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## **A VIEW ON THE UNINFORMED CONSUMERS TOWARDS QUALITY STANDARDS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TTIP NEGOTIATIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Radio broadcasts, TV shows and online media make a significant contribution to day-to-day consumer information and have a great impact on public opinion. The present study provides an overview of the German reporting about the quality standards of the agri-food industry in the context of the negotiations towards a EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). On the basis of a guided empirical content analysis, 436 publications released via radio, TV or Internet in the period from June 2013 to December 2016 were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. The quantitative analysis showed that the agri-food industry was generally of minor relevance in the coverage of TTIP, but focused mainly on quality standards. The term ‘quality and consumer protection standards’ frequently appeared in the reportings with the topics such as genetic modification, use of hormones, antibiotics or pesticides and the ‘chlorine-washed chicken’. These are not standards for official definition of the general food law. It was established that all publications lacked information about specific standards. Thus, the quantitative analysis showed a superficial view of quality standards with only symbolic characteristics. The results of the qualitative media analysis indicated a negative picture of the effects of TTIP concerning the agri-food sector and its standards. Due to the complex structure of the globalised agri-food chains, the importance of comprehensive consumer information was highlighted. Overall, German media failed to provide scientifically based information. Unfortunately, they just highlighted the possible negative changes which could be caused by TTIP.

**Keywords:** *agri-food industry, food safety, quality management, quality standards, Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A possible bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the EU and the US has been debated closely since 2011. Negotiations were started in June 2013 (European Commission, 2013). Intensive discussions are being held on possible impact for European standards on consumer protection and EU quality policy. A great interest

by the media and the attention of the civil society has emerged. In a very short time, countless alliances with the participation of political parties, associations, trade unions and citizens have been established who call the population to protest against the FDA. A strong presence of counter-movements could be achieved mainly by distributing its content to online media. Many of these non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work together in their protests against TTIP and thus achieve an enormous range. So far, only the sector-neutral information events of the anti-TTIP campaign movement in Germany have been analyzed, with the result that citizens are the victims of a professional disinformation campaign (Bauer, 2016). Furthermore, the general mood of TTIP in other European countries and the USA were analyzed. The findings indicated that the TTIP negotiations in the considered European countries do not play a major role (Maier, 2014). This situation has an impact on civil society. According to a study in 2015, the EU-wide acceptance to TTIP decreased by 2% compared to the year 2014 (Bluth, 2016). The reporting in the mass media influences the level of information and the opinion of the consumers significantly. Because of that a comprehensive, complete and scientifically correct presentation is indispensable for differentiated opinion formation (AGR, 2015). Although the media have an educational mandate, the consumer is offered a variety of topics that affect the opinion about the FDA negatively. The population is not properly informed and insecure. The relevance has not yet been properly researched with regard to the presentation of the quality standards of the agri-food industry within the scope of the TTIP negotiations. This study aims at filling this research gap.

### **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

Media can be differentiated into mass media and lead media. Mass media are characterized by a wide range of information. Leading media publications are to be used for information and form opinions of the public and other mass media (Gendolla *et al*, 2009; Hasebrink *et al*, 2013). Three types of media were analyzed: radio broadcasts, TV shows and online media. The radio is considered as background medium, which is used throughout the day (Engel, Breunig, 2015). Consequently, the coverage of radio broadcasts is rather high and it has a significant impact on shaping of public opinion and information status to consumers. As a medium of information and entertainment in Germany, television is of great importance in the everyday life of consumers. TV shows of the category "educational television" were the focus of analysis. In order to establish a representative cross-section in the presentation of quality standards of the agri-food industry within the context of the TTIP reporting, the websites of TTIP-counter-movements and consumer protection organizations (Non-Government-Organizations (NGOs)) were analyzed. The overall analysis took into account 169 radio broadcasts, 144 TV shows and 123 articles from eight websites of NGOs. They have been reviewed in terms of their relevance to the research question, thus the developed category system has been applied to a total of 51 TV shows, 34 radio broadcasts and 19 contributions on the respective websites of NGOs. Because TTIP

