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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
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GAS PRICES, DISASTERS TOP PUBLIC’S NEWS INTERESTS IN 2007

Man-made and natural disasters dominated the list of the public’s top news stories in 2007. Nearly half of Americans (45%) tracked news about the shootings of 33 students at Virginia Tech University very closely, while nearly as many paid very close attention to reports on the Minneapolis bridge collapse and the California wildfires.

As was the case in 2006, however, the rising price of gasoline attracted the largest audience of any news story. In May, 52% of Americans said they tracked rising prices at the pump very closely.

The Iraq war also continued to be a major story in 2007, though public interest in the war peaked early in the year and then fell noticeably. In early January, 40% followed news of President Bush’s troop surge very closely, while about the same proportion paid very close attention to reports on the situation in Iraq. By December, just 28% on average paid very close attention to news about Iraq.

Story...	Followed Very Closely %
1. Rising price of gasoline (May 20-25)*	52
2. Virginia Tech shootings (Apr 15-20)*	45
3. Bridge collapse in Minneapolis (Jul 29-Aug 3)	41
4. California wildfires (Oct 21-26)	40
5. Bush’s troops surge proposal (Jan 7-12)	40
6. Situation in Iraq (Dec 31-Jan 5)*	40
7. Cold winter weather (Feb 4-9)*	36
8. Six trapped Utah miners (Aug 5-10)*	36
9. British police find car bombs in London (Jun 24-29)	34
10. Mounting tensions between US and Iran (Jan 28-Feb 2)*	33
11. Tornadoes/violent storms in South and Midwest (Feb 25-Mar 2)	33
12. Recall of toys made in China (Nov 4-9)	33
13. Hot weather and its impact (Aug 5-10)	33
14. British sailors held/released by Iranian government (Apr 1-6)	31
15. Soldiers returning from Iraq (Nov 11-16)	31
16. Conditions at Walter Reed (Mar 4-9)*	31
17. Iraq policy debate (Apr 1-6)	31
18. Omaha mall shooting (Dec 2-7)	30
19. Reports about U.S. economy (Aug 5-10)*	28
20. Iran supplying weapons to Iraqi insurgents (Feb 11-16)	28

* Interest in these stories was tracked over several weeks and months; highest reported interest shown here.

Comparing News Coverage and Audience Interest

This year, for the first time, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press tracked public interest in the news on a weekly basis. The weekly News Interest Index was paired with the News Coverage Index, an initiative of The Project for Excellence in Journalism, which monitors the amount of news coverage devoted to major stories by newspapers, television, radio and online news outlets.

The news story that received the greatest amount of coverage in any given week this year was the Virginia Tech shootings. For the week of April 15-20, coverage of the tragedy in Blacksburg, Virginia accounted for 51% of the entire national newshole. No other story came close to attracting that amount of coverage in a single week.

Story...	Percent of Newshole
Virginia Tech shootings (<i>Apr 15-20</i>)*	51
California wildfires (<i>Oct 21-26</i>)*	38
Iraq policy debate (<i>Sep 9-14</i>)*	36
Imus's racist remarks (<i>Apr 8-13</i>)*	26
2008 Campaign (<i>Dec 9-14</i>)*	26
Minnesota bridge collapse (<i>Jul 29-Aug 3</i>)	25
Fired U.S. attorneys (<i>Mar 18-23</i>)*	18
Larry Craig scandal (<i>Aug 19-24</i>)*	18
Political instability in Pakistan (<i>Nov 4-9</i>)*	17
New Congress (<i>Dec 31-Jan 5</i>)	15
UK terror plot (<i>Jul 1-6</i>)*	14
Scooter Libby trial (<i>Mar 4-9</i>)*	13
British hostages held by Iran (<i>Apr 1-6</i>)	13
O.J. Simpson arrest (<i>Sep 16-21</i>)*	13
Utah mine accident (<i>Aug 5-10</i>)*	13
Ahmadinejad visit to U.S. (<i>Sep 23-28</i>)	13
Events in Iraq (<i>Sep 30-Oct 5</i>)*	13
Bush State of the Union Address (<i>Jan 21-26</i>)	13
Tuberculosis traveler (<i>May 27-Jun 1</i>)	12
Gerald Ford funeral (<i>Dec 31-Jan 5</i>)	12
Immigration (<i>Jun 24-29</i>)	

* Coverage of these stories was tracked over several weeks; highest weekly coverage is shown here.

