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Lost in Translation: The Impact of Culture on the Media in the United States and Germany

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What symbols are used in the German and American media?

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How do cultural and historical underpinnings impact the media on both sides of the Atlantic and what kind of challenge does that present?

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What role can the media play in explaining these cultural assumptions?

Introduction

The role of the media as an influencer in domestic politics is also crossing over into foreign policy as well. This holds true for the German-American relationship. Media reporting on both sides of the Atlantic influences not only public opinion but also serves as a key measurement of how the other country is perceived. The tensions between Germany and the United States over the Iraq War in 2003 served as an important reminder of the power of the media. Some of the reporting—on both sides—relied on clichés of the other country and reporting about the German or U.S. position was sometimes not objective, leading to an important question: Did the reporting about the United States in Germany, for example, reinforce anti-Americanism or were anti-American sentiments already so prevalent in the population that the German media had no other choice than to answer this public pressure by reflecting them?

This debate also aims at the question of cultural influences on the media. Exploring the cultural influences that help to “frame” German and American media reporting on important topics and understanding the implications of these different frames for U.S.-German and transatlantic relations, will be an important tool to understanding the media’s influence on German-American relations. In the age of globalization, media can influence public opinion around the globe in an instant. Public diplomacy on both sides of the Atlantic will have to take the influence of the media into account in their efforts to reach populations around the globe if they want to be successful. However, the ability of the U.S. or German government to control images and messages about their respective countries is limited, because they have relatively little power to control the modern media environment. Media can be a powerful vehicle for public diplomacy efforts by governments and companies. But media outlets are not neutral entities, and they act according to their own set of imperatives, including what “sells” or makes for “good TV.” What is reported and where, how it is reported, and how often it is reported are all decisions that help to shape public perceptions of an issue and its salience, and of our respective policies on that issue.¹

Reporting is influenced by cultural factors that shape journalists’, producers’, and editors’ framing of issues and selection of images—frames that are shaped in part by our respective

cultures, history, values, and traditions. These frames are often unarticulated or tacit, yet can have a powerful influence, particularly on how a story is reported. The cultural influences underlying our media frames, as well as our different policy approaches, are too often “lost in translation,” as journalists and commentators necessarily reduce complex realities into digestible bits designed to capture audiences in a fiercely competitive media environment. War and peace, for example, the conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq or elsewhere around the world; economic issues; and topics related to immigration, religion, and diversity are all issues currently in the news. Analyzing the media’s reporting on these issues especially highlights the cultural component of media reporting in general. By examining the symbols used in the media and by understanding what cultural issues and understandings drive reporting on these important topics of our time on both sides of the Atlantic, the actors in transatlantic relations can understand how to control these images better and how to ensure that important issues do not get overly contorted in either country and have a negative effect on German-American relations. Understanding the cultural impact on the media in Germany and the United States should then lead to a broader understanding of the influence of culture on the thinking and decision-making not only of the elite, but the population as a whole in both countries.

Symbols in the German and American Media

As previous projects by AICGS have shown, reporting on important but culturally sensitive issues has been hampered by the “mechanics” of media reporting. Because of the limited amount of time and resources the media has for reporting multi-faceted issues, they are often forced to resort to well-understood symbols as substitutes for in-depth analysis. This is especially evident in reporting on complex issues such as religion, immigration, the Middle East, and economic issues.

Symbols in the German Media

The German media relies on symbols, which not only save time, but also give an easy reference frame for the audience. One example is the concept of American conditions (*Amerikanische Verhältnisse*). Exploited not only by the media, but also by politicians, the use of this all-encompassing phrase supplants a meaningful analysis of what exactly American conditions are, what they look like, and how they can or cannot become reality in Germany and Europe. The symbol of American conditions is furthermore often taken together with the concept of globalization, and the symbols get mixed up, intertwined, and sometimes used interchangeably, blurring the line further of what exactly American conditions are. Rarely does one see an article in the German press analyzing real American economic conditions and so the short-hand of American conditions has already been accepted and used as a base for the German understanding of American economic problems, which they perceive as threatening a European way of life.

