

# The Serialized Past

## Archaeology News Online

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Maintaining the public's interest in the past has long been a major concern among archaeologists, and practitioners since Mortimer Wheeler have appreciated the value of reporting their finds through mass media outlets (Moshenska and Schadla-Hall 2011). While teaching the honors module *Archaeology in Contemporary Society* at the University of Chester in 2015, I wanted to assess the portrayal of our discipline in the news. I put together a computer lab session that collated headlines into word clouds and found some peculiarities of reporting across news sources. Yet when it came time to producing essays, few students chose to write about this subject. While there have been some great studies of archaeology in the media, they are aging fast and new work has yet to catch up with the digital world of online news.

Online news is no longer just the digital facsimile of print or televised reporting. British newspapers, for example, which have strong traditions of archaeology reporting, have begun to dominate the market in America despite the lack of a widely circulated print edition. According to the Pew Research Center (2016:21), in terms of unique daily visitors, the British sites [dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk) and [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com) are among the top five newspapers in the United States. Likewise, popular magazines, including *National Geographic* and *Archaeology*, have seen print circulation plummet as their digital audience has grown over the last decade ([statista.com](http://statista.com) 2016).

The news is arguably increasing its impact on the online dweller's headspace. In light of falling circulation numbers and rising challenges from online upstarts such as Buzzfeed and Vox, newspapers have had to evolve quickly (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016). There is evidence that they are integrating more seamlessly with social media outlets and mobile formats, such that surveys of news readers globally demonstrate that a majority of adults now get their news through social media on a daily basis (Newman 2016). Newspapers are seen as reporters of an objective reality (Bird 2010), but, as will be shown, each outlet has its own limited view of what is worth reporting. In the age of algorithmic content filtering, the political lean of any single source can be magnified through the active selection of ideological perceptions of the past that are already embedded in "factual" reporting of archaeology (cf. Zapatero 2013). With the headline-based sharing culture of social media online, archaeology news becomes rather like a serialized comic book: what new adven-

tures has Stonehenge been getting into? What new historical figures will be added to the shared universe?

This is not another inward-looking article lamenting the quality of archaeology reporting. While this remains an important issue needing constant reassessment, there is already a long list of contributions in scholarly literature addressing it (Finn 2001; Killgrove 2016; Matsuda 2014; Rocks-Macqueen 2014). What few have done is interrogate the medium itself, despite a trove of scholarship on the potentials of digital archaeology more generally (Morgan 2012; Morgan and Eve 2012; Richardson 2013, 2014). It is worth asking whether and to what extent archaeology news is different in a digital medium, and how researchers may use this resource to better understand their own place in contemporary society.

### PREVIOUS WORK

The last big statement of the engagement of archaeology with mass media was in 2007, with the edited volume *Archaeology and the Media* (Clack and Brittain 2007). While this was a significant step forward, the volume now feels outdated. Important sections include the history of archaeological communication by Kulik (2007:122), who notes an exponential rise in archaeology news reporting in the late 1990s, and a chapter by Scherzler (2007) on communication between archaeologists and journalists (cf. Finn 2001). Other important overviews have established the various shortcomings and recurring tropes that persist in journalistic accounts of the discipline (Ascherson 2004; Holtorf 2007; Matsuda 2014).

Critical analysis of digital archaeology online, however, has seen a real boom only in the current decade. A great deal of scholarly effort has now been levied toward the engagement of the public through social media (Morgan and Winters 2015; Perry and Beale 2015; Richardson 2014; Rocks-Macqueen and Webster 2014). Oddly, in this exciting and growing field of research, the everyday reporting of news has largely been left out. This is partly to do with a perception of daily news as an ephemeral and unreliable source of information, or "archaeotainment" (Holtorf 2007:45–50). News is pop culture, ubiquitous, a bit trashy (especially now in the dread era of clickbait), and overall, unimportant to the "real work" of producing archaeological

*Advances in Archaeological Practice* 4(4), 2016, pp. 556–561  
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DOI: 10.7183/2326-3768.4.4.556

data. But, of all people, archaeologists are trained to take trash seriously. If archaeotainment is the genre we are in, then we should try to make it good enough to get readers to buy the "back issues."

