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Author

Baum, Matt

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A Paradox of Public Opinion: Why A *Less Interested Public is More* Attentive to War

This study argues that even as the American people declares themselves, in countless public opinion surveys, less concerned with foreign affairs in the Post-Cold War era than at any time since the end of World War II, they are nonetheless growing increasingly attentive to foreign policy crises. I develop a theory suggesting that this trend is attributable to a “direct marketing” revolution in television broadcasting, which has for many Americans increased the appeal of information about foreign crises. As evidence, I conduct two statistical investigations. The first examines the relationship between individual media consumption habits and attentiveness to three recent high-profile foreign policy crisis issues. The second compares public opinion trends during the three major post-World War II American uses of military force -- Korea, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf, to determine whether the relationships identified at the individual level can account for aggregate trends in public attentiveness. I find that the public has indeed grown increasingly attentive to foreign crises over the past half century, and that this increase is attributable, at least in part, to changes in the mass media, particularly television.

Matthew A. Baum
Department of Political Science
University of California, San Diego
9500 Gilman Drive, M/C 0521
La Jolla, CA 92093
Phone: (949) 716-6446
Fax: (949) 716-6447
email: mbaum@weber.ucsd.edu

A Paradox of Public Opinion: Why A *Less Interested Public is More Attentive to War*

Section 1. Introduction

Seventy percent of respondents in the 1970 American National Election Study (NES) declared that the Vietnam War was *very* important to them personally. Twenty one years later, when the NES queried respondents about the Persian Gulf War, a similar percentage (63%) responded that it was *very* or *extremely* important to them personally.¹ At least in these surveys, Americans in 1991 appear to have considered the Gulf War similarly important as their counterparts in 1970 considered Vietnam.

Given the comparable importance that contemporary NES respondents attributed to the two conflicts, one might anticipate they would have devoted comparable attention to the two wars. Yet only half as many respondents in 1970 reported paying "quite a bit" or "a great deal" of attention to Vietnam (46%) as reported paying similar attention to the Gulf War in 1991 (90 %).²

A great deal of additional survey evidence corroborates this surprising anecdotal finding (see Baum 1999). For instance, Figure 1, below, compares the percentage of Americans who responded "no opinion" -- here employed as an indicator of attentiveness³ -- when asked whether

¹ The corresponding difference between the 1968 and 1991 NES surveys is a nearly identical eight percentage points.

² In 1968, 56 percent of respondents to the identical NES question claimed to be paying "a good deal" of attention to Vietnam. A nearly identical number (55%) claimed Vietnam would be very important in deciding how they would vote in the 1968 presidential election.

³ I define attentiveness as *the extent to which typical individuals, and by extension the mass public, are cognizant of, and willing to accept information about, a given issue.* "Attentiveness" is closely akin to several other constructs from social psychology, such as "awareness" and "salience." In fact, I conceive of attentiveness as lying somewhere between "awareness" and "salience." Individuals must become cognizant, or aware, of an issue before choosing whether to pay attention. Simple

or not they approved of how presidents Johnson, Nixon and Bush, respectively, conducted the two conflicts (see Appendix, Question 1). This question was asked repeatedly, in nearly identical form, throughout both the Vietnam War (1965-73, N=86) and Persian Gulf Crisis (8/90-9/91, N=41).⁴

cognizance, however, seems unlikely to have meaningful implications for politics. "Salience," in contrast, implies personal importance (Smith et al. 1956: 35), which extends beyond the bounds of the theory developed below. One must become aware of an issue before being attentive.

However, mere awareness may be insufficient to form an opinion, which requires paying attention to some minimal information about an issue. Yet, one can certainly pay enough attention to an issue to form an opinion without truly *understanding* the issue or determining that it is particularly *important* (perhaps in order to determine whether or not the issue is of personal importance).

⁴ There is substantial evidence that responding "don't know" or "no opinion" primarily represents *unfamiliarity*, rather than *ambivalence* about how to respond. For instance, in the 1996 American National Election Study (NES), respondents were asked a series of 19 "feeling thermometer" questions regarding politically prominent individuals and groups. Those answering "don't know" were then asked whether they were unfamiliar with the individual/group or ambivalent about the appropriate response. Overall, 76 percent indicated that their "don't know" response meant they were *unfamiliar* with the individual or group. I also conducted a series of validity and reliability tests. "Don't know" responses were consistently inversely related to political knowledge, education, interest in politics and political partisanship. Additional testing indicated that in *every* NES survey conducted during the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars, the likelihood of responding "don't know" to the war-related questions employed in this study was inversely and significantly related to the number of mentions of foreign policy-related issues in open-ended "most important problems facing the nation" questions. (For additional arguments and evidence in support of this hypothesis, see Zaller 1991, Page & Shapiro 1983, Powlick & Katz 1998b, Shapiro & Mahajan 1986, Edwards 1990). The latter test results are available from the author. These questions are frequently employed as indicators of issue salience. "Attentiveness" (as defined in footnote 3) represents a somewhat lower information threshold than "salience." Hence, if responding "no opinion" is a valid indicator

[Figure 1 here]

Far more Americans consistently failed to manifest an opinion during the Vietnam era than during the Gulf War. The mean rate of “no opinion” responses during the entire 1965-1973 period was almost twice that of the 13 month period of the Persian Gulf crisis covered in this Figure (14.5% versus 7.25%). In fact, on only one of 86 surveys between 1965 and 1973 did the “no opinion” rate reach as low as the overall *average* for the 13 month Persian Gulf crisis.⁵

Surprisingly, while Americans appear to have paid substantially more attention to the Persian Gulf crisis than to Vietnam, since the end of the Cold War they have declared themselves in countless public opinion surveys to be less concerned with foreign affairs than at any time since World War II. Figure 2, below, shows annualized trend, from 1945 to 1998, in the percentage of the public mentioning issues pertaining to foreign affairs, when asked by the Gallup Poll to name the most urgent problem facing the nation.

[Figure 2 here]

In the 1950's and 1960's, about half of the public regularly mentioned issues relating to foreign affairs; in the 1990's, the corresponding average is less than eight percent.⁶ Why would far

of issue salience, it is also most likely a valid indicator of attentiveness, which is a precursor of salience.

⁵On January 26, 1973, a Gallup poll, conducted for the Nixon Administration, showed a “no opinion” rate of 6%, the only instance of such a rate below 8% in the entire 1965-1973 period.

⁶Even at the absolute peak of public interest in the Gulf War, in late January 1991, when an unprecedented 97 percent of Americans claimed to be following the Gulf Conflict (Gallup/CBS Poll, 17-20 January 1991) substantially fewer people rated the Gulf War as “the most important problem facing the nation” as rated Vietnam as such in three separate Gallup surveys during 1968. (37% rated the Gulf War as “most important” on January 30, 1991, versus 53%, 42% and 51%, on January 9th, May 2nd and August 7th 1968, respectively, rating Vietnam as “most important.”) These figures suggest that while the Gulf War failed to acquire the degree of urgency for Americans achieved by the Vietnam War, a substantially broader segment of the population was

more Americans pay close attention to a war in 1991 than to a war 21 years earlier that the contemporary publics considered similarly important, particularly at a time when Americans appeared to be losing interest in foreign affairs? This is the question I seek to answer in this study.

While the conditions that could give rise to this paradoxical state of public opinion are general, for two reasons, foreign policy is particularly susceptible to this combination of low interest and high attentiveness. First, *ceteris paribus*, foreign crises are more likely than most issues to transcend traditional partisan boundaries and hence, public attention to foreign crises is less likely to be affected by heightened public cynicism regarding partisan politics (Dionne 1991, Putnam 1995). Second, beyond celebrity murder trials or sex scandals, few issues are as likely to capture the public's attention as the prospect of large-scale violence and the potential death of large numbers of Americans. Yet, as widely noted, the end of the Cold War, appears to have reduced the public's interest in foreign affairs (e.g., Holsti 1996, Moisy 1997), setting the stage for this low-interest and high-attentiveness combination.

In this study, I argue that a series of economically- and technologically-motivated changes in the modern media, particularly television, have substantially increased the average individual's exposure to information about foreign policy crises, even as they declare themselves *less* concerned with foreign affairs. This trend has potentially important implications for public policy because additional research has shown that public scrutiny can influence policymakers, both in Congress and the White House (Bosso 1989, Powlick 1995, Baum 1999).

