



The News Interest Index, 1986-2007
Two Decades of American News Preferences
Part 2: News Interest across Decades and “News Eras”

By Michael J. Robinson

Trends across Decades

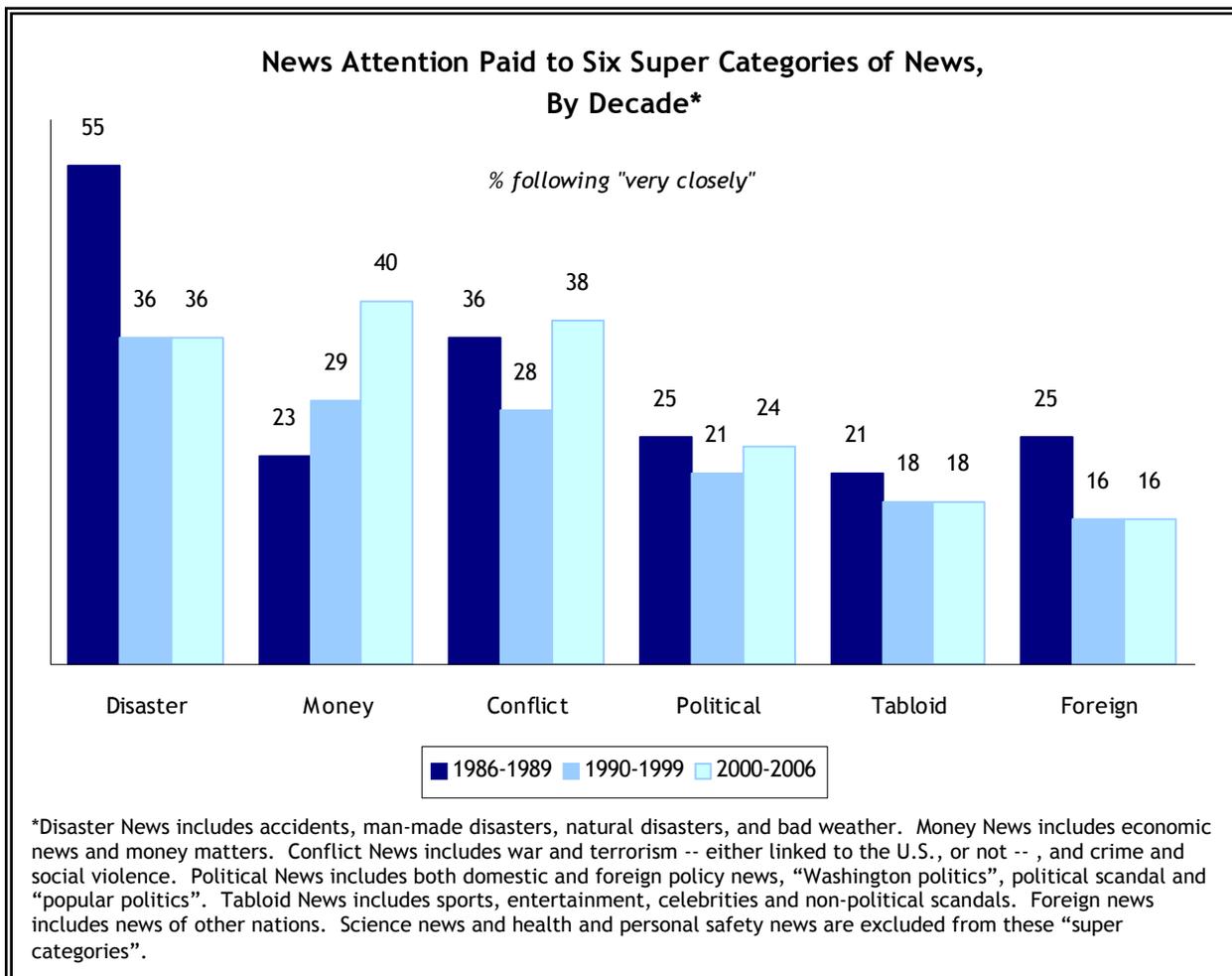
Public interest in news has changed slightly over the last two decades, but in a manner that suggests no meaningful trend. The average reading for the Pew News Interest Index did slip during the 1990s from 30% to 23%, a seemingly noteworthy decrease that represents nearly a fourth of the original level. Had the index continued to slide as much in the new millennium, that change would have suggested a trend of potentially great import. But in the current decade the index has bounced back to precisely its level during the 1980s: 30%.

Nor can any hidden trend be found embedded within the separate news categories. Among the 19 sub-categories of stories covered by the index, only five moved consistently in either direction -- either upward or downward. This is not much different from what one would expect by chance. And, if news tastes are at issue, within the five categories one finds contradictory evidence as to whether tastes have grown more serious, or less.

Two categories of news -- “Washington Politics” and “Money” -- trended upward. That combination might suggest that news tastes actually have become less serious across decades. “Money” news is about the quotidian; “Washington Politics” is sometimes little more than political gossip.

