

Times Mirror News Interest Index  
August 1989

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- \*\* News about the crash of a United Airlines DC-10 in Iowa, and the American hostages in the Mideast, were the only stories followed very closely by large percentages of Americans in early August.
- \*\* The third most closely followed story attracted much less attention -- the S&L bailout was followed very closely by only 26%. But, this is a surprisingly large number considering the nature of the story -- economic policy news out of Washington.
- \*\* News about State Department spy suspect Felix Bloch edged out HUD this month as the story with the most ink and the least public interest -- 14% said they were following it very closely.
- \*\* While public interest in the HUD has grown somewhat over the past month, the principal character in the HUD controversy is all but unknown to Americans. Only six percent of the public correctly identified Sam Pierce as the former Secretary of HUD.
- \*\* Despite generally positive evaluations of press performance, there is a division of opinion over two specific media practices, both involving the airing of a video tape. Half thought news programs that aired the tape of the hanging of Col. Higgins' had acted improperly in doing so. Forty-three percent thought showing the tape was the proper action.
- \*\* A plurality (49%) approved of the use of re-enactments on television news programs that were properly labelled, while 44% disapproved of their use on news programs, even if they are identified as simulations.
- \*\* Public perceptions of what's news and what's entertainment have been blurred with the addition of an increasing number of magazine format shows to the television schedule.
- \*\* A pronounced "generation gap" in news interest has emerged from Times Mirror's research with Americans over 50 exhibiting the greatest interest in most news stories, people between the ages of 30 and 50 ranking second, and people under 30 a distant third.

### Stories People Followed in Early August

News about the crash of a United Airlines DC-10 in Iowa, and the American hostages in the Mideast, were the only stories followed very closely by large percentages of Americans in early August. The Sioux City air disaster and the murder of Marine Lt. Col. Higgins and related Mideast events, were closely followed by about half the public (53% and 49%, respectively). The third most closely followed story attracted much less attention -- the S&L bailout was followed very closely by only 26%. While this is a far lower level of attention than was paid to the two top stories of the month, it is a surprisingly large number considering the nature of the story -- economic policy news out of Washington.

Interest in the dominant "Washington" story, the HUD scandal, increased slightly this month over the level recorded in July -- 21% were following the story very closely, compared to 15% a month ago. News about State Department spy suspect Felix Bloch edged out HUD this month as the story with the most ink and the least public interest -- 14% said they were following it very closely. Only stories about the 20th anniversary of Woodstock attracted less public attention (9%).

Increased public interest in HUD notwithstanding, the principal character in the HUD controversy is all but unknown to Americans. Only six percent of the public correctly identified Samuel Pierce as the Cabinet office in charge of Housing and Urban Development. Felix Bloch has a somewhat higher profile (17% correctly identified him). Ironically, the media controversy associated with the spy story achieved more penetration than the details of the story, or even Bloch himself. Thirty three percent reported that they had seen the ABC News video re-enactment of Bloch handing over secrets, or had heard about the controversy caused by airing the unlabelled simulation.

Colonel Higgins' murder and subsequent developments in the hostage situation in the Mideast, explain Americans' higher level of awareness this month of international events compared to either of the two domestic stories about government officials under fire. Half the public knew that the Israeli abduction of Sheik Obeid was the reason given by his captors for the hanging of the American Marine Colonel. About half of every major population group said they were following this story very closely, and when asked to choose the single story that they followed most closely, a plurality (42%) chose news about events in the Mideast. (The crash of the UAL DC-10, which occurred much earlier in the month, ranked second, with 32% choosing it as the top story.)

Although the Savings and Loan bailout bill attracted much less public attention than did news about either of these two major events, interest in the story varied considerably by demographic group. Specifically, older people were far more attentive to this story than were younger Americans. Thirty six percent of those fifty years of age and older, reported that they followed the story very closely, compared to only a third as many of those under thirty years of age (12%). More affluent respondents, (those with incomes of \$50,000 or more), who presumably have a greater stake in financial matters, were predictably more interested in this story than were those with incomes of less than \$20,000.

