

Article: “American News Consumption during Times of National Crisis”

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American News Consumption during Times of National Crisis

Have 9/11 and the ensuing war on terrorism sparked a reinvigoration of civic life in the United States? Opinion surveys show dramatic changes in the political attitudes of American citizens, as detailed by other contributors to this symposium. However, it remains unclear whether these changed attitudes have resulted in higher levels of civic activity.

If Americans today are more engaged in civic life than they were a year ago, we should see evidence of this change in the amount of attention they pay to news of national and international affairs. Unlike many other civic behaviors, watching or reading the news is relatively low in opportunity costs. Because the choice between viewing a *Simpsons* rerun or a national news broadcast is made so easily, the size of the audience for national news should be fairly sensitive to shifts in the perceived importance of public affairs. And like the proverbial canary in the mine shaft, changing levels of civic-mindedness are likely to be seen first in lower-cost behaviors like paying attention to

news before they are seen in higher-cost activities like volunteering or joining a group.

This article looks at changes in the size of American news audiences during the 1990–91 Persian Gulf Crisis and the more recent

period surrounding the 9/11 attacks. Like the current situation, the Persian Gulf crisis started suddenly, when Iraq launched a surprise invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. Since there are clear starting points for both national crises, comparing the percentage of adults watching television news broadcasts before and after each precipitating event should show whether the respective crises prompted changes in levels of popular attention to the news.

Audience Trends for Network News Broadcasts

Weekly television-ratings data collected by Nielsen Media Research are available for both cases.¹ Since the television audience grows in winter months, the time of year in which a precipitating event occurs can influence the apparent impact of the crisis. For this reason, I collected weekly ratings data from each case over 16-month periods starting the first week

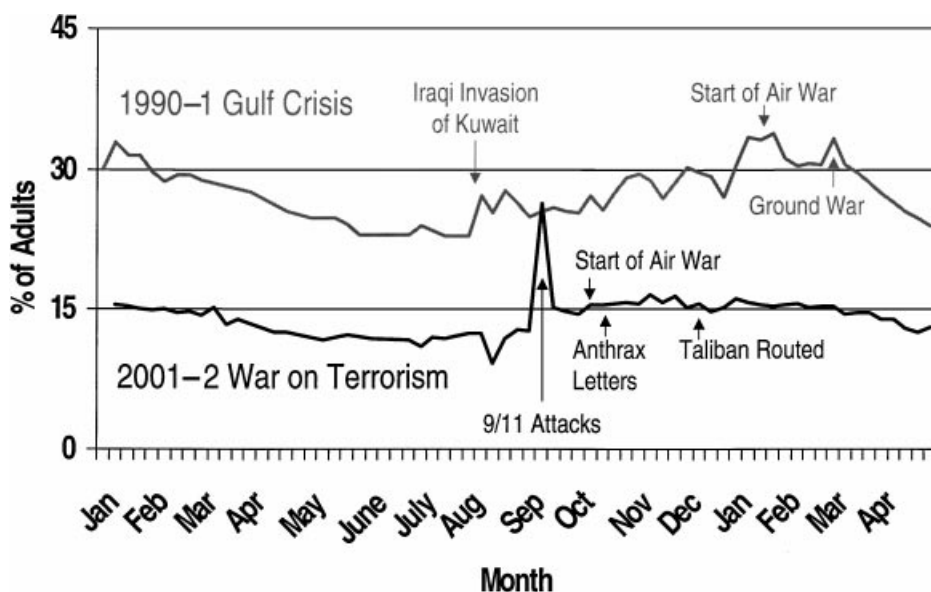
of January in the year the crisis began and ending the last week of April in the following year. To measure the combined total audience for nightly national news programs, I combined ratings for ABC's *World News Tonight*, CBS's *Evening News*, and NBC's *Nightly News*. To ease interpretation across the two cases, I translated these ratings data into the percentage of American adults that were tuning in to the nightly news.²

