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For The People & The Press

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News Coverage and News Interest - Matches and Mismatches
TOP STORIES OF 2009: ECONOMY, OBAMA AND HEALTH CARE

*A summary of finding from the weekly News Interest Index surveys
conducted over the course of 2009*

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News Coverage and News Interest - Matches and Mismatches

TOP STORIES OF 2009: ECONOMY, OBAMA AND HEALTH CARE

The troubled economy and efforts to revamp the nation's health care system dominated the public's news interest in 2009. From the year's start, Americans kept a close watch on the unfolding economic crisis, as well as Barack Obama's efforts to grapple with the crisis while trying to make good on campaign promises.

For the third week of January, for example, 57% of Americans said they followed news about the condition of the U.S. economy very closely, the highest percentage following any story that closely all year. That same week, 52% said they followed news about Obama's inauguration very closely. More than four-in-ten (42%) said the installation of the nation's first African American president was the story they had followed most closely that week, according to the Pew Research Center's weekly News Interest Index.

Those two topics – the economy and the new administration – then played a part in many of the top stories of 2009. In the second half of the year, the public's focus shifted more to the debate over overhauling the nation's health care system. Interest in health care reform grew in late summer – while Congress was in recess – as many lawmakers faced angry constituents at town hall meetings in their districts. Interest remained high as the debate unfolded in Washington.

Top News Interest Stories of 2009

<i>Story...</i>	Followed very closely %
1. Condition of U.S. economy (<i>Jan 23-26</i>)*	57
2. Barack Obama's inauguration (<i>Jan 23-26</i>)	52
3. Congress passes stimulus plan (<i>Feb 13-16</i>)*	50
4. Big bonuses to AIG employees (<i>Mar 20-23</i>)	50
5. Debate over health care reform (<i>Aug 21-24</i>)*	49
6. Obama unveils budget plan (<i>Feb 27-Mar 2</i>)	47
7. Rising unemployment rate (<i>Jan 9-12</i>)*	45
8. Deadly shootings at Fort Hood (<i>Nov 6-9</i>)*	44
9. US Airways plane lands in Hudson (<i>Jan 16-19</i>)	44
10. Swine flu and the vaccine (<i>May 1-4</i>)*	43
11. Obama's Afghanistan strategy (<i>Dec 4-7</i>)*	43
12. Attacks on ships by Somali pirates (<i>Apr 17-20</i>)*	41
13. Obama proposes health care fund (<i>Mar 6-9</i>)	41
14. Obama plan for troops in Iraq (<i>Feb 27-Mar 2</i>)	40
15. Stock market ups and downs (<i>Mar 13-16</i>)*	38

Dates show survey field period.

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

The News Media's Top Stories of 2009

<i>Story...</i>	Percent of newshole
1. Economic Crisis/AIG bonuses (<i>Mar 16-22</i>)*	53
2. Obama administration/Inauguration (<i>Jan 19-25</i>)*	45
3. Health care debate (<i>Sep 7-13</i>)*	32
4. Swine flu (<i>Apr 27-May 3</i>)*	31
5. Iran (<i>Jun 15-21</i>)*	28
6. Ted Kennedy dies (<i>Aug. 24-30</i>)	27
7. War in Afghanistan (<i>Nov 30-Dec 6</i>)*	27
8. Sotomayor nomination (<i>May 25-31</i>)*	24
9. Efforts to fight terror (<i>May 11-17</i>)*	22
10. Gaza conflict (<i>Dec 29 2008-Jan 4 2009</i>)*	21
11. Obama to European summit (<i>Mar 30-Apr 5</i>)	21
12. Fort Hood shootings (<i>Nov 9-15</i>)	20
13. Michael Jackson dies (<i>Jun 22-28</i>)*	18
14. Pirates off of Somalia (<i>Apr 13-19</i>)*	16
15. US auto industry (<i>Mar 30-Apr 5</i>)*	13

Based on Project for Excellence in Journalism's News Coverage Index. Dates show period in which news coverage was measured.