There are some signs that this is changing. Archaeological bloggers have been very vocal on archaeological news reporting, beyond simply reacting to the latest media circus or micro-scandal on Twitter (Meyers and Williams 2014). Kristina Killgrove, blogger, bioarchaeologist, and regular contributor to *forbes.com*, has assessed the reporting of archaeology news from an educator's perspective, most recently with a scathing critique on the dubious sourcing and attribution of the *Daily Mail* in particular (Killgrove 2014:39, 2016). There is now a Ph.D. thesis on the reporting of mortuary archaeology in the news, which suggests some potential for the systematic analysis of online news reporting (Park 2013). The mining of data for the ways these articles are being shared and commented on surely has major untapped potential.

The impact of social media on news reporting of archaeology is still very much in its infancy, but important new approaches are being pioneered within Digital Humanities, including the study of big data through text mining and network analysis (Graham 2015; Marwick 2013; Richardson 2014). While advocating the need for more work along these lines regarding the sharing of news articles, this article will begin with the raw material: the archaeology reporting itself.

## METHODOLOGY

This quick study reproduces the simple, in-class lab I have used in the past to quantify archaeology reporting online. For this study, I have chosen a spectrum of mainstream news sources, from established legacy newspapers to online-only sources, with high readership in North America and/or Britain. In past experience, internal search facilities and tags failed to capture all the relevant reporting of archaeology. For instance, while the news aggregator *Huffington Post* uses topics like "Archaeology" to organize its content, in most newspapers archaeology is variously found under world news, local news, science, and much more. The *Washington Post* places much of its archaeology news in its Morning Mix ("stories from all over") while the *New York Times* often has its stories in its Trilobites blog ("unearthing fascinating morsels of science"). To ensure I captured only relevant data, I used the Google advanced search feature and searched for the word "archaeologist" (which includes variations such as archaeologists, archaeological, etc.) within each domain for articles appearing from May to July 2016, catching the summer "high season" of archaeology reporting from the field. Using these parameters, a simple spreadsheet of headline text, date, and social media shares (where these data were freely available) was compiled. This experiment is readily reproducible in classrooms using any other online source.

## RESULTS

Figure 1 clearly shows that, aside from the *Huffington Post UK*, the British outlets in this study (*Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, BBC) were much more likely to report on archaeology than their American

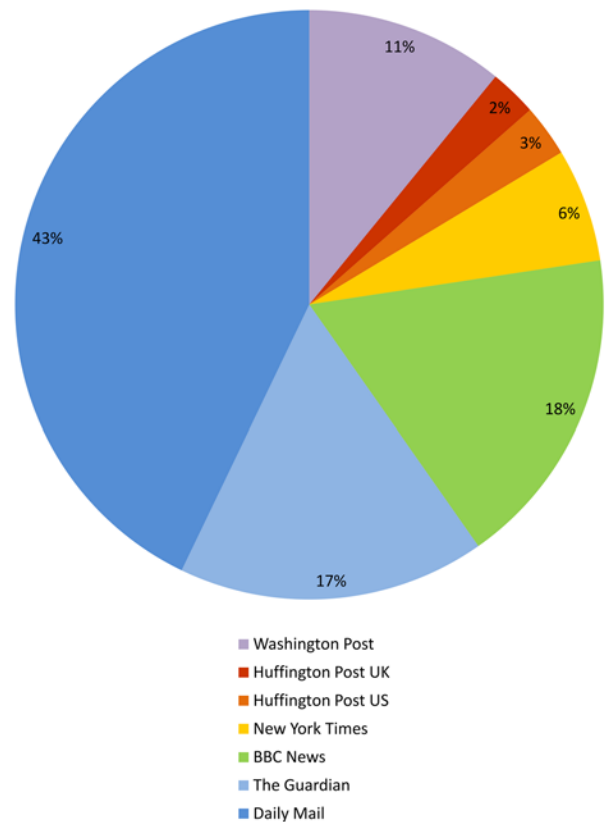


FIGURE 1. Pie chart showing the basic count of all news articles from select sources from May to July 2016.

