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Clashing Worlds and Images: Media and Politics in the United States and Germany BY KARIN L. JOHNSTON

Have the Media Become
Part of the Problem in
Transatlantic Relations?

Germany and the
United States:
Differing Media Realities?

What Forces Shaped U.S. and
German Reporting on Iraq?

Does Media Reporting
Reinforce Negative
Stereotypes?

Is the U.S. Media Becoming
More Critical of Itself and the
Bush Administration?

Is the German Media
Becoming more Americanized?

What is the Relationship
Between the Media,
Government Decision-makers,
and Public Opinion?

What Role do the Media have
in Shaping Mutual Perceptions
Across the Atlantic?

Over the last two years the German-American relationship has been rocked by some of the most tumultuous and emotional conflicts in over five decades—the 2002 German elections and Schröder’s public rejection of American policies in Iraq; harsh recriminations surrounding the failed second UN resolution in early 2003; tensions over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and future of the broader Middle East; and, above all, the war in Iraq and continuing postwar instability. These conflicts have been played out in intense public debates at home and across the Atlantic and amidst a political and moral tug of war in the media.

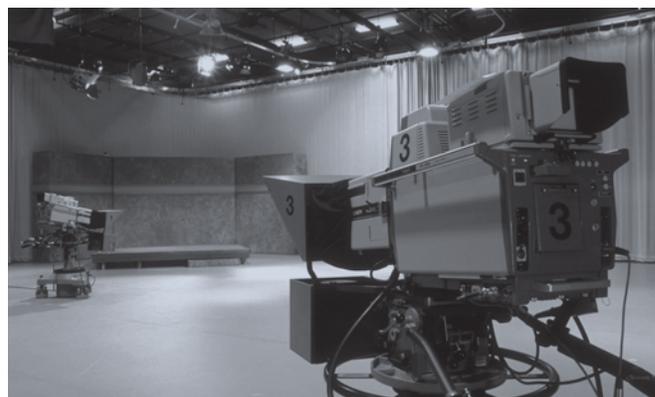
Although both governments in recent months have made concerted efforts to mend fences, popular opinion, particularly in Germany, continues to take a decidedly negative view of the Bush administration and its policies. Additionally, media coverage of and commentary on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the post-conflict situation in Iraq, as well as opinion surveys, suggest that published and public opinion will not be easy to turn around—despite the pragmatic tone struck in national capitals. Whether the mass media are merely a reflection of growing alienation from the United States or have themselves played a part in sustaining the perception gap across the Atlantic is unclear.

The German and U.S. Media: Policies, Perspectives, and Presentations in Conflict?

Differences over the Iraq war have indisputably led to unprecedented tensions in the transatlantic relationship. To explore the media’s role in this transatlantic rift, AICGS hosted a conference on January 9, 2004 entitled “The Media and German-American Relations: Policies, Perspectives and Presentations in Conflict?” Supported by the Thyssen Foundation, the Halle Institute at Emory University, Deutsche Welle, and the RIAS Berlin Commission, the conference brought together representatives of the German and American print, radio, and television media. Participants included Steve Erlanger, *The New York Times*, Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Marvin Kalb, Joan Shorenstein Center, Harvard University, Jamie McIntyre, CNN, and Roland Schatz, Media Tenor. For a conference summary, please go to: http://www.aicgs.org/events/2004/0109_2004_summary.shtml.

What is more certain is that U.S. and German publics over the last two years have been exposed to startling differences in images and language used to characterize the conflict in Iraq and the evolving postwar situation. Often one-sided and prone to negative stereotyping, the coverage of Iraq in Germany and the United States raises questions about the current state of media reporting and the potential impact of the mass media on the opinions of the listening and viewing publics.

Have the media become part of the problem in transatlantic relations? Are different media realities an indication of a growing values and interest gap—in other words, a reflection of new realities in transatlantic relations—or are the media driving opinion, in response to market demand and the competitive pressures facing many German and American media outlets? What is the relationship between the media, government decision-makers, and public



opinion? What initial lessons can be drawn from a comparison of media presentations on the issues surrounding the American-led intervention in Iraq?

The U.S. Media and the Iraq War: Blind-sided or Business as Usual?

