

Stories People Followed in Early May

The Alaska oil spill was the story that attracted the most public attention in early May. Nearly nine in ten Americans (89%) were following news coverage of the Alaskan oil spill very or fairly closely. A majority (52%) were following very closely, and a plurality (36%) chose it as the news story they paid the most attention to in the last month.

By comparison, no other story was being followed very closely by more than a third of the public. The explosion on the battleship Iowa ranked second at thirty-five percent. But Oliver North's trial (31%), the assault and rape of a jogger in Central Park (29%), and the Supreme Court's hearing of an abortion case (25%) received roughly comparable levels of attention during this period.

Of those we tested, two stories received clearly less public attention than the rest. Only fifteen percent said they were following very closely the top story out of Washington -- the investigation of House Speaker Jim Wright -- and even fewer, only six percent, were following one of the most important international stories of this period, the government scandal in Japan that has led to Prime Minister Takeshita's resignation.

The Alaskan oil spill riveted America's attention in a way that other current stories did not. In fact when the level of public attentiveness to the Valdez incident is contrasted with all previous research by the Times Mirror Center, we find that the story ranks fourth out of a list of 42 stories tested since 1986.

Even at that, the story attracted more interest among some groups of Americans than among others. The spill was a more compelling story on the two coasts than in the heartland of the country. It was followed very closely by majorities in the west (67%) and the east (56%), but not in the midwest (48%) or the South (43%). It also attracted less interest among younger people, who in general are less environmentally oriented than are middle aged and older Americans. More affluent and better educated Americans were also more interested in this story, again reflecting the general demographic pattern of interest in ecological issues.

Despite front page coverage in leading national newspapers, such as the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times, interest in the story about the assault and rape of a female jogger in Central Park was highly regional. In the East where 49% said they followed the story very closely, only the oil spill attracted more public attention. In other parts of the country half as many showed that level of interest in the story. It's of note that about equal proportions of men and women and black and whites followed this story closely.

The survey did find a gender difference in attentiveness to the stories about the Supreme Court's hearing of abortion arguments. Fifty-nine percent

of women said they followed this story closely, compared to 50% among men. And when asked which one story they followed most closely, women chose the Supreme Court case more often than men (11% vs. 4%). These differences aside, education was a stronger indicator of interest in the abortion story than gender, with college trained men and women expressing much higher levels of interest than those with less formal education of either sex.

Interest in the North trial did not vary much by demographic group or by region of the country. What's striking about reaction to the story is that while the trial of the former Marine Colonel ranked third in terms of being named as a story that people followed very closely, it took a close second place to the oil spill, when we asked respondents to choose the one story that they followed most closely. This may reflect the fact that the interviewing was done immediately following the announcement of a verdict in the case.

It should also be pointed out that previous Times Mirror research, shows that Americans have tended to tune out news about the Iran\Contra affair in general, despite the impact that the story has had on public opinion. However, North personally has been a compelling figure to many Americans. Indeed, the survey shows that among those who think of North as a hero and patriot, half were following the story very closely, while less than a third of North's detractors followed it closely.

The relatively low level of public attentiveness to the Wright and Takeshita stories is in keeping with the general lack of interest in stories about government scandals observed in other Times Mirror surveys. The Japanese story scored an all time low in public interest as a result of its occurring overseas, as well as being a government scandal. The public is as disinterested in the Wright affair as it was last summer about the conflict of interest allegations surrounding former Attorney General Edwin Meese. Both stories were followed closely by only 15% of the public.

Interest in the Takeshita story was uniformly low by population group, however we did find some substantial variation in the degree of attention paid to the problems of Speaker of the House Wright. Substantially more attention was paid by those over sixty five than those under thirty, and by whites compared to non-whites. Higher levels of awareness among the better educated are not unusual, in fact they are expected. But in this instance the differences are quite extreme. Those with a college degree are twice as likely as those with less than a high school education to have been paying very close attention to the ethics committee's investigation.

% FOLLOWING EACH NEWS STORY "VERY CLOSELY"

	<u>Alaska Oil Spill</u>	<u>Explosion on the Iowa</u>	<u>Oliver North Trial</u>	<u>Attack on jogger in N.Y.</u>	<u>Abortion Hearings</u>	<u>Investigation of Jim Wright</u>
Total	52	35	31	29	25	15
<u>Sex</u>						
Male	54	37	35	26	23	18
Female	51	33	27	31	28	12
<u>Race</u>						
White	53	35	31	29	25	16
Non-white	48	34	27	32	28	10
<u>Age</u>						
Under 30	46	24	25	22	26	5
30-49	53	35	25	27	26	12
50+	56	42	40	34	23	24
65+	58	44	36	32	24	26
<u>Education</u>						
College Graduate	55	35	35	36	33	21
Other College Graduate	61	39	32	24	30	13
High School Graduate	50	35	30	31	22	14
Less than H.S. Graduate	47	32	26	22	18	13
<u>Region</u>						
East	56	35	30	49	28	14
Midwest	48	31	32	20	24	12
South	43	37	29	22	22	16
West	67	38	34	25	29	18
<u>Party Id</u>						
Republican	52	36	30	27	24	14
Democrat	51	37	34	32	26	15
Independent	53	33	28	28	26	16

Question: Now I will read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past month. As I read each item, tell me if you happened to follow this news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely.

