

Public Relations and Media

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For the following remarks I will mainly draw on experience of my work at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, where I head the research division Middle East and Africa. Currently I am based as a Visiting Scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Middle East Office in Beirut.

My presentation will consist of two parts: First, I was asked to present SWP, second, I will give an outlook on SWP's media and public relations approach.

SWP, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Let me start by shortly sketching out what **SWP** is and how it functions: SWP is an **independent academic research centre** which advises the German Bundestag (the German Parliament) and the Federal Government on foreign and security policy issues. Its research products (written as well as oral) are primarily made available to members of Parliament and the federal government. They are then also published on the institute's website (www.swp-berlin.org).

The institute was **set up in 1962** by a private initiative as a foundation. Since 1965 it has been funded almost completely from the federal budget. The establishment of the think tank came about against the **backdrop of the Cold War** – with Germany being divided and in the centre of East-West confrontation and the Berlin wall just having been erected – when an intense need for independent thinking and policy advice particularly on issues related to hard (or: military) security was felt. Thus, the focus of the research institute was to be on security issues. Since then, the institute has developed – it has grown considerably in size and

the research agenda now also includes all kind of other **foreign and (soft) security policy** issues.

The centre is **politically independent**. In order to guarantee its independence it is overseen by a Council (equivalent to a Board of Trustees) composed of representatives from all parties in Parliament, the concerned ministries as well as personalities from academia, business and public affairs. This Council also appoints the institute's director and his or her deputies and approves the broad outlines for research. In addition, we have a Research Advisory Board to advise us on all questions related to the research agenda, the academic debate as well as research methods.

Currently, we have more than 130 full time staff, among them some 60 researchers in 8 research divisions – thus being the **biggest publicly funded think tank in Europe**. In addition to the Research Department, we have a large Information Department that not only supports the institute's research, but also provides information dossiers for Germany's political institutions.

Coming to the topic of the session 'Public Relations and Media' I would like to address three main issues: relations with the media; the website; and public relations with our main customers or 'how to reach our target groups.' My focus will be on media relations. Before I delve into the subject though, I would like to make one preliminary remark: We should keep in mind the specific **political context** of the think tank and the media we are looking at in Germany. Indeed, I am speaking about an environment where we have freedom of the press, freedom of expression and no censorship of the press or research institutes' work. I am also speaking about a think tank in a parliamentary democracy. Definitely, our experience and our approaches and strategies cannot be translated one-by-one into a different political environment. I still hope that some of our experiences as well as some elements of our approaches can be of interest to you and can serve as an input for developing media relations and public relations.

How to reach target groups

Let me start with the **first** important element and that is **how to reach target groups**. Indeed, our experience is that the greatest challenge for a think tank is not to reach journalists and the media – as they have a strong interest in contacting us for background information and interviews anyhow. It is rather to reach our main “customers,” i.e. Parliamentarians and employees in the administration. The main reason for this is that they are usually working to full capacity and therefore often lack the time and energy to consult us on policies. Sometimes they might also not be aware of the value added that policy consulting can provide. Therefore we are constantly thinking about new formats and instruments to reach out to them. Let me give you two examples of this: One is what we call ‘**interactive policy consulting**’ where we include decision-makers in the consulting process from the beginning to the end and allow them to have an active part in brainstorming sessions and workshops (defining problems, weighing different policy options, thinking jointly about their consequences and developing recommendations), in scenario building exercises, in writing studies or papers together. Thus, they are not only passive recipients of our work but rather become part of it – and therefore they are much more engaged and interested. To give you a concrete example: I initiated a **working group** in the first half of 2005 with representatives from all parliamentary factions on the issue of the upcoming Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. In this working group we tried to figure out jointly what the withdrawal would mean for the peace process and what Germany and the EU should and could do to support steps towards furthering peace in the Middle East.

A second instrument that we have recently introduced is what we call ‘**SWP compilations**.’ These compilations are a selection of short articles and research papers on a certain topic that we send per email to the concerned people in Parliament (usually the members of the foreign affairs or defense committee as well as the faction leaders and coordinators) ahead of important debates. The idea is to provide them with sound analysis and policy alternatives to inform their debates and decisions. A concrete example of a compilation that I have been involved in dealt with the German contribution to UNIFIL, the UN troops deployed in Southern Lebanon. This compilation was sent out last year ahead of the plenary debate on the prolongation of the mandate of German troops participating in the maritime component of UNIFIL.

The website

Let me **secondly** and shortly address our **website**. The website, of course, is a tool for providing policy consulting not only to decision makers but also to the interested public. On the website you will find short papers (SWP comments) on current issues, in-depth research papers (SWP research papers) as well as articles or pieces published externally (e.g. in scientific journals). You will also find dossiers on current issues providing documents, information and analysis and done by our documentation and information department. We know that the website is frequented a lot by journalists and students of international relations and regional studies, amongst others. We are currently trying to reshape the website to make it more user-friendly and attractive while maintaining its serious character.

In the globalization age, the website should also be an instrument to interact with other think tanks and the academic community worldwide and thereby to participate in the global debate on relevant issues. In this regard, we experience two problems with our website and our publications. These problems both result from our mission statement in which our task is defined as doing **research and giving policy advice** above all **to German decision-makers**. This translates into 1) a general rule where we publish in German leaving us with a lack of funding for translations as well as an English website which is underdeveloped when compared to the German one; and 2) a rule according to which research papers should be available for our customers first and only later be published on the website. While we have already reduced the time lag between finishing research papers and publication on the website from 3 months to 3-6 weeks, we still want to maintain a privileged position to our main customers – even though this often is in contradiction with the fast pace of developments.