The California wildfires were the second most heavily covered story, receiving 38% of the coverage the week of October 21-26. The Iraq policy debate accounted for 36% of the national news coverage the week of September 9-14. This included coverage of Gen. David Petraeus' status report on Iraq and testimony before Congress.

Coverage Lagged Interest: Iraq Vets and Product Recalls

Many of the news stories that received the most coverage also ranked near the top of the list in public interest, including Virginia Tech, the California wildfires and the Minnesota bridge collapse. Yet there also were a number of instances when public interest surpassed news coverage, or vice versa.

News about rising gas prices received relatively little coverage but still registered strongly with the public. During the week of May 20-25, 52% said they followed rising gas prices *very* closely (the highest percentage for any story in 2007), while 27% said it was the story that week they followed *most* closely.

But just 4% of news coverage that week was devoted to reports on gas prices. More than twice as much news coverage that week was devoted to immigration (10%), the Iraq policy debate (10%), and the situation in Iraq (9%); each of these stories drew less public interest than did rising gas prices.

When Interest Exceeded Coverage: Gas Prices, Walter Reed, Product Recalls		
<i>News story...</i>	<i>% Following most closely</i>	<i>% of newshole</i>
Gas prices (May 20-25)	27	4
Walter Reed (Mar 4-9)	20	6
Staph infections (Oct 14-19)	18	3
Pet food recall (Apr 29-May 4)	17	1
U.S. economy (Oct 28-Nov 2)	16	4
Iraq war veterans (Nov 11-16)	15	3
Chinese toy recall (Nov 4-9)	15	2
Bush veto of SCHIP (Sep 30-Oct 5)	12	2

The story of poor treatment for Iraqi troops recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center also struck a nerve with the public, but received only modest news coverage. During the week of March 4, 20% of Americans cited Walter Reed as their most closely followed story of the week, trailing only the situation in Iraq (27% most closely).

After the *Washington Post* exposed the shabby treatment for veterans at Walter Reed, other news organizations followed suit. During the week of March 4, 6% of news coverage was devoted to the story. That same week, the war in Iraq (15%) and the verdict in the trial of former White House aide Scooter Libby (13%) received far more coverage. The Libby story drew approximately twice as much coverage as Walter Reed (13% vs. 6%), but just 6% of the public cited the Libby case as that week's top story compared with 20% for Walter Reed. In that same week, 24% of the public said the Walter Reed story was receiving too little coverage from the media, only 4% thought it had been overcovered.

The pet food recall in late April attracted a significant amount of public interest: 17% listed this as their most closely followed story of the week, though the news media devoted just 1% of its overall coverage to this story. Another recall story followed a similar pattern. When Chinese-made toys were recalled in early November, 15% of the public said this was the story they were following most closely. Women were particularly interested in this story, with 23% listing it as their top story. The media devoted 2% of its coverage to the story.

News about the dangers of an antibiotic-resistant staph infection topped the news interest index the week of October 14. Fully 18% of the public listed this as their most closely followed story of the week, again women followed the story much more closely than men. Coverage of this story accounted for 3% of the national newshole.

News Interest Lagged Coverage: Petraeus and Pakistan

The stories that received extensive news coverage but failed to engage the public mainly dealt with either Washington news or overseas developments.

Perhaps the biggest disconnect involved the release of Petraeus' status report on the war in Iraq. The week that Petraeus delivered his report and testified in front of Congress (Sept. 9-

14), the media devoted 36% of its overall coverage to the Iraq policy debate. That made it one of the most heavily covered stories of the year, behind only Virginia Tech and the California wildfires, and slightly above President Bush's troop surge announcement (34% during week of Jan. 7-12).

Petraeus's report drew substantial interest, but as many people cited the 2008 campaign as their most closely followed story for the week as mentioned the Petraeus report (14% each). Nearly as many cited the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks as that week's top story (11%).

Two Washington-based stories that generated a great deal of media coverage but attracted relatively small news audiences were the verdict in the Scooter Libby trial and the firing of eight U.S. attorneys by the Justice Department, which led to the eventual resignation of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. In the early weeks of the U.S. attorney scandal, the media devoted a great deal of attention to the story. The week of March 11 it was the most heavily covered story (taking up 16% of the overall newshole); during the week of March 18 it was the second most heavily covered story (18%). The public gave the story a much lower priority each of those weeks.