should regulate all European and US standards of the agri-food industry, mainly the standards were considered that are in the media discussions of particular relevance. The following international standards were of particular importance: DIN EN ISO Standards, International Featured Standards (IFS), Global G.A.P, GS1 Germany, QS and EQA Standards. All selected media contributions were analyzed with the focus on Germany. The analysis period was set from the beginning of the TTIP negotiations in June 2013 until 31.12.2016. Data were collected from April 2016 to January 2017. Since the media's portrayal on the quality standards of the agri-food industry as part of TTIP was a complex analysis object, empirical content analysis was combined with the model of guideline analysis. In this way, formal and content-related elements could be presented in a reduced form. For a thorough analysis of the presentation of topics in different media formats and assessing the impact of mass media on public opinion of consumers, various elements had to be considered. Apart from the content, stylistics was also the focus of the investigations. The procedure of content analysis had to be intersubjectively comprehensible and was carried out in four phases (Früh, 2015): the planning phase, the development phase, the test phase and the application phase. Two types of content analysis are distinguished: the manifest analysis and the latent analysis. In this study, the latent content analysis was performed. In order to reflect the underlying significance of a media contribution, each article was read and subjectively assessed. The guideline analysis as a useful addition to the empirical content analysis allows the consideration of complex issues, it captures the content and the function of a media report. Both methods were applied to contributions that dealt with defined keywords on quality standards as well as the impact on the agri-food industry. The eight defined keywords were „chlorine-washed chicken“, „genetic modification“, „hormone meat“, „cloning“ and the use of pesticides and antibiotics in agriculture. In addition, the “precautionary principle” was included in the analysis, which plays a key role in the TTIP negotiations and is opposed to the US aftercare principle. The precautionary principle is essential in the European agri-food industry to produce high-quality and safe products. Another keyword was "weakening of standards". The standards of the agri-food industry had to be differentiated from the standards of other industries. Accordingly, only statements were considered, which were directly related to the agri-food industry or those which are responsible for consumer protection. For the analysis a five-stage system was used. Their categories were described by variables. The categories of identification, formal design, origin, content and function were selected. Different variables have been assigned to each category. For each medium an adapted guideline sheet was compiled to answer the research questions. The content and wording of the guidelines were adapted to the respective media format.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following, results regarding relevance, frequency of the keywords, use of subject-related information source and content of the quality standards of the agri-food industry in the context of TTIP reporting are presented and discussed.

### **Relevance of media reporting**

As shown in Table 1, a total of 436 contributions of different media formats were considered, of which 104 articles were relevant for the formulated research question and were analyzed. This corresponded to a relevance of 23.9%. The share of relevant contributions in television was highest with 35.4%. Radio stations have published a larger number (169) of contributions, but their relevance to the research question was lower (20.1%). The least relevance of contributions was found at the NGOs (15.4%).

Table 1. Relevance of the considered analysis items and share of reporting on the agri-food industry (AFI) and quality standards (QS)

	considered	relevance	relevance [%]	AFI [%]	QS [%]	QS on AFI [%]
TV	144	51	35.4	23.9	13.0	54.4
Radio	169	34	20.1	10.7	5.0	46.7
NGOs	123	19*	15.4	text 16.9 film 69.7	11.6 23.5	68.5 33.7
	436	104*	<b>Ø 23.9</b>			

\* The difference is explained by 15 unrecognized contributions from 3 NGOs. In these cases, the value of the analyzed items could not be determined by the structure of the websites, so that only the contributions of 5 other NGOs are summarized.

Decisive for the results is the period during which the study was carried out. During the data collection from April 2016 to January 2017 three rounds of negotiations, the US presidential election and the publication of TTIP leaks by *Greenpeace* took place. Given the broad basis for negotiation and the large number of contentious issues of the agreement, it was expected that the share of reporting on the agri-food industry and its standards would be low, as confirmed by the analysis results.

### **Frequency of keywords**

The most frequent use of all the keywords under investigation was in the medium of television. It is clear from Figure 1 that it was reported most frequently on “genetic modification” (78.4%), “weakening of standards” (72.6%) and “chlorine-washed chicken” (54.9%). Most often mentioned by radio broadcasts were “genetic modification” (50.0%), “chlorine-washed chicken” (41.2%) and the “precautionary principle” (29.4%). The “weakening of standards” was most frequently reported by NGOs in the online media with 79.4%, followed by “genetic modification” (58.8%) and “precautionary principle” (29.4%). Overall, the “genetic modification” (62.4%) was most frequently mentioned in the reporting. The “weakening of