One striking feature of these trends (Figure 1) is that the evening news audience today is only about half as large as it was a decade before. During the 1990–91 period, between 23% and 33% of American adults watched nightly network news broadcasts, depending on the time of year. Since January 2001, Nielsen data put the total size of nightly news audiences at between 11% and 16% of American adults (not counting the week of 9/11). It is unclear whether today's total audience for all forms of public-affairs content is any smaller than it was a decade before, but if it is, the falloff is likely to be slight. Instead, the once-larger broadcast news audience of 1990–91 is today spread out across a wider range of news products, with cable, the Internet, primetime news magazines, and local television news each attracting sizable portions of a national news audience that once was shared mainly by the three evening news programs.

Because news audiences have become increasingly fragmented, absolute differences in the percentage of adults watching network news during each crisis period are less telling than the relative changes in audience size within each trend. If we begin our analysis immediately before each precipitating event and follow the trends over the next several months, the two cases appear to reveal different patterns of audience response. In the Persian Gulf crisis, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait immediately produced a four-percentage-point spike in the American news audience. The nightly news audience then grew steadily over the fall months as the American military buildup in Saudi Arabia signaled a looming confrontation with Iraq. Nearly a third of American adults were directly exposed to one of the three nightly news broadcasts in the weeks leading up to and immediately following the start of the air war, which began on January 17, as war against Iraq was vigorously debated in Congress and then witnessed live on television. The news audience shrank somewhat in early February before experiencing a three-percentage-point jump during the week of ground combat, which began on February 23. This rapid victory over Iraqi ground forces was followed by an abrupt

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Figure 1
Weekly Percentage of American Adults Watching
Nightly Network News Broadcasts



Source: Nielsen ratings data compiled from various media sources. These trends report the combined weekly audience for ABC's *World News Tonight*, CBS's *Evening News*, and NBC's *Nightly News*.

turn away from the news, and the nightly audience dropped nearly 10 percentage points over the eight weeks following the close of the ground campaign.

Eleven years later, the tragedies of 9/11 had the immediate effect of more than doubling the size of the evening news audience, from 13% of American adults in the week of September 3–9 to more than 26% in the week of September 10–16. Nielsen Media Research later estimated that 79.5 million viewers were tuning into any of 11 broadcast or cable networks showing news coverage on the night of 9/11. As impressive as this level of attention seems, the January 2001 Super Bowl attracted about the same number of viewers.³ Moreover, the evening news audience just as swiftly contracted to 15% of American adults in the week of September 17–23 and never rose more than one-and-a-half percentage points above that level in the following seven months. In contrast to frequent event-driven surges in news attention throughout the Persian Gulf crisis, news attention in the post-9/11 U.S. held quite stable at about four percentage points above pre-9/11 levels for several months before declining steadily after the start of the new year in 2002. By the middle of April 2002, the size of the evening news audience had returned to the previous July's level of just 13% of adults.

When thus interpreting these postcrisis trends using the immediate precrisis period as a benchmark, it appears that the Persian Gulf crisis produced a gradual mobilization of adults into the television news audience, but that the present war on terrorism generated a smaller shock to the size of American news audiences that started decaying soon after it began. During the Persian Gulf crisis, the average size of the evening news audience grew by 13.8 million persons between the last week of July 1990, and the first week of January 1991. During the war on terrorism, the growth in the evening news audience between these two weeks was only half as large, amounting to 7.4 million more audience members in 2002.

However, this interpretation of post-crisis growth in the news audience requires us to ignore the left-hand side of Figure 1. The longer-term trends leading up to each precipitating event call into question whether either of these national crises fundamentally increased the size of the news audience. Once we take into account the cyclical shifts in the size of television news audiences, the apparent changes prompted by each crisis become harder to distinguish from normal seasonal movement. It seems impressive at first glance that 32.7% of American adults were following the evening news in a typical week during the critical month of January 1991, up from 23.2% for July 1990. However, this number loses some of its luster when we recognize that the evening news audience was nearly as large—31.4% of adults—in the previous January. Given the seasonal variation in the size of news audiences, a more appropriate way of measuring the impact of national crises is to calculate the size of the news audience after the precipitating event compared to its size from the same period in the previous year.

