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THE PUBLIC AND THE NEWS

A Report On 1990

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NEWS INTEREST INDEX - YEAR END SUMMARY

The Public Looked Abroad For News In 1990

In a year that began and ended with American troops in the field, international news dominated the consciousness of Americans in 1990.

In nine months of the last year, international news stories were the most closely followed news stories of the month, and throughout the entire period the public regarded international events as the most important news.

Clearly, the crisis in the Gulf attracted more public attention than any other news story. Two in three Americans have followed the Gulf story very closely each month since Saddam Hussein's armies marched into Kuwait. The invasion of Panama was the only individual news story unrelated to the Gulf that engaged the close attention of a majority of the public in 1990.

The sustained level of intense public interest in the Gulf stands in sharp contrast to the modest level of public interest in the momentous political changes that have occurred in Eastern Europe this year. German unification, the fall of communist governments in almost every nation in Eastern Europe, and the near disintegration of the Soviet Union failed to interest most Americans. At no point this year has the percentage closely following any of these stories exceeded 30%.

In the early part of the year, 25 - 30% of the public were following closely the major stories out of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. However, as the year wore on, interest flagged and the Persian Gulf crisis further overshadowed what was happening in former Iron Curtain countries. In September, only 13% were closely following news about the Soviet Union's severe economic problems. By November, as little as 6% of the public was closely following news of unrest in the Ukraine and other parts of the USSR.

Even so, major domestic stories tracked in the Times Mirror News Interest Index generated less interest than international stories. On average, the 63 major domestic news stories studied by the Center for The People & The Press drew the close attention of 24% of the American public, while 37 international stories attracted 28% of the public. Tellingly, even the most closely followed domestic story had an international twist. The top rated domestic story of the year was news about gasoline price increases following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Sixty-two percent of Americans followed this story very closely (September).

Over the course of 1990, public interest in the economy increased markedly. In the spring, when the first signs of economic storm clouds appeared, only 18% of the American public followed economic news very closely. By September, 29% were paying close attention to such news, and by November that percentage rose to 39%. The latter was approximately the same percentage that followed news about the economy after the crash of the stock market in 1987.

Interest in the budget deficit followed the same pattern. The Rostenkowski deficit reduction plan in the spring was largely ignored by the American public: 10% paid close attention. By June, 18% were following very closely news about Administration and Congressional efforts to resolve the budget deficit. As negotiations dragged on, became more fractious and nearly resulted in a shutdown of the government, public attention increased to the 34% level (November).

Interest in news about George Bush also picked up over the course of the year. The top Bush stories of the year in terms of public interest were criticisms of the president for his change of heart on taxes and his development of Persian Gulf policy -32% followed such reports very closely. The President's approval ratings were highest when public attention to White House news was lowest. George Bush's popularity score was 73% when only 22% were paying attention to his attendance at the February Drug Summit in Columbia. His approval sank to 49% when the nation was riveted to news about his Persian Gulf policies.

The exception to this Bush visibility/popularity inversion occurred in March when a resounding 76% of the public learned of the President's distaste for broccoli with no apparent impact on his approval score.

Sensational crimes and trials captured substantial public interest this year. The serial killings in Gainesville, Florida attracted more public attention (36%) than other well-known crime stories such as the Charles Stuart murder-suicide in Boston (29%) and the New York subway murder of a Utah tourist (20%).

The trials and tribulations of Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry engaged much less public interest than media attention. Twenty-eight percent followed news of the Mayor's drug arrest very closely, but in succeeding months interest waned; 22% followed the DC Mayor's trial and 16% were attentive to the verdict of the trial.

The nomination of David Souter to the U.S. Supreme Court was the other Washington story that attracted less public interest than expected. Only 16% followed news of the New Hampshire jurist's nomination, and just 15% followed news of his confirmation after weeks of televised hearings.

Although major international news outdrew major domestic news in 1990, the stories at the very bottom of the list were predominantly international ones - news about the civil war in Cambodia and Benazir Bhutto's ouster from office in Pakistan each attracted the attention of 4% of the public.

