

## Soft News and Political Knowledge: Evidence of Absence or Absence of Evidence?

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*In “Any Good News in Soft News?” Markus Prior investigates whether, beyond enhancing their attentiveness to select political issues (Baum, 2002a), consumers also learn about politics from soft news. He presents evidence suggesting that the audience for soft news is much smaller than that for hard news, and that a self-expressed preference for soft news outlets is associated with at most sporadic gains in factual political knowledge. In this commentary, I argue that the audience for soft news outlets is, in fact, quite large, even rivaling that for hard news. I further argue that long-term retention of factual political knowledge—the focus of Prior’s web-based survey—is an overly restrictive definition of learning. By broadening our definition—taking into account recent insights from cognitive and social psychology concerning human information processing—it becomes possible to understand how consuming soft news might indeed be associated with learning about politics, but not necessarily with an enhanced long-term store of factual political knowledge. I present evidence that consuming soft news influences the attitudes of politically inattentive individuals and that, in at least some fairly predictable contexts, doing so is also associated with enhanced factual political knowledge. I conclude that while Prior’s finding of an absence of evidence of consistent factual political knowledge effects represents a valuable contribution to our understanding of the political significance of the soft news media, it does not constitute compelling evidence of absence of any meaningful learning about politics associated with consuming soft news. Hence, it is premature to conclude that there is no good news in soft news.*

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In a recent article (Baum, 2002a), I argued that politically unengaged individuals who consume soft news are more likely to report being attentive to major foreign policy crises than their similarly inattentive counterparts who do not consume soft news. Markus Prior extends this research by investigating whether this increased attentiveness translates into anything meaningful, about which political scientists or communication scholars should care. Specifically, he considers whether expressing a preference for soft news as a news source is associated with enhanced gain of factual knowledge about politics in general or high profile political events in particular.

Prior’s findings, based on an original Web-based survey, show that, at least in those areas he investigated, any factual knowledge effects associated with preferring soft

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news outlets are spotty at best. This is a noteworthy finding. After all, one of the first tasks in determining whether and how soft news matters for politics, citizenship, or democracy is to determine where and under what circumstances soft news effects are, or are not, likely to emerge. And here, Prior has made an important contribution. His findings suggest a preference for soft news is unlikely to be consistently associated with increases in general factual knowledge about politics. Nor does soft news appear to produce consistent long-term effects on factual knowledge about high profile political issues and scandals.

Nevertheless, as Prior acknowledges in his conclusion, his findings do not necessarily demonstrate that viewers do not “learn” anything from soft news programs. While, as he correctly notes, many scholars have argued that a knowledgeable electorate is normatively good for democracy (see Prior’s citations) and that a woefully ignorant public may be incapable of fulfilling its democratic responsibilities (e.g., Almond, 1950; Lippmann, 1955; Key, 1961; Cohen, 1973; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), others (Popkin, 1994; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Sniderman et al., 1991, to name only a few) have countered that citizens do not need a great deal of factual knowledge about politics in order to fulfill their basic responsibilities as democratic citizens. According to this latter school of thought, which Sniderman (1993) termed the “New Look,” by relying on informational shortcuts and heuristic cues, many individuals who know and care little about politics are nonetheless able to reach reasoned judgments about a wide range of topics, including politics. Hence, attentiveness to soft news coverage of political issues may facilitate “learning,” in the sense of providing heuristic cues that help people to make reasoned political judgments, without significantly increasing the volume of factual political knowledge that individuals who are uninterested in politics store in memory.

Additionally, as Lodge and his colleagues (e.g., Lodge & McGraw, 1995; Lodge, Steenberger, & Brau, 1995) have shown, individuals may rapidly forget the facts surrounding a given issue or policy, yet remember how they *felt* about it. According to this “on-line processing” model of reasoning, typical individuals rapidly discard factual details regarding the objects to which they devote their attention. But they maintain an on-line summary evaluation of how they feel about such objects. Each new piece of information about a given object is tagged with an emotional “charge” (e.g., positive or negative). The individual then discards the information and retains the emotional tag, which is added to his or her running tally. If a majority of the emotional tags in the running tally are positive, the individual will have a net positive summary evaluation of the object, and vice versa. Through this process, individuals are able to remember what they support or oppose, or like or dislike, without necessarily remembering *why* they feel that way.

The significance of informational shortcuts and heuristic cues for the question of whether or not exposure to soft news produces tangible learning effects is straightforward. If, by relying on informational shortcuts, such as knowing what they like or dislike (which Sniderman et al., 1991, refer to as a “likeability heuristic”), individuals are able to make reasoned judgments without a lot of facts, and if they are able to extract the critical aspects of a piece of information (i.e., the emotional tag) without necessarily retaining in memory the information itself, then the absence of a measurable increase in factual political knowledge does not demonstrate the absence of learning. Rather, it simply demonstrates the absence of long-term retention of factual knowledge. As I earlier indicated, this is certainly of intrinsic interest but it is not necessarily the same thing as an absence of “learning” or “knowledge” effects, at least more broadly defined.

Leaving aside the question of whether or not expanding the quantity of factual

knowledge stored in memory is a sufficient definition of learning, or whether a self-declared *preference* for soft news *as a source of news* can reasonably be employed to test a model based on *incidental* exposure to political information, Prior's study raises at least three additional questions: (a) Do enough people actually watch soft news for it to matter for American politics? (b) Should we expect soft news consumption to be systematically associated with *any* factual knowledge effects, under *any* circumstances? and (c) What, if any, *other* types of learning effects might be associated with consuming soft news? In the remainder of this commentary, I address each question, in turn.

### How Much Is Enough to Matter?

Beginning with the first question, Prior's data appear to suggest that, at least when compared to hard news, the audience for soft news outlets is small. This, in turn, raises at least the possibility that their political significance may be small as well. And, indeed, he effectively demonstrates that more survey respondents express a preference for hard news than soft news. Prior also presents evidence suggesting that compared to 1999 (when I gathered my original sample of Nielsen ratings for select soft and hard news programs), the audience for at least several soft news programs in mid-2002 was either smaller or largely unchanged. He further argues, and presents some substantiating evidence, that the total audience for cable news is inadequately accounted for by aggregate daily averages, such as the CNN rating of .40 reported in Baum (2002a).

