

The 500-Year Test: Will Today's Journalism Matter after Tomorrow?

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Abstract

Part of the media's social responsibility is to try, through their reporting, to secure social well-being for future generations. But this content analysis of 379 front-page newspaper articles found that more than 91 percent of them would fail to have any lasting relevance or impact on people's lives in the future. Fewer than 10 percent of all articles on the front pages of American daily newspapers have such long-term relevance, despite the fact that plenty of potential story topics rich in long-term significance seem to exist. When newspapers do cover such topics, they often fail to write about them in a way that would optimize the long-term relevance the article could offer society.

Introduction

What duty do journalists have to help society secure a healthy and prosperous future? It is widely accepted that journalists have 1) an obligation to the truth and 2) a social responsibility to look out for the best interests of society. Living up to those obligations should require journalists to be mindful of what will matter in the long term, but so much of what is in the news today has a very short "shelf life," meaning that the topic will cease to be relevant fairly quickly.

Not every issue of importance has a long-term component to it. Like the daily rituals of our personal lives such as waking up, getting dressed, and eating, the routine elements of civic life must be attended to. When the city changes a tax law, or the police investigate a suspicious fire, or a business announces hackers have stolen data, a journalist will cover the story because it matters. But despite being worthwhile now, such stories have little or no long-term relevance.

In addition to stories whose relevance lies in the present, there are other stories whose relevance lies in the future. Some are relevant both now and in the future. Others may seem to lack current relevance, but will become increasingly important over time. Many of these type of stories will impact the future as much or more than the present. But that doesn't mean journalists should wait until then to cover them. In many cases, the time for these stories is now, when they can help society plan and prepare for the future, rather than simply react to whatever develops.

Just as people aspire to achieve more in their lifetimes than just getting up, getting dressed and eating every day, the media should do more than just cover routine matters of immediate significance only. But the number of stories included in the news mix that will still matter 100, 200 or 500 years from now seems far smaller than the number of such topics that exist. They are passed over for stories with more immediacy-- stories that may matter today but not much beyond that. By neglecting to cover issues of long-term relevance, journalists are

abdicating their duty to look out for the best interests of society (their social responsibility) as well as to truth-telling (ignoring so much of importance misrepresents reality and, in effect, perpetuates a mistruth).

Imagine a historian 500 years from now glancing at the front pages of today's newspapers. Would that person be impressed with how forward thinking our media and our society were, or would he or she see myopic ancestors so mired in the unimportant details of the moment as to be blind to things that would have made the future better? How many of the news items from that 500 year old newspaper would cause a future historian to say, "Now that was an important issue. It mattered then, and it's easy, with 500 years of hindsight, to see how it continues to hold great importance today"? Instead, it seems that the passage of time might reveal that much of what the media busy themselves with today was irrelevant-- a waste of time both then and now.

It seems worthwhile to examine, in greater detail than casual observation can allow, how the media are doing when it comes to reporting issues of long-term relevance. Improvement is easier after a thorough diagnosis, and it seems likely that the mainstream media could be doing a much better job in this area (covering topics of long-term significance). The purpose of this paper is to systematically analyze American daily newspaper performance in the area of reporting news of long-term relevance.

Literature Review

No formal analysis of the kind proposed here has been performed before. Therefore, there is no existing research upon which this study can be said to build. In this way, it is a pioneering study. However, there has been much written about the media's social responsibility, and there have been several projects and initiatives designed to improve the function of the mass media that have, as part of their work, touched on themes that resonate with the idea that the media should be paying great attention to matters of long-term significance but perhaps are not.