International news stories that failed to attract a large news audience included negotiations over North Korea's nuclear weapons program in February, violence in Lebanon in May, political instability in Pakistan in November, and the Middle East peace conference in Annapolis, MD, also in November.

<i>News story...</i>	<i>% Following most closely</i>	<i>% of newshole</i>
Petraeus Report (Sep 9-14)	14	36
Pakistan instability (Nov 4-9)	11	17
Fired U.S. attorneys (Mar 18-23)	8	18
Libby verdict (Mar 4-9)	6	13
Middle East peace summit (Nov 25-30)	4	8
Karl Rove's resignation (Aug 12-17)	2	7
North Korea's nuclear program (Feb 11-16)	2	6
Lebanon violence (May 20-25)	2	6

Iraq War Less Dominant

During the first half of 2007, news about the Iraq war was the public's most closely followed news story in 18 out of 23 weeks of polling. Iraq reached its high point for the year in terms of public interest in late January, when 39% said that they were following news about the war more closely than any other story that week.

There were only five weeks when Iraq was *not* the top weekly story through the first six months of the year. The Virginia Tech shootings, gas prices, attempted car bombings in Britain and the release of British hostages held by Iran were the only stories to supplant the war in Iraq as the top weekly story during this period.

However, Iraq was a less dominant story from July through December. Iraq was the public's top weekly story 11 times during the subsequent 23 weeks of polling. Notably, the Iraq war has not been the top weekly story since the middle of October (Oct. 7-12).

During the second half of the year, the war was supplanted as the week's top story by big news items, such as the California wildfires and the Minnesota bridge collapse; but also by stories that

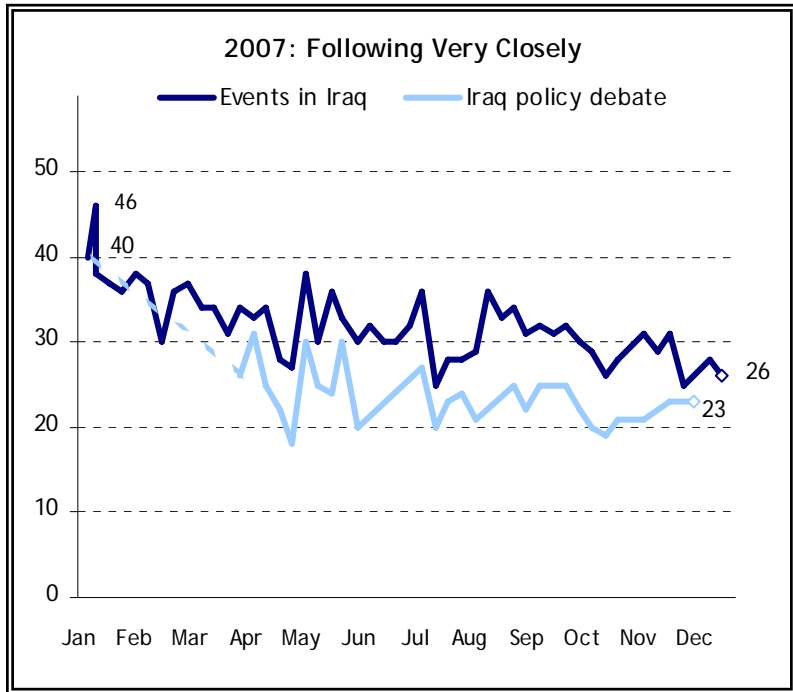
Most Closely Followed News Stories of 2007