Yet, further review of recent Nielsen ratings data suggests that the audience for soft news outlets is neither particularly small (either absolutely or relative to that for network evening newscasts) nor necessarily shrinking.<sup>1</sup> In fact, depending on the time frames, programs, and units of measurement one examines, ratings for some soft news outlets appear to have grown relative to 1999. For instance, during the first quarter of 2002, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* earned an average rating of 5.8 and was watched daily by an average of 6.1 million households (or a little over 7 million viewers), equivalent to the sweeps week ratings cited by Prior. It is, in fact, not uncommon for Oprah's audience to exceed 8 million viewers (Baum, 2002b).<sup>2</sup> During the November 2002 sweeps, Oprah earned a 6.3 rating (Pursell, 2002), nearly the same as the January–June 1999 figure I cited in Baum (2002a). And, because the number of U.S. households has increased over time, a 6.3 rating in 2002 represents 260,000 *more* households than the show's 6.5 rating in 1999 (i.e., more than 6.72 million households in November 2002—or nearly 9 million viewers—compared to an average of 6.46 million households during January–June 1999). Hence, by any measure, the audience for the *Oprah Winfrey Show* has remained quite large, and by some measures has expanded, relative to 1999. Indeed, Oprah's audience frequently matches, and sometimes exceeds, the average of 8.4 million total viewers who, on a typical evening during the first quarter of 2002, watched the top dozen cable news programs *combined*.<sup>3</sup>

A similar pattern is apparent for infotainment programs. For instance, Prior's data show a slight decline in ratings for *Entertainment Tonight (ET)* between January–June 1999 and May 2002 (from 5.9 to 5.7) and a larger decline compared to the show's 4.9 rating in late-June/early-July 2002. Yet in November 2002, *ET's* ratings climbed to 6.3, representing about 6.7 million households or 9 million viewers. This represents an increase of about 800,000 households, or 1.1 million viewers, relative to the show's 5.9 average rating from the first half of 1999. And in some months over the past several years, *ET's* ratings have reached as high as 7.0, representing about 10 million viewers (*Daily News*, 2001). Moreover, in most markets, *ET* airs opposite one of its two primary

infotainment competitors, *Access Hollywood*, which is typically watched by about 3.8 million viewers, and *Extra*, which in November 2002 attracted about 4.1 million viewers per evening.<sup>4</sup> Hence, depending on which *ET* rating one employs (4.9, 5.7, 5.9, 6.3, or 7.0) and whether or not one assumes a 100% overlap in audiences for programs broadcast at different time slots, these three programs alone typically reach between 11 and 18 million unique viewers per day. Moreover, while *Extra's* ratings declined by about 24% between the first half of 1999 and November 2002 (from 3.8 to 2.9), *Access Hollywood* appears to have taken up *Extra's* slack; its ratings rose by about 45% during the same time period (from 2.0 to 2.9).

When one accounts for the many other soft news outlets that air on a typical day, including, to name only a few, *Inside Edition* (about 5 million viewers), *Live with Regis and Kelly* (about 5 million viewers), *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (about 7 million viewers), and *The Late Show with David Letterman* (about 4.5 million viewers), the total audience for soft news programming begins to appear quite substantial. While, as Prior points out, there is most likely *some* audience overlap across some of these programs, it seems, to put it mildly, highly improbable that the identical 11–18 million viewers are watching all of these soft news shows, plus the many others not listed here, every day. Finally, if one counts news magazine programs like *Dateline* and *20/20* as soft news outlets (as I believe they *should* be counted), the total soft news audience is quite possibly larger than that for the three network evening newscasts, which have, over the past several years, attracted a combined average of between 24 and 31 million viewers per evening, depending on the time of year.<sup>5</sup>

The picture for cable news is also not entirely clear cut. For instance, during the first quarter of 2002, the audience for the highest-rated cable news program included in Prior's data, *The O'Reilly Factor*, was about 1 million viewers, about the same as the show's typical audience in early 2001 (Kloer, 2001). This represents just over half of the 1.8 million figure presented by Prior for May 2002.<sup>6</sup> At minimum, these data suggest that the audience for *The O'Reilly Factor* varies widely.

Additionally, since cable news viewers tend to be highly politically engaged and more interested in political news than typical Americans (Pew Center, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, & 2000), they are presumably more likely to either stay tuned to one of the major cable news networks across multiple programs or to switch back and forth from one cable news network to another. It is therefore difficult to determine how many Americans actually watch nontrivial quantities of cable news or how many of these viewers represent new additions to the hard news audience, as opposed to longtime news enthusiasts who have either switched over from network newscasts or simply failed to have their daily appetite for news sated by a single 30 minute network news broadcast. On balance, then, Prior is most likely correct in asserting that the American public's consumption of hard news has not fallen substantially, and, thanks to cable, may even have increased in recent years. Yet it is by no means clear that any such increase has come at the expense of the soft news media, whose audiences do not appear to be either small or declining (absolutely or relatively). Indeed, by at least some measures, the soft news audience appears to be growing.

Regardless of the "true" relative ratings picture, however, the key to answering the question of "how much is enough to matter" lies less in aggregate numbers—like the Nielsen ratings both Prior and I cite—than in identifying the viewing habits of critical segments of the audience. In evaluating the significance of soft news coverage of political issues, the key audience demographic is the least educated and politically engaged segments of the public, who tend to be the predominant consumers of soft news pro-

gramming (Baum, 2002a; Hamilton, 2003; Davis & Owen, 1998). After all, soft news coverage of a political story is unlikely to significantly affect the overall level of knowledge about a given story retained by politically attentive individuals, who presumably rely upon more diverse, and more information-intensive, sources of political news.

And, among politically inattentive or uneducated members of the public, survey evidence indicates that the frequency of soft news consumption is far greater than the aggregate totals suggest, in some instances rivaling that of hard news consumption. For instance, across four surveys conducted by the Pew Center between 1996 and 2000 that included the appropriate media consumption questions (Pew Center, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, & 2000), respondents without a high school diploma reported watching “tabloid” TV programs like *Hard Copy* and *Inside Edition* with, on average, about 27% greater frequency than their counterparts with a college or postgraduate education. The corresponding differential for daytime talk shows was nearly 72%. Nielsen ratings for several popular infotainment programs and daytime talk shows, broken out by education, mirror this pattern. In October 2002, for instance, ratings for *ET*, *Access Hollywood*, *Extra*, and *Inside Edition* were, on average, 26% higher for households lacking a college-educated adult, compared to college-educated households. The corresponding combined average ratings for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Live with Regis and Kelly*, *Dr. Phil*, and *Caroline Rhea* were one-third higher among non-college-educated households.