Relations with the media

Let me **thirdly** come to SWP's **relations with the media**. Media relations actually consist of two **dimensions**: one dimension that is mainly shaped by the demand of the media and another one that can be shaped by us

by supplying information, analysis, and organizing exchange forums. Our media relations comprise four main **elements**: 1) interviews, background talks with journalists, as well as analytical pieces and op-eds by researchers; 2) the website; 3) a newsletter in German and English which appears irregularly but frequently (2-3 times a month) to inform about new publications as well as SWP's staff and relevant internal developments. 4) While we do not organize public events, we do have several formats of events to which we invite journalists, such as the monthly 'Jour fixe' or the irregular 'Middle East Roundtable' featuring speakers from the Middle East – to name just two. In these gatherings Chatham House rules apply, i.e., journalists might not quote directly or attribute to people what is being said, because we want to maintain an open, confidential atmosphere. Still, these meetings are quite attractive for journalists due to the combination of analytical expertise and the presence of decision-makers concerned with the issue at stake.

But why do we engage with the media in the first place? I would hold that there are two main reasons: 1) We see media relations as an element of what one could call **consultancy to the public** (or: information of the public). And we think that the public has the right to expect that kind of information from a research institute that is publicly funded. 2) Our experience tells us that media relations are also an **important part of policy consulting** because analyses and ideas often only get the attention of policy-makers when they are publicized in the media or reproduced in the media. Quite often, visibility in the media triggers a concrete demand for consultation by decision-makers. It can therefore have an influence on agenda setting.

At the same time, **media relations are tricky**. Researchers need to be aware of the way media work – as this way might contradict with the approaches of academic policy consulting. Media are characterized by extreme time constraints, a tendency for simplification and exaggeration or dramatizing in order to catch the consumer's attention. They favor strong statements over nuances and complex arguments. And the closer a researcher is to (top) decision-makers the more he or she is of interest to the media – which see him as a chance to get 'the inside story' and statements on policies that they would not be able to get from official spokespeople. However, this can prove a trap for the researcher. Indeed, the two **main challenges** I see for researchers in dealing with the media

are 1) not to lose credibility as a researcher and 2) not to lose the confidence and trust of the political class – with the latter being essential for policy consulting: for access and receptivity, the willingness to listen, to share ideas, and to accept the researcher as a sparring partner in testing ideas and thoughts.

In order to make efficient use of the media for public information and policy consulting while not losing credibility and trust, we have developed the following rules for dealing with the media.

Rules for dealing with the media

1) **no offensive media strategy:** In the center of our work are research activities, not media relations. Interviews and media pieces are not to replace academic, scientific work; they should rather be seen as a by-product of it.

2) **credibility as a research institute:** We speak and write only about issues which we are really knowledgeable about, i.e., issues which we have done in-depth research on and published about before. This might sound banal but is not easily done in relations with the media because it often includes saying 'no' to journalists or referring them to a colleague in cases they want an interview on a subject we might have an opinion about but we lack in-depth knowledge.

3) **no advocacy:** We do not try to shape policies or engage in politics ourselves. We rather concentrate on presenting arguments and analysis, laying out alternative policy approaches, or describing possible risks, conflict of objectives, unintended consequences of certain policies, etc. We do not advocate a specific policy but leave it to the politicians and the administration to take decisions – as in the end it is not us but them who will be held accountable for the policies.

4) **objectivity and confidentiality:** We try to retain as much objectivity as possible. In particular, we refrain from party politics and party positions. Also, we try to avoid condemning specific activities or policies or persons and do not engage in "blaming and shaming." We might however speak about the risks which certain policies bear and point out alternative

policies. We keep confidential information to ourselves rather than bragging with it in the media.

5) **media training**: Most of my colleagues have learned how to deal with the media through learning-by-doing. However, experience has shown that it is not only the quality of the content which is important in order to get a message across in the media, but that the ability to formulate the message in a short, coherent and comprehensible manner and to speak convincingly is essential. This also necessitates knowledge about how media work and what techniques one can apply in giving interviews and making statements. Therefore, since a couple of years, every SWP researcher should participate in at least one media training course.

6) **which media?**: It is important to choose well which request for an interview or an opinion piece we comply with. The main criteria should be 1) the respectability/seriousness of the media and 2) its relevance. Media are considered relevant when they are read or watched by the political elite and/ or serve as a forum for policy discussions. This applies to the big national/international print media, public TV and radio, but also regional and local newspapers which are read e.g. in the capital.

7) **which format?**: Our experience tells us that sometimes it is more efficient to place an analytical or an op ed piece in a widely-read paper than giving lots of interviews, because when writing oneself one can decide about how to frame the subject, how to build the argument and what the conclusions are rather than being squeezed into a format and concept of a journalist. We also experience that it is quite useful to give an interview or write a piece in parallel to publishing a research paper on the website. The idea then is to present the paper's main argument as well as to entice policy-makers and the informed public to read on.

8) **build relations with the media**: Media will not accept a contribution by anyone. And most of the time it is not the quality of the contribution that will decide about it being published, but the name and position of its author. Therefore, it is necessary to invest in building up mutually beneficial relations with some selected journalists over time.

9) **PR officer or clearing house?**: Because of this importance of close relations between the researcher and some journalists for getting one's message across, we at SWP have decided against a PR officer or a

central clearing house for press relations. While our research manager engages in some of the PR tasks mentioned earlier, we prefer to leave the contact between the researcher and the media to the individual researcher.