

Selling International News

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Abstract

With the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as a backdrop, we look at what kinds of news stories attract public attention. We focus on what kinds of international news stories have been “followed closely,” as measured by the Pew Center’s monthly reports on media interest. We explore 413 major news stories from 1986 through 1994. Each story was decomposed into topics (like sports or foreign affairs) and spins (such as sex or suspense).

On September 11, Americans tuning in to their regular dose of morning news got more than the usual traffic, weather, and sports. International terrorists had destroyed four airplanes, the World Trade Center towers, and a piece of the Pentagon. Many Americans spent the days and weeks that followed glued to the news. The television networks obliged, joining their cable cousins with 24-hour coverage, and newspapers such as *The New York Times* devoted entire sections to the developing war on terror.

As cataclysmic as the attacks had been, public interest in the war against terrorism declined rapidly throughout 2002. Less than a year after the terrorist attacks, the Pew Center for People and the Press reported that “levels of reading, watching and listening to the news are not markedly different than in the spring of 2000” (Kohut 2002). Even more surprising, the poll found that while U.S. troops have been deployed worldwide in the fight against a truly global adversary, the proportion of Americans consistently following international news was fairly low. Perhaps this validates the old criticism that Americans are apathetic towards the world unless American blood is spilled. But this surprising decline in interest for news about the war against terrorism also raises a basic question: what makes for interesting news? That is the basic question at the heart of this paper, for if a global fight against terrorism cannot hold the attention of U.S. news consumers, what can?

Even in times of relative calm, television presides as the preferred medium for news consumers. Reviewing media coverage of five issues in the 1980s, Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992:56) found consumers consistently rating television coverage "more attention-grabbing, interesting, personally relevant, emotionally involving, and surprising than newspaper or magazine coverage." (Also see Graber 1990, Salomon 1984, Robinson and Sheehan 1983, and Altheide 1976.) All of these story attributes are important elements in news stories that

Americans find appealing, and they all contribute to the relative disinterest Americans have in news about politics and foreign policy.

The political science and communications literature leads us to expect that human interest, suspense, tragedy, and stories about “people like us” caught in difficult situations lead to heightened interest among news consumers (Graber 1993; Iyengar 1991; Shoemaker & Mayfield 1987). Attention is peaked by news about familiar personal challenges like finding a job, paying a mortgage, and raising kids. Sex sells, as does patriotism and a good war (McLeod & Eveland 1994, Cook 1991). Conflict and violence draw audiences, while news about politics does not – unless political stories emphasise scandals and conflict.

That is the conventional wisdom. This paper puts these and other hypotheses to an empirical test, drawing on a detailed analysis 413 major news stories from 1986 through 1994 (King, Cooley & Curtis 1999). These data, unpublished until now, are reviewed in light of the events of 9/11.

Using the Pew Research Center Interest Index, we evaluate news based on ten subject categories (foreign policy, sports, etc.) and the “spin” put on those stories (including human interest, sex, conflict, patriotism, and suspense). Our general objective in this paper is to identify empirically what distinguishes “interesting” news stories from “uninteresting” ones. We focus specifically on stories related to foreign policy, seeking to understand when and why Americans pay attention to news about other countries. As an illuminating example, we also examine the relationship between economic stories about pocketbook issues (in which people have a personal stake) and stories about businesses that are distant from every-day lives. Finally, we build a multivariate model of consumer interest in news stories in order to clarify how these issues and others, such as politics, are covered by the news media.

Expectations

Americans confront a proliferation of news sources, from multi-channel cable systems to news radio and the Internet.

All of these news outlets lead to a flood of information. How people tame that tide is the subject of Doris Graber's *Processing the News* (1984), and her analysis gives guidance about what kinds of stories people find appealing. The flood of news is pared down, in a sense, through a series of barriers, and a relatively small number of stories are ultimately processed by a consumer. Graber imagines that the tide of information is evaluated within psychological schemas, and news items that do not fit into these fairly established patterns of thinking are more likely to be passed over by consumers. Our approach is much the same.

Three sequential considerations greatly enhance the chances that news stories will grab the attention of Americans. First, consumers need the cognitive capacities to understand what a story is about. Second, news should be personally relevant. And third, stories should be told in ways that entice readers, by emphasizing elements of conflict, suspense, and (when possible) sex.