These relative differences do not, of course, reveal how often respondents actually consume different types of news. In fact, in the aforementioned Pew surveys, those who did not graduate from high school reported watching TV tabloids and talk shows with only 13% and 27% less frequency, respectively, than network newscasts. The corresponding figures for respondents with a college education or better were 34% and 56% less frequency, respectively. This suggests that, at least for less-educated Americans, infotainment programs and talk shows are not all that much less likely than network newscasts to be a potential source of news, at least about *some* issues. Moreover, not surprisingly, the same Pew Center surveys also indicate that less-educated individuals consume less hard news than their better-educated counterparts. This suggests their political attitudes are likely to be disproportionately shaped by whatever political information, however intermittent, they *do* elect to consume via soft news programming. Indeed, these are the very individuals whose attitudes and opinions are *most* likely to be influenced by exposure to political information (Zaller, 1992; McGuire, 1968, 1973). Prior’s findings do appear to show that when asked to name their preferred sources of *news* (as opposed to entertainment), more respondents, in the aggregate, prefer hard news than soft news. Yet it is at minimum premature to conclude from those data—which, in fairness, Prior does not do—that soft news does not matter for American politics.

### Looking for Factual Knowledge Effects

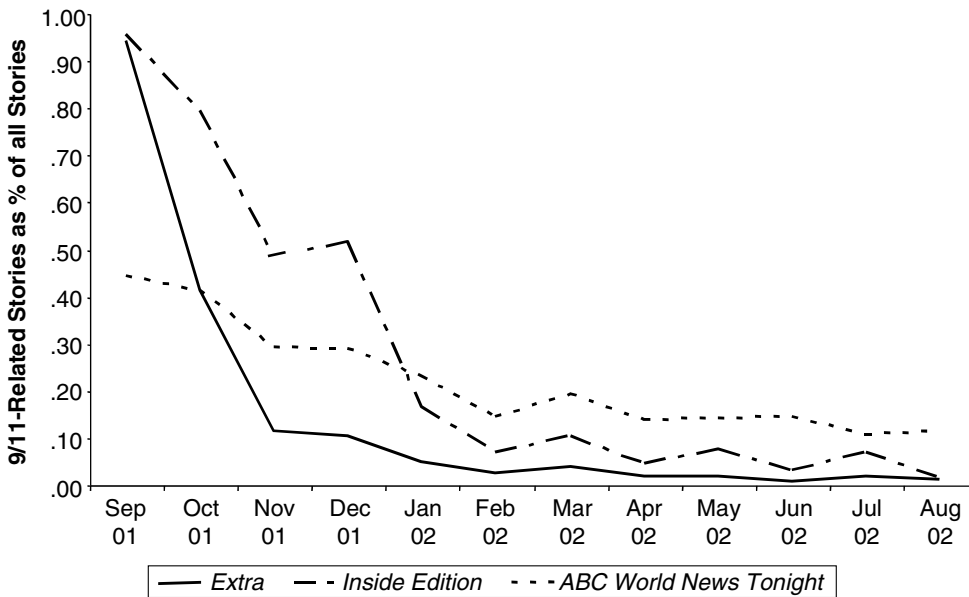
The second question raised by Prior’s study concerns what, if any, factual knowledge effects we *should* anticipate arising as a result of soft news consumption. Prior finds that a preference for soft news had inconsistent effects on knowledge about several scandals, including the arrest for under-age drinking of President Bush’s daughter Jenna, the Gary Condit scandal, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson’s admission that he had fathered a child out of wedlock. He also found only modest knowledge effects regarding the War on Terrorism and on a battery of four traditional political knowledge questions. The latter questions queried respondents concerning their knowledge of the size of the foreign aid budget, the trend in the U.S. crime rate, whether Democrats or Republicans were more

liberal/conservative, and which party controls the House of Representatives. Of these various issues, the only statistically significant positive knowledge effects associated with consuming infotainment programs involved the Gary Condit scandal. A preference for talk shows, in turn, was associated with significant positive knowledge effects with respect to the Jenna Bush arrest, crime rate trends, and recognition that Republicans are more conservative than Democrats. Prior concludes from these results that consuming soft news has little consistent effect on political knowledge, and certainly far less effect than consuming hard news.

Yet, the absence of knowledge effects across most of these issues does not necessarily imply that soft news consumers learned nothing about them from these programs or that soft news consumers *never* (or almost never) learn (defined as enhancing their store of factual knowledge) from such programs. With respect to the specific scandal events included in Prior's survey, conducted in February and March 2002, in each instance the survey took place long after the event in question. The Gary Condit scandal essentially disappeared from the media following 9/11, over six months before Prior's survey. Jenna Bush's arrest took place nine months prior to the survey. And Jess Jackson's admission regarding his illegitimate child took place over 13 months prior to the survey in question. Given the propensity of soft news outlets to focus only on the most current and dramatic political issues—to a greater extent than most hard news outlets—it is extremely unlikely that the soft news media were covering any of these issues in close proximity to Prior's survey. (A cursory review of topical abstracts from several soft news shows, using Lexis-Nexis, appears to substantiate this conjecture.) Hence, any factual knowledge effects concerning these particular issues associated with consuming soft news would be quite long-lasting indeed. Perhaps not coincidentally, the scandal issue for which Prior found the strongest soft news factual knowledge effects—the Gary Condit affair—was also the most recent, relative to his survey, and the one receiving the most sustained and intense soft news coverage.<sup>7</sup>

The War on Terrorism is a different matter entirely. Clearly, this was still an extraordinarily high profile topic in early 2002. And Prior also finds little evidence of soft news knowledge effects concerning the War on Terrorism. This appears, at least at first glance, a more damning critique of the potential factual knowledge effects associated with consuming soft news programming. After all, the terror attacks of 9/11 and their aftermath constituted one of the most dramatic, high profile issues of the past half-century. If soft news had no meaningful factual knowledge effects here, it seems unlikely that it would matter for other, less dramatic issues. Yet, upon closer scrutiny, the evidence appears less clear. For instance, a review of the program topics from two prominent infotainment programs, *Extra* and *Inside Edition*, indicates that both shows offered extensive coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath, including the War on Terrorism. Figure 1 presents the trend in the percentage of *all* stories presented on these programs devoted to topics related to 9/11. For purposes of comparison, the figure also presents the trend for ABC's *World News Tonight*.

