

Media Tenor:

Established as a well-known, public institution

Media Tenor: What was your expectation in 1993, when the concept for Media Tenor was developed?

Wolfgang Donsbach: Actually, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann gave the impulse. Just like all empirical communication researchers she knew of **Media Monitor** in the US. We all admired what Bob Lichter had achieved: Providing a more or less continuous observation of media trends employing the method of quantitative content analysis. Admittedly, we all had sufficient experience with this method, but our research mainly consisted of individual studies that were limited in scope or time period. The idea behind the **Media Monitor**, however, was to examine media content over open-ended time periods and topic ranges. This is what, aside from Ms. Noelle-Neumann, brought together people like Wolfgang Bergsdorf, Hans Mathias Kepplinger, Augustinus Heckel-Donnersmarck, Joachim Faber, Peter Schiwy, yourself and me.

The interest in this type of research, then and now, is obviously motivated by the results of many studies illustrating the power of the media in society. It really was a rather paradoxical situation to conduct regular opinion polls, that is “monitoring” public opinion in some way, while looking only sporadically and unsystematically at media content, the main reason for how public opinion develops.

The goal was therefore to provide an interested public with analysis on the media’s agenda, their position on short-term and long-term topics, societal values and individual protagonists in politics and business. Naturally, this implicitly included the question about quality standards in the media and journalistic norms, as well as discovering which media stand out positively or negatively.

MT: What was achieved?

Wolfgang Donsbach: We founded the non-profit Association for Media Content Analysis, whose main task was to create a system for continuous media monitoring and to make it available to the public. As far as the research was concerned, we succeeded in it rather quickly. Of course, in comparison to what **Media Tenor** has become today, the first issues we published seem rather modest. After all, we had to invent everything from scratch, since the scope of our work significantly exceeded what our US role-model was doing. We soon realized that, in order to cover the costs, we had to establish some economic basis for our research and conduct additional studies on a contractual basis. At that point it was interesting to see that many big companies’ public relations chiefs shied away from **MT** like the devil from holy water. Our work provided an objective way of measuring the effectiveness of their media relations work, and this did not necessarily make it easier to get started. But the project was born, the infrastructure for research and, above all, the publication existed. The association parted with the product “**Media Tenor**”, handing it over to the private business Innovatio GmbH, where it remains to this day and is obviously prospering. In the past year, we have dissolved the Association for Media Content Analysis, which I had chaired since 1997. It had accomplished its most important goal, even if it was continued by others.



**Professor Dr.
Wolfgang Donsbach**
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Today, looking at the extent to which **MT** is quoted by the media, one can safely say that it has established itself as a well-known, public institution. The data of the content analyses are recognized and, in case of controversies, publicly discussed. As a communication researcher, political scientist, or simply as a politically active and interested citizen, I can always follow the trends of media coverage, evaluating how selected issues or persons are reported on. After ten years of research, **Media Tenor**’s unique archive of empirical-historical data has become one of its main assets. I think that it does a good job repeatedly rummaging through this box, in order to demonstrate long-term development trends. Another aspect of **MT**’s success story is certainly its increasing international interconnection.

MT: What are its weak points?

Wolfgang Donsbach: Actually, I cannot think of many. It is a pity, however, that many of the founders stopped being involved with **MT**. I would have wished that to be otherwise. Maybe the recognition of media content analysis in the media could be improved. **MT** is scolded on a regular basis when it publishes critical results on a particular medium or media genre. Journalists do not like others to scrutinize their work. Still, general media continue to be the necessary link to the people, since hardly any of them will read **MT** publications directly. I cannot say anything about the extent to which **MT** is recognized by the elite in politics and business. But it seems to me that people in those circles are aware of it.

MT: Introducing a comprehensive content analysis of all the coverage in opinion forming daily newspapers, weekly media and TV news allowed for analyzing topical trends which, in previous times, had not been the researchers’ focus of interest. Which of the results produced by **Media Tenor** in the past ten years surprised you the most?

Wolfgang Donsbach: I always found the “historical” analysis most captivating, for example the portrayal of the GDR history in the first years of its existence, and later also those on the SED (the former ruling party in East Germany). The strong point of these nationwide content analysis is that they also point to what is not published or broadcast.

MT: Do you have a favorite among the charts that you use in your lectures?

