

# DOING WELL AND DOING GOOD:

*How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking  
the News Audience and Weakening Democracy—  
And What News Outlets Can Do About It*

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The news has changed greatly during the past two decades. In response to the intensely competitive media environment created by cable news and entertainment, news outlets have softened their coverage. Their news has also become increasingly critical in tone.

Soft news and critical journalism have not stopped the decline in news audiences. Cable television and, more recently, the Internet have cut deeply into the readership of newspapers and news magazines and into the viewing audiences for network and local newscasts. This attrition might have been even greater if the news had not been recast into a softer and more critical form. One thing is certain: news consumption has fallen dramatically during the past decade (FIGURE 1).

Soft news and critical journalism, whatever their initial effect, may now be hastening the decline in news audiences. Evidence also suggests that soft news and critical journalism are weakening the foundation of democracy by diminishing the public's information about public affairs and its interest in politics. Can the news media do well and also do good? Can they meet their need to attract audiences and also fulfill their responsibility to inform the public? In this report, we will present evidence that suggests these objectives are compatible—indeed, are mutually reinforcing. We will argue:

- That hard news and not soft news is the reason why most people pay attention to news;
- That people who prefer hard news are heavier consumers of news than those who prefer soft news;
- That the trend toward soft news has contributed to declining interest in the news;
- That hard news strategies are a viable response to a hyper-competitive media environment;
- That critical journalism has weakened people's interest in politics and, with that, their interest in news; and
- That journalists can temper critical journalism in ways that will heighten

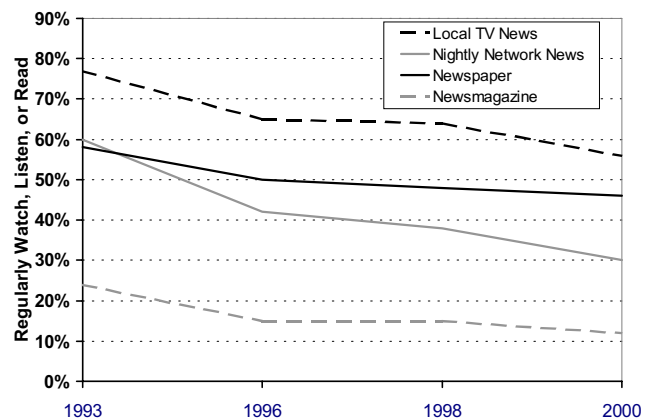
interest in politics and in news, and that will strengthen the press's watchdog role.

These arguments are based on a two-year news study that was undertaken with the support of a grant from the Smith-Richardson Foundation. We conducted national surveys designed to measure Americans' news habits, interests, and preferences. Our research also includes an analysis of 5331 news stories, randomly selected from those available on LEXIS/NEXIS during the 1980-1999 period for two television networks, two weekly news magazines, three leading newspapers, and twenty-six local dailies. The content analysis was limited to the front and local sections of newspapers (thereby excluding, for example, the sports and travel sections) and conventional news broadcasts (thereby excluding programs such as NBC's "Dateline.") Additional information on the study's research methods, including the identity of the news organizations included in the content analysis, is provided in the appendices.

## SOFT NEWS VS. HARD NEWS

Nearly everyone believes that the news today is substantially different than it was even a decade or two ago. As competition between news organizations has intensified, the news has edged toward entertainment in its form and content—what the scholar and former broadcaster Marvin Kalb calls "the new news."<sup>1</sup> Market-centered

**Figure 1: News Audiences Are Shrinking**



Source: Pew Research Center on the People and the Press.

journalism is one description of the tendency. “Infotainment” is another. “Soft news”—the term we will commonly use in this report—is a third.

Critics say that the news is based increasingly on what will interest an audience rather than on what the audience needs to know. Former FCC chairman Newton Minow says that much of today’s news is “pretty close to tabloid.” Former PBS anchor Robert MacNeil says that the trends “are toward the sensational, the hype, the hyperactive, the tabloid values to drive out the serious.”<sup>2</sup> Some critics have used harsher language. Matthew Carleton Ehrlich describes today’s news as “the journalism of outrageousness.”<sup>3</sup>

Soft news’s critics have not gone unanswered. Its defenders say that audiences are the lifeblood of the news—that without economic security, a free press would exist only in name. They say there is no value in news that is admired but is not watched or read. And they claim that soft content is not by definition worthless—it provides information that can guide people’s actions as citizens.

Soft news does bring some people to the news who would not otherwise pay attention and who would otherwise be even less informed. And there is no question that some soft news stories do offer useful lessons to citizens—about safety, health, and similar subjects. Nevertheless, the evidence is mounting that soft news imposes a net cost on democracy.<sup>4</sup> News that highlights incidents and developments that have little to do with public affairs and that are selected for their capacity to shock or entertain can distort people’s perceptions of reality. There was a period in the 1990s, for example, when crime news skyrocketed and people came to believe the crime rate was rising even though it was actually falling.<sup>5</sup> Soft news also diminishes the quality of public information and discourse.<sup>6</sup> In Neil Postman’s words, we risk “amusing ourselves to death.”<sup>7</sup> Americans devote more hours of the day to media consumption than any activity except sleep and work.<sup>8</sup> If during this time, we are steeped in entertainment and distracted by remote incidents, the contribution that the news could make to the quality of public life is

diminished.

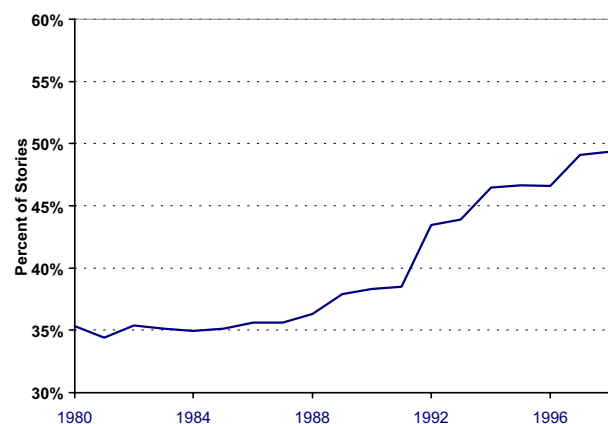
It may be diminished unnecessarily. Soft news may actually be eroding people’s interest in news. Before presenting evidence for this contention, we need to clarify what is meant by soft news and to show just how fully it has become part of day-to-day news coverage.

**Defining and Measuring Soft News.** A leading journalist was once asked how he defined the news. After a pause, he said: “I know news when I see it.” The same might be said of soft news. Journalists and scholars clearly have some notion of soft news in mind when they criticize or defend it. Yet they seldom define the term plainly.<sup>9</sup>

Soft news is sometimes used in a way that implies it is all the news that is not “hard news.”<sup>10</sup> Hard news refers to coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life, such as an earthquake or airline disaster.<sup>11</sup> Information about these events is presumably important to citizens’ ability to understand and respond to the world of public affairs.<sup>12</sup> News that is not of this type is, by definition, “soft.”

By this standard, soft news has increased dramatically as a proportion of news coverage. News stories that have no clear connection to policy issues have increased from less than 35 percent of all stories in 1980 to roughly 50 percent today (FIGURE 2). Stories with a public

**Figure 2: News Stories Without a Public Policy Component**

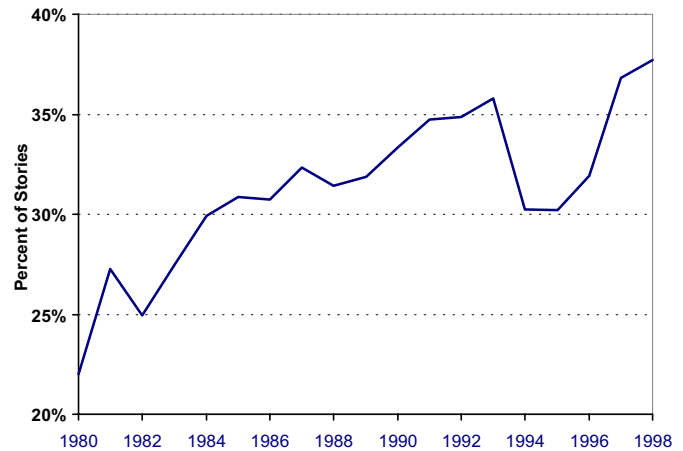


policy component—hard news—have declined by a corresponding degree. News mediums differ somewhat in the amount of change, but the trend is the same for all of them—local TV news, national TV news, leading newspapers, local dailies, and weekly news magazines. Each has less policy-related coverage today than a decade or two ago.

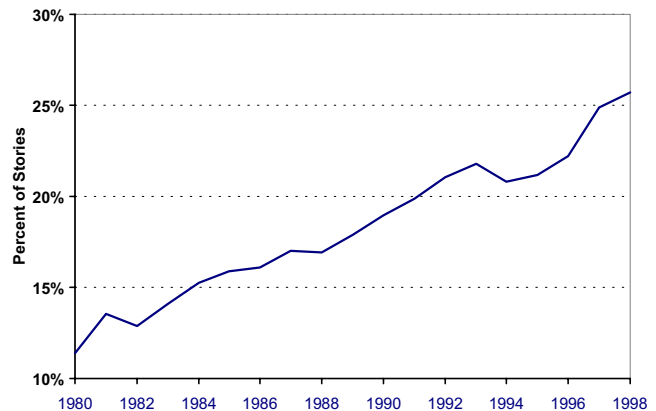
Soft news has also been identified by certain characteristics. It has been described, for example, as news that is typically more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news.<sup>13</sup> These characteristics, in fact, have become more prevalent in the news. In the early 1980s, taking all news outlets into account, approximately 25 percent of news stories had a moderate to high level of sensationalism compared with nearly 40 percent now (FIGURE 3). Stories that include a human-interest element also figure more prominently in the news (FIGURE 4). They accounted for less than 11 percent of stories in the early 1980s; that number has more than doubled (26%) since then. Dramatic incidents—crimes and disasters—are now also a larger part of the news (FIGURE 5). Stories in the “news you can use” category have also doubled in number since the early 1980’s. Other examples could be provided but the point would be the same: the characteristics commonly ascribed to soft news have become a larger part of news content.