Content analyses of media coverage showed that U.S. print, TV, and radio presentations of the Iraq conflict tended to lend credence to the Bush administration's carefully constructed case for going to war. The media reported extensively on the administration's position that Iraq had acquired weapons of mass destruction (WMD), had connections to terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda, and that it was imperative to move quickly to protect the United States by preventing those weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists.¹

In broadcast news, particularly on the cable news talk shows, the tone struck was more supportive of the war than negative. Fox News Channel's coverage tended to be the most pro-war; for every negative statement about the Bush administration, three positive statements were presented. Coverage by the three major news networks was mixed overall, though ABC tended to be most critical and Fox most supportive. Some broadcast journalists, such as Dan Rather, freely acknowledged a pro-war bias and defended the patriotism that fed it.² In print coverage, front-page news reports focused on the Bush administration's message of the imminence of a triple threat from Saddam Hussein, global terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Anti-war demonstrations, when covered, rarely appeared as headline news or on page one. The media helped to create the impression of a gradual though inevitable movement towards war.

During the war itself, U.S. reporting, both print and television, focused on the war's prosecution—both through reports by "embedded" journalists and with commentary by retired military officers offering their expert opinion on tactics and strategy. Many stories were crafted for local news consump-

tion and focused on U.S. soldiers in the field and their families at home. Graphic images of dead U.S. soldiers generally were not shown, contrary to other countries' media outlets, which displayed much more graphic images of U.S. and civilian casualties. Contrary, too, to footage seen in countries like Germany, there was less U.S. reporting on civilian casualties and the impact on the Iraqis themselves than on the military campaign itself.

The framing of the conflict in the U.S. media largely followed the main outlines set forth by the administration and did not always acknowledge the public's concerns about going to war—concerns often shared by Americans who were nominally supportive. Americans debated whether immediate military action in Iraq was necessary or justified, but the Bush administration was persistent in its assertion that a war against Saddam Hussein was a self-defensive act that was part of the larger war against terrorism. Americans strongly supported the president's insistence on requiring Iraq to accept inspections, but qualified their support for war by voicing the expectation that the administration would secure UN approval (less than a third favored unilateral action).

While media outlets reported that a solid majority of Americans supported the president's decision to go to war, the picture was, in fact, more nuanced. While surveys showed that a plurality or a small majority tended to support the president's choice of going to war, another 15 to 20 percent within the quoted "solid majority" of Americans did not necessarily agree with Bush's decision but declared they would support the president should he proceed. American leaders and the public expressed strong patriotic feelings and their support for troops

in the field, but in May 2003—when victory was fresh—only 53 percent supported the choice for war because they thought it was the best thing to do, while another 15 percent felt unsure of this, but supported Bush because he was the president.³

Following the declared end of “major hostilities” in Iraq, doubts about the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq began to grow. The failure to find any solid evidence of WMD—the initial, primary justification for invading Iraq—the absence of evidence that Iraq provided direct assistance to Al Qaeda as was strongly inferred, the administration’s inability to stop the violence and instability in postwar Iraq, and finally, growing concerns about U.S. fatalities in Iraq and the seemingly open-ended nature of U.S. engagement in the country have reversed popular opinion on whether the war was justified. The U.S. media also have been forced to answer the question of why they failed to adequately challenge the government’s case for war.

Many American journalists in retrospect have conceded that coverage of the Iraq conflict was flawed. While many of these criticisms may be unique to reporting on the Iraq war specifically, the controversy surrounding the very public mea culpa of the *New York Times* regarding its own failures in reporting, and *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller’s role in those blunders, suggest that the problems are embedded in the culture of American journalism today. Among the criticisms to emerge from the media’s self-examination of its role in reporting the war on Iraq are:

- insufficient corroboration (independent or separate verification) of information fed to journalists in the rush to scoop the competitors, increase ratings, or get a front page story;
- over-reliance on sources sympathetic to the government’s views and on anonymous sources;
- prominent placement of official government statements on page one, while other stories that challenged the government’s case were rarely placed on or near the front page;
- publicizing of claims from sources that supported the administration’s case, even though intelligence sources or others had repudiated their reliability.

