

# Amnesty International 2005

## Putting human rights on the agenda

by  
**Markus N. Beeko,**  
 AI Germany  
 Head of  
 Communications &  
 Campaigns

**Dr. Dawid D.  
 Bartelt,**  
 AI Germany  
 Senior Press Officer

October 2005

Severe and scandalous human rights violations like the massacre on Tiananmen Square, Abu Ghraib or the discovery of a mass grave in Kosovo seem to make it quite easily into the TV evening news. Like the environmental disaster, the humanitarian catastrophe, or the personal drama of a celebrity, they draw attention and compassion. But unlike these, human rights issues in general show difficulties in triggering longer media coverage and a sustainable public debate. **MediaTenor** has supported Amnesty International in 2005 in analysing strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in its aim to put human rights on the agenda, with a special focus on the German media.

### Amnesty International – a reliable source of information

Since 1961 Amnesty International has worked to raise public awareness of human rights violations, victims and human rights defenders worldwide. AI may take credit for having drawn the world's attention to numerous cases and for helping to organise rapid and widespread reaction and resistance as well as addressing general issues of concern. **MediaTenor** numbers show quite clearly that Amnesty International is established as a major and reliable source of information on the human rights situation worldwide. Its coverage outnumbers other German

human rights organisations (**chart 1**); more than three quarters of German media coverage on AI puts the spotlight on human rights violations with a high percentage naming AI as a source of information (**chart 2**).

Nevertheless it remains a challenge to put a pressing human rights issue on the media agenda, especially if the issue is not already on the political agenda in general.

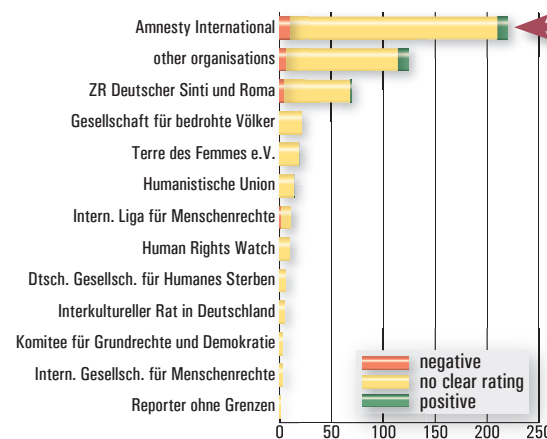
### Against all odds – obstacles to agenda setting for human rights

Contrary to the myth of NGOs and the media teaming up, **MediaTenor** research shows: More and more NGOs face critical media coverage. And: With the growing number of NGOs competition between issues has increased.

Secondly, the media environment is “unfriendly”: general media interest in human rights is low, as shown in **chart 3**. Furthermore the **MediaTenor** research demonstrates the episodic framing guiding the coverage, focusing on events instead of topics, which makes it difficult to raise awareness for the political processes behind human rights violations.

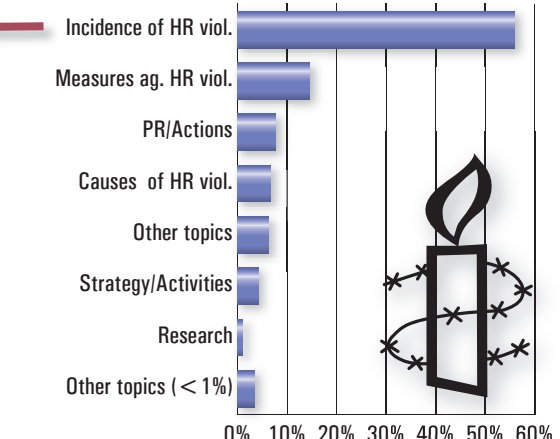
Thirdly, there are limits to an agenda setting strategy for human rights that lie within the ethical codex of AI communication: while agenda setting requires a targeted communication focus, amnesty sets the “individual at risk” as the priority and thus addresses a heterogeneous range of urgent human rights issues every day rather than communicating strategically limited and focussed topics.

