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Transcript Curiosity

DAYTON, Ohio — In these parts, where pop fiction and "The Happy Hooker" tend to be the reading norm in paperbacks, the paperback versions of the President's Watergate transcripts have been selling almost as rapidly as season tickets to Cincinnati Bengal football games.

Even though it has been a number of weeks since the transcripts were first published, sales have waned only slightly after the initial burst. The leading downtown department store has had to reorder the transcripts several times and the book buyer says that the transcript paperbacks are outselling any paperback in memory. The closest rival in recent times was an account of a local murder.

It is not just your average student of government who is gobbling up copies of the transcripts. If that were the case, sales would be few in this typically Midwestern community where weighty political tomes are not exactly hot items. (The public library did not order a copy of Raoul Berger's highly acclaimed impeachment study until several months after publication, and then only after a special request was made by a citizen.) Clearly, then, the transcripts are appealing to a mass audience. But why?

Some of the reasons are obvious: the wide publicity given the transcripts; the opportunity to obtain a first-hand account instead of relying on press reports; the desire to be well informed.

But another less obvious reason was illustrated in a conversation overheard in a bookstore. A beehived, pink pantsuited woman had a copy of the transcripts in hand and was paying for it when she asked the cashier about the contents. The cashier said: "Why I've been reading them. And

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they're very interesting. They're not boring at all."

They're not boring. That's the key. Citizens who would recoil at the prospect of watching the Senate Watergate Committee hearings go on day after day, who would be bored with the proceedings of the House Judiciary Committee, are turned on by the transcripts. The transcripts appeal to America's insatiable appetite for gossip about the famous and infamous.

In a nation that once doted on "Confidential Magazine," a country where gossip columnists thrive and where citizens flock to buy the latest copy of movie magazines that promise to tell the inside story of Hollywood's latest heart throb, the transcripts are a "can't miss" item. While at one level they are tedious, complex reading, at another level they provide an intimate glimpse of what goes on behind the closed doors of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. A gossip magazine might headline the transcripts: "What really happens when Dick, Bob and John are alone together." The expletives deleted in the transcripts just add to the fun and fantasy.

When Richard M. Nixon released the transcripts, he undoubtedly did not expect the beehived ladies to be purchasing them in droves; he underestimated the ingenuity of the American book publisher. But, more importantly, he underestimated the curiosity of Americans about the activities of celebrities. Call it the titillation factor, if you like. In a nation where prurient interest is exceeded only by the other side of the same coin—puritan morality—the titillation factor cannot be discounted.