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TV Trials Captivate Public

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TV TRIALS CAPTIVATE PUBLIC

Melodramatic court trials carried on television recently have enjoyed huge audiences in the United States, a new nationwide Times Mirror survey found. Fully 43% of the American public have watched at least four of five of the most sensational trials aired on TV within the past few years. The survey also suggests that regular viewing of court trial proceedings may lead to a greater appreciation of the U.S. court system, which has fallen out of public favor in recent years.

The nationwide survey last week found that more than half the country watched the two trials that culminated this past month. Almost two-thirds (62%) of the public viewed all or parts of the proceedings against Lorena Bobbitt for sexually mutilating her husband, and 53% watched the case against Eric and Lyle Menendez for murdering their parents.

The nature of the Bobbitt crime -- cutting off her husband's penis -- was the main reason for interest in that case, respondents said, while the motive for the Menendez killings -- sexual and physical abuse -- was the main draw in that trial. Even though it drew a smaller audience, the Menendez trial was the more engaging of the two; Menendez viewers rated this case as interesting to watch as a fictional crime drama, while a plurality of the Bobbitt trial viewers thought the trial was less compelling than watching fictional crime.

Compared to previous major televised trials, a bigger audience watched proceedings against Los Angeles police officers for beating Rodney King (81%). The Palm Beach case against William Kennedy Smith for rape drew 55%, and that against Long Island teenager Amy Fisher for attempted murder reached 43% of the public.

The poll of 1,207 adults conducted Jan. 27-30, 1994, found that overall, more than four out of ten respondents said they watched four or more of these five trials. Another 34% watched two or three trials, and 23% watched one or two.

These highly publicized trials have greatest appeal to the less affluent and less educated audiences. Some 49% of respondents with income under \$20,000 a year watched four or more trials, compared to 37% of those with family income over \$50,000. And only 30% of college graduates watched four or more trials compared to 51% of those with less than a high school diploma. Similarly, larger proportions of those with less wealth and formal schooling watched both the Bobbitt and Menendez trials, and more often watch the "Court TV" network.

The real-life trials have particular appeal to women under 30 years of age, with 56% of that population watching four or more proceedings compared to 40% of men in that age group and roughly 40% of the other demographic categories.

Compared to the top news stories last month, the Bobbitt and Menendez trials took back seats to the nation's two natural disasters as well as to the attack on Olympic figure skater Nancy Kerrigan. The Los Angeles earthquake was followed very closely by 63% of the public, and the news of the bitterly cold weather in the east and midwest drew very close attention from 51%. The Kerrigan story was followed very closely by 45%, an extraordinarily large proportion of the public for an individual caught up in a criminal conspiracy. In comparison, the Bobbitt case drew 26% and Menendez 12% who followed very closely.¹

¹ For more details, see the Times Mirror Center's release Feb. 3, 1994: Quake and Kerrigan Vie for Public Attention: Public Sympathetic to Inman Charges.

The cable network, Court TV, has provided some Americans a direct window on many of the nation's most compelling trials. In the Times Mirror survey last week, 21% of all respondents said their cable systems offer "Court TV." No fewer than 44% of this group said they watch Court TV, either regularly (9%) or at least sometimes (35%).

Many of the small sample of Court TV, viewers interviewed said they have a better understand the legal system and think the courts are fairer as a result of watching trials on TV. Specifically, 66% said their viewing gave them a greater understanding of the way the American court system works; and 49% said they have a better impression of the fairness of the judicial system as a result.

The Times Mirror poll also found that Court TV viewers had a more favorable view of the judicial system generally than those who do not watch the network, or don't have access to the channel.

In contrast, among the public at large, opinion of the courts has become more negative. In the total sample, 43% said they had a basically favorable opinion (2% very favorable, 41% favorable) of the American legal system, while 53% had an unfavorable opinion (35% unfavorable, 18% very unfavorable). A similar question asked by the Roper Organization nine years ago found quite a different finding, a 52% majority having a favorable (highly or moderately) view of the courts, and 45% basically unfavorable.