RELIGION AND IMMIGRATION IN GERMANY

In reporting about issues pertaining to religion and immigration, the German media also relies on symbols. In both the German and French media, the headscarf is the most used symbol

when it comes to Islam, and Muslim-non-Muslim relations. As a symbol in the media, it is often used to conjure the feeling of Muslims as being “the other,” as different from the modernized Western world. It symbolizes the alleged suppressed role of women in Islam and the question of the compatibility of Muslims with the secularized West, which prides itself on the strict separation of church and state. Immigration and religion are often blurred in the German media because of the focus on immigrants from Turkey, who are predominantly Muslim. The conflicts that play out between the German society and immigrants—often now living in Germany in the third generation—are also symbolized by the building of larger mosques in Germany. The desire of the Muslim community in Cologne, for example, to build a mosque has been turned into a battle by some between Islam and the West not in small part due to the media coverage of this issue, which has used these symbols to simplify the debate. While the United States understands itself as a nation of immigrants, the narrative in Germany on immigration is still in flux, as Germany comes to terms with immigration and integration of immigrants.



Symbols in the American Media

Similar to their German counterpart, the American media also relies on symbols. Yet the same symbols used in the United States and in Germany are often placed in a different context and are connected to differing cultural and historical associations on both sides of the Atlantic.

RELIGION AND IMMIGRATION IN THE U.S.

The American Media relies on symbols especially when it is covering issues of religion and immigration. The portrayal of the “good” (assimilated American) versus the “bad” (non-Westernized) Muslim abroad has substituted the even less differentiated portrayal of Muslims after the terrorist attacks of September 11, which equated Muslims in Beirut with their religious brothers in Chicago or Detroit without allowing for any differences among them. A more differentiated discussion is lacking in the American media. Symbols can be understood differently in different cultures. For example, the headscarf in one culture can be taken to mean the suppression of women’s

rights and the state’s restriction of religion, whereas in another culture, this same symbol can be taken as a sign of freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

When covering issues of immigration, the American media still relies on symbols such as the Statue of Liberty and the classic immigration story of people wanting to come to the United States to stay, when, in fact, a majority of immigrants are not coming to stay but plan on leaving after having worked for several years. While that may or may not hold true in the end, at least in the beginning these are the intentions of people coming (legally and illegally) to the U.S., a fact which is completely missed by the media. The American media, while not primarily responsible for this myth, has also proven inadequate in dispelling it. The same goes for distinguishing between legal and illegal immigration, which does not foster an analytical debate about the issue of immigration itself and the impact or non-impact immigration has on the American society. The impact or non-impact on the society, however, is mostly neglected in favor of a moral argument about legal and illegal immigration, splitting the issue unnecessarily into two parts.

The Impact of Culture on the German and American Media

The use of symbols in the debates and the reporting in the media on both sides of the Atlantic is often impacted by the cultural, historical, and traditional frameworks that both countries work with and which are therefore also part of the media. All human beings and societies try to understand the problems and challenges that they are facing by applying past experiences and common understandings based on these past experiences. The media is no exception.

German Perceptions of American Economic Conditions

In Germany, the cultural perceptions of American conditions are largely influenced by the legacy of the Cold War, both positively and negatively: The United States was seen by some as an economic model for success and modernization, but also by others as a superpower guilty of cultural imperialism. However, before one can place blame on the United States, other factors must be considered. These changes are not due solely to Americanization, but also to globalization. Indeed, globalization may play an even larger role in the modernization of developing countries.

In economic terms, Germans are more risk adverse, in contrast to Americans, who tend to embrace risks more readily. Germans would like to know what you get before taking risks,

explaining their strong attachment to the welfare state, which provides security from the cradle to the grave. Germany’s idea of American conditions, which they perceive as threatening not only to their own economic security but also to the political and economic balance in the society as a whole, may soon become a thing of the past, replaced by globalization and the idea that American conditions will soon also be German conditions. The German notion of having unlimited economic security provided by the state is going through a thorough revision as new global players (such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China) pose challenges that simply cannot be met by simplistic symbols such as American conditions and capitalist locusts descending on defenseless Germans. Thus, cultural connotations of the society will have to change for the debate on economic issues to change and vice-versa. In this context, the media can either become a catalyst for such change or hinder a meaningful analysis by clinging to old, clichéd symbols such as American conditions.