standards” was the second most common statement of the study at 55.6%. The next important keyword with an average consideration of 40.9% was the topic “chlorine-washed chicken”. With a share of 30.1% the “precautionary principle” was applied. About the “use of hormones” was reported in 22.2% of all coverage. The most rarely used keywords were “use of pesticides” (9.5%) and “use of antibiotics” (7.2%). Little has been reported on the topic of “cloning” (8.2%). Overall, the frequency of the examined keywords was low in all media formats. The general explanation of quality standards was of most importance in television (53.0%), whereas the radio was the rarest of 17.7%. Furthermore, an increased use of keywords in the negative presentation of TTIP compared to the neutral reporting was to be seen. An exception was the medium radio, which published most frequently neutral contributions. Neutral presentation, meaning without judgment, took place via radio broadcasts on “genetic modification” (51.6%), “weakening of standards” (16.1%), “use of antibiotics” (9.7%), “use of pesticides” (6.5%) and “cloning” (3.2%). The general term “standards” was most frequently used in TV shows with a neutral view regarding TTIP (80.0%). Finally, it should be noted that the fixed keywords of the analysis were significantly used by the media.

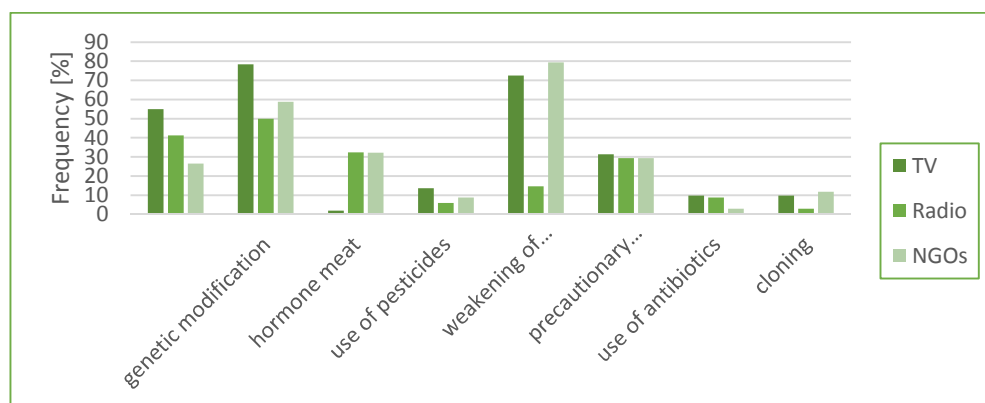


Figure 1: Selection and frequency of used keywords in the analysis items

### ***Sources of information***

The results provide an overview of the most common sources of information, which were used by media in terms of the positions and representations of TTIP. The medium of television generally used the most information sources. The most important sources of information were statements by politicians (43.4%), German representatives of industry and commerce (30.3%) and consumers (29.4%). In radio broadcasts, only the moderator or the journalist were involved in 44.1% of the contributions. The most important source of information for the radio were politicians (55.9%). Consumers, upholders of consumer protection and entrepreneurs were of secondary importance in radio shows. Moreover, in 47.1% of the contributions of NGOs, no references were mentioned. Their main sources of information were economic studies (23.5%) and statements of interested entrepreneurs (20.6%). Quotes from stakeholders of consumer protection (2.9%)

and consumers (2.9%) were the least relevant. Statements by representatives of the European Commission were found at 5.9% less frequently than those of politicians who are not participating in the negotiations (14.7%). With the exception of contributions from affected farmers and food companies, 98.3% of all analyzed items were made by persons who are not familiar with the agri-food industry. Given the fact that reports on the agri-food industry have a extensive impact on consumers as well as a high emotional effect, it has been expected that the anti-TTIP-organizations have often reported about this sector. This aims at mobilizing the population against TTIP. The analysis showed that the expectation of published films and videos, which emphasized the negative consequences of the FDA and invoked consumers to take part in demonstrations, was confirmed. The results on the publications of the NGOs illustrated the organized structure against TTIP. At the same time, it showed that NGOs, through their large presence, were able to influence consumers without having to provide detailed information. De facto, in most of the articles, no sources of information on the agri-food industry and its quality standards were used. Thus, the omission of scientific sources of information can be used as a means to achieve a desired effect on consumers.