Outside analyses tend to support the view that the shortcomings in U.S. media reporting on Iraq are the product of many common practices in journalism. Susan Moeller, Assistant Professor in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, analyzed press coverage on WMD during the Iraq crisis and found that poor coverage was less the result of political bias held by reporters, editors, or producers than from established journalistic conventions. For example, the “inverted pyramid” style of print stories, where

statements from major figures are reported in the lead and alternative views are cited much farther down, allowed the administration’s interpretation to carry the greater weight.⁴

Furthermore, the U.S. media tends to report events from a U.S.-centric perspective; this, along with the fact that coverage of foreign news and opinion has continually declined in recent years, means that viewers and readers are unaware of the political debate outside of the United States. In addition, heavy reliance on quotes of administration officials made the coverage one-sided and gave the appearance that there was little opposition to the Bush policy—or, put another way, that there was near consensus on the administration’s intended course of action both within the policy elite and the American public, which was not, in fact, the case.

More broadly, the Iraq case has amplified ongoing debates about changes that have negatively impacted the journalistic profession in the United States:

- Technological changes—cable news, the internet—have fragmented the U.S. media landscape. The competition for audiences and dollars, along with the pressures of round-the-

U.S. and German Views

Foreign policy isn’t made by the media. But in the Information Age, it can’t be made without it.
- *Warren P. Strobel, Knight Ridder*

American television networks remained convinced that the [Iraq] war had to be fought in the wake of 9/11 ... German television dealt with the images in a highly critical way ... I believe these differences will persist for a long time to come. The same images will be used, but they will be evaluated and commented on differently.
- *Jo Groebel, European Institute for the Media*

The need for facts is never more acute and the news media’s duty of witness never more urgent than when the issue is war and peace.
- *Tim Rutten, LA Times*

Every journalist needs information, but is aware that sources have their own interests as well. Therefore, each source must be checked. The choice of reports is determined by relevance, not by availability or the impact of images.
- *Markus Rettich, n-tv*

clock news programming, has led to downsizing, closing of foreign bureaus, cost-cutting measures in the newsroom, and a “softening” of hard news to make it more entertaining for the audience;

- Changes in the economic ownership and the management of media over the last decade have resulted in corporate owners expecting profitability from news divisions, which has led to pressure to keep ratings up, costs down, and to cut corners in checking sources or verifying facts in order to scoop competitors;
- The distinction between journalism and opinion is vanishing; a large segment of what is sold as news, particularly on the “shout shows” on cable and radio news shows, does not

appear to adhere to standard journalistic practices but, rather, to the dictates of “pseudo-journalism,” in which journalists opine and predict, rather than report, and where inaccurate information is often presented but rarely corrected;

- Television, in particular, is blurring the lines between journalism and politics, with journalists opining or predicting, rather than reporting;
- Journalists have become part of the policy elite; celebrity journalists or columnists may find it difficult to keep the necessary distance to power and authority and retain a healthy dose of skepticism vis-à-vis “fed” information from official sources.⁵

The German Media and the Iraq War: Balance or Bias?

As in the American case, German coverage closely reflected the government’s official position and public opinion on Iraq. In August 2002, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder appealed to the public’s strong anti-war sentiment by declaring that Germany would not participate in any “adventure” in Iraq, regardless of whether the UN passed a resolution in support of military action. The German government continued its active opposition to the early use of force in Iraq in tandem with the French, and eventually the Russian, government, a position that enjoyed strong public support.

Negative coverage of the United States grew throughout the first half of 2003, as international efforts to prevent the impending war failed. American anti-war demonstrations and commentators were frequently reported, sometimes receiving more coverage in Germany than in the United States. The language used to describe images of the United States often was negative, one-sided, and frequently stereotypical. A few examples:



- The February 20, 2003 cover of *Stern*, a popular German weekly magazine, depicted Schröder’s David to Bush’s Goliath with the words, “Rebellion Against America;”
- Vietnam analogies and stories were frequent, both before the war (anti-war demonstrations compared to those in the late 1960s) and after the war (e.g., *Der Spiegel’s* cover title: “The Case of Iraq: Bush’s Vietnam,” April 19, 2004);
- The *Stern* cover of March 20, 2003 depicted Bush as the Statue of Liberty, with the title: “Bush plays with fire—war in the name of freedom...will the whole world be burning soon?” An inside photo showing Bush and his cabinet after 9/11 sported the subtitle: “They are planning America’s dominance in the world.”