Finally, soft news has been described as a change in the vocabulary of news. The news is said to have become more personal and familiar in its form of presentation and less distant and institutional. To examine this thesis, we made use of DICTION, a computer program that identifies the frequency with which certain types of words are used in text material. When applied to news stories, DICTION provides a precise indicator of how, if at all, the vocabulary of reporting has changed. Our findings show a dramatic change in this vocabulary that is consistent with the soft news thesis. COLLECTIVES and SELF-REFERENCE are among the DICTION categories. COLLECTIVES include words used to reflect categorical modes of thought, such as social groupings (for example, crowd, humanity), task

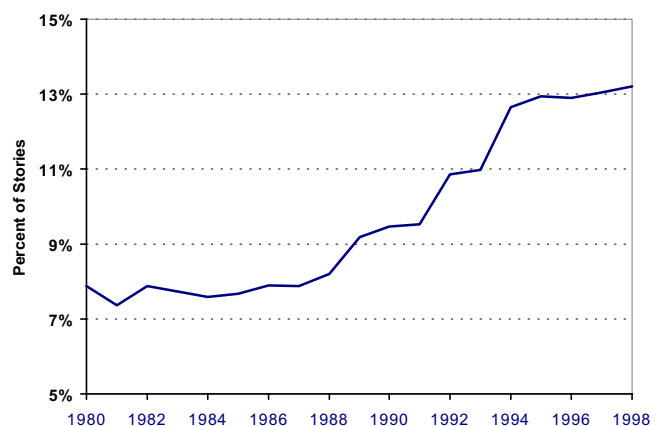
**Figure 3: Sensationalism in News Stories**



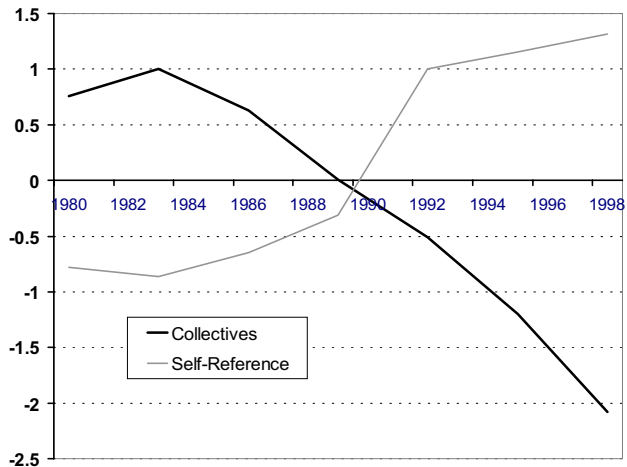
**Figure 4: News With a Human-Interest Element**



**Figure 5: Crime and Disaster As a Subject of News Stories**



**Figure 6: Use of Collectives and Self-Reference Words in News Stories**



groups (army, congress), and geographical entities (county, republic). SELF-REFERENCE contains all first-person references (for example, I, I'm, me, mine, myself). During the past two decades, reporters' use of COLLECTIVES words, which are part of the vocabulary of hard news, has declined substantially (FIGURE 6). In contrast, their use of words in the SELF-REFERENCE category, which help form the vocabulary of soft news, has increased substantially.

Further evidence of how the vocabulary of news has changed is found in other DICTION categories. There are 35 categories all together, and most of them have either increased or decreased in frequency during the past two decades in ways that reflect the softening of news. Among the word categories that are used more frequently, for example, is HUMAN INTEREST, which includes standard personal pronouns, words representing family members and relations, and generic terms, such as friend or baby. Among those used less frequently is COMPLEXITY, which is a measure of the average length of the words in a story.

In sum, the news has softened considerably. No matter how soft news is defined—as a residual category to hard news, as a set of story characteristics, or as the words of reporting—it is a measurably larger part of news coverage. The trend is not confined to local or national news organizations, nor is it limited to the broadcast or print medium. The trend is not equally

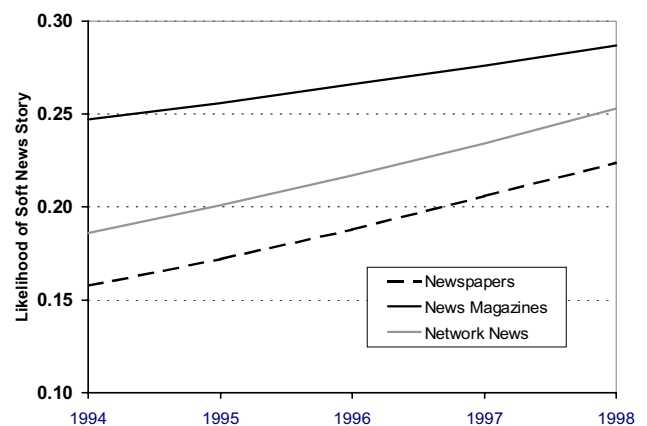
pronounced in all media, but it is evident in all (FIGURE 7).

**Soft News Sells, or Does It?** The growth of soft news is rooted in marketing and ratings studies that indicate entertainment-based news can attract and hold audiences. Local television stations have boosted their ratings through soft news formats, and soft news leads have worked their way onto front pages and to the top of newscasts.<sup>14</sup> Crime stories dominate local TV newscasts, providing the largest share of lead stories and filling the largest proportion of air time.<sup>15</sup> Some major news organizations have also softened their news substantially. NBC revamped its nightly newscast in 1997 by adding features and trimming its hard news, particularly stories from abroad.<sup>16</sup> “The NBC Sprightly News” is how one critic described the new format,<sup>17</sup> but it may have helped NBC to become the ratings leader.

Nevertheless, soft news strategies have not always succeeded and they appear to be faltering at a growing rate. Local TV news for a while was untouched by rating declines. Local audiences held steady as newspaper circulation and network news ratings fell. In the past few years, however, local TV news has lost a fourth of its audience—a decline exceeding that of any other medium.

This report does not claim that the market-research studies that underlie the soft news

**Figure 7: The Increasing Frequency of Soft News Stories**



*Note: Lines represent the probability that a reader or viewer randomly exposed to a story would find a soft news story.*

strategy are inaccurate. Their findings have helped some news organizations to successfully market their product. These studies, however, have a substantial limitation. They focus on the short term. This perspective is an inevitable consequence of a hyper-competitive industry where reputations and jobs are kept or lost according to the latest audience ratings or circulation figures. But the short-term and long-term effects of soft news may be quite different. Sensationalism draws people's attention in the first instance but endless sensationalism may ultimately dull it.

The history of the news business suggests that quality prevails over pizzazz in the long run. Our evidence suggests that the axiom still holds. We will start with a look at Americans' opinions of today's news.

#### **What Americans Think of Today's News.**

Americans are ambivalent at best about today's news. In our survey, 49 percent claimed it is "excellent" or "good" while 51 percent said it is "fair," "poor," or "awful." Only 9 percent think it is excellent, a figure not greatly different than the 7 percent who think it is awful.

By a wide margin, Americans say the news is "informative" (FIGURE 8). They find it "interesting" but curiously do not find it highly "enjoyable." They think it is "depressing," "negative," and "sensational." They are split evenly on whether it is "superficial" or "thorough" and whether it is "biased" or "fair." A majority claim it is "accurate" but more than two in five call it "misleading."

Americans tend to believe the news has declined in quality. By a 5-3 margin Americans tend to think the news has gotten "worse" rather than "better". This opinion is more pronounced among people who follow the news regularly and those who have followed the news long enough to recall a different news era. People who think the news has gone "soft"—that it has become more sensational and superficial—are also more likely to say its quality has deteriorated.

#### **What Type of News Do Americans Say They Like?**

In our audience survey, we sought to measure respondents' preference for hard or soft news by

**Figure 8: How People Perceive the News**

<b>Is the News...?</b>	
Sensational/Serious	58/42%
Depressing/Uplifting	84/16%
Misleading/Accurate	42/58%
Not Enjoyable/Enjoyable	52/48%
Uninformative/Informative	16/84%
Negative/Positive	77/23%
Superficial/Thorough	50/50%
Boring/Interesting	23/77%
Biased/Fair	47/53%

asking whether they preferred "news that sticks mainly to stories about major events and issues affecting the community and the country" or "news that focuses on specific incidents such as a crime or fire or accident?" Respondents had a clear preference for hard news (FIGURE 9). Two-and-a-half times as many respondents said they prefer stories about major events to stories about specific incidents. In a follow-up question, respondents whose first choice was hard news (hereafter, the "hard news consumers") said, by two-to-one, that they "would like to see less" soft news. In contrast, most of those whose first choice was soft news (hereafter, "soft news consumers") said, by two-to-one, that they liked hard news "almost as much" (FIGURE 10).

Soft news is not restricted to stories about crimes, fires, and accidents. To obtain a broader indicator, respondents were asked about their interest in various types of news. Public-affairs stories were again at the top, although they shared this position with health-related stories, many of which are of the soft news type. Both categories ranked far higher than the others and also appealed to a broader segment of the public. Sports news, business and finance news, crime news, and celebrity and entertainment news had much less overall appeal and attracted narrower audiences—each was of keen interest to some people and of little or no interest to others.

Direct questions about news preferences provide useful information but may be subject to response bias. Just as some people overstate how often they vote, some may exaggerate their

interest in public-affairs news. People may also be reluctant to admit an interest in crime and celebrity news. To reduce these possible sources of measurement error, we developed an indirect test of preferences—21 headlines that were representative of soft and hard news headlines that appear regularly in the news (FIGURE 11). For each headline, respondents were asked of their interest in reading a story with that headline. The Headline Test confirmed the previous findings: that hard news is more appealing than soft news to most people and that hard news consumers have less tolerance for soft

news than soft news consumers have for hard news (FIGURE 11).