The discussion about economic issues and the question of how globalization will affect the German welfare state and the European economic model has been more emotional in Germany than in the United States, because it is also tied with the German post-World War II identity. After the catastrophe of the Third Reich, Germans have derived much of their self-worth from their quick economic recovery and this historical

narrative has been placed firmly in the cultural context. Ironically, this recovery had been made possible by the American financial support derived from the American conditions that are now being decried, but the present context and relations with the United States have changed. Germans have become less economically secure in a more globalized world and this insecurity is one of the reasons why the society begins to cling to old, established values, such as its established economic framework. The media plays on these cultural references, which are so familiar in their respective countries, but the symbols are often also used to tie a group together culturally in times of insecurity. The symbols then play on an “us versus them” mentality and create a rallying point for connecting a society that is becoming less cohesive in times of globalization. Economic issues are only one example; the same can be said for symbols used in the media for immigration and religion. The media is certainly not the cause of this; politicians and society itself revert to easy symbols as well. Yet, by perpetuating these symbols the media can contribute to clinging to easy clichés and allows for them to become part of a society’s culture, a cycle which can become problematic.

Applying Cultural Frames on Reporting on Immigration and Religion

The problem when it comes to reporting on religion is how to ensure that the reporting is done respectfully and in a way that does not reflect the view of the journalist but rather allows the audience to draw their own conclusions. In the United States, the journalistic treatment of the topic “religion” has changed drastically since the 1966 Time cover “Is God Dead?”² and is remarkably different from the European—and especially the German—coverage of religion. Connected to this is the different importance attached to religion in the societies and politics. Politicians in the United States stress their religion to the point that it would be almost impossible today for a convicted atheist to become President of the United States. If a German politician, on the other hand, would open his remarks with a quote from the Bible, he or she would be subjected to instant ridicule.

The fact that religion seems to be much more prevalent in American newspapers than in German ones has to do with a fundamentally different understanding of the connection between religion and values not only in the society, but consequently also in the media. The media understands its role to portray a politician’s religious affiliation in a way as to serve as a guidance to the public on what the politician’s core values are and if he or she would follow those core values once elected to office. The dissimilar coverage of religion in the U.S. and in Germany also points to a fundamentally different understanding of religion in both countries: In the United States, religion is understood to be more about faith than religion,

because faith is equated with values. Due to the history of the United States, secularism is understood as a protection for religions from the state. A completely different history in Europe has led to the cultural conviction that secularism is meant to protect the state from religions—it does not stress a freedom for religion, but rather freedom from religion. This leads to a completely different understanding of issues of religion in society and, subsequently, in the media.

But even in the United States it has become very difficult to cover religion well because religion has become so politicized. Journalists have to invest a great deal of time to understand religious issues completely in order to cover these issues thoroughly. Because of twenty-four hour news cycles this has become logistically and financially impossible and very few journalists can cover only one issue such as religion.

Additionally, a survey done by Mark Rozell comparing a group of Republican Party convention delegates and a group of journalists uncovered that journalists find the sources for their reporting most often among groups of the Christian Coalition and through literature that was handed out.³ Because of the limitation of such sources, the picture that is painted in the media can become distorted and not allow for a complete analysis. Due to the time limitations for journalists, the variety of sources is further cut short. These “mechanical” problems of reporting can be found on both sides of the Atlantic but for public audiences relying on the media to not only explain their own country, but trying to get a glimpse of the respective other country through stories that are often picked up by the wire services and then translated, these mechanics are often not visible and distorted snapshots of a country are taken as the whole picture.

The American media bases its symbols on different cultural and historical traditions, which then lack the complexity of the entire picture. Especially the reporting on Muslims is laced with symbols which are often applied without explanation and then lead to a simplified understanding which does not capture the entirety of Muslim-non-Muslim relations. In political reporting, Muslims abroad are usually depicted as political extremists, rarely going beyond the image of the suicide bomber to achieve their political goals. Following problematic images in the American press of Muslims after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the image of the “good

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Muslim” has emerged in the American media in recent years. The American media usually portrays American Muslims as

An historical and cultural tradition of the United States is its understanding of itself as a country of immigrants, which have come to the United States to assimilate and, while they have distinctly different traditions, will still become culturally part of the American way.

well integrated and without strong ties to their religious brothers in the Middle East or other Muslim countries. This is based on the historical and cultural understanding of the United States as a country of immigrants, which have come to the United States to assimilate and, while they have distinctly different traditions, will still become culturally part of the American way. This self-narrative of the American society has been reflected in the American media and has colored the reporting on issues pertaining to Muslims and religion.

