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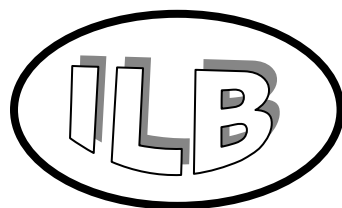
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The Impact of Media Coverage on Proposed Strategies for Preventing Future Food Scandals

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Abstract

At the beginning of the year 2005 the German meat industry frequently featured in the media with reports on tainted meat. Since then, a huge number of new problems concerning meat production and trade have arisen which have uncovered weaknesses in food quality control, and highlighted the explosive nature of this subject matter. It is unclear what effect the media involvement has had on the political process of regulatory decision-making in the food industry, and to what extent it has influenced this process. The following article examines these issues with regard to the presentation of food safety scandals in the media, as the role of press coverage will continue to increase in importance in the coming years. This research is based on the content analysis of 347 articles on the topic of “tainted meat” which were published in seven German newspapers. The empirical results demonstrate that state actors such as government ministers and the administration have dominated the debate in the media, and thus decisively contributed to the fact that the responsibility for food security in Germany is assigned to the government. Companies and organizations in the meat industry hardly ever appear in the discussion.

Keywords: *Media Analysis, Political Decision Making, Media Effects, Tainted Meat, Content Analysis*

1. Introduction

The German media has reported frequently about tainted meat since the beginning of 2005. This has corresponded with a huge rise in the number of problems concerning meat and animal husbandry, e. g. the controversies about bird flu or the castration of piglets. This shows that issues concerning food, especially meat, are suitable for a never-ending media discussion, stirred up again by every new scandal.

It is unclear what effects the media involvement has had on the political process of regulatory decision-making in the food industry, and how strongly it has been influenced by the media. Political actors normally take notice of the general opinion conveyed by the media, and are unwilling to push ideas that are unpopular in the important media. A spokesperson with high media coverage could therefore exert influence on political decision-making.

The following analysis examines these questions with regard to the presentation of this subject in the media, as the role of press coverage in the food sector will become increasingly important in the future.

We applied an empirical media analysis based on 347 newspaper articles relating to the topic “tainted meat” taken from major German newspapers and food and meat industry journals. We

used a triangle of interests approach, originally from environmental policy communication studies, to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of the roles of politics, businesses and other groups in the public eye (VON PRITTWITZ, 1990).

Chapter 2 of this article sets out the theories of agenda setting, framing and the triangle of policy interests as the basis for the empirical analysis. In Chapter 3 we describe the methodology of the media analysis which is used for the evaluation of the newspaper articles. Chapter 4 then presents the results of the analysis of spokespersons, victims, offenders and helpers as well as the suggested solutions for the problems with tainted meat. This is followed by a discussion of the results in Chapter 5, focusing on the effect of the absence of direct influence by industry members on political decision-making. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a summary of the most relevant points.

2. Theoretical frame of reference: The relationship between the media and political action

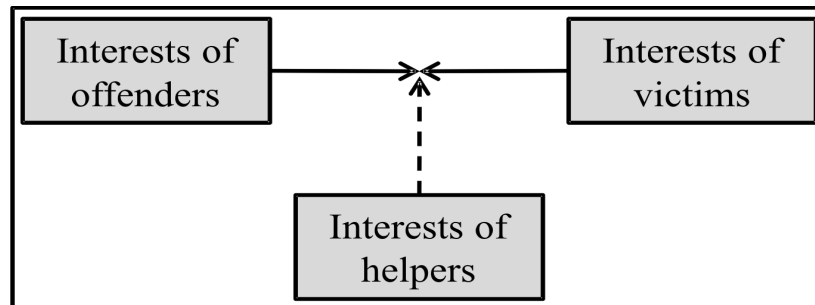
The contemporary public consciousness is largely a “media consciousness” (GERHARDS et al., 1998: 38). The political “consciousness” may thus be understood as a set of interwoven arenas, within which speakers compete for attention with the goal of asserting their own interpretive framework. The theories of media science explain the influence of the media on the political elite through the approach of Policy Agenda-Setting (LINSKY, 1986 and ROGERS et al., 1991). According to this, topics particularly prominent in the public eye have a disproportionate influence on the agendas of the political decision-makers.

The media is, however, not a freely accessible resource but acts according to its own interests, performing the role of gatekeeper between the information and the published news. Various factors influence the chance of publication of a news item, including the political inclination of the medium (GERHARDS et al., 1998: 43), and attention-grabbing characteristics that increase the 'newsworthiness' of an item (STAAB, 1989), but also the supply of other available news items (GERHARDS et. al., 1998: 42). Recognition of the influential power of the media leads to competition among political actors to use this channel to promote their own interpretive framework. To this end, those wishing to utilise the media generally play by its rules, however not all actors have equal potential to produce material appropriate to the news. This potential is dependant on status, resources and specialised knowledge. Furthermore, the opportunity to take part in public discussions within the media is contingent on the controversiality of the issue. A new and potentially explosive story (for example a breaking crisis) will attract investigative journalism, with which the coverage is expected to depart from the usual press-release information and become more independent. In times of crisis the media are therefore dependent on information from various sources. Against this background, the question arises which actors can assert themselves in the public arena and assume the role of spokesperson.

