



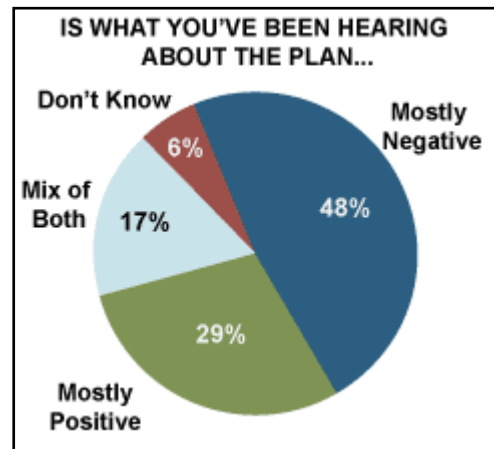
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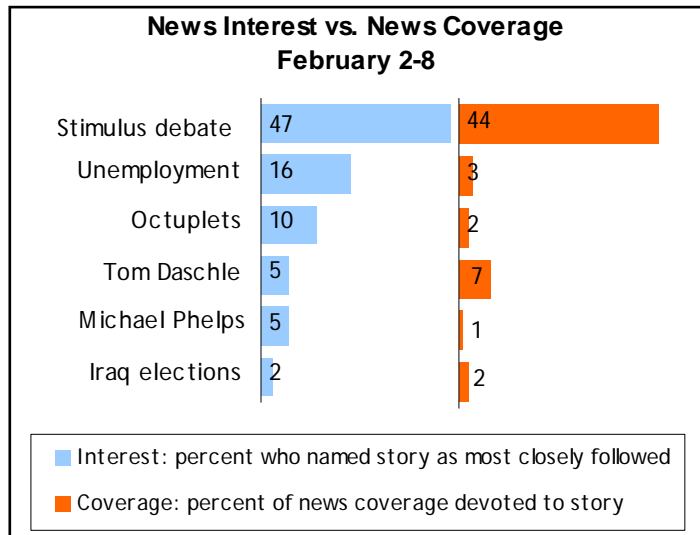
Too Much Coverage of Phelps, Octuplets
STIMULUS NEWS SEEN AS MORE NEGATIVE THAN POSITIVE

As the contentious debate over President Obama’s \$800 billion economic stimulus plan played out in Congress over the past week, more Americans were hearing bad things than good things about the legislation.

Close to half (48%) of the public says that what they were reading and hearing about the plan in the news was “mostly negative,” while about three-in-ten (29%) say what they read and heard was “mostly positive.” Some 17% say they saw a mix of both, according to the Pew Research Center’s weekly News Interest Index survey conducted Feb. 6-9.



The public followed the debate more closely than any other story last week by a wide margin amid continuing news of major job losses and stern warnings from Obama about the severity of the crisis. Some 47% say the stimulus debate was the story they followed most closely, while 16% say they followed reports about rising unemployment most closely. One-in-ten say they followed stories about a California mother giving birth to octuplets most closely.



Meanwhile, the weekly News Coverage Index by the research center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism shows that the economic crisis and Obama’s bid to win Republican

support for the stimulus legislation dominated the news last week, filling 44% of the newshole. The story is still generating significant coverage as lawmakers work to send a final bill to Obama quickly.

While people are hearing more negative than positive news about the stimulus plan, there are no signs that this is having a negative impact on impressions of Barack Obama. Six-in-ten Americans say their opinion of Obama has not changed in recent weeks. Close to one quarter (23%) say their opinion has become more favorable, while only 16% say their opinion has become less favorable.

These findings comport with a separate Pew Research Center for the People & the Press report released this week showing growing opposition to the stimulus plan since January, combined with overwhelmingly positive ratings of Barack Obama. [See [“Support for Stimulus Slips, But Obama Rides High”](#) released Monday, February 9, 2009.]

Many Americans say they want more information about specifics of the stimulus proposals. Half of the public says there has been “too little coverage” of exactly what is included in the stimulus plan. Still, close to four-in-ten (37%) say those details have gotten “the right amount of coverage;” only 8% say the details have gotten “too much coverage.” When it comes to the congressional debate over the legislation, just more than half (54%) say there has been the right amount of coverage, while about a third (34%) say there has been “too little coverage” and 8% say there has been too much.