One of the most applicable forays into explaining why journalists may not do so well in covering issues that will matter in the far future is from Phil Meyer, author of the book "Precision Journalism." In 2000, Meyer was part of a discussion sponsored by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism titled *Cracking the Code: Creating New Lifelines between Journalists and Academics*. During that conversation, Meyer said this:

"The newspaper business is now a business that doesn't want to go to much trouble to do stuff that doesn't have immediate payoff. And that's why they don't connect with academics because we think in the very long term and they think in the very near term and our horizons are just too different" (Meyer 2000). If journalists tend not to be very good long-range thinkers, as Meyer suggests, then perhaps that shortcoming can be overcome. In his 2011 book titled "Letters to a Young Journalist," William Freedman counsels a would-be reporter embarking on a career in journalism. He explores the difference between news with immediacy and news with long-term significance and says that reporting requires a kind of context that allows journalists to know and to share with their readers how the momentary significance of an event fits into the "larger flow" that ultimately leads to the future. (Freedman 2011). Without such an awareness,

journalists cannot possibly recognize what will matter in the far future or how to deal with it today in a way that will benefit later generations.

Tom Rosenstiel, currently the executive director of the American Press Institute and one of the most celebrated thinkers in the history of journalism, believes that as social media challenge and erode the mainstream media's agenda-setting effect and power to influence public discourse, it is more important than ever that they offer due diligence to matters of long-term significance. If not, someone else will and the media may find that they themselves, not just what they are covering, are irrelevant.

“...journalists [have] a responsibility to the LONG TERM health of communities, not just the news of the moment. This seems an especially important idea today. Journalists always should have focused on news that really mattered, as well as news that was momentarily interesting. But now, given that readers have so many choices, wasting people's time with too many incremental stories seems both ethically questionable and also economically,” (Rosenstiel, 2013).

In 2000, the Pew Center for Civic Journalism conducted a conference titled Roadmap 2005: National vs Regional Journalism Strategies for a Successful Future (Pew Center 2000). The purpose of the event was mostly to help ensure traditional mainstream media would survive potential threats from new media, but in thinking about what newspapers would have to do to remain competitive, several insights into better focus on issues of lasting importance were generated.

“Journalists are the purveyors of meaning, content and context amid all the noise out there, abilities that will be more valuable, more essential in the future than ever. Our society needs the help of journalists, not exclusively, but the help of journalists to lead us from the

Information Age to what we hope will become the Knowledge Age. And we'll all be better off then," said Gary Pruitt, then President and CEO The McClatchy Company (Pruitt 2000). "At the same time we're guiding and directing, newspapers are going to have to provide increasingly sophisticated journalism to set us apart from the ubiquitous, commodity headline stories that are everywhere. This places a premium on reporters and editors knowing what to focus on and how to get beneath the obvious and how to tell stories compellingly. As an industry, we've talked for some time about our relative advantage in providing perspective, analysis, context and interpretation. I think we're going to have to multiply that several times over in the coming years. As a result, I think reporters will generally tend to be more specialists in the future than generalists to meet that demand for more sophistication in reporting."

The landmark book by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel titled "The Elements of Journalism" resonates strongly with the idea that journalists have a duty to report events of long-term significance in a way that will maximize social good. The book basically elaborates nine "elements of journalism" produced during an exhaustive, two-year examination of what journalism is and ought to be (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001).

The first element suggests that "journalism's first obligation is to the truth." The ethical principle of truth-telling is about a lot more than not lying. It is about presenting an accurate picture of current and future reality. No picture can be accurate if it is not complete, and so journalists have an obligation to tell their readers not only about what matters today, but what will matter tomorrow and beyond. With so many important long range issues hinging on policy decisions being made today, journalists are not living up to their obligation to tell the truth if they act as if the only issues that matter are those that will come to fruition within the next fiscal year or the next election cycle.

In addition to truth, Kovach and Rosenstiel insist that journalism's first loyalty is to citizens. Citizens (and by extension society) should exert a greater influence on a journalist's performance than politicians or industry officials, both of whom tend to keep journalists tasked with story topics that lack long-term relevance for citizens (society) in the future.