Media publicity is shaped not only by the attempts of societal actors to hijack it for their own purposes, but also by the deliberate concentration of the coverage on certain prominent interpretive patterns. This situation is referred to in contemporary media research as (Issue) Framing (DRUCKMAN, 2004 and ENTMAN, 1993). In many cases, the evaluation of such situations uses frames that restrict the range of interpretation for the public through compaction and simplification of structures (CHRISTMANN, 1997: 191 and DOMBROWSKI, 1997: 148 f.). Frames help to identify the important aspects of a topic, thereby providing a model of the selective perception of complex topics. Accordingly, they allow both individuals and organisations to quickly achieve an overview of complex problems with multifarious information (SNOW et al., 1986: 464). In the foreground are the causal attributes, i.e. the attribution of causes, initiators, consequences and possible solutions (DOMBROWSKI, 1997: 150 f.). One specific framing model, originally from environmental politics, is the ‘triangle of interests’. This concept distinguishes

between three different points of view, or interests that can be taken with regard to a problem (VON PRITTWITZ, 1990: 116) (see Figure 1).

1. The interests of the offender are geared towards exploiting a resource or structure, through which the interests of a third party or objects of legal protection are compromised, or resources are wasted. These interests are primarily associated with a negative public image.
2. The interests of the victim are to halt damaging activities or structures as quickly as possible. The effect of appearing as a victim is, however, ambivalent: moral advantages on the one hand are countered by the impression of powerlessness that can easily lead to a loss of political bargaining power.
3. The interests of the helper are to draw benefit from their own ability to solve socially defined problems. The portrayal as helper or problem-solver is in general not only morally advantageous, but also linked with the assumption that one has valuable resources at one's disposal that are of political, economic or social bargaining value.



Source: VON PRITTWITZ, 1990: 118

Figure 1. Triangle of Interests

In many media reports on (environmental) political crises, characterisation of the issue by means of this triangle of interests can be observed, where it is in the interests of the various parties to assign themselves an advantageous role. In this discussion, the question arises which function is assigned to which parties by the spokesperson, thereby conferring a certain role to them. Concerning the primary responsibility for food safety, the question of who is handed the role of helper acquires great importance.

3. Research design

3.1 Data Collection

The basis of this investigation is formed by articles from German national daily newspapers (Die Welt, Frankfurter Rundschau, and the Süddeutsche Zeitung), a national weekly magazine (Der Spiegel) and three specialist journals from the food and meat industries (Die Lebensmittelzeitung, Allgemeine Fleischerzeitung and Fleischwirtschaft).

Die Welt, Frankfurter Rundschau and the Süddeutsche Zeitung can be described as „elite publications“ (KLEINSCHMIT and FEINDT, 2004: 93) or „spectrum newspapers“ (KEPPLINGER, 1998: 43). As well as the general public, they are also read by journalists (KEPPLINGER, 1994), thereby reaching an extended audience through the mass media (GERHARDS et al., 1998: 191). In addition, they are also read by political decision-makers, which is why they are assigned a central position in the political process (WILKE, 1999: 310 ff.; WITTKÄMPER et. al., 1992 and HERZOG

et al., 1990). Der Spiegel – the first German weekly magazine – holds a position of great importance in Germany. It is read by two-thirds of all journalists (WILKE 1999: 318) and in contrast to the daily newspapers, deals with topical issues in depth. The Lebensmittelzeitung, Allgemeine Fleischerzeitung and Fleischwirtschaft are the highest circulating journals in the food and meat industries. They were included in the investigation in order to analyse the industry-specific media arena. The newspaper articles are available on the internet using a full-text search. In total, during the time period of the investigation from 01.04.2005 to 31.03.2006, there were 394 articles published that contained at least one of the search terms “Gammelfleisch” (tainted meat), “Fleischskandal” (meat scandal) or “Ekelfleisch” (rotten meat). However, only the 347 articles which contained at least one passage in which the topic of tainted meat was mentioned were used in the analysis. Ranking the publications according to the percentage of the total number of articles, the Allgemeinen Fleischerzeitung published 25.1 % of all articles, the Welt 21.9 %, the Frankfurter Rundschau 21.0 %, the Süddeutsche Zeitung 15.0 %, the Lebensmittelzeitung 14.1 %, the Spiegel 1.7 % and Fleischwirtschaft 1.2 %. Thus 59.7 % of the articles came from the quality press, and 40.3 % from industry-specific journals.