**Who Pays Closer Attention to News—Hard or Soft News Consumers?** Respondents who have substantial exposure to a news medium nearly every day can reasonably be said to use it regularly.<sup>18</sup> By this standard, 33 percent of Americans regularly read a daily paper’s news pages, 43 percent regularly watch local TV news, 29 percent regularly watch national cable or broadcast news, and 24 percent regularly listen to radio news.<sup>19</sup>

Hard news consumers are much heavier consumers of news. Forty percent of them regularly read a daily paper’s news pages compared with only 26 percent of soft news consumers. For national TV news, hard news consumers have a 46 to 27 percent edge. The difference for radio news is proportionally even larger—28 percent to 11 percent. Only in the case of local TV are news habits equal—45 percent of hard news consumers and 47 percent of soft news consumers are regular viewers.

In sum, hard news consumers are the foundation of the news audience. More people are interested in hard news than soft news, and those who prefer hard news devote a lot more time to news.

**Is Soft News Contributing to Audience Decline?** Soft news has been the industry’s answer to the problem of shrinking audiences. As we suggested earlier, however, its long-term effect on the public as a whole may be injurious. Soft news may be diminishing the overall level of interest in news.

This possibility is evident in the perceptions, opinions, and behavior of hard news consumers. They are the core consumer group but they are hardly enamored with the news. Compared with the soft news audience, the hard news audience is more likely to say that the news is:

- fair, poor, or awful rather than good or excellent
- getting worse rather than better
- biased rather than fair
- sensational rather than serious

**Figure 9: Hard News Is Preferred News**

**Proportion Preferring News About...**

Major events or issues (hard news)	63%
Specific events like crime (soft news)	24
Both equally (hard and soft news)	13
	100%

**Figure 10: Interest in Other Type of News**

	Hard News Consumers		Soft News Consumers
Like soft news almost as much	33%	Like hard news almost as much	69%
Would like to see less soft news	67	Would like to see less hard news	31
	100%		100%

**Figure 11: Do Hard News Headlines Attract More Interest?**

	All Respondents	Hard News Consumers	Soft News Consumers
Hard News Headlines	3.34	3.44	3.04
Soft News Headlines	3.14	3.04	3.33

- misleading rather than accurate
- superficial rather than thorough
- uninformative rather than informative
- unenjoyable rather than enjoyable
- negative rather than positive
- depressing rather than uplifting
- boring rather than interesting.

In any other business, this type of response by the core consumer group would be cause for alarm. So it should be for the nation's news business. Its primary audience is less than happy with the product it is getting. They are also more likely than the soft news consumers to say they are paying less attention to the news than in the past. The reasons they cite are complaints about soft news. "Too much crime and drugs," said one respondent. "They show more bad things than good," said another.

**Lessons from Local TV News.** Local television, as noted previously, has a regular news audience built equally on hard and soft news consumers. In the other markets, soft news consumers are the smaller group. Their attraction to local TV news is undoubtedly attributable to its softer news content. Yet, news can repel as well as attract. Why do hard news consumers not pay relatively more attention to local TV news? Why are they not a majority of its regular audience, given the fact that they are a large majority of other audiences? Could it be that local stations through their soft news strategies have been driving them away?

NewsLab recently conducted a study that sought to determine why local TV news, once unaffected by audience decline, has lost a huge chunk of its audience in recent years.<sup>20</sup> The NewsLab study included a national survey of 500 former or less frequent viewers of local news. Many said they had cut back on their viewing time because they no longer found the content of these newscasts worthwhile. Their reasons are a litany of soft news complaints:

- "too much crime" (32%)
- "seldom presents positive things" (24%)
- "always the same stuff" (25%)
- "too many fluff stories" (25%)
- "too negative" (23%).<sup>21</sup>

The Project for Excellence in Journalism has been systematically tracking the content and audience ratings of 146 local TV news programs. Nearly two-thirds of the stations that have the highest quality newscasts have had an increase in ratings in recent years, a higher percentage than any other category.<sup>22</sup>

Although NewsLab's research is directed at local TV news, the performance of National Public Radio supports the notion that hard news has drawing power. NPR is the only national broadcast outlet that has increased its audience since the 1980s. Although NPR relies on features as well as hard news, its features tend to be interpretive of the day's hard news events. NPR has a higher proportion of hard news consumers in its audience than other broadcast outlets or the typical daily paper.

**Continuing Fragmentation and Hard News.** It is not the purpose of this report to propose market-specific strategies.<sup>23</sup> The goal is to raise questions about how trends in news content might be affecting people's interest in news. Nevertheless, there is one development that has important implications for news content strategies: audiences will continue to fragment as new competitors, including those on the Internet, contend for audience share. As the histories of radio and cable television indicate, a highly fragmented market rewards those who appeal narrowly to a particular audience segment. In radio's early days, the strongest stations were those that offered general programming. Over time, people became more selective and radio became a niche medium—talk stations, country music stations, oldies stations, top-forty stations, all-news stations, and so on.

When information sources are abundant, people tend to gravitate toward those that offer a differentiated product. The way in which people navigate cable television is an example. Although there are many available channels, the typical user concentrates on six to eight of them, returning again and again to these channels and staying tuned when something of interest appears. The six to eight channels, of course, vary from viewer to viewer, depending on personal interests.

As markets continue to fragment, news



strategies are almost certain to target either the hard or soft news consumer. Demand for hard news should be stronger because of the larger size and narrower preferences of hard news consumers. The strategy that is likely to fail is one that targets both soft and hard news consumers. The problems with this strategy are already evident in local TV markets: a recent study found newscasts that emphasize either hard news or soft news have higher average ratings than those pursuing a middle course.<sup>24</sup>

**The Limits to Soft News.** Soft news has a place in the news. Even the most ardent hard news consumers like the diversion that an amusing or compelling soft news story can provide. But soft news is a weak foundation for a news program or newspaper. To build the news around something other than public affairs is to build it on sand. People attend to daily news year in and year out because they are interested in keeping track of their community, the country, and the world. Even most of those who prefer soft news admit that they like hard news nearly as well. Soft news can spice up the news but cannot anchor it.

Soft news, if used with restraint, can expand an audience by attracting people who find the news more enjoyable when it has a touch of personal drama. But heavy doses of soft news will ultimately wear out an audience, just as even the best sitcom eventually loses its audience. Soft news is repetitive and thus at some point tiresome. The faces of soft news change daily—today’s murder victim is not tomorrow’s—but they are sadly interchangeable as their numbers mount.

Hard news affects the audience in a very different way. It would be grandiose to claim that hard news is the daily unfolding of a people’s history. But it is a snapshot of key moments in public life. The plots and characters are constantly shifting, and the stakes are sometimes high. It is an on-going story affecting all of us and, for more than a century, has been the primary reason that millions of people each day choose to spend some of their time on the news. Soft news lacks that kind of drawing power.

## CRITICAL JOURNALISM VS. CREDIBLE JOURNALISM

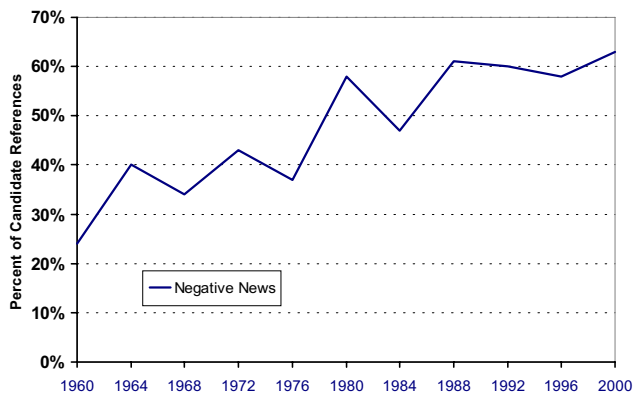
“Journalism and democracy share a common fate,” writes James Carey of Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism. “Without the institutions or spirit of democracy,” Carey says, “journalists are reduced to propagandists or entertainers.” He says further: “When journalists measure their success solely by the size of their readership or audience, by the profits of their companies, or by their incomes, status, and visibility, they have caved into the temptation of false gods, of selling their heritage for a pottage...”<sup>25</sup>

What Carey could have added is that news and politics share a common fate. Interest in news and interest in politics are inextricably linked. Very little sustained attention to news exists outside of a sustained interest in politics. The news is a window onto the world of public affairs. Without an interest in that world, there is little reason to follow the news. And people who do not have much political interest do not, in fact, consume much news.

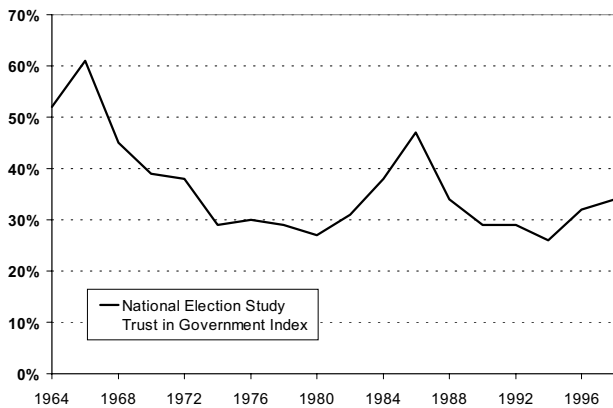
It is in this context that a second trend in the news—critical journalism—becomes an important consideration. Critical journalism has weakened people’s interest in politics and, with that, their interest in news.