counterparts (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*). The *Daily Mail* was by far the most prolific reporter of archaeological news. This is partly due to their publication of press releases from various sources, leading to considerable duplication of stories. All the major outlets reprint material from the wires to a certain extent, but it is clear that the editorial team at the *Daily Mail* finds more archaeology press releases worthy of publishing through its own channel. That works out to an average of nearly two archaeology stories every day (Figure 2). This may partly be a response to audience demand, as the *Mail* stories also tended to have higher share counts than any other source.

Focusing in on the most prolific sources, the *Daily Mail*, BBC, and the *Guardian*, there is some evidence for a slight correlation in the frequency of their reporting over time (Figure 3), an indication that frequency is most likely based on the availability of press releases than investigative reporting (Finn 2001; Rocks-Macqueen 2014). The remaining sources studied here had a much more irregular frequency of archaeology reporting, which did not correlate with the trends in Figure 3.

As most people are now getting their online news through social media, tracking shares is critical to assess impact. Of the sources where this data was available, the top 10 most shared stories are summarized in Table 1. This shows a wide variety of interests going beyond Britain and America, but weighted toward the

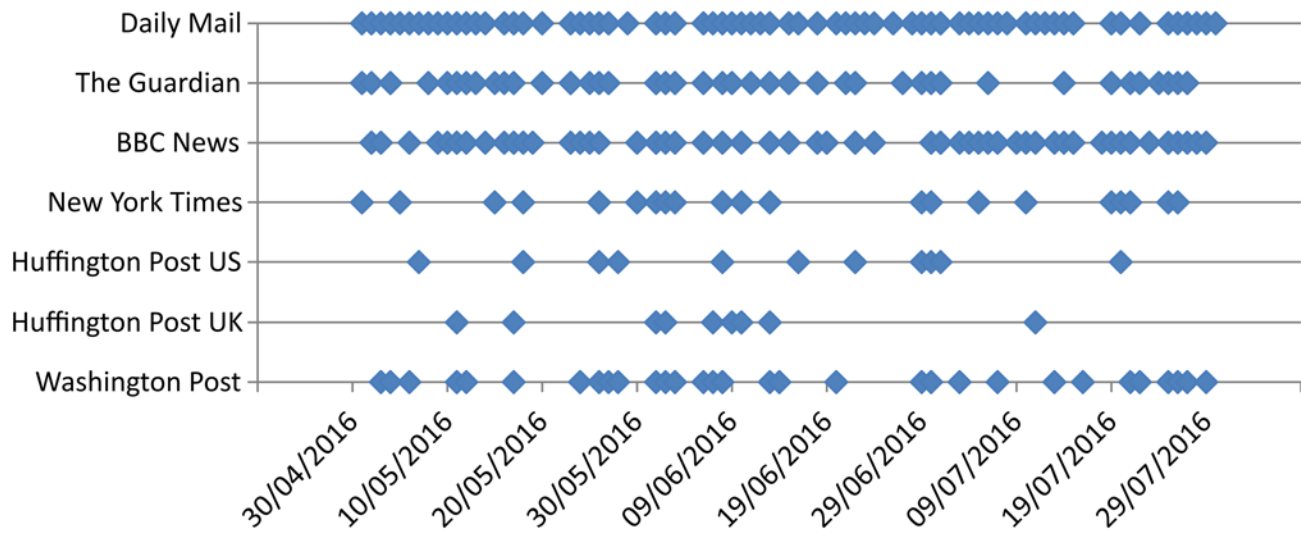


FIGURE 2. Archaeology news reporting across several different outlets tracked by day from May to July.