This comparison paints a very different picture. During the Gulf Crisis an

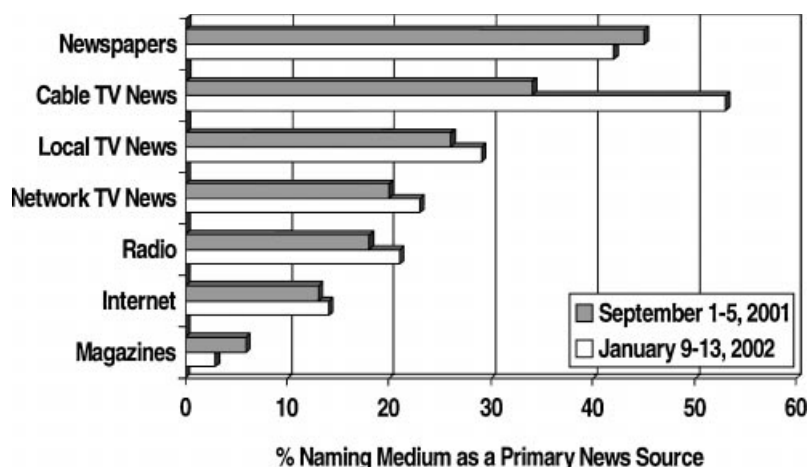
average of approximately 2.4 million more adults per day were watching evening news broadcasts in the first four months of 1991 compared to the first four months of 1990. The same comparison for the war on terrorism produces a mean difference of just less than 900,000 more audience members per day in 2002 than in 2001. Seasonal-adjusted growth in the news audience was nearly three times as large during the Persian Gulf crisis as during the current war on terrorism, but in both cases the magnitude of growth was rather small, amounting to 0.4% of adults in 2001–2 and 1.3% in 1990–91.⁴ Seen from this perspective, the clearest impact of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was in increasing the amount of weekly variance around the seasonal mean rather than in shifting the mean itself. Similarly, 9/11 appears to have accelerated the seasonal growth curve for the evening news audience during the fall of 2001 without producing a substantive shift in its average size.

Where Else Are Americans Getting Their News?

The preceding analysis begs the question of whether Americans are still getting their news primarily from network news broadcasts. If people are turning instead to other sources for public affairs information, then an analysis of those sources might shed a more flattering light on levels of civic engagement in post-9/11 America.

According to surveys conducted by the Pew Center for the People and the Press (Figure 2), there have been some notable changes in the mix of news media used by Americans since 9/11. The questions from which I obtained these data allowed respondents to name up to three media as primary sources of news, so these survey data capture a potentially broad range of media involvement.⁵ In the first week of September 2001, newspapers were the most commonly

Figure 2
Where Have People Been Getting Most of Their News about National and International Issues?



Source: Pew Center for the People and the Press surveys. Since up to three answers were accepted per respondent (see note 6), the sum for each survey adds up to well over 100%.

mentioned source of information about public affairs. By the second week of January 2002, cable television news had become the most-cited news source, mentioned by over half of respondents.

All of the other pre- and post-9/11 differences are individually within the margins of sampling error for these surveys, but collectively they reveal some common patterns. First, there has been a decline in the percentage of Americans turning to print news since 9/11. Audit bureau data released by the Newspaper Association of America confirms that U.S. daily newspaper circulation in the period from September 31, 2001, through March 31, 2002, was 0.6% lower than in the prior six-month period that ended in September, 2001.⁶ Second, the declining reliance on newspapers and news magazines seems to be offset by a shift toward electronic news sources. Aside from the obvious jump for cable television news, slightly higher percentages of Americans reported in January 2002 that they turn to local television news, network television news, radio, and the Internet for public affairs information. Taken together, these two changes suggest that Americans now seem to be more attentive to media that specialize in delivering the “latest” news even as they reduce their reliance on sources of news that emphasize in-depth reporting and providing context for understanding the current crisis. But how many people are actually tuning in to cable?