**The Rise of Critical Journalism.** Traditional reporting came under attack within the news media in the 1960s. The existing rules held that reporters should refrain from speculation and confine themselves to reporting the facts. Newsmakers had the advantage under these rules: their public words and actions largely determined the content of political coverage. The rules of reporting changed with Vietnam and Watergate, when the deceptions perpetrated by the Johnson and Nixon administrations convinced reporters that they had let the nation down by taking political leaders at their word. Two presidents had lied, and politicians’ words and actions would no longer be taken at face value.<sup>26</sup> Other developments—including the growing celebrity status of the television journalist and heightened audience competition—also fueled a more critical form of reporting.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 12: Negative Coverage of Presidential Candidates**

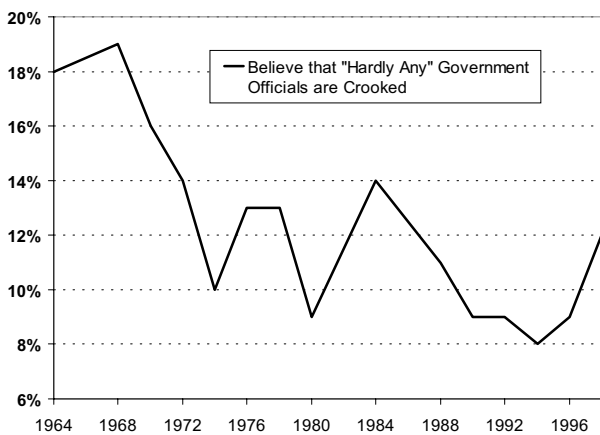


**Figure 13: Trust in Government Has Declined**



Source: *The National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan*

**Figure 14: Trust in Politicians' Honesty Has Declined**



Source: *The National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan*

Journalists today find fault with most everything that politicians say and do. The press no longer even has much respect for public officials' private lives—even their bedroom behavior is fair game for news stories. Reporters, as Michael Robinson suggests, seem to have taken some motherly advice and turned it upside down: "If you don't have anything bad to say about anyone, don't say anything at all."<sup>28</sup>

As a result, negative coverage of politics has risen dramatically in recent decades. Negative coverage of presidential candidates, for example, now exceeds their positive coverage (FIGURE 12).<sup>29</sup> By 1990, negative coverage of Congress and its members was over 80%.<sup>30</sup> Each president since 1976—Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton—has received more negative coverage than his predecessor.<sup>31</sup> Federal agencies have fared no better; in the 1990-1995 period, for example, not a single cabinet-level agency received more positive than negative coverage. As portrayed by the press, America's public leadership is almost universally inept and self-serving.<sup>32</sup>

**Declining Political Trust and Interest.** Negative news has weakened Americans' attachments to politics. Trust in government has dropped sharply in the past four decades (FIGURE 13). The change has not been a constant one. After 1980 and again recently—in both cases, as a response to a stronger economy—trust has risen, but at no time in the past three decades has it come close to reaching its earlier level. Meanwhile, the proportion of Americans who think most government officials are honest has dropped substantially (FIGURE 14). It is now roughly half what it was in 1968, during the Vietnam War.

Interest in public affairs has also declined substantially (FIGURE 15). The number of Americans who say that they are interested in public affairs "most of the time" has fallen from roughly 35 percent to 25 percent. A few decades ago, nearly twice as many Americans claimed to be interested "most of the time" as said they were interested "only now and then." Today, the amount of people who say they are interested in public affairs "only now and then" is equal to the amount who say they are interested "most of the

time” (25%).

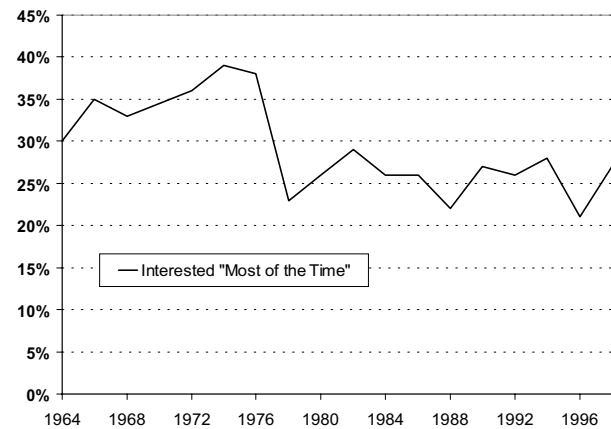
**Critical Journalism and Declining Interest in News.** Critical journalism has contributed to the decline of political trust and interest. It is not the only factor, nor necessarily the major one. Scandals that have shaken Americans’ confidence in the presidency have contributed, as has the current politics of money and spin. Social change has also contributed; America’s young adults are markedly less interested in politics than earlier generations of young adults (see box “Young Adults: Why They Don’t Care Much About News or Politics). Nevertheless, critical reporting is part of the problem. Research studies show that negative news is eroding Americans’ political trust and interest.<sup>33</sup>

The decline in Americans’ political interest has diminished their interest in news. As politics becomes less attractive to citizens, so, too, does the news. Individuals who have a strong interest in politics are three and one-half times more likely (83% to 24%) to follow the news closely than those with a weak interest. As interest falls step-by-step, so too does news consumption (FIGURE 16).

Other indicators tell the same story. In our survey, respondents who do not follow the news regularly were asked why they do not pay more attention. Negative perceptions of politics were a prominent factor. Fifty-nine percent cited their belief that “politics has become pretty disgusting and is less deserving of my attention” as a “very” or “somewhat” important reason why they do not pay more attention to news. Moreover, the best predictor in our survey of whether people say they are now paying “less” rather than “more” attention to the news is the perception that today’s news is “negative” rather than “positive” (FIGURE 17). Among those who claim they are playing less attention today than several years ago, 93 percent perceive the news to be largely negative in tone.

**Bad News Sells—But Not In All Subject Areas.** Some journalists might contend that bad news sells—always has, always will—and that whatever people might claim, they are actually drawn to bad news rather than repelled by it. This contention, even if true, is not relevant in the

**Figure 15: Interest in Public Affairs Has Declined**



Source: *The National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan*

**Figure 16: Political Interest Drives News Consumption**

News Consumption	High Interest	Moderate Interest	Low Interest
High	84%	37%	15%
Medium	14	46	34
Low	2	17	51
	100%	100%	100%

**Figure 17: People Who Believe News Is Negative Now Paying Less Attention**

News Is:	More Attention	Some Attention	Less Attention
Positive	31%	16%	7%
Negative	69	84	93
	100%	100%	100%

context of the current argument. It is based on the long-term effect of negative political coverage on people’s interest in politics and thereby the news.

Nevertheless, “bad news is good news” is an old adage of reporting, and it helpful to examine its validity in the narrower context of specific news stories. In our Headline Test, we administered two versions of each of the 21 headlines. One was a positive version (for example, “Young Girl Survives House Fire”) and one was negative (“Young Girl Dies in House Fire”). Half of the respondents were administered the positive version and half received the negative one, and each respondent was administered a mix of the two types. Negative headlines did attract more interest than the positive ones (FIGURE 18). The difference was not large, and tone was less important than content. The positive and negative versions of a headline about Middle East conflict, for example, drew more interest than either version of a headline about drug charges involving a pro football player. Nevertheless, the negative headlines attracted more interest on average than the positive versions.

However, this was true only of soft news stories. The positive versions of the hard news headlines actually drew slightly more interest on average than the negative versions. People do find a story about a fatal accident more compelling than a non-fatal one, but a story about a failed public policy does not necessarily

**Figure 18: Preference for Positive & Negative News**

	All News Stories	Soft News Stories	Hard News Stories
Average for Positive Headlines	3.25	3.11	3.37
Average for Negative Headlines	3.31	3.23	3.33

attract more attention than one about a successful policy. In fact, Americans seem about as tired of negative political news as they are of negative political advertising. According to recent surveys, a majority of Americans believe that public-affairs reporting has become too negative, too sensational, and too intrusive.<sup>34</sup>

**Toward a More Credible Form of Journalism.**

The idea that the news is too negative is one that many journalists reject. They claim that they are merely doing their job: the public is better served by a highly skeptical and intrusive press than a compliant one. CNN correspondent Bob Franken says, “We historically are not supposed to be popular, and it’s almost our role to be bearer of bad news.”<sup>35</sup>

Critical journalism, however, places an extraordinary demand on the reporter. In theory, it requires the journalist to thoroughly scrutinize the behavior of officials and bring to light their shortcomings. And indeed, there are instances where careful investigative journalism has contributed to proper governance. In the early 1970s, for example, the U.S. press through its Watergate investigations helped force the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Top-notch investigative journalism, however, requires an amount of time that most journalists are not normally allowed to devote to stories. It ordinarily takes a great deal of effort to determine the validity of a politician’s claim or to prove instances of wrongdoing or ineptitude. The pressures of the 24-hour news cycle make it nearly impossible for journalists to regularly engage in high-quality investigative reporting.

As a consequence, most of the negative content is supplied through journalists’ use of sources rather than deep investigation. When a politician makes a statement or takes action, reporters turn to adversaries to attack it. The critical element is supplied, not by a careful assessment of the claim or action, but by the insertion of a counter-claim: “This has become a routine procedure... Instead of straight news, [journalists] prefer, on supposedly professional grounds, to support a controversy. This development or degeneration of critical journalism explains, in our view, the high rate of criticism in the news.”<sup>36</sup> This type of critical

## Young Adults: Why They Don't Care Much About News or Politics

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About half of today's young adults pay no appreciable attention to news. They do not read a daily paper regularly and do not closely follow the daily news on television, even though they may catch it from time to time. Why is this the case? A prevalent explanation is that they do not have a reading habit. That is true of many of them, which may account for why they do not read the newspaper. But nearly all of them watch television and many watch a lot of it. Why is not television news a regular habit?

The primary reason is that most young adults do not have much interest in politics. Compared with 25 percent of older adults, 42 percent of those under 30 years of age express little or no interest in politics. Their political interest and news exposure are closely correlated ( $r=.56$ ). As young people's political interest increases, so does their level of news exposure. The problem is, not many of them care about politics.

Why is this the case? Although young adults are chronically less interested in

politics than older people, today's young people are particularly uninterested. They grew up in an era when political issues were small in magnitude and when cable television and its entertaining programming dominated home life. Their childhood experience was very different than that of the generation preceding them. That generation was raised on Vietnam, civil rights, the Cold War, and Watergate. Twenty-four percent of them report that "quite a lot" of attention was paid in their home to politics when they were growing up. Only a third say "not much" attention in the home was given to politics. In contrast, among the latest generation of young adults, only 14 percent say "quite a lot" of attention was paid to politics in the home and over 50 percent say "not much."