### ***Presentation of content***

All analyzed media were verified for their content. The results showed a very low positive view on TTIP. At least, TV shows had a positive share of 5.90%. In contrast, radio broadcasts and NGOs did not show any positive depictions about TTIP. The neutral reporting predominated with 91.2% in radio shows. A prevailing negative presentation of the entire analysis period was noticed for TV stations (54.9%) and NGOs (100%). Positive presentations were achieved primarily by the fact that potential negative effects are weakened. The neutral impression was achieved by the simultaneous use of positive and negative contributions. In the case of the positive presentation, sentences were used to insure the future import ban on hormone meat, genetic modification, cloned meat or "chlorine-washed chicken", and to prevent a reduction in consumer protection standards. TTIP supporters recognized the differing perceptions of certain quality criteria between the EU and the US. It has repeatedly been explained that the EU does not have higher standards of protection in all areas, for example in the case of limiting values of contaminants and microbiological quality at raw milk products. Above all, there were different points of view and argumentative structures about the precautionary and aftercare principles. While some of the TTIP supporters require the unaltered maintenance of the precautionary principle, others argue that both the precautionary and aftercare principle are effective approaches that should be better united in the future. Concerning the proposed mutual recognition of protective standards, different statements have been made. On the one hand, the position was held that mutual recognition should not be accepted so that the different levels of protection should continue in the future and common standards have to be developed on both sides of the Atlantic. On the other hand, mutual recognition was seen positively as long as labeling requirements for the origin and production processes are mandatory. Global harmonization could affect the international

standards (e.g. DIN EN ISO, IFS, Global GAP, GS1, QS, EQA). In none of the reports were detailed contents or specific quality standards of the agri-food industry mentioned, which could be altered by the agreement. In addition, it was found that the argumentation with false facts concerning the "chlorine-washed chicken" and other stereotypes prevents an impartial view of the chances of TTIP. In the negative reports, the emotions were mainly achieved through dramatizations, musical effects, metaphorical pictures and evaluative language as well as biased and generalized statements. The quality standards of the agri-food industry were without exception presented as endangered, without mentioning specific regulations. Consumer voices were involved in the media reporting, but the share in positive presentations was lower than in neutral and negative reports. Farmers were mostly negative about TTIP, while representatives of other economic sectors were in positive mood. NGOs were mainly represented in negative reports on TTIP. Negative statements were often dramatized. For example, it has been predicted that unlabelled banned goods will be imported on the European market and the competition between the manufacturers will be increased. TTIP would also contribute to a reduction of the biological diversity, the wide range of products and quality of food. Apart from that the discussion about the "chlorine-washed chicken" was used in order to bring European standards of intensive animal husbandry into a better light. It should be noted that the concept of animal welfare has always been discussed differently in the European population than in the USA. In Europe, animal welfare is part of the transformation processes to more sustainability and is related to healthy animals mean safe food. This is now recognized not only by science, but also by the industry. Of course, it is also part of the preventive idea behind the EU food law. Regardless of the medium, the European agri-food industry was seen as the loser of the TTIP agreement, as the differences in this area were fundamental and the higher-regarded European standards of protection were inevitably seen as jeopardized. By moral concerns about the methods in agriculture especially emotional aspects could be used without distinguishing between scientific and ethical foundations. The different levels of protection of the standards were critically discussed in all media, without any concrete standards being mentioned. In principle, more detailed information were provided on subjects not related to the agri-food industry than on quality standards in the agri-food sector. Their role seems to be underestimated, as in the future, the private standards should be more closely integrated into the negotiations on international trade agreements (Petersen, Lehnert, 2017).

## CONCLUSIONS

The planned EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) was presented in the media by supporters as well as by critics. Consequently, the different points of view and statements were the focus of this specific analysis. It has been shown that a change in European quality standards has been recognized in the population and interest has developed. For example counter movements have been established. However, consumers should not be informed and educated, as an

intensive debate on standards of the agri-food industry would automatically lead to a discussion about negative effects. As a result, both the presentation of TTIP supporters and TTIP critics kept the level of information on the agri-food industry low. In reports with a positive attitude towards TTIP, the relationship to the agri-food industry is lower, thereby avoiding the fear of consumers about the threat in this sector. An exclusion of possible negative effects is discussed. The benefits of TTIP for the EU were presented from an economic point of view or in other economic sectors. It was found that in none of the analysis items specific terms of the standards of agri-food industry were declared. The use of the term "standards" in the media does not correspond to the official definition of the European food law and was therefore just of general nature. The discussion about modification of protection standards in the food production was used as a polarizing and emotionalizing aspect in the reporting about the agri-food industry under the TTIP negotiations where the consumer can generally be assumed to be uninformed or non-expert. Indeed, there was a lack of consumer-oriented information.

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