	<i>% following “very closely”</i>		
	1986-1989	1990-1999	2000-2006
	%	%	%
War/Terrorism (US-Linked)	44	36	43
Bad Weather	42	40	40
Man-made Disasters	54	33	34
Natural disaster	61	38	37
Money	23	29	40
Crime and Social Violence	24	30	27
Health and Safety	--	25	29
Domestic Policy	30	23	26
Campaigns and Elections	25	20	24
Washington Politics	17	19	24
Political Scandals	22	20	19
Other Politics	--	18	26
Sports	25	20	19
War/Terrorism (Non-US)	26	15	27
Science and Technology	33	15	16
Foreign Policy (US)	18	17	22
Other Nations	25	16	16
Personalities and Entertainment	9	17	17
Celebrity Scandals	22	13	17

But three categories of news shifted downward, and two of those changes could conceivably be regarded as symbolic of greater seriousness. Interest in natural disasters fell precipitously from an index score of 61% in the '80s to 38% in the '90s. Nor did it revive in the 2000s, with the index dropping an insignificant single percentage point. Taken alone this apparent trend might imply a less sensation-seeking news audience. So, too, would the shift away from sports news, with the three decade index scores dropping from 25% to 19% over the period.



The third, and last, category to trend lower, though only slightly, is political scandal. Those following political scandals very closely fell from an average of 22% in the 1980s to 19% in the 2000s. But that anemic trend could readily be interpreted either way -- as either a sign of enhanced or diminished news tastes.

In reality, this decade-by-decade assessment of news interests means neither a more nor less serious taste in news. While five categories do shift consistently, nearly three times as many show no continuous trend whatsoever. And those that do so fail to establish a meaningful direction with respect to public taste. The only pattern that seems to exist here is "U-shaped," with eight news categories starting "high," slipping in the next decade, then rising, again, in this decade.

The same is true when one groups all 19 news categories into six "super categories." Only one super category -- Money News -- trends either way: ever upward. Political News -- as measured by the index -- does not trend. Nor does Conflict News, Foreign News, nor Disaster News. Neither does Tabloid News.

Across decades, Tabloid News -- a combination of stories concerning celebrity gossip, non-political scandals, popular culture, and sports -- does not attract greater news attention. Although there is no pattern here, interest in Tabloid News is greatest in the '80s, with an index score of 21%. During the next two decades interest in Tabloid News flattens out at an average 18%. From this evidence one may conclude that the much-discussed soft-news genre -- indicated here by Tabloid News -- has not grown more alluring for the national audience.

Only one category among the six provides a clear-cut case of decade-by-decade change: Money News. This category includes everything from happenings on Wall Street to stories that touch at or near the family purse. Money News registers with audiences, ranking second among super categories with a three-decade score of 34%. And, decade-by-decade, interest in Money News has increased. In the '80s, its index score was 23%; in the '90s it moved forward to 29%. In this decade it leaped to 40%.

Trends across “News Eras”

While pundits sometimes use “the decades” to explain social phenomena, social scientists typically do not. With theories about media impact, academics often discount “time” per se as a factor in transforming audiences. For the last 50 years, the professional emphasis has been on changing informational technologies and information systems in explaining transformations in audience attitudes, orientations, and behavior.

Most famously, Marshall McLuhan, in a pre-digital world, theorized that every media era produced a unique audience and a unique politics: that the medium is the message¹.

Neil Postman in his *Amusing Ourselves to Death*² argued that the shift toward television -- because of its unique commercial imperatives -- infantilizes American audiences. Leonard Sussman, as early as 1989, shifted his focus from television news to “digitalism.” In *The Coming Age of ISDN*³ (Integrated Systems of Digital News), Sussman said digital information systems -- linked computers -- *might* liberate oppressed peoples and nations. Changing technology has been at the heart of most theories about news effects since at least the coming of the Radio Age.

The question then emerges: If news interests and news tastes are not transformed by “decades,” are they transformed by the changing information technology? The answer: apparently not.

News Eras: Network, Cable, Online

Once upon a time, news eras lasted for generations. Now they last, at most, for decades. Broadcast radio was the preferred source of political information from the '30s through the '50s. But in 1962, television had, for the first time, become the nation's primary source of information. By 1964, television had also become America's most trusted news source.⁴ The network news era had arrived.

In 1980, CNN became operational, and in less than 10 years CNN had moved past broadcast networks as the most trusted source.⁵ In 1989, for the first time, The People & the Press polls put CNN in the lead as the most credible news organization in the eyes of the public. And in 1991, CNN rocketed past the broadcast networks in a second aspect -- perceived quality of coverage. Immediately after the first Gulf War, 61% said CNN had done the best job in covering that conflict.⁶ As a result, 1991 is easily-documented as the beginning of the cable (coaxial) news era. Since then CNN -- “Cable News” -- has never relinquished its lead as principal news source, most especially during political crisis or emergency.

Beginning in this decade, however, cable news has experienced the same sorts of problems that afflicted network news at the beginning of the last -- declining audience size and credibility. And the so-called “cable surge” that has, during crisis, afforded cable its greatest audience advantage has also begun to abate.

