

Times Mirror News Interest Index
November 1989

Public Interest and
Awareness of the News

Analysis

Conducted by:

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ANALYSIS

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Two momentous news stories engaged the attention of a majority of the American public over the past four weeks. Nearly three in four Americans (73%) followed very closely news about the destruction caused by the San Francisco earthquake while half the public (50%) followed closely the recent news about the opening of the Berlin Wall.

In contrast, the public paid only meager attention to three other stories considered by the November Times Mirror News Interest Index. Fewer than one in seven Americans followed very closely news about the resumption of hostilities between the Contras and government forces in Nicaragua (13%). State and local election coverage evoked the same level of attentiveness as the Central American conflict (13%). The percentage who said they followed election news closely was somewhat greater in the East (21%).

Interest in the World Series was also not very great, with 23% saying they followed series news very closely. Attentiveness was only somewhat greater among men than women (29% to 18%). This modest level of interest comports with the low TV ratings achieved by this year's series relative to those of the past.

In the four year history of the Times Mirror ratings only one story, the explosion of the Challenger, aroused more public interest (80%) than the San Francisco earthquake. Attentiveness to news about this natural disaster was very high in all parts of the country and among people from all walks of life. Even a two-thirds majority of people under 30 years of age, who are usually least interested in all types of news, said they followed the story very closely and interest in earthquake news did not slip below the seventy percent level in any region of the country.

The level of public attention to the opening of the Berlin Wall is as great as has been observed for such major stories this year as the political upheaval in China, the Valdez oil spill, and Supreme Court decisions on abortion and flag burning.

The current survey was done in the midst of news about dramatic events in East Germany and its results mirror the impact that this story has had on the public. At the outset of the interviewing on Thursday, November 9, we asked respondents about their interest in news about political changes in East Germany and the flight of the refugees - 29% reported they were following that story very closely. Over the succeeding three day period the proportion who said they were following news about the opening of the Wall climbed to 50%. The historic developments in Germany,

however, had less impact on those groups of Americans who are usually indifferent to international events. Attentiveness was below the 50% mark among non-whites (32%), those without college training (42%), and among younger Americans (42%).

The press got very good grades this month from the American public because coverage of the two stories followed most closely, the earthquake and the Berlin Wall was highly praised. Typically, about twenty percent give the press an excellent rating for its coverage of a national news story. Coverage of these stories were rated as excellent by no fewer than 44%, which is comparable to the excellent rating given news organizations for their China coverage in June and their Hurricane Hugo coverage in September.

% FOLLOWING EACH NEWS STORY "VERY CLOSELY"

	<u>San Francisco Earthquake</u>	<u>Political Changes in East Germany & Flight of Refugees to West Germany</u>	<u>Opening of Berlin Wall</u>	<u>Resumption of fighting in Nicaragua</u>	<u>World Series</u>	<u>Elections</u>
Total	73	29	50	13	23	13
<u>Sex</u>						
Male	69	33	53	18	29	15
Female	75	25	47	8	18	12
<u>Race</u>						
White	74	29	53	12	24	12
Non-white	66	26	32	20	20	22
<u>Age</u>						
Under 30	64	22	42	12	25	10
30-49	74	26	47	11	21	10
50+	77	36	58	15	25	18
<u>Education</u>						
College Graduate	75	38	62	16	23	17
Other College	76	34	56	14	24	11
High School Graduate	72	25	46	12	23	13
Less than H.S. Grad.	70	23	33	9	24	12
<u>Region</u>						
East	69	24	56	11	22	21
Midwest	73	34	40	12	28	8
South	71	29	49	14	17	13
West	79	39	51	13	28	10
<u>Party Id</u>						
Republican	73	34	54	12	25	13
Democrat	76	29	54	13	25	18
Independent	69	24	40	14	20	9
<u>Income</u>						
\$50k+	78	42	57	15	25	16
\$30k-49.9k	78	31	53	12	22	13
\$20k-29.9k	73	34	53	12	23	10
Under \$20k	69	23	44	13	24	13

Question: Now I will read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past month. As I read each item, tell me if you happened to follow this news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely.

PRESS COVERAGE RATINGS OF NEWS STORIES

Story Followed Most Closely:

	<u>Total</u>	<u>San Francisco Earthquake</u>	<u>The Opening of the Berlin Wall</u>
<u>Coverage</u>			
Excellent	41%	44%	44%
Good	41	39	45
Only Fair	13	13	8
Poor	3	2	1
Don't Know	<u>2</u> 100%	<u>2</u> 100%	<u>2</u> 100%
Sample Size	1185	848	140

PRESS PERFORMANCE

	<u>May 1989</u>	<u>July 1989</u>	<u>August 1989</u>	<u>September 1989</u>	<u>October 1989</u>	<u>November 1989</u>
Excellent	19%	26%	25%	19%	32%	41%
Good	43	42	45	50	45	41
Only Fair	24	21	21	22	18	13
Poor	10	10	8	7	3	3
Don't Know	<u>4</u> 100%	<u>1</u> 100%	<u>1</u> 100%	<u>2</u> 100%	<u>2</u> 100%	<u>2</u> 100%

Question: In general, how would you rate the job the press has done in covering (STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY IN Q.1); excellent, good, only fair, or poor?