The News Interest Index not only monitors what news the public pays attention to, but also what the public learns from the news. In 1990, Times Mirror surveys found that while relatively small percentages of the public were following news about changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe closely, most Americans understood the basic story lines. For example, 79% of the public knew that the U.S. took a mild position with regard to Moscow's embargo of Lithuania after the breakaway republic declared its independence. Six in ten were aware of the impending German economic unification prior to its occurrence, and seven in ten knew of Romanian strongman Nicolae Ceausescu's fate.

Similarly, two in three were aware in September of Soviet support for the embargo of Iraq, and a similar proportion knew of the Violeto Chamorro presidential victory in Nicaragua.

The level of public information about domestic stories generally trailed the level of information about international stories. On average, 57% of the public gave correct answers to questions dealing with international subjects, while only 45% answered correctly on domestic stories.

The three domestic policy stories scoring highest in public comprehension were these:

79% knew that the taxpayers would pay for the S&L bailout

68% knew of the President breaking his "Read my lips, no new taxes" pledge

67% could name at least one type of tax that would increase as a result of the budget deficit agreement

The public was less well-informed about people in the news than about either international or domestic news concepts. John Poindexter and Nelson Mandela were the most readily identified names among those tested by Times Mirror (60% correctly identified the former presidential aide, 58% the African leader). But few Americans could correctly identify such well-publicized figures as Vaclav Havel (14%), Colin Powell (17%) and Louis Farrakhan (20%).

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE NEWS INTEREST INDEX IN 1990

January

News about the NFL playoffs was followed very closely by about the same number of Americans (27%) as paid close attention to events in Eastern and Central Europe. Among Americans under 30 years of age, interest in the playoffs was higher (39%).

March

Americans registered a strong protest about the amount of news coverage devoted to the marital breakup of Donald and Ivana Trump. A record 55% said there was too much news about the Trumps. This is by far the largest "over-covered" rating recorded by the Times Mirror News Interest Index.

Media judgment was also called into question by the public on another major issue of the month - the Andy Rooney suspension. A fifty-eight percent majority of the public disapproved of the CBS decision to suspend the controversial *60 Minutes* columnist, while only 24% approved.

April

A political story from a small state commanded substantial public attention nationwide. Twenty-three percent of the public said they followed very closely news about attempts to pass a restrictive abortion law in Idaho. This is a significant registration of public interest for a story that only received a modest amount of coverage on network evening news.

Lately, the American public has heard more about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles than famous rock stars, Academy Award winners, Grammy winners or the Simpsons (the other new TV cartoon phenomenon).

July

The Supreme Court ruling on anti-flag burning legislation and congressional efforts to amend the constitution evoked half as much interest as did news about the high court's 1989 flag burning decision. A year ago, 50% said they followed very closely news about the Court's flag burning decision. Only 24% said they paid close attention to news about the June 1990 ruling.

August

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait sets a News Interest Index record when 85% rate it the most important news story. The previous high watermark on this measure was 56% for the invasion of Panama in January.

The public gives the press better than average grades for its coverage of the Mideast situation, despite the fact that there have been few pictures of troops in Saudi Arabia or video accounts of the fighting in Kuwait.

September

While the public feels the press has been objective, a plurality feels that the views of Americans who oppose the (Gulf) buildup have not received enough exposure. Forty percent expressed that opinion, compared to 15% who think that critics of American policies have gotten too much coverage and 35% who think they have received the right amount of coverage.

October

Although the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and U.S. troop deployment to the Gulf continues to dominate the consciousness of Americans, news about rising gasoline prices drew nearly as much public interest in September. At the same time, attentiveness to the plight of hostages in the Gulf fell below levels recorded in previous surveys.

November

Only 46% knew that Congress adjourned having achieved a budget agreement, while 30% thought it adjourned without one and 24% had no idea. Age and education were closely related to the public's lack of knowledge in this area -only 31% of Americans under 30 years of age knew that an agreement was reached, while 66% of college graduates were aware of it.