Also, Kovach and Rosenstiel assert that journalism must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant. Journalism "must balance what readers know they want with what they cannot anticipate but need.... a journalism overwhelmed by trivia and false significance ultimately engenders a trivial society." Kovach and Rosenstiel's comment that the media can create a trivial society by emphasizing the wrong things in their coverage underscores the importance of covering issues that will matter greatly in the long term, even if those issues seem to have little impact on right now. Kovach and Rosenstiel assert that "the primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing" (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001, p. 17)

The most recent "State of the Media" report from the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism suggests that as the depth and long-term relevance of reporting continues to decline, the media's financial woes only grow:

"Signs of the shrinking reporting power are documented throughout this year's report. Estimates for newspaper newsroom cutbacks in 2012 put the industry down 30 percent since its peak in 2000 and below 40,000 full-time professional employees for the first time since 1978. In local TV, our [special content report](#) reveals, sports, weather and traffic now account on average for 40 percent of the content produced on the newscasts studied while story lengths shrink. On CNN, the cable channel that has branded itself around deep reporting, produced story packages were cut nearly in half from 2007 to 2012," (Pew Project, 2013).

Perhaps cutting quality reporting of issues that matter is the cause of, not the solution for, the media's pain. There is evidence that Americans want something more than the media have been delivering—something of substance and long-term relevance. In 1995, the Harwood Group conducted a series of 15 focus groups into people's opinions regarding politics and the media. The findings, published by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, suggest Americans aren't really satisfied with a steady diet of media content that has absolutely no long-term relevance to their future or that of society.

“Americans now deeply lament the state of the union. They are frustrated that the nation has not made more progress on its concerns, exasperated that America has not changed how it addresses its common challenges... People do not believe that America currently has the will and the capacity to tackle the tough questions that confound the nation... They believe that the nation is heading seriously off course and has been for some time. These feelings are not a momentary or passing fad but emerge from day-to-day experiences. They are based on Americans' growing fear that their aspirations will be dashed and that their worst nightmares will become reality... They say that leadership is nowhere to be found. They see politicians engulfed by an obsession to win re-election and make personal gains rather than serve the public. They argue that news media focus too much on dirt and gossip, and that they have abandoned their public role to inform people and to act as truth tellers... People question whether political leaders, news media, business leaders and citizens themselves have the will to act at all, let alone to put our nation back on course. One of the realities that frighten Americans today is their concern about whether the nation can address its challenges given current conditions of American public life... The news media are enamored with conflict and sensationalism, and journalists seem to have lost sight of their mission to inform,” (Pew Center, 1995).

As evidenced by the Pew Center report titled America's Struggle Within, people fear that the future will turn out badly, and they feel that the media are not doing enough to help ensure a healthy and prosperous tomorrow. It seems unlikely that such concerns will be remedied if the media do not embrace a long-term vision of their social responsibility and begin reporting on issues of long-term relevance. Given the direction of the literature, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: In American daily newspapers, issues without long-term relevance will outnumber issues with long-term relevance.

Hypothesis 2: In American daily newspapers, many issues with long-term relevance that could have been covered will fail to be reported.

Methodology

This content analysis of American daily newspapers examined the long-term relevance of stories on the front pages of 10 daily newspapers. The front page is where editors traditionally place the most important stories of the day, which would include stories thought to be of great long-term relevance. To avoid sampling error that might result if all the newspapers analyzed came from the same general region, the sample was stratified to tap papers from the Northeast, South, Midwest and Western United States. Within those regions, the individual papers to be sampled were selected randomly from all papers published in that region.

The decision to analyze 10 newspapers was made because that number would allow multiple (two or three) papers to be analyzed from each region without having the analysis become too burdensome as it might have been had dozens or hundreds of papers been analyzed. The following newspapers were selected for inclusion in the content analysis: from the Northeast, the Bangor (Maine) Daily News and the Times Union (Albany, N.Y.); from the South, the Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle, the Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader, and the Sun-Herald (Biloxi, Miss.); from the Midwest, the Fort Wayne (Ind.) News-Sentinel and the Sioux City (Iowa) Journal; and from the West, The Los Angeles Times, The Columbian (Vancouver, Wash.) and the Casper (Wyo.) Star-Tribune.