These data indicate that in September 2001, following 9/11, *Extra* and *Inside Edition* each devoted nearly *all* of their coverage to the terror attacks and related issues (e.g., domestic anthrax attacks and the war in Afghanistan). In October 2001, *Extra* devoted over 40% of its programming to 9/11-related topics and themes, while *Inside Edition* featured 9/11-related topics in nearly 80% of all story segments the show broadcast. Coverage by *Extra* dropped significantly over the next several months (about 10% of *Extra*'s programming in November and December 2001 was devoted to 9/11-related topics), while *Inside Edition* continued to devote about half of all programming to 9/11-



**Figure 1.** Percentage of all stories on *Extra*, *Inside Edition*, and *ABC World News Tonight* related to 9/11 or its aftermath, September 2001 through August 2002. (Sources: Vanderbilt Television News Archive (<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>), <http://www.insideedition.com>, and <http://www.extratv.com>.)

related themes for the duration of 2001. The dropoff was somewhat more gradual for *World News Tonight* but followed the same general pattern. The point is that both of these infotainment programs offered extensive and fairly sustained coverage of 9/11, including the War on Terrorism. In light of these figures, it is difficult to fathom how regular viewers of these shows could possibly have managed to learn absolutely *nothing* about the War on Terrorism.

Yet in Prior's survey, respondents who reported preferring infotainment programming were *no* more likely than their non-infotainment consuming counterparts to know the name of a country that shares a border with Afghanistan (Pakistan), the name of the local Afghan rebel group allied with U.S. forces in Afghanistan (the Northern Alliance), or the name of the agency founded in the aftermath of 9/11 (Office for Homeland Security). There are at least two plausible explanations for this discrepancy. Either survey respondents learned all they knew about these issues from traditional news sources, before they were exposed to any such information on infotainment shows, thereby rendering infotainment coverage redundant, or these three questions failed to tap into what infotainment viewers *did* learn about the War on Terror.

While the first possible explanation is undoubtedly true for some individuals, Prior's findings, consistent with my own, suggest that there are certainly a significant number of infotainment viewers who do not consume much hard news. Hence, it seems unlikely that this explanation could account for the apparent *total* absence of learning effects. And even if viewers *were* gaining the identical information from both sources, it is unclear how one could disentangle who learned what from which source. In other words, if hard and soft news programs cover the same aspect of a story at about the same time, and a viewer consumes both types of programming, which one is incidental? In fact, media effects research (e.g., Iyengar, 1991), combined with my own content analysis

investigations (Baum, in press) suggests that, at least for politically unengaged individuals, the answer may be *hard* news. This is because soft news outlets are in the business of making information highly accessible. This makes such information easier for politically unsophisticated consumers to understand (Hamilton, 2003), and, hence, presumably also more appealing to them.

Moreover, in covering foreign policy, soft news programs rely almost exclusively—and significantly more so than traditional news outlets—on episodic, rather than thematic, framing of stories (Baum, in press). Research in social psychology, in turn, has found that people are more likely to recall information presented in an episodic manner, because it is more vivid (Lynn, Shavitt, & Ostrom, 1985), and that episodic frames tend to have a stronger impact on individuals' attention (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

The second possible explanation seems more compelling. After all, the questions included in Prior's survey address specific facts about particular aspects of the War on Terrorism. One can imagine that respondents may have learned some things about the War on Terrorism from infotainment programs without necessarily learning (and recalling at the time of the survey) the name of a country bordering Afghanistan or of the agency created after 9/11 to protect domestic security. Similarly, it is not entirely surprising that infotainment coverage of 9/11-related events would not focus on the identities of the various factions within Afghanistan. After all, as I have argued elsewhere (Baum, 2002a, in press), soft news coverage typically does not emphasize military and political tactics and strategies (e.g., alliance relations). Indeed, soft news outlets typically cover politics and foreign affairs in a quite different manner than hard news outlets. They may simply have covered different *aspects* of the War on Terrorism than their hard news counterparts. The questions included in Prior's survey, in turn, may have tapped into the types of topics more likely to be covered by the hard news media.

In fact, in a content analysis of infotainment TV coverage of 9/11-related stories (Baum, in press), I found that the tabloids remained true to form in their coverage, focusing on dramatic human-interest stories and celebrity involvement and almost exclusively episodic frames. While hard news outlets also cover human-interest stories and employ episodic frames, their coverage of political issues, including foreign policy, is typically far more diverse and far more likely to include reports about geography, U.S. allies (e.g., Pakistan and the Northern Alliance) or government agencies (e.g., the Office of Homeland Security). Indeed, many infotainment consumers may have learned a great deal about certain aspects of homeland security, such as new security measures being taken at airports, without necessarily committing to memory the name of a specific federal agency.

It is also not entirely surprising to find that a preference for soft news exerts at most an inconsistent influence on viewers' partisan knowledge or knowledge concerning the foreign aid budget. After all, soft news outlets typically eschew partisan political content. For instance, in an additional content analysis, I found that in their coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, several soft news outlets made almost no mention at all of the words "Democrat" or "Republican" (Baum, in press). And I found a similar absence of partisan content in coverage of the 2000 election by entertainment-oriented talk shows, both daytime and late night (Baum, 2002b). In both cases, this contrasts sharply with coverage in traditional news outlets. Still further content analyses revealed that, in the 1990s, soft news outlets rarely so much as mentioned the phrase "foreign aid." In contrast, as Prior points out, "crime" is one of the primary topics for many soft news outlets. Given this, the fact that he discovered much stronger knowledge effects with respect to the crime rate is unsurprising (as he himself notes).