The earlier generation also grew up at a time when most television sets in America were tuned at the dinner hour to the ABC, CBS, or NBC evening news. That generation was raised on broadcast television and, in most markets, the nightly newscasts were the most readily available programs in the early evening. The current generation of young adults was raised on cable television.

Entertainment programming was readily available at all hours, and it dominated their TV exposure. Only 39 percent of this generation say that news was a "daily part of home life" when they were growing up. Among people of the preceding generation—those who grew up in the "golden age" of broadcast television—59 percent say that the news was a "daily part of home life."

For analysts who seek to understand why today's young adults have so little interest in news and in politics, the answer lies largely in the childhood experiences that have just been described. This generation was nurtured on neither politics nor news. Much of what they did experience in these two realms was discouraging—negative news and scandal-laced politics. Some of these Americans will acquire a greater interest in news and politics as they settle into their middle age, but their childhood socialization experiences will have a lasting impact. They cannot be expected to quickly or fully acquire what they failed to acquire while growing up.

**Figure 19: Percent of Air Time, 2000  
General Election  
Labor Day to Election Day**

Journalists	74%
Candidates	12
All Others	14
	100%

*Source: Center for Media and Public Affairs for  
Shorenstein Center/Smith Richardson Soft News Study*

reporting, says the political scientist Larry Sabato, is more properly described as “attack journalism.”<sup>37</sup> It is rooted in superficial conflict and controversy rather than careful analysis and inquiry. Coverage of the Democratic-controlled Congress of 1993-1994 by the national media was nearly 70 percent negative—it was derided as a do-nothing Congress. When Congress shifted to Republican hands in 1995-1996, its coverage, too, was nearly 70 percent negative—it was derided as a do-too-much Congress.<sup>38</sup>

Increasingly, the journalist has become a direct participant. No longer constrained by a need to place newsmakers’ words and actions at the center of the story, reporters have become the focus. In broadcast network coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign, for example, reporters who were covering the candidates spoke six minutes for every minute the candidates’ words could be heard on the air (FIGURE 19). Reporters now regularly pass sweeping judgments about what politicians are saying and doing.<sup>39</sup> Their judgments are constrained by a norm of partisan neutrality. But there is no norm that limits negativity.<sup>40</sup>

The real bias of the press today is not a partisan one, but a pronounced tendency to report what is wrong with politics and politicians rather than what is right. This type of reporting passes for watchdog journalism but is nearly ideological in its premise: most politicians are presumed to be incompetent, venal, or deceptive, and it is the journalists’ role to let everyone know that’s the way it is.<sup>41</sup> In the 1972-1992 period, for example, scandals (financial dealings, sexual

impropriety, etc.) rose from 4% of congressional coverage to 17% — 1 in every 6 stories.<sup>42</sup>

**Protecting the Watchdog Role.** It would be a mistake to conclude that critical journalism in all cases frustrates political leadership and undermines the democratic process. A watchdog press is a vital safeguard against abuses of power. Officials cannot always be trusted to act properly, and the press is a check on impropriety. Yet the public needs a watchdog press with the judgment to distinguish real abuse from officials’ small errors of judgment and performance. By failing to do so, the press can “poison the well,” weakening the bond of trust required for effective government. Recent polls indicate that most Americans believe that press skepticism is an important factor in keeping politicians from abusing public office. Yet most Americans also say that the press gets in the way of efforts to solve society’s problems. Press skepticism is thus seen as both an obstacle to effective governance and a form of protection against wayward politicians.

Yet the press may be compromising its watchdog role by its zealous pursuit of scandals and wrongdoing. When the public is deluged day after day with stories of what’s wrong with the government, its expectations of public officials decline and its trust in the media’s judgment diminishes. An effect is that the public may reject the media’s outcries. Such was the public reaction to the news media’s initial reporting of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Even though the press intimated that the president would have to resign, the public reacted differently. The news coverage was so sensational, so lurid, and so rooted in hearsay that a majority of Americans believed it was unfair to Clinton and embraced his presidency, though not his behavior. If ever there was a wake-up call for the watchdog press, the Lewinsky scandal was it. Having barked too much, the press had no bite.

Critical journalism needs to give way to a more credible form of journalism. It would be a type of journalism that does not ignore official wrongdoing and does not turn the media agenda over to the newsmakers. It would also be one, however, that gives proper voice to the newsmakers, pays sufficient attention to what

government is doing well, and assesses politicians' failings by reasonable standards. News with these characteristics would help to restore trust and renew interest in both politics and in the news.

## CONCLUSION

Shrinking audiences are a threat and challenge to America's news media. Their response has been a flood of soft news and critical reporting. The relentless quest for riveting stories, however, works against the new media's intention to provide citizens a clear understanding of their stake in public affairs. Soft and negative news distorts the public's perceptions of what the journalist Walter Lippmann called "the world outside." The irony is that, in the long run, these distortions also make that world a less attractive and inviting one. Interest in public affairs declines and so, too, does interest in news.

Democracy cannot operate effectively without a free press that performs well as watchdog and information source. In other words, the press must do its job well if democracy is to succeed. As we have argued in this report, what is good for democracy is also good for the press. In the long run, the best way to build an audience for news is through balanced public-affairs reporting. To believe otherwise is to assume that people follow the news for its entertainment or shock value. In the long run, entertainment programming is more entertaining than news for those who desire to be entertained. If they can temporarily be persuaded otherwise, they are unlikely to sustain their enthusiasm and will follow the news irregularly. Meanwhile, those interested in hard news will also have a diminished appetite because the news is too soft or too nasty to meet their taste. Such readers, viewers, and listeners are irreplaceable. A news habit takes years to create and takes years to diminish but, once diminished, is not easily restored.

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# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Marvin Kalb, The Rise of the 'New News': A Case Study to Two Root Causes of the Modern Scandal Coverage (Cambridge, MA: Joan Shorenstein Center, 1998); See also Reuven Frank, Out of Thin Air: The Brief Wonderful Life of Network News. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Joshua Gamson, "Incredible News: Tabloids Meet News," Current No. 370 (Feb 1995): 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in James McCartney, "News Lite," American Journalism Review, June 1997, pp. 19-21.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Carlton Ehrlich, "The Journalism of Outrageousness," Journalism and Mass Communication Monographs No. 155 (Feb 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Doris Graber, Processing the News (New York: Longman, 1988); Thomas E. Patterson, The Mass Media Election (New York: Praeger, 1980); Shanto Iyengar, Is Anyone Responsible? (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas E. Patterson, The American Democracy (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 309-310; also see, S. Robert Lichter and Richard E. Noyes, "Bad News Bears," Media Critic (1994): 81-87.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Ken Auletta, Three Blind Mice (New York: Random House, 1991); Edwin Diamond, The Media Show (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 107.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Although scholars have frequently mentioned soft news in their work, few have attempted to measure it systematically. The earliest substantial study was conducted by Scott and Gobetz ("Hard News/Soft News Content of the National Broadcast Networks, 1972-1987," Journalism Quarterly, Summer 1992: 406-412), Their study found a slight increase in the amount of soft news, particularly in the closing segments of newscasts. The Scott and Gobetz research, however, was based on summaries of the newscasts rather than actual news stories and looked only at two one-week periods for each year.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Davis, The Press and American Politics

(Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 108-109.

<sup>11</sup> See F.Leslie Smith, Perspectives on Radio and Television (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> This definition derived from Wolfgang Donsbach, "Soft News," unpublished paper, August 4, 1999, p. 1; McCartney, "News Lite," p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> See William C. Spragens, Electronic Magazines (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Lou Prato, "Don't Bash Consultants for Tabloid TV News," American Journalism Review 15 (Nov 1993): 46-52.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew R. Kerbel, If It Bleeds It Leads (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> McCartney, "News Lite."

<sup>17</sup> Howard Kurtz, "A Lite 'n' Lively 'Nightly'," Washington Post, February 17, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Two survey questions for each medium were used to determine which respondents would be classified as regular users. For national TV news, for example, respondents were first asked: "Do you watch the national news, such as the ABC, NBC, or CBS evening news or the CNN newscasts, nearly every day, a couple of times a week, or less often than that?" They were then asked: "When watching the national news, do you usually watch most of the news program or do you normally switch to something other than news after a few minutes?" Respondents who said they watch nearly every day and watch most of the newscast when they tune in were categorized as regular viewers of national TV news.

<sup>19</sup> Respondents were also asked whether they rely on the Internet for daily news. Five percent qualified as regular consumers of Internet-provided news. This figure, however, may exaggerate the use of the Internet as a daily news source. Other questions that we asked of those who claimed to rely on the Internet suggest that most news exposure through that medium is inadvertent and fleeting—that is, the news is frequently encountered when searching for other information on the Internet and that such encounters usually last seconds rather than minutes.



<sup>20</sup> Deborah Potter and Walter Gantz, "Bringing Viewers Back to Local TV," NewsLab survey, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Some former and less frequent local viewers were no longer watching because they are now busier or out of the home at the news hour. Every medium has audience attrition for this reason but it is offset by the audience gain of people who now have more time on their hands. The irreplaceable readers, viewers, and listeners are those who have stopped paying attention because they no longer enjoy it.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Rosenstiel, Carl Gottlieb, Lee Ann Brady, "Time of Peril for TV News," Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Although the study was not designed to provide precise guidance, there are some instructive results. For example, self-described "busy" people have a stronger preference for hard news than "less busy" people and less tolerance for soft news. And by a 3-1 ratio, busy people place a premium on public affairs information, ranking it at the highest level in terms of their expectations of news content. Apparently, busy people think they have little time for news fluff. When they attend to the news, they seek to be informed rather than entertained and they want their news tightly packaged.

<sup>24</sup> Rosenstiel, et al, "Time of Peril for TV News."