3.2 Methodology

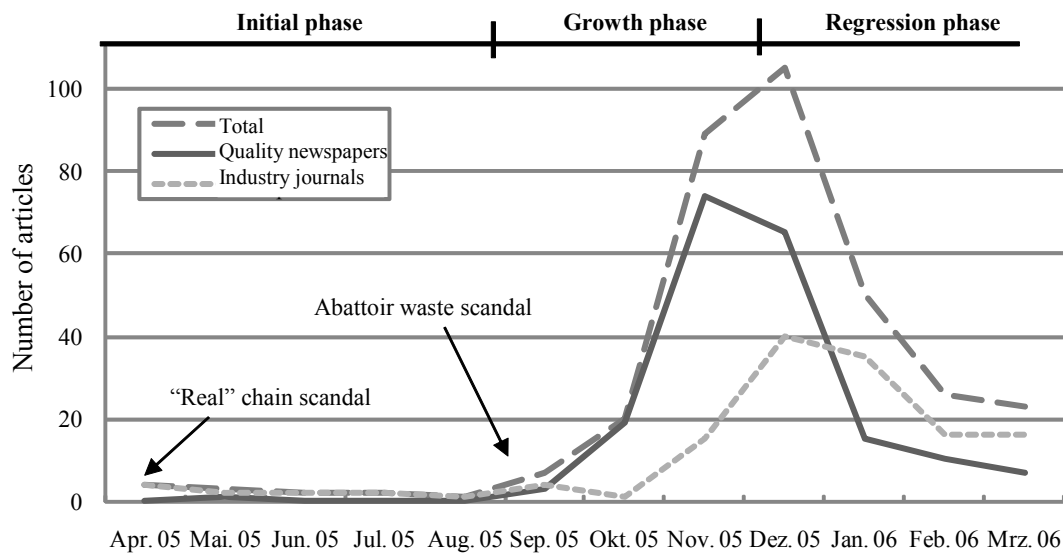
This study uses a quantitative content analysis that allows the generation of reliable and quantifying statements using the large bodies of text that are typical for the mass media (BONFADELLI, 2002: 53). Alongside formal categories (e.g. publication date and author), a category system split into various category groups is used. From the theoretical framework (see Chapter 3), the category “spokesperson” and, based on the political triangle of interests, the categories “offender”, “victim” and “helper” were created. The potential feature characteristics of these categories are divided into sectors, so that according to the viewpoint, different feature characteristics are specified. The sectoral classification allows the separation of actors from the political-administrative system (for example national governments and administrations) as well as from private and civil society (for example organisations, businesses and individuals). The category system further contains the category “problem solving devices”. This category encompasses variables reflecting the range of suggested means to safeguard food quality. The variables of this category were recorded in an explorative manner and theoretically validated.

The unit of analysis for the categorisation is the propositional unit of the statement. These are single verbal comments from spokespersons quoted in the articles, which are relevant and can be coded from the article text (GERHARDS et al., 1998: 47). Code-relevant statements are those which directly relate to the tainted meat scandal, and it is possible to code multiple statements in one article. The spokesperson can be directly or indirectly quoted, and notably with this means of analysis, the media itself can perform as spokesperson.

4. Results of the content analysis

4.1 Formal criteria of the coverage

The trajectory of the “tainted meat scandal” coverage follows a typical course (see Figure 2) (RUß-MOHL, 1981: 73f.). The initial phase was shaped by the cases of re-labelled meat in various stores of the retailer “Real” at the start of April 2005. The issue of tainted meat then experienced an upsurge in publicity with the discovery of the processing of abattoir waste in September later that year. During this period, the issue became politically hot topic, pushing other issues further down the agenda. This coincided with the over-dramatisation in the coverage typical of this point in the trajectory of a news story.



Source: Own data

Figure 2. Course of the "tainted meat scandal" coverage

By January 2006 the media interest in tainted meat had almost halved. The mass media lost interest in the meat scandal (regression phase), and new cases barely made it into the news. The majority of the articles published in this period concentrated on potential solutions to the problem. Among other things, the reason for this is that the industry journals react more slowly to daily events. They do not depend to such an extent on the topicality of their articles, as their readership is primarily a specialist audience that has a long term interest in the subject matter. In these publications, the discussion of possible solutions to the problem is often part of the report.

4.2 Spokespersons, Victims and Offenders

The spokesperson has the opportunity to frame the topic with his own interpretation. This framing often includes the allocation of victim, offender and helper roles to certain actors. From this privileged position, the spokesperson has the opportunity to manipulate the public debate. In the seven newspapers used in this study, a total of 740 statements on the scandal were found. Within these, 45.2 % of the statements could be directly attributed to members of the political administration, 31.3 % to private and commercial actors such as associations, companies and individuals, and 23.5 % to journalists (cf. Table 1). In 25.8 % of all cases the statement was made by the national or regional government, to which ministers, state secretaries on both levels, and the federal council belong. A quarter of all discussions, and over half of the contributions from the political administrative domain were led by top-level executives, while other political forces (e.g. the opposition, EU-bodies and administrations) played a subordinate role. The second most important contributors were journalists from the respective newspaper, filling the role of 'problem definer' with 19.6 % of all statements. Journalists from other newspapers were very rarely quoted (3.0 %). The prominent role of journalists in the discussion results not only from their representation in commentaries and reports, but also from bridging text and concluding comments.

The high proportion of journalists as spokespersons in this study corresponds with the conclu-

sions of other media analyses (KLEINSCHMIT and FEINDT, 2004 and KLEINSCHMIT et al., 2007).