Though consistent with Prior's findings in most respects, the results from my con-



tent analyses appear at odds with his finding that a preference for talk shows was strongly positively associated with knowing that Republicans are more conservative than Democrats. Indeed, Prior finds (see his Table 8) that talk shows outperform all other media—including newspapers, magazines, Internet news, national TV news, and radio news—as a predictor of knowing which party is more conservative. Yet, the very strength of this finding raises at least the possibility that expressing a preference for talk shows is, in at least this one instance, tapping into something other than partisan content on entertainment-oriented TV talk shows, such as, perhaps, a preference for political talk shows like *Hardball* or *Crossfire*. After all, even notwithstanding the results of my content analyses, it seems highly improbable that Oprah Winfrey provides more partisan content to her audience than, say, *The CBS Evening News* or *Newsweek*.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Some Evidence of Factual Knowledge Effects From Operation Just Cause (1989–1990)***

It is one thing to argue that certain types of factual knowledge effects are relatively unlikely to be associated with consuming soft news programming. It is quite another to demonstrate that, at least under *some* circumstances, some factual knowledge effects *do* emerge. After all, as I have argued, gaining factual knowledge is not equivalent to learning. And soft news outlets seem better suited to influencing attitudes and providing informational shortcuts than to enhancing viewers' long-term store of factual political knowledge. Yet, under some circumstances, it does seem likely that viewers would, in fact, gain at least *some* factual knowledge from soft news outlets, at least in the short run. (Recall that the on-line information-processing model suggests that many individuals will rapidly forget the details they learn about an issue while retaining only their emotional reactions to such information.)

One of the more likely places to find such effects would presumably be in the midst of a high-profile U.S. military engagement, like Afghanistan, which, as I have shown elsewhere (Baum, 2002a), is highly likely to attract the attention of soft news outlets. Unfortunately, few surveys both include the necessary questions for testing this possibility and take place in close proximity to such an event. One exception is a Times Mirror survey conducted in January 1990, in the midst of *Operation Just Cause*, the December 21, 1989, U.S. invasion of Panama whose stated goal was to oust from power Panama's ruling strongman, General Manuel Noriega.

Unlike many U.S. military interventions in the 1990s (e.g., Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia), *Operation Just Cause* involved an invasion by over 30,000 U.S. ground forces into overtly hostile territory. Hence, not surprisingly, Americans, on average, were highly attuned to events in Panama. According to the Pew Center's News Interest Index, which has tracked public interest in major news stories since 1986, 60% of respondents claimed to have followed the Panama invasion "very" closely. As of August 2001, this made it the 19th most closely followed story out of nearly 900 items included in the index, thereby placing in the *top 2%* of all news stories since 1986.<sup>9</sup>

As noted, crime—including drug-related crime and drug trafficking—is among the most common topics in the soft news media, especially among infotainment programs. Given General Noriega's alleged links to Colombian drug traffickers, *Operation Just Cause* represented in many ways an ideal topic for the soft-news media, combining multiple highly accessible, soft news-friendly themes (e.g., U.S. military intervention, violence, controversy, a readily identifiable villain, crime, drug trafficking, etc.) into a single dramatic storyline highly amenable to soft news programming sensibilities.

Unfortunately, the Panama invasion took place at a time before transcripts for most soft news programs were accessible. This makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the soft news media covered the invasion. The exceptions are network TV news magazine programs, all of which covered *Operation Just Cause* at length. At a time when the “war on drugs” was considered a major crisis issue in America, the primary focus of these programs, not surprisingly, was General Noriega’s alleged links to Colombian drug kingpins. For instance, in January and February 1990, ABC’s *20/20* ran a series of stories, called “Drug War Status Reports,” featuring Noriega’s alleged drug connections. The other network TV news magazine programs on the air at the time, including *48 Hours* and *Primetime Live*, also emphasized the relationship between the Panama invasion and the war on drugs. Hence, while data limitations prohibit a detailed assessment of the soft news media’s coverage of the U.S. invasion of Panama, those outlets for whom 1989–1990 transcripts are accessible do appear to have covered it at length and to have focused their coverage on General Noriega.

The Times Mirror survey includes a series of questions asking respondents how often they watch, read, or listen to a variety of news and entertainment media outlets. To test whether exposure to soft news influenced consumers’ knowledge about *Operation Just Cause*, net of their hard news consumption, I transformed the media consumption questions into two scales, separately measuring respondents’ exposure to soft and hard news. Table 1 lists the items included in each scale.<sup>10</sup>

This survey does not contain any questions that explicitly measure respondents’ intrinsic interest in international affairs. Nor does it include any items addressing respondents’ political engagement in general. Yet, as I have shown elsewhere (Baum, 2002a, in press), soft news coverage is more likely to matter for respondents who are not intrinsically interested in following politics or international affairs. An alternative indicator of political engagement is respondents’ level of education. Though education is clearly an imperfect indicator of a respondent’s propensity to follow politics or international affairs, numerous studies have found it to be closely related to political knowledge or engagement and have employed it as an indicator of such (Ault & Meernik, 2000; Bennett, 1995; Converse, 1964; Krause, 1997; MacKuen, 1984; Baum, 2002a, 2002c). Hence, I employ

**Table 1**  
Items included in soft and hard news indexes

Hard news index items	Soft news index items
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read daily newspaper</li> <li>• Watch news programs on TV</li> <li>• Listen to news on radio</li> <li>• Read weekly news magazines</li> <li>• Read magazines like <i>Atlantic</i>, <i>Harpers</i> or <i>The New Yorker</i></li> <li>• Read business magazines</li> <li>• Watch Sunday interview/news shows, like <i>Meet the Press</i></li> <li>• Listen to National Public Radio</li> <li>• Watch <i>McNeil-Lehrer</i></li> <li>• Watch CNN</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch <i>A Current Affair</i></li> <li>• Watch <i>Entertainment Tonight</i></li> <li>• Read personality magazines, like <i>People</i></li> <li>• Read tabloid newspapers, like <i>The National Enquirer</i></li> <li>• Watch TV news magazine shows, like <i>20/20</i></li> </ul>

education level as a crude indicator of political engagement in general and a propensity to follow international political events in particular. I also include a series of control variables measuring respondents' party identification, socioeconomic status (family income and employment status), demographic characteristics (age, race, and gender), and the perceived importance of the Panama invasion to the respondent.<sup>11</sup>

As my dependent variables, I focus on two questions related to *Operation Just Cause*: (a) "Do you happen to know where General Manuel Noriega took refuge to escape capture by American troops?"<sup>12</sup> and (b) "Do you happen to know in what way control of the Panama Canal will change in the future?" I thus investigate whether soft news consumption influenced respondents' propensity to correctly identify the location where General Noriega sought refuge and to know that the U.S. had a treaty obligation to turn control of the canal over to Panama.

