

FOR RELEASE: THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

Times Mirror News Interest Index  
December 1989

Public Interest and  
Awareness of the News

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Donald S. Kellermann, Director  
Carol Bowman, Research Director  
Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press  
202/293-3126

## HIGHLIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

Only 28% of Americans are paying close attention to the sweeping political changes taking place in Eastern and Central Europe.

This represents a significant fall off in public interest in this story since November, when the Times Mirror News Interest Index found 50% following very closely the breaking news about the opening of the Berlin Wall. In a period when foreign news is dominating coverage, a national story, abortion, is of more interest to the American public than any other. Thirty five percent say they are following very closely news about attempts to change the abortion laws. This is less attentiveness than was measured in July right after the Supreme court's ruling but, is significantly more than was observed in May, during the court's deliberative period. The current level of attention to this story is not in response to a major news event but rather, to a steady stream of commentary and analysis on this divisive social issue.

Not one of the eventful international news stories covered in this month's index was followed by as much as a third of the public. The Bush Gorbachev Summit at sea was followed very closely by only 20%.

Re-occurrences of political instability in the Philippines and armed conflict in El Salvador also failed to capture the attention of Americans. Just 18% very closely followed the coup attempts in Manila and news out of El Salvador reached 14% of the American public. The only major story to attract fewer Americans also has a foreign angle. Ten percent followed very closely news about the purchase of Rockefeller Center by Japanese investors.

The level of attention to news from Eastern Europe has returned to the level recorded in October when the focus of the story was the flight of East German refugees to the West. Yet despite these relatively low levels of close attentiveness to news from overseas, the survey indicates that the public grasps the significance of the changes that are taking place in East bloc countries and is absorbing both important news concepts and awareness of some of the sidelights to the major stories.

Forty seven percent cite the opening of the Berlin wall and changes sweeping Eastern Europe as the most important news event of 1989. No other story comes close - The San Francisco earthquake, named by 17%, is the second most frequently mentioned story.

Awareness of Soviet policy with regard to the changes that are occurring in countries such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany is quite extensive. Only 8% think the Soviets are trying to discourage such change, while most think the Soviets are either trying to encourage it (43%) or remaining neutral (38%).

Even though most did not follow news about the Summit closely, at least one aspect of

the Summit at sea sunk in. A fifty four percent majority knows that the weather caused cancellation of some of the scheduled meetings between the President and the Soviet leader.

The human element of the European story penetrated as well. Nearly six in ten (58%) could volunteer basically correct information about why Nadia Comaneci fled Romania. (This is the only aspect of the story about which young people knew more than older people). Helmut Kohl, on the other hand is correctly identified by far fewer (30%) than know about the former Olympic star's saga.

Corazon Aquino is far better known to Americans than the West German leader, with 64% correctly identifying her but, the public information level about recent events in the Philippines is much below what it is for Europe. Only 46% knows that the U.S. was backing the government during the coup attempt and 42% knows that U.S. forces became involved in the conflict. Awareness of these matters barely reached a majority of the public, even among those most attentive to the news.

News about each overseas story regardless of locale or nature was followed more closely by men, older people and those who attended college. The relationship between age and attentiveness to international news is the most dramatic of these patterns. For example, Americans over fifty years of age are virtually three times as likely as those under 30 years of age to follow news about the Summit very closely (31% versus 11%). Gender differences are not nearly as extreme but, women consistently show less interest in the dominating foreign news events of the month. On the other hand women and younger people are substantially more likely than men and those over 30 to follow very closely news about abortion. (women 41%, men 28%) (under 30 years 41%, over 30 years old 33%).

The rating given the press coverage of the news stories followed most closely by the public is well below the levels recorded in October and November, when the press was covering the San Francisco Earthquake, Hurricane Hugo and the initial stories about the opening of the Berlin Wall. Twenty two percent rate news coverage as excellent compared to 41% in November and 32% in October. As in November, ratings for the European story are better than average (35% excellent), while stories about abortion are rated more poorly (14% excellent), as they have been in previous surveys.

Ironically, even though abortion is the most followed story of the month during a period when there was a blizzard of news about the political change in Europe, it is most often cited as a story that received too much coverage -by 12%. Only 7% mention stories about Europe in that regard while 10% feel the Bush Gorbachev summit was over reported.