**Chart 1: Coverage of German HR organisations in German Media**



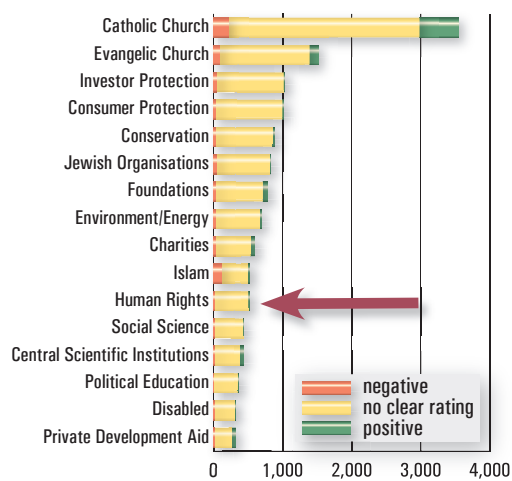
Number of reports (at least 5 lines/seconds)  
 Source: Media Tenor 01/01 – 08/31/2005  
 Basis: 34,507 reports in 18 German media

**Chart 2: Coverage of Amnesty International: Topic Structure**



100%: all reports on Amnesty International  
 Source: Media Tenor 01/01 – 08/31/2005  
 Basis: 2,421 statements about/from AI

**Chart 3: Coverage of German NGOs in German Media: Fields of activity**



Number of reports (at least 5 lines/seconds)

Source: Media Tenor  
01/01 – 08/31/2005

Basis: 34,507 reports  
in 18 German media

**AI and Guantánamo: a concise media strategy**

This year, a concise AI media strategy proved that agenda setting is possible. In May 2005, launching its annual report 2005, AI made the systematic human rights violations by the US government its main message. Since the erecting of Camp Delta at Guantánamo on Cuba in 2002 and the unlawful imprisonment of so-called enemy combatants AI had repeatedly addressed the ongoing violations of international law by the USA. By naming Guantánamo the “Gulag of the 21st century – a structural analogy misunderstood as a historical comparison – AI triggered a well-timed and renewed, if controversial,

media interest in the issue. AI was being debated in commentaries and editorials – quite a rarity.

The constant monitoring by **MediaTenor** helped AI in Germany to follow the media coverage closely and to supply additional facts and expertise to back-up its credibility and integrity. While first reactions also included critical coverage, the vast majority of media comments in the following weeks acted on the assumption that AI “had a point” and gradually concentrated on the human rights issues at stake. When AI issued further information in the summer on the existence of secret US prisons, the US government failed to distract public attention from Guantánamo and the other US detention centres, while the Gulag comparison was no longer mentioned (**chart 4**). The position of AI since then has been endorsed by third parties, including the OECD and the UN special rapporteur against torture.

At a point when public opinion was beginning to get used to the human rights and international law scandal to which Guantánamo is a striking symbol, AI succeeded in reviving the debate on the human rights aspects of the “war on terror” – an important example for the agenda setting of human rights.

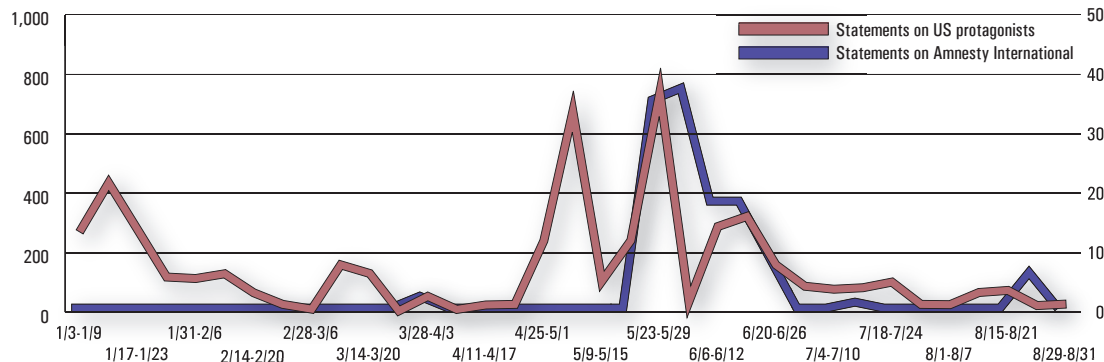
**Basis:**

**Media:** Bild, Die Welt, F.A.Z., Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung, taz; Focus, Spiegel, Die Zeit; ARD Tagesschau und Tagesthemen, ZDF heute und heute journal, Deutsche Welle TV: Journal in German and English language, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 News, ProSieben Nachrichten

**Time:** 01/01 – 08/31/2005

**Analysis:** 34,507 reports (at least 5 lines/sec.) on HR organisations in German media

**Agenda-Setting of Human Rights Topics: The “Gulag comparison” in the media**



Number of reports (at least 5 lines/seconds)

Source: Media Tenor  
01/03 – 08/31/2005

Basis: 126 statements about/from AI;  
5,238 statements about US protagonists