Interestingly enough, the German media has begun to carry this image of the well-integrated

Muslim in the United States as well. An article by Marc Huger and Daniel Steinvoth in *Spiegel Online* calls the assimilation of Muslims in the United States “A Lesson for Europe.”⁴ Private conversations with Muslims, however, paint a different image of their lives in the United States and integration in the U.S. is more problematic than the media would let on. Since September 11, the American media has grappled with how to depict American Muslims and Muslims abroad. While angering the American Muslim community at first by portraying Muslims the same in the U.S. and abroad, analysis in the press now does not allow for any connection between Muslims in America and abroad. This again, however, is too simplistic. A recent survey found that Muslims in America connect to non-American Muslims abroad through the internet more than any other Muslim group in Western countries.⁵ While American Muslims seem to be more integrated in the United States than in Europe, a complete picture of this integration and the potential problems that might surface in the next generation is lacking. A Pew survey in May 2007 survey hinted at these problems by reporting an increase in the younger generation for support of suicide missions, a percentage that was actually lower in Europe than in the United States.⁶ Thus, the American media does not always portray a differentiated picture about American Muslims. As the *Spiegel Online* article shows, this undifferentiated image is sometimes even picked up by the German media, allowing for a continuation across the Atlantic of incomplete analyses.

Topics such as relations with Muslims are understood in the

United States by applying the familiar frames of immigration. Muslims, however, have to be understood differently due to the religious component, which encompasses a Muslim’s entire life and which therefore separates them from other immigrants. The application of typical frameworks associated with immigration in the media prevents the public from understanding this all-encompassing aspect. Aspects of Muslim life, theoretical underpinnings of Islam as a religion, and the context between religion and education in Islam are rarely analyzed in the media, leading to a limited understanding in the American public about the differences between Shiites and Sunnis, for example, or the definition of Wahhabism and Salafism. Yet, even though they are not used correctly and consistently in the media, these terms are still used throughout the American press, leading to confusion of these terms in the American public.

The Impact of Culture on Reporting on Foreign Policy

The war in Lebanon illustrated another problem the media faces in terms of reporting on foreign policy issues: the continuing decline of the number of foreign correspondents who have a deep knowledge of a certain region or country. This is especially problematic in a region like the Middle East, which is such a complex and emotional environment that deep knowledge and good access to sources are vital to avoid media coverage that is limited in scope and analysis. The war in Lebanon highlighted the cultural impact on the media even further: No other topic is as greatly debated in Germany as Germany’s military involvement around the world after World War II. The media could not escape this historical debate in Germany and all reporting on war will be influenced by that, but especially when it involves Israel.

German society is very reticent when it comes to the use of force, deeply influenced by past experience and only reluctantly convinced by its politicians after the war in the Balkans to allow German soldiers to serve abroad. The United States, however, sees war as a necessary means to protect its interests around the world, especially when it comes to Israel. Thus, the reporting about the war in Lebanon in the United States and in Germany could not have been more different. In Germany, the suffering of civilians was the focus and—when the war dragged on—so, too, was the role of Israel as the aggressor in the war. The question of disproportionality was emphasized and television viewers saw more carnage and Lebanese casualties, while Israeli casualties were less frequently shown. The media in the United States, however, was sympathetic to Israel and its right to defend itself. The symbols of war, the way wars are covered in the United States and Germany, are fundamentally influenced by the societies’ respective historical understanding of war. This will be

reflected in foreign policy decisions as well as in the media coverage about the foreign policy issues and Germany's and

America's involvement in these decisions.

Decoding the Symbols and Understanding Cultural Frames: The Role of the Media

The Twenty-four Hour News Cycle: The Constant Demand for News

The media on both sides is constricted by time and resources and in the age of twenty-four hours news cycles this is unlikely to change. It is also unlikely that either the German or the American media will abandon the use of symbols as a shorthand for communication with the public as these symbols conjure associated cultural and historical traditions and meanings without having to entertain in-depth analyses. It is important, however, for the media not to get lost in these symbols and rely on them as the only reference frame available. As part of the adjustment to the twenty-four hour news cycle, the media will have to engage in a debate of what its role will be, especially for the print media. Competing with TV news and the internet will reduce the print media further to written sound bites such as symbols and catch phrases. This is an adjustment not only for the media, but also for the consumer. Constant access to a variety of opinions also means constant access to proponents of one's own opinion. The media may be short of time and resources to provide in-depth, unbiased analysis, but the twenty-four hour news cycle also allows the consumer to rely on an insular source of information, limiting demand for in-depth analysis that does not comply with the consumer's world view.