Table 1. Frequency of comments

| Actor | Medium | | | | Total | |
|---------------------------|---------------|------|----------------|------|-------|------|
| | Quality press | | Industry press | | | |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Political | 248 | 53.1 | 87 | 31.8 | 335 | 45.2 |
| National government | 68 | 14.6 | 30 | 10.9 | 98 | 13.2 |
| Regional governments | 72 | 15.4 | 21 | 7.7 | 93 | 12.6 |
| Opposition | 36 | 7.7 | 6 | 2.2 | 42 | 5.7 |
| Other | 72 | 15.4 | 30 | 10.9 | 102 | 13.8 |
| Journalists | 111 | 23.8 | 56 | 20.4 | 174 | 23.5 |
| Own journalists | 95 | 20.3 | 50 | 18.2 | 145 | 19.6 |
| Quoted journalists | 16 | 3.4 | 6 | 2.2 | 22 | 3.0 |
| Meat sector | 38 | 8.1 | 77 | 28.1 | 115 | 15.5 |
| Associations | 9 | 1.9 | 40 | 14.6 | 49 | 6.6 |
| Meat industry | 24 | 5.1 | 24 | 8.8 | 48 | 6.5 |
| Other | 5 | 1.1 | 13 | 4.7 | 18 | 2.4 |
| Consumer associations | 22 | 4.7 | 9 | 3.3 | 31 | 4.2 |
| Professionals, scientists | 2 | 0.4 | 4 | 1.5 | 6 | 0.8 |
| Other | 46 | 9.9 | 41 | 15.0 | 79 | 10.7 |
| Total | 467 | 100 | 274 | 100 | 740 | 100 |

Source: Own data

From the remaining groups quoted in the articles, 6.6 % of statements can be attributed to meat industry associations, and 6.5 % to businesses in the meat industry, e.g. meat processors and butchers. Overall, the meat industry plays a large role among the non-political contributors to the discussion with 15.5% of comments. These comments come above all from the industry-specific press, which, with 28.1 % of the cases predominantly awards the role of spokesperson to the meat industry. Consumer associations, scientists and industry professionals are barely represented in the discussion (5.0 %; cf. Table 1).

As a rule, events like scandals or political problems only lead to public action when they can sympathise or identify with the victim involved (KLEINSCHMIT and FEINDT, 2004: 96). The role of the victim is of secondary importance in this discussion, i.e. is so obvious, that in 63.3 % of all comments (450) no victim was mentioned, as in the majority of cases the consumers themselves or society as a whole (48.3%) were seen as victims (cf. Table 2). In almost half of the cases in which victims are named, the media portray consumers in such a way so as the public can identify with them (ibidem: 96). This occurs relatively consistently across all groups of commentators. In the industry press, consumers are identified as victims much more seldom (33.0 %) than in the quality press (59.3 %). As with the quality press, the industry specific press focuses on their own readership, in this case the food and meat businesses (40.2 %), as victim.

Table 2. Nomination of victim

| Victim | Spokesperson | | | | | | Medium | | | | Total | |
|-----------------------|--------------|------|-------------|------|-------|------|---------------|------|----------------|------|-------|------|
| | Government | | Journalists | | Other | | Quality press | | Industry press | | | |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Consumer | 24 | 44.4 | 25 | 47.2 | 63 | 50.4 | 80 | 59.3 | 32 | 33.0 | 112 | 48.3 |
| Meat industry | 12 | 22.2 | 12 | 22.6 | 36 | 28.8 | 21 | 15.6 | 39 | 40.2 | 60 | 25.9 |
| Retailers | 1 | 1.9 | 6 | 11.3 | 8 | 6.4 | 4 | 3.0 | 11 | 11.3 | 15 | 6.5 |
| Criminal businesses | 4 | 7.4 | 0 | 0.0 | 4 | 3.2 | 8 | 5.9 | 0 | 0.0 | 8 | 3.4 |
| Consumer associations | 1 | 1.9 | 1 | 1.9 | 2 | 1.6 | 3 | 2.2 | 4 | 4.1 | 7 | 3.0 |
| Executives | 9 | 16.7 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 2.2 | 6 | 6.2 | 9 | 3.9 |
| Farmers | 2 | 3.7 | 2 | 3.8 | 3 | 2.4 | 3 | 2.2 | 1 | 1.0 | 4 | 1.7 |
| Other | 0 | 1.9 | 7 | 13.2 | 9 | 7.2 | 13 | 9.6 | 4 | 4.1 | 17 | 7.3 |

Source: Own data

The two most important commentators, the government and the journalists, also differ in their choice of victim.¹ It is striking that the journalists in contrast to other groups, and especially to the government (1.9 %), identify the retailers as victims (11.3 %). The national and regional governments, however, mainly identify as victims the executives (16.7 %), which are represented by the governments in the public debate. The remaining spokespersons from the commercial and private domains show a bias towards the meat industry as victim.

Media attention is likely when it is possible to prove negligent behaviour or intent on the part of the offender (BODENSTEIN and SPILLER, 1998: 66). These conditions were fulfilled at first by the discovery of large quantities of tainted meat, and later through the investigation of the guilty parties by the authorities. In the case of the “tainted meat scandal”, in only 37.7 % of all cases was no offender named, thereby concentrating the coverage on the issue of guilt rather than on the plight of the victims (63.3 % not named).