Stories People Were Talking About

The stories people talked about generally reflected those that they followed closely. At the top of the list, nearly eight in ten (79%) Americans discussed the Alaska Oil Spill with friends, family or co-workers. The incidence of discussion of the disaster was higher in the west than the rest of the country, where oil spills have occurred more often and where environmentalism may be more of a crystallized issue.

The ongoing trial of Oliver North had been the topic of discussion among seventy-one percent of Americans. The topic engendered much more discussion among whites (73%) than among non-whites (58%). Positive feelings about North were more associated with talking about the trial than were negative ones. Those who thought of him as a hero and patriot were more likely to have discussed the trial than either those who thought he was well meaning but misguided, or a liar and a criminal.

Washington's other ongoing investigation, that of the House speaker Jim Wright was discussed by only a little under a third of the population (31%). It too evoked more discussion among whites than non-whites, and it was more often a subject of discussion among men and those in the West. Feelings about the charges were also indicative of whether the story became a topic of discussion. Those who felt the charges were serious enough to have Wright removed as Speaker of the House were more likely to discuss the case (46% vs. 32%) than those who did not feel the charges warranted removal.

Around four in ten discussed the attack in Central Park (45%) and the Supreme Court abortion case (41%). As was the case with attentiveness, discussion of the rape in Central Park also had a very strong regional aspect. Sixty-four percent of those in the east had discussed it, far more than those in any other region. Again, neither gender nor race was a driving factor.

% WHO DISCUSSED EACH NEWS STORY WITH FRIENDS, FAMILY OR CO-WORKERS

	<u>Alaska Oil Spill</u>	<u>Explosion on the Iowa</u>	<u>Oliver North Trial</u>	<u>Attack on jogger in N.Y.</u>	<u>Abortion Hearings</u>	<u>Investig- ation of Jim Wright</u>
Total	79	64	71	45	41	31
<u>Sex</u>						
Male	83	66	72	44	39	37
Female	76	62	70	46	42	25
<u>Race</u>						
White	81	65	73	45	42	32
Non-white	66	56	58	47	37	22
<u>Age</u>						
Under 30	81	63	69	38	45	18
30-49	87	67	73	49	45	31
50+	71	61	71	45	34	38
65+	63	56	63	45	27	36
<u>Education</u>						
College Graduate	88	65	80	54	53	45
Other College Graduate	85	66	70	44	46	30
High School Graduate	79	66	70	46	37	28
Less than H.S. Graduate	63	56	67	33	31	21
<u>Region</u>						
East	78	65	66	64	42	30
Midwest	81	63	70	36	37	24
South	73	63	73	41	40	32
West	87	65	77	38	45	38
<u>Party Id</u>						
Republican	82	68	74	46	42	32
Democrat	76	61	67	46	42	30
Independent	78	62	72	43	38	31

Question: Have you had occasion to discuss (**INSERT NEWS ITEM**) with friends, family or co-workers, or hasn't it come up in conversation?

Press Performance

Overall, the press gets reasonably high marks for its coverage of the news stories. Nearly two-thirds (62%) say the press has done an excellent or good job in covering the story they followed most closely in the last month, but as many as one in three gave news organizations bad grades for how they covered these stories. The public was most laudatory about press coverage of the Iowa explosion and clearly most critical of coverage of the abortion story.

Nearly three-quarters (73%) rated press coverage as excellent or good. About two-thirds give positive marks to the coverage of the Central Park assault (66%), the trial of Oliver North (61%), and the oil spill in Alaska (63%). Clearly the public was much more critical of the coverage of the Supreme Court hearing of the Missouri abortion case. About half (51%) consider it excellent or good, but thirty-four percent rate the coverage as only fair.

PRESS COVERAGE RATINGS OF NEWS STORIES

	<u>Story Followed Most Closely:</u>				
	<u>Alaska Oil Spill</u>	<u>Explosion on the Iowa</u>	<u>Oliver North Trial</u>	<u>Attack on jogger in N.Y.</u>	<u>Abortion Hearings</u>
<u>Press Coverage</u>					
Excellent	19%	20%	19%	26%	11%
Good	44	53	42	40	40
Only Fair	21	18	26	24	34
Poor	13	4	9	9	11
Don't Know	$\frac{3}{100\%}$	$\frac{5}{100\%}$	$\frac{4}{100\%}$	$\frac{1}{100\%}$	$\frac{4}{100\%}$
Sample Size	(455)	(114)	(327)	(117)	(96)

Question: In general, how would you rate the job the press has done in covering (STORY FOLLOWED MOST CLOSELY IN Q.7); excellent, good, only fair, or poor?