Furthering the Debate: The Connection Between Society and Media

The media has a societal role to play in furthering an analytical discussion of today's domestic and foreign policy challenges which should go beyond perpetuating symbols. There are encouraging signs that the media takes this function seriously and that it is prepared to go beyond the use of symbols. Economic issues, such as globalization, have gotten a more in-depth treatment in the German media lately and American conditions have been more thoroughly examined than in the past. After the economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) in the 1950s, Germany has undergone a sort of "psychological economic miracle" by understanding that it has to open up—economically—in order to maintain its standard of living. This has also been reported in the media, which then allows for a change of symbolism—the image of American conditions

becomes less threatening as it is understood in its complexity.

Media and society will only be able together to understand the cultural underpinnings of certain phrases and the meaning behind them. For international news consumers, this will always be difficult to understand. Americans had a hard time comprehending why American conditions seemed to conjure up such terrible images for Germans when it was the United States which had helped Germany support its economic miracle after World War II. If the cultural and historical reasons behind the symbols are "lost in translation," misunderstandings will occur again, especially if reporting from abroad is repeated on the other side of the Atlantic without further reflection. The media will have to constantly question not only society's assumptions but also its own perceptions held in the past in order to facilitate not only a dialogue in the society but also with other countries.

The media can only present the public with in-depth analyses explaining the cultural and historical underpinning of symbols used so frequently on both sides of the Atlantic if the public is interested in hearing them.

Even though we live in a globalized world, even though the German-American relationship is based on similar values, cultural and historical traditions still put a lens on our respective understanding of the world. Religion in one country and context does not have to mean the same to another country in another context. The media should better understand its role in explaining these differences, even if—or maybe especially when—this means going beyond the currently used symbols. This will add value to the German-American relationship. On the other hand, however, societies will have to be willing to go beyond the headline and be willing to engage with complex issues not only in their own context but also abroad. Thus, twenty-four hours news cycles present a challenge not only to the media, but also to societies' attention span. The media can only present the public with in-depth analyses explaining the cultural and historical underpinning of symbols used so

frequently on both sides of the Atlantic if the public is interested in hearing them. Even though the media has a societal role to play, one should not forget that it is also a business driven by the bottom line. If symbols devoid of analysis are what increases readership then this is what the media will present.

Thus, understanding the cultural and historical issues behind the problems of our time and wanting to understand these is also the responsibility of the society. Only then can society demand in-depth analysis from the media.

Conclusion

The media is part of the cultural narrative of its country and this will always be reflected in its reporting. No media reporting about any issue will be completely objective and void of cultural underpinnings. In order for these to have a minimal effect on the German-American relationship, however, this needs to be understood and media reporting fraught with symbolism has to be thoroughly analyzed. Examining the reporting on such important issues as war and peace, economic problems and systems, and matters of immigration and religion has shown that culture and history have a great effect on the use of symbols in the media and on media reporting about these issues. The way we understand each other through the media and through reporting about each other will always be colored by our own cultural narrative. Yet, in order to avoid simplicity and miscommunication in the German-American relationship, it is necessary to examine these symbols and understand the cultural underpinnings. The media's role—on both sides of the Atlantic—must be to facilitate this and thereby enhance the German-American dialogue.

NOTES

1 Karin L. Johnston, "Revitalizing Public Diplomacy: Challenges for Germany and the United States," AICGS Issue Brief no. 5 (Washington, D.C.: The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, March 2006); idem., "Clashing Worlds and Images: Media and Politics in the United States and Germany," AICGS Issue Brief no. 1 (Washington, D.C.: The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, August 2004).

2 Time, 8 April 1966, <<http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19660408,00.html>> (5 October 2007).

3 Mark J. Rozell, "The Press v. the Pulpit: Covering the Religious Factor in U.S. Politics," AICGS Working Paper Series, (Washington, DC: The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 2007).

4 Marc Huger and Daniel Steinvorth, "A lesson for Europe – American Muslims Strive to Become Model Citizens," Spiegel ONLINE, 13 September 2007, <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,505573,00.html>> (8 October 2007).

5 Comment made at AICGS workshop entitled "German-American Media Reporting on Religion, Diversity, and Immigration," 28 September 2007.

6 The Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," 22 May 2007, <<http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>> (8 October 2007).

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