



The News Interest Index, 1986-2007

Two Decades of American News Preferences

Part 1: Analyzing What News the Public Follows -- and Doesn't Follow

By Michael J. Robinson, special to the Pew Research Center

Introduction

For more than two decades, the Center for the People and the Press has conducted surveys in which representative cross-sections of the U.S. public are questioned about the extent of their interest in major news events of the day. Starting in 1986, the Center and its forerunner organizations have collected News Interest data from 165 separate national surveys. Nearly 200,000 adult Americans have been interviewed with respect to their interest in and reaction to some 1,300 news stories.

During the first 10 years of the News Interest project, the Times Mirror Company provided the funding for the research. Since 1996 the Pew Charitable Trust has continued to sponsor the Center for the People & the Press, which is now part of the larger Pew Research Center located in Washington, D.C.

Given this wealth of data on the public's news preferences, the Center asked political scientist and long term consultant to the Center, Michael Robinson, to undertake an exhaustive review of the findings from these surveys. The first section of this report, the product of that review, begins by examining the degree of public interest in different types of news stories. A second forthcoming section traces possible trends in public interest in news categories both over time and as they might relate to changes in the character and composition of the news media.

For 20 years before his retirement in 1993, Michael Robinson was, successively, on the faculties of Catholic University, George Washington University and, most recently, Georgetown University. Since then he has served as a senior fellow at the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press and, most recently, as a consultant to the Pew Research Center.

Part I: Analyzing What News the Public Follows -- and Doesn't Follow

Summary

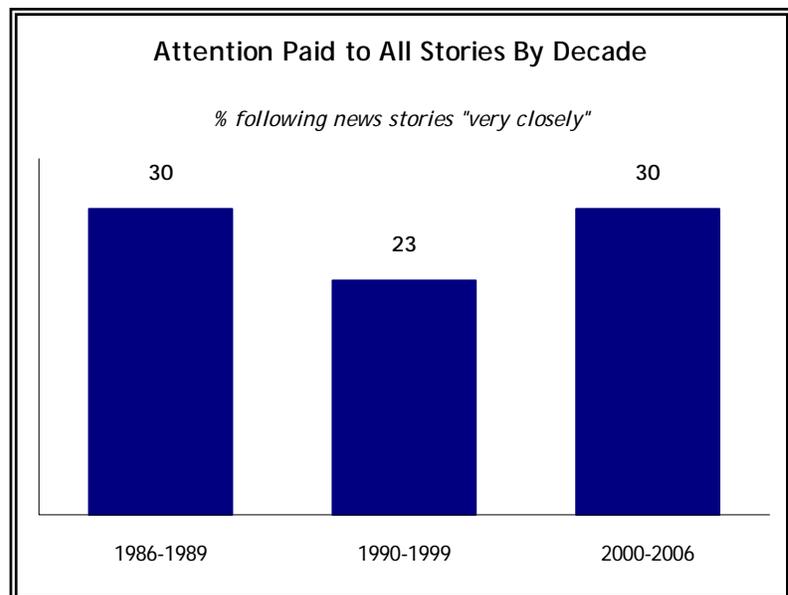
Although the size and scope of the American news media have changed dramatically since the 1980s, audience news interests and preferences have remained surprisingly static. Of the two major indices of interest that are the focus of this report -- overall level of interest in news and preferences for various types of news -- neither has changed very much. This has been especially true for news preferences; Americans continue to follow -- or to ignore -- the same types of stories now as they did two decades ago. News "tastes," measured among 19 separate categories of news, have barely shifted at all: Disaster News and Money News continue to be of greatest interest to the U.S. public; Tabloid News and Foreign News remain the least interesting.

Overall News Interest:

The overall level of "interest" in news has changed somewhat during the last two decades, but that limited change has not indicated any clear pattern of greater, or lesser, interest across 20-plus years.

The Pew News Interest Index (NII), which measures how closely news audiences follow stories of all kinds, has shifted only modestly. The index -- based on the percentage of the American news audience who say they are following a story "very closely" -- ranges from 0% percent through 100%.

During the last 21 years (1986-2006), the average percentage of adult Americans following all stories "very closely" is 26%. While "very close" attention is a demanding standard, this ratio of approximately one-in-four suggests that, at least with respect to most day-to-day reporting, the American news audience is only modestly interested.



The overall intensity of attention varies somewhat, decade by decade, likely reflecting to some degree the intrinsic interest and importance of events in the news. In the latter half of the 1980s, as the Soviet Union crumbled, the news index averaged 30%. In relatively halcyon 1990s, the average fell to 23%. In the first decade of this century, with the country traumatized by terror attacks, a faltering economy and engagement of U.S. troops abroad, the index rebounded but only to its 1980s level of 30%.

While news interest does appear to shift as a consequence of real-world circumstances, no such shift is observed as a consequence of “news era” or changing technologies. Across three different “news eras” -- the “network news” era; the “cable-news” era, and the early years of the “on-line news” era -- overall interest in the news has held reasonably steady.

Specific News Interests:

The index reveals that Disaster News -- reports about catastrophes, man-made or natural -- garners the greatest interest. Money News -- stories about employment, inflation, and prices, especially gasoline prices -- ranks second overall. At the other end of the topic spectrum, Foreign News -- news from abroad unlinked to the U.S. -- engenders the least interest. Tabloid News -- stories about entertainers, celebrities and personalities -- does almost as poorly. Conflict` News -- stories about war, terrorism, and social violence -- consistently elicits much more news attention than does Tabloid or even Political News.

Continuous News Tastes:

On balance, there is scant evidence that during the last quarter century -- despite major changes in the news “menu” -- the American audience has moved toward a diet of softer news. News tastes have become neither less nor more serious since the 1980s.

The evidence shows that the much-discussed soft-news genre -- indicated here by Tabloid News -- has not grown more alluring for the national audience. This is not to say that media outlets have erred financially in devoting substantial

Interest in Six Combined News Categories: 1986-2006	
	Average % following “very closely” %
Disasters	39
Money	34
Conflict	33
Political News	22
Tabloid News	18
Foreign News	17

coverage to celebrity and scandal. In today's competitive news environment, small ratings shifts can translate into big economic gains. A cable news outlet doesn't have to engage a national audience on a story like Anna Nicole Smith to justify the saturation coverage. Engaging the tabloid audience can pay off.

Only one category among the six "super categories" of news exhibits a clear-cut trend. Close attention to happenings that affect family finances directly or indirectly has increased decade-by-decade. In fact, since 2000, Money News has engendered more than twice as much interest as has Tabloid News. On the other hand, news about politics or other non-military happenings in other nations remains as uninteresting to audiences now as in the 1980s. Foreign News has consistently been at, or near, the bottom of the index for 21 years.

The News Interest Index:

These conclusions are based on data collected from 165 separate national surveys, all conducted by the Center for the People & the Press beginning in 1986. All told, nearly 200,000 adult Americans have been interviewed for this on-going examination of news preferences.

Since its inception the news interest index has been derived by asking poll respondents "how closely" they have followed a story, or a group of stories, that were front-page news at the time of the polling. Each respondent is given four choices to this "how closely" question -- "very"; "fairly"; "not too closely"; "not at all closely," but in constructing the index only the "very closely" response is used as the best approximation of actual news interest. Unless otherwise noted, all the statistics included here are predicated upon the percentage of respondents who said they were following any given story "very closely."

That question has now been asked with respect to 1,300 news stories. Many of them are continuous and on-going, such as the war in Iraq. Some are unique, time-limited events, such as the death of Princess Diana. All stories were major news stories at the time the polling was conducted.

Two Stories Involving NASA: Then and Now

Although the evidence presented in this report involves literally hundreds of news stories, two stories connect the earliest findings with the most recent in illustrating the constancy in public attention to different types of news. Interestingly, both involve the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The first of these stories, the explosion of NASA's space-shuttle Challenger, falls within the category of Disaster News. The News Interest Index began in the wake of that first space shuttle disaster, back in January, 1986. That initial NII survey showed that fully 80% of the adult population followed "very closely," a level of intensity comparable to that evoked by the terror attacks on September 11, 2001.

Contrast this with a recent, but very different NASA-related story. In February 2007, NASA, again, became the focus of intense national news coverage. This time, instead of human tragedy, the news concerned scandalous behavior. Veteran astronaut, Lisa Nowak, was arrested and charged with kidnapping a romantic rival in a love-story gone wrong.

News coverage of Nowak's behavior -- coverage which was both considerable and controversial -- wound up producing remarkably little expressed public interest. The NII poll conducted immediately after the story broke revealed that only 10% of the audience followed this scandal story "very closely." In other words, attention paid to this NASA-related scandal was merely one-eighth the attention paid to the Challenger disaster.

These two stories -- and the attention audiences gave to each -- epitomize some of the most important realities concerning news interest since the 1980s. Then, as now, Disaster News rivets audiences. Then, as now, Tabloid News fails to do the same.

Journalists might well predict and easily accept that disaster stories always "sell." But journalists might not predict that tabloid reporting sells so poorly. In fact, journalists may find it difficult to believe that scandal and celebrity reporting fails to engage the national audience, an understandable skepticism that will be addressed at length in the second section of this report.

Skepticism notwithstanding, both of these patterns of news interest have manifested themselves repeatedly during the last three decades: Disaster News engages audiences; Tabloid News, not so much.