The sampling period was selected to coincide with a time of relative normalcy, devoid of events that might monopolize the news hole and shut out stories that would otherwise appear on the front page. Data collection began in early November 2013, after the government shutdown and the Syrian chemical weapons stories had faded from the spotlight. The period of time from early November through early December 2013 was not one of those periods of media obsession

with a single story, and therefore should have been a good opportunity to see undistracted coverage on a range of important issues.

The analysis included all front page stories from the 10 newspapers on 10 separate dates: Nov. 5, 8, 13, 15, 18, 20, 22, 25, Dec. 2 and 4. Three trained coders and twelve journalism students trained to administer this methodology conducted the analysis as part of a class project. Analysis proceeded in three steps.

First, the three coders reviewed all front page stories from the 10 newspapers on the 10 dates indicated. The stories, 379 in all, were coded into two categories: 1) those that likely will have or likely will have had significance in the lives of people living 500 years from now and 2) those that likely will become irrelevant within 500 years. The stories that seemed likely to become irrelevant within 500 years were discarded, and the stories identified as having potential for long-term relevance were labeled as data set one.

Second, the three trained coders searched a variety of alternative news sites from the same time period (Nov. 5-Dec. 4) for stories exhibiting great long-term relevance. Stories with promise of long-term relevance from the alternative sites were labeled data set two and were then combined with data set one.

Third, the 12 journalism students ranked the stories from the combined data sets in order of the strength of their long-term relevance. The story believed to offer the greatest long-term relevance was ranked first and the story with the weakest long-term relevance was ranked last. Keep in mind that all of the stories being ranked had been determined to have some degree of long-term relevance. Each of the 12 students ranked the stories independently, and then their rankings were averaged. The articles were stripped of bylines and other identifiers, and the students didn't know which articles were from which data set.

Results/Discussion

A total of 379 newspaper articles were analyzed from the front pages of 10 American daily newspapers on 10 days from Nov. 5 - Dec. 4, 2013. Of these, coders determined with 96 percent inter-rater reliability that 346 would likely have no impact on the lives of people living 500 years from now. The remaining 33 articles, or about 8.7 percent of all front page stories, were about topics that could have an impact on the lives of people living 500 years in the future—thus exhibiting long-term relevance.

Coders also located an additional 30 articles from alternative news sources during the same sampling period that were not covered by the newspapers being analyzed but that passed the 500-year test (exhibited the promise of long-term relevance). These additional 30 articles were combined with the 33 articles of long-term relevance found in the 10 newspapers being analyzed.

The combined data set of 63 articles was then independently ranked by 12 journalism students trained in this study's methodology. The rankings were based on the relative strength of the long-term relevance of the articles, with the article of greatest long-term relevance being ranked first and the article with the least long-term relevance being ranked 63rd (all 63 stories had been determined by the coders to have some degree of long-term relevance). The independent rankings of the 12 students were then averaged to calculate the final rankings for the articles. The final (averaged) rankings are shown in the following table:

TABLE 1. Ranking of News Articles Exhibiting Long-term Relevance

HEADLINE	SOURCE, DATE
1 *What 11 billion people mean for Earth	Livescience 11-19
2 *Russian fireball fallout: Huge asteroid numbers raise stakes of impact threat	Science 11-1
3 *Human health depends on a healthy environment	Scientific American 11-25
4 *Africa risks losing 20 percent of elephants in 10 years	AFP 12-1
5 *Aiming for truly sustainable buildings	NYT 11-5
6 *Climate change seen posing risk to food supplies	NYT 11-5
7 *Benefits of bees greater than thought	AFP 12-4
8 *Five modern diseases grown by factory farming	Livescience 11-7
9 *Showdown looms for lucrative tuna industry	AFP 12-1
10 *Ethiopia spearheads green energy	AFP 12-4
11 *The future of electricity grids: distributed power	WSU 11-11
12 *Argentina grapples with most polluted river	AP 12-4
13 *Graphene superconductors ready for EV energy	Technology Review 11-12
14 * Bloomberg wants restaurants to compost	NYT 11-22
15 *Five places already feeling effects of climate change	Livescience 11-22
16 *Seven iconic animals humans are driving to extinction	Livescience 11-25
17 Shrimp fishery shut down for 2014, Gulf of Maine stock has collapsed	Bangor Daily News 12-4
18 Testing trash, half could be recycled, composted	Casper Star Tribune 11-20
19 Putting a lid on Styrofoam	Albany Times Union 11-13
20 *Raise water spending	Reuters 12-4
21 *Effects of warming seen as climate talks open in Warsaw	Reuters 11-12
22 *Climate talks in trouble as green groups walk out	AFP 11-21
23 *Climate talks drag on without clarity on targets	AP 11-20
24 *Finding the Higgs leads to more puzzles	NYT 11-4
25 *Brightest explosion ever seen in the universe defies astronomy theories	Science 11-21
26 *Slashing fossil fuels comes with a price	NPR 12-2
27 Fracking under fire	Casper Star Tribune 11-8
28 *China to launch two new carbon trading exchanges	Reuters 11-25
29 *Gas injection triggered Texas earthquakes	Livescience 11-7
30 *Evolution debate again engulfs Texas board of education	
31 Utilities director leads way for future of water	Ft. Wayne Journal Gazette 12-2
32 2014 decisions likely on Yellowstone basin water	Casper Star Tribune 12-6
33 Tiny particles may upend universe, 28 rare neutrinos found	LA Times 11-22
34 Scallop conservation plan paying off, 2012 sees record average price	Bangor Daily News 11-25
35 Turning freeway into park?	LA Times 11-20
36 Pentagon's green push has price tag	LA Times 11-18
37 Crawling the streets	LA Times 11-25
38 Local food push healthy all around	LA Times 11-25
39 Deal in works in Iran nuclear talks	LA Times 11-8
40 Iranian nuclear deal examined	Ft. Wayne Journal Gazette 11-25
41 Legislature to debate full slate of energy bills	Bangor Daily News 11-18
42 Proposed oil terminal fuels concern about toxic air in Fruit Valley	The Columbian 11-15
43 DMR reviewing comments on offshore drilling	Biloxi Sun-Herald 11-20
44 FDA moves to ban trans-fat	LA Times, Ft. Wayne Journal
Gazette, Albany Times Union, The Columbian 11-8	
45 FERC sues Lincoln mill, Portland energy firm	Bangor Daily News 12-4
46 Coast poverty on the rise	Biloxi Sun-Herald 11-18
47 Poland's economy falls from pedestal	LA Times 11-13
48 Jobs report key part of economic outlook	The Columbian 12-6
49 More Maine kids in poverty	Bangor Daily News 11-22
50 Increase in number of homeless	Bangor Daily News 11-22
51 LAPD ranks dwindle as few apply	LA Times 12-4

52 Senate discusses gay rights protection	Ft. Wayne Journal Gazette 11-8
53 Constitution need not ban gay union, mayors say	Fort Wayne Journal Gazette 12-4
54 Recount looms over \$15 wage initiative	The Columbian 11-18
55 Study: Children's fitness declining	Ft. Wayne Journal Gazette 11-20
56 Wyoming has room to improve	Casper Star Tribune 11-8
57 US test scores rise slightly in reading, math	Lexington Herald-Leader 11-8
58 *China easing one-child policy	USA Today 11-15
59 *Odebrecht plans ethane cracker, polyethylene plant	11-14
60 LaPage sees upside to warming	Bangor Daily News 12-6
61 *US air pollution authority faces supreme court test	Reuters 11-24
62 *Two companies teaming up to tackle Monsanto	11-24
63 Get your fill	Biloxi Sun-Herald 12-4

*Articles from data set two.

Hypothesis 1 was supported. About 8.7 percent of the stories found on the front pages of the newspapers sampled were about topics likely to have long-term relevance. More than 91 percent of front-page stories will have no long-term relevance. As such, stories without long-term relevance outnumber stories with long-term relevance by a greater than 10:1 margin.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported. Coders browsing alternative news sites easily found an additional 30 articles with long-term relevance that were overlooked by all 10 of the newspapers analyzed for this study.