Americans often lack the background to discuss important political issues of the day, and this dampens the media's ability to keep citizens informed about public policies. For example, a survey funded by the Kaiser Family Foundation found only 6 percent of American adults able to name the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. And in a finding echoing Philip Converse's work on ideology, just 53 percent of Americans -- slightly better than one would expect by flipping a coin -- correctly identified the Republican party as the more conservative of the two major American parties (Morin 1996).

Lack of background knowledge may be especially problematic for international news coverage. In the Pew survey, 65 percent said that they did not follow international news because they lacked sufficient knowledge of events. This response polled much higher than those who cited repetitiveness (51%), or remoteness (45%) as a reason for not following international news. Unfortunately, Americans do seem to be disengaged from their own foreign policy. In the same poll, only half (48%) of the respondents correctly identified Colin Powell as the Secretary of State, and even less (29%) knew that Donald Rumsfeld was the Secretary of Defense (Kohut 2002). This lack of knowledge seems to be a significant hurdle to news programmers attempting to cover international issues.

Politicians complain that the news media cover political scandals, gossip, and conflict -- with elected officials cast as villains. Our suspicion is that reporters are simply looking to cover politics in ways that are accessible and engaging for most Americans. Human-interest elements are given more play than political institutions, and as Shanto Iyengar laments in *Is Anyone Responsible?* (1991), the tendency to personalize the news through anecdotes about individuals makes it more difficult for Americans to see broader social and political trends. Instead, news consumers fixate on the exceptional cases. Personal relevance matters.

Some of the most personally relevant issues are “pocketbook” ones. Richard Parker, the founder of *Mother Jones*, says that if one ever wants to engage strangers in a discussion about economics, one only need ask about housing values in a neighborhood. On his recommendation, we tried this with perfect strangers who, like those in the Kaiser and Pew surveys, might not be able to name the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court or the Secretary of Defense. However, they could gauge with great precision movements in the local housing markets, the impact of property taxes on schools, and the relative merits of home-equity loans and conventional

mortgages. We expect that stories about these kinds of immediate “close to home” concerns will be especially appealing to Americans. Stories about specific businesses, like the much-publicized 1998 merger of Netscape and America On Line, are far less likely to generate much interest.¹

Beyond personally relevant subjects, the way a story is spun may matter as well. This distinction between a story’s *subject* and its *spin* is maintained throughout this paper. A spin is the way that a subject is covered, and the more common ones include conflict, sex, human interest, patriotism and suspense. We expect, for example, that consumers will not follow stories about government very closely, but add an element of conflict or violence, and interest might inch higher.

Data

To explore the attributes of popular news stories, we turn to the Pew Research Center Interest Index surveys covering major news stories from 1986 through 1994. Every few months, staff of the Times-Mirror Center for People and the Press (the Pew Center’s precursor) selected four to six major news items and asked respondents how closely they had been following the stories. The national random samples typically included at least 1,000 respondents, and during the nine years beginning July 1986, Pew Research Center collected information on 413 stories.

¹ As an aside, there is an interesting parallel in the selection of stories for TV movies. Whether or not a movie is made depends on ratings expectations, and Wachtell and Wu’s (1993) investigation shows a big boost for fact-based stories about every-day people caught up in extra-ordinary circumstances. If a real-life event is covered recently in the popular press, expected ratings are even higher. Wachtell and Wu tell of an independent producer who had recently “gone to a network with a great fictional story, and the network executive turned it down saying, ‘It would make a good movie ... if only it were true.’ [The producer] missed the old days when fact-based movies hadn’t been so much in demand. ... It seemed as if TV movies and television news shows suddenly were competing for the same stories” (pg. 5, cf. Oliver & Armstrong 1995).

These stories are not a random sample of all the news, and one needs to be careful interpreting their results. News stories in the Index were chosen by Pew staff after reviewing newspapers, news magazines, and television news programs to find the most prominent stories. The staff usually included at least one foreign policy story, and the staff occasionally added stories that were getting lots of attention in Washington but which the staff suspected were not resonating beyond the Beltway (Parker 1996). What we have from Pew, then, is a truncated though still very useful dataset of news stories.

The share of Americans following a news story very closely ranges from 2 to 80 percent and averages 26 percent. As shown in Table 1, the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger attracted the most attention. Near the bottom of the list, one is much more likely to find foreign affairs stories, such as the 1990 ouster of Pakistani Prime Minister Bhutto.