This study is divided into four sections. In the next section (Section 2), I present my theory, which I term a byproduct theory of information consumption. I assume that individuals' seek to maximize their overall utility from consuming information, given the finite volume they are able to consume, as well as the inherent trade-off between consuming a given piece of information and doing other things, within a given time period. Hence, my model of information consumption becomes a simple cost-benefit decision rule, which takes the form of the familiar utility calculus. An individual weighs the expected *benefit* derived from carrying out a given activity against the

attentive to the Gulf War.

expected *costs* of undertaking the activity and will only do so if the net expected benefit outweighs the expected cost.⁷

This section is divided into three parts. The first considers the benefit side of the equation, including an assessment of how individuals in their daily lives go about determining what types and quantities of information warrant their attention. I find no evidence of a trend towards increased expected benefits for typical individuals from consuming news about politics in general or foreign policy in particular. I next turn to a second potential explanation for increased public attentiveness to foreign crises: a decline in the expected costs of paying attention. Here I introduce several mechanisms that appear potentially capable of reducing the expected costs for typical individuals of paying attention to information about foreign crises.

In the third part of Section 2, I review a series of technological, economic and strategic changes in the media marketplace that, together, may have altered the cost-benefit calculus of typical individuals. This review reveals evidence that the strategic practices of television broadcasters have indeed reduced the expected costs of paying attention to information about

⁷ In typical expected utility models, the expected benefit is discounted by the *probability* of gaining the benefit by carrying out a given activity. Throughout this analysis, I hold the probability term constant. The *probability* of receiving “useful” information from paying attention to political issues—with “useful” meaning any information which gives the individual “useful” new knowledge, for whatever reason—has tended to increase in conjunction with the diversification of the formats through which it is presented. A high probability of receiving one's anticipated benefits does *not* require a commensurate probability of receiving *political* news. Rather, it merely requires that the individual expect to receive whatever sort of information a program promises to deliver. Any political information transmitted as an incidental byproduct will not necessarily factor into the individual's decision calculus. This suggests that for many people, in this context, the probability of receiving the expected benefit is quite large, most likely approaching 100%. This assumption reduces the utility calculus to expected benefits minus expected costs.

select political issues, including foreign crises, through the mechanisms suggested by the theory.⁸

To test my hypotheses, in Section 3, I conduct a cross-sectional investigation of the correlates of public attentiveness to three recent foreign crisis issues. I then consider whether the relationships identified in this individual-level analysis can help explain the paradox of aggregate public attentiveness with which I opened this study. Finally, Section 4 summarizes and concludes.

Section 2. How Soft News Raises Public Attentiveness to Foreign Crises

2.1 An Expected Utility Model of Individual Information Consumption

This section evaluates both elements of the expected utility model. I then consider how individual decision processes and strategic media practices have combined to increase public attentiveness to foreign policy crises. I begin with a consideration of the expected benefits of paying attention to information.

2.1.1 Expected Benefits of Paying Attention

In recent years, the traditional view of the typical citizen as “muddle-headed (lacking constraint) or empty-headed (lacking genuine attitudes)—or both” has been challenged by what

⁸ One related theoretical debate not directly addressed by my theory concerns whether knowledge about political issues tends to be domain specific (Iyengar 1990)—meaning that knowledge varies across issue areas, depending upon an individual's personal priorities—or more general and *not* issue-specific (e.g., Zaller 1992). My theory holds that individual's are increasingly willing to pay attention to information in one particular domain—foreign affairs—*not* because they care about foreign affairs, but rather as an *incidental byproduct* of seeking something else entirely: entertainment. Hence, I remain largely agnostic regarding this latter debate. Nevertheless, wherever possible, in the empirical investigations reported below and, to a far greater extent, elsewhere (Baum 1999), I have attempted to control for the possible influence of changing societal demographics on public attentiveness to foreign policy. For instance, recall that, in the data reported above, the difference in self-reported personal importance between Vietnam and the Gulf War was far smaller than the difference in attentiveness.

Sniderman (1993) terms “the New Look.” Proponents of this view (Page & Shapiro 1992, Page, et al 1987, Sniderman, et al 1991 and others), while recognizing that most people possess limited factual political knowledge, argue they are nonetheless capable of making reasoned decisions, based upon cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, derived from life experiences and cues from trusted leaders. Others (Popkin 1994) have termed this “low information rationality.”

According to the "New Look," individuals economize on their attention. This is because paying attention is costly; we must ignore many other information stimuli to focus on any given piece of information. Individuals therefore tend to accept only information they believe is likely to result in useful new knowledge (Lupia and McCubbins 1998), and for which the expected benefits outweigh the expected costs of paying attention. In an era of cheap information, individuals may thus simply raise an ever-higher perceptual “screen” with which they effectively filter out the vast majority of information they encounter. In fact, recent empirical evidence (Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996) showing that the public’s factual knowledge about politics has remained largely consistent since World War II suggests this is precisely what has happened.

For typical individuals, the marginal benefit of acquiring additional data about an issue, in order to increase one’s confidence in a decision or opinion, clearly declines as more and more data is accepted. Beyond some threshold, an individual has gathered all the information necessary to reach a decision with a sufficient degree of certainty. As the marginal benefit of continuing to pay attention begins to decline, individuals are increasingly likely to turn their attention elsewhere.

Indeed, if individuals make efficient use of limited information to arrive at reasoned decisions, and are able to effectively screen out excess data, it is unclear why citizens in the 1990s ought to differ from prior generations in their ability to understand and evaluate the political environment. Thanks to the information revolution, vastly more information is available in the 1990s relative to previous decades. However, “low information rationality” suggests that this information explosion may be of limited practical consequence.

This further suggests that individuals in the 1990s need not fundamentally differ from prior generations in their propensity to consume political information. While the *volume* of data

confronting typical individuals in the 1990s may greatly exceed that available to prior generations, the vast majority of information, then and now, is ignored. Like their counterparts in the 1940s, individuals in the 1990s pay attention to sufficient information to reach a decision with an acceptable degree of confidence, after which they simply turn their attention to other more rewarding activities. Hence, for example, the availability of 24-hour news channels, like CNN or MSNBC, will not necessarily increase the amount of political information accepted by typical individuals, who can simply filter out the increased volume of information to which they may be inadvertently exposed in the course of “channel surfing.”

If individuals' attention capacities have remained fairly constant and their capacity to screen out unwanted information has remained robust, then there remain only two plausible explanations for any increased attentiveness to foreign crises. Either the perceived benefit of information about foreign crises has increased, or, alternatively, the cognitive *cost* of paying attention to such information may have declined. Upon reflection, the first possibility seems implausible. Innumerable public opinion surveys reveal that many individuals perceive most political news as offering few personal benefits.⁹ For instance, over the past half century, the public's factual political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), and interest and participation in politics (Niemi et al. 1989, Baum 1999, Bennett 1986) have each declined or remained constant, while public apathy (Bennett 1986) and cynicism about politics (Nye et al. 1997, Dionne 1996, Miller 1974, Broder 1994) have increased substantially. Moreover, as noted above, Americans appear *less* concerned about foreign affairs in the 1990s than at any time in the Post-WWII era (recall Figure 2). This evidence suggests the overall expected benefit of political information, including information about foreign

⁹ For most Americans, there are *some* political issues that are of interest under *some* circumstances. For instance, a usually apolitical senior citizen may pay close attention to a high-profile debate regarding social security reform. Many Americans, however, are largely disinterested in day-to-day political debates. Such individuals tend to pay attention to politics only when a particularly high profile debate arises involving an issue area with respect to which they perceive themselves as having a substantial personal stake. For many individuals, such occasions are relatively rare.

policy, is, for most individuals, highly unlikely to have increased. Therefore, if the public is indeed more attentive to foreign crises in the 1990s, we must look elsewhere for our explanation.¹⁰ In the next section, I investigate the second possible explanation: a decline in the cognitive cost of paying attention to information about foreign crises.

2.1.2 The Costs of Paying Attention

The cognitive "costs" of paying attention can be usefully grouped into two categories: opportunity and transaction costs. Opportunity costs represent the inherent tradeoff between paying attention to a piece of information and turning one's attention elsewhere. For instance, by watching a given television program, an individual forecloses the option of watching another program, or devoting that period of time to another activity. Whenever an individual elects to pay attention to one piece of information, he or she pays the opportunity cost of *not* paying attention to something else. Transaction costs, in turn, represent the time and effort required to undertake a given activity, such as paying attention to information about a foreign crisis. The more time and energy required to carry out the activity, the greater the transaction costs.

