

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

News about the drug wars, international and domestic, dominated the American consciousness in September in a way that no other issue did. There was extensive public attentiveness, significant public understanding, and few complaints about the amount of press coverage devoted to the story:

*Half of the American public (49%) reported that they followed very closely news either about the struggle in Colombia or news about the Bush administration's efforts here at home. News about drugs in the US was followed very closely by a somewhat larger proportion of the public (40%), than those who followed events in Colombia (34%).

*63% of the Gallup sample volunteered that drugs were the most important problem facing the nation - an unparalleled proportion to mention any national problem save a war, or economic disaster; and this is up 36 percentage points in three months.

* The President's speech on this subject was viewed by 39% of the public, with 14% saying they watched Bush's first address to the nation in its entirety.

* Despite the continuous presence of national and international drug problems as the lead on the news, only four percent thought the war in Colombia had received too much coverage or that the Bush administration efforts to deal with the problem were over covered.

* Half the public knew that the Colombian crackdown came in response to the wave of assassinations in that country.

By all our measures, save one, the drug story made its mark on the American public. The only aspect of the story that failed to evoke a majority response from our sample was the identity of William Bennett, who was identified correctly by only 24% of our sample.

The third most closely followed story was the banishment of Pete Rose from baseball for life. Thirty percent were following this story closely, which was nearly as many as felt the story received too much coverage. Attentiveness to the end of Pete Rose's career was only somewhat more extensive among men than among women (36% vs. 26%).

The discoveries of Voyager 2 and the trial of televangelist Jim Bakker were both followed closely by only one in five Americans, yet these low levels of attention stand in sharp contrast to how much the public knew about the stories and how they felt about press performance with regard to them.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) knew what Voyager 2 is, and two in three knew that the space ship would continue on into space, going beyond our Solar System. These high levels of public understanding may in part explain the fact that people were especially positive about press coverage of this story. Press performance is usually rated as excellent by about one in four people. But in this case, coverage of Voyager 2 was rated as excellent by 40% of those who followed the story closely.

With regard to Jim Bakker, an astounding 71% of the public knew that the former TV evangelist suffered an emotional breakdown causing a temporary suspension of his trial. But in this case high levels of public knowledge didn't seem to lead to public praise for press performance. Only 14% of those following the Bakker story rated press coverage as excellent and Jim Bakker's trial led the public's list of which stories got too much press coverage. As many as thirty two percent felt the story was over covered.

Region, age, and gender made a difference in attitudes toward the Bakker story. Women were more inclined than men to pay at least some attention to the story (63% vs 54%) and attentiveness was somewhat greater in the South and among older people. Women and people in the South were also more apt than others to feel the story of Bakker and his trial had been over reported.

Incidents of racial violence in New York City and Virginia Beach were also followed closely by about one in five. The story was more likely to be followed closely by those in the East, and among non-whites. In fact, it was second only to the stories about drugs among non-whites. Interestingly, these combined incidents have not received as much public attention as news about the rape of the jogger in Central Park did a few months ago. In May, 29% of the public told us they followed this story very closely. The level of non-white attention to both stories was about the same but, the recent incidents of racial violence in Virginia and New York is evoking less interest among white than did stories about the rape of the jogger.

The trial of Leona Helmsley for tax evasion was practically ignored by Americans, regardless of race, color or creed. Only nine percent said they had been following it very closely.

Given the generally low level of interest in foreign news, especially foreign political news, a surprising 57% of the public knew that the new Prime Minister of Poland was a member of the Solidarity party and not a communist. This is especially remarkable given the fact that just a few months ago stories about political unrest in Poland were followed closely by only 12%.

Overall press performance was rated somewhat less positively this month than in July and August. Only 19% of respondents gave an excellent rating to the story they followed most closely, compared to 25% in the two preceding months.