Television has been the principal news source about Eastern Europe for Americans following the story and it appears to be a more dominating source for this news story than it

generally is. Sixty four percent say they had been getting most of their news on this story from TV, while only 24% name newspapers as a source, 6% radio and 2% magazines. When the Roper poll asks respondents a comparable question, "where they get their news in general", an identical proportion cite television but, more also mention newspapers, radio and magazines.

Those who are not following events in Eastern and Central Europe closely most often explain their lack of attentiveness so as to suggest that the story is difficult to follow. Sixty nine percent of this group say the story is confusing, and 60% think it's not clear what's happening. Both answers are much more prevalent among less well educated people who are not following this news. Repetitiveness also is mentioned frequently as a reason for lack of attentiveness (by 58%). As many as half of those inattentive to the story give being unable to identify with the people of Eastern Europe as a reason. A general lack of interest in foreign news is also cited by 50% of this group.

**% FOLLOWING EACH NEWS STORY "VERY CLOSELY"**

	<u>Gorbachev/ Bush Summit</u>	<u>Political changes in Eastern and Central Europe</u>	<u>Renewed fighting in El Salvador</u>	<u>Coup attempt Against Filipino Government</u>	<u>Japanese Purchase of Rockefeller Center</u>	<u>Attempts to Change Abortion Laws</u>
Total	20	28	14	19	10	35
<u>Sex</u>						
Male	24	35	18	24	10	28
Female	16	21	10	14	10	41
<u>Race</u>						
White	21	28	14	18	10	33
Non-white	14	25	16	19	12	49
<u>Age</u>						
Under 30	11	20	9	13	9	41
30-49	14	27	14	17	8	33
50+	31	32	17	23	12	33
<u>Education</u>						
College graduate	26	35	16	22	11	38
Other college	20	28	12	19	10	37
High school graduate	15	25	13	19	8	32
Less than h.s. grad.	22	24	14	13	10	36
<u>Region</u>						
East	24	30	15	24	14	38
Midwest	18	27	13	14	5	36
South	20	27	12	17	10	37
West	18	26	16	19	10	28
<u>Party ID</u>						
Republican	24	36	15	23	12	36
Democrat	14	23	13	14	7	36
Independent	21	25	14	19	11	33

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**

Coverage	Story Followed Most Closely:			
	Gorbachev/ Bush Summit	Political Changes in Eastern and Central Europe	Coup Attempt Against Filipino Government	Attempts to Changes Abortion Laws
Excellent	25	35	20	14
Good	52	48	43	40
Only Fair	18	15	27	34
Poor	3	1	6	9
Don't Know	<u>2</u> 100%	<u>1</u> 100%	<u>4</u> 100%	<u>3</u> 100%
Sample Size	(203)	(303)	(141)	(297)

**PRESS PERFORMANCE**

	May 1989	July 1989	August 1989	September 1989	October 1989	November 1989	December 1989
Excellent	19%	26%	25%	19%	32%	41%	22%
Good	43	42	45	50	45	41	45
Only Fair	24	21	21	22	18	13	25
Poor	10	10	8	7	3	3	6
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%	<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.6); excellent, good, only fair, or poor?

**TREND IN FAVORABILITY RATINGS OF NEWS ORGANIZATIONS**

	<u>Very Favorable</u>	<u>Mostly Favorable</u>	<u>Mostly Unfavorable</u>	<u>Very Unfavorable</u>	<u>Never Heard of/ Can't Rate</u>	<u>Total %</u>	<u>Number of Interviews</u>
<u>Network TV News</u>							
December, 1989	25	60	10	2	3	= 100%	(1235)
August, 1989	28	54	11	3	4	= 100%	(1507)
January, 1989	21	61	12	3	3	= 100%	(2048)
May, 1988	20	58	14	4	4	= 100%	(3021)
January 27, 1988	12	69	13	3	3	= 100%	(NA)
January 7-18, 1988	18	60	14	4	4	= 100%	(2109)
October, 1987	19	62	10	3	6	= 100%	(1501)
April/May, 1987	21	63	11	3	2	= 100%	(4244)
January, 1987	19	55	16	6	4	= 100%	(1502)
July, 1986	30	53	10	4	3	= 100%	(1504)
June, 1985	25	59	8	2	6	= 100%	(2104)
<u>Daily Newspapers</u>							
December, 1989	20	58	12	5	5	= 100%	(1235)
August, 1989	25	52	12	5	6	= 100%	(1507)
January, 1989	22	56	13	4	5	= 100%	(2048)
May, 1988	19	59	13	4	5	= 100%	(3021)
January 27, 1988	19	62	11	3	5	= 100%	(NA)
January 7-18, 1988	21	59	12	4	4	= 100%	(2109)
October, 1987	21	58	9	4	8	= 100%	(1501)
April/May, 1987	22	59	12	3	4	= 100%	(4244)
January, 1987	19	57	13	6	5	= 100%	(1502)
July, 1986	28	51	11	6	4	= 100%	(1504)
June, 1985	25	56	8	3	8	= 100%	(2104)

