

Agenda Setting Newsletter



6th International Agenda Setting
Conference, Lugano 26-28.10.2005

International media image of U.S. once again suffers

President George W. Bush's trip to Europe had a positive effect on the international media image of the U.S., but it waned quickly. In March, as they had prior to February, media in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, presented the U.S. in a predominantly negative tone. The prevailing negative public sentiment in Germany toward the U.S. and the president in particular is thus also unlikely to change. The polling institute ipsos found that German respondents' negative opinion toward the U.S. exceeded their negative opinion of France by a factor of six. In the same poll, conducted 18 months ago, they gave President Bush a negative 2.7 rating on a scale between negative 5 and plus 5, while the French president received a plus 1.5 rating. "Only one month of positive reporting on the U.S. related to the Bush visit to Europe is not enough to change the general climate," says Markus Rettich, head of political research at the International Media Tenor Institute, based in Bonn, Germany.

Media Tenor is performing a continuous analysis of the news coverage of the U.S. in European, Middle Eastern and Asian print and TV news outlets. During Bush's trip to Europe, the media coverage in most of the analyzed countries was considerably less negative than before. The analysis of the coverage in March, however, showed that the volume of reporting on the U.S. and the president decreased and became generally more negative in tone than in February. This was the case particularly in media such as El Pais, Handelsblatt and Al Quds.

Within Europe, El Pais had the most negative coverage of the U.S., featuring issues such as international conflicts and the treatment of POWs. The increase in negative coverage in Corriere della Sera was due to reporting on the death of an Italian journalist. Even though Italian media criticized the military, their coverage was generally less critical than one might expect.

In March, U.K. media, particularly the Times, focused its coverage on Iraq, and was predominantly negative in tone. Following the school shooting in the Red Lake reservation, there was also a higher volume of coverage of violent crime in the U.S.

In Germany, Media Tenor registered an increased volume of coverage in TV news broadcasts, which closely followed the controversy around whether or not to prolong Terry Schiavo's life support. This resulted in a spike in negative coverage of issues related to the social environment in the U.S. In contrast, there was less coverage of the U.S. in print media, which focused mostly on Iraq.

Breaking down the news coverage in every country by individual news outlets, Media Tenor found that in recent reporting, the amount of news coverage did not necessarily correlate with how negative the tone of the coverage was. On ARD Tagesthemen, BBC1 six o'clock and BBC1 nine o'clock news, the coverage of the U.S. was both low and negative in tone, while in El Pais the U.S. received increased coverage, of which 19% consisted of negative reports (relative to only about 5% positive coverage).

Unlike European media, Middle East media outlets featured increased coverage of the U.S. in March relative to February. As in Europe, the tone of coverage was more negative in March, doing away with the slight improvement of the media image of the U.S. there. Al Jazeera's journalists featured U.S. administration officials as a source mostly when reporting on domestic security, democracy and elections. Interestingly, media in the Middle East have generally displayed a strong tendency toward using U.S. administration sources in their news coverage. This is contrary to coverage in European media, where the president and his administration had much less of a voice. Similarly, strong U.S. administration sourcing, also kept with the more general Middle East media trend of relying much less on the opinions of their own journalists, compared to European or Asian media.

In Asia, news coverage of the U.S. also remained predominantly negative in tone. While in February reporting in Japanese media concentrated on elections and building democratic structures, in March there was a shift toward coverage of defense policies, export demand and the wrangling around talks with the North Korean government. The news coverage in China's People's Daily was quite negative overall, but reports on international relationships and international trade were balanced in tone.