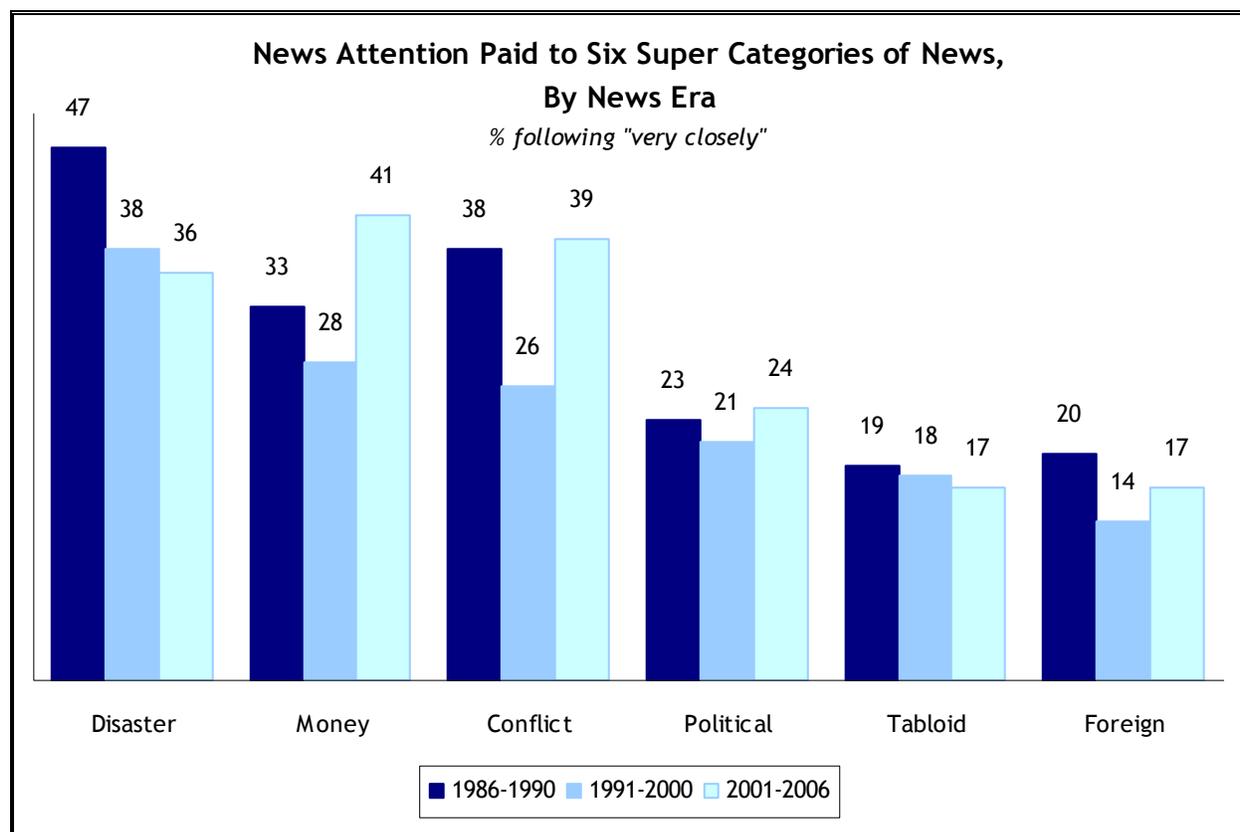
At the same time, online news sources have been growing steadily in numbers and in audience size, although this distinction is difficult to draw because practically all news sources have websites and online capabilities. The United States seems to find itself betwixt and between news eras. No “Hundred Hour War” has moved the public past one era and into the next.

Broadcast evening news continues to retreat -- not in numbers of outlets or amount of programming, but in regular audience. Between 1993 and 2006, the percentage of those regularly watching evening news fell from 60% to 28%. According to a Pew survey conducted in 2006, regular cable news viewing has slipped to 34%.⁷

Digital -- online -- news sources are, however, holding their own. In that same Pew survey measuring news consumption, 31% said that they go online for news three or more times per week. Online news has not replaced broadcast or cable news, but it has melded with both to the degree that seven of the top 17 news websites are network or cable news websites.⁸ With almost everything online now a growth industry in mass communications, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that between the years 2000 and 2007 the average American will nearly double his or her time online, jumping from 104 hours per year to 195 hours.⁹

If one assumes that the U.S. is at the dawn of a new news era -- or at least in the twilight of the cable news era -- then the changeover began with the new millennium. In 1996 only 2% of the public was going online for news at least three times a week. Four years later that number had increased by almost a factor of 12 -- to 23%.¹⁰

If 2001 began a different news era, then the question again becomes what are the implications for news preferences. The conventional wisdom is a blend of Postman and McLuhan. The newest system -- in part due to economic pressure, in part due to greater user autonomy -- should debase news tastes. But does it?



In fact, one might ask whether each of these three successive news eras produces different

interests and preferences that shift toward lower common denominators. To answer these questions there is, again, the chance to check for any change in the original 19 news categories. This time, however, direction of change is more important than before: The prediction is that this shift from broadcast, to coaxial, to digital should cause a downward shift, toward “soft” news.

Yet, among the news categories, 15 do not show any linear pattern across eras. Four categories of news do show a linear progression -- sports, political scandal, personality, and natural disaster. But sports moves the opposite way from predicted -- away from the softer news that the category symbolizes. So, too, with natural disaster -- a quasi-sensationalist kind of journalism. The public has moved away from disaster news, as measured by the index. Interest in political scandal stays essentially flat across eras (22%; 20%; 19%). And political scandals are an ambiguous category, neither intrinsically soft nor hard as a news genre.

Personality/Entertainment does fit with the debasement theme. In the network era the index for this inherently soft news category is 12%; in the cable era, 17%; “online,” 19%. Nearly all of that apparent softening fades away, however, when the 19 categories are combined into the six super categories.

Four super categories fail to produce any consistent pattern; two show some trending. Across eras, Disaster News becomes less “interesting.” Tabloid News remains essentially unchanged, losing one percentage point per era (the index scores: 19%; 18%; 17%). All told, then, the best single test for the notion of debasement-by-news-era fails almost totally.

Looking at possible shifts in news tastes that are generational, the results turn out to be mixed. Those who were less than 30 years of age between 1986 and 1996 were just as interested in Tabloid News as those in that age bracket in the years after 1996. There is no media effect hidden here by generation.