To test whether any knowledge enhancing effects of soft news exposure vary among respondents with differing intrinsic levels of interest in politics or foreign affairs, I interact the soft news index with respondents' education level. Given the propensity of soft news outlets to focus on only the most dramatic, human-interest aspects of political stories, my *ex ante* expectation was that soft news consumers, particularly those at lower education levels, would be more likely than non-consumers to know where General Noriega took refuge, but not necessarily that the U.S. was scheduled to turn control of

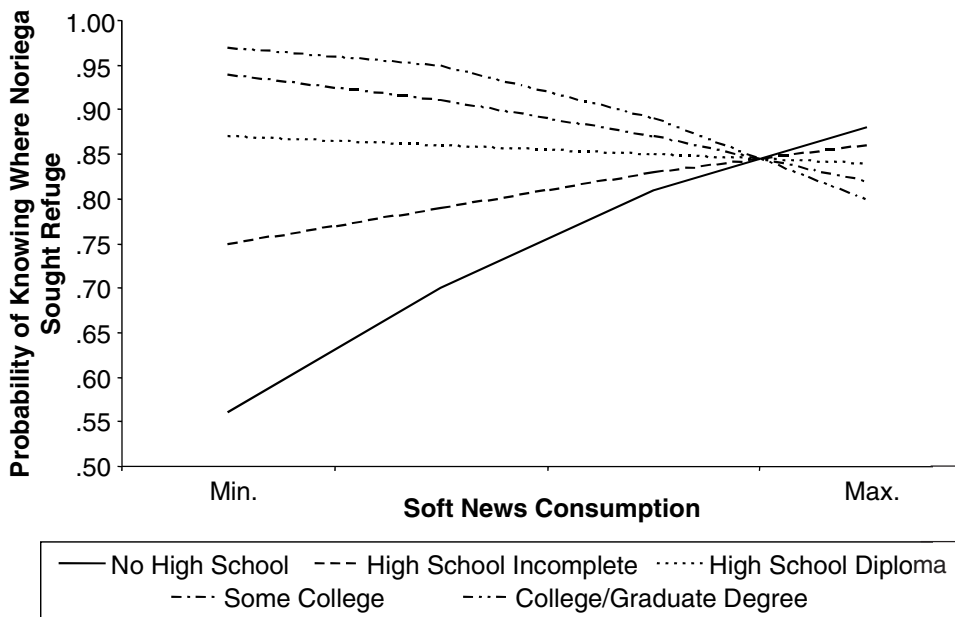
**Table 2**

Logit analyses of likelihood of knowing where general Noriega sought refuge during *Operation Just Cause*, or that the U.S. was scheduled to cede control of the Panama Canal to Panama, as soft news consumption and education vary

Independent variables	Know about Noriega: Coef. (SE)	Know about Panama Canal: Coef. (SE)
<i>Media consumption habits</i>		
Soft news index	.923 (.509) <sup>^</sup>	.045 (.416)
Hard news index	.809 (.229) <sup>***</sup>	.718 (.155) <sup>***</sup>
<i>SES/demographics</i>		
Education	1.181 (.345) <sup>***</sup>	.641 (.257) <sup>**</sup>
Age	.024 (.007) <sup>***</sup>	.015 (.005) <sup>**</sup>
Family income	.214 (.095) <sup>*</sup>	.152 (.075) <sup>*</sup>
Male	.642 (.220) <sup>**</sup>	.978 (.159) <sup>***</sup>
White	-.536 (.623)	.477 (.384)
Black	-2.011 (.676) <sup>**</sup>	-.449 (.476)
Unemployed	-.071 (.264)	-.005 (.233)
<i>Political engagement</i>		
Party identification	-.056 (.278)	.086 (.188)
Personal importance of Panama invasion	.565 (.209) <sup>**</sup>	-.383 (.154) <sup>**</sup>
Soft news index × education	-.336 (.144) <sup>*</sup>	-.100 (.110)
Constant 1	-4.535 (1.404) <sup>***</sup>	-5.237 (1.066) <sup>***</sup>
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (N)	.19 (1,080)	.17 (1,080)

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

<sup>^</sup>*p* < .10; \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.



**Figure 2.** Probability of knowing where General Noriega sought refuge, as education and soft news consumption vary.

the canal over to Panama. Table 2 presents the results of two logit analyses, employing both dependent variables.

The results indicate that, as expected, consuming soft news increases respondents' propensity to know where Noriega sought refuge but has no effect on their propensity to know about changes in the status of the Panama Canal. The former was a primary focus of soft news coverage of *Operation Just Cause*; the latter was in all likelihood ignored by the soft news media (though this remains conjectural).<sup>13</sup> In Figure 2, I translate the key coefficients into probabilities of offering a correct response to the Noriega question, as respondents' education level and soft news consumption vary.

The curves shown in Figure 2 indicate that among the roughly 15% of respondents lacking a high school diploma, exposure to soft news is positively associated with knowing where General Noriega sought refuge. Among those who did not attend high school, as soft news consumption varies from its lowest to highest levels, the probability of offering the correct answer increases by 32 percentage points (from .56 to .88). The corresponding increase among respondents who attended "some" high school is 11 percentage points (from .75 to .86). Soft news consumption, in turn, had virtually no effect on high school graduates (about one third of all respondents).

Interestingly, among college-educated respondents (roughly half of all respondents), the effects reverse, with greater soft news exposure associated with a *reduced* propensity to offer the correct response (ranging from 12 to 17 percentage points for respondents who attended "some" college and college graduates, respectively). These data suggest that, for highly educated individuals, consuming soft news represented more of a distraction from *Operation Just Cause* than a source of information about it.

These results address only two questions, concerning only one foreign policy crisis,

which was in many ways a unique event. It is therefore difficult to generalize beyond this particular survey or event. After all, as we have seen, *Operation Just Cause* was one of the highest profile news stories of the past two decades. And, as noted, the search for General Noriega was the highest profile aspect of the story. Hence, it is not terribly surprising that the knowledge effects of soft news exposure would, in this instance, be limited to a relatively small percentage of respondents. Most Americans probably found it difficult to *avoid* information about the invasion. In fact, in this latter respect, and somewhat paradoxically, the extraordinarily high profile of *Operation Just Cause* makes finding distinct soft news effects all the more impressive.