“Great Civilizations” and historical figures, as expected. It is also interesting to see that these major stories, which were reported by all the channels studied here, were not always shared with the same frequency, showing some granularity among different audiences, which would be well worth further study.

Drilling down into the content of the remainder of the dataset, a basic word count of headlines performed using the free online tool wordcounter.net shows some interesting patterns (Table 2). Unsurprisingly, these tend to conform to Holtorf’s (2007) analysis

of archaeology reporting as a reflection of action in the present, especially digging, revealing, and finding. Expanding the search to key phrases, or pairs of words that occurred together, “year old” and “years ago” express the main information being passed on by these reports. The remaining phrases largely relate to the major news stories of the period under study, but “world’s oldest” and “found under” are part of the tropes of archaeology in the media identified by Ascherson (2004) over two decades ago. It is worth asking whether this is what people want out of archaeology stories, or whether these are the ones

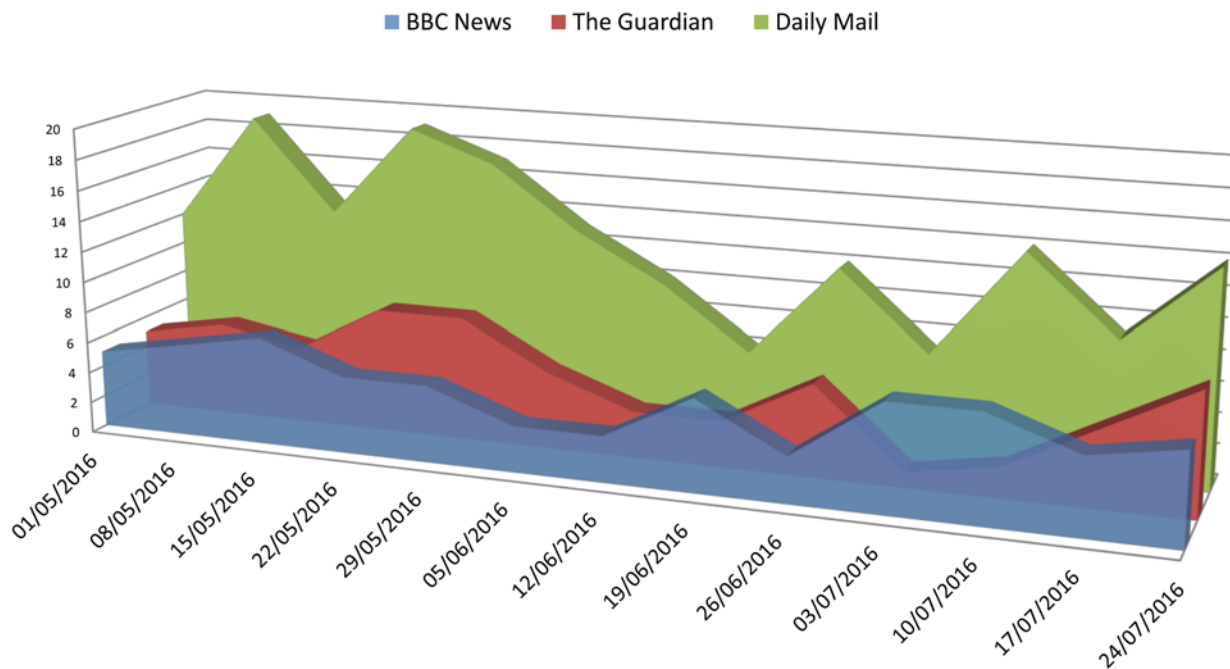


FIGURE 3. Frequency of archaeology news reporting in the *Daily Mail*, *Guardian*, and BBC by articles published per week.

