



2020

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Recommended Citation

Pekar, Bailey Elaine (2020) "Extra! Extra! Read All About It: Cultural Heritage Conservation in The Media," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 33.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/33>

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Extra! Extra! Read All About It: Cultural Heritage Conservation in the Media

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Abstract

In order to understand how and why media covers cultural heritage science, my research mentor Patti Wolter, Helen Gurley Brown Magazine Professor, and I studied three years of news coverage of heritage science and determined that coverage depends on different variables about the content of the story. This paper analyzes art conservation science in the media through literature review of consumer media, understanding how these topics appear within the news cycle. We collected and analyzed more than 1,000 news articles looking specifically at their content, date, context of publication, and word count. The publications that produced these articles were also analyzed for insight into the intended audience of the articles.

In general, we found that articles that included elements that connected the news to a famous name, a new discovery, the process of conservation itself, or a technological advancement typically garnered the highest amount of media attention. Attention here is defined by the number of separate articles written for a variety of news outlets about the same subject. In addition, timelines that demonstrate when a story first breaks and when many consumer news publications pick up on the story suggests that institutional press releases play an important role in drawing attention to a new topic. Beyond a good press release, the results of this study suggest that there are several other criteria upon which media focus, and a combination of a number of these criteria are what can gain a story a lot of attention.

Keywords: Arts and Humanities, Communications, History, History, Journalism Studies

Introduction

In the age of the 24-hour news cycle, the deluge of information can be overwhelming and difficult to understand. For scientists working in art conservation, media coverage in mainstream press as opposed to just academic journalists lauding their work can be the key to more funding for future research, more attention from the scientific community, and a greater awareness as a whole in the field of art history and conservation. However, for many scientists, the way the news cycle and publications in the media pick and choose stories to write about is a mystery.

Our ultimate goal in studying which stories about art conservation have made news in the recent past is to be able to inform how to frame topics for better media dissemination in the future. As far as story content, we hypothesized that we would see a lot of articles tagged with “Famous Artist” and “Discovery,” because of our perception that name recognition of an artist is important to the relevance of a story as well as the element of timeliness included in the “Discovery” tag. In addition, we also hypothesized that we would be tracking how stories moved from academic publications (University Press, Museum Press, Research Journal) to the niche, art-focused publications (Industry/Trade), and then finally breaking through to the mass media (Consumer publications). For our purposes here, the term “story” refers to the intangible happenings in the scientific world, while the term “article” refers to the written pieces that come from news publications.

Methods

In our research, we used Google to search for articles about the topic of art conservation science published between January 2016 and April 2019, analyzing these articles for evidence of larger trends. These articles were found by using the search terms “art conservation,” “art restoration,” and “cultural heritage conservation,” which produced many overlapping results. The articles we were searching for were the ones that specifically dealt with the intersection of art and science. In total, we analyzed 1,339 pieces of media. Of this, 1,308 were written articles, 17 were videos, and 14 were audio pieces, with a primary focus on the written articles. Each piece of media was assigned a number of tags (up to 10) describing the content within and was also given a separate tag to connect it to a larger story, if applicable. The content tags are as follows: Famous Artist, Exhibition, Event, Discovery, Pure Process, Conservator Profile, Process, Local Art, Finance, and Tech/Digital.

The “Famous Artist” tag describes a story that is related to a famous artist, work of art, or well-known museum. Our criteria for what constituted fame emphasized the name recognition that even someone with minimal knowledge of art would know and recognize, like Vincent van Gogh or Leonardo da Vinci. “Exhibition” describes a new exhibition of recently restored work or other elements related to the display of a work. “Event” describes a catastrophic event such as a fire or flood that has damaged some work of art or the science around conserving and restoring such damaged objects. The “Discovery” tag refers to a discovery derived from scientific research work in the field of art conservation. The “Pure Process” tag specifically refers to the few stories focused only on the conservation process and its visual appeal. “Conservator Profile” describes a profile written or filmed about the conservator completing the conservation of a work of art. The “Process” tag, one of the most frequently used, includes the elements of the story related to the

scientific and technical process of conservation. The “Local Art” tag describes the conservation of art that is culturally significant to a community, such as a mural or a building, and is typically written either from the perspective of a community member or for the community as a whole. “Finance” refers to news about financially significant donations or grants to a program of conservation. “Tech/Digital” refers mainly to technological breakthroughs from the scientific aspect of conservation. Although there is some overlap with the Discovery tag, the point of differentiation is the focus on the development of a technology for use in conservation.