My findings in this limited statistical investigation suggest that exposure to soft news does most likely have at least *some* effect on factual knowledge, at least with respect to those aspects of high-profile issues, like foreign crises, that attract substantial soft news coverage, and at least in the short run. These results also suggest, however, consistent with Prior's findings, that there are limits to such factual knowledge-enhancing effects. Soft news coverage of political issues is far less diverse than that of hard news (Baum, in press), and hence any factual knowledge-enhancing effects are likely to be relatively narrow, limited to the particular aspects of foreign crises that soft news programmers elect to emphasize. Unfortunately, these data do not allow a test of the extent or duration of such knowledge-enhancing effects. I therefore leave the important question of whether such effects are substantial and durable, or merely shallow and fleeting, for future research.

### **What Other Types of Learning Might Be Associated With Consuming Soft News?**

The third question raised by Prior's findings concerns the nature of any *other* types of learning effects that might be associated with exposure to soft news. One possibility is that watching soft news coverage of political issues might influence viewers' *attitudes* about such issues. For instance, consistent with the on-line processing model of reasoning, viewers may extract emotional "charges" (positive or negative) from soft news coverage of, say, a foreign crisis or an election, and add them to their running emotional tallies, without necessarily retaining the details of a given story. These additional emotional charges may then influence their net assessments, or attitudes, concerning the object of the soft news coverage.

In fact, elsewhere (Baum, 2002b, 2002d) I report evidence consistent with this possibility. In the latter study (Baum, 2002d), I find that individuals who are either uninterested in politics or lack a college education (ranging from 40% to 55% of respondents), but not their more politically engaged or college-educated counterparts, grow increasingly suspicious of proactive or multilateral U.S. foreign policy initiatives as their soft news consumption increases. A content analysis of soft news coverage of a variety of foreign policy issues (e.g., the appropriate U.S. role in the world, U.S. involvement in Bosnia, NATO expansion, and President Clinton's foreign policy management) revealed the likely explanation for this pattern. In their coverage of these and other foreign policy issues, soft news outlets tended to emphasize the dangers and risks inherent in overseas U.S. military engagements overseas, including the likelihood of failure, to a much greater degree than traditional news outlets. They were also far more likely than hard news outlets to draw analogies to past U.S. foreign policy failures (e.g., Vietnam) and far less likely to include comments by credible information sources (e.g., experts or members of the administration). In other words, the soft news media, to a much greater extent than

their hard news counterparts, disproportionately emphasize *negative* coverage of U.S. foreign policy initiatives.

Moreover, as noted above, research has shown that episodic frames, which are virtually ubiquitous in the soft news media (again, far more so than in hard news programming), influence people's attention and judgments to a much greater extent than thematic frames. And, in sharp contrast to traditional news outlets, the soft news media almost never employ thematic frames. Finally, additional research in social psychology (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987, 1989; Reeder & Spores, 1983) has shown that negative information tends to outweigh positive information in people's evaluations of most issues or objects, particularly those related to moral judgment (e.g., "right" vs. "wrong," "good" vs. "evil," etc.). America's leaders, in turn, routinely frame the nation's adversaries as the embodiment of evil (e.g., G. H. W. Bush likening Saddam Hussein to Hitler, or G. W. Bush branding Al Qaeda and its supporters as "evildoers"). Hence, in evaluating U.S. foreign policy initiatives, the American people are strongly encouraged by their leaders to base their opinions on moral judgment, thereby reinforcing the centrality of negative information.

In short, among politically inattentive and relatively uneducated Americans, who tend to be disproportionately receptive to isolationist themes (Baum, 2002d; Holsti, 1996), exposure to soft news coverage of foreign crises appears to be associated with *enhanced* isolationism. In contrast, politically attentive individuals, who are overwhelmingly internationalist (Baum, 2002d; Holsti, 1996), appear to discount, or counterargue (Zaller, 1992), any pro-isolationist messages. These latter individuals grew increasingly *supportive* of U.S. multilateral foreign policy initiatives as their soft news exposure increased.

Turning briefly to the other study (Baum, 2002b), here I find that politically inattentive respondents who reported watching daytime talk shows like *Oprah Winfrey* and *Rosie O'Donnell* in the 2000 National Election Study, but *not* their more politically engaged counterparts, were more likely to indicate that they had crossed party lines and voted for the opposition party presidential candidate in 2000. The reason, simply stated, is that in the 2000 election cycle, the entertainment talk show media offered an unprecedented volume of campaign coverage. The major party candidates appeared on myriad talk shows, ranging from *Oprah Winfrey*, *Live with Regis and Kelly*, and *Rosie O'Donnell* to *Letterman* and *Leno*, to *Queen Latifah*, and Comedy Central's *Daily Show*. And content analyses of these programs revealed that, in interviewing political candidates, entertainment-oriented talk shows were far less critical or partisan, and far more likely to present their interview subjects in a favorable light, compared to traditional political interview programs (e.g., *Meet the Press* or *This Week*) or campaign coverage by national news programs. Hence, politically inattentive viewers who encountered the opposition party candidate in an entertainment talk show context were likely to gain a favorable impression of that candidate. And previous research (Sniderman et al., 1991) has shown that politically inattentive or cognitively unsophisticated individuals, who typically lack strong partisan leanings, are particularly likely to employ the aforementioned "likeability heuristic" in rendering political judgments, such as deciding how to cast their vote. In contrast, exposure to daytime talk shows had little effect on politically attentive respondents. After all, Americans who find politics intrinsically of interest tend to have numerous sources of political news and are therefore well equipped to counterargue, or discount, any information that might conflict with their (typically) more strongly held partisan predispositions. They are also less likely to rely upon the "likeability heuristic" than their less politically engaged counterparts.

Taken together, these findings suggest that exposure to soft news may have an important influence on individuals' attitudes, including even their voting behavior—par-

ticularly among those not intrinsically interested in politics or foreign affairs—without necessarily having a comparable effect on their long-term factual knowledge about specific political issues or events.

