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If you think the O.J. Simpson trial sparked a media frenzy, take a look back sixty years to the death of Charles Lindbergh, Jr., the 20 month old son of the famous aviator.

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Remembering the Media Frenzy Surrounding the Lindbergh Baby Trial

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Remembering the Media Frenzy Surrounding the Lindbergh Baby Trial

JACK FORD, co-host:

It's been called the trial of the century, but it's not the O.J. Simpson case. It was the trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann in New Jersey in 1935. Hauptmann stood accused of the kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh Jr., the 20-month-old son of the famous aviator. And if you think there's been too much press coverage of the Simpson case, take a look back at the trial that set the standard for media abuse.

(Film footage is shown of the Lindbergh baby.)

Mr. ROY CHESOSKI: Everyone felt that the Lindbergh baby was identifiable almost as their own child, and slaughtering a baby of America's most famous hero, at that time, and leaving him abandoned in some dense woods was an outrage to all of society. From the moment the crime was committed in March of 1932 to Bruno Hauptmann's execution in 1936, I'd say its impact was the trial of the century.

(Film footage is shown.)

FORD: It was 60 years ago this month that the other trial of the century took place in this courtroom in Flemington, New Jersey. Much like the Simpson case, the Lindbergh kidnapping trial involved murder, intrigue, and an American hero. And much like the Simpson case, the role of the media became an issue.

Mr. RON CHEKOSKI: Coverage by the media--sensational, excessive, inaccurate in many cases.

(Film footage is shown.)

FORD: True in both cases. And six decades later, the subject can still draw a crowd. Ron Chekoski is a former newsman and a Lindbergh historian. Is your sense that there was more interest and more fascination on the part of the public in the Lindbergh trial than there is on the part of the public now for the Simpson trial?

Mr. CHEKOSKI: I think there was--11 million words, 500 reporters, wire editors, newsreel cameramen. Some newspapers, during the course of the trial, at key days of testimony, actually they doubled their

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circulation on a given day.
(Film footage is shown.)
FORD: The trial became an event, and the press became part of that event.
(Film footage is shown.)
Mr. CHEKOSKI: The Walter Winchells, the gossip columnists. They were all here. The Hearst newspapers had a dominant effect as to what happened here in this courtroom. In fact, a chief defense council, Edward O'Riley, was hired and paid by William Randolph Hearst to represent Bruno Hauptmann.
FORD: The jury was sequestered across the street at the Union Hotel, and the jurors lived just one floor above the reporters.
Mr. CHEKOSKI: You had them yelling out odds as to guilt or innocence of Bruno Hauptmann. They actually kept a chalkboard on a daily basis where the odds changed.
They ran a gauntlet there every morning, and, in that context, the state police would form a human chain, the jurors would be escorted across Main Street, very often being abused verbally—people yelling epithets at the individuals in the jury and yelling such things as `Kill Hauptmann, kill Hauptmann, kill the German.'
(Film footage is shown.)
FORD: But the worst abuse by the press might have been the misuse of courtroom cameras. The rule `no cameras while the judge sits' was flagrantly violated.
Mr. CHEKOSKI: Some of the newsreel companies actually went ahead and showed the newsreel footage between the twin bills at the local Bijou Theater. The following Monday, the judge threw all cameras out of the courtroom, and the cameramen had to play--ply their trade outside.
(Film footage is shown.)
FORD: That abuse led to rules that kept cameras out of court for decades. But did those cameras contribute to courtroom theatrics? The prosecution's cross-examination of Hauptmann was a dramatic high point of the trial.
(Film footage is shown.)
FORD: Fifty years later, many of the same questions remain. But Ron Chekoski thinks we've come a long way.
Mr. CHEKOSKI: Instead of camera, the courtroom argument now comes back in--in the Simpson case, and the guidelines set for the use of camera in the courtroom add a certain element of restraint.
(Film footage is shown.)
FORD: Did the media excesses have an impact on the jury's verdict?
Mr. CHEKOSKI: Despite those outside excesses, procedurally, the court was run in a proper manner. (Film footage is shown)
FORD: Bruno Richard Hauptmann is convicted, albeit on circumstantial evidence--on very damning evidence, nonetheless.

(Film footage is shown.)

Mr. BRUNO RICHARD HAUPTMANN: I have told all I know, all the time.

FORD: Bruno Richard Hauptmann was executed on January 13th, 1936. Anna Hauptmann, his widow, fought all her life to clear his name. She died last October at the age of 95.