If the opportunity or transaction costs associated with paying attention to information about foreign crises have declined, this could account for increased public attentiveness to foreign

¹⁰ It remains possible, however, that Americans have grown more attentive to one particular domain of politics -- foreign policy -- but not to other areas of politics (recall footnote 8). For instance, increased immigration to the United States could produce a trend towards greater public attentiveness to foreign policy issues. A larger foreign-born population may simply be more interested in foreign affairs (Iyengar 1990). Yet, as noted, Americans, in the aggregate, appear to have grown *less*, not more, concerned about foreign affairs. Moreover, elsewhere (Baum 1999) I have investigated this alternative explanation and found that trends in immigration, while possibly a contributing factor, do not account for the observed increases in public attentiveness to foreign crises. (It is important to reemphasize that my investigations focus on attentiveness, not knowledge or personal importance.)

crises. I will therefore consider each, in turn. Beginning with opportunity costs, given the extremely low value of news about foreign policy or politics in general, for many individuals, the only way they are likely to pay attention is if the tradeoff required is negligible. One means of mitigating the perceived tradeoff might be to attach, or "piggyback," high-cost political information to low-cost entertainment-oriented information. Political information might thus become a *free* bonus, or *incidental byproduct*, of paying attention to entertainment-oriented information.

In earlier decades, individuals frequently confronted the choice of watching the evening news or reading a newspaper to learn about politics, or watching entertainment-oriented programming. For many individuals, entertainment almost always trumped news about politics.¹¹ The opportunity costs of paying attention to political news were simply too high. Piggybacking could render this trade-off moot by, in effect, transforming the major political issues of the day *into* the entertainment that people seek.

Of course, piggybacking is unlikely to increase attentiveness to political information unless information about a political issue can be attached to entertainment-oriented information *without* increasing the cognitive costs of paying attention. This involves transaction costs. Research in cognitive psychology has found that for an attitude to influence an individual's opinion, it must be both *available* (stored in memory) and *accessible* (retrievable from memory) (Aldrich et al. 1989, Ottati and Wyer 1990). While there are many potential sources of accessibility, none approach the overwhelming predominance of the mass media in determining which issues command public attention, at least temporarily (Iyengar 1990, 1992). Iyengar (1990) terms this process *priming* (see also Miller and Krosnick 1996, Iyengar 1993, Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

Communications scholars, in turn, have identified a number of frames that are widely employed by typical individuals in explaining issues in the news. For instance, Neuman et al. (1992) identify a number of common frames that are readily recognized and understood by most

¹¹ In fact, my argument could be restated in terms of the public's demand for entertainment. Prior to the Information revolution, there may have existed an excess demand for entertainment among the public, that went unmet and is currently better satisfied by more diverse programming.

individuals. These include “us vs. them,”¹² “human impact,” “powerlessness,”¹³ “economic” and “morality”¹⁴ frames. To this list, Powlick and Katz (1998b) add an “injustice” frame (similar to “morality”). Indeed, Graber (1984) found that several of these common frames—“human impact,” “morality” and “injustice”—resonated strongly with her interview subjects and frequently informed their political judgments.¹⁵

The use of cognitive frames that are widely accessible for typical individuals -- which I term "selective framing" -- is likely to have two primary effects. First, paying attention to news that employs a highly accessible frame requires less cognitive energy than paying attention to such information presented in a traditional news format (e.g., newspaper or network news). Such information is cheap. Indeed, without selective framing, piggybacking would almost certainly fail. Second, receiving some "cheap" information about an issue, such as a foreign crisis, *primes* the issue. This reduces the marginal transaction costs of paying attention to additional information about the issue, as an individual's attitudes about the issue become increasingly *accessible*. Having been provided a *context* within which to evaluate information about a foreign crisis, individuals will likely find subsequent discussions of the crisis less confusing and more compelling, and thus presumably less *costly* to focus upon. In fact, for many individuals, if, through selective framing, information about a political issue can be piggybacked to cheap entertainment-oriented information, any transaction costs associated with accepting such political information are virtually eliminated.

This discussion suggests that if the news media has in recent years engaged in selective framing and piggybacking, it may have substantially reduced the expected costs of paying

¹² This refers to the media's tendency to divide protagonists involved in a story into two groups, those whom the audience should identify with, and those who are the “other” or “outsider.”

¹³ This refers to the “perception of control by powerful others” (Neuman et al. 1992:62).

¹⁴ This refers to framing of issues within a context involving moral values (Neuman et al. 1992: 62).

¹⁵ See Druckman (1999) on the limits of framing.

attention to foreign crises. This, in turn, might help account for any trend towards increased public attentiveness to foreign crises. In the next section, I present evidence that television broadcasters have, in fact, systematically and aggressively engaged in both strategies.

2.2 A Direct Marketing Revolution in the Mass Media

The previous discussion suggested that a decline in the cognitive costs of paying attention to information about foreign crises might help explain increased public attentiveness to such crises. This, however, begs the question of *why* the costs of such information might have declined. In this section, I address this latter issue. I shall present evidence that television broadcasters have indeed, in recent years, systematically employed selective framing and piggybacking strategies, in tandem, with the apparent effect of reducing the cognitive costs of paying attention to information about select high profile political issues, including foreign crises.

Kalb (1998a) has observed, “For the past 20 years, we have been the beneficiaries—or the victims—of a vast technological revolution that has transformed the way we get and process information.” Indeed, over the past several decades, the mass media—including television, radio and the print media—has undergone what is best described as a revolution in direct marketing. However, while all three media outlets have evolved in similar ways, due to its overwhelming dominance in American culture, innovations in television broadcasting hold far more important implications for American society than changes in either the radio or print media. Hence, the following discussion focuses on the television media.

2.2.1 The Revolution: An Overview

The television industry has evolved over the past half century from an oligopoly to a competitive market. In the 1950s and 1960s, television was dominated by the three broadcast networks, who presented political information primarily through their largely undifferentiated network evening news programs. One network executive recently recalled “when viewers turned on the TV set, they had five choices, and the networks were three of them...[and they] collectively

accounted for about 90% of the television audience” (Lowry 1997). The only other option available to consumers was reading a newspaper or magazine. The audience simply had no where else to go, and was therefore essentially “captive” (Baum and Kernell 1999). As a result, virtually all programming competed for the same audience and, hence, was designed to appeal to the largest possible portion of the overall audience.

Absent any significant competition, the major networks faced little economic pressure to earn a profit from their 30-minute evening news broadcasts. In December, 1962, CBS creator William Paley told a group of CBS correspondents “You guys cover the news; I’ve got Jack Benny to make money for me.” (Kalb 1998b:10). News broadcasts were seen primarily as a civic responsibility, or a means of buying respectability.

Since the early 1980s, the growth of cable television and, more recently, satellite broadcasting, has created a highly competitive television marketplace. Cable television is perhaps the single most important technological innovation responsible for changing the role of television programming, including television news. Between 1969 and 1998, the number of American households subscribing to cable expanded from about six percent to almost 70 percent. The average number of channels available to cable subscribers has also expanded dramatically, from less than 15, in 1983, to over 57 in 1998 (Webster and Lichty 1991, Lowry 1999). Combined, these developments represent an explosion of consumer choices.

As the number of channels increased, broadcasters began adapting to the newly competitive environment by tailoring their programming to attract a smaller, but more loyal, segment, or “niche,” of the audience. As a result, programming became increasingly differentiated (Webster and Lichty 1991) and broadcasters began to view news—which is far less expensive than original entertainment programming— as a potentially profitable enterprise (Kalb 1998a, 1998b).¹⁶ Since

¹⁶ For instance, one original episode of the NBC's *Dateline* costs about \$500,000. This contrasts with the approximately \$12 million price tag for a single episode of NBC's original drama series *ER* (NPR, 12/14/98). *ER* recently attracted a record audience of nearly 30 million viewers for one episode (*Los Angeles Times*, 12/16/98: F14). In that same week, an episode of *Dateline* was viewed

that time, the programming strategies of profit-conscious news organizations have increasingly come to resemble those of the entertainment media. This dramatically changed environment was reflected in the recent comment of CBS Chairman and CEO Michael H. Jordan that "Yes, we want to hold on to journalistic and other standards. But I don't aspire to that Paleyesque role. This is a business" (Kalb 1998b:10).