<sup>25</sup> James Carey, "Lawyers, Voyeurs, and Vigilantes," Media Studies Journal, Spring/Summer 1999, pp. 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> See Max Kampelman, "The Power of the Press," Policy Review, Fall 1978: 7-41.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Taylor, See How They Run (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Thomas E. Patterson, "More Style Than Substance: Television News in U.S. National Elections," Political Communication and Persuasion 8 (1991): 157.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas E. Patterson, Out of Order (New York: Knopf, 1993), 20; see also, S. Robert Lichter and Richard E. Noyes, Good Intentions Make Bad News, rev. ed (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Center for Media and Public Affairs for the Shorenstein Center/Smith Richardson Soft News Project, 2000.

<sup>31</sup> Center for Media and Public Affairs.

<sup>32</sup> Center for Media and Public Affairs.

<sup>33</sup> See Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Spiral of Cynicism (New York: Oxford, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> The best of these surveys are the annual media attitude studies conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Doreen Carvajal, "For News Media, Some Introspection," The New York Times, April 5, 1998, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Jorgen Westerstahl and Folke Johansson, "News Ideologies as Molders of Domestic News," European Journal of Communication (1986): 146-147.

<sup>37</sup> Larry J. Sabato, Feeding Frenzy (New York: Free Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>38</sup> Center for Media and Public Affairs.

<sup>39</sup> Patterson, Out of Order, 16-21; Catherine Steele and Kevin Barnhurst, "The Growing Dominance of Opinionated Journalism in U.S. Presidential Campaign Television Coverage," paper presented at Annual Meeting of International Communication Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1995, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas E. Patterson, "Bad News, Bad Governance," ANNALS 546 (July 1996): 97-108.

<sup>41</sup> Westerstahl and Johansson, "News Ideologies," 141.

<sup>42</sup> Center for Media and Public Affairs for the Shorenstein Center/Smith Richardson Soft News Project, 2000.

# Appendix A: Soft-News Survey Questionnaire

October, 2000. National random sample of 511 adults contacted by telephone by International Communications Research.

I'd like to ask you some questions about the news.

(SN1- THROUGH SN-19 SHOULD BE ASKED OF ONE-HALF OF THE SAMPLE.  
SN-20 SHOULD BE ASKED OF ONE-HALF OF THAT HALF AND SN-21 SHOULD  
BE ASKED OF THE OTHER ONE-HALF OF THE HALF)

- SN-1. Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. How much attention do you normally pay to what's going on in government and public affairs? A great deal of attention, quite a bit, just some, only a little, or none?
- SN-2. Think back to when you were growing up. How much attention was paid to news in your home? Was the news a daily part of your home life, paid attention to but not an everyday part of your home life, or a very small part of your home life?
- SN-3. When you were a teenager, how much attention did you personally pay to the news? Did you read a newspaper or watch TV news almost every day, sometimes but not regularly, or rarely?
- SN-4. When you were growing up, how much attention was paid to politics in your home? Was there quite a lot of interest and discussion of politics at home, just some interest and discussion of politics, or not much interest and discussion of politics?
- SN-5. What's your general opinion about the quality of the news that is available today? Would you describe it as excellent, good, fair, poor, or awful?
- SN-6. In general, do you think the news has gotten better or worse in recent years, or has it stayed about the same?
- SN-7. On the average day how much attention do you pay to the news? A great deal, quite a bit, just some, only a little, or none?
- SN-7a. During the past week, how much attention did you pay to the presidential election campaign — a great deal, quite a bit, just some, only a little, or none?
- SN-7b. Now we'd like you to think about the past day only. During the past day, have you been doing any thinking about the presidential campaign, or is this something that you haven't been thinking about?
- SN-7c. Still thinking about the past day only. Can you recall a particular news story about the presidential campaign that you read, saw, or heard during the past day?
- SN-7d. During the past day have you discussed the presidential campaign with anyone?
- SN-7e. Do you have either cable or satellite television?
- SN-7f. When you were growing up, did you have cable television in your home or not?

(IF Q.SN-7 = 5, SKIP TO NEXT INSERT; ELSE CONTINUE)

Now we'd like to ask you how much attention you pay to different news sources.

SN-8A. Do you read a newspaper nearly every day, a couple of times a week, or less often than that?

(ASK SN-8B IF SN-8A = 1 OR 2. IF SN-8A = 3, SKIP TO SN-9A)

SN-8B. While reading the paper, how much time do you normally spend on the news pages, such as the front page and the other pages that have stories about current events and public affairs? Would you say you pay a reasonable amount of attention to these pages or do you normally spend only a few minutes on them?

SN-9A. Now how about television news? Do you watch the national news, such as the ABC, NBC, or CBC evening news or the CNN newscasts, nearly every day, a couple of times a week, or less often than that?

(ASK SN-9B IF SN-9A = 1 OR 2. IF SN-9A = 3, SKIP TO SN-10A)

SN-9B. When watching the national news, do you usually watch most of the news program or do you normally switch to something other than news after a few minutes?

SN-10A. How about local television news? Do you watch the local news nearly every day, a couple of times a week, or less often than that?

(ASK SN-10B IF SN-10A = 1 OR 2. IF SN-10A = 3, SKIP TO SN-11A)

SN-10B. When watching the local news, do you usually watch most of the news program or do you normally switch to something other than news after a few minutes?

SN-11A. How about radio news? Do you listen to radio news such as National Public Radio or an all-news radio station nearly every day, a couple of times a week, or less often than that?

(ASK SN-11B IF SN-11A = 1 OR 2. IF SN-11A = 3, SKIP TO SN-12A)

SN-11B. When listening to radio news, do you usually stay tuned for a reasonable length of time or do you normally switch to something other than news after a few minutes?

SN-12A. How about news on the Internet? Do you follow the news on the Internet nearly every day, a couple of times a week, or less often than that?

(ASK SN-12B IF SN-12A = 1 OR 2. IF SN-12A = 3, SKIP TO 13A)

SN-12B. When attending to news on the internet, do you usually read the material for a reasonable length of time or do you normally change to something other than news after a few minutes?

SN-13A. In general, what is your main source of news? Is it the newspaper, national television news, local television news, the radio, or the Internet?

(IF Q.SN-13A = D OR R, SKIP TO Q.SN-14A)

SN-13b. Is there a second source that you rely on almost as much and, if so, which source is it? Is it the newspaper, national television news, local television news, the radio, or the Internet?  
(ONLY DISPLAY ITEMS NOT MENTIONED IN Q.SN-13A)

SN-14A. What type of news do you generally like best? News that sticks mainly to stories about major events and issues affecting the community and the country; or news that focuses on specific incidents such as a crime or fire or accident?

(ASK SN-14B, IF SN-14A = 2 OR 3 OR "DON'T KNOW". ASK SN-14C, IF SN-14A = 1 OR 3 OR "DON'T KNOW")

SN-14B. Now how about news that focuses on major events and issues affecting the community and country? Is this something you like nearly as well as news of incidents such as crimes and accidents, or would you like to see less news about current events and issues?

(ASK SN-14B, IF SN-14A = 2 OR 3 OR "DON'T KNOW". ASK SN-14C, IF SN-14A = 1 OR 3 OR "DON'T

KNOW”)

SN-14C. Now how about news that focuses on incidents such as crimes and accidents? Is this something you like nearly as well as news on major issues and events, or would you like to see less news about specific incidents such as crimes and accidents?

SN-15. When a major event happens, are you likely to spend more time following the news or does your news time stay about the same regardless of what’s happening?

SN-16A. Are you paying more attention, less attention, or about the same amount of attention to the news now as you did a few years ago?

(ASK SN-16B IF SN-16A = 1. ASK SN-16C, IF SN-16A = 2)

SN-16B. Is the main reason you’re paying more attention because you have more free time, because you think the news today is better than it was before, or what?

(ASK SN-16BB, IF SN-16B = 2. OTHERWISE SKIP TO SN-17)

SN-16BB. Why do you think the news today is better?

RECORD VERBATIM

(ASK SN-16B IF SN-16A = 1. ASK SN-16C, IF SN-16A = 2)

SN-16C. Is the main reason you’re paying less attention because you have less free time, because you think the news today is not as good as it was before, or what?

(ASK SN-16CC IF SN-16B = 2. OTHERWISE SKIP TO SN-17)

SN-16CC. Why do you think the news today is not as good?

RECORD VERBATIM

Next I’m going to read you some words that might be used to describe the news today. For each one, please tell me which of the two words better describes most news stories:

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17a. Are most news stories today (fair or biased)?

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17b. Are most news stories today (negative or positive)?

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17c. Are most news stories today (interesting or boring)?

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17d. Are most news stories today (serious or sensational)?

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17e. Are most news stories today (informative or uninformative)?

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17f. Are most news stories today (superficial or thorough)?

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17g. Are most news stories today (accurate or misleading)?

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17h. Are most news stories today (depressing or uplifting)?

(ROTATE ORDER OF ADJECTIVES)

SN-17i. Are most news stories today (enjoyable or not enjoyable)?

(SCRAMBLE ITEMS)

Now we're interested in what kinds of news you prefer when you watch, listen to, or read news sources.

SN-18. Using a 5 point scale, where "5" means extremely interesting to you and "1" means not at all interesting, how interesting to you is news about [READ FIRST ITEM]?

- a. Sports
- b. Celebrities and entertainment
- c. Health
- d. Crime
- e. Current events, politics, and public affairs
- f. Business and finance

Now we're interested in what's important to you when you watch, listen to, or read news sources.

(SCRAMBLE ITEMS)

SN-19. Using a 5 point scale, where "5" means extremely important to you and "1" means not at all important, how important to you is it that the news.

- a. Is lively and enjoyable
- b. Fits easily into your daily schedule
- c. Is timely and up to date
- d. Provides information that helps you to understand public affairs
- e. Provides information that helps you in your daily life
- f. Tells you about the good things and the bad things that happen to ordinary people
- g. Stirs your emotions and feelings
- h. Is substantial rather than sensational

(SN1- THROUGH SN-19 SHOULD BE ASKED OF ONE-HALF OF THE SAMPLE. SN-20 SHOULD BE ASKED OF ONE-HALF OF THAT HALF AND SN-21 SHOULD BE ASKED OF THE OTHER ONE-HALF OF THE HALF)

Next, I'm going to read you some news headlines to see how interested you would be in reading the story that would accompany each headline.

