

# 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](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives_en.htm)  
[www.epwahl.de](http://www.epwahl.de)  
[www.europa-digital.de](http://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. Just 43.5% of Germans voted 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 showed 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 – not politically correct to publicly voice opposition of the EU.

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

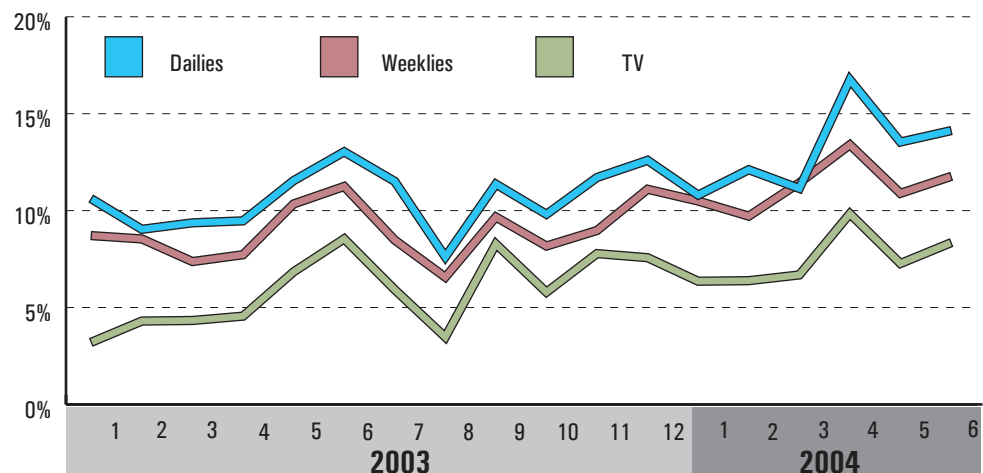
sory glance at the headlines from the beginning of last May supports this claim, but is deceptive. Most journalists welcomed the enlargement of the European Union. Official statements and celebrations were featured prominently in TV news. For instance: “Europe celebrates its enlargement and the unity between East and West attained today. With folk festivals, fireworks, concerts, and many other events new and old members greeted the Union of the 25,” reported the German **Tagesschau** on May 1. “Welcome Union,” in Poland’s **Gazeta Wyborcza** and “Welcome back to the free family of Europe” in the **Daily Telegraph** on the British Isles came out in favor of EU “expansion.” This was the picture painted on holidays. However, day-to-day media coverage of the European Union was 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 from January 2003 through June 2004 made reference to the EU. Awareness of the EU was even lower in TV news. 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 build-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 was rarely the focus 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 programs, the respective share was as low as 2.4%, and even in

## References to the European Union in German media: Comparison of daily press, TV news/current affairs programs and weekly press, 01/23 – 06/04



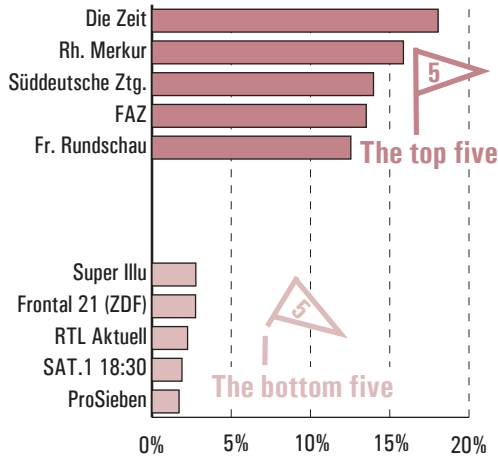
Share of all stories making reference to the EU, EU institutions or the EU economy for at least 5 lines/seconds

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

April 2004, before EU enlargement, it 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

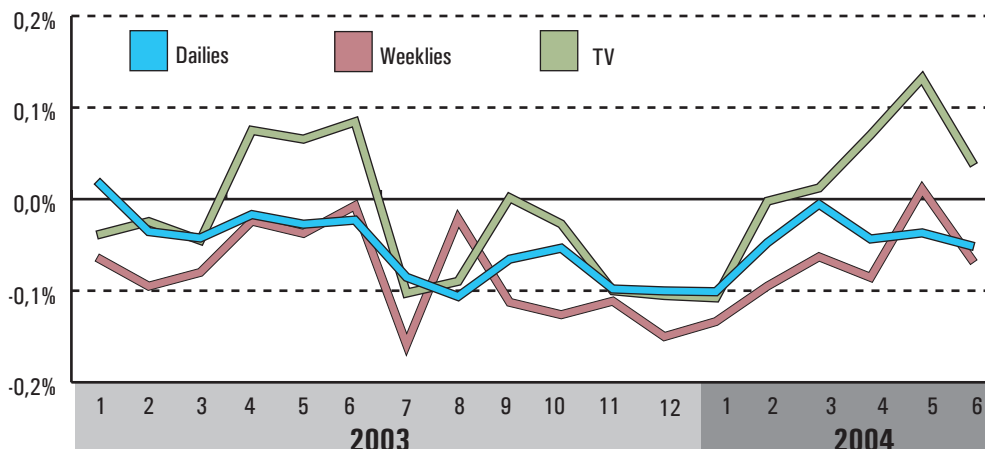
between the media. Whereas weekly media like **Die Zeit** or **Rheinischer Merkur** examine European perspectives in more than 15% of all their reports, the private TV news from **RTL**, **SAT.1** or **ProSieben** virtually ignore the EU in their reporting, with a share of EU references ranging from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

### Negativism abounds

Ratings of the EU and of EU institutions were consistently negative throughout January 2003 through June 2004 (18 months). Overall 12.2% of all descriptions were negative, with just 7.5% positive. Only in one month, January 2003, did the EU enjoy positive coverage. Evaluation of the EU on TV was more positive overall – but also more volatile, which is of course a consequence of the discontinuous coverage. In seven of the 18 months analyzed, 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 rather high at 7.7%.

