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## CHERNOBYL ANNIVERSARY

### Media vs. Scientists

Can it happen here? This month's Monitor compares major media coverage of the Chernobyl nuclear accident with a 1987 CMPA poll of American scientists. We analyzed the anniversary coverage this month, along with the first month of news stories following last year's accident. The outlets: New York Times, Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, ABC CBS, and NBC. The results:

\*For the media, a portent of domestic disaster:

- 61% of sources call U.S. reactors unsafe.
- 71% of stories find a domestic Chernobyl likely.
- 43% term U.S. reactors no safer than Chernobyl.

\*For scientists, a Soviet anomaly:

- 71% rate a domestic Chernobyl unlikely.
- 82% find U.S. reactors safer than Chernobyl.
- 66% call U.S. reactors safe, up from 60% in 1980.

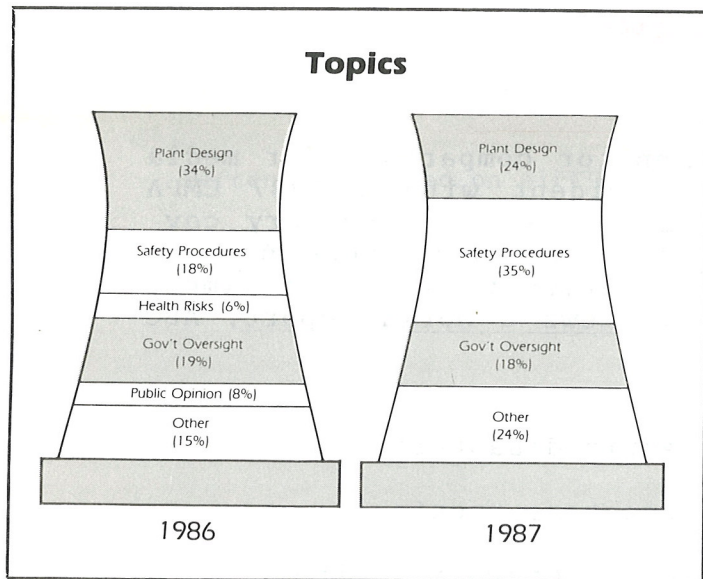
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**THE HART AFFAIR -- major media condemn Hart's judgment, split on his prospects, debate journalistic ethics.**



## HOT TOPICS

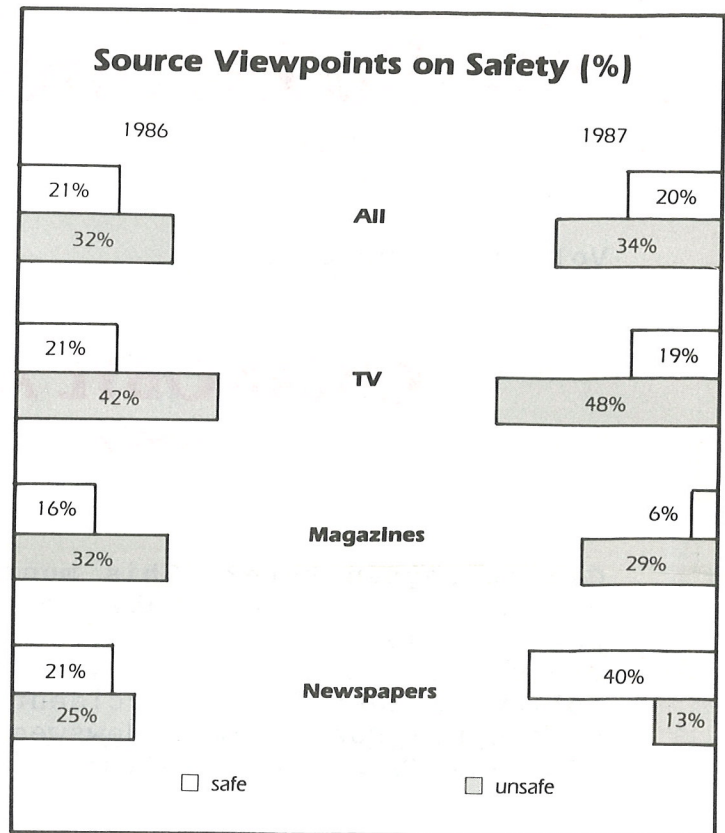
We analyzed 56 stories in the month after the accident and 17 during the week of anniversary coverage. (The 1987 TV news sample included special segments and programs as well as the evening newscasts). The major topic of concern shifted from plant design (a technological issue) to safety procedures (the human factor).



## SAFETY SLANTS

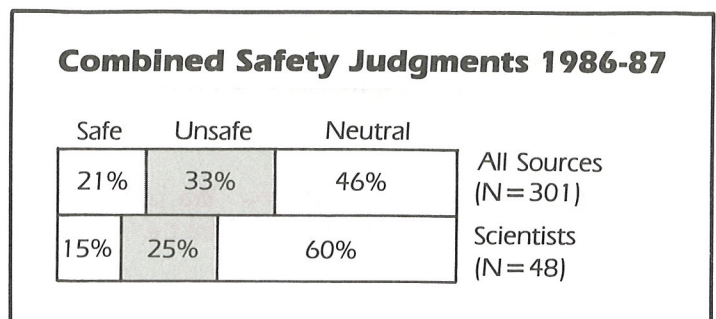
The largest source category was government officials, followed by various experts and representatives of utilities and anti-nuclear groups.