Tabloid News: Phelps & Octuplets Over-Covered

By contrast, most Americans say the press went too far in coverage of Michael Phelps and the California woman who gave birth to octuplets. Two-thirds (67%) say that Phelps received “too much coverage,” one-in-five (22%) say he received the “right amount of coverage” and just 5% say the Phelps story got “too little coverage.” The public feels much the same way about the octuplets story. A solid majority (62%) say that this story received too much attention from the press and only 5% believe the story was under-covered. That said, three-in-ten thought that the octuplets received the right amount of media attention.

<i>Coverage of...</i>	Too Much Coverage?			
	Too much %	Too little %	Right amount %	DK %
Michael Phelps marijuana photo	67	5	22	6=100
Mother of six having octuplets	62	5	30	3=100
Daschle’s tax controversy	18	20	56	6=100
Rising unemployment	13	23	62	2=100
Economic stimulus debate	8	34	54	4=100
Details of economic stimulus	8	50	37	5=100
Elections in Iraq	5	47	36	12=100

Despite this criticism, the controversial story about a California mother of six who gave birth to octuplets after receiving fertility treatments got fairly broad attention from the public and the media last week. About one-in-four (23%) followed this news very closely, and another 33% say they followed this news fairly closely. For 10% of Americans the octuplets birth was the top story of the week, nearly as many as the 16% who named news about job losses as their most closely followed story. According to the analysis by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, the octuplets story accounted for 2% of total news last week.

While most agree that the octuplets story has been over-covered, news about the mother and her 14 children has a distinct audience. Women – particularly older women – reported following the octuplets story more closely than other respondents. More than a third (37%) of women over 50 reported following this news very closely compared with 24% of men over 50, and fewer young women (17%) or young men (15%). But there is no similar distinction in terms of the level of coverage. Women and men, whether under 50 or over 50, agree that the octuplets have received too much coverage (roughly six-in-ten of each group).

	Women 18-49	Men 18-49	Women 50+	Men 50+
<i>Percent following...</i>	%	%	%	%
Very closely	17	15	37	24
Fairly closely	36	26	32	42
Not too closely	30	35	18	22
Not all closely	17	24	13	12
Don't know	0	0	0	*
	100	100	100	100

The star of last summer's U.S. Olympic team, Michael Phelps, attracted negative publicity last week when a British newspaper printed a photo of the champion swimmer allegedly smoking marijuana. Roughly two-in-ten (17%) followed this story very closely last week and another 27% followed it fairly closely. For just 5% of the public, the photo controversy was the most closely followed story of the week. The media, for its part, devoted 1% of all news to the Phelps story, according to the PEJ's content analysis.

Compared with other recent sports scandals, the Phelps story is in the middle of the pack in terms of public interest. News about Phelps using marijuana attracted somewhat less interest than the first reports about former NFL quarterback Michael Vick's involvement with an illegal dog fighting operation in July, 2007 (21% followed Vick's troubles very closely). More followed this week's Phelps story very closely than previous years' stories about baseball stars Roger Clemens and Barry Bonds

	% following very closely
Michael Vick dog fighting allegations {7/07}	21
Michael Phelps marijuana photo {2/09}	17
Roger Clemens testifies about steroid use {2/08}	13
Barry Bonds indictment for lying about steroid use {11/07}	11
NBA referee betting on games {7/07}	9

alleged use of performance enhancing drugs or the NBA referee who bet on professional basketball games.

Though the Phelps’ story touched off media debate about his status as a role model for children, adults living with children under the age of 18 were no more likely than those without children in the home to have followed the story very closely (15% vs. 18%, respectively).

The public’s reaction to the volume of coverage allotted Phelps and the California octuplets is comparable to other recent controversies. In the summer of 2007 about half said there had been too much coverage of Michael Vick’s involvement with illegal dog fighting, and slightly fewer than half felt the same about coverage of New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer’s participation in a prostitution ring in March of 2008. In the case of racist remarks by radio host Don Imus in April, 2007 about six-in-ten said that there was too much coverage. In July, 2007 close to nine-in-ten (87%) Americans said that the press devoted too much attention to “a number of scandals involving such celebrities as Britney Spears, Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan.”