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

Each week, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) monitors the amount of coverage devoted to major stories by newspapers, television, radio and online news outlets. For 2009, there is a general correspondence between the stories that attracted the most interest on the NII and those that received the most coverage, according to PEJ’s News Coverage Index.

For the public, breaking stories grabbed attention as well, such as the dramatic landing of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River, the death of pop star Michael Jackson and the shootings last month at the Fort Hood army base. Americans also closely followed news about the spread of the swine flu and the flu vaccine. This proved to be one of several story lines this year for which public interest at times exceeded coverage, especially during the flu’s fall outbreak.

More Coverage than Interest

This year, the media’s top stories generally reflected the public’s top interests: the economic crisis, the new administration and the health care debate were the most covered news stories. But there were number of occasions when news coverage exceeded the public’s interest and vice versa.

For example, the public expressed modest interest in several heavily covered stories about events in Washington and politics. Stories about the death of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy accounted for more than a quarter (27%) of the newshole the week of Aug. 24, making it the most heavily reported story of the week. But that week, the health care debate dominated public interest, although it accounted for just 11% of the newshole: 30% said health care was the story they followed most closely that week, compared with 17% who said the same about news about Kennedy’s death.

Where Coverage Exceeded Interest: Washington News, Politics		
News story...	% following <i>most closely</i>	% of <i>newshole</i>
Sotomayor nomination (<i>May 25-31</i>)	15	24
Sotomayor hearings (<i>Jul 13-19</i>)	14	22
Sen. Kennedy dies (<i>Aug 24-30</i>)	17	27
Gov. Sanford scandal (<i>Jun 22-28</i>)	4	11
Blagojevich scandal (<i>Jan 26-Feb 1</i>)	4	8
Who leads GOP? (<i>Mar 2-8</i>)	4	8
Specter party switch (<i>Apr 27-May 3</i>)	3	9
Palin book release (<i>Nov 16-22</i>)	2	8

Sonia Sotomayor’s historic nomination to the Supreme Court was another story that generated more coverage than interest. Stories about the first Latina nominated to the high court took up about a quarter (24%) of the newshole the week of May 25, making it the most reported story of that week. At that point, the story ranked third in public interest (15% most closely), behind the economy (20%) and news that GM planned to file for bankruptcy (18%).

In mid-July, stories about Sotomayor’s confirmation hearings made up 22% of coverage, again making it the top story of the week. But Americans were more focused on the economy (21%), health care reform (21%) and the aftermath of Michael Jackson’s death (17%); 14% said they followed the hearings more closely than any other story.

Sen. Arlen Specter’s switch to the Democratic Party and the release of Sarah Palin’s book, “Going Rogue,” also provide examples of coverage for national political stories that exceeded public interest. Specter’s switch, a critical story because it gave Democrats a more effective Senate majority, accounted for 9% of coverage the week of April 27; 3% of the public said this was the story they followed most closely.

Stories about Palin’s book took up 8% of the newshole the week of Nov. 16, while 2% said this was the story they followed most closely that week. Just 10% said they followed news about Palin’s book very closely.

More Interest than Coverage

The public took an early interest in the health care debate in March, when Obama talked about initial plans for overhauling the system, and remained highly interested until year’s end. About a quarter (26%) said health care was the story they followed most closely the week of March 2. News about health care, though, made up just 4% of the newshole. At that point, the economic crisis and stock market troubles dominated news coverage (43% of coverage).

Public interest and media coverage of the health care debate spiked in the summer, as lawmakers struggled to come to terms on legislation before their recess and then faced angry constituents during their break. Interest generally remained strong in the fall, even in weeks where there was little new on the story. In the Dec. 4-7 news interest survey, for example, 29% said they were following the health care debate more closely than any other story. That made health care the most closely followed story of that week. The coverage, as measured by PEJ, amounted to 5% of the newshole.