In addition, the word count of each article was recorded, as well as the publication that published the article. The publication was also categorized into one of seven categories that describe its intended audience: Industry/Trade, Research Journals, University Press, Museum Press, Consumer Local, Consumer National, and Consumer International. One interesting area of observation was how the different categories of publishers interacted with the same story as seen on a timeline. Our conclusions here are drawn from looking at the number of articles published about a specific story, and by whom. Other metrics such as the number of views, clicks, or time spent on an article were not studied here.

Results

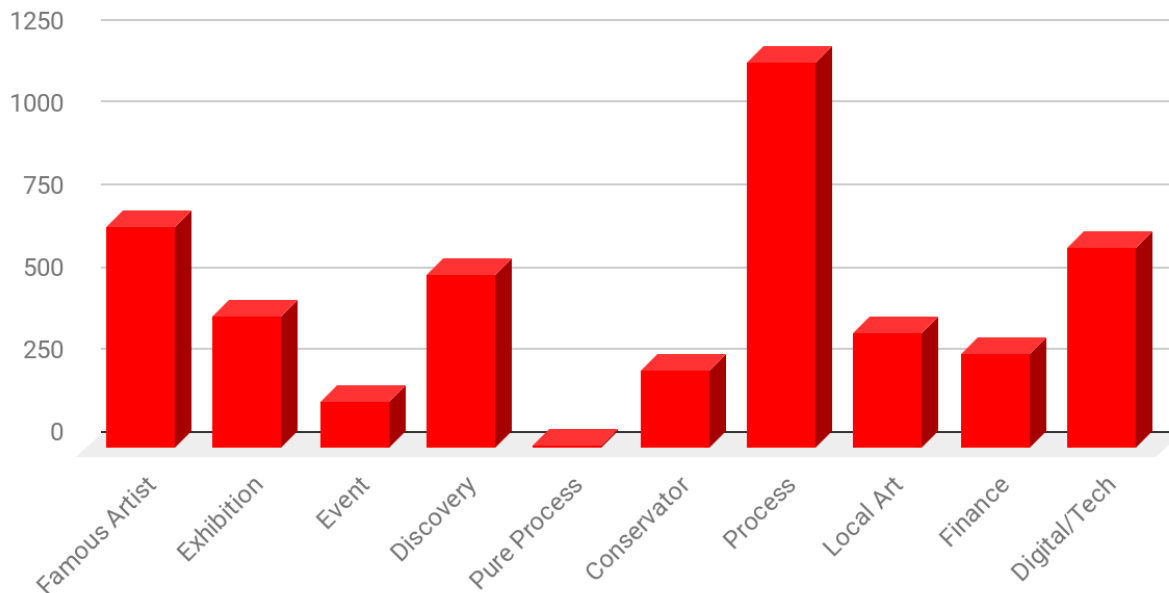
Of the 1,339 pieces of media we analyzed, 768 (about 57 %) of them were connected to a larger story. Overall, 107 of these stories were recorded, with a calculated average of seven articles per story, which is slightly skewed higher than it should be due to extreme outliers at the high end. For example, the story about Picasso Blue Period painting, to be discussed more in-depth later, was written about in 62 articles. The top six stories account for 277 articles, which is 36% of all the articles that fit under a story. The data can be more accurately described using the median and the mode, which is 3 and 2, respectively. This emphasizes how the majority of stories about

art conservation receive relatively little attention. The 53 stories with more than 3 articles each represent only 659 articles of the 1,339 in total, or a little under 50 percent.

The top six stories, each of which had more than 30 articles written about them, shared similar content tags. The most prominent of these are “Process,” “Famous Artist,” “Digital/Tech,” and “Discovery.” This is unsurprising, especially considering our initial hypothesis that articles written involving famous names such as Picasso would be more widely circulated. It also comes as no surprise that stories about conservation include information about the process of conservation, which is the most popular tag by far (89.6 percent of all articles are tagged this way). Beyond these four main tags, the next most frequently applied was “Exhibition,” which typically described a recently conserved piece of art that was on display. In some cases, the written article could be considered a form of promotional material for the exhibition in question.