As now, scandals back in the 1980s also failed to engage news consumers. For example, news reports about Congressman Barney Frank living with a male prostitute triggered a serious scandal in

Washington in 1989. But the Frank scandal barely registered with the national news audience, with an index score of 6%. Moreover, disasters of today -- like the loss of a second space-shuttle in 2003 -- still evoke huge levels of interest and concern. In fact, the in-flight disintegration of Columbia engendered about eight times as much interest as had news of Congressman Frank's scandalous sex-life from 15 years before.

Interestingly enough, that ratio -- eight-to-one -- is the same as that which divided interest between the Challenger disaster of yesteryear and Nowak's scandalous sex-life of today. In essence, no matter how one compares these NASA-related poll results -- whether across decades or across topics -- the same conclusion emerges. When shown sensational stories about human tragedy and sensational stories about scandalous behavior, Americans will now -- as then -- express great interest in the first type of reportage and little interest in the second.

Micro-Level: News Interest in 2007

Until 2007, news interest was usually measured on a monthly basis. Beginning in 2007, the index moved from a monthly to weekly format. That transformation allowed the NII to be linked directly with a newly created index -- the News Coverage Index. The NCI is a weekly report that monitors news *content*, collected from 48 major news sources on a daily basis. (The NCI is available at journalism.org, and is one of the on-going studies being conducted by Pew's Project for Excellence in Journalism.)

The original monthly format for the NII will serve as the basis for the sections of this report that follow this one. But before aggregating evidence for all the stories included in the index between 1986 and 2006, it is instructive to look at news interest at the micro-level -- to focus on those individual stories that have been included in this first year of the weekly NII.

During the first quarter of 2007, the news index included 33 discrete or on-going stories. The findings for this period generally correspond with those from the 20 years preceding. For example, the percentage of the national audience paying great attention to Super Bowl XXXI (26%) turns out to be precisely the same as the average for news interest paid to Super Bowls of the past. The numbers for the weekly NII tend to corroborate the findings for the original NII.

33 First Quarter News Interest Stories, 2007 (January-March)

	Percent following "very closely"
	%
On-going War in Iraq	46
Bush Plans for Troop "Surge"	40
Cold Winter Weather	36
Poor Conditions for Vets at Walter Reed	31
US Nuclear Weapons Dispute with Iran	29
Iranian Military Involvement in Iraq	28
Democrats Taking Control in Congress	28
Death of Gerald Ford	27
Boys Kidnapped in Missouri	27
New Research About Global Warming	26
Super Bowl XXXI	26
State of the Union Address	25
News About the 2008 Campaign	24
Execution of Saddam Hussein	23
Stock Market Volatility	21
Alberto Gonzales' Problems	20
Bomb Exploding near Vice- President in Afghanistan	19
Elizabeth Edwards' Breast Cancer	17
Boy Scout Missing in North Carolina	16
Phony Bomb-scare in Boston	16
Nuclear Weapons Talks with North Korea	15
Death of Anna Nicole Smith	14
US Air Strikes in Somalia	13
Verdict in Scooter Libby Trial	13
Hezbollah Violence in Lebanon	11
Bush in Latin America	11
Wild Fires in the West	10
Astronaut Charged with Felonies	10
Rescue on Mt. Hood	10
\$400 Million Jackpot	9
Firing of US Attorneys	9
War in Somalia	9
California Health-care Reform	9

All percentages included in this figure represent the HIGHEST score measured for each of these stories between January 1 and March 31, 2007.

The weekly NII also provides another element that should aid in understanding findings at the macro-level. Until 2007, news stories had been selected without the benefit of a quantitative measure of newsworthiness -- news coverage. These most recent stories, however, have been selected because each was discovered to be a significant story in terms of news coverage in the preceding days as measured by the NCI, thus enabling direct comparisons of the news "menu" -- content -- with the news diet -- attention.

Some stories on the list of 33 do well in a comparison between the size of the newshole each received and the magnitude of news interest it created; some do poorly. Here are the three types of news stories that emerge: stories running behind their coverage; stories running with their coverage; stories running ahead of their coverage.

Running Behind the Coverage

Consider first those stories that do much worse than expected, predicated on the coverage they received. They include: news about allegations concerning Attorney General Alberto Gonzales; news

News Coverage of 33 Stories, 2007 (January-March)	
	% of Newshole for Peak Week*
	%
On-going War in Iraq	40
Bush Plans for Troop "Surge"	34
Alberto Gonzales' Problems	18
Firing of US Attorneys	16
Democrats Taking Control in Congress	15
State of the Union Address	13
News About the 2008 Campaign	13
Verdict in Scooter Libby Trial	13
Death of Gerald Ford	12
Death of Anna Nicole Smith	10
Astronaut Charged with Felonies	9
Boys Kidnapped in Missouri	8
Execution of Saddam Hussein	8
Cold Winter Weather	7
Poor Conditions for Vets at Walter Reed	7
US Nuclear Weapons Dispute with Iran	7
Iranian Military Involvement in Iraq	7
Elizabeth Edwards' Breast Cancer	7
Stock Market Volatility	6
Nuclear Weapons Talks with North Korea	6
New Research About Global Warming	5
US Air Strikes in Somalia	5
War in Somalia	5
Super Bowl XXXXI	3
Phony Bomb-scare in Boston	3
Bush in Latin America	3
Wild Fires in the West	3
Rescue on Mt. Hood	3
Bomb Exploding near U.S. vice president in Afghanistan	2
Boy Scout Missing in North Carolina	2
Hezbollah Violence in Lebanon	2
California Health-care Reform	1
\$400 Million Jackpot	**

*Percentages represent the portion of the newshole devoted to each story during the week in which news coverage was most extensive.
Source: Project for Excellence in Journalism, News Coverage Index reports.
**This story did not appear in the week's top 10 list so its share of newshole was not calculated.

about White House aide Scooter Libby, and, especially, specific news about the firing of eight federal prosecutors by the Justice Department.

All three stories drew substantial media coverage: The Gonzales story ranked third on a list of 33 stories, the Justice Department controversy ranked fourth, and the Scooter Libby trial and verdict tied for sixth place. And yet not one of these on-going stories elicited a high level of news interest.

The index score for the media-saturated Gonzales situation was 20%; the score for the heavily-covered verdict in the Libby trial was 13%; the score for the removal of federal prosecutors, despite intense coverage, was 9% -- tied for last place on the NII list. In March, the Pew survey combined these story lines, asking respondents how closely they had been following "questions about how the White House and Attorney General Gonzales were involved in the firing of eight federal prosecutors." Even in combination, the story never exceeded 20% following "very closely."

More recently, however, public interest perked up at the news of the president's decision to commute Libby's sentence, with 27% following the story very closely, including 34% of Democrats.

All three of these stories deal in partisan Washington politics -- stories about politicians in trouble, or presumed to be. In short, they are typical "inside-the-Beltway stories," heavily-covered, but lightly-watched.

Not all Washington-based stories are as unsuccessful in garnering the public's attention even with only modest media coverage: George Bush's State of the Union Address received less news coverage than Alberto Gonzales' tribulations. The same was true for the Democrats taking formal control of both houses of Congress. Nevertheless both the State of the Union Address and the transfer of power to the Congressional Democrats elicited more interest among the public than did any news out of or about the Justice Department.

The news interest index for the Democrats-in-charge story was 28%; for the State of the Union it was 25%. The Democrats-in-charge reporting actually proved three times as interesting as the intrigue surrounding the sacking of the U.S. attorneys.

Interestingly, the other stories that failed to meet expectations -- with expectations based on degree of coverage -- were wholly *apolitical*. As noted above, attention paid to the Lisa Nowak scandal came nowhere near what one might have predicted, based on coverage. In fact, the Nowak story actually

received slightly more news coverage than the death of Saddam Hussein or the exposes about care for war veterans at Walter Reed Medical Center. But the Nowak scandal engendered not even half as much audience interest as either of those two war-related stories.

A classic example of disconnection between magnitude of news coverage and audience interest is provided by the death of Anna Nicole Smith -- a case discussed at greater length in a later section. In terms of coverage, Smith's death and its aftermath ranked tenth on the list of all 33 stories. In terms of news interest, as measured by the index, the Smith story ranked in the bottom third.

Weeks before Smith's demise, former President Gerald R. Ford died at his home in California. The Smith death and the Ford death received near-equal attention in the national press. But, conventional wisdom notwithstanding, it was Ford who evoked much greater interest. The portion of the public following Ford's death very closely was twice as large as that following Smith's (27% vs. 14%).

Neither Alberto Gonzales nor Anna Nicole Smith elicited much interest. In short, the esoterica of Washington's power struggles and the exotica of celebrities-gone-bad proved to be the kinds of stories that ran well "behind" their coverage.

Interest in campaign news also tended to run behind its coverage, though not appreciably so. In terms of newshole, the presidential campaign tied for sixth place; in terms of news interest the campaign ranked thirteenth, with an index of 24%. Even though the recent presidential campaign has attracted higher than normal interest for this stage in the election cycle, audience interest has lagged behind the level of media coverage.

Running with the Coverage

What kinds of stories achieved interest levels commensurate with their coverage? In early 2007, the most vivid example was the war in Iraq. In terms of coverage the war dominated completely. On separate occasions, the war and "the surge" accounted for more than a third of the entire week's newshole. As a share of the newshole, no other topic achieved half as much coverage as the war and the surge, and news interest corresponded almost perfectly with coverage. The news interest index for the war peaked in January, as did interest in Bush's plan to send 20,000 more troops to Iraq.