Where Interest Exceeded Coverage: Health Care, Stimulus and Somali Pirates		
News story...	% Following most closely	% of newshole
Obama on health care (Mar 2-8)	26	4
Stimulus signed into law (Feb 16-22)	35	9
Pirates off Somalia (Apr 13-19)	34	16
Swine flu (Oct 19-25)	32	5
Flight lands in Hudson (Jan 12-18)	25	12*
Stem cell debate (Mar 9-15)	15	5
Fargo Floods (Mar 23-29)	13	5
Binghamton shootings (Mar 30-Apr 5)	11	4
Air France jet crash (Jun 1-7)	21	10
US auto industry woes (Jun 8-14)	19	6

* Event took place late in week, greater coverage for final days of week.

Early this year, the public showed strong interest in the stimulus legislation pushed by Obama to help jump start the troubled economy. In early February, the media and the public were largely in sync. By the week of Feb. 16, Congress had cleared a measure and Obama had signed it into law. That week, the media divided coverage among several major economic stories. Reports on the stimulus took up 9% of the newshole, compared to 28% the previous week. But the public remained keenly interested: 35% said this was the story they followed most closely. No other story that week came close.

The safe landing of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River attracted significant public interest in mid-January, a rare story of a plane crash with a happy ending. More than four-in-ten (44%) said they followed the story very closely, while 25% said it was the story they followed most closely that week. But the river landing and rescue occurred on a Thursday, well into PEJ's weekly tally of news coverage, and accounted for only 12% of the total newshole measured for the week. The story did account for 29% of coverage for the remainder of the week, according to PEJ, putting coverage more in line with interest immediately after the incident.

In mid-April, the public also took a strong interest in news about the modern-day pirates who were capturing ships off the coast of Somalia and holding them hostage. With 34% saying they were following this story more closely than any other, the pirates topped the News Interest Index the week of April 13. The story did get significant media attention (16% of coverage), but the economy drew slightly more news coverage that week (18%).

Swine Flu Disparity in Fall

Americans followed news about the spread of the swine flu and the availability of a vaccine closely during both the spring and fall outbreaks. The initial reports on the flu outbreak, during the week of April 20, drew only 2% of all news coverage, according to PEJ. But it was the public's top story that week, with 21% citing the swine flu as the story they followed most closely.

The next week, the media and public were more in sync: during the week of April 27, news about the swine flu was both the top story in terms of news coverage (31% of the newshole) and news interest (39% most closely). Public interest in news about the swine flu remained high in May, though the amount of coverage leveled off.

The weekly News Interest Index also found that for many Americans the swine flu was a local news story. The May 6 News Interest survey asked people where they turned for news on the flu: 69% said they had learned something about the flu from local television, while 63% said