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey results are based on telephone interviews with 1,230 adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period of November 9-12, 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 3 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.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Times Mirror
 News Interest Index
 November 9-12, 1989
 n = 1,230

Q.1 Now I will read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past month. As I read each item, tell me if you happened to follow this news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely. **(READ AND ROTATE LIST)**

	<u>Very Closely</u>	<u>Fairly Closely</u>	<u>Not too Closely</u>	<u>Not at all Closely</u>	<u>DK</u>
a. The destruction caused by the San Francisco earthquake	73	22	3	2	* = 100
*b. The political changes in East Germany and the flight of refugees to West Germany	29	42	16	12	1 = 100
**bb. The opening of the Berlin Wall between East and West Germany	50	32	10	7	1 = 100
c. The resumption of fighting in Nicaragua between the Contras and Government forces	13	28	35	23	1 = 100
d. The World Series	23	17	22	38	* = 100
e. The elections in Virginia, New Jersey, New York City and other localities	13	25	28	34	* = 100

*Interviews conducted 11/9/89 among 505 respondents.

**Interviews conducted 11/10-12/89 among 725 respondents.

Q.2 Which one of the stories I just mentioned, have you followed most closely?
(DO NOT READ LIST. ACCEPT ONLY ONE RESPONSE.)

	<u>Story Followed Most Closely</u>
a. The destruction caused by the San Francisco earthquake	69
*b. The political changes in East Germany and the flight of refugees to West Germany	5
**bb. The opening of the Berlin Wall between East and West Germany	11
c. The resumption of fighting in Nicaragua between the Contras and Government forces	2
d. The World Series	5
e. The elections in Virginia, New Jersey, New York City and other localities	4
CAN'T SAY	<u>4</u> 100

***Q.3 In general, how would you rate the job the press has done in covering (STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY IN Q.1); excellent, good, only fair, or poor?

		<u>STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY</u>	
		<u>San Francisco Earthquake</u>	<u>The Opening of the Berlin Wall</u>
41	Excellent	44	44
41	Good	39	45
13	Only Fair	13	8
3	Poor	2	1
<u>2</u> 100	Don't know	<u>2</u> 100	<u>2</u> 100

*Interviews conducted 11/9/89 among 505 respondents.

**Interviews conducted 11/10-12/89 among 725 respondents.

***Based on those who followed a story most closely.

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

	<u>Percent Very Closely</u>
The explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger (July 86)	80
THE DESTRUCTION CAUSED BY THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE (NOV 89)	73
The little girl in Texas who was rescued after falling into a well (Oct 87)	69
The destruction caused by Hurricane Hugo (Oct 89)	60
The U.S. air strikes against Libya (July 86)	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 OPENING OF THE BERLIN WALL BETWEEN EAST AND WEST GERMANY (NOV 89)	50
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 (Aug 88)	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 (July 86)	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 (Aug 88)	42
The Bush administration's plan to deal with this country's drug problem (Sept 89)	40
The stock market crash (Oct 87)	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 (Aug 88)	37
The sentencing of Oliver North (July 89)	37

	Percent Very Closely
The hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship in the Mediterranean (July 86)	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 guilty verdict in the trial of televangelist Jim Bakker (Oct 89)	33
The world series (Oct 88)	31
The flight of East German refugees to West Germany (Oct 89)	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
THE POLITICAL CHANGES IN EAST GERMANY AND THE FLIGHT OF REFUGEES TO WEST GERMANY (NOV 89)	29
The attack and sexual assault on a female jogger in Central Park, New York, by a group of youths (May 89)	29
The failed coup attempt against Panamanian strongman Noriega (Oct 89)	29
The problems at nuclear reactor plants (Oct 88)	28
The end of Gary Hart's candidacy and the Donna Rice allegations (Sept 87)	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 WORLD SERIES (NOV 89)	23
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 (Aug 88)	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 (May 88)	20
The post-season baseball playoffs (Oct 89)	20
The attempts in Congress to repeal the new catastrophic health insurance plan (Oct 89)	19
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 (May 88)	18

	Percent Very Closely
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 (Sept 87)	17
The Education Summit held by Bush and the nation's Governors (Oct 89)	15
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
House approval of a cut in the capital gains tax (Oct 89)	14
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 (Oct 88)	14
THE RESUMPTION OF FIGHTING IN NICARAGUA BETWEEN THE CONTRAS AND GOVERNMENT FORCES (NOV 89)	13
THE ELECTIONS IN VIRGINIA, NEW JERSEY, NEW YORK CITY AND OTHER LOCALITIES (NOV 89)	13
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
The scandal involving Congressman Barney Frank and a male prostitute (Oct 89)	6