Unhypothesized finding: What's more, the alternatively sourced articles ranked much higher than the sampled newspaper articles on the strength of their long-term relevance. The top 16 articles and 26 of the top 30 in terms of strength of long-term relevance were from the additional sources. With only eight exceptions, the articles from data set one and data set two (the newspaper and alternative articles, respectively) basically sorted themselves out again after having been combined for the ranking process. Keep in mind that the articles had been stripped of bylines and any other identifying information that could have shown the students doing the ranking where the articles were generated. The noticeably higher rankings of the alternatively sourced articles seemed to be a function of both what the articles were about as well as how the topics were covered. Further study, perhaps in the form of a framing analysis, might reveal the

specific processes contributing to the effect leading to the pronounced trend observed in the rankings.

Top Articles

The first two articles in the rankings were overwhelmingly (unanimously) ranked as having the greatest long-term relevance of all the 63 articles found. “What 11 Billion People Mean for Earth” was a series of investigative reports looking at the impact of human overpopulation on a variety of resources. It paints an alarming picture of the future if humans cannot achieve sustainability in a number of areas, but especially in reversing overpopulation. The students ranking the articles felt this article would be seen as having been extremely relevant to anyone living 500 years from now. In fact, whether humans exist at all in 500 years could depend a great deal on the outcome of the topics addressed in this report.

“Russian Fireball Fallout: Huge asteroid numbers raise stakes of impact threat” detailed admissions from scientists that there are a lot of asteroids capable of doing tremendous damage to the Earth that no one knows about. Most of these objects are uncharted, and it is only a matter of time before one enters a collision course with the Earth. According to the article, humanity possesses the means to protect itself from such a threat but does not seem sufficiently motivated to do so. If our current state of unpreparedness remains unchanged, it would be too late to mount a defense once such an object was detected. Again, the students doing the rankings believed the subject matter of this article could be extremely relevant to people living sometime in the next 500 years.

Bottom Articles

Students said that many of the articles winding up near the bottom of the rankings were only there because of HOW they were written. In many cases, the topics could have been done in

such a way as to make them much more relevant in the future, but as they were written, the articles failed to muster much of long-term significance. For instance, “China easing one-child policy,” which was ranked 58, could have rivaled the number one article if it tackled the human overpopulation issue. Doing so should have been easy, given that China’s one-child policy is a population control measure. Instead, the article managed to talk about the political and economic implications of the change without substantively addressing the overpopulation issue.

Another example from the bottom is “Odebrecht plans ethane cracker, polyethylene plant,” an article that discusses a massive processing plant being built to use ethane from the Marcellus and Utica shale to produce polyethylene, which is used to make plastic. The article makes no mention of the great concern many scientists have about the mounting effects of plastic waste on land and in the Earth’s water. Ramping up plastic production is a prospect that will have tremendous relevance for people living 500 years from now, but the article did not reveal that dimension of the story.

Conclusion

This results of this study suggest that most American daily newspapers are probably not covering issues of long-term relevance as well as they should. These results confirm much of the literature, which shows cynicism of the media's performance in this area.

Specifically, newspapers often place irrelevant or nearly irrelevant stories ahead of those that could be a significant force for much-needed social change. Doing so is an abdication of the media's truth-telling and social responsibility roles. Journalists could do a better job of helping to ensure a healthy and prosperous future if they would report issues of long-term relevance whenever and wherever those issues exist. Under the current system of story selection and reporting methods, many opportunities to do so are passed over.

Also, this study suggests that when topics having potential long-term relevance are covered, most American daily newspapers probably do not address the subject matter in a way that thoroughly draws out the potential long-term relevance. Too often, when a story topic offers the opportunity to have a valuable "conversation" with audiences about matters of long-term significance, journalists drop the ball and instead present only worthless "small talk."

The key to improving journalism's long-term relevance lies both in changing what the media cover and how they cover it. To do so, journalists need to give more consideration to the future and what might be needed to ensure that it is healthy and prosperous.

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