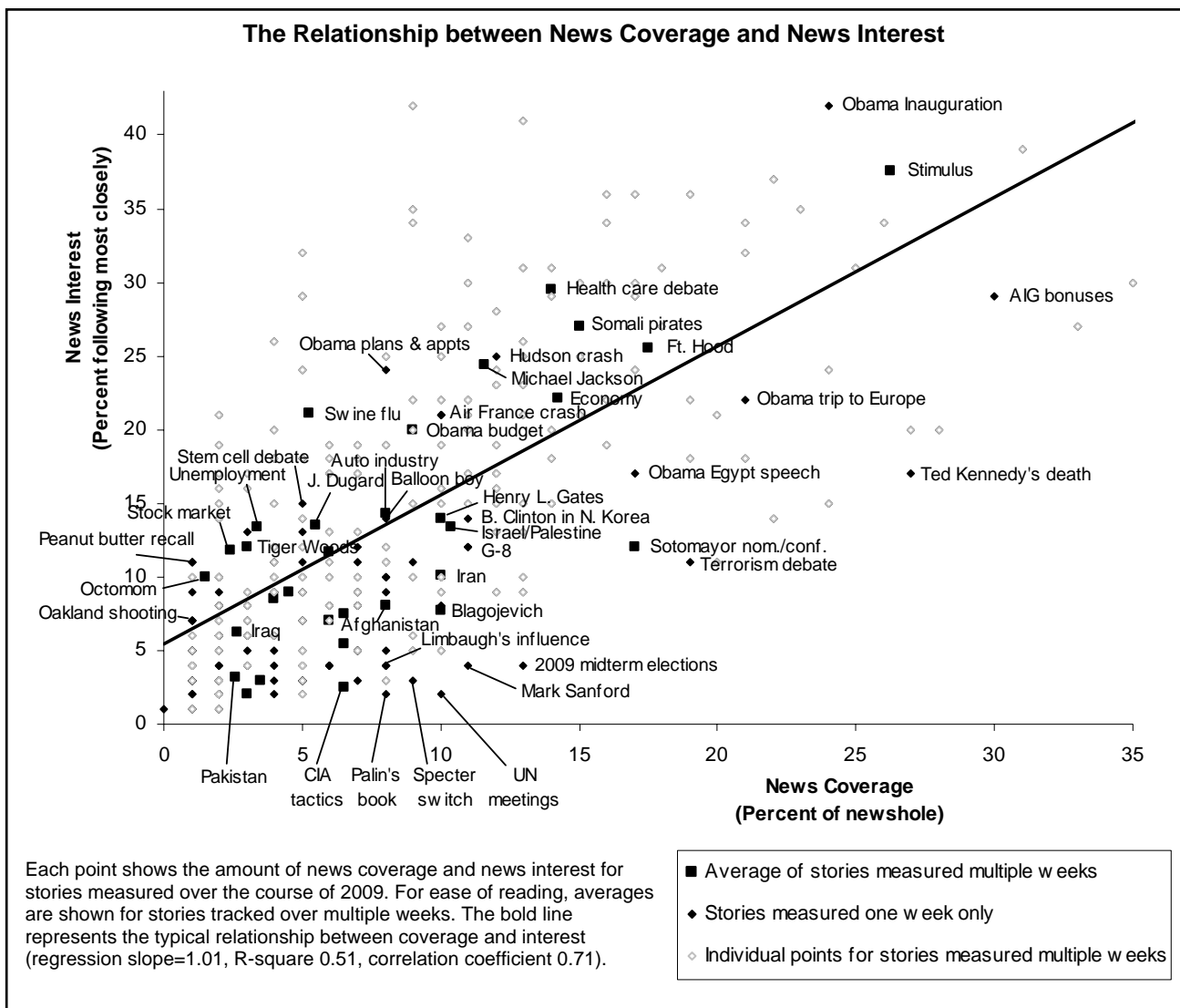
cable TV news. Notably, the internet was viewed as most useful in learning about the swine flu; 25% named the internet compared with 19% who said cable news and 17% local news.

The disparity in news coverage versus interest proved larger in the fall with the second outbreak. This time, public interest ramped up quickly with swine flu among the top one or two most closely followed stories throughout most of October. But national media coverage proved less intense. The week of Oct. 19, for example, 32% of the public said they were following swine flu developments more closely than any other story, making it the most closely followed story of the week. News coverage of the swine flu accounted for just 5% of the newshole, according to PEJ.

Matches and Mismatches at a Glance

The graphic below plots out the interest and coverage levels for all of the top weekly stories of the year. For long-running stories, such as the economy or health care, the numbers have been averaged and are represented by larger square dots. The bold diagonal line represents the typical relationship between coverage and interest across the entire year's worth of weekly measurements (as defined by a simple regression analysis).

Data points above the diagonal line represent stories in which public interest was high relative to the amount of press coverage. Those points below the line show stories in which press coverage was high relative to the amount of public interest. In both directions, the farther a story is from the line, the greater the gap between interest and coverage.