The tone and emphasis in mainstream media reporting further reflected widespread distrust of U.S. motives and rationales for going to war—the charge that Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction posed an imminent threat to the United States, the supposed link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, and the goal of democratizing the Middle East. German newspapers and broadcast networks instead ascribed other motives for U.S. action in Iraq: the need for cheap oil, and the desire to expand U.S. global power.

As in the United States, media reporting and commentary was largely consonant with dominant trends in public opinion. As the Pew Center’s 2003 survey reflected, in the build-up to war positive attitudes toward the United States declined as the negative reporting on Iraq increased. Much of the public dissent was based in strong opposition to U.S. policies, though

a majority of Germans thought that Bush, rather than America in general, was to blame for the war. Public opinion polls in March 2003 showed that 69 percent of Germans opposed the war, and 84 percent felt the war was unjustified.⁶ Favorable views of the United States fell precipitously, from 78 percent in 1999 to 25 percent in March 2003.⁷

The vehement public opposition to the war made journalistic attempts at providing a different perspective extremely difficult. Some Washington-based reporters commented later that they had found it very difficult to convince their editors to run stories that did not buttress the image of a unilateralist, united America bent on conducting a devastating war against the tenets of existing international law and against an Iraqi population that would suffer significant casualties over a long period of time.⁸ They faced hostile readers who wrote scathing emails and canceled subscriptions, making editors even more reluctant to consider running stories that presented a more nuanced view of Americans and the American debate.

The critical tone that characterized pre-war reporting was sustained after the commencement of military actions in Iraq. During the war, images shown on German television focused on Iraqi civilian casualties, the capture of American soldiers, and the devastation and human costs of war. In a country where many people still remember what it is to experience war, the images had a powerful impact.

ONE YEAR LATER: AN ASSESSMENT

In the aftermath of the war and the absence of any hard evidence of the existence of WMD and direct ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, there appears to be no comparable reassessment of how the German media covered the Iraq crisis, perhaps because most German media outlets feel that subsequent developments have confirmed their perspectives. German journalists expressed shock at how—as one journalist put it—the American media had become the “lapdogs of the [U.S.] government,”⁹ while not being particularly worried about the one-sided reporting of their own media industry.

Some German commentators argue that German journalists have no right to be complacent or self-congratulatory. Although trends in today’s journalism may be further advanced in the United States, the German media is not far behind. Germany has a dual broadcast media system of public and commercial broadcasting, and while the public arm of broadcasting is relatively protected from economic downswings, the commercial broadcasters and print media have experienced a fiscal crisis that has led to deep budget cuts, large lay-offs, and the same ensuing problems seen in U.S. media outlets.

In the end, both the German and American media may have fallen short of the standards that professionals in both countries embrace. The German media did a poor job of explaining why many Americans were more supportive of military engagement in Iraq—the cultural and historical context of the U.S. debate, the lingering 9/11 effects—as well as the fact that the path to war was preceded by a robust debate. American media outlets, on the other hand, did a bad job of covering why Germans were so opposed to the U.S. policy in Iraq—their own historical experience, and a value-based commitment to international law and multilateral action.

ABU GHRAIB: A NARROWING OF DIFFERENCES?

The disparities in coverage of the situation in Iraq have been sustained, to some degree, in reporting and commentary on the postwar situation, including revelations regarding alleged abuse and torture in the Abu Ghraib prison by U.S. military and civilian personnel. The most evident contrast is in the use of the word “abuse” in the United States and of “torture” in Germany to describe the growing scandal. In the initial stages, U.S. reporting focused on the small group of soldiers and the conditions that purportedly led to the abuse: overcrowding in the prison; dangerous working conditions; untrained guards; insufficient number of personnel to guard prisoners; lack of command supervision; low morale; and the apparent absence of established rules of interrogation. The German coverage on Abu Ghraib has described the acts as a violation of the Geneva Conventions as well as a systematic abuse and violation of human rights. More specifically, a direct link is drawn in German coverage between Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, where the German media has consistently criticized the Bush administration’s handling of detainees captured in Afghanistan and its insistence that the detainees are “illegal combatants,” not prisoners of war, and thus not covered by the Geneva Conventions.¹⁰

There may be signs of narrowing of differences, however, particularly in light of disclosures that in August 2002 and March 2003 Justice Department and Pentagon lawyers produced legal memoranda arguing that President Bush, as commander-in-chief, could legally override any international laws prohibiting torture because such laws “may be unconstitutional if applied to interrogation” of terrorists in order to protect the nation’s security.¹¹ Leading U.S. media outlets continue to follow closely the ongoing investigations, while commentaries have directly raised the question of whether these legal arguments, written in response to a request for guidance by the U.S. Southern Command that oversees Guantanamo Bay, contributed to the permissive atmosphere that led to the mistreatment of detainees in Abu Ghraib.

