

# Tracking issue careers

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## Summary of preliminary approaches of Media Tenor

The Agenda Setting concept assumes that mass media are influencing the public agenda and the topics of public awareness. In this context several studies showed correlations between the topic hierarchies of mass media and the public (see McCombs and Shaw 1972). Later research indicates that the audience not only falls into line with the main issues of the media but also with attributes, or message frames (see McCombs, Agenda Setting level 2) as well as affects like positive, neutral or negative tone of the coverage (see Shaw and Yu in this brochure, Agenda Setting, level 3). As these authors mentioned themselves, the media are especially setting the agenda of the major issues, that means the more or less important news. But what are major issues? How can we identify and differentiate between more or less important news? And how much coverage is required in order to have an impact on the public agenda?

Media Tenor tried in a first preliminary approach to determine how awareness thresholds have an impact on the public agenda and to answer the question: "How much coverage is needed for a topic to be noticed by the public?" Therefore, all articles from the political and economic parts of the five opinion-leading German newspapers, eight weekly media and seven TV News programmes were continuously analyzed from January 1998 to December 2001 concerning the prominence of certain issues and topics. These data were compared with results of the opinion

poll „Meinungsbarometer“ of the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen conducted from January 1998 to December 2001, measuring an issue hierarchy of public opinion. A threshold of 15% was determined: if at least 15% of the public is sensitive to a certain problem, the issue belongs to the Top-5-major topics of the public opinion.

The research hypothesis was:

If the topic should be noticed by at least 15% of the public:

- 200 articles per month are required in the opinion-leading daily press
- 25 articles per month in the opinion-leading weekly press
- 50 reports in the TV News per month are required in the opinion-leading media

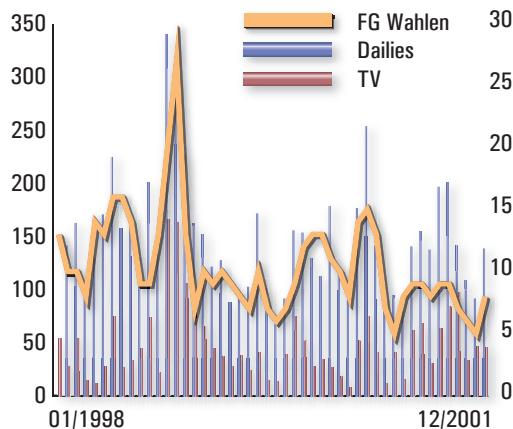
This hypothesis was examined with several issues ranging from the social topics, eg immigration/asylum policy, right wing radicalism, mad cow disease or education to economic aspects like economic situation/economic cycle, unemployment/labour market policy, pension system or the currency EURO.

The first example (Chart 1) shows the correlation between the news coverage of the daily press and TV News and the public awareness of immigration/asylum policy. Whenever the media coverage about that topic exceeds 200 articles per month in daily newspapers, after a short time at least 15 percent of the public is aware of the subject. If this is the case, the TV News also covered the subject in at least 50 reports per month.

The comparison between public awareness of the pension system and coverage in the weekly press

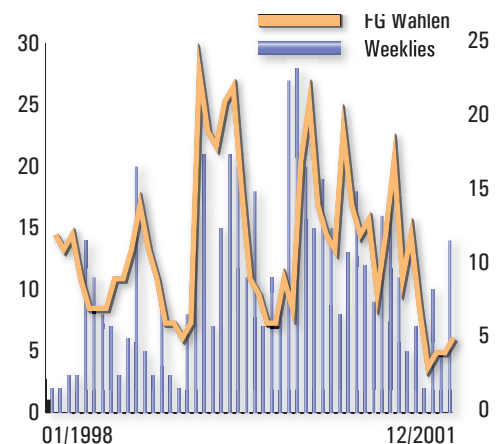
### Immigration/asylum policy in the German media and the public opinion

How much coverage is required having an impact on the public agenda?