While we initially hypothesized that more niche publications would be the first to report on any given story, the data we have collected has not proven this exclusively. The data has consistently shown that it is not quite this simple for every story, and no two stories are exactly alike in their “lifetime.” There are simply far too many variables at play to assert with complete confidence what causes a story to go viral. However, there are patterns that we have noticed that can begin to explain the successes of some stories in general terms and we have also gone in-depth with three case studies about some of the larger stories and publications.

Content Tag Usage Out of 1308 Total Articles



Case Study 1: NU Picasso Blue

On Saturday, February 17, 2018, during the AAAS Conference, a Northwestern University research team announced a discovery they had made while studying a painting from Pablo Picasso’s Blue Period.¹ Within 12 hours, more than a dozen publications ran an article about the discovery. Many of the first to publish were science-focused publications offering live coverage of the conference, such as *Science Magazine* (Industry/Trade)² and *Live Science* (Industry/Trade).³ In addition to this, consumer news source *The Guardian* (Consumer National)⁴ also published an article within hours of the announcement. By Monday, February 19,

¹Megan Fellman, “Research Team Uncovers Hidden Details in Picasso Blue Period Painting,” (Evanston: Northwestern Now, 2018) <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2018/february/research-team-uncovers-hidden-details-in-picasso-blue-period-painting/>

² <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/02/picasso-painted-over-another-artist-s-work-and-then-over-his-own-new-imaging-reveals>

³ <https://www.livescience.com/61796-hidden-artwork-beneath-picasso-painting.html>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/17/artwork-hidden-under-picasso-painting-revealed-by-x-ray>

articles about the discovery were being published by the likes of the *USA Today Network* (Consumer Local),⁵ *Fox News* (Consumer National),⁶ and *Smithsonian* (Consumer International).⁷ *The New York Times* published their article on Tuesday, February 20,⁸ the same day that the trade presses caught up, *Artsy.net* (Industry/Trade)⁹ and *Arthive* (Industry/Trade).¹⁰

The path this story took in the news cycle did not follow our initial hypothesis. Instead, it shows that for science stories, the launching point is niche science media and that mass consumer media pay attention to science press. The content tags that apply to this story and its articles are Famous Artist, Discovery, Process, and Tech/Digital, which were the main frames this story was told through various articles. This story was most likely deemed so newsworthy because it involved the combination of a famous, recognizable name (Pablo Picasso) and the timeliness of a new discovery that had just been announced, not to mention the legitimizing effect of the news breaking at the AAAS event.

Case Study 2: Van Gogh's Sunflowers

Although fewer articles were written about this story than the one about Picasso, the pattern that the timeline shows is interesting. On March 2, 2018, a research team from the University of Antwerp published the results of their study about the pigments used in Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" painting in the journal *Angewandte Chemie*.¹¹ Ten days later, *Chemistry*

⁵ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/science/2018/02/19/hidden-details-revealed-under-picasso-blue-period-painting/351633002/>

⁶ <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/picasso-masterpiece-reveals-lost-painting-hidden-details>

⁷ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/researchers-uncover-hidden-details-beneath-picasso-painting-180968204/>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/science/picasso-blue-period-scans.html>

⁹ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-hidden-details-uncovered-beneath-surface-blue-period-picasso>

¹⁰ <https://arthive.com/news/3207~Lost-landscape-painting-was-found-beneath-Picassos-masterpiece>

¹¹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/anie.201713293>

and *Engineering News* (Industry/Trade)¹² published a short article about the discovery. However, it was not until the University of Antwerp published their own press release about the discovery almost two months later on May 29, 2018, that consumer media picked up the story, starting with French-language publication *RTBF* (Consumer National)¹³ and *The Guardian* (Consumer International).¹⁴ On June 1, 2018, *The New York Times* (Consumer International),¹⁵ *Artnet* (Industry/Trade),¹⁶ and *Artforum* (Industry/Trade)¹⁷ published their articles as well.