There is, however, some indication that the eras do have some impact when one considers Foreign News. The under-30 group in the earlier years expressed more interest in Foreign News (index: 14%) than did the under-30 group from the more recent years (10%). Nonetheless, the four other super categories do not indicate that the “newer young” are less serious or less involved than the “older young.”

In sum, news tastes did not move much in any direction over three separate decades. More importantly, over three different news epochs -- network, cable, and online -- news choices did not shift downward.

News Interest and the Nature of the Times

The only pattern in news interest is one of seeming randomness. In the network-news era the index, at 27%, is one percentage point above the overall average. In the cable-news era, the index, at 23%, is three percentage points *below* that average. And in the current era -- increasingly digital in its technology -- the index, at 31%, is five points *above* the overall mean.

This U-shaped pattern of news interest -- first high, then low, then high again -- not only emerges when the index is analyzed by “era,” it also exists when the index is examined by “decade.” This U-shaped pattern also appears when the focus shifts from overall averages to index scores for the majority of the 19 news categories -- even for the majority of “super categories.”

Across the three news eras, in the 19 possible instances where change in news interest could have moved in any consistent direction, eight of the change patterns are U-shaped -- high, low, high. Only four of 19 news categories show a consistent increase *or* decrease in interest across these eras.

This U-shaped pattern of change cannot be easily reconciled with any explanation that relies upon a single variable or factor. For example, the shift from broadcasting, to cable-casting, to online

information might easily be assumed to produce a *continuing* increase (or decrease) in news interests or news tastes. It has not.

The same assumption could be made about changing demographics of the news audience. In fact, any specific factor linked with news interest (or audience behavior) could readily be assumed to produce changes that are continuous and unidirectional. That, however, has not happened; there is no consistent linear pattern to the changes that have been observed.

What, then, has happened? First, it is important to remember that during the last quarter century there has not been dramatic change in news interests or in news tastes. In fact, there has been more continuity than change in both of those dimensions. The two “high-interest” periods have not differed all that much from the single low-interest period.

For example, audience interest in Political News, as a super category, has barely changed at all, with scores of 23%, 21% and 24% across three news eras. Interest in Tabloid News has shown even less variation, with index scores of 19%, 18%, and 17% across those same eras.

But, when change in news interest has been appreciable -- for example, interest in Money News and Conflict News both jumped 13 percentage points between the second and third news eras -- there may well be a straight-forward explanation. It may, however, have little to do with news eras or news technologies.

The answer may lie in something that is itself non-linear -- something as quotidian as objective conditions. The best explanation for U-shaped interest patterns may well be the changing nature-of-the-times. One might even think of this as “reality,” albeit a mediated reality.

Beginning in 1986, and continuing through the end of 1990, there were two overarching story lines. The first incorporated the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The second involved the earliest phases of what would become the hot war between the West and Muslim nations in the Middle East.

Significantly, during those years, while the Warsaw Pact nations were imploding, news interest in the internal politics of “Other Nations” -- Foreign News -- was at its highest. Also, during those years, conflict with the Arab world grew increasingly serious; first with air strikes in Libya, and then with half a year of build-up for the 1991 war with Iraq. It was in 1990 that the index for war news reached its highest level, as the U.S. conspicuously prepared for its first conventional ground war since Vietnam. The first era, then, is better defined by its real-world story lines than by its news system.

The cable-news era began with, and was a consequence of, the first ground war in Iraq. But the war ended quite successfully and very quickly -- in 100 hours. By the late '90s, gasoline prices had fallen to a dollar per gallon, and the NASDAQ had risen to over 5000. In the media, the twin narratives by the end of the cable-news era were a limited peace and an apparently unlimited prosperity. By the end of the decade, the Dot.com revolution was still being waged and won. And U.S. wars were fought quickly and victoriously -- and from the *air*, not on the ground.

Significantly, it was in the quiescent '90s that Political News -- never of great interest to the national audience -- took the largest share ever of the NII-defined newshole. Political scandal -- the Monica Lewinsky scandal above all -- was also at its peak. But, as a category, political scandal holds even less interest for American news audiences than other kinds of national politics.

The cable-era, then, is defined much less by its news technology than by its actual -- and less-than-intriguing -- news themes: prosperity; political scandal; and the *Pax Clintonia*. As such, overall news interest was at its nadir.

The current era fits most comfortably with the nature-of-the-times interpretation of news interest. Expectedly, there is, in percentage terms, considerably more Conflict News in this era than in the other two. (A remarkable 33% of all NII stories since 2001 are classified as Conflict News.) In 2001 and 2002

the war on terror was almost always the lead. Since 2003, the lead has been the second war with Iraq -- this one protracted, unsuccessful, and deadly for thousands of Americans.

Given its intrinsic interest for audiences, Conflict News might, by itself, account for the fact that the news in this era has been more “interesting.” But Money News -- always of great interest -- has also been a bigger story than in the two preceding eras. First and foremost, that has meant news about the record-setting price of gasoline. As terrorism, war and gasoline have replaced the relative peace and notable prosperity of the '90s as the two top stories, the news interest index has responded accordingly. During this transition, the index has risen from its lowest overall level to its highest.

In the end, it would seem that news interest has been determined not nearly as much by changing news systems as by the changes in the news itself. The '80s were more “interesting”; the '90s, less so; the '00s have been most interesting so far.

Truth or Socially-Acceptable Responses?

All these findings rest on a supposition: that respondents tell the truth about how closely they are following any given story. But do polls about news tastes and preferences elicit valid responses? Or do such polls merely elicit responses that are socially acceptable? Is there a systematic “response bias” that compels news audiences to tell pollsters what audiences perceive they ought to be saying?