Audience Trends for Cable News

The Pew surveys suggest that many more people now rely on cable news outlets than before 9/11, and Nielsen ratings data confirm that the cable news audience has experienced a sizeable gain. Since cable news outlets provide continuous public affairs programming, Nielsen measures cable news audiences differently than network news audiences. Instead of estimating the average number of viewers for a particular program, Nielsen estimates for each cable channel the average number of viewers per minute in an entire day. While not directly comparable to network news ratings, since these averages mask how many different people watch the cable channels across an entire day, the change in these ratings before

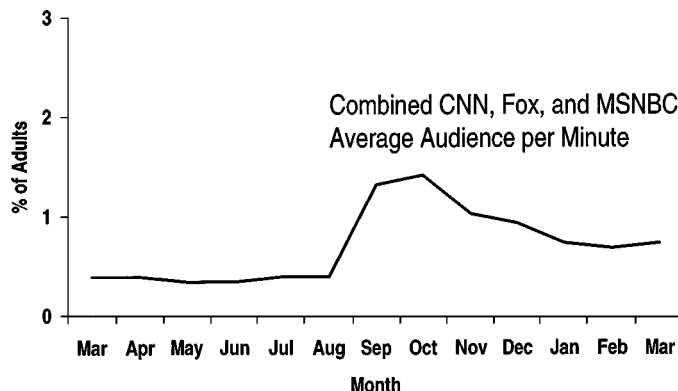
and after 9/11 clarifies how cable audiences have responded to the terror attacks.

Figure 3 shows the combined average audience per minute for the Cable News Network, Fox News Channel, and MSNBC, which are the top three cable news channels.⁷ For the six months leading up to September 2001, the combined audience for the three cable channels averaged just less than 0.4% of American adults, or about 800,000 persons. For the period from September 2001, through March 2002, the average cable audience more than doubled to nearly 1% of American adults, or approximately two million people. Figure 3 shows that the changes in the size of the cable news audience followed a similar course as that for the broadcast news audience. After a fourfold increase from 800,000 persons in August to 2.7 million in September, the average cable news audience gradually declined in size over the next several months. By March 2002, the combined per-minute audience for the three cable channels averaged 1.5 million viewers. While this is just half the size of the peak audience in September, it is also twice the size of the combined cable audience from a year before, indicating that cable news has indeed retained an appreciable number of new viewers.

Although Figure 3 appears to suggest that the cable audience remains far smaller than the broadcast news audience (and media reporters frequently interpret these numbers in this way), it is possible that the cumulative cable news audience—that is, the total number of unique viewers—could include a fairly large proportion of American adults on a given day. For example, the average per-minute cable news audience for November 2001, was 905,000 persons for CNN and 747,000 for Fox News. But the number of different people who watched at least 15 minutes of programming at some point during that same month was 93.4 million for CNN (or about 46% of American adults) and 58.5 million for Fox (or about 29% of American adults).⁸

However, it is unclear whether these cable viewers are getting a mix of news comparable to that received by network audiences. A recent content analysis of primetime news programming on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC during late January of this year (News Hour 2002) found that cable news shows focused on a

Figure 3
Average Percentage of American Adults Watching Cable News, March 2001 to March 2002



Source: Nielsen ratings data.

small number of “headline” stories, and that much of the primetime programming took the form of personal interviews or panel discussions rather than traditional news reporting. If the past behavior of cable audiences is any guide to the present, it is also likely that these new viewers constitute an irregular audience for cable news, tuning in to catch up with developing stories or breaking news, but otherwise relying primarily on noncable sources for their daily diet of news.