Question: I'd like your opinion of some news organizations. As I read from a list, please tell me which category best describes your overall opinion of what I name. First, would you describe your opinion of...as very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?

## **SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

The survey results are based on telephone interviews conducted by The Gallup Organization under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates among 1,235 adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period of December 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 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  
DECEMBER 1989

Q. A I'd like your opinion of some news organizations. As I read from a list, please tell me which category best describes your overall opinion of what I name. First, would you describe your opinion of **(INSERT ITEM, READ AND ROTATE LIST)** as very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?

		Very Favorable	Mostly Favorable	Mostly Unfavorable	Very Unfavorable (VOL)	Never Heard of/Can't Rate
a.	Network television news					
	Current	25	60	10	2	3 =100
	August, 1989	28	54	11	3	4 =100
b.	The daily newspaper you are most familiar with					
	Current	20	58	12	5	5 =100
	August, 1989	25	52	12	5	6 =100

Q. 1 What do you think is the most important news event that happened in the nation or world this year? **(DO NOT READ ANSWERS)**

17	The San Francisco earthquake					
1	The Alaska oil spill					
1	Political upheaval in China					
1	The Supreme Court decision on abortion					
3	The reduction of tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union					
48	The opening of the Berlin Wall and the political changes in Eastern and Central Europe					
1	The war on drugs					
1	The change of administrations/Bush takes over, Reagan leaves					
15	Other _____					
<u>12</u>	Don't know					
100						

Now a few questions about some people you may or may not have heard about.

0.1a Do you happen to know who Helmut Kohl is?

38	Yes ----->	(IF "YES" ASK:) Who is he? (DO NOT READ)
+QNo		30 Chancellor of West Germany/ West German Leader
*		
62S1		+QIncorrect answer
<u>100</u>	.QDon't Know	8S1
		<u>38</u>
		.QDon't know

0.2 Do you happen to know who Corazon Aquino is?

75	Yes ----->	(IF "YES" ASK:) Who is she? (DO NOT READ)
+QNo		64 President of the Philippines/ Filipino leader
*		
25S1		+QIncorrect answer
<u>100</u>	.QDon't know	11S1
		<u>75</u>
		.QDon't know

0.3 Can you tell me why Nadia Comaneci has been in the news recently?

58	Correct answer (ACCEPT ANY ANSWER THAT MENTIONS HER DEFECTION FROM ROMANIA TO HUNGARY OR TO THE WEST OR FLORIDA, OR HER INVOLVEMENT WITH A MARRIED MAN WITH FOUR CHILDREN IN FLORIDA)
16	Incorrect answer
<u>26</u>	Don't know
<u>100</u>	

0.4 Do you happen to know why Bush and Gorbachev didn't have all the meetings they were scheduled to have at last week's summit? (DO NOT READ)

54	Any mention of weather or storms
15	All other answers
<u>31</u>	Don't know
<u>100</u>	

0.5 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 Gorbachev/Bush Summit	20	35	30	14	1 = 100
b.	The political changes taking place in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and East Germany	28	40	19	13	* = 100
c.	The renewed fighting between government and the rebels in El Salvador	14	32	35	18	1 = 100
d.	The coup attempt against the Filipino government	19	39	25	16	1 = 100
e.	The Japanese purchase of Rockefeller Center in New York City	10	20	30	39	1 = 100
f.	Attempts to change the abortion laws	35	34	22	8	1 = 100

Q.6 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 Gorbachev/Bush Summit	17
b. The political changes taking place in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and East Germany	25
c. The renewed fighting between government and the rebels in El Salvador	5
d. The coup attempt against the Filipino government	11
e. The Japanese purchase of Rockefeller Center in New York City	3
f. Attempts to change the abortion laws	27
<b>CAN'T SAY</b>	<u>12</u>
	100