The large delay between the results of the study being published and when it hit mainstream media seems to demonstrate the necessity of institutional press releases as the crucial first step in the life of a consumer news source. Even though one publication, *Chemistry and Engineering News*, picked up the story from the original research journal, nothing else was published before the university issued a press release, after which half a dozen articles were published within 48 hours. The content tags that apply to this story, much like the Picasso story, are Famous Artist, Discovery, and Process. After the press release, this story was most likely deemed newsworthy because of the connection between the Famous Artist (Vincent Van Gogh) and the discovery about one of his more famous paintings, “Sunflowers.”

These case studies represent just two of the dozens of stories that circulated through media publications. In general, these trends suggest a connection between the initial press release and the subsequent timing of articles written afterwards. They also shed a little light on the “lifetime” of a story, from its “birth,” usually through a press release or the likes, to its “death,”

¹² <https://cen.acs.org/articles/96/i11/Method-identifies-subtypes-yellow-pigment.html>

¹³ https://www.rtf.be/info/medias/detail_une-nouvelle-methode-de-scan-leve-le-voile-sur-les-couleurs-des-tournesols-de-van-gogh?id=9930023

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/may/31/van-goghs-sunflowers-are-wilting-as-yellow-paint-fades-to-brown>

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/arts/design/van-gogh-yellow-sunflowers.html>

¹⁶ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/van-gogh-sunflower-discoloration-1296050>

¹⁷ <https://www.artforum.com/news/petals-van-goghs-sunflowers-have-begun-wilt-researchers-say-75656>

when no more new articles are published. Many story lifetimes overlap and engage with one another as similar themes are rehashed when new discoveries are made. For example, a more recent study (January 2019) on Van Gogh's "Sunflowers," based upon the findings of the first, had led to the Van Gogh Museum deciding that "Sunflowers" should no longer travel outside of the museum. This story, similar to the first, began with a press release, and spread to consumer news soon after.

Results: Publications

In total, all 1,308 written articles corresponded to one of 677 different publications. 491 of these publications, a whopping 72.5 percent, only published one article during this time period. Of the remaining 27.5 percent of publications, the average number of articles per publication is 4, and the mode is 2. Of the top six publishers of written articles, the first three (*The Art Newspaper*, *Artnet*, and *Hyperallergic*) are categorized as Industry/Trade, and the next three are categorized as Consumer International (*The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The BBC*).

The Art Newspaper is both an online and print publication that focuses its attention on the international art world, which, according to their website, has a readership of over 50,000.¹⁸ *Artnet*, while also serving as an art auction website, also has a robust news section that claims "hundreds of thousands" of newsletter subscribers.¹⁹ *Hyperallergic*, which calls itself "a forum for playful, serious, and radical perspectives on art and culture in the world today," claims 123,000 newsletter subscribers.²⁰ *The New York Times*, an internationally circulated newspaper

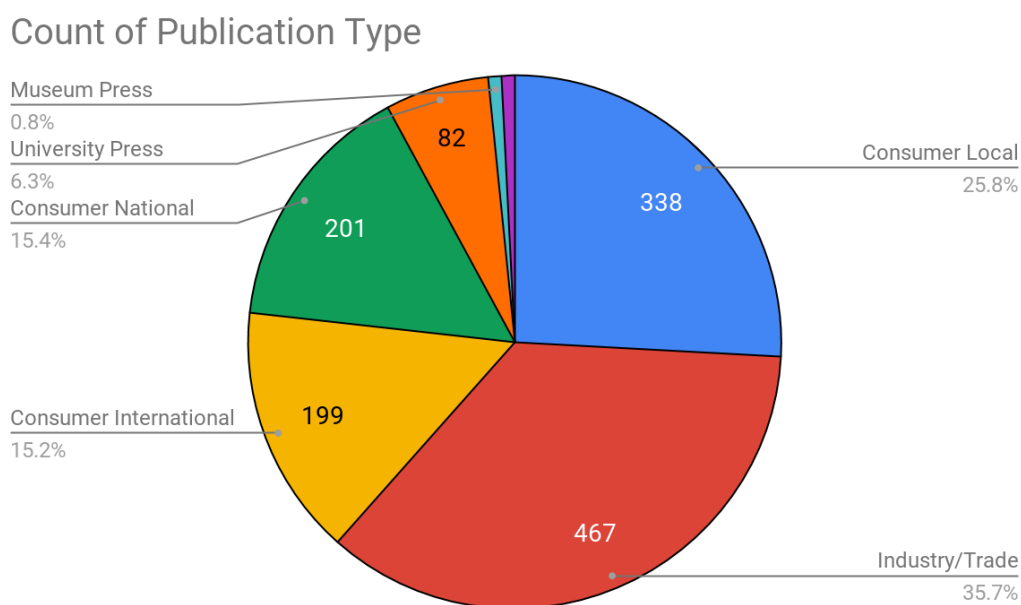
¹⁸ <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/information/advertise>