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

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



Average rating

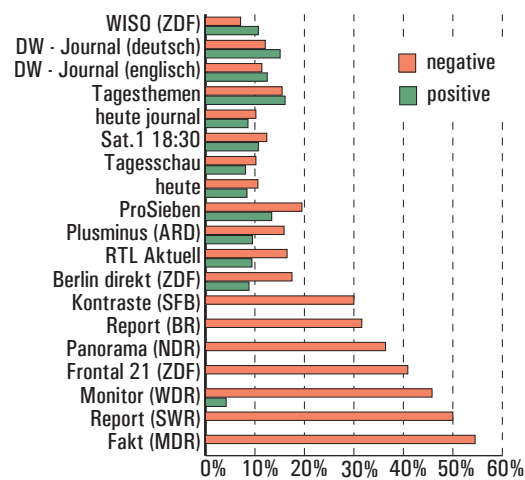
Source: Medien Tenor  
01.01.2003 – 30.06.2004

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 programs



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

ism, conflict and status. Conflicts between EU institutions, fraud and publicity events like EU summits naturally get more awareness than the everyday 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 polarizes 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 newspapers. On the other hand, the image of the commission and the council was even more negative than in other media.

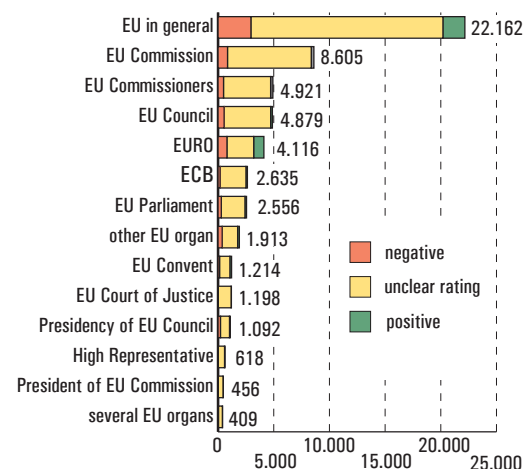
Again, differences between media outlets are vast. Whereas the main evening news from ARD and ZDF paint a rather balanced picture, the information heavyweights of German public TV – current affairs programs ranging from **Fakt**, produced by MDR, to SFB **Kontraste** - have virtually no positive aspects to communicate, when they report about the EU. On ZDF's **WISO**, at least 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

Media coverage is focused on the "executive" with 24.6% of all reports referring to the European Commission and 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, and even less on the ECB (European Cen-

tral 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. Focusing on the "movers and shakers," the media plays down the role of the parliament and other institutions. The worst reporting in terms of valuations concentrated on the rotating Presidency of the European Council. Invariably, every term of this office, 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 colorless 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. The Council of Ministers, with a 12.5% share, is notably more prominent on TV than in print news. This is probably due to the institutionalized “summit” character of the meetings, forcing TV stations to send their correspondents to the invariably scenic locations of European Council sessions.

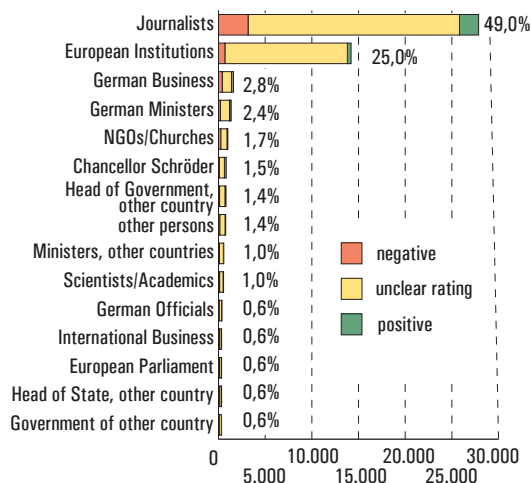
### A welcome scapegoat

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 primarily reflect the position of European institutions, and only 0.6% reflect the stance of 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.

Furthermore, 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 an opportunity, but as a great danger. “Wage dumping” and “unfair tax competition” are the bat-

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

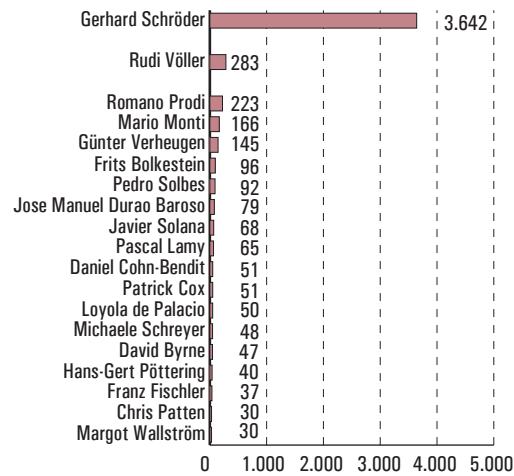


Number of reports with at least 5 lines/seconds

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

tle 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, nor 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.

In conclusion, 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) attacks 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?