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# The mirror crack'd

Jan 10th 2008 | BERLIN  
 From *The Economist* print edition

## A brave tale of journalists who sacked their editor



Editors in danger too

year ever.

Founded in 1947, even before the Federal Republic of Germany's official birth, *Der Spiegel* made its name by tormenting the Adenauer government, promoting dialogue with the communist east and dredging up scandals. In 1950 the Bundestag even convened a special committee to deal with its allegations that parliamentarians were bribed to choose Bonn as Germany's capital. Rudolf Augstein, the founding editor, gave *Spiegel's* staff half the company's shares in 1974.

Mr Aust's detractors think he has betrayed the Augstein legacy. To fight off *Focus*, they say, he made *Spiegel* less political and more superficial. Rather than crusading from the left, *Spiegel* launched tirades from the right, especially against the Social Democrat-led government of Gerhard Schröder in 1998-2005. "The fish rots from the head," complained Augstein's daughter, Franziska, in 2005. Worse, Mr Aust was rude to his staff. They have retaliated by ending his tenure early, in 2008 rather than 2010. One insider sees this as a last spasm of rebellion by ageing "68ers".

IF THE editor mangles this article, his correspondent can do little but fume. That would not be true at *Der Spiegel* ("The Mirror"), Germany's leading newsweekly, where the staff are in control. They have just abruptly dethroned their long-serving editor, Stefan Aust.

Mr Aust had made *Spiegel* shine. He was hired in 1994 to strike back against *Focus*, a colourful upstart, which he managed by livening up the magazine's appearance, grooming its prose and publishing more provocative covers. *Spiegel* now leads the newsweekly pack, selling 1m copies and having lost fewer readers than either *Focus* or *Stern*. *Spiegel* television, which Mr Aust once ran, is thriving; the *Spiegel* website (which is not his patch) has crushed all rivals. The magazine has lost political clout, but it still reaches the elite, says Henning Kornfeld of the *Kress Report*, which studies the media. Financially, 2007 was the *Spiegel* group's best



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*Der Spiegel* has a dossier about Rudolf Augstein. *Die Welt*, a German newspaper, discusses the search for a new editor. See also *Focus* and *Stern*. (All sites in German.)

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With Mr Aust gone, *Spiegel* can mesh its print and online personalities and launch more products bearing its brand, believe his executioners, who were joined by the publisher, Gruner+Jahr, owner of a 25% stake. But will any forceful personality be ready to put himself at the mercy of colleagues who have just turfed out an editor as successful as Mr Aust? The answer may become clear only when a new editor is picked, perhaps later this month.

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