conflict and status. Conflicts between EU institutions, fraud and publicity events like EU summits naturally get more awareness than the every-day procedures in the EU political process.

Most peoples' notion of the EU is formed by its TV image – a natural consequence of the great reach of TV. TV simplifies the issues and polarises the discussion – due to constraints of time and resources, but also as a consequence of growing competition. Therefore overall TV coverage was somewhat more sympathetic to the EU than reporting by the daily and weekly press. On the other hand, the image of the commission or the council was even more negative than in other media.

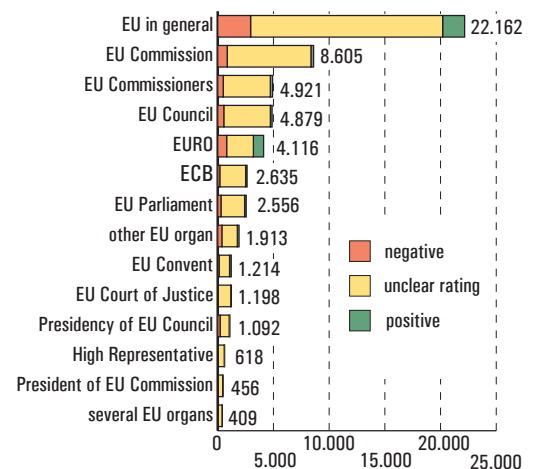
Again, differences between different media outlets are vast. Whereas the main evening news from ARD and ZDF paint a rather balanced picture, the information heavyweights of German public TV – current affairs programmes ranging from Fakt, produced by MDR, to SFB Kontraste have virtually no positive aspects to communicate, when they report about the EU. At least on ZDF's WISO consumer protection activities in Brussels receive positive coverage. Deutsche Welle TV, on the other hand lives up to its claim of being "at the heart of Europe".

Executive bias

Coverage focused on the "executive": 24.6% of all descriptions referred to the European Commission, another 10.5% to the European Council, the real power brokers in the community. On the other hand, only 4.5% focused on the European Parliament, even less than on the ECB (European Central Bank). Only

the European Court of Justice, the European convent and Javier Solana, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy were depicted positively overall, albeit only with a small surplus of positive reports. The "executive bias" of the media results from the priority access of the government to journalists. Symbolic politics, press conferences and informal contacts dominate the relationship between national governments and the "EU government" i.e. the European Commission with the media. With this focus on the "makers and shakers" the media plays down the role of the Parliament and of the other institutions. The worst reporting in terms of valuations concentrated on the rotating Presidency of the European Council. Invariably, every term of this function, which is held by the heads of the governments of the member states for six months, ends with a critical summary. Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi evolved into a sort of "European Ogre" by picking a fight with Martin Schulz, then head of the Socialists in the European Parliament. By denouncing Schulz as a Nazi prison guard, Berlusconi pushed Schulz above the awareness threshold of the European media, and poisoned German-Italian relations to the point where Chancellor Schröder was induced to cancel his planned holiday in Italy after trading insults with the Italian minister for tourism. The gaffe-prone Berlusconi, who among other PR coups lauded Putin's heavy hand in contradiction to the official European stance, has damaged the image of European institutions probably even more than the corrupt officials of Eurostat or the rather colourless figure of Commission President Romano Prodi.

Presence and rating of EU institutions, 01/2003 – 06/2004



Number of reports with at least 5 lines/seconds

Source: Medien Tenor Basis: 56,328 reports (at least 5 lines/seconds) about the EU/EU institutions in 36 German media 01.01.2004 – 30.06.2003

TV news is again dominated by the structure of events. With 12.5% the Council of Ministers figures notably more prominently on TV than in print news. This is probably due to the institutionalized “summit” character of the meetings, forcing the TV stations to send their correspondents to the invariably scenic locations of European Council sessions.

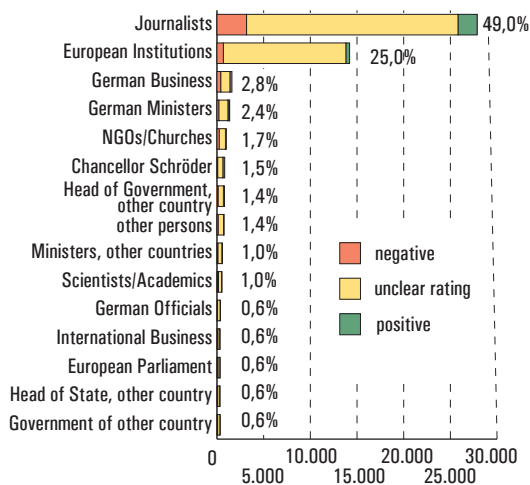
A welcome scapegoat

The European agenda is only to a small extent defined and communicated by the European institutions. Whereas 49% of all stories are dominated by the – overall critical – opinion of the reporting journalists, only a quarter of all reports mainly reflects the position of the European institutions, and only 0.6% the stance of the European Parliament. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, his cabinet, private companies and NGOs receive more attention than the representatives of the European peoples.