	Too much	Too little	Right amount	DK
<i>Amount of coverage of...</i>	%	%	%	%
Celeb starlet scandals {7/07}	87	2	8	3=100
Michael Phelps marijuana photo	67	5	22	6=100
Mother of six has octuplets	62	5	30	3=100
Don Imus remarks {4/07}	57	6	29	8=100
Eliot Spitzer & prostitution {3/08}	53	5	35	7=100
Vick dog fighting case {8/07}	49	6	37	8=100

Partisan Takes on Stimulus Coverage

About half of Republicans (49%), Democrats (48%) and independents (48%) say the debate in Congress over the stimulus was the story they followed most closely last week, but partisans differ in how they see the tone of the coverage. Republicans (55%) and independents (53%) are more likely to say what they’ve read and heard about the stimulus plan has been “mostly negative,” compared with 43% of Democrats who saw coverage that way. Democrats are more likely to say what they’ve heard has been “mostly positive” (38%), compared with 26% of Republicans and 21% of independents.

While partisans do not differ greatly in their judgment of the amount of media coverage given to the package, Republicans and independents are a bit more critical of the press than Democrats for not paying enough attention to the plan’s details. Slim majorities

What you’ve been hearing	Total	Rep	Dem	Ind
	%	%	%	%
Mostly positive	29	26	38	21
Mostly negative	48	55	43	53
Mix of both (Vol)	17	15	16	21
Don’t know	6	4	3	5
	100	100	100	100
Coverage given to plan details				
Too much	8	10	6	7
Too little	50	53	46	56
Right amount	37	34	42	34
Don’t know	5	3	6	3
	100	100	100	100

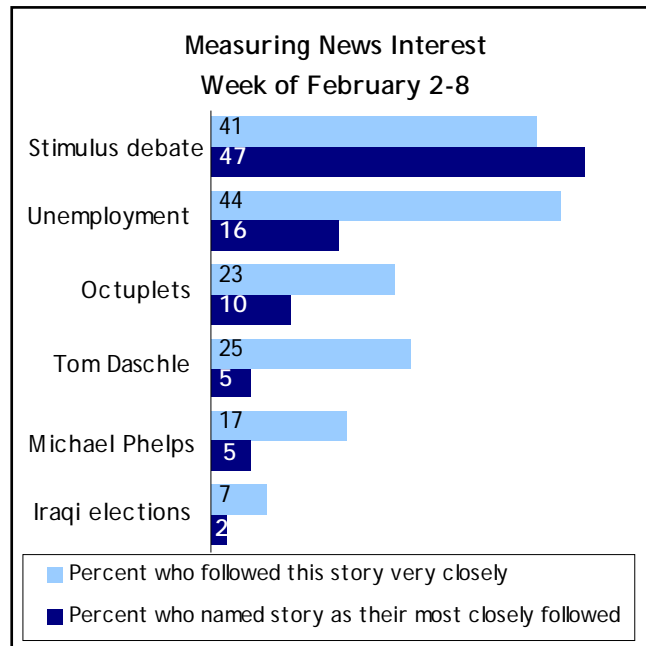
of both Republicans (53%) and independents (56%) say there has been too little coverage of what is included in the economic stimulus plan, compared with 46% of Democrats.

In Other News...

Former Sen. Tom Daschle’s decision to withdraw from consideration to be President Obama’s secretary for health and human services over a tax controversy attracted the very close interest of one-in-four Americans. For 5% of the public, this was their top story of the week.

The elections in Iraq received considerably less interest from the American public than the first time Iraqis went to the polls in February, 2005. Just 7% say they followed the Iraqi elections very closely last week, while a 40% plurality say they did not follow these elections closely at all. That

compares with a significantly greater percentage – 27% – that followed the Iraqi elections very closely in early 2005. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s content analysis, just 2% of news coverage was devoted to the Iraqi elections last week.



These findings are based on the most recent installment of the weekly News Interest Index, an ongoing project of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. The index, building on the Center’s longstanding research into public attentiveness to major news stories, examines news interest as it relates to the news media’s coverage. The weekly survey is conducted in conjunction with The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s News Coverage Index, which monitors the news reported by major newspaper, television, radio and online news outlets on an ongoing basis. In the most recent week, data relating to news coverage were collected from February 2-8, 2009 and survey data measuring public interest in the top news stories of the week were collected February 6-9, 2009 from a nationally representative sample of 1,002 adults.