In total, out of the 740 cases analysed in this investigation, 541 mention a culprit. The blame is primarily (37.5 %) laid on the meat industry in general and criminal businesses (cf. Table 3). Here, the industry media (21.8 %) and the quality media (19.2 %) barely differ. This demonstrates that although the industry press gives the meat industry more opportunities to present their definition of the problem and tends to portray them as victim, they also attach a certain amount of responsibility to them. The category “meat industry in general” comprises concrete, individual offenders within the meat industry, and shows that spokespersons apparently find it difficult to differentiate more precisely between offenders. Particularly the government often names generic offenders (28.4 %), and generally looks upon the meat industry disproportionately frequently as offender.

1. For clarity, henceforth only the government and journalists in the role of spokesperson will be explicitly explored. All other groups, such as the meat industry, are dealt with in the rubric.

Table 3. Nomination of offender

| Offender | Spokesperson | | | | | | Medium | | | | Total | |
|--------------------------|--------------|------|-------------|------|-------|------|---------------|------|----------------|------|-------|------|
| | Government | | Journalists | | Other | | Quality press | | Industry press | | | |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Meat industry in general | 38 | 28.4 | 27 | 18.8 | 41 | 15.6 | 66 | 19.2 | 43 | 21.8 | 106 | 19.6 |
| Criminal businesses | 16 | 11.9 | 18 | 12.5 | 43 | 16.3 | 54 | 15.7 | 15 | 7.6 | 97 | 17.9 |
| Executives | 22 | 16.4 | 18 | 12.5 | 63 | 24.0 | 62 | 18.0 | 6 | 3.0 | 83 | 15.3 |
| Meat traders | 16 | 11.9 | 21 | 14.6 | 23 | 8.7 | 45 | 13.1 | 14 | 7.1 | 60 | 11.1 |
| Retailers | 4 | 3.0 | 17 | 11.8 | 7 | 2.7 | 22 | 6.4 | 12 | 6.1 | 53 | 9.8 |
| Meat processors | 11 | 8.2 | 17 | 11.8 | 11 | 4.2 | 33 | 9.6 | 40 | 20.3 | 39 | 7.2 |
| Consumer | 2 | 1.5 | 7 | 4.9 | 7 | 2.7 | 17 | 4.9 | 21 | 10.7 | 31 | 5.7 |
| Cold storage facilities | 11 | 8.2 | 12 | 8.3 | 32 | 12.2 | 18 | 5.2 | 31 | 15.7 | 30 | 5.5 |
| Other politicals | 11 | 8.2 | 3 | 2.1 | 14 | 5.3 | 18 | 5.2 | 3 | 1.5 | 21 | 3.9 |
| Other | 3 | 2.2 | 4 | 2.8 | 22 | 8.4 | 9 | 2.6 | 12 | 6.1 | 21 | 3.9 |

Source: Own data

The state or, more accurately its executive organs, are with 15.3 % also looked upon as culprits. This is above all supported by the remaining spokespersons of the private and commercial sectors (24.0 %), and for the most part published in the quality press. The various groups of the meat industry (dealers, cold storage facilities, processors) were seldom seen as offenders. Some problem definers even blame the consumer, although this position was above all expressed in the trade press, and barely mentioned by the government or the quality press.

The “tainted meat scandal” is thus for the majority of the spokespersons seen as a problem of the meat industry and its elements, although even here differences according to specific interests appear.

4.3 Helpers and problem solving devices

In the preceding chapter, the various spokespersons and the groups identified as victims and offenders were described. In contrast to these roles, the role of the helper bestows advantages as it implies not only power to shape political debate but also ample bargaining resources, as well as at the same time being morally advantageous (cf. Chapter 3).

In 72.7 % of all cases a problem-solver was named, thus making them more frequently named than both victims and offenders. This demonstrates the demand of the media for a competent actor to take on the problem. In first place with a total of 43.9 % is the government, particularly the national government (cf. Table 4) which was named in 17.7 % of cases as problem-solver. The only non-governmental group that is frequently named as problem-solver are butchers, (7.4 %). It is, however, almost exclusively seen in the role of helper by the remaining spokespersons. In contrast, those named as victim or offender were seldom also attributed the role of problem-solver (consumers 1.7 % and meat industry 5.7 %).

Table 4. Nomination of problem solver

| Problem solver | Spokesperson | | | | | | Medium | | | | Total | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|------|-------------|------|-------|------|---------------|------|----------------|------|-------|------|
| | Government | | Journalists | | Other | | Quality press | | Industry press | | | |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| National government | 44 | 26.2 | 25 | 18.0 | 24 | 11.0 | 60 | 19.1 | 33 | 15.7 | 93 | 17.7 |
| Other executives | 33 | 19.6 | 20 | 14.4 | 32 | 14.6 | 63 | 20.1 | 22 | 10.5 | 85 | 16.2 |
| Regional government | 36 | 21.4 | 15 | 10.8 | 2 | 0.9 | 39 | 12.4 | 14 | 6.7 | 53 | 10.1 |
| Inspectors/Police | 15 | 8.9 | 16 | 11.5 | 18 | 8.2 | 34 | 10.8 | 15 | 7.1 | 49 | 9.3 |
| Other political | 8 | 4.8 | 9 | 6.5 | 25 | 11.4 | 26 | 8.3 | 16 | 7.6 | 42 | 8.0 |
| Butchers | 0 | 0.0 | 4 | 2.9 | 35 | 16.0 | 12 | 3.8 | 27 | 12.9 | 39 | 7.4 |
| Judiciary | 9 | 5.4 | 13 | 9.4 | 14 | 6.4 | 25 | 8.0 | 11 | 5.2 | 36 | 6.8 |
| Associations | 4 | 2.4 | 10 | 7.2 | 21 | 9.6 | 18 | 5.7 | 17 | 8.1 | 35 | 6.7 |
| Meat sector | 9 | 5.4 | 3 | 2.2 | 18 | 8.2 | 8 | 2.5 | 22 | 10.5 | 30 | 5.7 |
| Retailers | 0 | 0.0 | 7 | 5.0 | 10 | 4.6 | 6 | 1.9 | 11 | 5.2 | 17 | 3.2 |
| Consumer | 1 | 0.6 | 3 | 2.2 | 5 | 2.3 | 7 | 2.2 | 2 | 1.0 | 9 | 1.7 |
| Private quality assurance systems | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 2.2 | 3 | 1.4 | 2 | 0.6 | 4 | 1.9 | 6 | 1.1 |
| Other | 9 | 5.4 | 11 | 7.9 | 12 | 5.5 | 14 | 4.5 | 16 | 7.6 | 32 | 6.1 |