Table 1
Examples of Major News Stories, 1986 through 2002
And “Interest” Ratings from the Pew Center Surveys


	<i>% following story “very closely”</i>	<i>News Story (Month of Survey)</i>
Closely followed	80%	Explosion of space shuttle Challenger (July 1986)
	78%	Terror attacks on the U.S. (October 2001)
	73%	San Francisco earthquake (October 1989)
	70%	Rodney King verdict, ensuing riots (May 1992)
	69%	Crash of a Paris-Bound TWA Plane off New York Coast (July 1996)
	69%	Jessica McClure rescued from a Texas well (October 1987)
	69%	Columbine Massacre (April 1999)
	67%	End of the Gulf War & Troops’ Homecoming (March 1991)
	66%	Hurricane Andrew (September 1992)
	66%	Iraq invades Kuwait, US deploys troops (Aug. 1990)
	65%	Midwest floods (August 1993)
	63%	Southern California earthquake (January 1994)
	62%	Increases in gasoline prices (October 1990)
	61%	High price of gasoline (May 2002)
	60%	Invasion of Panama (December 1989)
	60%	Hurricane Hugo (September 1989)
	Not so closely followed	58%
58%		Oklahoma City bombing (June 1995)
...		...
13%		The civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (average 1991-94)
8%		Irish Republican Army cease-fire announcement (September 1994)
7%		Summit between Clinton and leaders of Asian nations (December 1993)
6%		Debate over NATO expansion (April 1997)
5%		Passage of the National Service Act (September 1993)
4%		Dismissal of Pakistan’s Prime Minister Bhutto (August 1990)
4%		Civil War in Cambodia (May 1990)
3%	Debate on Chilean Augusto Pinochet’s Fate (December 1998)	
3%	Woody Allen & Mia Farrow Breakup (September 1992)	

What accounts for the variation in interest across news stories in the Pew Center sample?

A casual glance at the list points us in a couple directions. Accidents and natural disasters rank very high, as do war stories involving U.S. troops. Those foreign policy stories that do not

evoke American pride and patriotism almost always rank well below. Stories about pocketbook issues -- such as increases in gasoline prices and federal tax policies -- get much closer attention from Americans than stories about specific businesses, mergers, and acquisitions. Finally, Americans pay relatively little attention to celebrity scandals and gossip (Kohut 1995). These first impressions, however, are not rigorous and might lead us astray. A more systematic analysis is needed.

To determine which attributes of major stories made them especially interesting to consumers, we generated a list of ten possible story subjects and five story spins. Each of the 413 stories was then evaluated for all fifteen attributes.

One can think of a story's subject as similar to the part of the newspaper where it is likely to be found. We have limited the number of subject areas to ten. While  could have categorized more subjects, we stopped at ten to avoid respondent fatigue. Subject areas included: (1) government and politics, (2) foreign affairs (3) human rights and social welfare (4) personal economics and pocketbook concerns, (5) business and industry, (6) crime, law and justice, (7) scandal and gossip, (8) sports, entertainment and leisure, (9) natural disasters and accidents, (10) science and technology.

Any story could possess elements of each of the ten subjects. For example, when President Richard Nixon resigned his office in August 1974, the news story may have had components from multiple subject areas: government, crime, gossip, and perhaps foreign affairs as well.

The most common ways of spinning news subjects are along dimensions of: (a) human interest, (b) pride and patriotism, (c) conflict and violence, (d) suspense, and (e) sex and romance.

The Watergate story was suspenseful, which heightened Americans' interests. The analytical approach in this paper allows us to gauge which type of "spin" most effectively lures consumers to stories about politics and public policy.

After compiling this list of subjects and spins, masters-level students at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government evaluated each of the 413 story descriptions. The methodology is detailed in a footnote.² The essential point is that each subject within a story was rated on a scale from zero (not applicable to the story) to five (very applicable to the story). Subject scores were then averaged across respondents. These averages are used as independent variables in a subsequent regression.