¹⁹ <http://www.artnet.com/advertising/>

²⁰ <https://hyperallergic.com/about/>

and digital news source, claims over 78 million unique visitors to their website per month.²¹ *The Guardian*, a UK-based news source, claims 24.9 million visitors per month.²² *The BBC*, by far the largest and most widely circulated of the six, claims visits from 95 million unique browsers per month.²³

Together, these six publishers account for about 18 percent of all articles published. The total spread for publication type is as follows:



It comes as no surprise that Industry/Trade publications make up about 35 percent of all publications. The most prolific three publications in this category are *The Art Newspaper*, *Artnet*, and *Hyperallergic*, which all publish articles mainly about news in the art world. Therefore, it is not hard to assume that the audience is also interested in art conservation. However, the second-largest category, Consumer Local, was much more difficult to predict.

²¹ <https://nytmediakit.com/index.php?p=digital>

²² <https://advertising.theguardian.com/advertising>

²³ <https://www.bbcglobalnews.com/>

Our hypothesis was based on the idea that art conservation stories originated with publications in the Industry/Trade category and then trickled down through the Consumer media, with Local, of course, being the last and therefore the least prolific category. What the data seems to suggest, however, is slightly different. With almost a quarter of the articles published coming from local news sources, many of these articles are covering local art conservation, such as the removal for the conservation of iconic public art,²⁴ the conservation of a mural with cultural significance,²⁵ or even an article about a local art conservation business restoring artwork in a local church.²⁶ The common thread throughout these stories is community, or the sense that this art is significant to the community as a whole, which explains its role in that specific location. For that reason, most of these stories stay local and do not move up the chain to national or international levels of coverage.

Case Study 3: *The Art Newspaper* and *The New York Times*

The Art Newspaper (Industry/Trade) and *The New York Times* (Consumer International) were both the most prolific publishers within their respective categories. As shown in the data gathered for this study, *The Art Newspaper* published the greatest number of articles overall, while the *NYT* (*The New York Times*) was fourth in that list, behind two other Industry/Trade publishers. *The Art Newspaper* published a total of 70 articles, while the *NYT* published 33. In comparing the two publications, a few interesting trends come to light.

While 51 percent of the *NYT*'s articles published connected to a larger story in the media cycle, only 27 percent of *The Art Newspaper*'s stories did. This suggests that *The Art*

²⁴ <https://thephilanews.com/iconic-love-sculpture-temporarily-removed-conservation-51889.htm>

²⁵ https://laist.com/2019/02/20/southwest_museum_mural_getting_restored.php

²⁶ <https://onmilwaukee.com/ent/articles/trinity-artwork-restoration.html>

Newspaper's priority was presenting articles that were of interest to the art community specifically, rather than covering every single story that hit the mainstream news as well. One potential source of evidence for this is shown in the tag spread. Only 21 percent of *The Art Newspaper's* articles were tagged with Discovery. More than twice that many (45 percent) of the *NYT's* articles were tagged this way. Conversely, and by a much smaller margin, *The Art Newspaper* also tended to publish more articles tagged with Finance, whether related to auction or donation. 21 percent of their articles were tagged with Finance while only 9 percent of the *NYT's* articles were. However, one key similarity between the two is that they had a similarly high percentage of articles tagged with Famous Artist and Process. Taken as an average, 69 percent of their articles were tagged with Famous Artist and 96 percent were tagged with Process, which further defines those two tags as making an art conservation story newsworthy.

In addition, the *NYT* consistently published longer articles than *The Art Newspaper*; almost half of their articles were longer than 1,000 words in length (45percent), while only about a tenth of *The Art Newspaper's* articles were (9.8 percent). *The Art Newspaper* tended to publish shorter (average word count of 585), information-dense news releases, rather than long form pieces (average word count of 937) that the *NYT* seemed to favor.