2009 in Review

A look at the two most closely followed stories each week shows how the economy and the health care debate consistently dominated the public's news interests. Interest in the economy and related stories, including the economic stimulus bill and unemployment, peaked early in the year. The economy continued to be the public's second most closely followed story throughout much of the second half of the year.

The debate over reforming the nation's health care system heated up in late July and was the public's most closely followed story nearly every week for the remainder of the year.

In addition to the economy and health care reform, other stories broke through and captured the public's attention at different points throughout the year. In mid-January, the safe landing of the US Airways jet in the Hudson River was the most closely followed story by the public. A week later, Barack Obama's inauguration was the most closely followed story.

In mid-April, stories about pirates attacking ships off the coast of Somalia captured the public's interest. And the death of Michael Jackson and the ensuing investigation made this the top story for three weeks from the end of June through mid-July.

Most Closely Followed News Stories of 2009

<u>Week</u>	<u>#1 Most closely followed story</u>	<u># 2 Most closely followed story</u>
Jan 2-4	Financial crisis	Obama transition
Jan 9-12	Mideast conflict	Unemployment
Jan 16-19	Plane in Hudson	Economy
Jan 23-26	Inauguration	Economy
Jan 30-Feb 2	Economy	Stimulus debate
Feb 6-9	Stimulus debate	Unemployment
Feb. 13-16	Stimulus passage	Economy
Feb 20-23	Stimulus passage	Stock market
Feb 27-Mar 2	Economy	Obama budget plan
Mar 6-9	Obama health plan	Unemployment/Stocks
Mar 13-16	Economy	Stock market
Mar 20-23	Economy	AIG bonuses
Mar 27-30	Economy	Obama budget
Apr 3-6	Obama Europe trip	Unemployment
Apr 9-13	Economy	Somali pirates
Apr 17-20	Somali pirates	Economy
Apr 24-27	Swine flu	Auto industry woes
May 1-4	Swine flu	Economy
May 8-11	Swine flu	Economy
May 15-18	Economy	Health Care
May 21-24	Economy	Swine flu
May 29-Jun 1	Economy	GM bankruptcy
Jun 5-8	Economy	Air France crash
Jun 12-15	Economy	GM, Chrysler troubles
Jun 19-22	Economy	Protests in Iran
Jun 26-29	Michael Jackson	Health care
Jul 2-5	Michael Jackson	Economy
Jul 10-13	Michael Jackson	Economy
Jul 17-20	Economy/Health care	Jackson
Jul 24-27	Health care	Economy
Jul 31-Aug 3	Health care	Economy/M. Jackson
Aug 7-10	Health care	Economy
Aug 14-17	Health care	Economy
Aug 21-24	Health care	Economy
Aug 28-31	Health care	Economy/Ted Kennedy
Sep 3-6	Health care	Economy
Sep 11-14	Health care	Swine flu
Sep 18-21	Health care	Economy
Sep 25-28	Health care	Economy
Oct 2-5	Health care	Economy
Oct 9-12	Health care	Swine flu
Oct 16-19	Health care	Swine flu
Oct 23-26	Swine flu	Health care
Oct 30-Nov 2	Swine flu	Health care
Nov 6-9	Fort Hood shootings	Health care
Nov 13-16	Health care	Fort Hood investigation
Nov 20-23	Health care	Swine flu
Dec 4-7	Health care	Afghanistan
Dec 11-14	Health care	Economy
Dec 18-21	Health care	Economy