TIMES MIRROR DATABASE

PUBLIC ATTENTIVENESS TO MAJOR NEWS STORIES

1990

PERCENT FOLLOWED VERY CLOSELY

66	Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the deployment of U.S. forces to Saudi Arabia (Aug 90)
63	Iraq's occupation of Kuwait and the deployment of U.S. forces to the Persian Gulf (Oct 90)
63	Iraq's occupation of Kuwait and the deployment of U.S. forces to the Persian Gulf (Sept 90)
62	Iraq's occupation of Kuwait and the presence of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf (Nov 90)
62	Recent increases in the price of gasoline (Oct 90)
60	Invasion of Panama (Jan 90)
57	The plight of the American hostages and other Westerners detained in Iraq (Sept 90)
57	Recent increase in the price of gasoline (Aug 90)
56	Recent increases in the price of gasoline (Sept 90)
49	The plight of American hostages and other Westerners detained in Iraq and Kuwait (Nov 90)
47	The plight of American hostages and other Westerners detained in Iraq and Kuwait (Oct 90)
46	Freeing of two Americans who had been held hostage in the Mideast (May 90)
39	Reports about the condition of the U.S. economy (Nov 90)
38	News about the candidates and elections in your state (Nov 90)
38	Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to the U.S. for a Summit meeting (June 90)
38	Drug use and efforts to combat it (Jan 90)
36	The murder of five people by a serial killer around the University of Florida campus in Gainesville (Sept 90)
34	Congressional and Administration efforts to reach a budget deficit agreement (Nov 90)
34	Attempts by Congress and the Administration to find ways to reduce the budget deficit (Oct 90)
34	Reports about flooding in Texas and other southwestern states (June 90)
33	Crash of the Colombian airliner near Kennedy airport in New York (Feb 90)
32	Criticisms of George Bush for being inconsistent in what he said about taxes and what he said about Persian Gulf policy (Nov 90)
31	Celebration of Earth Day (May 90)
30	Reports about the condition of the U.S. economy (Aug 90)
30	Freeing of jailed black South African leader Nelson Mandela (March 90)
30	President Bush's call for higher taxes to help reduce the federal deficit (July 90)
29	Reports about the condition of the U.S. economy (Sept 90)
29	Reports about the fires in Southern California (July 90)
29	Lithuania's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union and Moscow's response (April 90)
29	Suicide in Boston of Charles Stuart who murdered his pregnant wife and blamed it on a black man (Feb 90)
29	Political changes taking place in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and East Germany (Jan 90)
28	The death of 87 people in a fire at a social club in the Bronx, New York (April 90)

**PERCENT FOLLOWED
VERY CLOSELY**

- 28 Political changes taking place in the Soviet Union (March 90)
- 28 Arrest of Washington DC's Mayor Barry on drug use charges (Feb 90)
- 28 The revolution in Romania (Jan 90)
- 27 Deployment of U.S. marines to Liberia to protect the lives of Americans caught in the civil war (Aug 90)
- 27 Lithuania's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union and Moscow's response (May 90)
- 27 Acquittal of the owners of the McMartin Day Care Center in California who were charged with sexually abusing children (Feb 90)
- 27 The NFL playoffs (Jan 90)
- 26 Bush/Gorbachev summit meeting in Helsinki (Sept 90)
- 26 The death of Hank Gathers, a college basketball player, during a game (April 90)
- 26 Political changes taking place in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and East Germany (Feb 90)
- 24 Supreme Court decision that found laws against flag burning unconstitutional and the attempt in Congress to amend the Constitution (July 90)
- 24 Nelson Mandela's visit to the U.S. (July 90)
- 24 Deployment of the Hubble Space Telescope (May 90)
- 24 Difficulties the government is having in getting people to fill out Census forms (May 90)
- 24 The NCAA Basketball playoffs (April 90)
- 24 Supreme Court decision regarding a person's right to die (July 90)
- 23 Attempt in Idaho to pass a bill that would severely restrict abortions (April 90)
- 23 Greyhound bus drivers' strike (April 90)
- 23 Discussion of the reunification of Germany (March 90)
- 22 Reunification of Germany (Oct 90)
- 22 Washington Mayor Barry's trial (July 90)
- 22 The 54 year old Oregon woman suffering from Alzheimers who ended her life by using a suicide machine (July 90)
- 22 President Bush's visit to Colombia to attend a drug summit (March 90)
- 22 The Super Bowl (Feb 90)
- 22 Letter bombings of federal judges (Jan 90)
- 21 Controversy surrounding the way Roseanne Barr sang the National Anthem at a San Diego Padres baseball game (Aug 90)
- 21 Tensions between Moscow and the Baltic Republics of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania who wish to secede from the Soviet Union (June 90)
- 21 Discussions about German reunification (April 90)
- 21 Political changes taking place in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany and other countries of Eastern and Central Europe (March 90)
- 20 The murder on a New York subway platform of a Utah man attempting to protect his family from attack by teenage muggers (Sept 90)
- 20 Earthquake in Iran (July 90)

