

Did bloggers bring down the German president?

June 3 2010, by Lenaig Bredoux



German President Horst Koehler addresses a press conference on May 31 at the presidential residence in Berlin, where he said he was stepping down. The resignation came after mainstream media jumped on comments about Germany's overseas role that they would have missed if it hadn't been for bloggers.

President Horst Koehler's shock resignation this week came after mainstream media jumped on comments about Germany's overseas role that they would have missed if it hadn't been for bloggers.

Koehler, whose job was largely ceremonial but who spoke as a kind of moral arbiter, was on his way back from visiting German troops in

Afghanistan when he gave an apparently innocuous interview to a German [radio station](#).

In the interview, aired on May 22, Koehler appeared to imply that military operations like in Afghanistan were, in part, commercially motivated and necessary to protect Germany's economic interests.

"[A] country of our size with its ... export dependency should also know that, if in doubt, in an emergency, a military engagement is also necessary to defend our interests, for example free trade routes," he told Deutschlandfunk.

Newspapers and magazines went wild, with the president, head of the International Monetary Fund from 2000-4 and who was a year into his second term, accused by commentators of advocating "gunboat diplomacy."

Stung by the criticism and saying that he had been misunderstood, and to general surprise, the popular Koehler quit as Germany's head of state.

But the offending interview had initially been ignored by the [mainstream media](#) and would have been forgotten had a few eagle-eyed bloggers not picked up on what the 67-year-old had said.

But the bloggers, including 20-year-old student called Jonas Schaible who writes on [beim-wort-genommen.de](#), and Stefan Graunke on [www.unpolitik.de](#), did not believe for a moment that they were at the start of something big.

And they still don't.

"I have refused to give interviews because I don't see myself at the head of a movement, just part of a network," Graunke said on his blog on

Wednesday.

"I didn't topple Horst Koehler ... And nor was it all the bloggers in Germany. To do something like that the blogosphere's influence is too small," Schaible said.

"A blogger with 1,000 readers per month topples a president? That sounds good, sure, but seriously, who believes it?"

But perhaps they are being too modest.

"It was Jonas Schaible who alerted us to Koehler's controversial comments by writing on his blog and twittering to the editorial staff. Thank you," said Kirsten Haake, a journalist on the website of the prestigious Die Zeit weekly.

Jan-Hinrik Schmidt, a media expert at Hamburg University, said that ultimately, it wasn't the Internet that brought down the president.

"But what is interesting is the exchange between blogs and established media, showing that a forgotten issue can come back, and that journalists' mistakes ... can be rectified," Schmidt told AFP.

"The [blogosphere](#) has become part of public opinion."

[Blogs](#) are increasing in importance, "not because they want to challenge established media, but because classic journalism is less and less capable of achieving its mission alone," Graunke said.

"It's just that with more eyes, we see better."

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