One primary consequence of the changing television marketplace has been the rise of "soft news," which has increasingly supplanted traditional news programming. Soft news includes such programming formats as network and tabloid television news magazines, daytime and late night talk shows and "specialty" cable programming (e.g., MTV News and Comedy Central's "Daily Show"). Soft news self-consciously employs selective framing, emphasizing dramatic human interest-oriented stories, intended primarily to attract and hold viewers. Whereas the imperative of traditional news programming was to *inform*, that of soft news is primarily to *entertain*. Television broadcasters have, in effect, sought to transform news programming into an inexpensively produced form of entertainment (Davis and Owen 1998, Kalb 1998b). Along these lines, senior ABC News correspondent Sam Donaldson recently acknowledged that, due to increased competition in the television news industry, the major networks are desperately "trying to find a larger audience of people who've never really cared about news." To do so, Donaldson added, the networks are "reaching out more and more for people who believe there are three-headed cows" (CNN, 10/10/99).

by about 13.5 million viewers. NBC thus spent nearly 11 times more money-per-viewer for *ER* (about \$.40), than for *Dateline* (about \$.037). Moreover, 30 seconds of advertising on *ER* costs almost 3.8 times as much as on *Dateline* (\$565,000 versus \$150,000) (Graham 1997, Bark 1998). Yet, a little additional division reveals that NBC must air 11.5 minutes of commercials during an episode of *ER* before breaking even on its \$13 million cost. In sharp contrast, NBC earns a profit in its fourth thirty-second commercial aired during *Dateline*. Viewed in this light, news magazines appear to represent a far greater programming value for network investments. Similarly, the average cost for one hour of a network "sitcom" is about \$1.8 million (Davis and Owen 1998:100).

Two examples of the increased prevalence of soft news, and the consequent prominence of selective framing, are the rise of network news magazines and tabloid entertainment news magazines. In Fall 1998, the three primary broadcast networks, combined, offered 10 prime-time hours per week of news magazines; and CNN added an additional four hours per week of news magazines (Weinstein 1998). Since 1996, NBC alone has expanded its daily news production from three to 27 hours per day (Kalb 1998b).¹⁷ Tabloid news magazines and talk shows (e.g., *Hard Copy*, *Extra!*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *Oprah Winfrey*, *Geraldo Rivera*, etc.), which have also proliferated in recent years, focus almost exclusively on soft news. One study, by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, concluded that celebrity, scandal, gossip and other “human interest” stories have increased as a share of total media coverage over the past 20 years from 15 to 43 percent (Kalb 1998a:21-22). Moreover, a recent content analysis of tabloid news programs (CMPA 1997), found that such programs rely heavily on selective framing, emphasizing widely accessible “morality” and “justice” frames.¹⁸

News and political information have thus been re-packaged into numerous formats designed to appeal directly to the more specific entertainment-oriented interests of smaller niche audiences. Simply stated, like direct-mail marketers, television broadcasters have, out of necessity (the mother of invention), grown increasingly adept at providing something for everyone.

2.2.2 Soft News Coverage of Foreign Crises

¹⁷ TV news magazines increasingly emphasize soft news. A content analysis of stories on *60 Minutes* during the period January to June 1998 revealed that 60% of the 62 segments aired addressed soft news (i.e., celebrity profiles, “can you believe?” investigative reports or lifestyle pieces), while only 13% dealt with traditional hard news topics (all involving international issues). The remaining 27% of segments fell between “hard” and “soft” news (Kalb 1998a).

¹⁸ Over half of the tabloid stories examined in the CMPA study were framed in *moralistic* terms, passing judgment on the central actors.

Earlier, I suggested that selective framing makes piggybacking a viable strategy. And, indeed, *soft news programs have covered every major U.S. foreign military crisis in the 1990s*. I contacted a variety of daytime talk shows and tabloid news magazines to determine the extent to which they covered the Persian Gulf War and the ongoing series of post-Gulf War crises with Iraq, as well as four other high profile U.S. foreign crises of the past decade—Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo. I also searched Lexis-Nexis program transcripts for a variety of soft news programs. Table 1 below presents the results of these inquiries. These figures are extremely conservative, due to limited availability of transcripts, sporadic program topic listings, unwillingness of many programs to provide the requested information, as well as the recent start-dates and subsequent cancellation of several of the programs. The figures in Table 1 represent the number of different broadcasts of each program in which a given crisis was featured.

[Table 1 here]

Of course, the information in Table 1 represents raw data. To determine whether these figures constitute "significant" coverage, I compared soft news coverage of four foreign crises in the 1990s with coverage of the same crises on ABC's "World News Tonight." The results indicated that, taken together, the television talk shows listed in Table 1 presented over half (56%) as many *separate broadcasts* addressing the U.S. interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, combined, as the total number of *stories* (including multiple stories per broadcast) on World News Tonight. The corresponding figure for Somalia and Haiti was over 40 percent as many broadcasts. Indeed, the number of *separate broadcasts* addressing Bosnia presented in one tabloid news magazine, "Extra!: The Entertainment Magazine," is equivalent to nearly half (40%) of the total number of Bosnia-related *stories* on ABC's World News Tonight. While these programs, individually or combined, predictably offered significantly less coverage of these four crises than the network evening news, these figures nonetheless appear non-trivial. This suggests that television broadcasters have indeed systematically piggybacked coverage of foreign crises along with entertainment-oriented programming.¹⁹

¹⁹ For instance, during the Persian Gulf War, while CNN and the major networks filled the

2.2.3 Americans' Consumption of Soft News

Also important, large numbers of Americans watch soft news on a regular basis. In one recent poll, 78 percent of respondents reported watching television news magazines, such as *20/20* or *Dateline*, compared to 67 percent who reported watching the network evening news (Pew Center 1998). In the same survey, nearly as many respondents reported watching tabloid news programs such as *Hard Copy* or *Inside Edition* (47%), as CNN (57%). And more respondents reported watching the tabloids than CNBC (39%), MSNBC (32%), ESPN (40%), or the three major network morning programs (*CBS This Morning*, *ABC's Good Morning America* and *NBC's Today Show*) combined (42%). An additional 35 percent of respondents reported watching one popular tabloid news magazine (*Entertainment Tonight*), while 28 percent reported watching daytime TV talk shows.²⁰ This suggests that selective framing and piggybacking are highly effective programming strategies.

While the preceding evidence shows that large numbers of Americans watch soft news programming, it does not explain why. Might some individuals tune in to soft news with the explicit intent of learning about foreign crises? Such individuals may reason that, when a crisis arises, the soft news media will offer more interesting coverage than network newscasts or newspapers. If so, the byproduct theory would be irrelevant. Fortunately, recent surveys have

airwaves with graphic images of precision bombs and interviews with military experts, Oprah Winfrey and other soft news programs focused on the impact of the war on the spouses of soldiers serving in the Gulf and on the families of Americans being held as "human shields" in Iraq. Information about the Gulf War was thereby piggybacked to entertainment (i.e., "human drama"), and viewers were able to learn about the War as a free incidental byproduct of paying attention to an entertainment program.

²⁰ These figures represent the percentage of respondents who reported watching a given program either "regularly" or "sometimes." The alternative responses were "occasionally" or "never."

asked respondents this very question. One survey (Pew Center 1996) asked respondents the extent to which they prefer news about entertainment, famous people, crime or international affairs (among other topics), as well as whether, and to what extent, they consume a variety of soft news programs. I created an *Entertainment News Index*, based on the first three items mentioned above and a soft news index based upon the latter series of questions.²¹ If information about foreign crises is being piggybacked to entertainment programming, primarily as an incidental byproduct, then we should observe a strong positive relationship between interest in entertainment-oriented news and consumption of soft news, but *not* between interest in news about international affairs and soft news consumption. Figure 3, below, strongly supports this conjecture.

[Figure 3 here]

Consistent with my byproduct theory, Figure 3 indeed shows a strong positive relationship between interest in entertainment-oriented news and consumption of soft news. Most respondents apparently watch soft news primarily for its entertainment value. In contrast, the relationship between interest in news about international affairs and consumption of soft news is essentially zero. This strongly suggests that to the extent individuals are receiving any information about foreign crises in the soft news media, they are doing so not by design, but rather as an incidental byproduct of seeking entertainment. Any information about foreign crises appears in these data to be piggybacked to entertainment-oriented news.

2.2.4 *Summary and Testable Hypotheses*

Popkin (1994) argues the key to inducing individuals to pay attention is not necessarily to

²¹ The previously cited CMPA (1997) study indicated that the first three items are the primary topics of soft news. Five types of soft news are included in this scale, including entertainment news magazines, network news magazines, daytime television talk shows, MTV and tabloid newspapers.

flood them with more and more information, scattershot, but rather to put the information where they are most likely to look for and notice it. Driven by market competition, broadcasters appear to have learned this lesson.

