

The Missing Intern Mystery

Media Coverage of the Chandra Levy/Gary Condit Story

Major Findings:

- **Disappearing In Turn**

The Condit/Chandra story got more coverage last month than the G-8 summit and the stem-cell debate combined. *Page 2*

- **Nothing But Chandra**

NBC's coverage exceeded that of ABC and CBS combined. *Page 2*

- **Condit's Cable Con-**

duit Fox and CNN ran 163 prime-time reports on the story. *Page 3*

- **Rise and Chandra**

Coverage on the morning TV shows tripled nightly news totals. *Page 1*

- **Chiding Condit**

Since July, Condit jokes have outnumbered Bush and Clinton jokes combined on late-night TV shows. *Page 5*

To analyze the unexpected feeding frenzy over a missing persons case, CMPA examined the media coverage from first reports on May 16 through August 8, on four major newspapers, two 24-hour cable news channels, and the evening and (for July only) morning news shows of the major broadcast networks. Overall we tallied 739 stories or program segments on the Chandra Levy-Gary Condit story.

An unlikely story dominated the nation's news agenda in the summer of 2001 – the disappearance of a young Washington intern named Chandra Levy. This missing persons case differed from the many thousands reported each year only because of Ms. Levy's sexual relationship with U.S. Representative Gary Condit (D- CA). Yet in less than three months (May 16 through August 8) the *Washington Post* carried 157 stories on this case (averaging over three a day), *USA Today* ran 57, and *The New York Times* printed 39. The *Los Angeles Times*, the major paper located nearest to Congressman Condit's district, carried 78 stories during this period. The 24-hour cable news networks gave the story heavy play on their prime-time programs, led by Fox News Channel's "The Edge with Paula Zahn" (37 shows), "The O'Reilly Factor" (30), and "Hannity and Colmes" (28), followed by CNN's "The Point with Greta Van Susteren" (27), "Larry King Live" (16), and "Crossfire" (11). (Tapes of MSNBC shows were not available for this analysis.)

On broadcast television, however, the story was driven not by the network evening news shows, but by their morning shows. The evening newscasts combined for only 62 stories, including a mere

(continued on page 2)

Number of Stories

Total **Peak Period**
May 16 - Aug. 8 July 2 - July 16

Print

	<u>332</u>	<u>108</u>
<i>Washington Post</i>	157	48
<i>New York Times</i>	39	17
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	79	23
<i>USA Today</i>	57	20

Broadcast TV

	<u>244</u>	<u>138</u>
Evening News	62	35
ABC	18	10
CBS	7	6
NBC	37	19
Morning News	182	103
ABC	(59)	34
CBS	(51)	28
NBC	(72)	41

Cable TV

	<u>163</u>	<u>53</u>
FOX	95	25
Paula Zahn	37	8
O'Reilly	30	9
Hannity & Colmes	28	8
CNN	67	26
Greta Van Susteren	27	8
Larry King	16	5
Wolf Blitzer	13	7
Crossfire	11	5

*July only

two stories in May and June. This averages out to only about three stories per week per network over a period of nearly three months. Even this total was produced primarily by a single network - NBC, whose 37 stories easily exceeded the combined totals of ABC (18) and CBS (7). NBC also featured this

story on five different segments of its prime time news magazine "Dateline." The only other broadcast evening news program that carried the story was ABC's "Nightline," which aired one episode on this story.

This light coverage on the evening news contrasted sharply

with heavy coverage on all three networks' morning shows, which we analyzed during the month of July only. During this single month, NBC's "Today Show" aired 72 stories, followed by ABC's "Good Morning America" with 59 and CBS's "Early Show" with 51. The total of 182 morning news stories is triple that of the evening news stories on the same networks, despite being confined to the month of July. It is also notable that NBC outpaced its competitors in all news formats on this story, although the disparity remained greatest on the evening news shows. When morning, evening, and prime-time shows are combined, NBC aired 114 Chandra stories, compared to 78 on ABC and 58 on CBS.

Feeding Frenzy

The story reached its feeding frenzy phase in early July after reports that Mr. Condit, contrary to his denials, had been romantically involved with Ms. Levy. Once the networks finally decided to follow the case on their flagship evening news shows, they quickly made up for lost time. Over two-thirds of all network evening news coverage came in the two-week period between July 2 and July 15.