Conclusions

As a result of our data collection, we have been able to surmise a few general conclusions about the field. First, merely receiving coverage from trade press and research journals do not guarantee that consumer news media will pick up the story. Typically, a press release from the university or museum are what is required for the story to make this jump. For example, the Van Gogh Museum's use of newsletters and press releases often lead to many of their discoveries making news, such as their in-depth study into his *Sunflowers*. Following the study published in

Angewandte Chemie, the museum published a press release at the beginning of the painting's conservation in January 2019, and again at the end when they posted an update and announced that it would no longer travel outside of Amsterdam.²⁷ Here we see that, at each step, the museum is releasing well-produced updates that keep the story in the news cycle by way of new articles written to share the new information. This example demonstrates the importance of press releases in gaining news attention.

Another conclusion we have drawn is a recognition of the value in defining stories around the famous artist or work as well as detailing the process of conservation itself, such as the current conservation of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* happening at the Rijksmuseum. The combination of such a high-profile work from a very famous artist, plus the curiosity about restoring a painting that hasn't been touched since the 1970s, makes this story one that keeps popping up in the news cycle. Although the restoration process has barely begun, 34 articles have already been published discussing the conservators' plans (Process) and the contextual importance of Rembrandt (Famous Artist). Stories like this that emphasize these elements tend to receive more coverage (again, as quantified by the number of articles published).

The downside of this focus on these elements is that there are comparatively few articles in the consumer media about the independent value of the field of art conservation. Most articles instead emphasize the value of a specific piece of work framed by the conservation work being done. Indeed, the scientific aspect of many of these stories is overshadowed in written articles by focus placed on other aspects: the impact, the technology, the cost. Speaking further about Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, for example, when the news broke that the pigments Van Gogh used were disintegrating, most of the consumer media focused on how the pigments were transforming

²⁷ <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/exhibition-van-gogh-and-the-sunflowers/conservation-treatment-sunflowers>

from yellow to olive green. Very few articles, if any, discussed in detail the scientific explanation for this shift in color, nor the science that discovered it.

Discussion

One aspect of journalism that we wish to discuss is the concept of newsworthiness. We used this as a guiding concept to answer the question of what elements make a story about art conservation more newsworthy than others. Newsworthiness can be defined using a series of values, as in Tim Harrower's book *Inside Reporting*. Impact, immediacy, proximity, prominence, novelty, conflict, and emotions can all contribute to a story's newsworthiness, which then produces the need for articles to be written about it.²⁸

Another concept that similarly guided our questions was the idea of a "news hole," from Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson's book *The Institutions of American Democracy: The Press*, wherein "the news hole presumes that a day's news must fill a number of predetermined empty spaces... on a regular and predictable basis."²⁹ Taking this concept, if we assume there is a space in the news hole for a story about art conservation, then which kinds of articles are we seeing fill it? Is there a way to predict which stories will and which won't? After asking these sets of questions, we directed our research towards analyzing the content of articles and looking for patterns in that respect, which is how we noticed the recurring pattern of articles revolving around "Process," "Famous Artist," "Digital/Tech," and "Discovery."

²⁸ Tim Harrower, *Inside Reporting: a Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism*. 3rd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013) 19.

²⁹ Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The Institutions of American Democracy: The Press*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2006), 69.

Limitations

Studying the news media in the aggregate is a challenge because of the difficulties of data collecting. Most news articles are hosted on the publication's website, but sometimes links do not work, or the article is deleted. In other cases, publications have paywalls or exclusions to access their content, and for this reason the data collected here is in no way a holistic study of art conservation in the media. There is no doubt some articles that were published that have been missed in this study for various reasons, but we feel as though our analysis of what we do have is thorough enough to be a start.

Our next step will be to conduct more qualitative research from the top-down, rather than relying solely on our interpretations of the data we have collected thus far. This upcoming summer, I will be conducting interviews with journalists and scientists to understand their perspectives on the implications of our data. A few of the specific questions I will be asking will involve their perspectives of newsworthiness: How do editors "find" ideas for articles? How does this process differ between trade press and consumer media? How do writers take the highly scientific aspects of the story and incorporate it into an article for readers with a non-scientific background? The results from these interviews will then be used in conjunction with this to inform a white paper that will be a guide for scientists seeking media attention for their work.

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