Under normal, every-day circumstances, these developments might not necessarily result in a public better informed about politics than were earlier generations. In fact, the highly segmented modern television marketplace presumably allows individuals to *escape* political news more effectively than was the case in prior decades. Most of the time, soft news programs avoid foreign affairs entirely, in favor of more salacious issues, such as celebrity sex scandals and murder trials. Many entertainment-seeking television viewers may therefore remain largely uninformed about the day-to-day political issues facing the nation.

However, when a foreign crisis emerges—and crosses over, via piggybacking, from network newscasts to the soft news media—a far broader audience will likely confront information about the crisis. Moreover, unlike the relatively “mundane” presentation of political information offered by the network news, a soft news program will employ selective framing to hold the interest of their entertainment-seeking audience. Hence, while the overall *benefits* of political news may have remained largely unchanged over the past half century, the cognitive costs of paying attention to information about *select* issues, including foreign crises, have declined substantially, due primarily to their previously untapped entertainment value.

A number of hypotheses follow from the theory outlined above. Three such hypotheses, which I test in the next section, are as follows:

- H₁: *Ceteris Paribus*, people who watch soft news programs should be more attentive to foreign crises than people who do not.
- H₂: *Ceteris paribus*, soft news consumption should be most strongly positively related to foreign crisis attentiveness among the *least* politically-engaged members of society and *least* strongly positively related to attentiveness among the *most* politically-engaged members of the public.
- H₃: However, *ceteris paribus*, attentiveness to other, more typical or partisan, political issues should *not* be significantly related to consumption of soft news.

Section 3. Statistical Investigations

3.1 Media Consumption Patterns and Attentiveness to Foreign Crises

I now attempt to draw a direct link between consuming soft news and attentiveness to several foreign policy crisis issues. My data is drawn from a May 1996 survey of public media consumption habits conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. In addition to asking respondents which types of television and radio programming, magazines and newspapers they watch, listen to and read, the survey also asked if respondents followed several foreign crises. Additional questions included a series of socio-economic items as well as a series of questions useful for producing a scale estimating the respondent's level of political knowledge.

As dependent variables, I focus on three questions, each addressing respondents' interest in a different foreign crisis issue. Respondents were asked the following: "Now I will read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past month. As I read each item, tell me if you happened to follow this news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely": (1) "The military conflict between Israel and the pro-Iranian Muslims in Lebanon"; (2) "The passage in Congress of a new law dealing with domestic terrorism"²²; and (3) "The situation in Bosnia."

I transformed the responses into dichotomous variables, coded 1 if respondents followed the issue "not at all closely" and 0 otherwise. My hypothesis is that a respondent's claim to have followed a given crisis *not at all* indicates that individual was "inattentive" to the crisis.

The independent variables for this investigation fall into three categories: socio-economic status, interest in and knowledge about politics, and media consumption habits. The latter variables consist of a broad range of questions concerning respondents' interest in and attention to news and entertainment programming on television, radio, in magazines and in the newspaper. I collapsed these variables into two indexes, the first representing the extent of respondents' exposure to a series of "hard" news sources and topics and the second capturing respondents'

²² Domestic terrorism is clearly linked by the public to international terrorism.

exposure to soft news.²³ In addition to the two indexes, I separately control for respondents' level of interest in international affairs. Below, I list the components of each index.²⁴ (The coding and definitions of all independent variables are described in detail in the Appendix.)

Items Included in Pew Survey "Soft" and "Hard" News Indexes²⁵

Hard News Index Items

To What Extent Does Respondent:

- Watch Network National News
- Watch Local News
- Watch Business News
- Watch CNN
- Watch C-SPAN
- Watch PBS News Hour with Jim Lehrer
- Listen to National Public Radio
- Listen to News on Radio
- Read Business Magazines
- Read News Magazines
- Read Daily Newspaper
- Follow News about National Politics
- Follow News about Business & Finance
- Follow News/Public Affairs on Internet

Soft News Index Items

To What Extent Does Respondent:

- Watch Tabloid News Programs
- Watch Daytime Talk Shows
- Watch Network News Magazines
- Watch MTV
- Read Tabloid Newspapers
- Follow News about Entertainment
- Follow News About Famous People
- Follow News About Crime

Results from separate logit analyses of the three dependent variables are reported at Table 2, below. As one might anticipate, consumption of "hard" news is strongly positively associated with attentiveness to each foreign crisis ($p < .001$), as is political knowledge, though this latter variable is statistically significant only in the *Terrorism* model. Interest in international affairs is

²³ I include print media and radio sources in each index. As previously discussed, these media have undergone similar changes as television. However, the results are not materially affected when the non-television media variables are excluded.

²⁴ Each item consists of a four point scale, with four representing *maximum* interest or attention. Two exceptions in the hard news index are reading newspapers and listening to news on the radio, which are dichotomous variables, coded 1=respondent reads newspapers or listen to news on the radio and 0 otherwise. The items comprising the hard and soft news indexes produced alpha reliability scores of .72 and .66, respectively.

²⁵ Removing local and internet news from the hard news index, did not significantly affect the results.

also positively and significantly related to the public's attentiveness to the three crises. Many of the demographic and political interest and participation variables, however, are insignificant in some or all of the models.²⁶ Most importantly for my purposes, however, exposure to soft news is positively and significantly associated with attentiveness to each crisis, thereby, in each instance, supporting Hypothesis 1.

[Table 2 here]

In order to determine whether exposure to soft news exerts differing effects on respondents with varying levels of overall interest in international affairs, I include an interaction term (*Soft News x Interest in International Affairs*). The results strongly support Hypothesis 2. The interaction term is statistically significant in two of the three models ($p < .05$ and $p < .056$), and correctly signed in all three models.²⁷ Beginning with the Israel-Lebanon conflict, the graph in the upper-right hand quadrant of Figure 4, below, illustrates the influence of the soft news media on attentiveness to the

²⁶ This may be attributable to multicollinearity among the control variables.

²⁷ One potential problem with the interaction approach I have employed concerns the possibility of reverse causality between interest in international affairs and interest in Bosnia, Lebanon and Terrorism, which I have employed as my dependent variables. It is certainly possible that respondents who are interested in any or all of these foreign crisis issues report systematically greater interest in international affairs *because* of their interest in those issues. To investigate this problem, I ran a bivariate regression, with only the suspect causal variable (interest in international affairs) on the right hand side. I then re-ran the full model, substituting the residuals from the bivariate model for the actual "interest in international affairs" variable. This effectively purged the causal variable of any element which was "caused" by the dependent variable. If a significant relationship remained, I could be fairly confident that the direction of causality is not reversed. In fact, when I conducted this test for all three dependent variables, the relationships all remained largely comparable to those reported above. I have therefore elected not to report the revised models (results are available from the author upon request)

Israel-Lebanon conflict. Because logit coefficients are difficult to interpret, the coefficients on the key independent variables are translated into probabilities, with all controls held constant at their mean values.²⁸

[Figure 4 here]

For individuals who report following international affairs “very” or “somewhat” closely, attention to soft news exerts virtually no effect on attentiveness to the Israel-Lebanon conflict. However, among individuals who follow international affairs “not very” or “not at all” closely, the story is quite different. These latter individuals do appear to learn about the conflict through the soft news media. For example, among respondents who follow international affairs “not at all closely,” as attentiveness to soft news increases from its lowest to highest levels, the probability of following the conflict “not at all” declines sharply from .64 to .18. This suggests that respondents who are uninterested in international affairs are nonetheless exposed to information about the Israel-Lebanon conflict through the soft news media.

Turning to the congressional Anti-Terrorism debate, the graph in the lower-left hand quadrant in Figure 4 presents the probabilities of following the terrorism debate “not at all closely,” with all controls held constant at their mean values. Among respondents who are highly interested in international affairs, watching soft news appears to modestly *decrease* attentiveness to the anti-terrorism debate, though the curve is nearly flat and hence most likely substantively meaningless. However, as before, individuals who follow international affairs “not very” or “not at all” closely do appear to learn about the anti-terrorism legislation via the soft news media. For instance, among respondents who report following international affairs “not at all closely,” as attentiveness to soft news increases from its lowest to highest levels, the probability of following the anti-

²⁸ I translate the coefficients into probabilities using the standard logit equation

(“ $\exp(z)/[1+\exp(z)]$ ” in Stata), which allows the inclusion of probability weighting (“pweight” in Stata). Probability weighting is arguably an important aspect of analyzing public opinion surveys—particularly those that, unlike the NES, do not attempt to insure that the respondents are representative of the population.

terrorism debate “not at all closely” declines from .66 to .12.²⁹ This result is, again, consistent with Hypothesis 2.