There is, in fact, an on-going debate as to whether survey research is a valid measure of any audience behavior, especially in comparison with “ratings” research. This debate erupted again in early 2007. The outsized life and unexpected death of Anna Nicole Smith ignited several media-related controversies, one of which was whether the national audience simply lied about its real level of interest in Smith's death.

Pew surveys conducted days after the story broke indicated that more than six in 10 Americans said that the reporting about Smith had been the most *overcovered* story of that week -- a remarkable news week which also included news about the Super Bowl and the arrest of astronaut Lisa Nowak on attempted kidnapping and battery charges.¹¹ In that same survey, only 11% of the sample claimed to be following the Smith story “very closely.”

Ratings data, however, suggested a different reality, especially for cable news. On CNN, for example, the program during which the Smith story broke attracted nearly three times as many viewers as had that same program the day before. Cable programs that featured Smith's death drew substantially greater ratings than those (few) that did not.¹²

This discrepancy became a near-instant media issue, as CNN's Paula Zahn chastised the audience for its hypocrisy. CNN's own polling indicated that 71% of the national audience said they were not interested in the Smith situation, so Zahn responded by saying respondents were essentially lying: “Don't bother denying it. We've seen the ratings... We know millions of you are out there [watching] America's newest guilty pleasure.”¹³

There is a possible reconciliation -- discussed below -- between these seemingly contradictory pairings of evidence: the polls versus the ratings. But three reasons suggest the public does not typically offer up socially-acceptable answers about the likes of the Anna Nicole Smith story or about most any other kind of news.

First is the easily-documented reality about expressions of news tastes: Audiences are not at all shy about expressing interest in news categories that are *not* “socially desirable.” News about the weather ranks second out of 19 news categories in terms of audience interest. And there is nothing high-brow about paying rapt attention to weather stories.

Nor does the public reveal any compunction about labeling most foreign news uninteresting. Foreign news is typically regarded as a symbol of sophisticated news tastes. Yet foreign news ranks seventeenth in news appeal, virtually tied with tabloid reporting for last place. Significantly, among the

very least followed stories in the entire array -- those with index scores of 4%, or less -- one is about politics; four are celebrity stories; and six are foreign news.

If respondents were seeking to offer answers that somehow convey status, they would not express great interest in weather reporting, or in disaster news of all types. Nor would they admit to having little, if any, interest in reports about the politics of other nations. News audiences seem more than willing to voice opinions about news preferences that are neither sophisticated nor cosmopolitan.

There is a further reason for believing the audience when it describes its own news interests: consistency of response. Pew has asked about news preferences in two different ways -- first about specific stories, the approach used until this point. But there have been several surveys in which Pew has asked about *generic* news types: "weather news"; "health news"; "Washington news," etc.

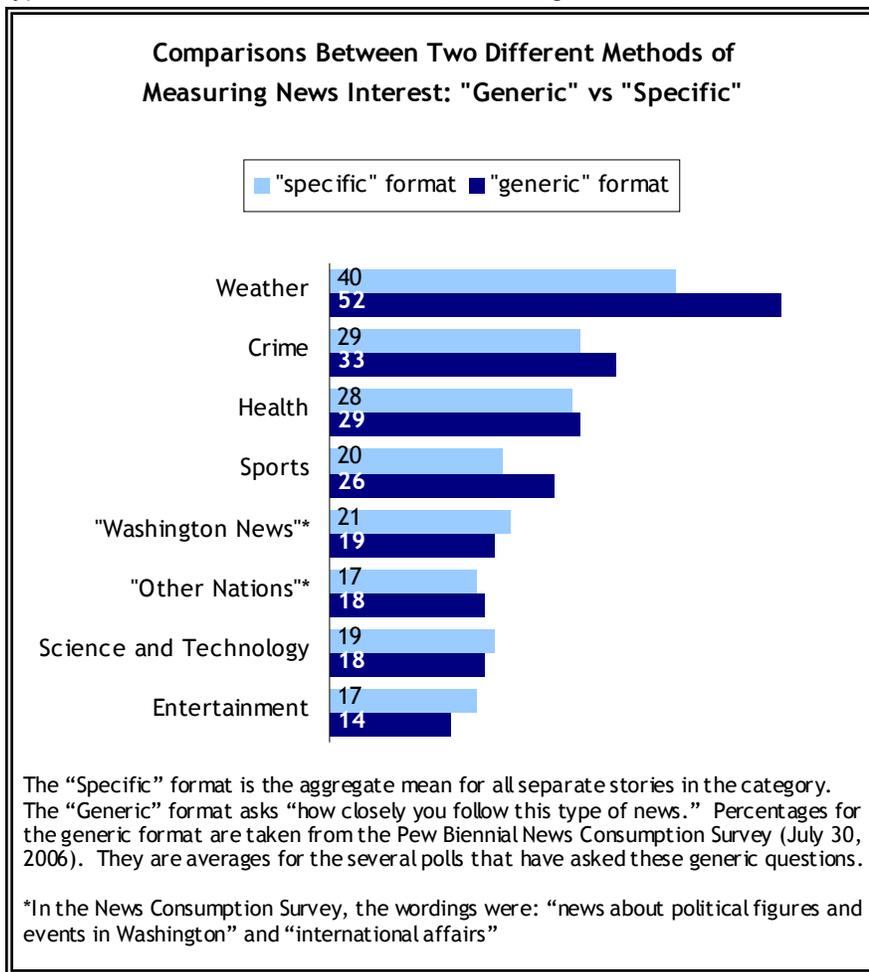
The consistency of responses is considerable. Whether respondents are answering about specific news events or generic news types, the percentage following "very closely" in both cases is almost identical. The only discrepancy here is with weather news.