- 19 Attempts by Congress and the Administration to find ways to reduce the budget deficit (Aug 90)
- 19 Elections in Nicaragua (March 90)
- 18 News about the candidates and election campaigns in your state (Oct 90)
- 18 Special meetings between the Bush Administration and Congressional Leaders to find ways to reduce the federal deficit (June 90)
- 18 Continuing news about the Savings and Loan scandal (June 90)
- 18 Reports about renewed inflation and rising interest rates (May 90)

**PERCENT FOLLOWED
VERY CLOSELY**

- 18 Senator Moynihan's proposal to cut social security taxes (Feb 90)
- 17 Racial tension in New York City resulting from the Bensonhurst trial verdict and the black boycott of Korean grocers (June 90)
- 17 Discussions between the American and Japanese governments about trade issues (April 90)
- 17 A custody case involving a mother who went to jail and a little child taken to New Zealand by her grandparents (March 90)
- 16 Nomination of David Souter to the U.S. Supreme Court to replace Justice William Brennan (Aug 90)
- 16 Washington DC Mayor Marion Barry's trial ending in a mistrial (Aug 90)
- 16 Financial troubles of Donald Trump (July 90)
- 16 Dispute between the President and Congress over allowing Chinese students to remain in America (Feb 90)
- 15 Senate confirmation of Supreme Court Justice David Souter (Oct 90)
- 15 Controversy over the exclusion of blacks from membership in many country clubs at which national golf championship matches are played (Aug 90)
- 13 Worsening economic conditions in the Soviet Union (Sept 90)
- 13 Civil unrest and ethnic violence in Soviet Azerbaijan (Feb 90)
- 12 Major League Baseball's decision to force George Steinbrenner to give up active control of the New York Yankees (Aug 90)
- 12 Pledge of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress to end the armed struggle in South Africa (Aug 90)
- 12 Marital breakup of Donald and Ivana Trump (March 90)
- 11 The incident in Gaza in which a deranged Israeli killed seven Palestinians and the West bank riots that followed (June 90)
- 11 Legalization of banned black opposition groups in South Africa and the promise to free Nelson Mandela (Feb 90)
- 10 The spending and tax proposals made by Congressman Dan Rostenkowski to help reduce the budget deficit (April 90)
- 10 Academy Awards (April 90)

- 9 Aids conference in San Francisco (July 90)
- 9 May day protests in Moscow (May 90)
- 9 Bankruptcy of Drexel Burnham Lambert Inc. (March 90)
- 8 The murder in New York City of Jewish militant Rabbi Meir Kahane (Nov 90)
- 7 First reports from the 1990 U.S. census (Sept 90)
- 6 Continuing political unrest in the Ukraine and in other republics of the Soviet Union (Nov 90)
- 6 United Nations Children's Summit held in New York (Oct 90)
- 6 Elections in Romania (June 90)
- 6 The visit to the United States of Vaclav Havel, the new president of Czechoslovakia (March 90)
- 6 Trip of high ranking officials to China (Jan 90)
- 4 Dismissal of Pakistan's Prime Minister Bhutto by Pakistan's President (Aug 90)
- 4 Civil war in Cambodia (May 90)
- 2 Tom Cruise's separation from his wife (April 90)