The story is repeated for the final dependent variable—attentiveness to the situation in Bosnia. Among respondents who regularly follow international affairs, soft news appears largely irrelevant. However, at lower levels of interest in international affairs, soft news is an important source of information about Bosnia. This relationship is evident in the graphic in the lower-right hand quadrant of Figure 4. This figure clearly indicates that the lower the respondent’s level of interest in international affairs, the greater the positive relationship between watching soft news and attentiveness to Bosnia. Among those respondents least intrinsically interested in international affairs, as attentiveness to soft news increases from its lowest to highest levels, the probability of following the situation in Bosnia “not at all closely” declines by 37 percent, from .46 to .09. Once again, this result clearly supports Hypothesis 2.

Finally, to test Hypothesis 3, and thereby partially validate the distinction I have drawn between foreign crises and other political issues, I tested my soft- and hard-news indexes against a fourth dependent variable, based upon whether or not the respondent had followed news about the Republican presidential candidates during the 1996 primary election campaign.³⁰ I tested this latter dependent variable against two separate models. The first included an interaction between the soft news index and political partisanship and the second interacted the soft news index with political knowledge. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, soft news proved highly insignificant across these and numerous additional specifications of each model (not shown). Hence, the soft news media appears in these relationships to be a source of public attentiveness to foreign crises, but *not* for the presidential primaries. Because primaries are highly partisan political events and hence less

²⁹ Among the highest soft news consumers, those *most* interested in international affairs are modestly *less* likely to have followed the terrorism debate than their less intrinsically interested counterparts. However, these differences are extremely small and thus are most likely substantively meaningless.

³⁰ I constructed a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if the respondent reported following news about the Republican candidates “not at all closely” and 0 otherwise

appealing to a politically cynical citizenry, they are less attractive candidates than foreign crises for selective framing and piggybacking.³¹

3.2. Aggregate Trends Revisited: The Korean, Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars

As with most long-term trends, there are clearly numerous possible explanations for the aggregate attentiveness trends presented in the introduction. Yet, the findings presented in the previous section raise the question of whether these individual level relationships can help to account for the aggregate level trend (recall Figure 1). While data limitations preclude a direct test of the influence of variations in exposure to soft news, over time, on attentiveness to foreign crises, several indirect tests are possible. First, if soft news is at least partly responsible for the trends described in the introduction, then, given my individual-level findings, we should observe the most substantial over-time increases in attentiveness among respondents who are *least* inclined to follow political issues or foreign affairs. Second, if, as I have argued, soft news increases attentiveness primarily among individuals who are not typically interested in politics or foreign affairs, any positive relationship between political engagement and attentiveness to foreign crises should weaken, over time. In effect, the least-politically engaged members of society ought to be catching up to their more politically oriented counterparts.

In order to search for these hypothesized patterns in the aggregate over-time trends, I identified a foreign crisis-related survey question (see Appendix, Question 2) that was asked in all six NES surveys conducted during the wars in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf, as well as in one NES survey during the Korean War.³² The dependent variable for this investigation is dichotomous,

³¹ The 2000 presidential election may be an exception. Several celebrity candidates associated with the Reform Party, including Pat Buchanan, Donald Trump and Jesse "The Body" Ventura, hold substantial appeal for the celebrity-oriented soft news media. Indeed, each of these candidates has relied upon the soft news media's fascination with their celebrity to publicize their campaigns.

³² Adding the Korean War allows me to control for the potential counter-argument that greater rates of "don't know" responses during Vietnam reflect the greater controversy surrounding the

coded 1 if the respondent answered "don't know" to the aforementioned war-related question and 0 otherwise.³³ My data includes all NES surveys conducted during the three wars—1952, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1972, 1990 and 1991. Because the dependent variable is dichotomous, I conducted a series of logit analyses. As an indicator of respondents' general propensity to follow war-related news, I employ the interviewer's estimate of the respondent's level of political information.³⁴ The NES surveys also include a broad range of questions that allow me to control for a variety of factors, such as education, political partisanship and socio-economic status, which might also account for variations in attentiveness.

The results from my multivariate logit analyses of all war-era NES surveys are presented in Models one through seven at Table 3.

Vietnam War, relative to the Gulf War. While the war in Korea did become controversial, it never approached the magnitude of controversy surrounding Vietnam. Hence, if "no opinion" rates during Korea are greater than during Vietnam, this suggests that cognitive conflict, resulting from ambivalence or controversy, is insufficient to explain the variation in "don't know" responses across the several conflicts.

³³ While "don't know" rates are clearly an imperfect indicator of attentiveness, in each of the seven NES surveys, respondents were *explicitly* offered the opportunity to express ambivalence, by answering "pros and cons" or "depends," rather than responding "don't know." This clearly strengthens my case that the latter response represents a lack of attention, rather than ambivalence. Additional validity testing (not shown), indicated that respondents who considered Vietnam (1970) or the Gulf War (1990/91) relatively unimportant were significantly more likely respond "don't know" than those who considered the wars important (.30 vs. .14 for Vietnam and .05 vs. .02 for the Gulf War). (The two variables are correlated at .19 in 1970 and .05 in 1991.)

³⁴ Zaller thoroughly evaluates the issues associated with using this subjective rating. He found that it performed as well as most scales constructed from 10 to 15 direct knowledge questions (1992: 338). He also looked for, but failed to find, any evidence of a systematic bias in favor of higher-status individuals, such as white males (Zaller 1985).

[Table 3 here]

The results in Table 3 clearly support both hypotheses. Because logit coefficients are difficult to interpret, at Figure 5, below, the coefficients on *political information* from each model are transformed into a graphical representation of the probability of responding “don’t know” during each war, as respondents' political information varies, with all controls held constant at their mean values. For the Vietnam and Gulf wars, for which multiple surveys were available, the curves represent the mean level of "don't know" responses across all surveys conducted during a given war.

[Figure 5 here]

Figure 5 indicates that among less politically informed respondents (levels 1-3), the three wars line up precisely as theory predicts, with the largest probability of responding "don't know" recorded during Korea, followed by Vietnam, and then the Gulf War.³⁵ More importantly, the gap between the wars diminishes as political information increases. At the lowest level of political information, the difference between Korea and the Gulf War is 26 percentage points. At the highest level of information, the corresponding difference drops to five percentage points.³⁶

³⁵ The difference between Korea and Vietnam seems unimpressive. However, it is important to note a subtle, yet significant change in question wording, beginning in 1964, which Kinder (1983) describes as a shift “...from a gentle to a somewhat more insistent invitation to admit to no opinion at all...” This change may be at least partially responsible for the modest difference between Korea and Vietnam.

³⁶ King et al (1998) have developed a simulation technique for producing confidence intervals surrounding probabilities derived from transformed logit coefficients. By reviewing these confidence intervals, it is possible to determine whether the predicted probabilities are statistically distinguishable from one another. In fact, the 95% confidence intervals (not shown) for the models summarized at Figure 5 indicate "don't know" rates during the Korean and Vietnam Wars are distinguishable from each other ($p < .05$) among only the least politically informed respondents. In contrast, the difference between these two wars and the Gulf War are statistically significant for all

Also noteworthy is the trend towards reduced variance in attentiveness to the three wars, across levels of political information. In 1952, as respondents moved from the lowest to highest category of political information, their probability of responding “don’t know” declined by 24 percentage points. The corresponding decline during the four Vietnam era NES surveys was 16 percentage points. Finally, during the Gulf War, the least- and most-politically informed respondents differed by only three percentage points, on average, across the two surveys. This latter finding is again consistent with the individual-level relationships, and with my hypotheses. Taken together, these findings suggest that the rise of soft news, given the differing effects of soft news consumption on different types of individuals, indeed appears capable of producing the aggregate trends presented in the introduction.

Section 4. Conclusion

This study began by identifying an apparent paradox in public opinion surrounding America's major military conflicts. Many Americans are not particularly interested in politics. Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, increasing numbers of Americans claim to have lost interest in foreign affairs. Yet, in the post-Cold War era, when the U.S. employs military force abroad, Americans appear to be paying *closer* attention than ever before. I employed a cost-benefit expected utility model in an attempt to locate a possible explanation for this inconsistency. This investigation identified a prime candidate suspect: the rise of soft news.

