

Journalist's Resource

Research on today's news topics

REPORTING, RESEARCH, WRITING

Writing about a research study: Good examples of using scholarship as a basis for reporting

Tags: [training](#)

Reports, data and research have long been a rich vein of ideas and material for reporters — explanatory journalism has merited its own [Pulitzer Prize](#) in various forms since 1985, after all. However, in the past several years it has seen renewed focus with the rise of blogs such as [Vox](#), [538](#), [Wonkblog](#) and [The Upshot](#), and mainstream media shows signs of covering research with greater frequency and closer focus than in the past.

“Writing through” an academic study is a classic journalistic task — pulling out the high points and expressing them concisely in accessible language. In their briefest form, such stories can come off like a glorified [press release](#), with little more than a few key figures ready for citing by others. What often gets lost are the depth and detail that can provide a much better picture of why a particular piece of research — among the millions published yearly — is worth citing, as well as the researchers’ original caveats.

When a study informs deeper journalistic inquiry, however, the results can be revelatory. For example, a [May 2015 New York Times](#) feature on water conservation in the American Southwest was based in part on a close reading of a [2014 study](#) in the journal *Land Economics*, “The Residential Water Demand Effect of Increasing Block Rate Water Budgets.” While the title of the study wasn’t exactly a prizewinner, the resulting feature highlighted the difficulty of equitably balancing the demand for water in an increasingly parched world, yet didn’t stint on the numbers.

Below are 15 academic papers that also received coverage in the news media. Some of the resulting stories were substantive, others more pro forma. But each one required the journalists to ask a series of [key questions](#) about the study’s design, data sources, limitations and more, as

well as to conduct relevant interviews. They also had the choice of doing a straight write-up or using the study as part of a larger story, pulling in additional research or adding their own material.

Politics

"Does Facebook Drive Political Polarization? Data Science and Research"

This 2015 study published in the journal *Science* examines the effect of Facebook's News Feed algorithm on the kinds of political posts users view and consume. See the related *New York Times* article ["Facebook Use Polarizing? Site Begs to Differ."](#)

"Corporate Speech and the First Amendment: History, Data and Implications"

Based on a statistical analysis of 423 legal cases, a 2015 working paper from Harvard Law School details the expanded corporate use of the First Amendment over time. The study was covered in ["First Amendment, 'Patron Saint' of Protesters, Is Embraced by Corporations,"](#) which also profiled the researcher, John C. Coates IV.

Health

"Plastics, Human Health and Environmental Impacts: The Road Ahead"

A 2014 research overview in *Reviews on Environmental Health* summing up the state of knowledge on the benefits, dangers, disposal of, and future of plastics. A blog post the same year, ["In Plastics and Cans, a Threat to Women,"](#) used the study as a taking-off point to look at the impact of the plastic BPA on women's health.

"Safety in Numbers: Are Major Cities the Safest Places in the United States?"

For a 2013 study in *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, a research team from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania analyzed 1.3 million injury deaths in 3,141 U.S. counties over a seven-year span to understand rural and urban risk factors. The research was covered by *The Atlantic's* Citylab blog, ["You're More Likely to Die a Violent Death in Rural America Than in a City."](#)

"Impact of the New USDA School Meal Standards on Food Selection, Consumption and Waste"

To help combat childhood obesity and cut food waste, new USDA school-meal standards went into effect for the 2011-2012 school year; this 2014 study looks at the impact of the new regulations on students' food choices and consumption rates. The *Washington Post* wrote about the study's results in ["Two New Studies Underscore Hopes, Frustrations of Revamped School Lunches."](#)

"Prevention of HIV Infection with Early Antiretroviral Therapy"

The *New England Journal of Medicine* published a study based on a clinical trial of 1,763 heterosexual couples where one partner was HIV-positive and the other HIV-negative. The

study's results were detailed in a 2011 *New York Times* article, "[Early H.I.V. Therapy Sharply Curbs Transmission.](#)"

Transportation

"Electric Vehicles, Battery Technology and Renewable Energy"

This research roundup keys off a 2015 study in *Nature Climate Change* detailing the dramatic declines in the cost of battery packs for electric vehicles. The main study was covered by *BloombergView* in an article titled "[Clean Energy Revolution Is Ahead of Schedule.](#)"

"Comparative Environmental Life Cycle Assessment of Conventional and Electric Vehicles"

A 2012 study in the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* analyzes how electric cars stack up against those with traditional gas and diesel engines over their entire life cycles. The *Guardian* examines the study in "[Are Electric Cars Bad for the Environment?](#)" and includes correspondence with one of the authors digging deeper into the research.

Economics

"The State of the Nation's Housing, 2014: Rentals Up, Homeownership Down, Minorities Become a Force"

A 2014 report from Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies explored the challenges facing the sector, which on average makes up nearly 5% of U.S. economic activity. The *Washington Post* article highlighted one aspect of the study in its article, "[Millennials May Be About to Move Out.](#)"

"America's Rental Housing: Evolving Markets and Needs"

A report in 2013 from the Joint Center for Housing Studies examined the demographics of those who rent, the housing stock and its condition, construction trends and public-policy challenges now and in the future. A *New York Times* article, "[With Rental Demand Soaring, Poor Are Feeling Squeezed,](#)" used the research to examine the lives of lower-income renters.

"The Low-wage Recovery: Industries and Jobs after the Great Recession"

The Bureau of Labor Statistics produces prodigious amounts of data, and in 2014 the National Employment Law Project (NELP) took a close look at the types of jobs that were lost during the recession and those that have been added since the recovery began. An article the same year, "[Recovery Has Created Far More Low-Wage Jobs Than Better-Paid Ones,](#)" sums up the NELP report.

Global warming

“How to Mitigate Climate Change: Key Facts from the U.N.’s 2014 Report”

Produced by the United Nation’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), this report lays out ways to limit or reverse harmful trends in greenhouse-gas emissions. The report received considerable coverage, including [“U.N. Climate Report Authors Answer 11 Basic Questions,”](#) from the *New York Times*.

“Anthropogenic Emissions of Methane in the United States”

Researchers from Harvard and five other institutions sought to better understand the regions and sectors that are the key sources for methane emissions caused by human activity. A 2014 *Los Angeles Times* story, [“U.S. May Be Producing 50% More Methane than EPA Estimate Indicated,”](#) reported on the study.

“Urban Adaptation Can Roll Back Warming of Emerging Megapolitan Regions”

A 2014 study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS) looks at the potential of large-scale urban adaptation strategies to counteract the effects of long-term global climate change. The research was the centerpiece of a *Christian Science Monitor* article, [“Cool Roofs in Warming Cities? They May Come at a Cost, Study Finds.”](#)

“Research on What ‘Global Warming’ and ‘Climate Change’ Mean, and When to Use the Terms”

This 2014 study is based on two nationally representative surveys, one conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change and the other by the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication. The *Guardian* covered the research in [“Americans Care Deeply about ‘Global Warming’ — but Not ‘Climate Change’”](#)

Related research: A 2015 tip sheet, [“Guide to Critical Thinking, Research, Data and Theory: Overview for Journalists,”](#) gives a quick survey of some of the analytical tools used in the research world. It’s adapted from an essay by Stephen Van Evera, the Ford International Professor in the MIT Political Science Department, and covered in greater depth in his book *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*.

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