Consequences of Public Disengagement from the War on Terrorism

If 9/11 has founded a new era of civic-mindedness in the U.S., it seems to have left Americans’ collective appetite for news largely undisturbed. The size of the network television news audience grew only slightly, and newspaper readership continued to decline after 9/11. While the average size of the cable news audience has doubled, it remains a small fraction of American adults, and the audiences for both network and cable news have diminished with each passing month.

It is too soon to identify any long-term implications for the public’s limited attention to the early stages of this war, let alone to speculate whether the trends of the last year are likely to continue into even the near future. However, two consequences of the public’s disengagement are already apparent.

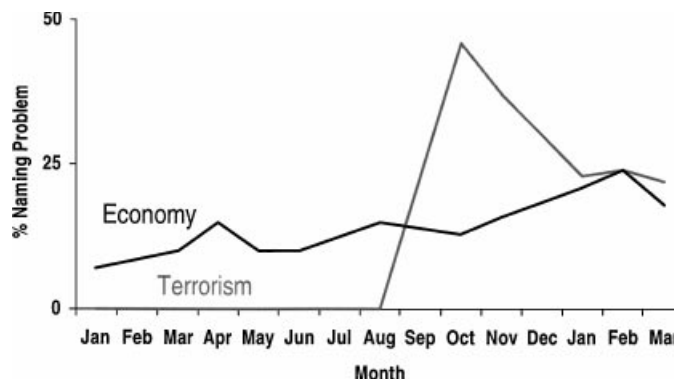
First, many Americans consider the war on terrorism to be a domestic issue rather than a foreign-policy issue. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducted a survey in January 2002, which asked two slightly different versions of the same question (Pew 2002). The first read:

“Right now, which is more important for President Bush to focus on: domestic policy or the war on terrorism?” A second version changed “the war on terrorism” to “foreign policy,” but was otherwise identical. If Americans think about the war on terrorism as a foreign-policy issue, the percentages in both versions of the question should be nearly identical. Yet, the public’s responses could hardly be more different. To the first version of the question, 33% of respondents answered domestic policy and 52% named the war on terrorism. These numbers were reversed in the second version, where 52% chose domestic policy and only 34% said foreign policy.

Question-wording effects of this magnitude—generating an 18-point shift in surveyed opinion—typically indicate that the mass public has insufficiently reasoned through its opinions (Yankelovich 1991). It is certainly understandable why many Americans see the war on terrorism as a domestic issue. Most paid close attention to news of the terrorist attacks in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC, but have been less attentive to the news during the Bush administration’s subsequent military actions and diplomatic initiatives overseas. Further analysis of this wording effect by Pew researchers revealed that the tendency to think of the war on terrorism as a domestic policy issue was closely related to level of formal education: college graduates gave essentially the same mix of opinions in response to both versions of the question, while those with a high school education or less demonstrated the

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Figure 4
Percentages Naming Terrorism and the Economy as the “Most Important Problems,” January 2001 to March 2002



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization.

greatest sensitivity to these wording changes (Pew 2002). Since people with higher levels of education also tend to be more attentive to the news (Price and Zaller 1993), the tendency to see the war on terrorism as a matter of domestic policy may be a direct outgrowth of public disengagement from the news in the aftermath of 9/11.

A second consequence is that while opinion surveys reveal consistently high levels of support for American military action against countries and organizations suspected of sponsoring terrorism, the roots of this support may not run deep. This possibility is suggested in recent trends from Gallup polls that ask Americans to name “the most important problem facing the country today.”⁹ Figure 4 shows how terrorism leaped onto the public’s agenda following 9/11: nearly half of Americans named terrorism as the country’s most important problem in an October Gallup poll (no data are available for the month of September). However, the ensuing months saw a rapid falloff in the percentage of the public concerned about terrorism, so that by January 2002, fewer than a quarter of Americans named terrorism as the country’s most important problem. In contrast, unease with the state of the economy came to rival terrorism as the top issue of public concern in the first quarter of 2002. Given the impact of a shifting public agenda on evaluations of George Bush Sr.’s job performance in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf war (Krosnick and Brannon 1993), it is notable that the declining importance of terrorism and the increasing importance of economic concerns track George W. Bush’s declining job-approval rating. Although President Bush has made it clear that the allied military campaign against terrorism is just beginning, fewer people today are likely to be evaluating him on the basis of his performance as commander in chief.