News broadcasters, facing unprecedented competitive pressures, recognized that real-life human drama could attract a large audience, and could be produced at far lower cost than fictional drama. According to one former producer for CNN and ABC's *20/20* news magazine, the Persian

but the most highly politically informed respondents. This is unsurprising. Given that many of the technological advances in the mass media with which my theory is concerned first began to proliferate in the 1970s, my theory would predict a more substantial differential between the 1970s and the 1990s than between the 1950s and 1960s.

Gulf War drove home for news executives the tremendous ratings potential of military conflicts, which could be realized by transforming war reporting into a made-for-television soap opera:

It started with the Gulf War—the packaging of news, the graphics, the music, the classification of stories...Everybody benefited by saturation coverage. The more channels, the more a sedated public will respond to this....If you can get an audience hooked, breathlessly awaiting every fresh disclosure with a recognizable cast of characters they can either love or hate, with a dramatic arc and a certain coming down to a deadline, you have a winner in terms of building audience.

—Danny Schechter (*New York Times*, online edition, 2/1/98)

In other words, through selective framing, news broadcasters have successfully piggybacked information about foreign crises to entertainment-oriented information. Soft news consumers thereby gain information about foreign crises as a free incidental byproduct of seeking entertainment. The cross-sectional evidence demonstrated that individuals do in fact learn about foreign crises from soft news, without necessarily seeking such information. Moreover, I found evidence that this process might potentially account for the aggregate trends introduced at the outset of this study. The absence of a critical test makes latter evidence conjectural. Yet, the disaggregated time series data does indicate that different groups of Americans have responded to America's major military conflicts in manners consistent with the theory's predictions, and consistent with the cross-sectional findings.³⁷

Substantial scholarly research has shown that public opinion can influence policy outcomes (Bartels 1991, Powlick 1995, Powlick & Katz 1998a and 1998b, Page & Shapiro 1983, Kernell 1997, Baum 1999, Ostrom and Job 1986). This suggests that the changing presentation of news about foreign policy in the media may have important practical consequences for American politics.

³⁷Elsewhere (Baum 1999), I have replicated all of the findings reported in this paper across numerous additional data sets and multiple indicators of attentiveness, as well as with multiple survey modalities, including separate comparisons of telephone and in-person interviews. I have also found evidence, through content analyses, of substantial increases in television coverage of foreign crises, primarily in the soft news media, over time. Taken together, this additional evidence reduces the likelihood that the results are an artifact of survey techniques, question wording, invalid or unreliable indicators of attentiveness, or the interview methods of a given survey organization.

Additional research is necessary to determine the actual policy effects of rising public scrutiny on the foreign and domestic policy making processes. However, in a democratic political system in which, through elections, leaders are directly accountable to the public, it seems unlikely that heightened public scrutiny of America's foreign policy would be entirely without consequence.

Scholars have long pondered the barriers to information and political participation confronting democratic citizens. I have presented evidence that some of these barriers may be falling. Where America's foreign policy was once the domain of a fairly small "foreign policy elite," soft news appears to have, to some extent, "democratized" foreign policy. One might be tempted to take heart from the apparent leveling off of attentiveness to foreign policy across differing groups of Americans. After all, a more broadly attentive public might yield more broad-based participation in the political process. Many democratic theorists would likely consider this a desirable outcome. Yet, it is unclear that more information necessarily makes better citizens, particularly if the quality of that information is suspect. Indeed, one cannot help but be concerned by the prospect of a citizenry learning about the world through the rather narrow and frequently distorted lens of the sensationalistic soft news media.

Appendix

Select 1952-92 NES, Gallup and CBS/New York Times Variables

Data Sources

The Persian Gulf War-era data is drawn from a 1990-91 NES Panel Study focused on the Gulf War, the 1992 NES survey, from on-line Lexis-Nexis retrieval of Gallup and Roper surveys and from Mueller (1994). Vietnam War-era survey data was collected through on-line Lexis-Nexis retrieval, from Mueller (1973) and from the 1966, 1968, 1970 and 1972 NES surveys. Korean War-era data is drawn from the 1952 NES survey.

Dependent Variables

1. “Do you approve or disapprove of the way President [Johnson/Nixon/Bush] is handling the situation in [Vietnam/the Persian Gulf]?”
2. “Do you think we did the right thing in [getting into the fighting in Vietnam or Korea/sending U.S. military forces to the Persian Gulf] or should we have stayed out?” Coding: 1=“don’t know” or “no opinion,” 0=all others.

Independent Variables

Importance of War: “How important is this issue [Vietnam War/Persian Gulf War] to you personally...extremely important, very (important), somewhat (important), or not (important) at all? Coding: Responses of “extremely” or “very” were coded 1, while responses of “somewhat” or “not at all” were coded 0. (Note: the word “personally” was included in 1991, but not in 1970).

Follow Public Affairs: “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. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” Coding: 1=hardly at all, 2=only now and then, 3=some of the time, 4=most of the time.

Political Information: Interviewers assessment of respondent’s “general level of information about politics and public affairs.” Coding: 1=very low, 2=fairly low, 3=average, 4=fairly high, 5=very high. For interactions, five-point scale was collapsed to three categories, where 1=very low or

fairly low, 2=average and 3=fairly high or very high. The 1952 political awareness scale was constructed from the following NES variables: 520017, 520034, 520041, 520042, 520043, 520046, 520049 and 520052. (Question wording and coding are available from the author upon request.)

Internal Efficacy = Question: “Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with these statements....Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.” Coding: 1=agree, .5=don’t know, 0=disagree.

External Efficacy: Question: “Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with this statement....People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.” Coding: 1=agree, .5=don’t know, 0=disagree.

Partisan Affect: Four-point scale estimating the *extent* of the respondent’s partisanship. Coding: 0=Apolitical, 1=Independent-Independent, 2=Independednt-Democrat or Independent-Republican, 3=Weak Democrat or Weak Republican, and 4=Strong Democrat or Strong Republican.

Select Pew Survey Variables

Voted in 1992: Dummy variable, coded 1 if respondent voted in 1992, and 0 otherwise.

Political Knowledge: The respondent’s level of political knowledge was estimated through construction of a Likert scale, derived from three knowledge-based questions. Respondents were asked if they knew: (a) who the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives is; (b) which political party has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives; and (c) what the federal minimum wage is today. (For question c, answers within one category of the correct answer, on a 7-category scale, were coded as correct responses.) Respondents were given one point for each *correct* response, resulting in a three-point scale, with three representing highest political knowledge.

Ideology: Five-point scale measuring respondent’s ideological preferences. Coding: 1=very conservative, 2=conservative, 3=moderate, 4=liberal and 5=very liberal.

Partisanship: Three-point scale estimating the extent of the respondent’s partisanship. Coding: 1=No Preference, 2=Independent or Other, 3=Democrat or Republican.

Party Identification: Five point scale, coded 1=Democrat, 2=Independent, leaning Democratic,

3=Independent, No Preference or Other, 4=Independent, leaning Republican, 5=Republican.

Media Consumption I: “Now I’d like to know how often you watch or listen to certain TV and radio programs. For each that I read, tell me if you watch or listen to it regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never.” Coding: 4=regularly, 3=sometimes, 2=hardly ever, 1=never. Items: *Network Newscasts; Local Newscasts; CNN; CSPAN; NPR; TV News Magazines; PBS News Hour with Jim Lehrer; MTV; Tabloid TV Shows*(e.g., *Hard Copy, A Current Affair* or *Inside Edition*); *Daytime Talk TV* (e.g., *Ricki Lake, Jerry Springer, or Jenny Jones*); *Rush Limbaugh* radio program; *Political Talk Radio; Family Radio*

Media Consumption II: “I’m going to read you a list of different types of news. Please tell me how closely you follow this type of news either in the newspaper, on television, or on radio...very closely, somewhat closely, not very closely, or not at all closely?” Coding: 4=very closely, 3=somewhat closely, 2=not very closely, 1=not at all closely. Items: *International Affairs; Political News; Business News; Local Government News; Religious News; Sports News; Consumer News; Science News; Health News; Community News; Arts News, Entertainment News, News About Famous People, News about Crime.*

Media Consumption III: “Now I’d like to ask you about some other ways in which you might be getting news about the presidential campaign. For each item that I read, please tell me how often if ever you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates from this source. (First,) how often, if ever, do you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates from _____—regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never?” Coding: 4=regularly, 3=sometimes, 2=hardly ever, 1=never. Items: *Late Night TV Talk; Campaign on MTV*

Media Consumption IV: “Now I’d like to know how often you read certain types of publications. As I read each, tell me if you read them regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never.” Coding: 4=regularly, 3=sometimes, 2=hardly ever, 1=never. Items: *Tabloid Newspapers; News Magazines; Business Magazines*

Daily Newspaper: Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent reads a daily newspaper regularly.