Just as the "Pew Interest Index" stories are not a random sample of all news events, Kennedy School students are (probably) not a random sample of Americans. The students may be more likely than the rest of the population to see 'business' and 'government' ramifications of stories. Nonetheless, we have confidence that our respondents have the backgrounds to

² The 413 stories were randomly placed into lists containing no more than 35 stories each. Each survey was then completed by three to five respondents, and their answers were averaged as described in the text. Respondents saw the same description of the story that Times Mirror used in their national random samples. (Example: "Attacks on foreigners in Germany by neo-Nazis.") Along with the headline was the list of story subjects. Respondents were then asked, "Using a one-to-five scale (1 meaning somewhat applicable, 3 meaning applicable, and 5 meaning very applicable) please rate how relevant or applicable these categories are to the given story. (Note: More than one category may apply to each news story. Do not mark an answer if it does not apply. Mark 'Don't Know' if the subject matter of the story is not familiar to you.)" For evaluating a story's likely "spin," respondents were shown a list of what we were calling 'story elements.' We asked the respondents, "using the card provided, write the numbers of up to three story elements that, in your opinion, contributed to public interest in this story." The story element 'human interest' was originally evaluated as a story subject. We originally called the 'pocketbook' category 'economics,' but it was clear from how respondents categorized issues that they interpreted 'economics' as 'pocketbook,' leaving the 'business' category to cover specific industries.

intelligently assess the stories in the Pew sample.³ We tapped the students' expertise not to rate how closely the public follows a story – the public opinion polls measured that. We used the students' expertise simply to discover what subjects and spins were perceived as present in the news coverage.

For an example of how subject categories were assessed, consider April 1990 news stories about Lithuania's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union. Five of the ten subject categories were marked by at least one of the masters-level student analysts. Both the 'business' and 'pocketbook' categories registered a low score of 0.50 on the zero to five scale. The 'government' category was assessed at 1.50, 'human rights and social welfare' at 3.75, and 'foreign policy' at 5.0, meaning that each of the respondents rated foreign policy "very applicable to the story." Our dataset contains similar evaluations for all 413 news stories.

Similarly, we asked student analysts to identify story elements that, in their opinion, "contributed to public interest in the story." We consider those elements to be akin to how the a story is likely to have been spun by reporters and editors. For example, the story of Congress's November 1993 passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement was evaluated by respondents as having elements of patriotism and suspense -- but no sex at all.

Table 2 reports the frequencies of story subjects and story spins. The results are consistent with news summaries emerging from other kinds of samples. Typically government and politics stories lead the way, followed by stories with a foreign affairs component. Similarly, Graber (1993:122) categorized roughly 50 percent of national television news topics under the heading "government/politics."

³ The typical MPP class in 1995 was 56% male, 34% ethnic minorities, primarily from the east coast (40% from the Northeast and 11% from the Midwest), and had an average age of 25 years.

The prominence of government and foreign policy stories raises a contrast with Table 1, which showed the public's rating of the most and least popular stories. Everything we have seen up until Table 2 leads us to expect that government and foreign policy stories are unlikely candidates to be followed closely. Yet these are precisely the major news stories most often covered by the national media. This paradox may be explained by journalistic ethics. If all decisions about what to report were driven by what consumers seem to want, we suspect that more of the nation's media outlets would look like *The National Enquirer*. Rather, to some extent, the news media cover issues that reporters and editors think Americans *should* be getting. In addition, domestic and foreign governments are virtual news factories, and many of the issues surrounding them are too important for journalists to ignore.

One may be surprised by the low profiles in Table 2 given to sports, entertainment, and gossip. Many Americans turn first to the sports pages of our daily newspapers. Others turn first to the comics or to Ann Landers' advice column. Before getting down to the business of reading the day's news, consumers monitor ongoing interests, such as box scores and comics. The Pew polls, however, were specifically designed to tap into a different set of issues. Some news stories have the potential to break audiences out of their routines. What are the attributes of major news stories that can compete with *Doonesbury* and the *Dodgers*?

Table 2
Frequency of Story Subjects and Story Spins

<i>Story Subject</i>	Percentage	“Somewhat or Very Applicable” Frequency ⁴
Government and Politics/Legislation	50.6%	209
Foreign Affairs	37.5%	155
Human Rights / Social Welfare	25.9%	107
Personal Pocketbook Concerns	23.7%	98
Business and Industry	19.9%	82
Crime / Law and Justice	19.4%	80
Scandal and Gossip	18.6%	77
Sports, Entertainment / Leisure	6.1%	25
Natural Disasters / Accidents	5.6%	23
Science and Technology	2.4%	10
 <i>Story Spin</i>		
Human Interest	32.7%	135
Patriotism / Pride	24.7%	102
Conflict / Violence	24.2%	100
Suspense	7.3%	30
Sex / Romance	5.3%	22

Note: columns do not sum to 100% because multiple categories may be entered for each story. Frequencies are a percentage of 413 news stories.