Wolfgang Donsbach: Yes, but this is also a bit dated by now. It was the chart on the issues that the media covered

when Angela Merkel was elected head of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) in 2000. Information on hairstyle, dressing habits and appearance dominated – rather than political abilities or values (**Media Tenor** no. 95, April 15th, 2000). I always showed it as an example of the personalization of politics.

MT: What areas should **Media Tenor** focus its research on?

Wolfgang Donsbach: It is a structural problem of analysis such as those by **MT** that they are conducted with a rather broad focus, in order to make the data comparable over time. One cannot strongly concentrate on selected issues in a very sophisticated manner, because the dimensions of problems continue to change in time. The code books would have to be adapted and changed over and over again, which would make a comparison over time impossible. In our analysis, for example those on campaign coverage, we often realize that the side aspects of a given topic have a decisive influence on the population; not the so-called “frame” itself makes a difference, but its details. You can only assess those with very specific code books.

One example is the first televised debate between Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his challenger Edmund Stoiber during the 2002 German parliamentary election campaign. The perception of who had won the debate was not shaped by explicit statements in the media, but by the assessment of the TV debate format as such. Even we had to complement our study on the campaign with a specific content analysis to work out that detail. An organization with a broader scope, such as **Media Tenor**, obviously cannot do that. What I would wish to see more is the statistical linking between media content and opinion polling data. At this point existing timelines have gotten so rich, that they provide excellent material for drawing conclusions on media effects.

MT: As President of the International Communication Association (ICA) you have considerable insight in international developments. Where do you see points of contact for global research projects?

Wolfgang Donsbach: I believe that my choice of the conference topic for the ICA New Orleans Conference was generally well-received: “Communication Research in the Public Interest.” Researchers worldwide should increasingly redirect their attention to the question what research we actually need. “Need” in the sense of what benefits us as individuals, as society, as political system and as world population? I am not calling for completely giving up all research that is essentially free of value judgements, when it comes to justifying hypotheses. But I think that we should be more sensible and value-oriented when choosing research topics. We simply do not need agenda setting study number 387, when its point has been made a long time ago.

MT: In his book “The Vanishing Voter”, Thomas Patterson has written about the growing disinterest among Americans to participate in the electoral process. In the most recent Europe-

an parliamentary election the non-voters have equally turned out as the strongest party on this continent. Can you imagine a trend of vanishing voters in Europe that is similar to the one in the U.S.?

Wolfgang Donsbach: I do not consider the situation to be quite as dramatic, yet. In any event, many in the U.S. also claim that the political abstinence of the population has been exaggerated by those studies. Or they point out that the research was based on unrealistic expectations on the voters’ interest in and understanding of politics. The study in question combined weekly interviews with media content analysis, assessing each day and for each particular event what voters were interested in and what made them turn away from politics. It think that a similarly extensive study would also be necessary in our country, because it would help us to better understand the disenchantment with politics, as well as media effects.

MT: What do you think will be the role of communication science in ten years?

Wolfgang Donsbach: Communication science has grown in importance along with public communication, particularly that of media communication. In the past twenty years, hardly any other scientific field has expanded as much as communication science. And there is no end in sight. We will always have sufficient and new work, that is phenomena in society, which have to be described and explained. As an empirical science we also have to offer the conceptual framework for solutions. The history of science shows that disciplines evolved according to a number of different criteria. They may be of a general or theoretical nature, as is the case with philosophy or physics. Others follow specific tasks of problem solving, such as medicine or air and space engineering.

Communication science can be largely attributed to the second category of disciplines. It did not evolve from the desire to achieve a general “understanding of the world,” but rather to learn more about a newly developed phenomenon in society – that of mass communication. This is precisely the reason why the first scientific treatises, which are acknowledged as the origin of the field, date back to the end of the 17th century. Kaspar von Stieler’s “*Zeitungs Lust und Nutz*” (the pleasure and usefulness of newspapers) is one example: People wanted to understand something that was obviously becoming more and more important.

Communication science will always be an integrative science in need of other disciplines. We assemble methods, theories and explanations from all kinds of other fields. As a matter of fact, all sciences concentrating on phenomena do so: Medical scientists use biology, chemistry or mechanics, space engineers physics and aerodynamics, and we use primarily psychology and to a slightly lesser degree sociology, sometimes history, economics, etc. In a media democracy we therefore do not have to worry about our field going under any time in the near future.

Interview by Roland Schatz