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No Conspiracy against China

A study about the China-reporting by leading German media finds no anti-Chinese conspiracy but criticizes a focus on conflicts and demands more background reports and analysis

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The German media reporting on China has a „core agenda focused on conflicts and violence“ and is dominated by „German self-positioning“ and „gauging of systems“. These are the main findings of a German media study² published on June 14 by the Green-party related Heinrich-Böll-Foundation in Berlin. The 300 page study titled „The China-reporting in German media“ evaluated reports of the year 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics. In that year there have been more reports on China than ever.

German media reports about the deadly unrest in Tibet in March 2008 and about the Olympic torch relay the following month even led to a protest-march in the center of Berlin of more than 3000 Chinese living in Germany. The protesters were angered by some wrongly labeled newspaper-photos and a perceived anti-Chinese bias of German reports. In the second half of 2008 the German public itself argued about the Chinese program of Germany's public foreign broadcaster „Deutsche Welle“. Critics including some exiled Chinese dissidents claimed the station serves as a propaganda tool for China's Communist Party and demanded all staff members to be screened.

Chinese government officials themselves instrumentalised this German debate as proof of Western double standards when the longtime deputy head of the Chinese program of Deutsche Welle was demoted after having made strong comments in favour of the Beijing government. No doubt, in

2008 German-Chinese relations had been a hot and sensitive issue and the media reports, which shape public opinion, played a crucial role in this. And a public opinion poll found a growing negative image of China in Germany in the year of the successful Beijing Olympics.³

„Self-centered and partly ideological view“

According to the media study's authors, the communication researcher Carola Richter of the University of Erfurt and the political scientist Sebastian Gebauer of the University of Duisburg-Essen, there could not be found any conspiracy in German media against China as some Chinese officials and nationalists had implied. However, in many reports Richter and Gebauer noticed a self-centered and partly ideological view of China by German media and a lack of differentiation of Chinese actors. The latter they especially came across when analysing German reports about China's activities in Africa and during the conflict in Tibet.

The study evaluated 8766 China related reports of three dailies, three weeklies and the news programs of two public TV-broadcasters. It is the most comprehensive study ever done about German media reporting on China. The examined dailies are the conservative „Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung“ (FAZ, Frankfurt), the liberal „Süddeutsche Zeitung“ (SZ, Munich) and the center-left „die tageszeitung“ (taz, Berlin). The examined weeklies are the liberals „Der Spiegel“ and „Die Zeit“ (both Hamburg) and the conservative „Focus“ (Munich). The TV-stations are the federal ARD-network and the national second channel ZDF. In addition several German

¹ The author is editor Asia-Pacific desk of „die tageszeitung“ (taz), Berlin, one of the dailies evaluated by the study.

² The German version of the study „Die China-Berichterstattung in den deutschen Medien. Eine Studie von Carola Richter und Sebastian Gebauer. Mit Beiträgen von Thomas Heberer und Kai Hafez“, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Bildung und Kultur, Band 5, Berlin, can be found at the website of Heinrich-Böll-Foundation:

<http://www.boell.de/publikationen/publikationen-china-berichterstattung-medien-9409.html>

³ A poll for the BBC World Service notes an increase of a negative view of China by Germans from 59 to 69 per cent in 2008:

http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/views_on_countriesregions_bt/588.php?nid=&id=&pnt=588#china

correspondents in China and Asia-editors (including the author of this article) were interviewed. Richter characterised the chosen media as „the key media for the production of nation images“. According to her only less than half of the examined reports had a direct China focus, while most only related to China „in an allegorical and stereotypical form“.

The study categorized and evaluated both the topics and quantity of the reports and then made case studies on the different subjects. These are the conflict in Tibet, the issue of human rights, civil society, freedom of the press and of opinion, the German-Chinese relations, the environmental and climate policy in China and China's role in the global economy. In another chapter interviews with correspondents and editors provide valuable insights into their attitudes, the publication process, internal debates and editorial structures. In two annexes the findings of the study are put in context by professor of comparative analysis of media systems, Kai Hafez, of Erfurt University, and of professor for politics in East-Asia, Thomas Heberer, of University of Duisburg-Essen. Both professors had also supervised the study.

„Strong emphasis on political rights“

In general the study gives a relatively high mark to the reports of the China-correspondents and Asia-editors of all examined media. At the same time it notes a lot of clichés being reproduced. China is being brushed off especially in those articles which mention the people's republic only in passing, then for example superficially characterizing China as „climate offender“ or as „low-wage country“. Heberer noticed in a discussion about the study that the main problem in China-reporting is not with the examined German national media but can be found at the influential regional media, which mostly lack their own China correspondents and which sometimes make very derogatory headlines and tend to use more negative stereotypes.

In regard to the evaluated national media the study notes a lack of reporting on science and education while at the same time there is a strong emphasis on human rights. But while political rights are stressed, social issues and social rights are being neglected at the same time. The study also criticises a strong focus on Tibet and on a few internationally well-known Chinese dissidents, but that hardly any background is provided about the issues itself. Unfortunately the study lacks a comparison of human rights reporting in regard to other countries as this would have exceeded

the scope of the study. So it finally remains open whether the issue of human rights is being instrumentalised by German media as some Chinese officials claim. Or whether there is no difference to human rights reporting on other countries as German correspondents in China argue.

