



THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER
For The People & The Press

NEWS Release
1615 L Street, N.W., Suite 700
Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel (202) 419-4350
Fax (202) 419-4399

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Thursday, December 30, 2010

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
Andrew Kohut, Director
Michael Remez, Senior Writer

Public's Top Stories of the Decade – 9/11 and Katrina

The 9/11 terrorist attacks drew more public interest than any other story in the past decade. In October 2001, a month after the attacks, 78% said they were following news about the story very closely, up slightly from the week after the attacks (74%).

The devastating hurricanes that hit the Gulf Coast in 2005 – first Katrina and then Rita – also captured the attention of an overwhelming numbers Americans. In October of that year, a month after Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, 74% said they were following news about the storms very closely (70% were following very closely the week after Katrina hit).

The 2005 hurricanes sent the price of gas soaring, a development that also drew broad public attention. In September 2005, 70% said they were following news about high gas prices very closely. In general, the public is highly attentive to fluctuations in gas prices. Nearly as many said they were closely following rising gas prices in May 2006 (69%) and June 2008 (66%), and when prices fell in October 2008, 53% followed very closely.

Most Closely Tracked Stories: 2001-2010

	% following very closely
1 Terrorist attacks on the U.S. (October 2001)	78
2 Hurricane Katrina and Rita impacts (October 2005)	73
3 High gasoline prices (September 2005)	71
4 Condition of U.S. economy (September 2008)	70
5 Sniper shootings near D.C. (October 2002)	65
6 Iraq war (May 2003)	63
7 Debate over Wall Street bailout (October 2008)	62
8 2008 presidential election (October 2008)	61
9 Major earthquake in Haiti (January 2010)	60
10 Debate on war with Iraq (October 2002)	60
11 Major decline in U.S. stock market (October 2008)	59
12 Gulf oil spill (July 2010)	59
13 Tsunami in Indian Ocean (January 2005)	58
14 Release of U.S. air crew from China (April 2001)	55
15 Plot to blow up transatlantic flights (August 2006)	54
16 Falling price of gas (October 2008)	53
17 Hurricanes Charley, Frances and Ivan (Sept 2004)	52
18 Court ruling on Pledge of Allegiance (July 2002)	52
19 Barack Obama's inauguration (January 2009)	52
20 Health care reform debate (March 2010)	51
21 War in Afghanistan (October 2001/January 2002)	51
22 Passage of Obama's economic stimulus (Feb 2009)	50
23 Hurricane Ike (September 2008)	50
24 Millions in AIG employee bonuses (March 2009)	50

PEW RESEARCH CENTER. Highest percentage shown for stories measured more than once. From 2001-2006, news interest measured monthly; from 2007-2010, news interest measured weekly.

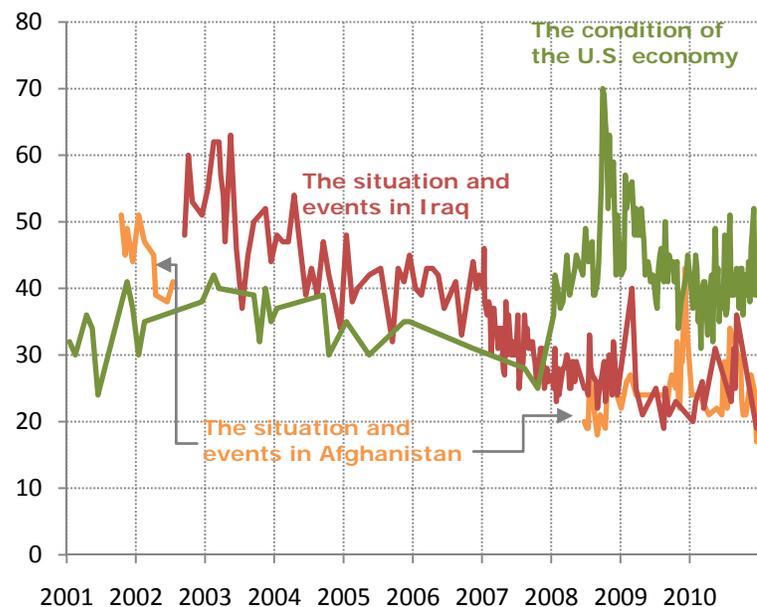
Aside from Hurricane Katrina, several other natural disasters over the past ten years riveted the American public's attention. In particular, roughly six-in-ten very closely followed both the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the 2004 tsunami that struck coastal areas surrounding the Indian Ocean.

During this decade there were several mass shootings, but the ongoing shooting spree that for weeks terrorized the Washington, D.C.-area attracted the most public interest. In October 2002, 65% said they were following news about the sniper attacks very closely. The sniper shootings were the public's top story in 2002.

A number of the decade's top stories occurred during a tumultuous two-month period in the fall of 2008. As the mortgage and financial crisis grew, 70% of Americans said they were following economic conditions very closely in September of 2008, and in October 59% reported very close attention to the stock market declines specifically. Around the same time, 62% said they were following the debate in Washington over plans to use government funds to stabilize the markets very closely. By this measure, public interest in the bank bailout debate was far more intense than the highest levels of interest in the 2009-2010 health care debate (51% followed very closely in the final week before passage) or the 2009 stimulus debate (50% very closely). And to top off a month packed with economic news, 61% of Americans were following the 2008 election very closely at the same time.

Interest in news reports about the situation in Iraq peaked during the early months of the war. In May 2003, during the week in which President Bush delivered his "Mission Accomplished" speech and two weeks after the fall of Baghdad, 63% said they were following news about the situation in Iraq very closely. Just a year later, a darker chapter in the war – the offensive by

Tracking Interest in the Economy, Iraq, Afghanistan



PEW RESEARCH CENTER

insurgents in Fallujah and allegations of abuse by U.S. troops at abu Ghraib prison – also drew considerable interest. In May 2004, 54% said they followed news about the situation in Iraq very closely.

Public attention to news about the war in Afghanistan was highest when military action began in late 2001 and early 2002, when 51% were following very closely. By the summer of 2002 interest had fallen off substantially; in July 2002 41% were following events in Afghanistan very closely. In recent years, the highest level of interest in Afghanistan came in late 2009 as Barack Obama announced his plans for winding down the U.S. military effort there. In December of that year, 43% followed his policy announcement very closely.

Of the biggest news stories of 2010, three make the list of the decade's top stories: the earthquake in Haiti, which 60% followed very closely, is among the top ten most closely followed stories of the decade. Slightly lower, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico this summer was followed very closely by 59% at the peak of public interest. And the final debate over health care reform was followed very closely by 51%, just edging in to the top 25 stories of the decade.

About the Pew Research Center's News Interest Index

Since 2007, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press has asked about public attention to six top news stories each week. From 2001 through 2006, a list of top news stories was asked roughly once a month. The survey question reads as follows: "As I read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past (week/month), please tell me if you happened to follow each news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely." All figures reported in this analysis are the percent saying "very closely".

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

Michael Remez, Senior Writer

Leah Christian and Jocelyn Kiley, Senior Researchers

Robert Suls, Shawn Neidorf, and Alec Tyson, Research Associates

Jacob Poushter, Research Analyst

Danielle Gewurz, Research Assistant

For more information about the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press' weekly News Interest Index, go to www.people-press.org.

© Pew Research Center, 2010