Source: Own data

The national government nominates others as helpers as frequently as they self-nominate (43.0 %). Furthermore, the authorities and the judiciary also have a high proportion of self-nomination (cf. Table 5). There are large disparities in the utilisation of the role of spokesperson between the various associations. The consumer associations frequently see themselves as problem-solvers, whilst the meat industry associations rarely touch upon their role as potential problem-solvers, pointing to a weak institutional position.

Table 5. Self-nomination as helper

| Spokesperson | Total nominations | Self-nominations | Self-nominations/Total nominations |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| Butchers | 15 | 11 | 73.3% |
| Regional and municipal administration | 14 | 9 | 64.3% |
| Retailers | 13 | 7 | 53.8% |
| Judiciary | 19 | 9 | 47.4% |
| Consumer associations | 11 | 5 | 45.5% |
| National government | 93 | 40 | 43.0% |
| National opposition parties | 10 | 4 | 40.0% |
| Regional and municipal government | 80 | 28 | 35.0% |
| Regional opposition parties | 11 | 3 | 27.3% |
| Other associations | 27 | 6 | 22.2% |
| Meat industry associations | 43 | 8 | 18.6% |
| Veterinarians | 6 | 1 | 16.7% |

Source: Own data

In summary, it is striking that the main problem-solvers often nominate themselves to this role and use their position of authority to ascribe competence in problem-solving to themselves. In 79.8 % of cases a solution to the problem was offered, showing that spokespersons consider it very important to use their role to influence the solutions being discussed. The most frequently mentioned measure is the improvement and intensification of checks and controls, in which both the commentators and the media are in agreement (cf. Table 6). Furthermore, a new Consumer Information Law should enhance the status of the interests of the consumer against those of the businesses, this law being publicised particularly by the quality press. These demands are also supported by the call for an improvement in information accessibility and new rules for the handling of abattoir waste.

The handling of abattoir waste especially is seen by the government as an opportunity to solve the problem (12.5 %). A further approach is to deter offenders with an increase in the severity of penalties. All of these are concrete state measures, although in some cases only very broadly defined (for example, requiring simply stricter controls). Overall, the government seems to consider suggestions for solutions to the problem as a responsibility of the state (in 78.3 % of recommendations), whilst other groups nominate state responsibility in only 58.8 % of cases. The industry press publishes a lower proportion of solutions from the state in comparison to the quality press, instead focussing more on solutions from the industry.