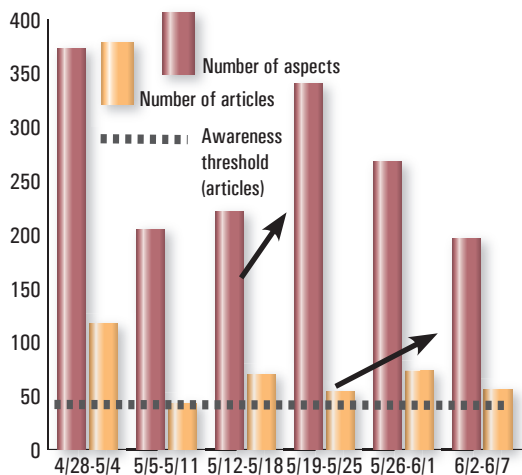
Source: Media Tenor  
 01/01/1998 – 12/31/2001

### Pension system in the in German weekly media and the public opinion



Source: Media Tenor  
 01/01/1998 – 12/31/2001

### Issue Monitoring: Employment market



Statements/reports vs. articles about the issue

Source: MediaTenor  
4/28 - 6/7/2005

about that subject shows a similar correlation (see **Chart 2**). For this topic even a little less coverage is enough to influence the public awareness.

In most cases these hypotheses were verified, even though in some cases other aspects (eg. personal concerns) had more influence. That means for some topics like unemployment it seems that less coverage is sufficient. Other important factors which need a follow up are eg. killer issues, the impact of continuity of coverage vs. an abrupt increase in articles about that topic.

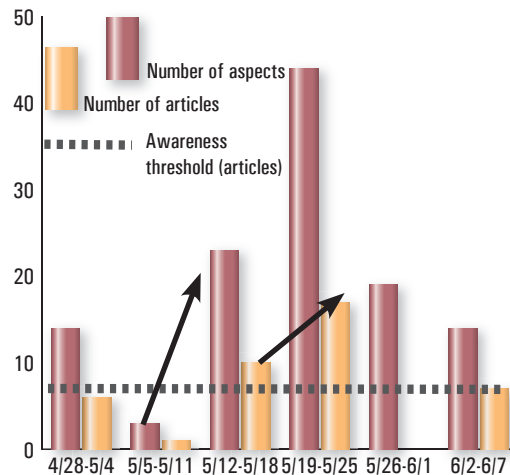
To sum up, the awareness thresholds have turned out to be a good orientation for positioning a topic on the public agenda in the daily work of **Media Tenor**. They are the basis for issue monitorings, providing benchmark for the practical work in the field of communication.

#### Tracking issue careers

Another question of our daily work is the development of issues. How do they emerge and can we predict their emergence?

From the practical viewpoint this is important for successfully timing the capture of the most favourable communication environment. Also in this field **Media Tenor** developed an approach for issues monitoring of selected topics. Therefore **Media Tenor** analyses not only the whole articles in which the topic is the principle subject, but also tracks whether an individual issue is just a minor subject in the articles. So an issue can come into account twice: as an individual issue and in relation to its importance within the article. In measuring the emergence phase

### Issue Monitoring: Education



Statements/reports vs. articles about the issue

Source: MediaTenor  
4/28 - 6/7/2005

the prediction rate in some cases is high: if a topic is not politically initiated (which is not predictable) issue careers starting as minor aspects in articles give good hints and time headstart for the so called "Agenda Surfing". This is especially important for communicators who are to weak to put a subject onto the media agenda by themselves.

Their chance is to monitor issues, especially broader categories rather than narrowly defined issues, since the latter are usually too specific to have a significant presence in the news. It's also necessary to analyse the media on a weekly basis because issue careers are often short term developments. If an issues emerges, it shows a significant increase in coverage as minor topic (red arrow in **Chart 3 an 4**). With a time delay one can measure an increase of whole articles about that subject as well reaching the awareness threshold.

All in all, these approaches are still in a preliminary phase and profound research is still needed. But they give an indication of the complex impact and interaction of Agenda Setting processes.

#### Basis:

**Media:** FAZ, WELT, SZ, BILD, Frankfurter Rundschau; BamS, WamS, Woche, Stern, Focus, Spiegel, Zeit, Rheinischer Merkur; Tagessthemen, Tagesschau, Heute Journal, Heute, RTL, Sat.1, Pro7

**Time:** 01/01/1998 – 12/31/2001

04/28 – 06/07/2005

**Analysis:** 595,502 reports (at least 5 lines/seconds)

Can we predict issue careers?