(SCRAMBLE ITEMS)

SN-20. Using a 5 point scale where "5" means you'd be extremely interested in reading the story and "1" means you'd be not at all interested, how interested would you be in a story with the headline:

- a. Pro Football Player Cleared of Drug Charges
- b. Mayor Breaks Ground for New City Playground; Critics Say It's Too Close to Busy Streets
- c. Popular Computer Game Said to Help Children's Mental Development
- d. New Strain of Flesh-Eating Bacteria Poses Health Threat
- e. Newest Millionaires Give Generously to Charity
- f. Heavy Coffee Drinking Poses Cancer Risk, Study Concludes
- g. Clerk Thwarts Convenience Store Robbery
- h. Local Residents Oppose Zoning Change Required For New Apartment Construction
- i. 10% of Doctors Overcharge Medicare, But Tighter Controls Have Reduced Fraud Level
- j. Fire Department Faulted for Low Training Standards and Readiness
- k. Young Girl Survives House Fire
- l. Employees Over 50 Losing Jobs to Younger Workers
- m. Oregon Dam Construction Project Not a Threat to Marine Life, Environmentalists Say
- n. Agency Head Charged With Bribery
- o. President and Congress Agree On Education Spending Bill

- p. State Department Criticized For Mishandling Of African Famine Relief
- q. Republican Leaders Back Clinton's South American Drug Initiative
- r. Prospects Dim for Middle-East Peace Settlement
- s. Crime Rate Falls From Last Year's Level
- t. Fed Chairman Greenspan Announces Rate Hike, Stock Market Falls
- u. Two Dozen Congressional Candidates This Year Refuse To Take Special Interest Money

(SN-1- THROUGH SN-19 SHOULD BE ASKED OF ONE-HALF OF THE SAMPLE. SN-20 SHOULD BE ASKED OF ONE-HALF OF THAT HALF AND SN-21 SHOULD BE ASKED OF THE OTHER ONE-HALF OF THE HALF)

(SCRAMBLE ITEMS)

- SN-21. Using a 5 point scale where "5" means you'd be extremely interested in reading the story and "1" means you'd be not at all interested, how interested would you be in a story with the headline:
- a. Pro Football Player Arrested on Drug Charges
  - b. Mayor Breaks Ground for New City Playground
  - c. Popular Computer Game Said to Hurt Children's Mental Development
  - d. New Strain of Flesh-Eating Bacteria Poses Health Threat But Is Not Highly Contagious
  - e. Newest Millionaires Stingy With Charitable Giving
  - f. Heavy Coffee Drinking Poses No Cancer Risk, Study Concludes
  - g. Convenience Store Clerk Critically Injured In Robbery
  - h. Local Residents Back Zoning Change Required For New Apartment Construction
  - i. 10% of Doctors Overcharge Medicare
  - j. Fire Department Praised for High Training Standards and Readiness
  - k. Young Girl Dies in House Fire
  - l. Employees Over 50 No Longer Losing Jobs to Younger Workers
  - m. Oregon Dam Construction Project Threatens Marine Life, Environmentalists Say
  - n. Agency Head Cleared of Bribery Charges
  - o. President and Congress Clash Over Education Spending Bill
  - p. State Department Applauded For African Famine Relief
  - q. Republican Leaders Attack Clinton's South American Drug Initiative
  - r. Middle-East Violence Subsides, But Prospects Dim for Peace Settlement
  - s. Crime Rate Rises From Last Year's Level
  - t. Fed Chairman Greenspan Announces Rate Cut, Stock Market Rises
  - u. Two Dozen Congressional Candidates This Year Received Over \$1 Million in Special Interest Money

# Appendix B: Content Analysis Codes

5331 news stories, randomly selected from those available on LEXI/NEXIS during 1980-1999 period, were content-analyzed. Codes below do not include the DICTON categories.

3-3	YEAR	61	Newsweek
5-5	MONTH	14	NEWS SECTION
7-7	DAY OF MONTH	1	1/A/National
8	SHEET NUMBER (top of page, center)	2	2/B/Metro
9-10	FILE NUMBER (bottom left corner of packet)	3	Other, etc
11	PAGE NUMBER (top of page, right) page 10= 0	9	Indeterminate section (newspaper)
12-13	NEWS OUTLET	0	Television News
1	New York Times	15	STORY SOURCE
2	Washington Post	1	News outlet, byline story
10	USA TODAY	2	News outlet, no byline
20	Omaha World Herald	3	News outlet's wire service (e.g. Gannett)
21	San Diego Union-Trib(Copley)	4	Compiled from wire services
22	St. Petersburg Times	5	AP
23	Cleveland Plain Dlr (Advance)	6	Reuters/UPI
24	Sacramento Bee (McClatchy)	7	New York Times or other news outlet-based wire service (except news outlet's own chain service, such as Gannet—code as 3 in this case).
25	Virginian Pilot (Landmark)	8	Other identified source
26	Seattle Times	9	Source not identifiable
27	Tacoma News Trib (McClatchy)	16-17	STORY LOCATION (pg. # or placement in newscast)
28	Buffalo News (Buffett)		NOTE: With television, the placement is based on the order stories are presented in the newscast. Be careful to check whether stories were entered in order of presentation. (NBC seems to load backwards. In such a case, count from the bottom up, e.g. if a story is 12 <sup>th</sup> of 14, it should be coded 03 (i.e. as the third story in the newscast)).
29	Austin American States (Cox)	18-21	STORY LENGTH (4 digit)
30	Cincinnati Enquirer (Gannet)		If story exceeds 9998 words, code as 9998.
31	Orlando Sentinel (Tribune)	9999	Indeterminate length
32	Houston Chronicle (Hearst)	22	DAY OF WEEK (1 digit)
33	Hartford Courant (Times)		Monday 1
34	S.F. Chronicle (Chronicle)		Tuesday 2
35	Columbus Dispatch		Wednesday 3
36	Allentown Morning (Times)		
37	Arizona Republic (Central)		
38	Denver Post (Media News)		
39	Indianapolis News (Central)		
40	Dallas Morning News (Belo)		
41	St. Louis Dispatch (Pulitzer)		
42	Knoxville News Sent. (Scripps)		
43	Minneapolis Star Trib (Cowles)		
44	Louisville Courier Jrnl (Gannet)		
45	Kansas City Star (Capital/ABC)		
50	ABC		
52	NBC		
60	Time		

Thursday	4	
Friday	5	
Saturday		6
Sunday	7	

of this day was also arbitrary (i.e., there is no event, peg, hook, etc. that makes this story particularly newsworthy on this day).

- 23 TYPE OF STORY (In coding this, focus on the lead of the story)
- 1 Basically straight news/hard news (happened in past 24 hours; event or incident based)
  - 2 Balanced mix of straight news and news analysis
  - 3 Mainly news analysis (taking material from different times; includes motives, expectations, etc.)
  - 4 Feature/human interest
  - 5 Verbatim text-interview, speech, or document

- 24 FOCUS OF STORY  
Determine what the key focus of the story is. The peg for the story may be current, but the focus of the story could still be on a past event.
- 1 Current/ ongoing event or development
  - 2 Current incident (NOTE: An incident is a small isolated personal event that in an of itself does not have broader social implications; and it is usually unexpected. The commission of a crime is ordinarily an incident and not an event.)
  - 3 Update on past event
  - 4 Update on past incident
  - 5 Upcoming event
  - 6 Non-event/ non-incident

- 25 SALIENCE OF STORY (Why is this story in today's news?)
- 1 Event/incident/anniversary of such magnitude and such timeliness that no responsible editor could ignore it on this day.
  - 2 Event/incident, etc. of such magnitude that it had to be covered but not necessarily on this day.
  - 3 Event/incident, etc. of such timeliness, but of small magnitude that an editor could have chosen to cover or ignore it, but if deciding to cover it, had to do so on this day.
  - 4 Event/incident, etc of a smaller magnitude that an editor could have chosen to cover or ignore. The choice

- 26 SOURCE OF STORY (Where did this story come from? One way to consider this question is whether this story, or a similar one, would have been produced, on this day, by other news outlets, or was it clearly generated by this particular news outlet.)
- 1 Outside event/incident/actor triggered it.
  - 2 Inside decision (editor, reporter) triggered it.
  - 3 Cannot be determined.

- 27 PUBLIC/PRIVATE FRAME
- 1 Public affairs/public realm and includes public actor (not celebrity or head of private institution). Or Public affairs/public realm but does not include public actor (an e.g. would be a criminal act—may include incidental reference to public actor, e.g. "Police said...")
  - 3 Private realm involving salient actor, e.g. celebrity, major corp., major foundation or just private realm

- 28 POLICY/NON-POLICY FRAME  
Does this story have relevance for public policy?
- 1 Substantially policy related/policy relevant
  - 2 Somewhat policy related/policy relevant
  - 3 Non-policy related (or so slight as to be inconsequential)

NOTE: Not all public affairs are policy relevant. The policy relevance/ relatedness must be stated. A crime story that makes no reference to public safety, for example, may not have any policy content. As another example, an election campaign story that reports on who is winning without discussion of what this might mean in terms of public policy may not have any policy content.