Consequently, the grievances of all these interest groups occupy the foreground of the great European picture, leaving little room for positive aspects of integration. On the contrary, “Brussels” can be blamed for things not running smoothly in the sphere of national responsibility, leading to the publication of nonsense stories, like the European banana bend directive.

On top of this, the basic economic argument in favor of the common market is not relished by leading German politicians. Consequently, the emerging competition from the new accession countries is perceived not as a chance, but as a great danger. ”Wage dumping” and ”unfair tax competition” are the battle

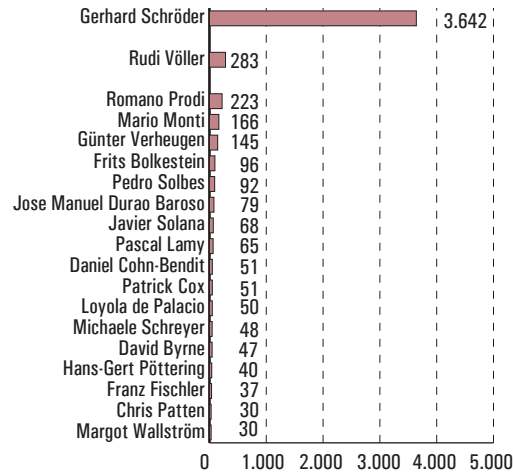
Rating of the EU institutions/ EU by different sources / Share of voice



Number of reports with at least 5 lines/seconds

Source: Medien Tenor 01.01.2004 – 30.06.2003 Basis: 56,328 reports (at least 5 lines/seconds) about the EU/EU institutions in 36 German media

Media presence of selected EU representatives, 01 – 06/2004



Number of reports (at least 5 lines/seconds or headline)

Source: Medien Tenor 01.01. – 30.06.2004 Basis: 86,452 references to individuals in 36 German media

cries of trade unions and populist politicians – up to and including German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. The insights of economic theory do not fit well with the public – and with journalists.

This state of affairs is made worse by the fact that the EU lacks a popular face in the media: In the first half of this year, German national soccer coach Rudi Völler received more attention than Commission President Prodi, not counting the sports sections.

To sum it up, the EU as a whole and in the personification of its leading politicians is not master of its own media image. Whereas national politicians and political parties have a fair chance to overcome media antagonism and the (media) actions of their competitors, the task for EU protagonists is aggravated by the friction of international reporting. This does not make the case for scolding voters, but for self-criticism.

Basis:

Media: Bild, Berliner Zeitung, Die Welt, F.A.Z., Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Tageszeitung (taz); Die Zeit, Focus, Rheinischer Merkur, Spiegel, Stern, Super Illu; Bild am Sonntag, F.A.Z. Sonntagszeitung, Welt am Sonntag; ARD Tagesschau, Tagesthemen (incl. Bericht aus Berlin), Fakt, Kontraste, Monitor, Panorama, Plusminus, Report (BR und SWR), ZDF Heute, Heute Journal, Berlin Direkt, Frontal 21, WiSo, RTL Aktuell, Sat.1 18:30, ProSieben Nachrichten, Deutsche Welle Journal (English and German)

Period of Analysis: 01.01.2003 – 30.06.2004

Analysis: Examination of all stories in the political and business department, making reference to Germany/German protagonists, the EU or to companies. Analysis of EU coverage in terms of protagonists, topics, sources and tone

Even German national coach Rudi Völler outperformed Romano Prodi in terms of media presence

- Open questions:**
- How can the bad image of the EU be overcome:
 - Exchange of perspectives brought about by the exchange of personnel.
 - Diversity of perspectives by joint stories and joint interviews.
 - Asking colleagues and protagonists from other countries to contribute their opinion and view.
 - Unleashing creativity by breaking down the barriers of the routines of departments.
 - Institutionalizing EU coverage by establishing an EU department in every media organisation?