Q.7 Of all the stories mentioned, which of them, if any, received too much coverage? (DO NOT READ. ACCEPT MULTIPLE RESPONSES)

	<u>Received Too Much Coverage</u>
a. The Gorbachev/Bush Summit	10
b. The political changes taking place in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and East Germany	7
c. The renewed fighting between government and the rebels in El Salvador	6
d. The coup attempt against the Filipino government	5
e. The Japanese purchase of Rockefeller Center in New York City	3
f. Attempts to change the abortion laws	12
g. None	45
<b>CAN'T SAY</b>	<u>15</u>
	103

IF RESPONDENT SAID '0' CAN'T SAY IN Q.6, SKIP TO Q.9

Q.8 In general, how would you rate the job the press has done in covering (STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY IN Q.6); excellent, good, only fair, or poor?

		STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY			
		Gorbachev/ Bush Summit	Political Changes in Eastern and Central Europe	Coup Attempt Against Filipino Government	Attempts to Changes Abortion Laws
22	Excellent	25	35	20	14
45	Good	52	48	43	40
25	Only Fair	18	15	27	34
6	Poor	3	1	6	9
<u>2</u>	Don't know	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>100</u>		<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>
(1037)		(203)	(303)	(141)	(297)

IF RESPONDENT SAID "1" OR "2", VERY CLOSELY OR FAIRLY CLOSELY, TO "B" IN Q.5 ASK Q.9. ALL OTHERS GO TO INTERVIEWER INSTRUCTION ABOVE Q.10.

Q.9 Where have you been getting most of your news about what's been going on in Eastern and Central Europe, from newspapers, radio, TV, magazines, or talking to people or where?

24	Newspapers
6	Radio
65	TV
2	Magazines
1	Talking to other people
1	Other _____
<u>1</u>	Don't know
<u>100</u>	
(871)	

IF RESPONDENT SAID "3" OR "4" NOT TOO CLOSELY, NOT AT ALL CLOSELY OR "0" DON'T KNOW TO "B" IN Q. 5, ASK Q. 10.

Q. 10 Some people have given us some reasons why they have not been following news about the changes in Eastern and Central Europe very closely. As I read from a list tell me if it applies to you.

	<u>Yes</u>
a. I'm generally not too interested in foreign news	50
b. It's not clear what's really happening	60
c. It's confusing	69
d. I can't identify with the people over there	50
e. The news is too repetitious	58
NONE	9 (364)

ASK EVERYONE:

Q. 11 What is your impression of U.S. policy in the Philippines? Has the U.S. been backing the rebels, backing the government, or has the U.S. been neutral?

5	U.S. has been backing the rebels
46	U.S. has been backing the government
28	U.S. has been neutral
$\frac{21}{100}$	Don't know

Q. 12 To the best of your knowledge did U.S. forces become involved in the conflict in the Philippines or weren't U.S. forces involved?

42	U.S. forces were involved
40	U.S. forces weren't involved
$\frac{18}{100}$	Don't know

0.13 Is it your impression that the Soviet Union is encouraging the political changes that are occurring in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, such as in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, or are they trying to discourage them, or have they been generally neutral on the subject?

43 Soviet Union is encouraging political changes

8 Soviet Union is discouraging them

38 They have been generally neutral on the subject

11  
100 Don't know



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 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

	<b>Percent Very Closely</b>
<b>ATTEMPTS TO CHANGE THE ABORTION LAWS (DEC 89)</b>	<b>35</b>
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
<b>THE POLITICAL CHANGES TAKING PLACE IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA, HUNGARY AND EAST GERMANY (DEC 89)</b>	<b>28</b>
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
<b>THE GORBACHEV/BUSH SUMMIT (DEC 89)</b>	<b>20</b>
The attempts by the U.S. government to depose General Noriega in Panama (May 88)	20
The post-season baseball playoffs (Oct 89)	20
<b>THE COUP ATTEMPT AGAINST THE FILIPINO GOVERNMENT (DEC 89)</b>	<b>19</b>
The attempts in Congress to repeal the new catastrophic health insurance plan (Oct 89)	19

	<b>Percent <u>Very Closely</u></b>
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
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
<b>THE RENEWED FIGHTING BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND THE REBELS IN EL SALVADOR (DEC 89)</b>	<b>14</b>
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
<b>THE JAPANESE PURCHASE OF ROCKEFELLER CENTER IN NEW YORK CITY (DEC 89)</b>	<b>10</b>
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