With the war, even the exception proved to be the rule. That is, when the amount of Iraq-related reporting was, for whatever reasons, less than might have been expected, then news interest was also correspondingly lower. Consider the case of Saddam Hussein. The execution of Saddam did not turn out to be an attention-grabber with the public. A modest 23% of the national audience followed the hanging of the former dictator “very closely.”

While there are several plausible explanations for the failure of Saddam’s execution to elicit great interest -- the length and tenor of the trial, for example -- the most-straightforward explanation may well be the surprisingly limited coverage of that execution. Saddam’s hanging accounted for only 8% of the newshole in the week that it occurred.

Human interest stories also produced attention levels commensurate with coverage. Reports about boys kidnapped in Missouri attracted above-average levels of coverage and above-average levels of interest. Elizabeth Edwards’ announcement that her cancer had returned received middling press attention and garnered middling levels of interest. That same pattern held for a boy rescued in North Carolina and hikers rescued from Mt. Hood. On balance, human interest reporting did about as well with audiences as the size of the coverage would have predicted.

Finally, in contrast to the war in Iraq is the war in Somalia. For each war separately, levels of coverage and levels of attention were generally in line. In Somalia, however, where U.S. troops are not overtly engaged, it is the paucity of coverage and the meagerness of interest that were shown to be similar. Press coverage of the war in Somalia ranked eleventh from the bottom of the list; news interest tied for last place, at 9%.

Running Ahead of the Coverage

Interest in a few stories ran ahead of their coverage. The most interesting example may be the story about inadequate conditions for soldiers and marines at Walter Reed Medical Center. Although the story, which began in February as an exposé in the *Washington Post*, received mid-level news coverage, it evoked high-level interest and concern. The news interest score for the soldiers’ story at Walter Reed reached 31%, the fourth highest on the list.

One surprise in these findings involves audience interest in global warming. Press attention to research about climate change was quite modest during this period; global warming reports appear in the lowest third in terms of coverage. But audience interest has been much greater than that. With an index score of 26%, climate change ranks in the Top 10 list in terms of audience interest.

Interest in one story clearly outpaced its coverage -- weather. Several bad-weather stories drew some media attention in early 2007, but even the most widely-covered of those events barely placed them in the top half of all stories receiving coverage. Still "cold winter weather" (in February) engendered a news interest index score of 36%, achieving the third highest ranking among all stories and outpacing even the Walter Reed story. Cold winter weather was almost three times as interesting to audiences as the Scooter Libby trial.

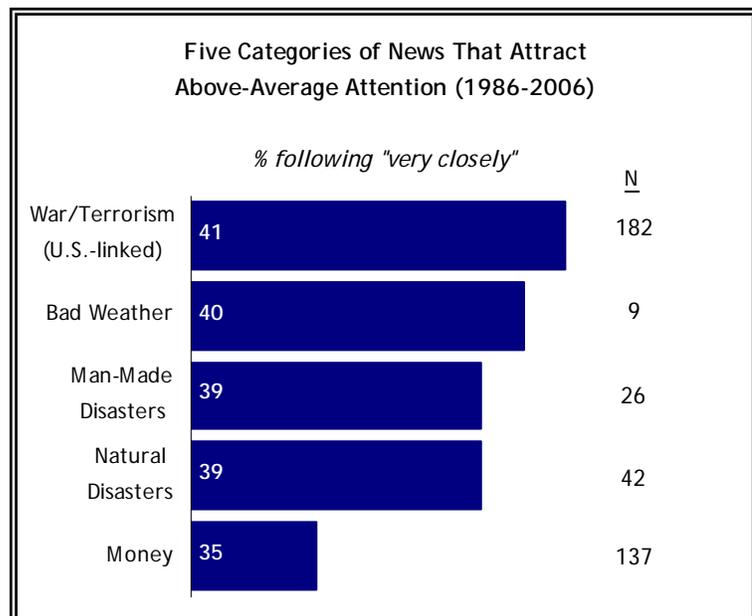
Macro-Level: News Interest from 1986-2006

What about news reporting at the “macro-level” -- stories grouped together by “news category”? Generally, macro-level analysis confirms the findings from the individual stories assessed in 2007. When all stories assessed in the 1986-2006 period are grouped into 19 news categories, index scores range from a high of 41% to a low of 16%. Overall, the average for stories in this 21-year period is 26%. In this section of the report, the averages for each of the news categories are compared with that overall average. There are no comparisons between news interest and news content, as there were with the stories from 2007.

News index scores for all 19 categories are assigned to one of three ranges: above-average (five categories with averages of 30% or more); near-average (nine categories with averages between 20% and 30%); and below-average (five categories with averages of less than 20%). News about war and terrorism is of greatest interest and concern. Political news of all types holds sway in the middle tier; news about celebrities ranks at the bottom of the list.

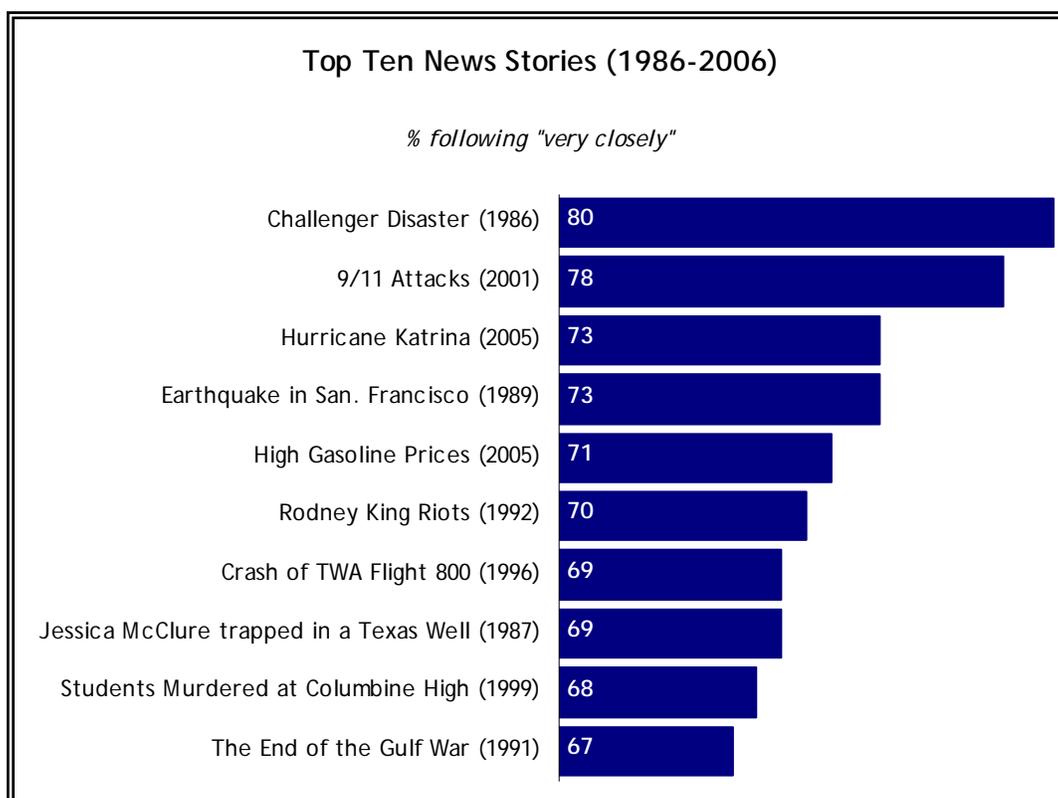
Above-Average Interest Categories

All of the five categories that exceed the overall average are much as would be expected -- with perhaps one exception. Top-tier categories include terrorist attacks; battle-front; catastrophes; and money news. Less expected, perhaps, is that weather news ranks second most interesting of all news categories.



Terrorism:

Since 1986, no fewer than three of the 10 most closely followed stories have involved either terrorism or U.S. involvement in combat. News reports about the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were in a statistical tie with the Challenger disaster in receiving the highest interest index scores ever recorded by Pew (78% and 80% respectively). Throughout the fall of



2001 (September-December) news coverage of the 9/11 attacks produced an average index score of 69%, highest ever for an on-going news story.

Attentiveness to terrorism is not limited solely to international events, or to international terrorists. Nearly six-in-10 Americans (58%) intently followed Timothy McVeigh's truck-bomb attack on the Murrah building in Oklahoma City in May 1995. Attention to the bombing in Oklahoma City did not, however, reach the levels associated with attacks by foreign terrorists.

Not all terrorist news is created equal, as the McVeigh case implies. And American concern with terrorism seems to have a predictable pattern to it. Interest in terrorism is determined, in large measure, by three factors: the proximity of the event to the U.S.; the severity of that event; and the ethnicity of the victims.

In 1998, the coordinated bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania killed more than 200 Africans, but only 12 Americans. The index score for these two bombings was just 27% -- only one percentage point higher than the average for all stories.