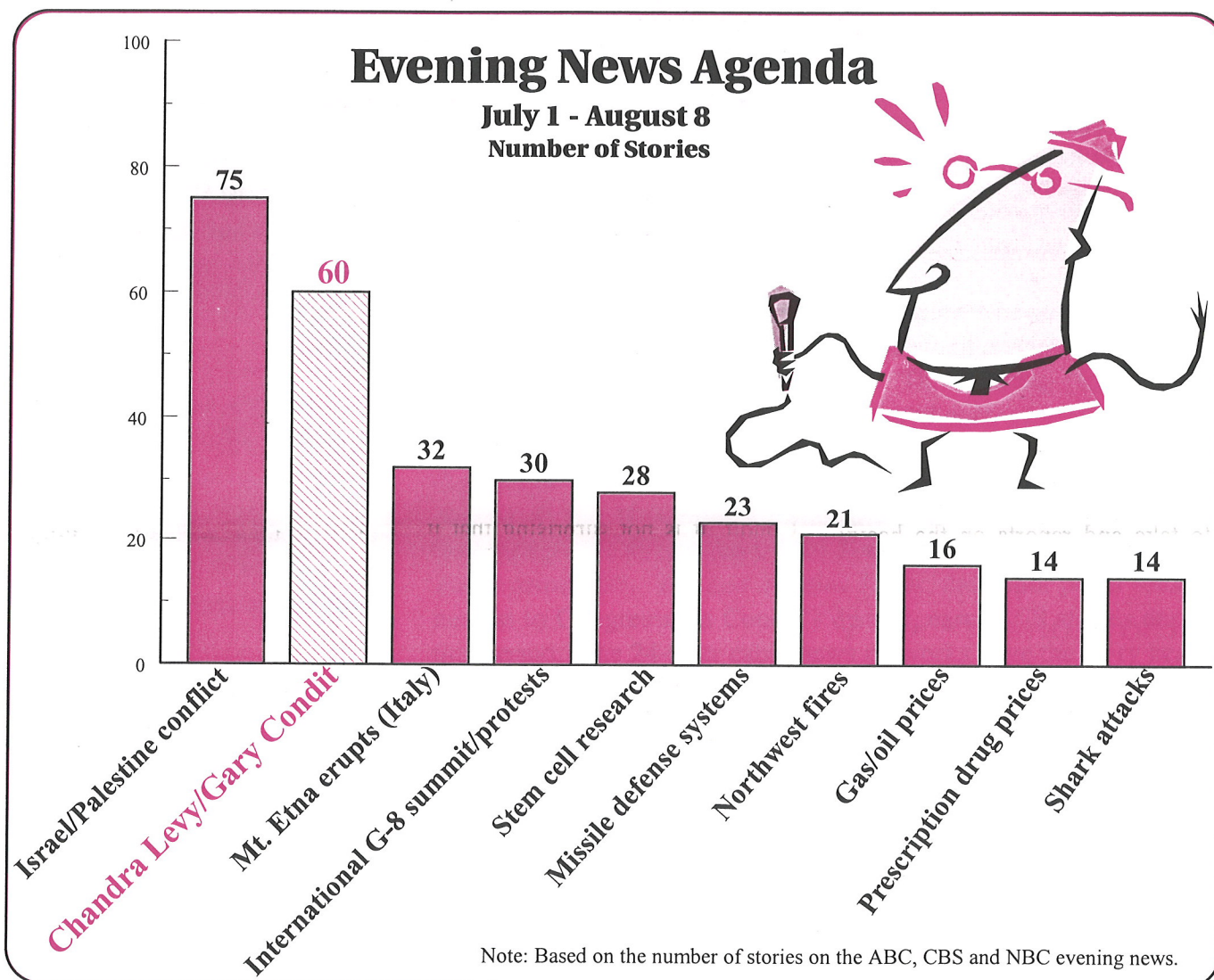
In fact, since July 1, the Chandra Levy case has generated more nightly news stories than any topic apart from the burgeoning Middle East

conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The 60 stories broadcast on Ms. Levy and Congressman Condit in July and early August represents more than the combined coverage of the heavily protested summit of industrialized nations in Genoa (30 stories) and the debate over stem-cell research (28) during this same period.

This upsurge in media interest was triggered by a July 2 report on Fox News Channel that a United Airlines flight attendant claimed she had an affair with Condit, but was urged to deny it.

During the next two weeks, the cable news networks featured the case on 50 prime-time shows, with the total divided evenly between CNN and Fox. NBC also broadcast all five of its "Dateline" segments during this period. The story was showcased most frequently on the broadcast morning news shows, which featured a remarkable 103 stories, led by NBC's "Today" 41 (three per day), followed by ABC's "Good Morning America" (34), and the CBS "Early Show" (28). These three shows together averaged

more than seven stories per day over this two-week period. By contrast, although a majority of all broadcast evening news stories on the case appeared during this time period (35 out of 62 stories), only NBC averaged more than one story per night (19 over the two weeks) followed by ABC with ten and CBS with only six stories.