## Conclusion

Markus Prior's research raises a number of important questions for scholars interested in determining whether and how the soft news media matter for American politics. His findings clearly show that there are limitations to the factual knowledge-enhancing effects of exposure to soft news programming. I have suggested, however, that important "learning" effects may be taking place that are not captured in Prior's research design. There are many types of learning, and enhancing one's long-term store of factual knowledge is only one such type.

At the same time, Prior's findings confirm my incidental by-product model (Baum, 2002a) by showing, in a more direct way than was possible in the surveys I employed, that in contrast to hard news consumers, individuals who watch soft news shows do so primarily in search of entertainment, not enlightenment. This finding alone makes Prior's study noteworthy, as it shows that the entertainment media has the potential to influence political attitudes in ways not necessarily intended or anticipated by producers of such programs.

I also sought to demonstrate that even given a relatively narrow definition of "learning" (i.e., increasing one's store of factual knowledge about an object), in at least some circumstances, it is in fact possible to find factual knowledge-enhancing effects associated with consuming soft news programming, at least among relatively apolitical segments of the public. In order to do so, however, it is first necessary to recognize that some Americans are more likely than others to depend on soft news outlets as a source of political information. Hence, aggregate Nielsen ratings data showing larger audiences for hard news programs do not necessarily demonstrate the irrelevance of the soft news media for American politics. And, when one disaggregates individuals according to ex ante propensity to rely upon soft news programs for political information, factual knowledge effects do emerge, at least *while* a given issue is attracting the attention of the soft news media. I thus found that low-education soft news consumers were more likely than their counterparts who did not consume soft news to know where General Noriega had sought refuge from U.S. forces during *Operation Just Cause*.

At the same time, my findings reinforce Prior's conclusion that the factual knowledge effects associated with soft news consumption are most likely limited. After all, soft news consumers, regardless of their education level, were not more likely to know that the U.S. was, at the time, scheduled to surrender control of the Panama Canal to Panama.

Taken together, Markus Prior's findings and my own suggest that soft news coverage of political issues most likely does have meaningful consequences for American politics, but that such consequences are not without limits, in terms of both the types of individuals likely to be influenced by soft news programming and the types of effects likely to result from consuming soft news (e.g., changes in attentiveness, political attitudes, or factual political knowledge). For instance, as noted, I have found strong attention and attitudinal effects among politically inattentive individuals and those lacking a great deal of formal education, but much weaker, and sometimes even opposing, effects among their more politically engaged or better-educated counterparts. Further, and more in-depth, exploration of the nature, extent, and limitations of such effects represents the next phase in this research agenda, to which Markus Prior has offered an important contribution.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Barbara Osborn for providing some of the Nielsen ratings data presented in this section. The other data were identified through searches of Lexis-Nexis.

2. In 2002, one ratings point represented 1.067 million households. Each household, in turn, represented about 1.33 viewers (source: Lexis-Nexis).

3. There is presumably some overlap in viewers across these programs. Thus, the 8.4 million figure is most likely exaggerated. According to Nielsen ratings data, the top 12 cable news programs during the first quarter of 2002, in order, were *Larry King Live* (CNN), *The Fox Report with Shephard Smith* (Fox), *The O'Reilly Factor* (Fox), *Newsnight with Aaron Brown* (CNN), *Hannity & Colmes* (Fox), *Crossfire* (CNN), *The Point* (CNN), *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren* (Fox), *Wolf Blitzer Reports* (CNN), *The News with Brian Williams* (MSNBC), *Hardball with Chris Matthews* (CBNC), and *Alan Keyes Making Sense* (MSNBC). The average audience across these programs is about 700,000 viewers (though they range in size from less than 300,000 to over a million).

4. To determine airtimes for *ET*, *Extra*, and *Access Hollywood*, I reviewed the schedules for each show from a random sample of local markets nationwide, as listed on the programs' respective Web sites.

5. While Prior correctly points out that the ratings I included in Baum (2002b) were, due to data limitations, potentially biased against the network newscasts (because the network news ratings were from late June 1999, while the soft news ratings were taken from the first half of the year), the basic point—that the audiences for some soft news programs rival those of the individual network evening newscasts—nonetheless holds, even when the playing field is leveled. For instance, in the first week of May 2002, the *CBS Evening News* attracted an average of 7.5 million viewers per evening (Huff, 2002), about 500,000 and 700,000 fewer viewers, respectively, than the daily averages in May 2002 for *Entertainment Tonight* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

6. Both ratings represent the audience for the prime time (8:00 p.m. EST) broadcast of *The O'Reilly Factor*. As is the case with some soft news programs (e.g., *Extra*, *Inside Edition*, and Comedy Central's *Daily Show*), *The O'Reilly Factor* is rebroadcast in the late evening. But, according to Nielsen ratings data, the audiences for late-night rebroadcasts of cable news programs, including *The O'Reilly Factor*, are typically far smaller than those for early-evening broadcasts. Nevertheless, absent the improbable circumstance that the same viewers watch a program every time it airs on a single day, the Nielsen ratings data both Prior and I have utilized understate the actual total daily audience size for some cable and soft news programs.

7. In contrast, though, in "Sex, Lies, and War" (Baum, 2002a), I did not specifically investigate factual knowledge effects, it is worth noting that the events I analyzed were either ongoing or only recently concluded when the surveys I employed were undertaken.

8. It is also possible that multicollinearity is suppressing some of the hard news preference items.

9. Pew's News Interest Index is available at <http://people-press.org>.

10. The alpha reliability scores for the hard and soft news scales are .62 and .58, respectively.

11. The latter question asks respondents to name the most important national issue of the past month. I recoded the responses into a dummy variable, coded 1 if the respondent mentions the Panama invasion and 0 otherwise.

12. This question is coded 1 for correct responses ("Vatican Sanctuary" or "Catholic Church"), and 0 otherwise. Since the hunt for Noriega was the most prominent aspect of the Panama invasion, and was covered intensely by the media—including the soft news media—this seems a particularly appropriate place to search for any factual knowledge effects associated with consuming soft news.

13. Though data limitations preclude an in-depth content analysis in order to verify this conjecture, the patterns of soft news coverage I have identified in content analyses of other political issues, including foreign crises (Baum, 2002a, in press), suggest that the soft news media rarely address thematic issues, such as the underlying causes of a conflict. It is therefore highly unlikely that the impending change in ownership of the Panama Canal would have received much attention in the soft news media.



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