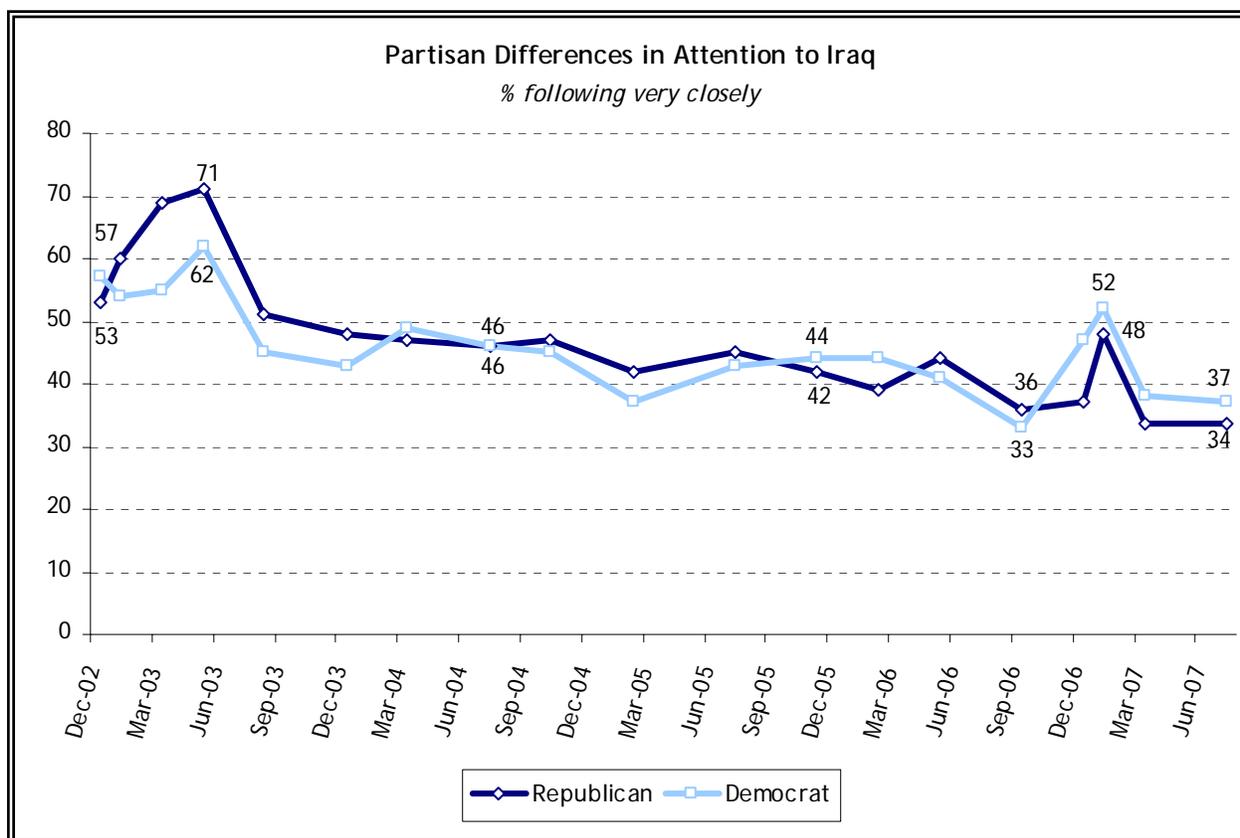
In July 2005, nearly half (48%) of the American news audience followed the subway bombings in London very closely. Those attacks killed 52 people -- most of them British. The terrorist bombings that occurred in two Bali discotheques in October, 2002 -- just a year after 9/11 -- killed nearly 200 civilians, most of them Asian. That assault was followed very closely by only 20% of the U.S. news audience. Apparently the location of the violence and the nationality of the victims are more important than the lethality of the attack in determining news interest in terrorism.

Combat:

In recent years, combat might be considered a sub-category of terrorism, but prior to the retaliatory strikes against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan following 9/11, war news was almost on par with terrorism as a focus of audience interest.

The U.S. attacked Iraq for the first time in January 1991 in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait several months before. Terrorism was not an issue. Interest in the quick ending of the first war -- the "Hundred Hour War" -- surpassed interest in the start of the current war in Iraq by a noteworthy 10 percentage points (67% vs. 57%). While the 1991 U.S.-led war managed to make the Top 10 list of most closely-watched stories, the "Shock-and-Awe" campaign, which began the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, did not. Nor has any other story about the current war in Iraq made that list.

Interest in happenings on the ground in Iraq has topped the list of most closely followed stories in almost every report based on the weekly News Index which Pew initiated at the start of 2007. In the preceding years since the start of the war in 2003, the news index for the Iraq war has held reasonably constant. On average, 43% of the public has followed the stories from this Gulf War very closely (through the end of 2006). The actual capture of Saddam Hussein produced an interest index reading of 44% -- a large number, but not an enormous one. (Saddam's capture evoked about twice as much interest as his execution.) By comparison, U.S. air strikes against Libya in 1986 produced a news interest score of 58%; the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989 achieved a score of 60%.



One reason that the on-going war in Iraq may engender less interest than earlier military actions is that it has been more controversial than earlier conflicts covered by the NII, as well as being characterized by sharply partisan differences of opinion. Pew analysis of News Interest Index data shows that in the months before and immediately after the U.S.-led invasion in March 2003, Republicans, who were, on average, more supportive of the war, followed news reports more closely than Democrats. More recently, however, as the conflict has dragged on with no apparent end in sight, Democrats, who have, on average, opposed the war have tended to follow stories about it somewhat more closely. Significantly, news interest in the Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse story -- the most controversial, and perhaps most disturbing, story of the entire war -- was relatively modest with 34% of the national audience following the Abu Ghraib revelations very closely.

Weather News:

At the micro-level, weather news was one of only two stories to run far ahead of coverage in 2007. The appeal of bad weather news also applies in the aggregate: Weather reporting greatly exceeds

the average news index for all news categories combined. In fact, weather stories rank second highest among all categories. The average index score for all weather stories is 40%, just one percentage point below that of U.S.-linked war and terrorism. During the course of two decades, the lowest score for an inclement weather condition was 25%; the highest, 51%.

That high point, occurring in January 1994, puts “cold weather in the Northeast” on an exactly equal par with the outbreak of war in Afghanistan (October 2001); the national debate about going to war with Iraq (December 2002); and the U.S. Supreme Court’s controversial ruling that burning the American flag is a First Amendment right (June 1989).

Why should weather news engage the national audience so deeply? Perhaps the answer lies in four compelling aspects of weather-related stories. Weather news is easily understood; it implies danger; it has the potential for catastrophe; and it is close-to-home, if not so much geographically as psychologically.

Whatever the reason for the remarkable appeal of bad-weather news reports, the implication for understanding news interest is important in two ways. First, weather news is followed more closely than policy-related news, campaign-related news, or news about political scandals. Weather news, in short, trumps political news -- the heart of national journalism -- by a ratio of nearly two to one.

The appeal of bad-weather reporting has a second implication for understanding news attention. Polling of news audiences is often criticized for eliciting answers that are socially acceptable but not necessarily truthful. That criticism presumes that the public gives pollsters the answers that make it sound knowledgeable, enlightened, sophisticated. Were that the case, however, it is doubtful the public would also express more interest in weather stories than in every category of news that might somehow be regarded as more serious-minded -- be it policy-related, Washington-based or international in focus.

Whatever else is true, the public fascination with weather news seemingly disproves the adage that everyone talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it. Americans do more than talk about the weather -- they watch, listen and read about it very closely.

Disasters of All Kinds:

Disaster news also engrosses audiences. News about catastrophes ranks third on the list of news interest. With respect to public attention, there is no difference between disasters (or personal tragedies)

that result from the hand of man as opposed to the hand of God. Man-made disasters produce a news interest score of 39%; natural disasters are tied with them at 39%.

Reports of airline crashes -- a quintessential man-made disaster -- hold considerable interest for audiences; on average, plane crashes evoked an index score of 41%. Hurricanes -- a quintessential natural disaster -- engendered an index score of 45%. The figure for hurricanes is slightly greater than that for air catastrophes, but both percentages place these stories in about the same realm -- the upper quintile for all stories.

The real difference in the news appeal of disasters is, again, domestic versus foreign. Earthquakes, for example, can cause audiences to pay very close attention, if the earthquake location is proximate. The two California earthquakes (1989, 1993) were, on average, followed closely by 68% of the public. Neither quake killed as many as 100 Americans. Earthquakes outside of the U.S. did not elicit even a third as much attention, with seven major earthquakes in other nations managing an index score of merely 20%. Yet, on average, those foreign quakes cost the lives of 27,000.

This ethnocentrism is apparent in all aspects of disaster news. The July 1986 meltdown of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, in what was then the Soviet Union, led to the worst accident in the history of atomic energy. The proportion of Americans intently following this historic accident that contaminated much of the Ukraine and Central Europe was 46% -- a figure well above average, but one that equates with far more-limited disasters in the U.S.

The tragic cave-in at the Sago mine in West Virginia in 2006, killed 14 miners, but produced no cataclysmic effects. Yet, that man-made disaster was followed very closely by 41% of the American news audience -- an almost equivalent level of interest to that accorded the Chernobyl disaster. The private plane crash that killed a piloting seven-year-old in 1996, was followed intently by 44% of the U.S. audience.

The greatest disparity, however, is evident in the accident that placed toddler Jessica McClure down a well in Texas, just a year following Chernobyl. Eventually rescued, Jessica McClure proved to be mesmerizing. Fully 69% of the American news audience followed the "Baby Jessica" story very closely. That reading put Baby Jessica in eighth place among all 1,300 stories. Chernobyl, in contrast, failed to rank in the top 100 stories.