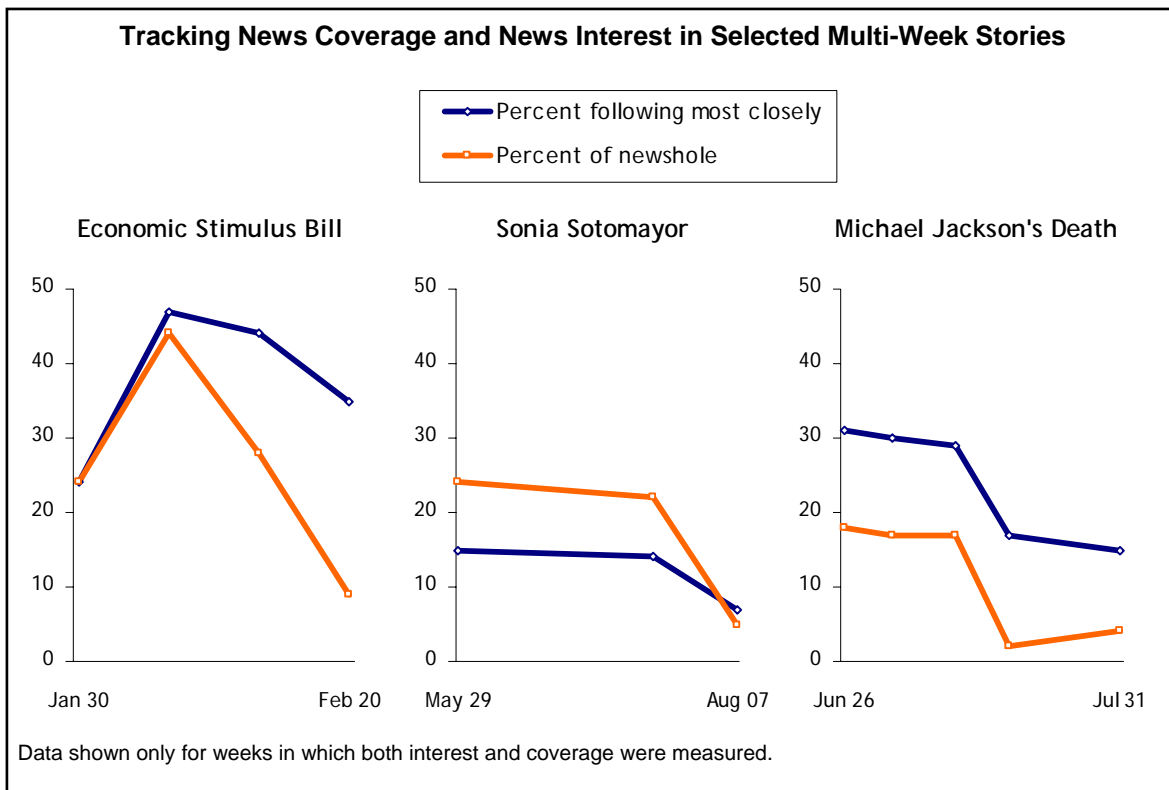
Respondents were asked which one of the six top news stories of the week they had followed most closely.

The public closely tracked the outbreak of swine flu during the first wave in late April and May and then again during the second outbreak this fall. The story was either the top or second most closely followed story for four straight weeks in October. In November, the shootings at Fort Hood captured the public’s attention and was one of the most closely followed stories for two consecutive weeks.