Differing Media Realities Reflect Differing Perspectives

Why were Germans and Americans exposed to different media realities with regard to the Iraq conflict? As noted previously, some disparities can be explained by the disparate structures of the mass media in Germany and the United States and the asymmetric effects of market forces. Additionally, however, media coverage appeared to reflect the dominant historical, cultural, and political prisms that each society used to make sense of the conflict. The cultural context influenced German and American viewpoints on the war and infused media reporting in both countries :

- **Use of force.** German history and the experience of war have created a public deeply skeptical of the efficacy of using force and predisposed to using force only as a last resort and only within a multilateral context. Americans were more willing to support military action, on a basis of self-defense, when given strong claims from authoritative sources about the nature of the threat.
- **Multilateralism.** Support of multilateral institutions and for the process of consensus-building are deeply held tenets of German foreign policy. While a majority of Americans still support the UN and a multilateral approach to solving global problems, the U.S. strategic debate under the Bush administration emphasizes the right of the United States to undertake unilateral action if it is deemed necessary to protect U.S. vital interests.
- **International law/norms.** In Germany the war in Iraq was consistently depicted as a violation of international law. There was anger at the U.S. dismissal of the validity of international laws, regimes, and norms that govern international behavior. The Bush administration argued it had tried to involve the UN as much as possible in a grave matter that involved the self-defense of the United States and the requirement, under UN resolution 1441, for complete cooperation from Iraq, but failure to obtain UN support would not prevent the United States from protecting itself.



- **Human rights.** Germany's difficult postwar history also contributed to a strong sense of the need for international human rights, and German news coverage raised the issue of an American-led war violating these rights. The United States saw the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as justified by his horrendous human rights record—i.e. it situated the argument for human rights violations specifically within Saddam Hussein's regime and his elimination as liberating the Iraqi people.
- **Approach to terrorism.** Given their own domestic experiences, Germans do not feel that "winning" a war on terrorism is feasible, nor do they necessarily believe that military tools are more effective in fighting non-state actors. They tend to see terrorism in international coordination terms, while Americans see terrorism in national strategic terms. For Americans, the collective trauma of 9/11 has driven terrorism to the top of the list of concerns and continues to infuse both domestic and foreign policy deliberations.

The Media and German-American Relations

German and American reporting on the Iraq war both reflected and shaped societal perspectives and public opinion. Culture, values, and history at times infused the framing of issues, the selection of language, and the tone of reporting on both sides of the Atlantic. Other differences, however, appear to be rooted in journalistic conventions as well as market trends that are transforming journalism both in the United States and Germany.

A better understanding is needed of the relative influence of cultural reflexes, journalistic practices, and market pressures on media images and reporting in the United States and Germany. Under what circumstances do our respective cultural prisms perhaps unduly influence reporting? Or is war reporting an exception? What factors are decisive in shaping reporting more generally on events across the Atlantic?

Further, given the role of media in informing the public and framing public policy debates, what is the relationship between reporting, public opinion and perceptions, and policy debates? Even if the media influences public opinion, does it matter? What are the policy implications of media trends for the public diplomacy of the United States and Germany to inform and educate audiences on the other side of the Atlantic about the complex realities of their respective societies? Efforts to shape more informed publics in both countries will fail unless they take into account the influence of competing voices in the German and American media. Future research should focus on the nexus of issues related to media reporting, public opinion, and the implications of these linkages for governmental and non-governmental initiatives to build greater understanding of each other's polities and policies. ■

Notes

1 See "The Media Go to War: TV News Coverage of the War in Iraq," *Media Monitor*, July/August 2003, Volume XVIII, Number 2, (Center for Media and Public Affairs: Washington, D.C.), 2003; "Media Tenor, 3/2003, (Media Tenor: Bonn), 2003; "The Media and German-American Relations: Policies, Perspectives and Presentations in Conflict," AICGS Conference Summary, January 9, 2004, http://www.aicgs.org/events/2004/01092004_summary.shtml

2 Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, Evan Lewis, "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 118, no. 4, Winter 2003/2004, pp. 592-593. Website: <http://www.psqonline.org/>

3 Kull, Ramsay, Lewis, p. 595; see also "Americans on Iraq War and Finding Weapons of Mass Destruction," PIPA/Knowledge Networks Survey, May 31, 2003. Website: http://pipa.org/whatsnew/html/new_6_04_03.html.