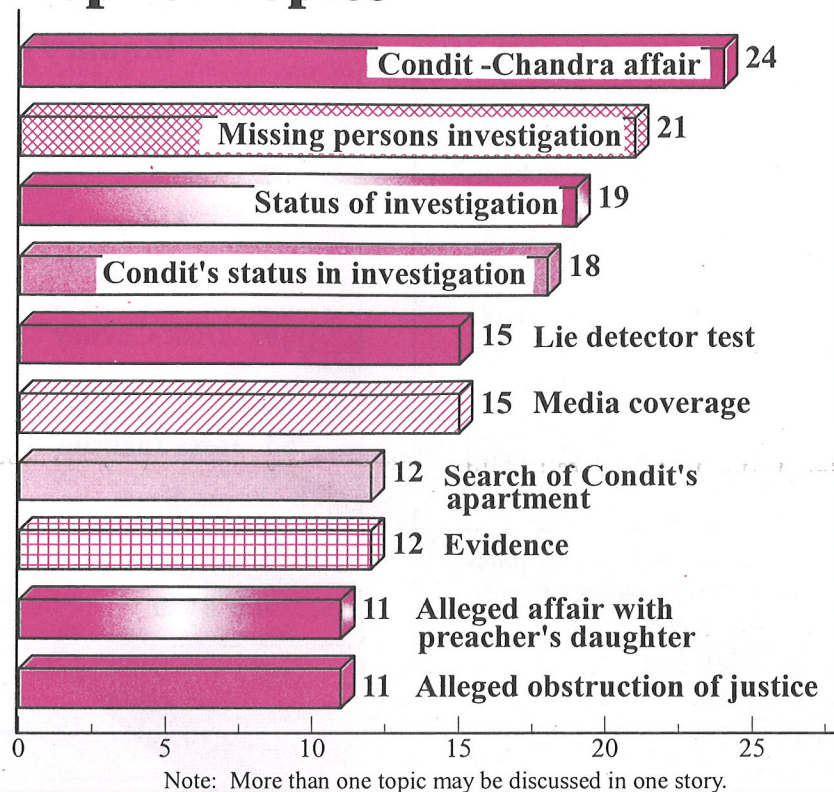


It's About Sex

As this chronology of the coverage suggests, the news hook was less Ms. Levy's whereabouts than Mr. Condit's sex life. In fact he was the major focus of 50 out of the 62 evening news stories. This is also evident from the specific topics that attracted the most attention. The heaviest coverage (24 stories) went to Congressman Condit's affair with Chandra Levy, rather than the missing persons investigation itself.

The search for Ms. Levy's body took second place with 21 stories, followed by stories on the status of the investigation (19) and the issue of whether the congressman had anything to do with Ms. Levy's disappearance (18). The latter usually revolved around statements by the police that he was not a suspect. Tied for fifth place with 15 stories apiece were accounts of the lie detector test that the congressman arranged to take and reports on the heavy media scrutiny that the case attracted. Tied for seventh with 12 stories apiece were reports of the police search of Mr. Condit's apartment and discussions of specific pieces of evidence, such as a watch case he discarded. Rounding out the top 10 with 11 stories apiece were allegations that Mr. Condit had urged other mistresses not to talk to the police and the charge by a former Levy employee (later

Top Ten Topics



retracted) that Condit once had an affair with his underage daughter.

Criticizing Condit

Since the coverage was focused so heavily on Representative Condit, it is not surprising that it contained frequent evaluations of his behavior, which were predominately negative, by a two to one margin (66% negative). The most negative aspect of his coverage (78% negative) was the issue of whether he lied to the police and the Levy family. For example a former U.S. Attorney told ABC, "He has withheld vital information from [the police], and I'm quite sure they are very suspicious of his actions." (July 8)

