CHEMNBOYL 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.

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 technical 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

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.

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
## The Hart Affair: Major Themes

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Print</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hart's actions show character flaws</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>94%</td>
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<td>Hart unfairly maligned</td>
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<td>Hart's candidacy is doomed</td>
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<td>Hart can still recover</td>
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<td>Public figures must accept scrutiny</td>
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<td>45%</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalistic techniques were improper</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td></td>
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Percentages based on airtime for TV, column-inches for newspapers.

**TV:** ABC, CBS, NBC Evening News  
**Print:** New York Times, Washington Post

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### 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

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**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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