Table 6. Problem solving devices

| blem solving measures | Spokesperson | | | | | | Medium | | | | Total | |
|--|-----------------|------|-------------|------|-------|------|------------------|------|-------------------|------|-------|------|
| | Govern- ment | | Journalists | | Other | | Quality press | | Industry press | | | |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Increase/improve state monitoring | 53 | 17.5 | 25 | 16.6 | 46 | 13.1 | 73 | 15.2 | 51 | 15.7 | 124 | 15.4 |
| New consumer information law | 48 | 15.8 | 21 | 13.9 | 51 | 14.5 | 87 | 18.1 | 33 | 10.2 | 120 | 14.9 |
| Increase penalties | 43 | 14.2 | 23 | 15.2 | 33 | 9.4 | 70 | 14.6 | 29 | 9.0 | 99 | 12.3 |
| Improve information accessibility | 35 | 11.6 | 15 | 9.9 | 25 | 7.1 | 40 | 8.4 | 35 | 10.9 | 75 | 9.3 |
| New regulations for the handling of abattoir waste | 38 | 12.5 | 12 | 7.9 | 13 | 3.7 | 36 | 7.5 | 27 | 8.3 | 63 | 7.8 |
| National quality safeguards and risk evaluation | 5 | 1.7 | 5 | 3.3 | 20 | 5.7 | 15 | 3.1 | 15 | 4.6 | 30 | 3.7 |
| Legal ban on price dumping | 9 | 3.0 | 2 | 1.3 | 4 | 1.1 | 5 | 1.0 | 10 | 3.1 | 15 | 1.9 |
| Establishing a task force for meat-related criminal acts | 6 | 2.0 | 2 | 1.3 | 5 | 1.4 | 9 | 1.9 | 4 | 1.2 | 13 | 1.6 |
| EU-wide standardisation | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 10 | 2.8 | 6 | 1.2 | 1 | 1.2 | 10 | 1.2 |
| SUM | 237 | 78.3 | 105 | 69.4 | 207 | 58.8 | 341 | 71.0 | 205 | 64.2 | 549 | 68.1 |
| Improve industry monitoring | 22 | 7.3 | 10 | 6.6 | 39 | 11.1 | 26 | 5.4 | 45 | 13.9 | 71 | 8.8 |
| Increase ethical awareness of the businesses | 2 | 0.7 | 3 | 2.0 | 5 | 1.4 | 5 | 1.0 | 5 | 1.5 | 10 | 1.2 |
| SUM | 24 | 8.0 | 13 | 8.6 | 44 | 12.5 | 31 | 6.4 | 50 | 15.4 | 81 | 10.0 |
| Increase quality awareness of the consumer | 3 | 1.0 | 13 | 8.6 | 71 | 20.2 | 39 | 8.1 | 48 | 14.8 | 87 | 10.8 |
| Short-term hazard prevention | 24 | 7.9 | 16 | 10.6 | 27 | 7.7 | 55 | 11.4 | 12 | 3.7 | 67 | 8.3 |
| Improve traceability | 14 | 4.6 | 2 | 1.3 | 2 | 0.6 | 12 | 2.5 | 6 | 1.9 | 18 | 2.2 |
| Improve technical solutions | 1 | 0.3 | 2 | 1.3 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 0.6 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 0.4 |
| SUM | 42 | 13.8 | 33 | 21.8 | 100 | 28.5 | 109 | 22.6 | 66 | 20.4 | 175 | 21.7 |

Source: Own data

Solutions for which the industry is responsible, however, make up a smaller proportion of the total than those borne by the state. The industry should above all accept more responsibility through improved self-monitoring. This is emphasised especially by the remaining groups of spokespersons, among which the meat industry is particularly well represented. Furthermore, the spokespersons consider it important that the consumers increase their quality awareness, in order to stimulate the meat industry to increase the quality of their goods. The government restricts its commentary principally to its own area of responsibility.

Nearly all groups call for an improved and stricter governmental monitoring of food-safety. Solely the businesses of the meat industry, including abattoirs, meat processors and dealers, consider the solution to be in the modification of consumer behaviour. Only in fifth place does a withdrawal of business license come into consideration.

In summary, it can be said that an improvement of inspections and more market transparency is required. The main responsibility is clearly carried by the national and regional governments, and not by the meat industry. These results are comprehensively discussed in the following chapter.

5. Discussion

Political decision makers use the media coverage as a barometer of public opinion (GERHARDS, 1995: 151). Solutions that are positively received in the public debate have thus better chances in the political policy making process than those that are not.

One of the most important findings of this analysis of the “tainted meat scandal” of 2005/06 is that politicians and government representatives dominate the media discussion as spokespersons. Providing 30 % of all statements in the quality press, itself a particularly important influence on the public opinion, they are in the position to communicate their interpretive pattern to the public. They use this opportunity to highlight the executives as victims of the scandal, whilst portraying themselves in the role of helper in almost 50 % of cases - twice as often as do other spokespersons. Furthermore, the politicians focus more on state recommendations for solutions than other spokespersons (78.3 % to 68.1 %). The politicians (or governmental representatives) are thereby in a position to use their influence in the discussion to portray themselves in a positive light and to use the positive aspects of the position of helper, as well as of victim. The politicians thus paint a picture in which they are competent to solve the problem, not only as a political force but also by using the appropriate political instruments.

There are two ways of interpreting this portrayal: firstly, the political decision-makers are using their influential power to show themselves in a positive light. This is common procedure in public affairs to win over voters. Secondly, the emphasis of state solutions and measures can also be a sign of avoiding a loss of power with respect to solutions from the private sector. However, their position as dominant spokesperson enables political decision-makers to present their perspective to the public. Other actors, such as the meat industry, have in contrast few opportunities to emphasise their (potentially conflicting) recommendations. Assuming that the media discussion affects political decision-making, a positive-feedback cycle can result: the politicians or governmental representatives portray their interpretive pattern in the media, and these portrayals are in turn greeted by the government as a positive response to these decisions. Following the assumptions of the spiral of silence (NOELLE-NEUMANN, 1980), a dominant point of view in the media could even lead to the situation where other commentators adopt this view purely out of fear of isolation from the majority. In this discussion, the media acquires in two senses an intermediary role. Firstly the media form the connecting element between the public sphere and the actors, and secondly the journalists usually make nominations which lie in the average. As gatekeeper and disseminator of news, the media have a special significance for modern society. They supply the general public with news and provide an arena for all social actors. The

media does in one aspect, however, show its coverage as “customer oriented”. The quality press views the consumer as victim in nearly 60 % of cases, whilst in the industry-specific press the meat industry is nominated in this role in 40 % of cases. The general press thus cares little about the repercussions in the meat industry (16 %), and the industry-specific press views the consumer merely as a secondary victim (33 %). Reports about helpers and solutions follow a similar pattern, whereby the great importance of the consumers in the general discussion is replaced by the politicians as their elected representative. The quality press reports more about the helper-role of politics and state solutions than does the industry press.