When asked about "the weather," as opposed to particular weather events, respondents express markedly more interest in the weather. Perhaps the difference here is that "the weather" means *their* weather. Nonetheless, other than that anomaly, these two sets of responses are nearly equivalent. So, at the very least, the interest question provides consistent answers.

Finally, Nielsen ratings can, themselves, be

used to support the idea that audiences don't lie (much) about news tastes. Ratings for national evening news have fallen by half since the mid-'80s. But average Nielsen ratings for the traditional evening news programs are still about twice the average for the evening tabloid shows: "E.T."; "Inside Edition"; "Access Hollywood"; "The Insider"; and "Extra" (6.1 vs. 3.3).¹⁴ And recent evidence suggests that very soft news stories on local television actually lose audience share.¹⁵

One recent study directly implies that ratings data can be used to confirm that the public is telling the truth when it expresses a preference for middlebrow news reporting, as opposed to news that is less than that. PEJ examined ratings for eight "Big Events" on cable news between August, 1998 (Clinton's televised confession about the Lewinsky affair) and the congressional election results of November 2006. The other Big Events, in chronological order, were the Bush-Gore election dispute, the 9/11 attacks, the



U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the Bush-Kerry election result, hurricane Katrina and the terrorist attack on London in 2005.

Only one of these stories, the Clinton confession and its aftermath, can be considered tabloid fodder. And ratings for that story on cable did jump 71% in one month's time. But, on cable, Katrina produced a bigger bump -- 84%. The "hanging-chad" election evoked an increase in audience of 91%. And the 9/11 attacks increased the cable audience by a factor of nearly three. The greatest audience increase in percentage terms was thus produced by (a) a natural disaster; (b) a contested presidential election; and (c) a terrorist attack. Remarkably, the cable ratings for these three "Big Events," none of which trafficked in scandal, were almost three times greater on average than the cable ratings for the Clinton "confession." And cable ratings for the "Shock and Awe" attack that began the Iraq invasion in 2003 were four times greater than those for the Clinton-Lewinsky tale. In absolute (Nielsen) numbers, it was the scandal story that had the smallest audience -- by far.¹⁶

While tabloid stories do not engage the avid attention of large audiences, recent data indicate that such stories do generate intense interest among their core followers. As noted earlier, the expanded 2007 News Interest Index queries respondents about the one story they were following "most closely" as well as about their degree of attention to major stories in the news.

Analysis of the 2007 index finds that people who follow celebrity scandal stories very closely are also more likely to name these stories as their "top stories." Specifically, the 2007 data show that on average 42% of people who named events involving Anna Nicole Smith, Don Imus or Paris Hilton as a story they were following very closely also cited it in the follow-up question as the single story they were following most closely. For all other stories the comparable percentage was 26%. This phenomenon may help explain why, as further discussed below, small bore cable shows can attract sizeable faithful audiences by focusing on stories that may not be broadly popular. In short, tabloid news has a niche audience that is not as large as some might think, but is quite easily activated by its propensity to follow tabloid reporting.

Commerce or Sociology?

The debate between ratings research and survey research transcends methodology. Nielsen ratings tell us much more about marginal shifts in audience behavior. Polling data tell us more about the general audience. Ratings give much greater insight into commercial pressures on (commercial) news organizations. Surveys give greater insight into the sociology of audience. If one wants to understand what news organizations are doing -- and which changes they are making -- in deciding news content, one would look to ratings. But if one wishes to understand what audiences think about news content, one would choose to consult the polls.

This is no small difference. In fact, this difference between studying the audience commercially and studying it sociologically helps explain why highly competitive news organizations will make so much of Anna Nicole Smith, while news consumers will make so much less of her.

It is true that when CNN rushed to cover Smith's death, CNN tripled its audience -- and its rating -- from the day before. For CNN -- and its cable-news competition -- that is *the* story about audience. And in the feverishly competitive world of cable news, that "dramatic" increase in CNN's rating helps explain why in the three-week saga of Smith's death and internment, cable news sources devoted 22% of their entire newshole to her.¹⁷

This is what a shift in ratings will do to news content. But how big a shift is this in terms of the national audience? On CNN, the audience initially increased by a factor of three, an increase of approximately a million people -- less than a single Nielsen ratings point. And from the sociologist's perspective, that shift represents less than one half of one percent of the nation.

All this helps explain how it happened that the most competitive news systems -- cable, above all -- would become frenzied in covering the Smith story. And how, from a commercial perspective, based in ratings, news organizations were "right" in doing so. But this calculus, based in commerce and ratings, does not account for the broader reality -- that most of the national audience was, according to the polls, either indifferent to, or disapproving of, that coverage.

Moving beyond the case of Anna Nicole Smith is a larger set of realities, both commercial and sociological. First, the commercial realities: that the news business has become increasingly competitive; that with an ever-increasingly fractionalized news audience, even the smallest shifts in ratings can cause news organizations to alter substantially their news focus; that those changes do generally move toward a lower common denominator. But the rush -- by cable, especially -- to attract a niche audience to enhance ratings is about commerce and economics.