Analysis

Using the datasets summarized in Tables 1 and 2, we turn to a more systematic analysis. Our dependent variable is the percentage of Pew survey respondents saying that they followed a story “very closely.” Independent variables are comprised of story subjects and ways stories might be spun. We also include several interaction terms to see whether some story subjects become more popular depending on how they are played.

⁴ To be included in the table, story subjects needed to score 2.5 or higher. The same threshold was used for “human interest,” which was originally conceived as a subject, but which we now consider a spin. Story spins needed to be mentioned by at least a third of the Kennedy School survey respondents to make it on to Table 2.

The Multivariate Model

In our model, the dependent variable (ranging from 2 to 80, and with a mean of 26) is the percentage of American adults “closely following” a news story. The independent variables are comprised of ten story subjects, five story spins, and five interaction terms.

The variables are scaled so that a coefficient estimate can be interpreted as the independent increase in the percentage of Americans closely following a news story. For example, the coefficient on a “human interest” story is 13.61, meaning that a story scoring the maximum value on the human interest dimension is predicted to have 13.61 percent more Americans following it closely than an otherwise identical story with no human interest component.

Human-interest stories, in general, do very well, which is presumably why the media cover so many of them. There is, however, a wrinkle evident in our results. Human-interest stories that involve high levels of conflict and violence seem to play to a skeptical audience. When the two story spins are found together at their maximum values, our analysis predicts a 22.78 percentage point drop in consumer interest. Americans seem to like their dose of human-interest stories to be applied in more up-beat ways, as when someone overcomes adversity caused by an accident or by some grave social injustice.

Crime stories are the bread and butter of local news, and for good reason. They are relatively inexpensive to cover; there is a never-ending supply of events, and consumers pay attention to them. Our analysis estimates an increase in interest of 5.47 percentage points for major news stories about crime. Crime involving celebrities (such as the OJ Simpson case and

the attack on Nancy Kerrigan) do particularly well, but threats to ordinary citizens have their own appeal. For example, 36 percent of adults closely followed the 1993 stories about tourists being murdered in Florida.

Table 3
A Multivariate (OLS) Model of Consumer Interest in Major News Stories

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>Std. Err.</i>
<i>Story Subject</i>		
Government and Politics/Legislation	0.29	2.51
Foreign Affairs	-4.99*	3.11
Human Rights / Social Welfare	0.80	2.50
Pocketbook Concerns	17.38***	3.95
Business and Industry	-6.73	3.96
Crime / Law and Justice	5.47*	2.69
Scandal and Gossip	-4.94*	2.82
Sports, Entertainment / Leisure	-0.21	3.58
Natural Disasters / Accidents	11.62**	4.11
Science and Technology	9.99**	4.46
Science * Disasters	22.46*	11.62
<i>Story Spin</i>		
Human Interest	13.61***	3.54
Patriotism / Pride	5.34	4.57
Foreign * Patriotism	3.23	7.95
Foreign * Conflict	-17.54**	6.64
Foreign * (Conflict, Patriotism)	35.41***	9.89
Conflict /Violence	23.44***	7.26
Human * Conflict	-22.78*	9.49
Suspense	6.63*	3.75
Sex / Romance	-2.17	3.71
Intercept	12.20	2.88
413 Observations; R-squared = 0.35		

* P<0.05, ** P<0.01, *** P<0.001, with directional hypotheses (see text). The table reports OLS estimates. The dependent variable is the percentage of survey respondents saying they followed a story “very closely.” The independent variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1, so the coefficient estimates reflect the percentage increase in respondents “very closely” following a story, given a unit increase in the independent variable.

Natural disasters and accidents get the attention of consumers, with an expected 11.62 percent boost in people following those stories. Coverage of the San Francisco earthquake, Hurricane Andrew, and the 1993 floods in the Midwest all received widespread attention from news consumers. The same can be said for man-made disasters, like the 1989 crash of a United Airlines jet in Sioux City, which was followed closely by 53 percent of adults. Although disasters involving science and technology get a big boost in interest (a 22.46 percent increase), these kinds of events cannot be plotted in advance by even the most devious assignment editors.