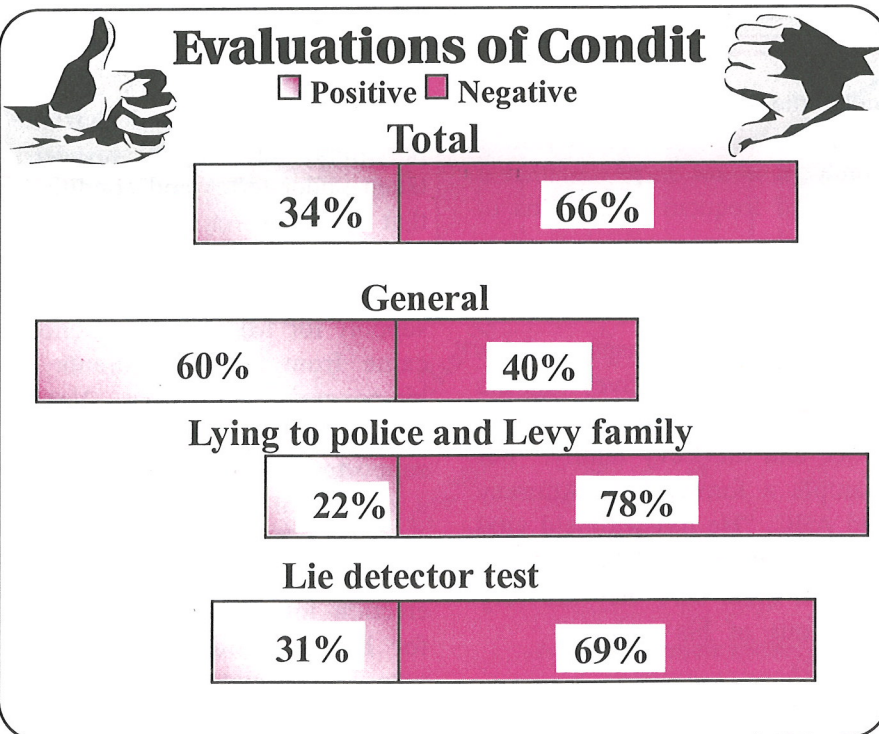
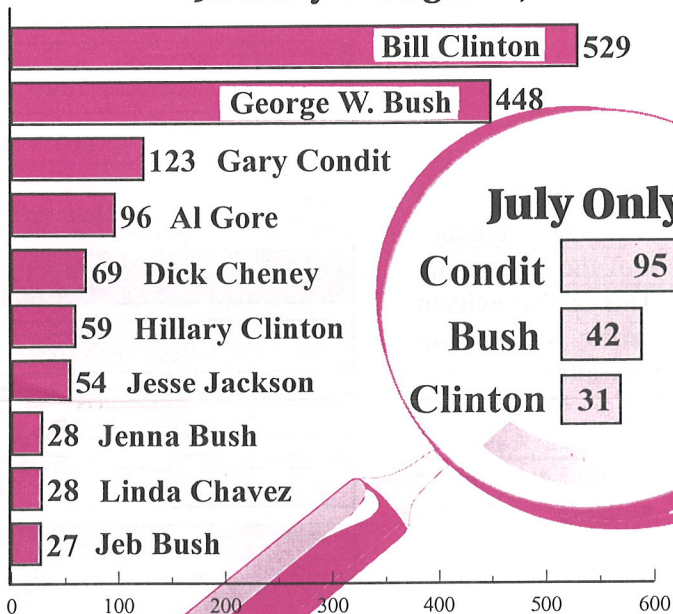
But he fared little better on evaluations of the lie detector test that he arranged privately to support his claims of innocence. Sources on this debate were split 69 percent negative to only 31 percent positive. For example, NBC quoted a Levy family attorney, who charged that the polygraph was "highly suspect... taken under terms and conditions that would not be under any law enforcement's desire." (July 15) The only substantial area of support for Mr. Condit's actions came from the constituents of his congressional district. Voters who appeared on camera supported their congressman by a margin of three to two (60% positive). For example one voter told ABC, "If there were an election tomorrow I would vote for him. I did not, with my vote, hire a saint, I hired a man." (July 8).

Comics Chide Condit

The spate of media attention to the Chandra Levy case in July brought Gary Condit the dubious distinction of being the most joked-about person in America. Throughout July, he was the target of 95 jokes by late-night TV comedians, a figure that surpassed the *combined* totals of his three nearest competitors – George W. Bush (42), Bill Clinton (31) and Dick Cheney (18). No other individual was the target of more than four jokes that month. That batch of barbs left him as the third leading joke target of 2001 with 123 jokes to his credit (or debit), a total surpassed only by Bill Clinton (529) and George W. Bush (448). Comedians also found Bill Clinton and Gary Condit an irresistible combination that frequently let them skewer two targets with a single dart.

Top Ten Joke Targets

January 1 - August 8, 2001



Sample Jokes:

"Last week, Gary Condit's lawyer said Gary took his own lie detector test and passed it. Next week he'll announce Gary gave himself his own trial and found himself innocent... this guy makes Clinton look like a good liar."

"Condit's been married 34 years. Clinton's been married over 20 years. So the secret to a long marriage is that the husband never stops dating."

"It looks like Condit is being abandoned by the Democrats. Imagine that – abandoned by the party that stood behind the Kennedys, Gary Hart, Jesse Jackson and Bill Clinton. It's like getting kicked out of Sodom and Gomorrah."

"It was so hot today that – Gary Condit was sticking to his story.... Bill Clinton climbed in bed with Hillary just for the chill.... Bush actually came inside and did some work."

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