

DATA MEMO: Pew Internet & American Life Project and Pew Research Center for
The People & The Press
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DATE: January 24, 2005

*“Fahrenheit 9-11” had broad political reach
Overall, 31% of adult Americans saw a political documentary last year
16% read political books*

Michael Moore’s documentary “Fahrenheit 9-11” may or may not get a lot of Academy Award nominations tomorrow, but it made a powerful contribution to American politics during last year’s campaign.

Fully 31% of adult Americans (over 60 million people) said they saw a documentary film related to the campaign or candidates in 2004.

Summary quote from Michael Cornfield: “This level of exposure in the time of a campaign to a theatrically released motion picture about that campaign is unique. Rarely do voters in the digital age spend a long time paying close attention to a single message about an upcoming election. Most campaign messages today come in short forms: advertisements, sound bites, email postings, bumper stickers.”

The year of the unprecedented attention to political documentaries also involved other kinds of long-form media. The survey showed that 16% of adult Americans said they read a book about current politics or national affairs. By comparison, 7% said they attended a campaign rally. And it should also be noted that 5% say they get political information from radio host Rush Limbaugh and 3% cited Howard Stern.

These findings come from a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project and the Pew Research Center For The People & The Press in November 2004.

The following subpopulations saw a documentary film in greater proportion than the general population (31%):

- Liberals 47% (compared to moderates 33%, conservatives 26%).
- Campaign activists 48%

- Kerry voters 45%, compared to Bush voters 25%
- Internet users who went online to get political news and information 44%
- College graduates 45%
- “Blue county” residents, those living in counties which went for Kerry: 39% (28% of red county residents)
- Americans ages 18-29 39%.

This data pattern leaves little doubt that “Fahrenheit 9-11” accounts for most of the people who answered “yes” to the documentary film question. Indeed, no other documentary about the 2004 campaign or candidates received anything close to the theatrical distribution of the Moore picture. These include “Bush’s Brain” (about presidential strategist Karl Rove) and “Going Upriver” (about John Kerry’s Vietnam service). “Stolen Honor,” a documentary critical of Kerry’s service, made the news when Sinclair Broadcasting announced it would screen the film on its television stations days before the election; the plan was greatly modified in the wake of protests. “Diary of A Political Tourist,” a chronicle of the Kerry campaign, aired on HBO.

Best-selling public affairs books relevant to the 2004 campaign included “Unfit for Command” (critical of Kerry), “The 9-11 Commission Report,” “Against All Enemies” (critical of President Bush), “Plan of Attack” (about the decisions leading up to the Iraq war), and “America: the Book” (a civics-book satire by Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show” staff).

The survey data come from a poll that was conducted between November 4 and November 22, 2004. The survey involved 2,200 adults and has a margin of error of plus or minus two points.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project is a non-profit, non-partisan initiative of the Pew Research Center that looks at the social impact of the internet. It does not take positions on policy issues.