In contrast, many science stories *can* be planned in advance, and our analysis reflects American's ongoing love affair with technology. The coefficient estimate for science and technology stories is 9.99. This goes beyond the popularity of the science section of the Tuesday *New York Times*. Advances in home computers are followed by a growing number of Americans. And the intersection of technology and leisure (such as improvements in television or stereo equipment) heightens interest in the news. Our speculation, however, is that much of the demand for science news surrounds health issues. A recent national television news broadcast began with three health stories, the first focusing on an apparent breakthrough in detecting cancers. This underscores our finding that personally relevant news is more likely to attract the attention of consumers.

What kinds of stories seem to have no large independent impact on how many people follow the news? Our analysis could discern no impact of government and politics stories or stories about human rights and social welfare. More unexpectedly, sports, entertainment, gossip, and sex seem to have little independent impact on consumer attention to major news stories. We think this is because such stories are part of the routine monitoring many of us do with the news.

We follow sports and entertainment stories as a matter of course, and staying current with gossip is a natural part of daily life.

The Contrasts Between Pocketbook Issues and Business Stories

The importance of personally relevant information is especially reflected in the contrast between pocketbook concerns and business stories. When the New York Stock Exchange crashed in late 1987, the paper value of hundreds of companies dropped dramatically. In less than a week, dozens of America's largest firms lost a quarter of their market value. Capital investments were scaled back, as the equity market's troubles rippled through the economy. It was a big story, which Pew found 40 percent of Americans following "very closely" (Lasorsa & Reese 1990). Not surprisingly, Kennedy School survey respondents rated the crash high on the "business and industry" scale. It was also highly rated as a "pocketbook" issue, because the livelihood of so many Americans was directly affected. Stories about businesses are likely to have pocketbook components, and in our sample the two subjects generate a 0.87 correlation coefficient.

Even though business and pocketbook subjects are usually found together, it is useful to keep the attributes separate when analysing news stories, because consumer interest in business stories is driven by pocketbook concerns. News items about specific troubled companies have little appeal, unless consumers can either empathise with the plight of protagonists or can see how business developments will affect them. Table 4 summarizes the importance of personal relevance in economic stories.

Table 4
Percentage of Americans "Very Closely" Following
Pocketbook and Business Stories

	Little or No Pocketbook Component	Moderate to High Pocketbook Component
Little or No Business Component	24.2% (n=220)	33.1% (n=33)
Moderate to High Business Component	20.1% (n=36)	29.6% (n=124)

Recall that the average news story in our sample was followed very closely by 26 percent of American adults. When little or no⁵ pocketbook components are in news stories, we can expect those stories, on average, to be less appealing to consumers. This is true even when business components are high. However, when pocketbook issues loom large (such as proposals to raise taxes), people pay closer attention.

Our multivariate analysis supports the findings in table 4. Absent pocketbook concerns, stories about business and industry actually lose an audience. The estimated coefficient on business stories is -6.73, while the impact of pocketbook concerns is 17.38 percentage points. For example, increases in gasoline prices were followed by 62 percent of Americans in October 1990, and 49 percent closely followed news of economic growth in March 1993. In contrast, 6 percent closely followed the 1995 merger of Time Warner and Turner Communications, despite plenty of related coverage in *Time* and on CNN. Apparently, Americans can and do distinguish between economics stories that affect their own bottom line budgets and business stories about remote corporations.

⁵ Entries in Table 4 were divided into quadrants based on the mean of "pocketbook" variable and the mean of the "business" variable. Accordingly, the "low, low" includes news stories that were below average for both story components. Likewise for the three other cells.

This finding is consistent with comments by business reporters. Their goal is to make economics stories “accessible” to readers and viewers, which is why so many business stories begin with vignettes about individuals. Recent news about “corporate downsizing” is commonly reported in ways that emphasize the impact on families and communities. Our analysis confirms that such “pocketbook” stories are a useful hook to get an audience paying attention to larger business issues.

Foreign Policy through the Lens of Conflict

Armed with our findings above, we now examine foreign policy reporting. American knowledge about other countries is notoriously low. The recent Pew survey suggests that Americans do not follow foreign affairs closely because most consumers do not know enough about other countries to be able to fit news into pre-established schemas. Also, few foreign events make a big impact on the daily lives of most Americans. In order to register with Americans, foreign stories are much more likely than domestic events to involve conflict or violence. Conflicts within other countries presumably get the attention of consumers, and as a result, we suspect that Americans have come to view the politics of other countries through the lens of conflict. When was the last time a major U.S. news outlet covered improvements in the social welfare of peasants in India? We do not know the answer to that question, but we are sure that riots between Hindus and Muslims are much more likely to get highlighted by the American media and are much more likely to register with news consumers.