The rapid decline in public concern about terrorism is a sign that American support for U.S. military involvement abroad may be less firm than it seems. If this American resolve is more closely tied to the dramatic events of 9/11 than to a new appreciation for the complexities of the post-9/11

geopolitical landscape, it becomes increasingly difficult to predict how Americans will respond to new developments or crises in the coming years of this war.

It remains to be seen whether this public disengagement has resulted from the stunning successes of the U.S. military

campaign in Afghanistan, or from the secrecy in which the war on terrorism has necessarily been shrouded. But the public's steady retreat from opportunities for news exposure should give pause to military and political leaders pondering the next step in this solemn undertaking.

Notes

1. I compiled these data from various media sources available from the LEXIS-NEXIS database. Nielsen uses representative national samples of 5,000 television households to estimate television viewing trends for all households in the U.S. Electronic "People Meters" continuously monitor all broadcast television, satellite, cable, and VCR viewing activity for each individual in a household.

2. Nielsen currently publishes ratings in terms of millions of audience members viewing a particular program. According to the 2000 Census, there are 205.05 million persons aged 19 or older in the U.S. Since household television penetration has been nearly universal since before 1980, simply dividing the former by the latter produces a reasonable estimate of the percentage of American adults watching nightly news programs. During the 1990–91 period, Nielsen reported ratings information using its measure of rating points, in which each point represents 1% of American television households viewing a particular program. To create comparable trends for the Persian Gulf Crisis, the combined rating points for all three network news broadcasts were multiplied by the mean number of persons aged 19 or older per household in the U.S. (1.87, according to the 1990 Census) and then by the number of households in the U.S. (91.99 million in 1990). This joint product was then divided by the total number of persons aged 19 or older (181.50 million) to estimate the percentage of adults watching nightly network news programs.

3. Lisa de Moraes, "For an Extraordinary Week, Nielsen Puts the Ratings Aside," *Washington Post*, 20 September 2001, sec. C.

4. These percentages come from the January through April averages between years for each case.

5. In these Pew surveys, respondents were first asked, "How have you been getting most of your news about national and international issues? From television, from newspapers, from radio, from magazines, or from the Internet?" Interviewers were instructed to accept two answers from each respondent, and in cases where the respondent provided only one answer, to prompt for a second. Any respondents who answered "television" were then asked "Do you get most of your news about national and international issues from network TV news, from local TV news, or from cable news networks such as CNN, MSNBC, and the Fox News Channel?" As with the first question, two answers were accepted from each respondent, and those providing only one were prompted for another. Since this question structure prompted each respondent to provide at least two and up to three answers, the sum of categories adds up to well over 100%. These data are from the January 17, 2002, report entitled "Unusually High Interest In Bush's State Of The Union" (Pew 2002).

6. Felicity Barringer, "Some Big Papers Buck Trend of Circulation Drops," *New York Times*, 7 May 2002, sec. C.

7. Cable ratings data are from Jim Rutenberg, "Audience for Cable News Grows: Programs are Holding Some Gains from Terror Coverage," *New York Times*, 25 March 2002, sec. C.

8. Reported in David Bauder, "The Different Audiences of News Networks Come into Focus," *Associated Press Wire Service*, 9 January 2002.

9. I obtained these data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research POLL database, which is available on LEXIS-NEXIS. Data from 2001 are not available for the months of February, July, September, and December.

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