This fall off may be a result of the kinds of stories in the news in September rather than related to feelings about whether the press has been fair in its coverage. No story was cited by more than 7% of the public as having been covered in a biased or unfair way and 66% did not name any of the stories included in this survey as being covered in an unfair way.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey results are based on telephone interviews with **1,238** adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period of September 7-10, 1989. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 4 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

TIMES MIRROR DATABASE
PUBLIC ATTENTIVENESS TO MAJOR NEWS STORIES
(1986 - 1989)

	Percent <u>Very Closely</u>
The explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger	80
The little girl in Texas who was rescued after falling into a well	69
The U.S. air strikes against Libya	58
The crash of a United Airlines DC-10 in Sioux City, Iowa (Aug 89)	53
The Alaska Oil Spill (May 89)	52
Supreme Court decision of flag burning (July 89)	51
The flight of the space shuttle (Oct 88)	50
The murder of Marine Lt. Col. Higgins in Lebanon, and and negotiations to free the other hostages in the mideast (Aug 89)	49
The drought and its effects on American farmers	49
The TWA hostage crisis that took place last summer in Beirut, Lebanon (July 86)	48
The political upheaval in China (July 89)	47
The Supreme Court decision on abortion (July 89)	47
The nuclear accident at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union	46
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (Oct 88)	43
The hot weather this summer and the greenhouse effect (Aug 88)	42
The downing of an Iranian passenger plane by a U.S. Navy ship	42
THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S PLAN TO DEAL WITH THIS COUNTRY'S DRUG PROBLEM (SEPT 89)	40
The stock market crash	40
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (Aug 88)	39
The U.S. Navy escort of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf (Sept 87)	38
The U.S. Navy escort of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf (Oct 87)	37
The stories about Dan Quayle, the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate	37
The sentencing of Oliver North (July 89)	37
The hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship in the Mediterranean	35
The explosion and fire on the U.S. Battleship Iowa (May 89)	35
THE WAR BETWEEN THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE MAJOR DRUG TRAFFICKERS (SEPT 89)	34
The Congressional hearings about the Iran- Contra affair (Sept 87)	33
The world series (Oct 88)	31
The Oliver North trial (May 89)	31
THE BANISHMENT OF PETE ROSE FROM BASEBALL FOR LIFE (SEPT 89)	30
The Democratic convention (Aug 88)	30

	Percent Very Closely
The attack and sexual assault on a female jogger in Central Park, New York, by a group of youths (May 89)	29
The problems at nuclear reactor plants (Oct 88)	28
The end of Gary Hart's candidacy and the Donna Rice allegations	28
The Republican convention (Aug 88)	27
Passage in Congress of a bill to bail out ailing savings and loan institutions (Aug 89)	26
The Supreme Court's hearing of arguments in a Missouri abortion case (May 89)	25
THE DISCOVERIES MADE BY THE SPACECRAFT VOYAGER 2 (SEPT 89)	22
THE TRIAL OF TELEVANGELIST JIM BAKKER (SEPT 89)	22
The April hijacking of a Kuwaiti airplane by Shiite Moslems (May 88)	22
The cease fire in the war between Iran and Iraq	22
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (May 88)	22
The charges that Pete Rose has bet on baseball games (July 89)	22
The scandal involving HUD (Aug 89)	21
The attempts by the U.S. government to depose General Noriega in Panama	20
THE INCIDENTS OF RACIAL VIOLENCE IN NEW YORK CITY AND VIRGINIA BEACH (SEPT 89)	19
Discussions of a U.S. Soviet arms agreement (Sept 87)	19
The stock market crash	18
The conflict in the Middle East between Palestinians and the Israelis in the occupied territories (May 88)	18
The nomination of Robert Bork to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court	17
The ethics committee's investigation of Speaker of the House Jim Wright (May 89)	15
News about the Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination (Oct 87)	15
Conflict of interest allegations about Attorney General Ed Meese (May 88)	15
The scandal involving HUD (July 89)	15
The spy scandal involving a U.S. Diplomat in Vienna (Aug 89)	14
Coverage of the Democratic and Republican candidates for the Presidential nomination (Sept 87)	14
The pending divorce between Mike Tyson and Robin Givens	14
News about the Republican candidates for the Presidential nomination (Oct 88)	13
Solidarity's role in governing Poland (July 89)	12
THE TRIAL OF HOTEL OWNER LEONA HELMSLEY FOR TAX EVASION (SEPT 89)	9
Stories about the 20th anniversary of the Woodstock Music Festival (Aug 89)	9
The scandal involving the Japanese Prime Minister and other high ranking officials (May 89)	6