Comparing the unmitigated disaster at Chernobyl with the disaster-avoided scenario that played out in Texas is another example of the “advantage” that usually accrues to domestic news. But nationalism alone cannot explain why, for example, an accident involving one little girl surpassed -- by a margin of 69% to 58% -- news interest in the Great Tsunami of December 2004, a catastrophe that claimed more than a quarter of a million lives in South and Southeast Asia.

No doubt ready media access and round-the-clock coverage were important explanatory factors. Part of the explanation surely lies in the audience appeal of the innocent. Part, too, is the age of the victim -- news interest typically runs much higher if the victim is a child. Finally, the McClure story possessed the element of hanging fire. All stories -- even presidential election stories -- garner greater interest if the outcome remains suspended in doubt. So, the girl-in-the-well saga had three powerful elements that enhanced its allure for the audience: innocence of the victim; youthfulness of the victim; and a suspenseful ending. Nevertheless, this level of audience interest and concern seems inconceivable for a little girl in a water well, were she not an American little girl.

Money News:

Ranking fifth on the list are stories and events dealing in finances -- particularly personal finances. Taken together, news reports about business, corporate scandals, employment, inflation, and -- above all -- “gasoline prices” engender a level of interest that ranks nearly 10 percentage points higher than all stories combined (35% vs. 26%). In fact, these dollars-and-cents stories are the last category of news to surpass the 30% boundary that defines “above-average” news interest.

Intriguingly, “Wall Street” news is not as interesting as “Main Street” finances. The Crash of 1987, with the Dow losing nearly 23% of its value in a single day, was followed closely by 40% of the public. While 40% is well above the average, the index score for run-of-the-mill reports about “the condition of the U.S. economy” was, on average, almost as high, at 36%. Stock market conditions -- crashes and corrections included -- produced an average index score of just 23%.

In terms of audience interest, conditions on Main Street typically run 10 percentage points higher than the situation on Wall Street. Even corporate mergers and scandals fail to engage the national audience; the bankruptcy of Enron and the scandals at WorldCom held great interest for about three people in 10. The general economy is notably more interesting to the public at large. Interest in the

economy peaked at the end of the recessionary period that ended in 1993. A full 49% of the public expressed great interest in reports about economic conditions in March of that year.

But even interest in the economy pales in contrast with news about the price of gasoline. Among the top 25 readings on money-related topics between 1986 and 2006, *all* were about the price of gasoline. The average index for those 25 readings was 60%. That figure puts gasoline prices, especially in this decade, nearly on par with California earthquakes as a focus of audience interest. As a domestic “issue,” gasoline prices prove to hold more audience attention than any other, across all three decades.

Nor is interest in gasoline limited to the price at the local pump. A Pew survey in May 2007 found many among the public (40%) also very interested in the reasons why gas prices are fluctuating and 30% highly concerned about effects on the broader economy.

The news interest index has but one reading about *declining* gasoline prices. Tellingly -- or ironically -- reports in 1998 about “gasoline prices hitting new lows” (under a dollar-per-gallon in some places) managed an index score of only 27%. This was the lowest score for any story about the price of gasoline, at about half the average for all stories about the increasing price of gas. In the domain of gas prices, interest in bad news completely overwhelms good news.

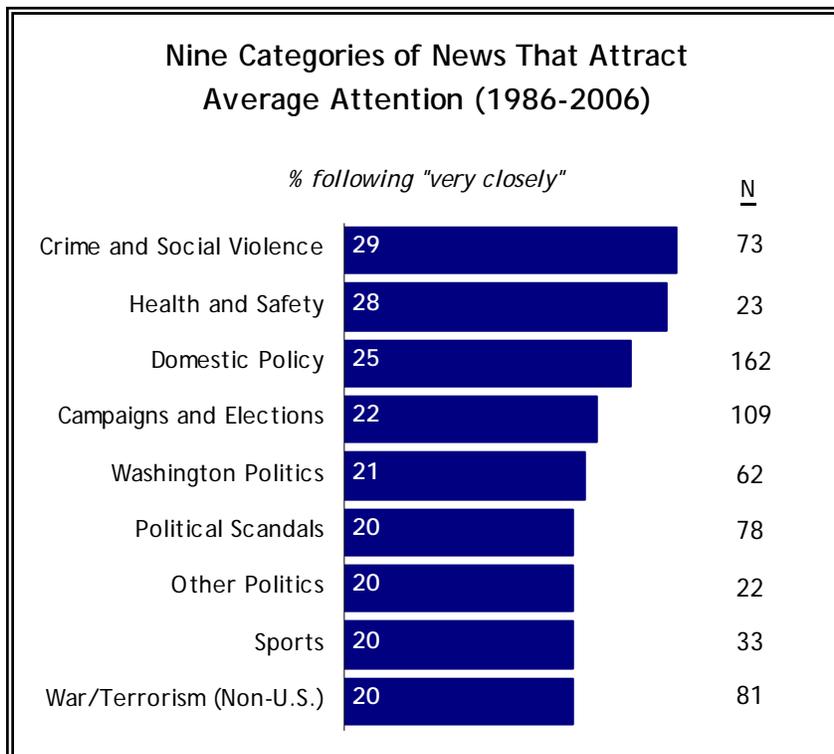
Average-Interest Categories

Nine categories of news fall at, or near, the overall mean. On this list there are very few big surprises. As before, news categories that are close-to-home -- crime, for example -- do slightly better than the average. Categories that are more “distant” -- for example, terrorism not involving Americans -- score below average in news interest. Most significantly -- for journalists and for journalism -- “politics” of every kind prove to be of middling appeal. All five types of “political” reporting fall below -- or well below -- the overall average.

Crime and Social Violence:

Crime reporting does slightly better than average in attracting news interest -- but perhaps not as well as expected. About three-in-10 Americans (29%) followed news about crime and social violence very closely.

Strangely, the O.J. Simpson case ran slightly below average as crime news. Pew asked about the Simpson murder and melodrama no fewer than 11 times. The average index for those readings was 26%. Interest declined over time, reflecting either audience burn-out, or increasing repulsion with the characters involved.



Subplots emerge

among different types of crime news stories; real-world gangsters, for one, do not seem to interest audiences at all. The John Gotti trial in 1992 eked out the lowest score among all crime-related stories, with an index of 7%. Crime stories in which the victim is somehow tainted also fail to grab attention. Lorena Bobbitt dismembered her husband, but the much-covered trial produced an index score of 26%, perhaps because the victim, John Wayne Bobbitt, seemed unworthy of public concern, or even attention.

Conversely, crime cases with sympathetic victims gain much wider attention. That is especially so when the victims are children who have little identity to the public other than their innocence. Spree-killings of students in Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas produced index scores of 46%, 46%, and 49%, respectively. The mass-killing at Columbine High -- made more graphic by extraordinary visuals -- caused 68% of the national audience to follow intently. That level of interest placed Columbine in the Top 10. (The massacre at Virginia Tech in April 2007, evoked much less attention, with 45% following that atrocity very closely -- about the average for the other school shootings).

The Rodney King story, which played out across three years (1991-1993), is the most complicated of all the crime stories about which Pew asked. Pew polled about the King case on three separate occasions -- the videotaped beating in 1991; the first trial in 1992, and subsequent rioting; the

second trial in 1993. The index scores were, respectively, 46%, 70%, and 47%. On average, Rodney King garnered twice as much news interest as did O.J Simpson. And that 70% reading from 1992 placed the Rodney King verdict-plus-rioting story sixth highest on the all-time Top 10 list.

During these three years, King was seen as victim and as perpetrator -- both a cause and consequence of criminal violence. The King story was also made more complicated by its racial element. Still, it appears from this case that videotaped violence invariably enhances interest, and that interracial violence is especially compelling for audiences. So, too, is looting and rioting.

Health and Safety:

Ranking seventh on the list, with 28% of the public paying very close attention, are stories that involve public health and personal safety. These reports almost always deal with threats to either or both. Although, as major stories, they are few in number, they do evoke slightly above-average levels of audience attention.

A shortage of flu vaccine in the fall of 2004 produced an index score of 44%, the highest score within the category. The recall of tires by Firestone in 2000 proved nearly as interesting, at 42%. At the other end of the category were reports about the prescription drug Viagra being released to the public for the first time in 1998 (15%).

One pattern that seems to exist here is that the exotic story does not interest news audiences nearly as much as more ordinary problems. In 2001, stories about mad cow disease in Europe managed an index score of 18%. In 1997, a recall of tainted hamburger meat engendered more than twice as much interest (40%). Nevertheless, when the illness is highly lethal, audiences pay attention, even if the disease is exotic or extraterritorial. The spread of SARS beyond Asia in 2003 had 39% of the public watching very closely.

Domestic Policy:

Domestic Policy is a broad category -- covering decisions reached, or debated by, government officials at the federal, state, or local levels. Whether the news covers a State of the Union address or a lower court ruling in a high-profile custody case, these are treated as domestic-policy stories.

This is the first category to appear on the list that deals directly with political leaders. Significantly, as a category, it ranks eighth. Overall, domestic policy stories fell just below the mean for all stories, with 25% following these reports very closely.

As expected, debates or decisions about governmental reform are of no great interest: campaign finance laws managed an index score of 14%. During the spring and summer of 2005, debates and decisions about welfare-state policies elicited considerably more concern. George W. Bush's privatization plan for Social Security produced an average index score of 35%.