Sources were mostly bearish on U.S. reactor safety. Among the slight majority who voiced a clear opinion, those who stressed the dangers outnumbered those who downplayed them by about 3 to 2. The results were nearly identical in both 1986 and 1987. In both years TV news produced the most negative coverage, with the news magazines not far behind. Time and Newsweek were especially critical, but their viewpoints



were mitigated by positive coverage at U.S. News. The newspapers provided the most balanced coverage--slightly negative in 1986, positive in 1987 (based on a much smaller number of sources). The consistency of source judgments across time and media outlets is a striking feature of the Chernobyl coverage.

Scientists cited in news stories came to equally negative conclusions. Pessimists outnumbered optimists by a 5 to 3 margin, although the majority made neutral or mixed assessments.



We, in effect, have a creeping Chernobyl...

Sen. John Glenn (D-OH)  
CBS 4/23/87

We have not and will not have a Chernobyl-type plant accident here.

Utility executive  
New York Times, 5/19/86

Anything that can melt down possibly will."

Expert  
CBS, 5/3/86

#### MEDIA vs. EXPERTS

Our poll of American scientists uncovered dramatically different opinions from those of scientists (and other sources) cited in the major media (see box). Large majorities rated U.S. reactors as safe and a Chernobyl-type accident as improbable. Results were very similar to 1980 and 1984 surveys of the same group. In fact, their safety ratings have risen slightly over time.

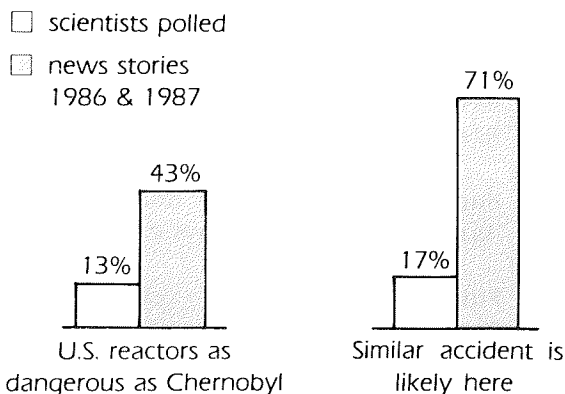
#### CMPA SURVEY OF SCIENTISTS

Random sample: 580 scientists from American Men & Women of Science.

- \* 71% rate a Chernobyl-type accident in U.S. as improbable; 17% rate it probable.
- \* 82% rate U.S. plants as safer than the Chernobyl plant.
- \* 66% regard U.S. reactors as currently safe, and 17% as unsafe.
- \* 88% believe nuclear plants will be important in meeting America's future energy needs.

CMPA: April, 1987

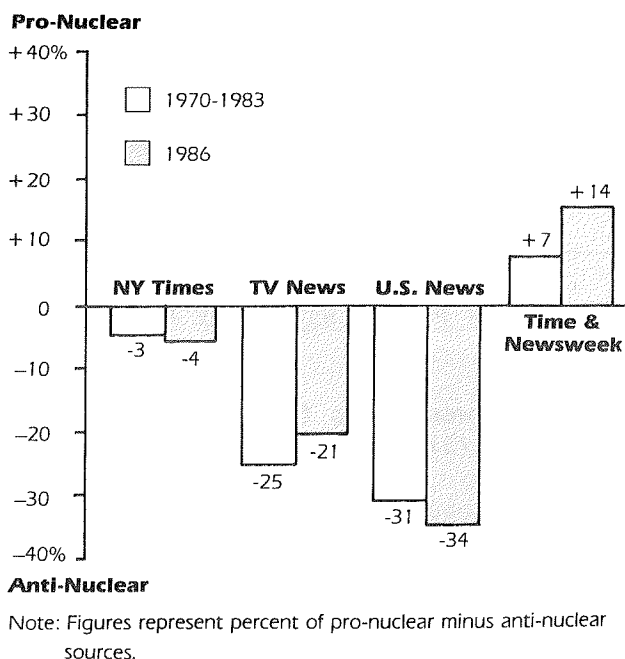
#### **Scientists vs. Media (%)**



#### PAST AS PROLOGUE

Chernobyl coverage varied sharply among major media outlets, but each outlet's perspective was almost identical to its own long term coverage of nuclear safety issues (Source: Nuclear News, CMPA, 1986). Since 1970 TV news, Time and Newsweek have been strongly anti-nuclear, the New York Times slightly anti-nuclear, and U.S. News slightly pro-nuclear. Thus newsroom traditions as well as events helped to shape the coverage.

#### **News Slant**



## THE HART AFFAIR: MAJOR THEMES

	<u>TV</u>	<u>PRINT</u>	<u>MENTIONS</u>
Hart's actions show character flaws	100%	94%	19
Hart unfairly maligned	0	6	
Hart's candidacy is doomed	70%	41%	24
Hart can still recover	30	59	
Public figures must accept scrutiny	45%	55%	17
Scrutiny unfair	55	45	
Journalistic techniques were proper	49%	45%	41
Journalistic techniques were improper	51%	55%	

Percentages based on airtime for TV, column-inches for newspapers.

TV: ABC, CBS, NBC Evening News

Print: New York Times, Washington Post

"character assassination"  
Gary Hart, 5/4

"If I'd gotten that tip, I'd have  
been there with cameras."  
James Wooten (ABC), 5/4

### COVERING HART--DAILY AVERAGES, May 3-6

TV: 5 stories - 11 minutes, 17 seconds

New York Times: 4 stories - 96 inches

Washington Post: 3+ stories - 98 inches

### THE PUBLIC RATES THE PRESS

Reporters went "too far" 50%  
ABC, 5/5/87

Media stakeouts are improper 80%  
USA Today, 5/4/87

Media invade people's privacy 73%  
Gallup, 1985

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