Then there is the sociology of it: that those ratings-driven changes in news menu do not necessarily mean concomitant changes in the news diet; that the national news audience does not shift its news diet nearly so quickly as news organizations shift their news menu, and that the *national* news audience does not necessarily shift toward the lower common denominator. The *niche* audience does that.

The national audience, as these surveys reveal, does not chase the kinds of stories the niche-seeking news media rush to cover. The broader audience remains consistently middle-brow. All this explains why, in June 2007, although cable news went into another feeding frenzy -- this time over Paris Hilton -- the percentage of the national audience following Hilton's jail-time very closely was only 13. And the hyped out-of-jail interview with Larry King on CNN wound up with an audience of only 3.2 million viewers. As the *Washington Post* noted, the audience for Hilton was less than one-fifth the audience attracted when Al Gore informally debated Ross Perot on "Larry King Live" back in 1993.¹⁸

A Changing News Universe

The twin goals of this report have been to track the news preferences and tastes of the American audience, and to ascertain whether those preferences and tastes have changed as the news media have changed. One can choose from a list of metaphors in drawing the conclusions.

One is the notion of a news menu that is presented and a news diet that is consumed. Another is an analogy from economics that emphasizes the supply-side of the news system (content), and the demand-side (the audience). A more general metaphor answers these questions as if the news system were a universe.

In the universe of news there are several dimensions, but two, when considered together, touch directly on the topic of news preferences. Those dimensions of the news universe are its size and composition. And given what is now known about both these dimensions, the news preferences of the national audience might well be assumed to be shifting toward the frivolous and puerile. The evidence here suggests strongly that that is not the case.

The Expanding Universe of News

It is axiomatic that the news universe has expanded more rapidly in the last 50 years than ever before. While some galaxies within it -- radio, newspapers and news magazines -- are no longer expanding, the newer galaxies continue to do just that.

One of the newest galaxies -- blogs -- has had an especially accelerated growth. In early 2003 there were fewer than 200,000 blogs. Blog search engine Technorati estimates that by the end of 2006 there were 60 million blogs.¹⁹ Although on-going research indicates that only about 10% of these web

logs are “political,”²⁰ that shift still represents an increase of nearly six million new sources of politically-relevant information in less than five years.

Less dramatic, but more relevant, has been the expansion in television journalism, old-fashioned and new-fangled. Television news is a mature galaxy, so it is less expansionary than some, but remains surprisingly so. The audience for traditional network evening news continues to decline. So, too, does the number of journalists working within it. But in terms of hours of content provided, and especially in the number of sources providing it, television news has continued to expand right up to the present.

Even excluding networks that are quasi-political -- Bloomberg TV, Comedy Central, CNBC -- the increase in the number of sources has been uninterrupted since the 1950s. In the '50s three networks provided news, but none did so as a principal form of programming. Until the 1960s, ABC, CBS, and NBC all presented only 15 minutes of news on weekday evenings. In the '60s, PBS joined the original three, and has since become a serious news source.

In 1979, the cable industry funded the creation of the first all-political network: C-SPAN. In 1980 Ted Turner revolutionized cable news with the inception of CNN. Two years later Turner broadcasting launched CNN2, now CNN Headline News. In 1986, C-SPAN added C-SPAN2, and both shifted more toward informational programming. Then Microsoft and NBC combined to create MSNBC in 1996. In that same year, Rupert Murdoch created Fox News, now the most widely-watched of the cable news networks. And in 2001 C-SPAN expanded again, with the inception of C-SPAN3. Remarkably, in 2006, three new, English-language international cable networks became available in parts of the United States: BBC World, Al Jazeera/English, and France24.

Not one of these 12 networks has gone dark. None does less news programming now than when it began. Even though some regard television news as a dying star, there are, in fact, three times as many network news organizations in 2007 as there were in 1967. (And all 12 have websites for their news; network news now means online news as well.) Television news no longer dominates the system, but, like most other elements in the news universe, it continues its expansion.

A “Softer” News Universe

If expansion of the news universe meant just more of the same, the implications for news audiences might be minimal, perhaps even beneficial. But, in part as a consequence of the expansion, the composition of the news universe has also changed. It is now accepted theory that the composition of the news universe has been devalued.

Thomas Patterson analyzed more than 5,000 news stories presented by 33 different sources between 1980 and 1999. Patterson concluded that the content of all the news media had, during those 20 years, become more sensational; more focused on human-interest, crime and disaster; more self-referential -- and much less policy-oriented. In a word, the news had become “softer.” In fact, his data indicate that in just five years time, the frequency of soft new stories had increased by approximately 25%.²¹

Since then the softening of news has continued. In 2007, the Project for Excellence in Journalism has analyzed more than 17,000 stories from six major news formats: newspapers, news radio, network news, talk radio, cable news, and “online news sites.” PEJ findings fit comfortably with those of Patterson.

It is not the case that the most modern format invariably presents the softest news content; website information proves to be unexpectedly internationalist in its focus.²² But online news is the exception. Overall, the “newer” the format, the softer the news. Other than online information sources, cable news is the youngest news genre, and it is consistently the softest, and the most given to tabloid reporting.²³

For one last time, Anna Nicole Smith’s story is instructive. During those weeks in which Smith’s story was most-widely covered, cable news was singularly committed to covering it. In percentage terms, cable news devoted more than four times as much newshole to Smith as did talk radio; more than five times as much newshole to Smith as did news radio, or online web sites; more than 10 times as much newshole as did network evening news; and more than 20 times as much as did newspapers.²⁴

Across all media, the Smith saga ranked as the eighth biggest story in the first three months of 2007. It is hard to imagine that, in the news universe of 20 years ago, a story like hers could have attracted so much press attention. But, more importantly, with the exception of online news, the “younger” the news genre, the greater the propensity to cover her. The news universe is not just expanding. Some of its more rapidly expanding components are growing increasingly tawdry in their composition.