Polarizing social issues involving family, sexuality, patriotism and God engender the highest levels of attention. A Supreme Court ruling on abortion (1989) moved the index score to 47%. A high court ruling that same year, protecting the right to burn the American flag, pushed the index even higher -- to 51%. In 2002, a federal appeals court ruling, declaring the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional, provoked more news interest than any other domestic policy story (52%). On the other hand, Supreme Court rulings prohibiting the death penalty for the retarded eked out a score of 16%; budget debates and decisions do just slightly better, at 20%.

Domestic policy news, despite its central role in U.S. journalism, creates mediocre levels of news appeal for American audiences. Nonetheless, news about domestic policy does produce more interest than campaign news.

Campaign News:

Only about one in five among the public pays great attention to campaign journalism (index score: 22%). In the Pew surveys, reports about hotly-contested New Hampshire primary campaigns in 1992, 1996, and 2000 managed an average index score of only 17%. Coverage of both major parties' nominating conventions (1988, 2004) evoked an average index score of 26%. (The one reading of a third-party convention -- the Reform Party -- held in summer, 1999 showed how completely uninterested Americans are in third parties. A tiny 1% of the public followed that convention very closely -- the lowest score among all scores).

Remarkably, even the most contentious presidential election in over a hundred years -- the Supreme Court-determined election in 2000 -- achieved an average index score (based on four separate surveys) of 34%. In keeping with the adage that presidential politics fails to capture the public's attention

until *after* Labor Day, not a single campaign story broke the 40% news-interest barrier unless it occurred after that holiday. Off-year elections, recall elections, congressional elections -- primary or general -- are much less involving. Jesse Ventura's election, Arnold Schwarzenegger's election by recall, Joseph Lieberman's primary defeat were all big stories in the media. On average, only 18% of the public followed these unusual elections very closely.

Washington Politics:

As a focus of news interest, stories about day-to-day politics in Washington fall immediately below campaign reporting. These sorts of news -- "inside-the-beltway" stories -- produce an average news interest index of 21%.

Included in this category are stories about political appointments; confirmations -- or rejections -- of those appointments; congressional hearings; the ups and downs of political careers and reputations; and "process" stories -- stories, for example, about what to do about independent counsels. Excluded from this category, however, are unalloyed political scandals, which are considered directly below.

Four stories in this category -- all representative of type -- fall precisely at the mean, with a news interest index score of 21%. These include reports about Samuel Alito's nomination to the Supreme Court (2005); Sen. Jim Jefford's quitting the Republican Party and thereby placing the Democrats in control of the Senate (2001); Lani Guinier's failed appointment to be Bill Clinton's first attorney general (1993); Madeleine Albright's designation as Clinton's second secretary of state (1996).

"Washington Politics" also includes controversies that don't become scandals. Among these are Richard Clarke's stinging criticism of George W. Bush's plan for war with Iraq, voiced after Clarke left his position as director of the National Security Council (2004). Another such controversy is the case of Sen. Trent Lott trying to stop President Bush from pushing him out of his job as majority leader following Lott's comment praising Strom Thurmond's 1948 segregationist candidacy for president. Clarke's criticism was followed very closely by 28% of the public -- a fairly high level of interest in a political dust-up. But while Lott did lose his job as majority leader, only 20% of the nation followed this high-stakes, Washington-style shoot-out very closely.

Typically, even Washington's most important political stories fail to register. The unprecedented attempt by House Republicans to remove Newt Gingrich as speaker in 1997 was followed very closely by

only 13% of the public. The suicide of White House Counsel Vince Foster in 1993 eked out exactly the same index score.

Washington intrigue and day-to-day politics wind up near the middle of the list of categories, ranking 10th. But that ranking still places this category ahead of the seamier side of the category -- the Washington Scandal.

Political Scandals:

Allegations about malfeasance in office prove to be the *least* interesting of those news categories that deal in national politics. Policy stories, campaign stories, even process stories raise more audience interest than tales of Washington scandal. The differences among all these categories are small. But, among them, political scandals wind up having the lowest index score -- 20%.

Ethical complaints filed against House Majority Leader Tom DeLay in 2005 managed to produce an index score of only 8%. Even DeLay's indictment later that year -- an indictment that shook the Washington political establishment and led to DeLay's resignation as majority leader -- produced a modest score of 18%. His resignation from the House of Representatives in 2006 elicited even less interest than his indictment (14%).

Nor is the public greatly interested in scandals on the Democratic side of the aisle. Pew asked about the Whitewater scandal more than half a dozen times between 1994 and 1997, but the percentage following that Clinton-era scandal very closely peaked at 22%. The average for all those soundings was an unimpressive 14%.

The charges against Ways and Means chairman Dan Rostenkowski in 1994 led to a federal indictment for fraud and embezzlement that included 17 counts. That number -- 17 -- turned out to be four points higher than the index score measuring public concern. In 1989, Jim Wright's ethical violations cost him his position as speaker of the House. Still, only 15% of the national audience bothered to follow that scandal very closely. Even Rep. Mark Foley's case -- which involved alleged sexual impropriety with at least one House page -- failed to register beyond the overall index average of 26%.

The biggest political scandal of the 1990's involved Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Pew asked about Lewinsky, and her aftermath, in 17 separate surveys. Even so, the public did not find the Clinton-Lewinsky case all that engrossing; on average, 28% followed the saga "very closely."

Even Clinton's impeachment trial in the Senate failed to garner much concern. Pew asked about the Senate trial three times in early 1999 and found that, on average, 27% followed the proceedings very closely.

There was also an on-going weather story in early 1999 -- "cold winter weather" throughout much of the nation. That "cold winter weather" elicited an index score of 37% -- a full 10 points higher than that provoked by Clinton's impeachment trial. As a rule, a bad weather report trumps a Washington scandal as a focus of interest or concern.

There are exceptions to the rule. One is Iran-Contra. Initially that then-emerging White House scandal produced only modest audience interest; early reports of money transferring illegally from Iran to the Contras in Nicaragua were followed very closely by just one in five. But, the central character in that scandal, Col. Oliver North, did cause audiences to take notice, at least of him. His appearance before a Senate investigating committee in 1987, and his subsequent trial, conviction, and sentencing for his role in Iran-Contra in 1989, produced an average news interest score of 34%. But the interest in North seems to have been considerably greater than in the scandal, per se.

There is another curious case of a scandal that did engage public attention: the House check-bouncing "scandal" of 1992. Although eventually regarded as a pseudo-scandal -- no money was ever embezzled from the House "bank" -- this story touched a nerve. At 36%, the index score for the House bank scandal was the highest among all scandals -- real or not-so-real.

The implications here for journalism are mixed. Reporting political scandal is, by definition, an integral part of the watchdog function of the press. Yet public interest in "watchdoggy" seems unpredictable, if not bizarre.

The news media played an on-going role in exposing the behavior of President Clinton in his worst scandal. And yet interest in that scandal remained limited. But the work of the press in exposing conditions at Walter Reed seems to have engaged the audience somewhat more. Again, the difference here may well lie in the identity of the victims in each case. In the Walter Reed scandal, where interest in watchdog reporting proved greater than usual, those victimized were badly wounded war veterans. In the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the watchdog came to the aid of no innocent victim.

Other Politics:

The category "Other Politics" includes news about such happenings as the actions of interest groups, major political rallies and demonstrations (non-violent), and controversies that play out in venues that are unofficial and outside Washington. The international AIDS conference in San Francisco in 1990 well symbolizes the category (index score: 9%). The running debate in and outside South Carolina about using the "Stars and Bars" as part of the state flag also represents "Other Politics" as a news category (index score:19).

Not surprisingly, this category, with its base in group interests and grievances, rarely engages a national audience. The index score for the category is 20%, putting it on par with political scandals.

Within the category, the UN Conference on women held in China in 1995, ranks at the bottom, with a paltry 8% of the American news audience paying very close attention. At the top is the worldwide celebration of the Millennium in December 1999; 35% of adult Americans followed that international event intently. The Millennium festivities, however, were very much the exception. Neither rallies or demonstrations, nor the activities of NGOs, captured the eye of the general public.

Sports:

Sports attracts about as much attention as "other politics." Only one American in five, on average, follows sports news very closely. News organizations -- especially local television stations -- usually package sports news together with weather news. But sports news wins only half as much audience attention as weather does.

Sports news rates almost as poorly with men as with women. Men do show greater interest in contact sports than do women, but the over-all difference between genders is surprisingly meager. For men, the news index for sports is 23%; for women the figure is 18%. In terms of audience appeal, sports may be the single most over-rated news category. News organizations may regard sports news as "boffo," but not even the Super Bowl creates huge levels of interest. The average Super Bowl is watched very closely by one in four Americans.

The baseball strike of 1994 is a classic case of coverage exceeding interest. Although the strike was a continuous story in the national media for almost an entire year, audiences took minimal notice. On average, just 13% followed the baseball strike very closely.

Since 1986, the highest score for any sporting event is the one achieved by the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. Forty-five percent followed those games intently. That number, however, does not reflect interest in the games so much as interest in a terrorist bombing in Olympic Park that took the life of one person and injured more than one hundred others. No other sports-related story approaches the Olympic Park story as a focus of audience interest.