News on Internet: “Do you ever go on-line to get information on current events, public issues and politics? If yes, how often do you go on-line for this type of information...?” Coding: 1=never, 2=less than once every few weeks, 3= 1-2 days per week or once every few weeks, 4=every day or 3-5 days per week.

Cable Subscriber = Dummy variable coded 1 if respondent subscribes to cable and 0 otherwise.

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Table 1. Partial Listings of "Soft" News Coverage of 1990s U.S. Foreign Crises³⁸

Program	Number of Different Programs Addressing Foreign Crises					
	Somalia	Haiti	Bosnia	Gulf War	Iraq (post-war)	Kosovo
<i>Network TV News Magazines</i>						
Dateline NBC	4	8	17	---	52	11
20/20	3	4	8	42	20	6
Primetime Live	8	4	11	36	16	---
48 Hours	3	4	3	2	8	1
60 Minutes	4	8	17	14	51	11
<i>Television Talk Shows</i>						
Jay Leno	---	39	25	---	102	10
David Letterman	4	20	32	---	88	11
Conan O'Brien	3	22	14	---	53	2
Oprah Winfrey	6	8	8	3 ^a	4	---
Rosie O'Donnell	---	---	3	---	4	9
Regis and Kathie Lee	5	7	10	---	13	6
Geraldo Rivera	3	5	40	6 ^a	13	---
Phil Donahue	37	26	59	---	58	---
Politically Incorrect	---	---	19	---	55	11
<i>Network TV "Soft" News Programs</i>						
Extra!	---	16	116	---	62	6
Entertainment Tonight	1	4	16	---	7	1
Inside Edition	---	4	11	---	24	3
A Current Affair	4	1	8	4 ^a	7	---
<i>Cable TV "Soft" News Programs</i>						
E! Network	3	3	26	---	6	2
Black Entertainment Network	---	23	3	---	12	6
Comedy Central's Daily Show	---	---	3	---	21	16
MTV	---	7	11	---	4	3
<i>Radio Programs</i>						
Howard Stern Show	---	---	18	---	47	25

Note: "----" indicates either that a given program was not on the air at the time of the conflict or that I was unable to obtain transcripts covering the period of the conflict.

^a Figures for the Gulf War are taken from daily program listings in the *Los Angeles Times*, which only sporadically list program topics, between January and March 1991. These figures almost certainly understate the true extent of coverage.

³⁸ A majority of the data included in this table was acquired through on-line searches of Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe. According to Lexis-Nexis, only select transcripts are available on-line. Hence, all figures acquired through searches of Lexis-Nexis must be considered incomplete. Comprehensive listings (through 10/98, thereby excluding Kosovo and the 12/98 crisis with Iraq) were acquired from the Oprah Winfrey Show and Extra! through telephone interviews with representatives from those programs. In many cases, these figures exclude coverage of the 16-19 December 1998 U.S. and U.K. bombing campaign against Iraq. Kosovo coverage is from February to June 1999.

TABLE 2. Media Consumption Habits and Attentiveness to Three Foreign Crises

	<i>Lebanon</i>	<i>Terrorism</i>	<i>Bosnia</i>
Independent Variables	Coeff (Std Err)	Coeff (Std Err)	Coeff (Std Err)
SES/Demographics			
Age	-.024 (.007)***	-.013 (.005)**	-.012 (.007)
Education	-.002 (.065)	.071 (.057)	.021 (.073)
Family Income	-.069 (.050)	.019 (.044)	-.085 (.062)
Gender	-.118 (.188)	-.032 (.158)	-.118 (.205)
Married	-.009 (.056)	.126 (.049)**	-.075 (.069)
White	.091 (.253)	.372 (.224)	-.064 (.265)
Political Interest & Knowledge			
Political Knowledge	-.171 (.090)	-.201 (.085)*	-.115 (.115)
Voted in 1992	-.226 (.207)	.047 (.177)	.014 (.244)
Partisanship	.033 (.169)	-.116 (.145)	.272 (.196)
Party Identification	.059 (.058)	.019 (.051)	.026 (.063)
Approve Clinton	-.326 (.162)*	-.161 (.138)	-.034 (.176)
Media Consumption			
Cable Subscriber	-.395 (.212)	-.175 (.174)	-.131 (.240)
Hard News Index	-.091 (.021)***	-.121 (.018)***	-.100 (.025)***
Soft News Index	-.148 (.058)**	-.180 (.057)**	-.139 (.070)*
International Affairs	-1.658 (.448)***	-1.333 (.450)**	-1.384 (.596)*
Interaction Term			
Soft News Index x International Affairs	.044 (.023)^	.052 (.023)*	.034 (.032)
Constant	8.174 (1.326)***	6.826 (1.301)***	5.839 (1.525)***
Pseudo R ²	.21 (N=1319)	.15 (N=1307)	.18 (N=1322)

^p<.056 *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Note: All models employ heteroscedasticity-consistent ("robust") standard errors.

TABLE 3. Logit Analyses of Attentiveness to Korea, Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars

	Model 1 Iraq 1991	Model 2 Iraq 1990/91	Model 3 Vietnam 1972	Model 4 Vietnam 1970	Model 5 Vietnam 1968	Model 6 Vietnam 1966	Model 7 Korea 1952
Independent Vars	Coeff. (Std Err)	Coeff. (Std Err)	Coeff. (Std Err)	Coeff. (Std Err)	Coeff. (Std Err)	Coeff. (Std Err)	Coeff. (Std Err)
Age	.051* (.022)	.015* (.007)	.023*** (.005)	.012** (.004)	.011* (.005)	.025*** (.006)	.010 (.007)
Education	.209 (.281)	-.022 (.049)	.065 (.038)	-.000 (.029)	-.006 (.036)	-.024 (.036)	-.052 (.091)
Family Income	-.040 (.063)	-.026 (.018)	.049* (.023)	.026 (.035)	.008 (.027)	.056 (.043)	-.016* (.008)
Male	-1.862 (1.025)	-.282 (.255)	-.494** (.198)	-.537*** (.150)	-.421** (.168)	-.754*** (.175)	-.565** (.226)
Political Information ¹	-.807* (.382)	-.360* (.161)	-.445*** (.106)	-.375** (.126)	-.381*** (.088)	-.223* (.093)	-.234** (.075)
Follow Public Affairs ²	1.187** (.439)	.037 (.149)	-.159 (.097)	-.000 (.117)	.057 (.089)	-.261** (.095)	_____
Partisan Affect	.440 (.425)	-.316* (.143)	-.051 (.095)	.067 (.072)	.036 (.082)	-.077 (.090)	.084 (.130)
Party Identification	-.317 (.225)	.005 (.074)	.014 (.044)	.030 (.035)	-.039 (.039)	.030 (.041)	-.035 (.048)
External Efficacy	.994 (.942)	.059 (.284)	.188 (.178)	-.145 (.153)	.183 (.163)	.215** (.071)	-.047 (.245)
Internal Efficacy	-1.587 (.938)	-.237 (.334)	.497* (.253)	.493** (.188)	-.124 (.191)	-.146 (.086)	-.040** (.269)
Constant	-9.763* (4.409)	-1.819* (.946)	-3.416*** (.655)	-1.570** (.524)	-1.825** (.663)	-1.554** (.602)	-.956 (.790)
Pseudo R ²	.25 (N=966)	.05 (N=1724)	.07 (N=2060)	.06 (N=1559)	.05 (N=1347)	.09 (N=1112)	.04 (N=1096)

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Note: All models employ heteroscedasticity-consistent "robust" standard errors.

¹The interviewer's estimate of respondents' level of political information was unavailable for 1952. Hence, the 1952 political information variable represents 9-point scale derived from eight direct knowledge

questions(see appendix).

²The 1970 "Follow Public Affairs" variable is based upon the interviewer's assessment of the respondent's level of interest in government and public affairs. (Excluding this variable had no substantive effect on the results.)