4 Susan D. Moeller, "Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction," CISSM Report, March 9, 2004 (Center for International and Security Studies (CISSM), University of Maryland: College Park, MD), 2004. Website: <http://www.cissm.umd.edu/>.

5 Cynthia Gorney, "The Business of News: A Challenge for Journalism's Next Generation," Carnegie Corporation of New York, Forum on the Public Interest and the Business of News (Carnegie Corporation of New York: New York), 2002; Marvin Kalb, "The Rise of the 'New News:' A Case Study of Two Root Causes of the Modern Scandal Coverage," Discussion Paper D-34, October 1998, The Joan Shorenstein Center for the Press and Politics, Harvard University; "The State of the News Media 2004: An Annual Report on American Journalism," The Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004.

6 Robert J. McCartney, "In Berlin, TV Bolsters Opposition to Iraq Conflict," *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2003, p. C8.

7 The Pew Global Attitudes Survey, "But Post-War Iraq Will Be Better Off, Most Say, America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties," Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2003.

8 John Lloyd, "Europe's Intellectuals Unite!" *Financial Times*, February 2, 2003, p. 11.

9 "The U.S. Through the Eyes of Others," hosted by Ralph Begleiter, Great Decisions TV Transcript 2002, http://www.fpa.org/topics_info_show.htm?doc_id=96024

10 Guantanamo detainees are designated by the United States as either Taliban or al Qaeda fighters; both categories, in turn, are designated as "illegal combatants," not prisoners of war. The administration's argument is that the 3rd Geneva Convention on prisoners of war thus does not apply to the detainees, since the 3rd Convention requires minimal signs of organization and identification for a fighting group's members to receive POW status. In any case, the United States remains in breach of the 4th Geneva Convention, which covers other categories of people swept up in a combat situation or in a military occupation and provides a fundamental set of guarantees regardless of status.

11 Mike Allen and Dana Priest, "Memo on Torture Draws Focus to Bush: Aide Says President Set Guidelines for Interrogations, Not Specific Techniques," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2004, p. A03.

The Media, Perceptions, and Policy in German-American Relations

The AICGS Study Group's discussion of the impact of the media on public and elite opinion and perceptions, on policy and policy debates in Germany and the United States, and on the bilateral relationship, will focus on the following issues:

- **Reporting in the Internet Age:** We will consider the implications of structural, economic, and technological trends in the media sector and in news consumption, particularly the impact of the Internet and cable TV on foreign reporting.
- **Reporting Across the Atlantic:** What U.S. and German events and developments are considered “newsworthy” in each country—and who decides? How do policies governing reporting and/or commentary on events across the Atlantic compare in Germany and the United States?
- **The Media and Youth Perceptions:** How, if at all, does media reporting affect the mutual perceptions of younger Germans and Americans? Are other sources of information (e.g. popular culture, education, personal experiences, etc.) more influential in shaping youth perceptions? Do the media help to foster “anti-Americanism” or “anti-Europeanism”?
- **The Media and Public Opinion in Germany and the United States:** What influence, if any, do the media have on public opinion in Germany and the United States with regard to each other's societies, political debates, and mutual relations?
- **The Media and the Policy Process:** What sources of information shape the perspectives of parliamentarians or government officials? In the case of the recent Iraq war, were the media, in this sense, part of a larger war or public diplomacy strategy in both countries?
- **Policy Implications:** Finally, the group will specifically examine the concrete policy implications of media reporting and public perceptions on issues critical to the current transatlantic agenda and consider the implications for U.S. and German public diplomacy as both countries seek to positively influence public perceptions and convey a more differentiated view of contemporary Germany and the United States to audiences across the Atlantic.

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