SELECTED TABLES

VIEW OF U.S. COURT SYSTEM

| | <i>Favorable</i> | <i>Unfavorable</i> | <i>Don't Know</i> | <i>(N)</i> |
|-------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------|
| <i>Total</i> | 43 | 53 | 4=100 | (1207) |
| <i>Sex</i> | | | | |
| Male | 44 | 53 | 3=100 | (600) |
| Female | 43 | 52 | 5=100 | (607) |
| <i>Race</i> | | | | |
| White | 43 | 53 | 4=100 | (1014) |
| Non-white | 47 | 51 | 2=100 | (184) |
| <i>Age</i> | | | | |
| Under 30 | 59 | 39 | 2=100 | (243) |
| 30-49 | 39 | 58 | 3=100 | (529) |
| 50+ | 39 | 55 | 6=100 | (415) |
| <i>Education</i> | | | | |
| College Grad. | 47 | 51 | 2=100 | (386) |
| Some College | 45 | 53 | 2=100 | (290) |
| High School Grad. | 42 | 55 | 3=100 | (404) |
| < H.S. grad. | 41 | 50 | 9=100 | (118) |
| <i>Family Income</i> | | | | |
| \$50,000+ | 42 | 57 | 1=100 | (280) |
| \$30,000-\$49,999 | 42 | 55 | 3=100 | (296) |
| \$20,000-\$29,999 | 48 | 50 | 2=100 | (213) |
| < \$20,000 | 44 | 51 | 5=100 | (301) |
| <i>Region</i> | | | | |
| East | 45 | 50 | 5=100 | (241) |
| Midwest | 44 | 52 | 4=100 | (288) |
| South | 43 | 53 | 4=100 | (422) |
| West | 42 | 55 | 3=100 | (256) |
| <i>Party ID</i> | | | | |
| Republican | 40 | 54 | 6=100 | (363) |
| Democrat | 49 | 48 | 3=100 | (371) |
| Independent | 42 | 56 | 2=100 | (428) |
| <i>Court TV</i> | | | | |
| Watch Regularly/ Sometimes | 53 | 45 | 2=100 | (105) |
| Hardly Ever/ Never | 45 | 51 | 4=100 | (143) |
| No Cable/Court TV | 42 | 54 | 4=100 | (959) |

Question: *Generally speaking, is your opinion of the court system in this country very favorable, favorable, unfavorable, or very unfavorable?*

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The survey results are based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates among a nationwide sample of 1,207 adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period January 27-30, 1994. 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.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY IN DETAIL

The sample for this survey is a random digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The random digit aspect of the sample is used to avoid "listing" bias and provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers (including not-yet-listed). The design of the sample ensures this representation by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers selected on the basis of their area code, telephone exchange, and bank number.

The telephone exchanges were selected with probabilities proportional to their size. The first eight digits of the sampled telephone numbers (area code, telephone exchange, bank number) were selected to be proportionally stratified by county and by telephone exchange within county. That is, the number of telephone numbers randomly sampled from within a given county is proportional to that county's share of telephone households in the U.S. Estimates of the number of telephone households within each county are derived from 1990 Census data on residential telephone incidence that have been updated with state-level information on new telephone installations and county-level projections of the number of households. Only working banks of telephone numbers are selected. A working bank is defined as 100 contiguous telephone numbers containing three or more residential listings.

The sample was released for interviewing in replicates. Using replicates to control the release of sample to the field ensures that the complete call procedures are followed for the entire sample.

At least three attempts were made to complete an interview at every sampled telephone number. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making a contact with a potential respondent. All interview breakoffs and refusals were re-contacted at least once in order to attempt to convert them to completed interviews. In each contacted household, interviewers asked to speak with the "youngest male 18 or older who is at home". If there is no eligible man at home, interviewers asked to speak with "the oldest woman 18 or older who lives in the household". This systematic respondent selection technique has been shown empirically to produce samples that closely mirror the population in terms of age and gender.

Non-response in telephone interview surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis.

The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (March 1992). This analysis produced population parameters for the demographic characteristics of households with adults 18 or older, which are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The analysis only included households in the continental United States that contain a telephone.

The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distributions of all weighting parameters. After an optimum sample balancing solution is reached, the weights were constrained to fall within the range of 1 to 5. This constraint is useful to ensure that individual respondents do not exert an inordinate effect on the survey's overall results.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

TIMES MIRROR CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE AND THE PRESS
NEWS INTEREST INDEX
January 27-30, 1994
N=1,207

INTRODUCTION: Hello, I am _____ calling from the Princeton Survey Research Associates from Princeton, New Jersey. We are conducting a telephone opinion survey for leading newspapers and tv stations around the country. I'd like to ask a few questions of the youngest male, 18 years of age or older, who is now at home (**IF NO MALE, ASK:** May I please speak with the oldest female, 18 years of age or older, who is now at home?)

MY FIRST QUESTION IS ...

Q.8 Generally speaking, is your opinion of the court system in this country very favorable, favorable, unfavorable, or very unfavorable ?