As both readership and voting public, the consumer is connected to all three main spokespersons (state, industry and media), and is thereby in a business or political exchange relationship. Nonetheless, apart from their importance as victims, consumers have little significance for the structure of this discussion. The attribution of the role of victim to the consumer in general can furthermore lead to a “de-politicisation” of the topic, i.e. because no concrete victim is named, the pressure for action is low. The responsibility of the consumer for higher quality awareness is seldom mentioned, connected to the fact that they are rarely nominated as offenders. The consumer associations only manage to contribute a small proportion to the overall coverage, where similarly to the other groups, they utilise the media to portray themselves as helper. In summary, it may be said that the consumers are seen as hardest hit, although with their “low” quality awareness they are also perceived as one of the offenders. The politicians, as elected by the consumers, apply themselves to solving the problem, and this is then communicated to the consumers by the newspapers that they read.

The grouping of the private businesses in this analysis comprises only few groups directly belonging to the meat industry or grocery stores. Despite this, the situation for these groups during the meat scandal differed greatly. Among the commercial actors, the butchers are the only ones to have emerged from the discussion unscathed. They are nominated as helper in over 7 % of cases, whereby much of this publicity was self-generated, so allowing the butchers to distance themselves from the negative image of the “meat industry”.

The meat industry in general, as well as its individual elements (abattoirs, processors, meat dealers and cold storage facilities), is focused upon as culprit. Thereby both the industry and quality press report with similar frequency about offenders from the meat industry. In the industry press, however, the industry is additionally depicted as victim of the scandal and is ascribed a certain amount of competence to solve the problem. It is thus in the industry press not only the scapegoat for the endangerment of the public, but suffers itself from the scandal and is possibly also through improved self-monitoring in a position to get the trade and processing of “tainted and rotten meat” under control. The main aim of the meat industry associations should be to represent the interests of their members in the quality press, however, they seldom appear as spokesperson in this medium. For this reason, the discussions in the two types of media have taken different courses. Furthermore, in contrast to other groups the meat industry associations only very rarely use the opportunity to nominate themselves as problem-solver, and do not support their own quality assurance schemes (e.g. QS Quality and Safety), therefore rendering these irrelevant in the public discussion.

The solution to the problem is clearly seen as a responsibility of the national government, but also to a certain extent of the regional governments. Thereby mainly stricter food-safety checks and a new Consumer Information Law are called for. These demands were, in part, picked up on very early on by the government and implemented. In November 2005 as a consequence of the meat scandals, the BMELV decided a ‘10-point instant program’. Although the measures also require compulsory industry self-monitoring, most points concern improved state control of food-safety, e.g. stricter inspections of meat traders, improved traceability of critical material, or closer cooperation of the individual authorities. Furthermore, increased sanctions were also called for (c.f. BMELV, 2005). Overall, the recommended measures can be assigned to sta-

te regulatory policy (legal instruments), as the changes concern the food and animal feed codes of law as well as other regulations (c.f. BMELV, 2007 and 2008).

In addition, on the 22nd of September 2006 a new Consumer Information Law was adopted. In important cases such as health hazards or infringements of rights, the responsible bodies are categorically obliged to inform the public by naming the businesses and products concerned. Infringements of rights are no longer allowed to be company or business secrets.

6. Concluding comments

This investigation reveals the dominance of political actors in the discussion about tainted meat. In the period 2005/06, this dominance led to the creation of new state measures, such as the high-profile Consumer Information Law or 10-point plan. This was not only in their conception but also in their implementation designed to demonstrate competence on the part of the state. Such measures are particularly important for the voters that regularly keep themselves informed through the media, and in consequence improve opinion polls results. Politicians devote a great deal of rhetoric to this subject, and as “classic” defender of “the man on the street” also a large proportion of the discussion itself, as well as utilising it during their own election campaigns. This corresponds with a subordinate role of the commercial sector in the discussion, which reaches nowhere near the amount of publicity achieved by the politicians. Whether this is due to lack of communication with the public or to the selection of publications in this analysis, is not ascertainable from the data. However, a quick look at the websites of the large companies concerned would indicate a lack of communication. The already poor reputation of the German meat industry (ALVENSLEBEN, 1997, ALBERSMEIER & SPILLER, 2008 and BRUHN, 2008) is thus further diminished by its lack of representation in the media.

From this observation, a further recommendation for the meat industry may be derived. Alongside further improvements to the quality assurance scheme, a significantly more professional approach of the associations and businesses to public relations is needed. This analysis shows that the creation of a competent PR infrastructure has been neglected, so that during crises the foreground is consistently taken by the politicians.

In the future, the commercial actors must recognise that internal lobbying, such as has successfully been employed by the associations for decades, will no longer suffice. Only those who can actively promote their ideas for solutions and development of the industry in public debate are in a position to win over the public, and thereby the politicians as well. For this they must be elected to be acceptable to the majority, but also identifiable with for individuals, including non-professionals. Otherwise, as happened in the case of the tainted meat scandal, new food industry regulations will end up being determined by political laities with no understanding of the industry-specific requirements.

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