The study is also criticising the working conditions of foreign correspondents in China. The authors argue for giving the correspondents more access to areas closed off by the government like Tibet. This would help „minimising many prejudices“, the study claims. Unfortunately the working conditions of the Chinese support staff (fixers, translators and researchers) of privileged foreign correspondents remain unmentioned.

„Focus on German elite persons“

The analysis of the reporting on economic and business affairs concludes that there is a focus on German actors and elite persons, who seem to be the main and even sometimes only sources. Some economic articles read like press statements of companies and not like well researched articles, the study found. In general China is described as an export market, while there is a lack of analysis of China's domestic market and its real needs. „The aim of learning through media about the other country and the dynamics in its society is often being replaced by an agenda based on domestic policies, which serves as a filter for the target region,“ the study concludes.

The study recommends that German media should expand their focus beyond the core agenda of conflicts and towards the reality of life-experiences of the Chinese people. „Media have the role of enlightenment and should provide contexts,“ Hafez argued. There should be more background analysis provided independently from actual events, the study demands. This recommendation is seen as mostly unrealistic by journalists, who participated in a discussion at the Berlin headquarter of Heinrich-Böll-Foundation.

The study also recommends a closer cooperation between scientific experts and the media. This was another controversial demand which made only few friends at the discussion and was not seen as realistic by both journalists and scientists. Even professor Heberer, who is already widely cited in German media, is sceptical about a closer cooperation and stresses the different approaches of journalists and scientists. But at the same time he wonders why the three main questions raised by sinologists according to him (Why is China so stable? Why is the Chinese government's policy so flexible? Why does the current Chinese leadership

enjoy so much legitimacy?) are not an issue for the media. Instead the media would focus too much on a view of China as seen by German domestic politics

More background analysis needed

In support of the evaluated correspondents and editors the study demands that German media houses strengthen their networks of foreign correspondents and their reporting on international affairs. But this is in contrast to the current trends in major publishing houses. Currently they make budget cuts especially in foreign reporting, which is very expensive. The study ends with demanding more mutual respect in reporting. But as it does not answer the question whether reports on China are less respectful than reports on other countries including Germany, correspondents reject this demand. They argue their reports on China are neither more nor less disrespectful than those about other countries. Debating respect risks falling into the trap of cultural relativism and finally refraining from necessary criticism as well as the critique of foreign media reports can stir nationalism and manipulate the agenda.⁴

Some journalists had been reluctant to cooperate with the research due to a questionable publicity policy of the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation.⁵ At the International Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2009, where China had been the guest of honour and created controversy due to censorship-issues, the foundation had organised a public discussion about China-reporting by German media. At that event professors Heberer and Hafez already criticised the German media for their reports⁶ before the interviews with the correspondents for the study had even started and the research advanced.

When the researchers later visited Beijing for the interviews, some correspondents questioned the scientific soundness of this approach and were suspicious that the researchers were only looking for evidence following Heberer's and Hafez' opinion. In addition some aired reservations against Heberer who is known for his views which are relatively friendly of the government in Beijing.

One of the journalists criticising the study also find it problematic that Heberer's research is again and again being instrumentalized by Chinese officials as alleged proof of their positions. This also happened with the study. An article in the official „People's Daily“⁷ cited it as proof for „a disturbing trend“ in the German media in „increasingly engaging“ in „vilification of China“ with „more than half of the 8,766 China-related reports“ being „stereotypical“. This article neither mentioned any passages of the study lauding some of the German media stories nor those critical of the Chinese authorities.

Reciprocal study in the making

However, the findings of the study are neither black nor white and are much more diverse as anticipated by Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, as its chairwoman Barbara Unmüßig stated at the public discussion. The foundation has also commissioned professor Guo Ke, the director of the Center for Global Public Opinions of China and professor of journalism at the Shanghai International Studies University with a research about the reporting of Chinese media on Germany. According to Guo, who participated in the discussion of the study on German media reports, the quality of reporting on Germany in China is lower and using more stereotypes than vice versa. But as the study by Richter and Gebauer shows there is still ample room for better reporting by the German media.

⁴ See Andreas Lorenz (correspondent for Der Spiegel): Medienselbsteinschätzung - Scheindebatte, in: Deutsch Chinesisches Kulturnetz, Dezember 2009, <http://www.de-cn.net/dis/med/de5405913.htm?code=pekkn1218>, Chinese Version at: <http://www.de-cn.net/dis/med/zh5405913.htm?code=pekkn1218>

⁵ Private communication of the author with two correspondents in Beijing who don't want to be named.

⁶ Report by dpa as printed in Taipei Times: German media's coverage of China shallow: academics, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2009/10/16/2003456049>

⁷ People's Daily: German media must abandon China stereotypes, June 23, 2010: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90780/91345/7036092.html>

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