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PUBLIC HOLDS CONFLICTING VIEWS OF PRESS REPORTS ABOUT GOVERNMENT MONITORING BANK RECORDS

The public is of two minds about news reports that the government has been secretly examining the bank records of American citizens who may have ties to terrorist groups. By a margin of 50%-34%, Americans think that news organizations have hurt rather than helped the interests of the American people with these reports. However, an even larger 65%-28% majority believes that these news accounts told citizens something that they should know about.

Partisanship is strongly related to how people think about these questions. Democrats are almost unanimous (82%) in believing that the public needed to know about the government’s bank monitoring program. Republicans are evenly divided on this question – 45% say it was something the public should know about, 47% say the public did not need to know.

By the same token, while nearly seven in ten Republicans (69%) believe the press reports have hurt the interests of the American people, relatively few Democrats agree (38%). Instead, a 46% plurality of Democrats regards the press reporting as beneficial to the public’s interest.

The findings are from a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press conducted July 6-19 among 2,003 adults nationwide. In the survey, half of respondents were asked if the reporting had helped or hurt the interests of the American people, while the other half were asked if this was something people

Partisan Gap on Press Reporting				
<i>Heard about government examining bank records of terrorist suspects</i>				
	<u>Total</u>	<u>Rep</u>	<u>Dem</u>	<u>Ind</u>
	%	%	%	%
A lot	24	29	23	22
A little	47	47	48	47
Nothing at all	29	24	29	31
Don’t know	*	*	*	*
	100	100	100	100
<i>In reporting this story, did news organizations...*</i>				
<i>Help or hurt the interests of the American people</i>				
Helped	34	17	46	38
Hurt	50	69	38	44
No effect/Don’t know	<u>16</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>18</u>
	100	100	100	100
<i>Tell the American people something they...</i>				
Should know about	65	45	82	63
Didn’t need to know	28	47	12	31
Don’t know	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>6</u>
	100	100	100	100

* Each question asked of half of the survey’s respondents.

should know about or didn't need to know about.

In addition, all respondents were asked how much they had heard about reports on the government program to examine bank records. About one-in-four (24%) have heard a lot, a similar number (29%) have heard nothing at all, with the rest saying they have heard "some" about it. Among Democrats and independents, hearing more about the story did not change their views about whether or not coverage of the story was appropriate. But the more Republicans have heard about news coverage of the government program, the more likely they are to say the reporting was damaging and unnecessary. Fully 82% of Republicans who heard a lot about the story say the interests of the American people were hurt by the reporting, and 57% say it was something the people didn't need to know about.

Overall, however, the public's reaction to this most recent case of conflict between press freedom and government secrecy is not unusual. Wide majorities have consistently supported a critical and independent press in previous Pew Research Center surveys – saying that press criticism of political leaders does more to prevent problems from arising than impede government performance. But at the same time, Americans also recognize the need for government secrecy, particularly when it relates to national security.

At no time was this more apparent than in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. A November, 2001 Pew Research Center survey found a 53% to 39% majority favoring the government's right to censor news it believes might threaten national security over the media's right to report what it sees as stories of national interest. But by a similar margin (52% to 40%) these same respondents felt that journalists should always dig hard to get all the information they can for their reports rather than trust government and military officials if they refuse to release information.

Americans age 65 and older are the most concerned about the potential harm caused by press revelations of the government's program. By nearly three-to-one (58% to 20%) older Americans believe the reporting hurt, not helped, America's interests. They are also the most likely to say that this was information that the American people did not need to know about.

Seniors More Concerned about Revelations

In reporting this story, did news organizations...

<i>Help or hurt the interests of the American people</i>	<u>18-29</u>	<u>30-49</u>	<u>50-64</u>	<u>65+</u>
	%	%	%	%
Helped	35	39	36	20
Hurt	44	48	49	58
No effect/Don't know	<u>21</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>22</u>
	100	100	100	100

Tell the American people something they...

Should know about	69	67	65	57
Didn't need to know	22	26	30	35
Don't know	<u>9</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>8</u>
	100	100	100	100

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Results for the July 2006 Religion and Public Life survey are based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of Schulman, Ronca & Bucuvalas, Inc. (SRBI) among a nationwide sample of 2,003 adults, 18 years of age or older, during the period July 6-19, 2006. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 2.5 percentage points. For results based on Form 1 (N=996) and Form 2 (N=1007), the sampling error is plus or minus 3.5 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.

ABOUT THE CENTER

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:

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**PEW RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE PEOPLE & THE PRESS
AND PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE
JULY 2006 RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE SURVEY
FINAL TOPLINE
July 6-19, 2006
N=2,003**

Q.3 Recently, there have been news reports that the federal government has been secretly examining the bank records of American citizens who might have ties to terrorist groups...how much have you heard about this? **[READ, IN ORDER]**

24	A lot
47	A little [OR]
29	Nothing at all
<u>*</u>	Don't know/refused (VOL.)
100	

ASK FORM 1 ONLY [N=996]:

Q.4F1 In reporting that the federal government has been secretly examining the bank records of American citizens who might have ties to terrorist groups, do you believe that news organizations have helped or hurt the interests of the American people?

34	Helped
50	Hurt
3	No effect on American people (VOL.)
<u>13</u>	Don't know/refused (VOL.)
100	

ASK FORM 2 ONLY [N=1,007]:

Q.5F2 In reporting that the federal government has been secretly examining the bank records of American citizens who might have ties to terrorist groups, do you believe that news organizations have told the American people something they should know about, or was it something they didn't need to know about?

65	Something they should know about
28	Something they didn't need to know about
<u>7</u>	Don't know/refused (VOL.)
100	