War and Terrorism Not Linked With the U.S.:

Violence in Atlanta is interesting to Americans. Violence outside the United States may -- or may not -- be interesting. The key is whether Americans are injured or somehow involved. Without U.S. involvement, even war news is less than engaging for the American news audience. The news index for stories in this category, taken together, is, again, 20%. Wars and terrorism not linked to the U.S. are tied for eleventh place on the list of news categories.

Typical here is the continuing violence that occurred in Bosnia before the U.S. intervened with ground troops in late 1995. In the years preceding that deployment, only 15% of the national audience paid great attention to the civil war in Bosnia. Immediately following deployment of U.S. troops, the reading for the war in Bosnia more than doubled -- to 37%.

With neither American troops nor Americans victims involved, interest in the on-going war in Darfur is similarly limited. On average, 15% of the national news audience is following the genocidal conflict in Darfur very closely. However, people also expressed an interest in more extensive coverage of Darfur, so that relatively low levels of interest may, in part, be due to limited media attention.

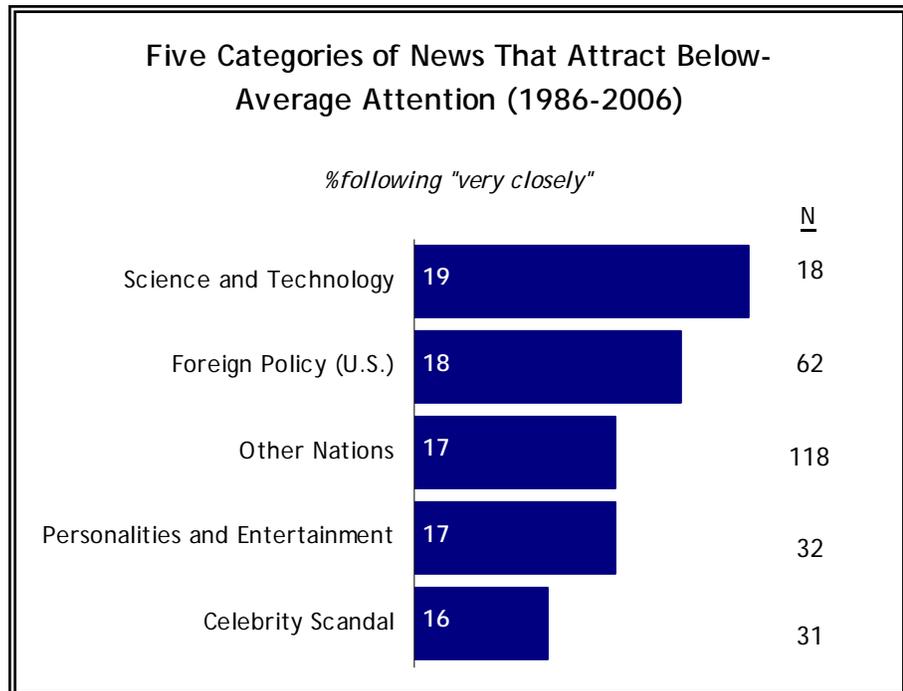
Coverage of terrorism produces the same pattern of concern, or lack thereof. On average, terrorist attacks in Israel (1996), Kenya (2002), Madrid (2004), and Bali (2005) were followed very closely by one-in-five Americans. That is far less than half the intensity of concern that Americans express about terrorism directed against their fellow citizens. Nevertheless, even the most remote locations for violence produce some news interest. And, as a category, news about war and terrorism abroad is more interesting to the national audience than news about anything else that takes place overseas.

Below-Average Interest Categories

Five categories of news fall at least seven percentage points below the overall mean. Three of these categories --

Science, Foreign Policy, and "Other Nations" -- did about as poorly as one might guess. But, two categories did less well in garnering interest than might have been expected. Those two categories -- "Personalities" and "Celebrity Scandal" --

occupy the two bottom positions on the list.



Science and Technology:

Although the public has high regard for both science and technology, it cannot bring itself to pay close attention to news about either. Among the public, 19% followed stories about science and technology very closely. That number places Science and Technology at the top of the list of those categories that are "below-average," and fifth from the bottom.

The disjunction here is large. Earlier Pew surveys revealed that NASA's successful man-on-the-moon program was considered to be the nation's greatest 20th Century achievement. But, other successful NASA programs rarely interest the general public.

On average, unmanned explorations of Mars caused only 17% of the public to pay very close attention. Even the successful landing of the Mars rovers failed to raise great interest (19%). And the Hubble telescope appears to be more popular than interesting; its deployment into orbit in 1990 produced a middling index score of 24%.

NASA-related news supports the notion that bad news usually enhances interest. The Challenger disaster, as noted above, remains the most compelling news story since 1986. The Columbia disaster of 2003 also created a huge audience, with 46% very closely following the disintegration of that space shuttle. Poignantly, the only successful space shuttle mission to receive a higher index score than the Columbia was the one that came next after the Challenger. Nearly three years after Challenger exploded, Americans watched to see if this next shuttle would lift off safely. A full 50% of the public followed that successful launch very closely.

Basic research in science and technology does even worse than space science in capturing attention. Reports about successful cloning were followed very closely by 17% of the public; mapping the human genome obtained an index score of just 16%. Even important findings about when and how the Universe began were of minimal interest. In 1993, a mere 9% followed important new evidence about the “Big Bang” with any great intensity. Science news with a human-interest component does much better; John Glenn’s final orbital flight in 1998 -- 37 years after his first -- had 34% of the public following very closely.

Why the public appreciates science, but shows such little interest in news about science, is readily understood. Science lacks narrative, and often lacks practical application. And news about science and technology, no matter how well-written, has the great liability of being inherently difficult to comprehend.

Foreign Policy:

Interest in news about U.S. foreign policy is markedly less than interest in domestic policy (18% vs. 25%). In fact, the index score for foreign policy reports is just two percentage points higher than that for the least interesting news category. Foreign policy ranks fourth from the bottom of the list.

Debates and discussion about the expansion of NATO were followed very closely by about one in 20 (6%). Debates and decisions concerning NAFTA -- a foreign policy issue with real implications for the pocketbook -- also registered rather poorly, although, with an index score of 22%, not nearly as poorly as NATO enlargement.

Unless directly related to imminent military action -- or to potential nuclear war -- foreign policy news rarely elicits much concern. As such, most international summit meetings produce interest scores of

10% or less; stories involving North Korea's nuclear arsenal can run to interest levels four times greater. And, as before, when the reporting has a human-interest dimension, the news becomes more involving. The months-long negotiation as to whether the United States should return Elian Gonzales to his father in Cuba proved to be the most involving on-going foreign-policy story of them all (average index score: 36%).

Other Nations:

Just as foreign policy is less engaging than domestic policy, foreign politics is less engaging than domestic politics. In fact, foreign news -- news of all kinds about other nations -- is third from the bottom in news interest. The index score for what might also be labeled news-of-the-world is a trifling 17%. Only the most monumental developments in "other nations" register with the general public. Most of the important stories from abroad that lack an American connection go practically unnoticed.

The arrest and extradition of Chile's Augusto Pinochet (1998) was followed very closely by 3% of the public. Tony Blair's election (1997) in Great Britain, ending 16 years of Conservative Party control, was followed very closely by 5% of the U.S. audience. The peace agreement in Northern Ireland, in 1998, ending decades of The Troubles, eked out an index score of 7%. The vote in 1992 to end more than four decades of apartheid in South Africa: 13%. The return of Hong Kong to Chinese authority in 1997: 14%.

Even negotiation leading directly to unification of East and West Germany was followed with great intensity by only 21% of the general public -- five points below the average for all stories. (Notably, although the reunification of Germany did not rivet audience attention, the actual opening of the Berlin Wall did. The dramatic and visual breaching of the Wall in November 1989 created an index score of 50, the highest score recorded among all foreign-news stories).

No foreign nation was more important to the United States than the Soviet Union. Its demise -- and the establishment of a Russian republic -- was arguably the most significant story about any "Other Nation" during the last 50 years. In fact, Pew polled Americans about that transformation 17 times between 1990 and 2001.

The actual break-up of the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1991 did register strongly as a news event -- 47% of the U.S. news audience followed that story very closely. On balance, however, the transformation from Soviet totalitarianism to Russian republicanism was not a major interest or concern.

The mean index score for all 18 readings was an uninspiring 18%. Even Boris Yeltsin's remarkable rise and fall was not so remarkable for the American news audience. The index provides a measure of how unremarkable: Yeltsin's first victory as president of Russia in 1991 produced an index score of 12%; his re-election in 1996, 7%; his resignation in 1999, 11%.

Mikhail Gorbachev fared significantly better. His historic first visit to the U.S. in 1990 scored 38%. But, his mounting problems at home, eventually leading to a failed coup attempt, managed only a score of 20% (March 1991).

While Mikhail Gorbachev was losing his fight to remain the Soviet president, half-a-world-away former heavyweight champion Michael Tyson was losing his fight to remain out of jail. Charged with rape, Tyson and his trial were incalculably less important than the trials of Mikhail Gorbachev. But not in terms of audience interest in the U.S. Although it was a close decision, Tyson tied Gorbachev in "news attention." Among the U.S. public, 31% followed very closely the disposition of the Gorbachev presidency: resignation. A statistically identical 32% followed very closely the disposition of the Tyson trial: conviction.

Personalities and Entertainment:

Mike Tyson's "tie" with Gorbachev is not altogether representative. Celebrity news rarely receives that kind of attention. In fact, celebrity news -- like celebrity scandals -- rarely engages huge audiences. Both categories actually fall at the very bottom of the list of news attentiveness.