Table 5 reports the percentage of domestic and foreign policy stories using the conflict frame. As suspected, foreign affairs stories are more likely to involve conflict or violence. More than three out of every five major foreign affairs stories are oriented toward conflict. Some of

this is driven by the presence of stories about the Gulf War in the Pew survey, but the distinction holds up well even when we exclude items evoking American patriotism.

Table 5
The Conflict and Violence Spin

	% of Stories Evoking Conflict and/or Violence Spin
Little or no foreign affairs component (n= 237; 57%)	24.1%
Moderate to high foreign affairs component (n = 176; 43%)	62.5%

Nearly a quarter of the news stories about domestic events were likely to have used the conflict and violence frame. Not surprisingly, these stories were more often about crime or about government policymaking. It makes sense to frame crime issues around conflict and violence, but one wonders about the long-term impact of disproportionately covering conflict-ridden foreign news stories, and our multivariate analysis questions the wisdom of this kind of coverage from a market perspective.

Foreign affairs stories are not widely popular to begin with (the estimated coefficient is - 4.99), but when foreign affairs stories involve conflict, even fewer Americans are inclined to pay attention. The “foreign conflict” interaction term in our analysis shows an additional loss of 17.54 percent of Americans following a story closely. We speculate based on our analysis of economic stories that foreign affairs stories would be more popular if they were written to show connections to the national and local interests of American consumers.

Following this expectation, the great exception on foreign stories and conflict is when U.S. troops are involved (McLeod *et al.* 1994). We measure this by interacting foreign affairs

stories with both conflict and patriotism spins. The result is a 35.41 percent increase in attention. When that is combined with the direct effect of conflict, we can expect six in ten Americans to follow U.S. war stories very closely. Add an element of suspense, and attention will be even higher. The model nicely predicts attention to the end of the Gulf War (67%), Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait (66%), and various military actions like the U.S. invasion of Panama (60%).

It is no surprise that wars boost attention. We need no other lesson than William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* reports about the 1898 sinking of the battleship Maine. But not just any war will do, American's must be involved. The key to making war stories interesting is to emphasize the role that Americans are playing to make the world a better, safer place. Still, after a war's close, our analysis suggests that journalists would be well advised to get their coverage off of war footing. Cut back on the emphasis on conflict and violence in other countries and aim for more personally relevant issues.

Conclusion

This paper modelled the demand-side for news by accounting for how story attributes are related to how closely Americans followed major news events from the mid 1980s through mid 1990s. Although stories about government, politics and foreign affairs account for a sizeable portion of most wide-circulation newspapers and often lead nightly news broadcasts, the public's demand for stories about politics, domestic or foreign, seems to be lower than the actual supply of policy-related news.

Rather, if newscasters determined their story line-ups purely on consumer demand, human interest stories and stories involving crime, natural disasters, and technological advances. These are all subjects that relate directly to everyday life in the most immediate sense. These

stories are also more likely to be about ordinary people with whom the average news consumer can relate.

Among major news stories, celebrity scandals and gossip do little to entice viewers. Instead, Americans seem to be interested in what we might call the “celebrity of ordinary citizens.” The more directly news can apply situations and challenges most Americans face (or ones they most fear confronting), consumer interest climbs.

The importance of making news personally relevant to consumers should not be underestimated. Consumers’ ability to distinguish between economic stories about close-to-home “pocketbook” issues like taxes, gas prices, and mortgage rates and stories about corporations and the business world is a particularly illuminating demonstration of this principle.

But by its very nature, international news is about faraway people and places, usually relating to government issues that would have a hard time drawing an audience even in a domestic context. That reality, combined with a general lack of information about the world prevalent among Americans, makes international news and foreign policy stories a tough sell. Newscasters traditionally throw a liberal dose of conflict and war into their international coverage in order to attract more viewers’ interest, but the evidence strongly contradicts the intuitive logic of this tendency. Rather, international news is no exception: in order to be interesting, stories must be personally relevant to the people consuming the news.

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