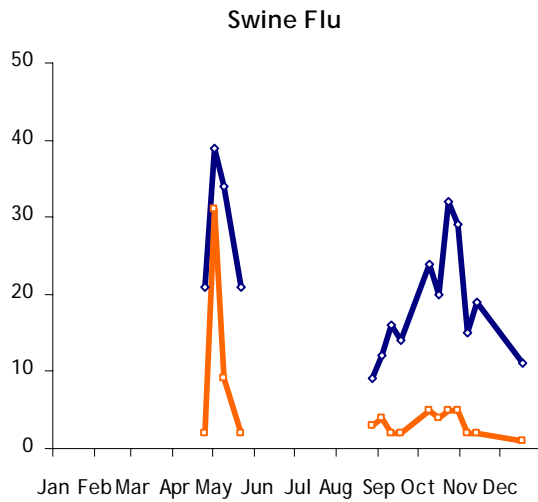
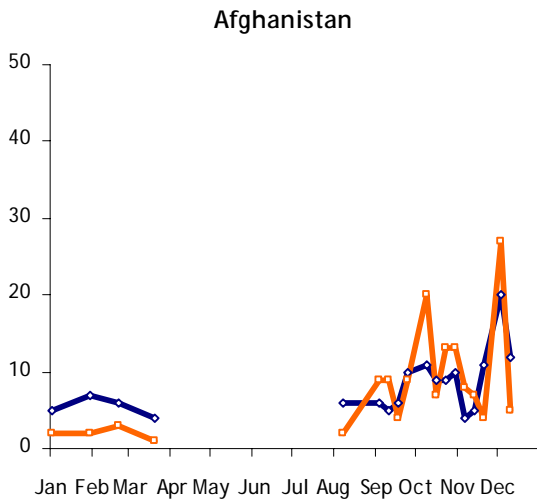
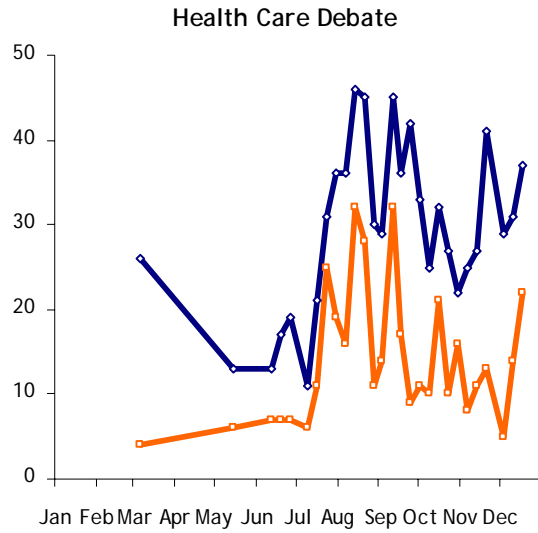
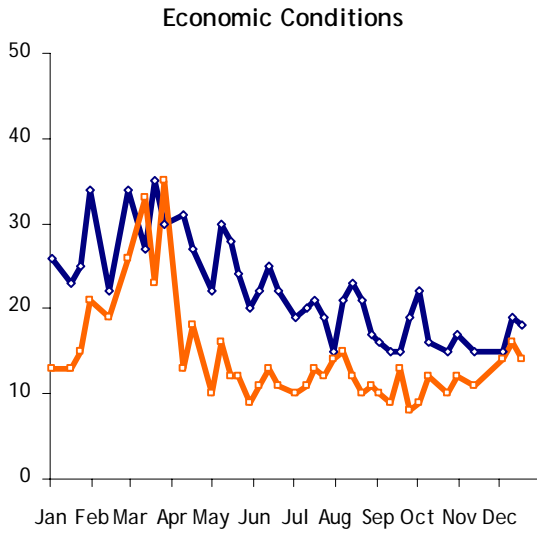
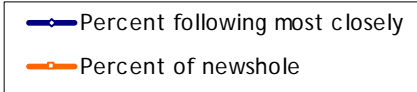
Interest in news about the war in Afghanistan grew late in the year as the Obama administration deliberated over a new strategy. The public’s attention peaked in early December shortly after Obama announced the troop increase. This was the only week this year that Afghanistan was one of the top two most closely followed stories.

Tracking Major Stories over Time

The graphs below track interest and coverage over the “life span” of several of the year’s major stories: the economic stimulus bill, and the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court and Michael Jackson’s death. The next set of graphs compares interest and coverage for news about the economy, the debate over health care reform, the situation in Afghanistan and the swine flu when they were asked over the course of the year.



Tracking News Coverage and News Interest in Long-Term Stories



Data shown only for weeks in which both interest and coverage were measured.

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 Monday through Sunday) 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 landline 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 4 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.

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