**TABLE 1.** The Top 10 Most Shared News Stories (Omitting Reviews and Commentary) for the Period May to July 2016.

Source	Date (day/month/year)	Headline	Shares
<i>Guardian</i>	11/6/2016	Revealed: Cambodia's Vast Medieval Cities Hidden beneath the Jungle	42,750
<i>Guardian</i>	2/6/2016	Dagger in Tutankhamen's Tomb Was Made with Iron from a Meteorite	35,234
<i>Guardian</i>	25/05/2016	Neanderthals Built Mysterious Cave Structures 175,000 Years Ago	23,495
<i>Daily Mail</i>	2/5/2016	Captain Cook's Endeavour Is Finally Found 230 Years after It Disappeared	22,000
<i>Guardian</i>	9/6/2016	Archaeologists Discover Massive Petra Monument	19,665
<i>Guardian</i>	12/5/2016	Paleoscatologists Dig Up Stools "as precious as the crown jewels"	11,243
<i>Daily Mail</i>	16/05/2016	Ancient Forest Lost Beneath the North Sea is Uncovered	10,000
<i>Daily Mail</i>	2/6/2016	Indus Valley Civilisation May Pre-Date Egypt's Pharaohs	7,900
<i>Daily Mail</i>	29/07/2016	What Happened to Ava? Scientists Reconstruct Face Of 18 Year Old Farmer	7,500
<i>Guardian</i>	26/05/2016	Is This Greek Hilltop the 2,400-Year-Old Burial Place of Aristotle?	7,435

we choose to contact the media about. Maybe we just need better scriptwriters?

## DISCUSSION

This preliminary study of archaeology news reporting online demonstrates that there is a strong appetite for news, with stories appearing in mainstream media sources on a daily basis in some channels. While the reporting quality of the *Daily Mail* has been questioned (Killgrove 2016), it is clear that this is the most active channel for archaeology news. The *Daily Mail* was also the most likely to follow up on a story after the first press release. However, to take an example, the initial report on May 26 of the supposed discovery of Aristotle's tomb had nearly 6,000 shares (Best 2016a), and the follow-up on June 1, which stated that this

was "NOT" (emphasis in original) Aristotle's tomb had only 53 shares (Best 2016b). The will-they-won't-they saga of Nefertiti's tomb, on the other hand, kept *Guardian* readers gripped for most of the last year (Guardian 2015; Borger 2016).

Another issue worth further work is the extent to which these sites are making the best use of the digital medium. All stories were heavily illustrated with static images, with less use being made of video. But very few made use of interactive media, such as rotatable 3D scans, or animated images, such as gifs, instead of videos (Morgan 2012:157–160). Most now have hyperlinked text that at least directs readers to further sources of information—the absolute minimum an online article should be expected to do—but, in many cases, these links are to related internal content as much or more often than to the academic or research pages of the team being interviewed.

**TABLE 2.** Most Frequent Keywords and Two-Word Phrases Used in Headlines in the Dataset.

Keyword	Frequency	Percent of total	Key phrase	Frequency	Percent of Total
year(s)	99	5	year old	55	10
old	66	4	years ago	16	3
ancient	63	3	Bronze Age	12	2
found	60	3	Captain Cook	8	1
new	28	2	world's oldest	7	1
site	25	1	Iron Age	7	1
lost	22	1	found under	6	1
archaeologists	21	1	Cook's ship	5	1
dig	21	1	Great Pyramid	5	1
reveal	21	1	old shipwreck	5	1

Studies of digital archaeology have often been aimed toward practitioners who are creating content for online use, yet few of these have realized the potential of archaeology news reporting as digital public archaeology. Despite the ephemerality of news, the existence of large repositories like these newspaper archives gives this genre of writing a “long tail” of influence (Richardson 2014:275–277). Killgrove has previously advocated teaching students to practice short-form reporting, including press release writing, as part of their archaeological training (Killgrove 2014:39). We should also challenge students to rethink the way we interact with the media to begin with and find new ways of tracking audience responses as part of our digital strategies. The public are not always potential volunteers and future archaeologists, but fans and spectators who devour these stories—let’s find out who they are, too.

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