

TABLE 11.1

CIRCULATION OF FORTY LEADING U.S. MAGAZINES

Reader's Digest	16,452,422
T.V. Guide	16,302,705
National Geographic Magazine	10,574,562
Better Homes and Gardens	8,143,083
Woman's Day	5,922,530
Good Housekeeping	5,217,147
McCall's	5,142,463
Ladies' Home Journal	5,086,714
Time	4,648,454
National Enquirer	4,285,707
Redbook	3,950,489
Star	3,682,796
Playboy	3,555,663
People	3,349,401
Sports Illustrated	3,329,415
Newsweek	3,227,391
Cosmopolitan	2,760,010
U.S. News & World Report	2,300,197
Southern Living	2,288,695
Smithsonian	2,262,015
Glamour	2,190,027
Penthouse	2,109,256
Field & Stream	2,032,020
Popular Science	1,844,323
Country Living	1,833,816
Money	1,821,625
Motorland	1,812,625
Parents Magazine	1,772,633
Seventeen	1,752,308
Life	1,749,936
Popular Mechanics	1,668,096
The Elks Magazine	1,526,010
Globe	1,525,745
Outdoor Life	1,514,400
Adventure Road	1,484,143
Sunset	1,430,860
Woman's World	1,413,575
Boys' Life	1,392,535
US Magazine	1,379,602
The Workbasket	1,402,785

Note. Magazines that emphasize national and international news are boldfaced.
Source: 1990 *The World Almanac and Book of Facts.*

U.S. foreign policy in Central America—a salient national security issue in which the Reagan administration's secret contra war was exposed during the Iran-Contra episode—only half of all Americans knew that the Sandinistas and contras had been fighting. Furthermore, a majority of Americans incorrectly believed that the U.S. government was supporting the guerrillas in El Salvador and the government in Nicaragua. During the same year, one in three Americans could not name a single member of NATO, whereas 16 percent thought the Soviet Union was a member of the Western alliance. Americans had difficulty identifying countries and regions on a world map, as was shown when 75 percent of “adult” Americans polled were unable to locate the Persian Gulf, 50 percent could not identify Japan and South Africa (and were unaware that apartheid was the official government policy), and 14 percent could not even correctly locate the United States.¹⁵

The low levels of attention, information, and understanding about national and international affairs among the American public are relatively normal and quite understandable. In most countries, the mass public exhibits characteristics similar to Americans. One may argue whether Americans are more or less interested and informed than other people in industrialized countries (recent surveys have placed Americans near the middle of the rankings, with the 18- to 24-year-old Americans usually dead last).¹⁶ Nevertheless, the pattern remains the same—the mass public, whether in the United States or abroad, is minimally interested and poorly informed, especially in comparison to members of the elite public. Low levels of political interest and information are also quite understandable if one examines “everyday life.” Most Americans, like people everywhere, face numerous daily demands and responsibilities that appear to have little to do with politics. While their lives are impacted by politics, it is at a distance removed from the individual. The lives of most individuals revolve around work, family, household, and friends. With the increase of divorce and two-income families, adults lead ever busier and more demanding lives. Most want to relax and enjoy life during their leisure time, which is rarely spent reading, talking, or thinking about national and international affairs. Instead, American pastimes emphasize activities other than politics, such as sports or shopping.¹⁷

It would be a mistake, therefore, to conclude that the ignorance of most Americans is a function of stupidity—a view often held by the more traditional and elitist perspective of the mass public. Rather, it is primarily a function of the various pursuits and demands of everyday life, which are reinforced by the existence of few incentives within American society for people to become politically informed and active.¹⁸ As many observers have pointed out, a lack of knowledge and understanding about national and international affairs does not preclude the existence of intuition and common sense. It is also important to place the low levels of interest and information in historical context. Three trends appear to have evolved. First, the level of interest and attention accorded to politics by most Americans has probably declined over the past decades. One hundred years ago politics and election campaigns were one of the few major forms of entertainment for many Americans; today, so many things compete with politics for people's attention—such as television, rock 'n' roll, professional and college sports, Hollywood and movies, the shopping mall and mass consumerism—that a low level