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 compiles this data to identify the top stories for the week. The News Interest Index survey collects 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 seven 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:

Andrew Kohut, Director
Scott Keeter, Director of Survey Research
Carroll Doherty and Michael Dimock, Associate Directors
Kim Parker, Senior Researcher
Michael Remez, Senior Writer
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Research Associates
Kathleen Holzward and Alec Tyson, Research Analysts

PEW RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE & THE PRESS
FEBRUARY 6-9, 2009 NEWS INTEREST INDEX OMNIBUS SURVEY
TOPLINE
N=1,002

Q.1 In the past few weeks, have you come to have a MORE favorable opinion of Barack Obama, a LESS favorable opinion of Barack Obama, or hasn't your opinion of him changed lately?

	<u>More Favorable</u>	<u>Less Favorable</u>	<u>Opinion has Not changed</u>	<u>Don't Know/Refused</u>
Barack Obama	23	16	60	1=100

2008 CAMPAIGN

TREND FOR COMPARISON:¹

October 31-November 3, 2008	25	25	49	1=100
October 24-27, 2008	24	21	52	3=100
October 17-20, 2008	33	23	43	1=100
October 10-13, 2008	29	21	48	2=100
October 3-6, 2008	28	23	47	2=100
September 26-29, 2008	31	23	45	1=100
September 19-22, 2008	25	20	53	2=100
September 12-15, 2008	20	20	58	2=100
September 5-8, 2008	20	20	59	1=100
August 29-31, 2008	29	19	50	2=100
August 22-25, 2008	22	21	54	3=100
August 15-18, 2008	16	21	60	3=100
August 8-11, 2008	15	18	64	3=100
August 1-4, 2008	16	22	60	2=100
July 25-28, 2008	17	21	59	3=100
July 18-21, 2008	16	22	60	2=100
July 11-14, 2008	15	17	64	4=100
July 3-7, 2008	17	17	62	4=100
June 27-30, 2008	21	19	56	4=100
June 20-23, 2008	16	16	66	2=100
June 13-16, 2008	17	15	64	4=100
June 6-9, 2008	19	17	61	3=100
May 30-June 2, 2008	17	21	58	4=100
May 22-25, 2008	18	20	60	2=100
May 16-19, 2008	19	19	59	3=100
May 9-12, 2008	20	23	55	2=100
May 2-5, 2008	11	25	59	5=100
April 25-28, 2008	16	24	58	2=100
April 18-21, 2008	18	24	54	4=100
March 28-31, 2008	18	27	52	3=100
March 20-24, 2008	22	30	46	2=100

For March 20-24, 2008 through October 31-November 3, 2008 the introduction read, "In the past few days." For September 12-15 through October 31-November 3, 2008 the question asked respondents to "Please think about each of the following candidates," Barack Obama, John McCain, Joe Biden and Sarah Palin in the 2008 presidential and vice presidential elections. For June 13-16, 2008 through September 5-8, 2008, the question was worded, "Please think about each of the following *presidential* candidates..." and asked about Barack Obama and John McCain. For March 20-24, 2008 through June 6-9, 2008 the list of presidential candidates included Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain.

Q.2 As I read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past week, please tell me if you happened to follow each news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely. First, **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE ITEMS] [IF NECESSARY “Did you follow [ITEM] very closely, fairly closely, not too closely or not at all closely?”]**