- 2 Very favorable
- 41 Favorable
- 35 Unfavorable
- 18 Very unfavorable
- $\frac{4}{100}$ Don't know/Refused

Q.9 In the past few years there have been a number court trials that have been widely broadcast on television -- as I read each, tell me if this is a trial that you watched when all or parts of it were broadcast on TV.

| | <u>Watched</u> | <u>Did not Watch</u> | <u>Don't Know</u> |
|---|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| a. The Palm Beach trial of William Kennedy Smith for rape | 55 | 45 | *=100 |
| b. The trials of Los Angeles police officers for beating Rodney King | 81 | 19 | 0=100 |
| c. The Virginia trial of Lorena Bobbitt for sexually mutilating her husband | 62 | 38 | *=100 |
| d. The California trial of Eric and Lyle Menendez for murdering their parents | 53 | 47 | *=100 |
| e. Trial of Long Island teenager Amy Fisher for attempted murder | 43 | 56 | 1=100 |

ASK Q.10-13 OF RESPONDENTS WHO FOLLOWED MENENDEZ OR BOBBITT VERY OR FAIRLY CLOSELY (Q.2) ASK ABOUT CASE FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY - IF BOBBITT AND MENENDEZ FOLLOWED EQUALLY CLOSELY ASK:

Q.10 Which case have you paid more attention to ... the Bobbitt case or the Menendez case?

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 53 | Bobbitt |
| 37 | Menendez |
| 8 | Both |
| $\frac{2}{(N=239)}$ | Don't know/Refused |

ASK Q.11 - ABOUT CASE FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY, EITHER BOBBITTS OR MENENDEZ BASED ON Q.2 OR Q.10

Q.11 Has the ... case been a topic of conversation among your friends or family, recently?

| | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| <u>Total</u> 66 | <u>Menendez</u> 45 | <u>Bobbitt</u> 74 | Yes |
| 34 | 55 | 26 | No |
| $\frac{*}{100}$ (N=799) | $\frac{0}{100}$ (N=229) | $\frac{*}{100}$ (N=570) | Don't know/Refused |

Q.12 What's most interesting about this case to you: the nature of the crime, the reasons for the crime, the suspense about the outcome of the trial, learning about how these people lived, watching the attorneys work or something else?

| | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <u>Total</u> 30 | <u>Menendez</u> 18 | <u>Bobbitt</u> 34 | The nature of the crime |
| 22 | 25 | 21 | The reasons for the crime |
| 21 | 23 | 20 | The suspense about the outcome |
| 8 | 10 | 7 | Learning about how these people lived |
| 5 | 9 | 4 | Watching the attorneys work |
| 6 | 6 | 6 | Other |
| $\frac{8}{100}$ (N=799) | $\frac{9}{100}$ (N=229) | $\frac{8}{100}$ (N=570) | Don't know/Refused |

Q.13 Is following the ... case to you more interesting, less interesting, or as interesting as watching crime dramas on TV?

| <u>Total</u> | <u>Menendez</u> | <u>Bobbitt</u> | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------|
| 28 | 29 | 27 | More |
| 38 | 32 | 41 | Less |
| 27 | 31 | 25 | Same |
| $\frac{7}{100}$ | $\frac{8}{100}$ | $\frac{7}{100}$ | Don't know |
| (N=799) | (N=229) | (N=570) | |

ASK ALL:

Q.13a Is Cable-TV currently available in your community?

| | | Early Jan <u>1994</u> | Feb <u>1993</u> |
|-----------------|---|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 91 | Yes | 89 | 89 |
| 9 | No - SKIP TO Q.9 | 11 | 11 |
| $\frac{*}{100}$ | Don't know/refused - SKIP TO Q.9 | $\frac{*}{100}$ | $\frac{*}{100}$ |

BASED ON THOSE WHO ANSWERED YES TO Q.8a

Q.13b Do you currently subscribe to Cable TV?

| | | Early Jan <u>1994</u> | Feb <u>1993</u> |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 67 | Yes | 64 | 64 |
| 24 | No | 25 | 25 |
| $\frac{*}{91}$ | Don't know/refused | $\frac{*}{89}$ | $\frac{*}{89}$ |

IF CABLE:

Q.14 Does your cable system offer a channel called Court TV - which broadcasts actual courtroom trials and other legal proceedings?

21 Yes

33 No

$\frac{13}{67}$ Don't know/Refused

IF YES:

Q.15 How often, if ever, do you watch Court TV - regularly, sometimes, hardly ever or never?

9 Regularly

35 Sometimes

36 Hardly ever

20 Never

$\frac{0}{100}$ Don't know/Refused
(N=248)

IF RESPONDENT ANSWERED '1' REGULARLY OR '2' SOMETIMES IN Q.15 ASK:

Q.16 As a result of watching Court TV do you think that you have a greater understanding of the way the American court system works, or haven't you learned much about the legal system itself from Court TV?

66 Yes greater understanding

31 No

$\frac{3}{100}$ Don't know/Refused
(N=105)

Q.17 Do you have a better or worse impression of the fairness of the court system as a result of watching Court TV?

49 Better

28 Worse

19 No difference

$\frac{4}{100}$ Don't know/Refused
(N=105)