Concepts and People in the News that People Are Following

Less than a majority of Americans were able to correctly identify one of three major figures who dominated the news last month. Four in ten know Jim Wright is Speaker of the House, even though only fifteen percent were following the story of his investigation very closely. Clearly Wright has an established level of knowledge with the public that predates his current problems. Men are more likely than women to correctly identify Wright (51% vs. 30%). The differences in knowledge found with advanced age, education and income are to expected and not unusual. Surprisingly, though, there was no difference by party identification. Equally forty-one percent of Republicans and Democrats were able to identify Jim Wright.

Despite the intense press coverage given to the confirmation hearings of John Tower, only thirteen percent were correctly able to identify his replacement, Richard Cheney. It is important to note that during this period Secretary Cheney has been at the center of the debate over limiting short-range nuclear weapons in Western Europe, as well as making the front page by predicting the failure of glasnost and the replacement of Gorbachev. It is understandable that only twelve percent identified the Japanese Prime Minister since seventy-seven percent had said they were not following closely the scandal surrounding his resignation.

Reflecting the different levels of interest in these stories, most Americans could correctly identify the scope of the Alaska oil spill, but few indeed could tell us about the current status of Prime Minister Takeshita. Seventy-two percent of those polled knew that the spill covered an area the size of a small state, rather than that of a few acres or miles. On the other hand, only three in ten knew that Prime Minister Takeshita had in fact resigned. Fully one half (51%) said they were not sure about the Prime Minister's current status and could not answer the question.

Opinion of Press Coverage of George Bush

The current Gallup poll records a decline in George Bush's overall approval ratings, as criticism of the President's ability to communicate his policies and plans have risen sharply. Against this backdrop we find the public perceiving that press coverage of this administration is far less extensive than coverage of Ronald Reagan's at a comparable period in time.

Only fifty-two percent approve of the job the president has done explaining his plans for the future, down from sixty-five percent in March. In addition, nearly half feel the press is reporting less about the Bush administration than Reagan's. Republicans and those under thirty are more likely to approve of Bush's communication efforts. Surprisingly, the president gets lower marks from the better educated than would be expected. Partisan differences do not exist on press coverage, although the young and the better educated are slightly more likely to think there has been less coverage.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The survey results are based on telephone interviews with 1,239 adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period of May 4-7, 1989. 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 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.

TIMES MIRROR DATABASE
PUBLIC ATTENTIVENESS TO MAJOR NEWS STORIES
(1986 - 1989)

	Percent <u>Very</u>
<u>Closely</u>	
The explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger	80
The little girl in Texas who was rescued after falling into a well	69
The U.S. air strikes against Libya	58
THE ALASKA OIL SPILL	52
The flight of the space shuttle (Oct 88)	50
The drought and its effects on American farmers	49
The TWA hostage crisis that took place last summer in Beirut, Lebanon (July 86)	48
The nuclear accident at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union	46
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (Oct 88)	43
The hot weather this summer and the greenhouse effect (Aug 88)	42
The downing of an Iranian passenger plane by a U.S. Navy ship	42
The stock market crash	40
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (Aug 88)	39
The U.S. Navy escort of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf (Sept 87)	38
The U.S. Navy escort of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf (Oct 87)	37
The stories about Dan Quayle, the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate	37
The hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship in the Mediterranean	35
THE EXPLOSION AND FIRE ON THE U.S. BATTLESHIP IOWA	35
The Congressional hearings about the Iran-Contra affair (Sept 87)	33
The world series (Oct 88)	31
THE OLIVER NORTH TRIAL	31
The Democratic convention (Aug 88)	30
THE ATTACK AND SEXUAL ASSAULT ON A FEMALE JOGGER IN CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK, BY A GROUP OF YOUTHS	29
The problems at nuclear reactor plants (Oct 88)	28
The end of Gary Hart's candidacy and the Donna Rice allegations	28

	Percent Very Closely
The Republican convention (Aug 88)	27
THE SUPREME COURT'S HEARING OF ARGUMENTS IN A MISSOURI ABORTION CASE	25
The April hijacking of a Kuwaiti airplane by Shiite Moslems (May 88)	22
The cease fire in the war between Iran and Iraq	22
News about the presidential campaign in 1988 (May 88)	22
The attempts by the U.S. government to depose General Noriega in Panama	20
Discussions of a U.S. Soviet arms agreement (Sept 87)	19
The stock market crash	18
The conflict in the Middle East between Palestinians and the Israelis in the occupied territories (May 88)	18
The nomination of Robert Bork to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court	17
THE ETHICS COMMITTEE'S INVESTIGATION OF SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE JIM WRIGHT	15
News about the Democratic candidates for the presidential nomination (Oct 87)	15
Conflict of interest allegations about Attorney General Ed Meese (May 88)	15
Coverage of the Democratic and Republican candidates for the Presidential nomination (Sept 87)	14
The pending divorce between Mike Tyson and Robin Givens	14
News about the Republican candidates for the Presidential nomination (Oct 88)	13
THE SCANDAL INVOLVING THE JAPANESE PRIME MINISTER AND OTHER HIGH RANKING OFFICIALS	6