	Very Closely	Fairly Closely	Not too Closely	Not at all Closely	DK/Refused
a. Reports about the rising unemployment rate	44	36	11	9	*=100
January 9-12, 2009	45	34	14	7	*=100
December 5-8, 2008	40	33	17	10	*=100
November 7-10, 2008	39	32	17	12	*=100
June 6-9, 2008	25	31	23	21	*=100
b. The debate in Congress over Barack Obama’s economic stimulus plan	41	33	15	11	*=100
January 30-February 2, 2009	36	29	22	13	*=100
TREND FOR COMPARISON:²					
January 16-19, 2009: Debate in Washington over the nation’s economic problems	35	33	17	15	*=100
December 19-22, 2008: Bush administration plan for emergency loans to U.S. automakers	37	33	16	13	1=100
December 12-15, 2008: Debate over a government bailout for U.S. auto industry	40	33	18	9	*=100
December 5-8, 2008: Debate in Congress over a bailout for U.S. auto industry	34	38	17	11	*=100
November 21-24, 2008	41	26	17	15	1=100
October 3-6, 2008: Washington debates plan to stabilize markets	62	26	7	5	*=100
September 26-29, 2008	60	22	10	8	*=100
September 19-22, 2008: Wall Street turmoil	49	28	14	9	*=100
September 12-15, 2008: Government takeover of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac	28	35	19	17	1=100
March 20-24, 2008: Bear Stearns buyout	21	26	21	32	*=100
February 8-11, 2008: Bush and Congress agreeing on an economic stimulus plan	22	33	23	21	1=100
January 25-28, 2008	24	36	19	21	*=100
August, 1989: Savings and loan bailout	26	30	20	23	1=100
c. The recent elections in Iraq	7	22	30	40	1=100
February, 2005	27	39	18	16	*=100
d. Tom Daschle withdrawing his nomination for a cabinet post over a tax related controversy	25	29	19	27	*=100
e. A picture showing Olympic swim champion Michael Phelps smoking marijuana	17	27	28	28	*=100

² January 16-19, 2009 asked about “The debate in Washington over what the government should do about the nation’s economic problems.” December 19-22, 2008 asked about “The Bush administration’s plan to provide billions in emergency loans to U.S. automakers.” December 12-15, 2008 asked about “The debate over a government bailout for the U.S. auto industry.” November 21-24, 2008 and December 5-8, 2008 asked about “The debate in Congress over a government bailout for the U.S. auto industry.” September 26-29, 2008 and October 3-6, 2008 asked about “The debate in Washington over a plan to use government funds to stabilize financial markets.” September 19-22, 2008 asked about “Turmoil among major financial institutions on Wall Street.” September 12-15, 2008 asked about “The federal government taking control of the mortgage companies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.” March 20-24, 2008 asked about “The buyout of Wall Street investment bank Bear Stearns.” January 25-28, 2008 and February 8-11, 2008 asked about “President Bush and Congress agreeing on an economic stimulus plan.” August, 1989 asked about: “Passage in Congress of a bill to bailout ailing savings and loan institutions.”

Q.2 CONTINUED...

	<u>Very Closely</u>	<u>Fairly Closely</u>	<u>Not too Closely</u>	<u>Not at all Closely</u>	<u>DK/Refused</u>
f. A California mother of six who recently gave birth to octuplets after receiving fertility treatment	23	33	27	17	*=100

Q.3 Which ONE of the stories I just mentioned have you followed most closely, or is there another story you've been following MORE closely? **[DO NOT READ LIST. ACCEPT ONLY ONE RESPONSE.]**

47	The debate in Congress over Barack Obama's economic stimulus plan
16	Reports about the rising unemployment rate
10	A California mother of six who recently gave birth to octuplets after receiving fertility treatment
5	Tom Daschle withdrawing his nomination for a cabinet post over a tax related controversy
5	A picture showing Olympic swim champion Michael Phelps smoking marijuana
2	The recent elections in Iraq
6	Some other story (VOL.)
2	Don't know/Refused (VOL.)
100	

Q.4 Do you think news organizations are giving too much coverage, too little coverage, or the right amount of coverage to each of the following?**[RANDOMIZE ITEMS]**

	<u>Too much coverage</u>	<u>Too little coverage</u>	<u>Right amount of coverage</u>	<u>DK/Refused</u>
a. Reports about the rising unemployment rate	13	23	62	2=100
b. The Congressional debate over the economic stimulus plan	8	34	54	4=100
c. What is included in the economic stimulus plan	8	50	37	5=100
d. The recent elections in Iraq	5	47	36	12=100
e. Tom Daschle withdrawing his nomination for a cabinet post over a tax related controversy	18	20	56	6=100
f. A picture showing Olympic swim champion Michael Phelps smoking marijuana	67	5	22	6=100
g. A California mother of six who recently gave birth to octuplets after receiving fertility treatment	62	5	30	3=100

Q.5 In following news about the economic stimulus plan over the past few days, is what you've been reading and hearing about the plan mostly positive or mostly negative?

29	Mostly positive
48	Mostly negative
17	Mix of both (VOL.)
6	Don't know/Refused (VOL.)
100	