The greater interest in the S&L story among older people appears to reflect a general pattern of behavior that has been observed over the course of Times Mirror News Interest Index surveys. There is a very pronounced generation gap with regard to news attentiveness.

People over fifty years of age are much more likely to pay attention to just about all news stories. Middle age people rank second, and younger people are a distant third in news attentiveness. For example, this month, 41% of people over the

age of fifty, followed three or more of the six national stories tracked by the Times Mirror News Index. Among middle aged people that figure was 29%, and among those under 30 years of age, only 18% followed three or more stories very closely. At the other extreme, fully 37% of the people under thirty surveyed followed none of these stories very closely, while only 20% of older people did so. Such differences occur consistently and raise questions as to the significance of the greater percentage of college graduates among the younger segments of the population.

This generation gap, especially evident in stories that don't attract a lot of public attention overall, may reflect the fact that older people are much more habitual consumers of the news. For example, there is a three fold increase in interest in the HUD story by age. Only ten percent of 18-29 year olds followed this story very closely, compared to 31% of those 50 and older. Similar patterns of attentiveness are found by age for virtually all stories covered in this series.

#### Press Performance

As in previous surveys, a majority of the public gives the press either excellent or good grades for coverage of the story it followed most closely. Television's coverage was rated better than was newspaper's, with 30% rating TV coverage as excellent and 39% good, compared to 19% and 43% for newspapers, respectively. TV news got particularly good grades for its coverage of the crash in Sioux City (41% excellent) compared to 25% for newspapers. Both media got far lower ratings for their coverage of the S&L bailout, with only 14% rating TV coverage as excellent and 11% rating newspaper coverage similarly. About four in ten rated coverage of this story as only fair or poor.

Despite generally positive evaluations of press performance, there is a division of opinion over two specific media practices, both involving the airing of a video tape. Half thought news

programs that aired the tape of the hanging of Col. Higgins' had acted improperly in doing so. Forty-three percent thought showing the tape was the proper action. Opinion was also mixed on whether or not news organizations should use video re-enactments of events in the news. A plurality (49%) approved of the use of re-enactments that were properly labelled, while 44% disapproved of their use on news programs, even if they are identified as simulations.

Generational differences also exist with regard to this news practice. Sixty-four percent of those under thirty approved of the use of video re-enactments of events in the news, compared to only 35% of those fifty and over. In keeping with the fact that those over fifty are heavier consumers of the news, 42% of this older group said they had seen the ABC News re-enactment or heard about the controversy, compared to only 23% of those under the age of thirty.

#### What's News and What's Entertainment

Given the close division of opinion about the use of re-enactments, it is not surprising to find that public perceptions of what's news and what's entertainment are blurred. While nearly all respondents who could make a judgement about "The Tonight Show" or "David Letterman" considered these shows to be mainly entertainment, and correspondingly, most think of "60 Minutes" as news, perceptions about most other programs tested were far less clear. Fifty percent considered "America's Most Wanted" as news compared to 28% who thought of it as entertainment. (Twenty-two percent could not rate the show or were unaware of it.) Pluralities also saw "Inside Edition" and Fox television's "A Current Affair" as news not entertainment. A similar division of opinion existed about "The Today Show": 48% news, 29% entertainment. The vast majority of the public could not evaluate two new, much-publicized, magazine format programs, "Primetime Live" and "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow." Of those

who did have an opinion, it was mixed as to whether these shows were news or entertainment.

Significant differences of opinion as well as patterns of behavior exist between age groups for this question as well. Younger people, who are lighter consumers of news and who were weaned on television rather than newspapers, were much more apt to perceive the most widely watched tabloid re-enactment show, "America's Most Wanted" as news and not entertainment. Sixty-five percent of those under 30 consider that show to be mainly news, while 41% of those over 50 years of age perceive it as a news broadcast.