The “Steady-State” Audience

These truths about the universe of American journalism should produce a news audience that is less knowledgeable, less involved, less interested in hard news and, lastly, more interested in tabloid reporting. Yet, so far none of these things has happened.

Pew has just completed a decades-long evaluation of political knowledge, comparing the 1970s with today. Although the evidence is mixed, on balance, it turns out that the American electorate was about as limited in its awareness of current events 30 years ago as it is today.²⁵

What’s more, the expanding news universe has had little effect on “time spent with the news.” The late 20th century audience spent, on average, 66 minutes per day following the news. In the 21st century, the national audience spends, on average, 66 minutes following the news.²⁶ Levels of involvement with the news have not declined. In fact, the news index is at its *highest* in this era.

Even the hypothesis that softer news would lead to softer news tastes falls short of the mark. When asked by Pew about interest in generic categories of news, the percentage of the audience that pays attention to “hard news” has not changed. In fact, the percentage in 2006 was identical to that in 1996.

Plus ca change

All these findings seem to corroborate the findings from the NII surveys that have been the basis for this report. The NII surveys, in fact, provide one last test of the hypothesis that news content and news taste actually are, at best, weakly linked.

Among the six super categories, two are especially good indicators of news tastes. Foreign News represents upscale news preferences. Tabloid News represents just the opposite. Those who follow Foreign News are likely to be readers of the *New York Times*. Those who follow Tabloid News are likely to subscribe to *Us Weekly*.

If news tastes were changing, one would expect to find evidence of it here, in the two categories of news that are so readily -- and frequently -- linked to notions of news tastes, good and bad. Yet Foreign News and Tabloid News are among the categories of news interest showing the least amount of change over the course of time. Neither category moves significantly in the rankings. In fact, Foreign News and Tabloid News have vied continuously to be the “least interesting” category.

With good reason, newspeople might well have feared that news tastes would have been in decline during the last three decades. For their part, optimists might at least have hoped that tastes in

The Hard News Audience	
	Attention to Hard News* High %
1996	27
1998	29
2000	24
2002	30
2004	31
2006	27

*High=follows int., national, local, and business news very/somewhat closely.

Pew Biennial News Consumption Survey, 2006.

news had become a touch more cosmopolitan. Neither those hopes nor those fears seem warranted. Serious news still rarely engages the national audience, but neither does pure fluff. The news diet remains “meat-and-potatoes,” almost in spite of a changing news menu. It is as if Americans have a set point in terms of news interest, involvement and tastes.

Just why the American news audience seems to have this set point is not at all clear. What is clear is that what might seem worrisome changes in journalism have not had much effect on news preferences. The news universe is expanding and transforming itself. The news audience, for now, remains steady-state.

¹ Marshall McLuhan (1964), *Understanding Media*, McGraw Hill, New York.

² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Viking, New York.

³ Leonard Sussman, *Power, the Press, and the Technology of Freedom, The Coming Age of ISDN* (1989), Freedom House, New York.

⁴ Elmo Roper, Television Information Office, 1964.

⁵ The Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, “Believability Study,” April, 1996, p. 1.

⁶ The People, Press and Politics, “Post-Gulf War Update,” March 30, 1991, p. 10.

⁷ Pew Research Center, Biennial News Consumption Survey, July 30, 2006, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁹ Associated Press, “Study of American Media Use Finds Web Finally Passing Newspapers, December 15, 2006; cited in PEJ, *The State of the News Media: 2007*, chapter on newspapers.

¹⁰ Pew Biennial Survey, p. 1.

¹¹ Pew Research Center’s “News Interest Omnibus Survey,” February 9-12, 2007, p. 4.

¹² “Anna Nicole Coverage Sweetens the Ratings Pot,” *Washington Post*, February 15, 2007, p. C7.

¹³ Cited in “Anna Nicole Smith, Anatomy of a Feeding Frenzy,” Project for Excellence in Journalism, Special Report, April, 2007, p. 8.

¹⁴ Nielsen data provided by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

¹⁵ Tom Rosenstiel, *We Interpret This Newscast: How to Improve Local News and Win Ratings* (2007), Cambridge Press, Cambridge, Chapter 5.

¹⁶ From *The State of the News Media, 2007*, Project for Excellence in Journalism, March, 2007.

¹⁷ “Anna Nicole Smith, Anatomy of a Feeding Frenzy,” Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007, p. 8.

¹⁸ Lisa de Moraes, “3.2 Million Pay a Visit to Paris Via CNN,” *Washington Post*, June 29, 2007, C5.

¹⁹ *Technorati: about us*, November 11, 2006.

²⁰ Pew Internet and American Life Project, “Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet’s News Story-Tellers,” July, 2006.

²¹ Thomas E. Patterson, “Doing Well and Doing Good,” The Kennedy School, Harvard University, December 2000, p. 5.

²² A Quarterly Report of PEJ News Coverage Index, Spring 2007, p. 5.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 14.

²⁴ PEJ Special Report: Anna Nicole Smith, Anatomy of a Feeding Frenzy, Project for Excellence in Journalism, April, 2004.

²⁵ Pew Research Center, “What Americans Know: 1989-2007,” April 15, 2007, p.1.

²⁶ Pew Research Center Biennial News Consumption Survey,” July 30, 2006, p. 10.