- 29 ACTION/NON-ACTION FRAME
- 1 Story implies/says there is an urgent need for action/ describes a problem



- (and by direct statement or implication indicates the problem needs to be fixed); suggests action should be taken, would be desirable, etc. (can be public or personal action)
- 2 Story implies/says there is a non-urgent need for action/ describes a problem (and by direct statement or implication indicates the problem needs to be fixed); suggests action should be taken, would be desirable, etc. (can be public or personal action).
- 3 Story describes action already taken or being taken to resolve the problem
- 4 No action component of note
- 30 **ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY FRAME**  
(NOTE: A decision here is necessary only if previous code is a 1, 2, or 3. The question is who/what needs to take the action or is responsible for the issue/problem).
- 0 Not applicable—coded 4 in previous code
- 1 Government/some level of government/ a governmental institution, or an individual public official (e.g. the president, mayor )
- 2 A group, or collective, or community in society or a private institution
- 3 Private individual
- 31 **NEWS YOU CAN USE**  
Is the purpose of the story to offer advice on a personal level (e.g. health or money advice), but not necessarily address universal conditions?
- 1 Primary purpose
- 2 Secondary purpose
- 3 Not the purpose
- 32 **CONTEXTUAL FRAME**
- 1 Episodic (story (not topic) is mainly in the context of a particular event, incident; the story does not go much beyond that specific event; the story takes the form of a case-study )
- 2 Thematic (story itself, not topic, is mainly in a broader context that deals with its meaning or implications for society, a trend that goes beyond this single event/incident; story places public issues in a broad or abstract context)
- 33 **CONFLICT/ NON-CONFLICT FRAME**  
(Based on story, and the way story is presented, not on the topic of the story.)
- 1 Substantial level of conflict
- 2 Some conflict (not merely incidental)
- 3 No conflict (or so slight as to be inconsequential)
- 34 **NATURE OF CONFLICT (NOTE: A decision is required only if previous code was a 1 or 2)**
- 0 Not applicable (previous code is 3)
- 1 Actual conflict: real, live, observable conflict between participants where they are the initiators.
- 2 Synthetic conflict: could be a real live conflict, but the way the conflict is presented is chiefly a product of the reporter. The conflict is introduced in the story through interviews with people in different places, differing interpretations, and opinions, all juxtaposed and pieced together by the reporter. Conflict is imposed on the situation by reporter's speculation or construction.
- 3 Cannot determine
- 35 **HUMAN INTEREST FRAME**  
(NOTE: Human interest stories do one or more of the following: use a human example or put a "human face" on an issue or problem; go into the private or personal life on an actor; employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of sympathy/empathy/outrage)
- 1 High human interest content
- 2 Moderate human interest content
- 3 Slight human interest content
- 4 No (or merely incidental human interest content)
- 36 **NEGATIVE/POSITIVE FRAME**  
(NOTE: This code is designed to pick up whether the story is thought on the whole to be in the good news or bad news category. In some instances it might be helpful to ask yourself the following questions: If about a newsmaker and you were his or her press secretary, would you consider this a favorable or unfavorable story? If about an institution (e.g. Congress), does this reflect

	favorably or unfavorably on the institution? If about a development (e.g. a social trend, event or incident) is this a good or bad thing for society?)		5	Definitely a hard news story
	1 Clearly negative/ unfavorable/ bad news			
	2 More negative or unfavorable than positive or favorable			
	3 Balanced mix between negative and positive			
	4 More positive or favorable than negative or unfavorable			
	5 Clearly positive/ favorable/ good news			
	6 Neutral story, no positive or negative			
37	<b>SENSATIONALISM FRAME</b> (NOTE: This code is designed to get at the “breathlessness” quality of a news story. Is this event/ revelation presented as something so earthshaking/ unsettling/ remarkable that everyone should take notice, or is it in the ho-hum category? This code should be determined in the context of how the story is told by the journalist rather than its substance. In other words, is this story being hyped? What kinds of adjectives are used? Is the material framed in a sensational way or not?)			
	1 High sensationalism			
	2 Moderate sensationalism			
	3 Low sensationalism			
38	<b>STORY AMBIANCE</b> What is the tone of this story (irrespective of topic)?			
	1 Serious/ Important			
	2 Matter of fact			
	3 Lighthearted			
39	<b>JOURNALISTIC STYLE</b>			
	1 Descriptive (tells “what” happened in a rather straightforward, descriptive way)			
	2 Interpretive/ analytical/ evaluation (analyzes, evaluates, or explains a situation while also describing aspects of it)			
40 FRAME	<b>SOFT NEWS/ HARD NEWS</b>			
	1 Definitely a soft news story			
	2 Mostly a soft news story			
	3 Mixed rather evenly			
	4 Mostly a hard news story			
		41		<b>GEOGRAPHIC ARENA</b>
		1		Foreign/international with no significant U.S. component
		2		Foreign/international with significant U.S. component
		3		National with significant foreign/international link (e.g. foreign affairs where focus is on the U.S. or action by the U.S. government.
		4		National
		5		Regional (multi-state, e.g., a story about a hurricane threatening the southeast U.S.)
		6		State
		7		Local
		9		None- no location context
		42		<b>STORY LEAD (What leads the story?)</b>
		1		A Political/Governmental personality (a newsmaker/ political leader/ celebrity) NOTE: The assumption here is that the person in newsworthy because of what he/she does or is.
		2		Nonpolitical/ nongovernmental personality. (Again, the assumption is that the person in newsworthy because of what he/she does or is. Thus even an artist, musician, fashion model, famous criminal (e.g. Giotti), or soap opera actor is a personality.)
		3		Expert person—professor, economist, doctor (essentially someone who is in the news because of what they know rather than because they are a personality in their own right. (A few experts achieve celebrity status and should be coded in the second category, e.g., Dr. Spock, Kervorkian, Milton Friedman). Also in this category would be someone close to the known personality (e.g. a close acquaintance of Newt Gingrich or OJ Simpson).
		4		Ordinary/ unknown person (such as a person in the street, bystander, employee, employer, farmer, crime suspect, criminal, clergy)
		5		Institution or agency of government (foreign or domestic, any level, e.g. Congress, White House, city council, Russian Duma)

6	Group/ organization (e.g., Red Cross, NAACP, local church) or institution	18	Sports
7	Corporation or Business-related entity (e.g., Wall Street)	19	Legal Affairs (but not as a public policy issue)
8	Country/ State/ City	20	Education (but not as a public policy issue)
		21	Stock Market
43	MAIN ACTOR/ REALM CODE (not applicable to all stories—coding should be consistent with previous code)	46-47	MAJOR ISSUE CODE
1.	President, White House, the Administration	01	Crime (individual crime only)
2	Cabinet Officer, Cabinet Department or other federal agency	02	Celebrityhood/ fame
3	Member of Congress, Congress, Capitol Hill	03	Natural/ manmade tragedy (real or potential)
4	Supreme Court, federal judiciary	04	Human (personal) triumph
5		05	Scandal
9	Not applicable	06	Entertainment/ Arts/ Lifestyle (but not media performance)
44-45	MAJOR TOPIC CODE	07	Sports
01	Government & policy (legislation, political process, policy problems, policy actions)	08	Business (not economic indicators or general performance, etc., but things like corporate mergers, a firm's profits)
02	Politics (campaign, vote, political strategy, political maneuvering)	09	Stock market (not in context of international economic conditions)
03	Political scandal	10	Economy
04	Political personality (focus on personal traits, family, etc. of political figures)	11	Unemployment/ jobs
05	Business & Commerce (but not unemployment, inflation, etc. in a political/ public affairs context—this type of story should be coded as 1)	12	International trade/ commerce/ economic system
06	Celebrity (non crime/ non scandal)	13	Environmental/ conservation
07	Celebrity crime/ scandal	14	Labor/ wages
08	Crime (but not as a public policy issue, which would be coded as 1)	15	Agriculture
09	Natural disasters (including potential disasters—such as a hurricane forming in the Atlantic)	16	Taxes
10	Manmade disasters (including auto accidents and house fires unless caused, e.g., by a lightning strike)	17	Government spending, public budgets
11	Science (including discoveries)	18	Inflation
12	Technology	19	Other economic issues (identify issue and story # on memo sheet)
13	Medicine (including medical discoveries, but not health as a public policy issue)	20	Health
14	Personal health	21	Welfare/ poverty
15	Media (but not as it relates to item 16)	22	Education
16	Entertainment, Arts, Fashion, Travel	23	Consumers (general)
17	Food	24	Housing/ urban development
	Religion	25	Transportation
		26	Social security/ elderly/ pensions
		27	Family/ children
		28	Public Safety (non-crime)
		29	Other social issue (identify issue and story # on memo sheet)
		30	War & Peace
		31	Terrorism
		32	National defense/ security
		33	Foreign affairs
		34	Immigration
		35	Famine
		36	Genocide

- 39 Other foreign/security issues (identify issue and story # on memo sheet)
- 40 Race issues
- 41 Women's issues (excluding abortion)
- 42 Abortion
- 43 Ethnic relations
- 44 Human rights (not in race, ethnic or gender context)
- 45 Men's issues
- 46 Gay/Homosexual
  
- 50 Crime (as a broad issue, not as an incident)
- 51 Drugs (as problem, not in context of particular crime)
- 52
- 53 Police conduct/ misconduct
- 54 Criminal justice system (e.g. how well it is working)
- 59 Other legal issues (identify issue and story # on memo sheet)
  
- 60 Science
- 61 Technology (but not business)
- 62 Communications (as a policy issue)
  
- 70 Religion
  
- 80 Performance of Government/ Political System
- 81 Performance of Media
- 82 Performance of Business
- 83 Condition of society (general)
  
- 90 Election story (that does not fit in any of the above categories or the next one)
- 91 Campaign finance/ campaign finance reform
  
- 98 Other issue (describe issue and note story # on memo sheet)
- 99 No issue realm

48 MAJOR CONTEXT FRAME (What is the way the story is framed? What is the general context in which the information is presented?)

- 1 Ambition and power frame: winning & losing, getting ahead, tactical maneuvering, strategy, succeeding, failing
- 2 Conflict frame: blame, infighting, differences of opinion/perspective, violence
- 3 Cooperation frame:

- working together, collective effort, etc.
- 4 Problem/ policy frame: identifying, describing, explaining problems (e.g. conditions of economy) or attempts to resolve them (e.g. policy solutions)
- 5 Human interest frame
- 9 None of these frames (describe frame and note story # on memo sheet)