KNOWLEDGE BY SUBJECT

- 87 Knew that CBS suspended Andy Rooney for comments that he made about blacks during a newspaper interview (March 90)
- 82 Knew General Manuel Noriega took refuge in a Vatican sanctuary (Jan 90)

- 79 Knew President Bush held a mild position on the Lithuania situation (May 90)
- 78 Knew Perrier was taken off the store shelves because of possible contamination (March 90)
- 79 Knew taxpayers will bail out failed Savings & Loan banks (June 90)
- 76 Knew George Bush hates broccoli (April 90)
- 70 Knew Romanian President Nicole Ceausescu was executed (Jan 90)

- 68 Knew there was no U.S. involvement in the revolution in Romania (Jan 90)
- 68 Knew Bush changed his tax policy (July 90)
- 67 Knew what types of taxes will be increased (Oct 90)
- 66 Knew of the recent Supreme Court decision on abortion (July 90)
- 66 Knew the rebels succeeded in overthrowing the existing Romanian government (Jan 90)
- 66 Knew that the Soviet Union is supporting U.S. efforts to get Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait (Aug 90)
- 66 Knew Joseph Hazelwood, the captain of the Exxon Valdez was found not guilty of the most serious charges made against him (April 90)
- 64 Knew that other countries will be sending armed forces to Saudi Arabia (Aug 90)
- 63 Knew Moscow tried to pressure Lithuania into withdrawing its declaration of independence by cutting off their fuel supply (May 90)
- 63 Knew Violeta Chamorro won the presidential election in Nicaragua (March 90)
- 63 Knew what types of taxes will be increased (Nov 90)
- 60 Correctly identified John Poindexter (April 90)

- 58 Knew East and West Germany had merged their monetary system (July 90)
- 56 Correctly identified Nelson Mandela (Feb 90)
- 51 Correctly identified David Souter (Oct 90)
- 51 Knew the Hubble space telescope had problems with its mirrors (July 90)
- 50 Knew Bush vetoed the family leave bill (July 90)
- 50 Knew Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's political position in the Kremlin has weakened (Feb 90)

- 47 Knew Social Security is taking in more money than it needs (Feb 90)
- 47 Knew the U.S. did not recognize Lithuania as an independent nation (April 90)
- 46 Knew Mikhail Gorbachev favors a multiparty system (March 90)
- 46 Knew Congress reached an agreement on a plan to cut the budget deficit (Oct 90)
- 44 Knew President Bush lost on capital gains (Oct 90)
- 40 Correctly identified Marion Barry (Feb 90)
- 40 Knew 50,000 died in earthquake in Iran (July 90)

- 37 Correctly identified Marla Maples (March 90)
- 36 Knew the U.S. will turn over control of the Panama Canal to Panama (Jan 90)
- 31 Knew the Supreme Court ruled that laws banning flag burning are constitutional (July 90)

KNOWLEDGE BY SUBJECT

- 27 Knew U.S. armed Iraq during their seven year war (Sept 90)
- 23 Knew of Savings & Loan banks in their area that have been taken over by the government (June 90)
- 20 Knew Richard Gephardt has been especially critical of George Bush (April 90)
- 20 Knew Boris Yeltsin was elected President of the Russian Republic (June 90)
- 20 Knew CBS got an exclusive interview with Saddam Hussein (Sept 90)
- 20 Correctly identified Louis Farrakhan (April 90)

- 17 Correctly identified Colin Powell (Jan 90)
- 17 Named any of the five U.S. Senators who are being investigated in the Savings & Loan scandal, the so called, "Keating Five" (May 90)
- 14 Knew U.S. armed Iran during their seven year war (Sept 90)
- 14 Correctly identified Vaclav Havel (March 90)
- 13 Knew April 22 is Earth Day (April 90)
- 10 Correctly identified Vaclav Havel (Jan 90)

- 5 Knew Ted Koppel was the first TV correspondent to broadcast from Baghdad (Sept 90)