<u>Week</u>	<u>#1 Most Closely Followed story</u>	<u># 2 Most Closely Followed story</u>
Jan 21-26	Iraq	Kidnapped MO boys
Jan 28-Feb 2	Iraq	2008 Campaign
Feb 4-9	Iraq	Winter weather
Feb 11-16	Iraq	Anna Nicole Smith
Feb 18-23	Iraq	Anna Nicole Smith
Feb 25-Mar 2	Iraq	Tornadoes
Mar 4-9	Iraq	Walter Reed
Mar 11-16	Iraq	Walter Reed
Mar 18-23	Iraq	Missing Boy Scout
Mar 25-30	Iraq	Anna Nicole Smith
Apr 1-6	British hostages	Iraq
Apr 8-13	Iraq	Imus remarks
Apr 15-20	Virginia Tech	Iraq
Apr 22-27	Virginia Tech	Iraq
Apr 29-May 4	Iraq	Pet food recall
May 6-11	Iraq	Tornadoes & floods
May 13-18	Iraq	Iraq policy debate
May 20-25	Gas prices	Iraq
May 27-Jun 1	Iraq	Tuberculosis case
Jun 3-8	Iraq	Immigration
Jun 10-15	Iraq	Immigration
Jun 17-22	Iraq	Ohio woman
Jun 24-29	UK bombs	Iraq
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July 1-6	Iraq	UK bombs
July 8-13	Iraq	2008 campaign
July 15-20	Iraq	NYC explosion
July 22-27	Iraq	2008 campaign
July 29-Aug 3	MN bridge	Iraq
Aug 5-Aug 10	Utah Miners	Iraq
Aug 12-17	Utah Miners	Iraq
Aug 19-24	Michael Vick	Midwest floods
Aug 26-31	Iraq	Katrina anniversary
Sept 2-7	Iraq	2008 campaign
Sept 9-14	Iraq	2008 campaign
Sept 16-21	Iraq	OJ Simpson arrest
Sept 23-28	Iraq	Ahmadinejad visit
Sept 30-Oct 5	Iraq	2008 campaign
Oct 7-12	Iraq	Cleveland shooting
Oct 14-19	Staph infections	Iraq
Oct 21-26	Calif. fires	Iraq
Oct 28-Nov 2	2008 campaign	Iraq
Nov 4-9	Oil prices	Iraq
Nov 11-16	2008 Campaign	Iraq
Nov 18-23	N/A	N/A
Nov 25-30	2008 Campaign	NFL's S. Taylor
Dec 2-7	Omaha shooting	2008 campaign
Dec 9-14	2008 Campaign	Snow/ice storms

Respondents were asked which one of the six top news stories of the week they had followed most closely.

received only modest press coverage. For instance, news about a mall shooting in Omaha received only 7% of the total news coverage, but was the most closely followed story of the week for 26% of Americans. The Iraq war was not among the public's top two stories that week; behind both the Omaha shooting and the 2008 presidential campaign.

Over the course of the year, the percentage of Americans following news about events in Iraq has declined gradually. In January, close to 40% of the public was paying very close attention to events in Iraq, by June the number was closer to 30%, and in the last six weeks, it has gone below 30%. Throughout the year, the public has paid closer attention to events on the ground in Iraq than to the debate in Washington over Iraq policy. The media's focus has been the reverse, with more coverage consistently devoted to the policy debate than to events in Iraq.



News coverage of Iraq, like public interest about the situation there, has declined since the beginning of the year. In January, 26% of the national newshole was devoted to news about Iraq. By contrast, during the past four weeks, the news media has devoted on average less than 4% of its the coverage to the war.

About the News Interest Index

The *News Interest Index* is a weekly survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press aimed at gauging the public's interest in and reaction to major news events.

This project has been undertaken in conjunction with the Project for Excellence in Journalism's *News Coverage Index*, an ongoing content analysis of the news. The News Coverage Index catalogues the news from top news organizations across five major sectors of the media: newspapers, network television, cable television, radio and the internet. Each week (from Sunday through Friday) PEJ will compile this data to identify the top stories for the week. The News Interest Index survey will collect data from Friday through Monday to gauge public interest in the most covered stories of the week.

Results for the weekly surveys are based on telephone interviews among a nationwide sample of approximately 1,000 adults, 18 years of age or older, conducted under the direction of ORC (Opinion Research Corporation). For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 3.5 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, and that results based on subgroups will have larger margins of error.

For more information about the Project for Excellence in Journalism's News Coverage Index, go to www.journalism.org.

About the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press

The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press is an independent opinion research group that studies attitudes toward the press, politics and public policy issues. We are sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts and are one of eight projects that make up the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan "fact tank" that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world.

The Center's purpose is to serve as a forum for ideas on the media and public policy through public opinion research. In this role it serves as an important information resource for political leaders, journalists, scholars, and public interest organizations. All of our current survey results are made available free of charge.

All of the Center's research and reports are collaborative products based on the input and analysis of the entire Center staff consisting of:

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