The media, popular culture, Hollywood, the showy rich, and celebrities from the world of entertainment -- this is what is usually labeled "soft news." And, despite the widely held supposition that the lives of the rich and famous evoke great interest among the hoi polloi, the evidence suggests otherwise.

As a category of news, "Personalities and Entertainment" is followed very closely by only 17% of the national audience. In fact, were it not for two extraordinary stories -- the violent deaths of Princess Diana (1997) and John F. Kennedy, Jr. (1999) -- that average would be merely 13%.

In death, the Princess of Wales and President Kennedy's only son each elicited hugely high levels of interest -- 54% followed both stories very closely. But, the death of royalty -- literally in the first instance and figuratively in the second -- has always evoked enormous interest. For lesser lights, there is nothing approaching those levels of audience interest.

Years after the fact, many of the 31 celebrity news stories seem not just frivolous, but even difficult to recall. Still, in their day, each was a big story -- though much bigger in press coverage than in audience attention.

Marriages-on-the-rocks have always been major fodder for the tabloid press. Nonetheless, celebrity divorce, in the public eye, is among the least interesting of soft-news topics. The amicable separation of Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman was followed very closely by 2% of the national audience. The not-quite-so-amicable divorce of Donald Trump from Ivana was followed very closely by 12%.

The death of "stars" has always been a major story in the tabloids. That is especially true of rock stars. Yet, again, the public seems surprisingly uninterested in rock-star obituaries. Kurt Cobain's suicide was of great interest to 7% of the general public. The interest index for the death of Jerry Garcia was 9%; for George Harrison, it was 10%. Frank Sinatra was no rock star, but he was among America's most famous 20th-century entertainers. His death was of great interest to 17% of the public.

In terms of audience interest, two obituaries do stand out from the rest. The death of civil-rights icon Rosa Parks (2005) was followed closely by 25% of the nation. And the violent, accidental death of world-famous naturalist Steve Irwin (2006) was intently followed by three-in-10 Americans.

Celebrity journalism produces its share of anomalies. One might have expected that the 20th anniversary of Woodstock (1989) would have engendered considerable national nostalgia, or at least

News Interest in Celebrity Soft-News (1986-2006)	
	following <u>very closely</u> %
Tom Cruise/Nicole Kidman separation (1990)	2
Kurt Cobain suicide (1994)	7
Monica Lewinsky book tour (1999)	7
Kitty Kelly biography of Nancy Reagan (1991)	8
Connie Chung firing at CBS (1995)	8
Publication of Hillary Clinton's memoirs (2003)	8
Publication of Bill Clinton's memoirs (2004)	8
Woodstock 20 th anniversary (1989)	9
Jerry Garcia's death (1995)	9
Academy Awards for 1989	10
Disney purchase of ABC (1995)	10
Reality TV: "Survivor"; "Big Brother" (2000)	10
Millionaire married on TV (2000)	10
George Harrison's death (2001)	10
Colin Powell book tour (1995)	11
The Trump divorce (1990)	12
Katie Couric leaving <i>Today</i> (2006)	12
New TV ratings system (1996)	13
Seinfeld sign-off (1998)	13
Michael J. Fox illness (1998)	13
Donald Trump bankruptcy case (1990)	16
Frank Sinatra's death (1998)	17
Arthur Ashe illness (1992)	18
Bill Clinton heart surgery (2004)	19
"Fahrenheit 9/11" film release (2004)	20
Roseanne Barr singing the national anthem (1990)	21
Rosa Parks' death (2005)	25
Steve Irwin's death (2006)	30
"Passion of the Christ" film release (2004)	37
Princess Diana's death (1997)	54
JFK, Jr.'s death (1999)	54

“boomer” nostalgia. “Woodstock Revisited” failed to do either (index score: 9%). Curiously, Rosanne Barr’s disrespectful rendition of the National Anthem in 1990 wound up creating more than twice as much interest (21%).

Not surprisingly, the national media pay considerable attention to their own. The public does not respond in kind. Connie Chung’s firing from CBS in 1995 barely registered with the national news audience, with an index score of 8%. Katie Couric’s departure from the *Today Show* registered at 12%. The end of *Seinfeld* -- and the ballyhooed end of the Seinfeld era -- came in at 13%. Controversies about “Reality TV” engaged one American in 10. The debate about Michael Moore’s polemical documentary “Fahrenheit 9/11” engaged two in 10. (In 2007, the sacking of shock-jock Don Imus registered at 24%.)

The only media-related story to engage a broad audience was the debate about Mel Gibson’s film, “The Passion of the Christ.” A remarkable 37% of the national audience -- more than twice the average for “entertainment” stories -- paid very close attention to the controversy surrounding Gibson’s 2004 film. Two years later, however, that same national audience paid less than half as much attention to Gibson’s video-taped anti-Semitic tirade. His comments made while under arrest for drunk-driving were of great interest to just 14% of the public.

These last two findings are not as inconsistent as they might appear. As a rule, the public pays even less attention to stories about celebrities-

News Interest in Celebrity Controversies and Scandals (1986-2006)	
	following very closely %
Woody Allen and Mia Farrow separation (1992)	3
Charles and Diana marital problems (1996)	3
Prince Andrew and Fergie separation (1992)	4
Scandals with British royals (1992)	5
Michael Jackson trial (Feb, 2005)	8
Leona Helmsley trial (1989)	9
Charles and Diana separation (1993)	11
Michael Jackson trial (Mar, 2005)	12
George Steinbrenner punishment by MLB (1990)	12
Michael Jackson trial (Jun, 2005)	13
Kobe Bryant assault case (2003)	14
Mel Gibson’s drunk driving (2006)	14
Mike Tyson and Robin Givens divorce (1988)	14
United Way director resignation (1992)	14
CO minister’s homosexual relationship (2006)	15
Michael Jackson charges (1993)	15
Kobe Bryant assault case (2004)	16
Martha Stewart release from prison (2005)	16
Kobe Bryant assault case (2003)	17
Martha Stewart trial and conviction (2004)	18
Ball players steroid use (2005)	18
William Kennedy Smith rape charges (May, 1991)	21
Pete Rose sports betting allegations (July, 1989)	22
Reverend Jim Bakker trial (Sept, 1989)	22
Ball players steroid use (2004)	22
Janet Jackson “wardrobe malfunction” (2001)	22
William Kennedy Smith rape trial (1991)	27
Michael Jackson molestation charges (Dec, 2003)	29
Pete Rose banishment from baseball (Sept, 1989)	30
Mike Tyson rape trial (1992)	32
Reverend Jim Bakker guilty verdict (Oct, 1989)	33

gone-bad than to stories about celebrities being celebrities.

Celebrity Scandal:

The public expresses slightly less interest in political scandal than in politics. So it should not be surprising to find that the public also expresses slightly less interest in celebrity scandal than in celebrities. Celebrity scandal, in fact, comes in dead last among all 19 news categories. On average 16% of the audience follows this type of story with great interest.

Not all divorces are the same -- some are friendly; some are not. And some are scandalous. The separation of Prince Charles from Princess Diana was not friendly. The separation between Prince Andrew and the Duchess of York was both friendly and scandalous. And the separation of Woody Allen from Mia Farrow was both nasty and tawdry. Yet none of these failed relationships attracted anywhere near as much audience as paparazzi.

All three break-ups appear on the list of the 10 *least* closely followed stories, out of a grand total of 1,300. The index scores for these divorces and separations were 3% for Allen and Farrow; 3% for Charles and Diana; and 4% for the Prince and the Duchess. For whatever reason, when Mike Tyson and Robin Givens divorced, the public expressed more interest, but not much more (index score: 14%).

Celebrity crime garners a bit more interest. Three readings involving basketball star Kobe Bryant's rape case produced an average index score of 16%; home-making maven Martha Stewart's case averaged 17%; the trial of Kennedy family relative William Smith for rape reached 27%. Among celebrity scandals, the highest reading went to TV evangelist Jim Bakker, convicted on several criminal counts involving fraud and conspiracy (33%).

Public indifference to celebrity scandals is wide-ranging. Almost nobody cares about the dysfunctional House of Windsor (5%). Hotelier Leona Helmsley also proved to be an after-thought (9%). Baseball players using drugs, or betting on sports, were more interesting to the general public than were either the Royals or the tax-evading "Queen of Mean." But not by that much. Overall, baseball scandals achieved an index score of 23%.

Perhaps the most telling case of celebrity scandal is that of "King of Pop" Michael Jackson, a story that began in 1993 and finally ended in 2005. Pew polled about accusations and charges against Jackson on five separate occasions. On balance, the portion of the public following the 12-year scandal

intently was 15%. Even sister Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" at the 2004 Super Bowl evoked more interest (index score: 22%).

Perhaps the King of Pop was considered innocent by the public, and therefore all the fuss was not worth their attention. Perhaps the public just grew woefully tired of a story that lasted a dozen years. Whatever the explanation, there is no more instructive a case than that of Michael Jackson. No matter how large the reporters' stakeout -- no matter how many satellite feeds -- the public has its own criteria for deciding which tabloid stories just aren't worth following.

Part 2 of Michael Robinson's analysis examines news interest across decades and whether the public's news interests have or have not changed across news eras. Check back next week for the second and final installment of *Two Decades of American News Preferences*.