

Kirk Citron: And now, the real news

We are drowning in news. Reuters alone puts out three and a half million news stories a year. That's just one source.

My question is: How many of those stories are actually going to matter in the long run? That's the idea behind The Long News. It's a project by The Long Now Foundation, which was founded by TEDsters including Kevin Kelly and Stewart Brand. And what we're looking for is news stories that might still matter 50 or 100 or 10,000 years from now. And when you look at the news through that filter, a lot falls by the wayside.

To take the top stories from the A.P. this last year, is this going to matter in a decade? Or this? Or this? Really? Is this going to matter in 50 or 100 years? Okay, that was kind of cool. (Laughter) But the top story of this past year was the economy, and I'm just betting that, sooner or later, this particular recession is going to be old news.

So, what kind of stories might make a difference for the future? Well, let's take science. Someday, little robots will go through our bloodstreams fixing things. That someday is already here if you're a mouse. Some recent stories: nanobees zap tumors with real bee venom; they're sending genes into the brain; a robot they built that can crawl through the human body.

What about resources? How are we going to feed nine billion people? We're having trouble feeding six billion today. As we heard yesterday, there's over a billion people hungry. Britain will starve without genetically modified crops. Bill Gates, fortunately, has bet a billion on [agricultural] research.

What about global politics? The world's going to be very different when and if China sets the agenda, and they may. They've overtaken the U.S. as the world's biggest car market, they've overtaken Germany as the largest exporter, and they've started doing DNA tests on kids to choose their careers.

We're finding all kinds of ways to push back the limits of what we know. Some recent discoveries: There's an ant colony from Argentina that has now spread to every continent but Antarctica; there's a self-directed robot scientist that's made a discovery -- soon, science may no longer need us, and life may no longer need us either; a microbe wakes up after 120,000 years. It seems that with or without us, life will go on.

But my pick for the top Long News story of this past year was this one: water found on the moon. Makes it a lot easier to put a colony up there. And if NASA doesn't do it, China might, or somebody in this room might write a big check.

My point is this: In the long run, some news stories are more important than others. (Applause)

Alisa Miller: The news about the news

How does the news shape the way we see the world? Here's the world based on the way it looks -- based on landmass. And here's how news shapes what Americans see. This map -- (Applause) -- this map shows the number of seconds that American network and cable news organizations dedicated to news stories, by country, in February of 2007 -- just one year ago. Now, this was a month when North Korea agreed to dismantle its nuclear facilities. There was massive flooding in Indonesia. And in Paris, the IPCC released its study confirming man's impact on global warming. The U.S. accounted for 79 percent of total news coverage. And when we take out the U.S. and look at the remaining 21 percent, we see a lot of Iraq -- that's that big green thing there -- and little else. The combined coverage of Russia, China and India, for example, reached just one percent.

When we analyzed all the news stories and removed just one story, here's how the world looked. What was that story? The death of Anna Nicole Smith. This story eclipsed every country except Iraq, and received 10 times the coverage of the IPCC report. And the cycle continues; as we all know, Britney has loomed pretty large lately.

So, why don't we hear more about the world? One reason is that news networks have reduced the number of their foreign bureaus by half. Aside from one-person ABC mini-bureaus in Nairobi, New Delhi and Mumbai, there are no network news bureaus in all of Africa, India or South America -- places that are home to more than two billion people.

The reality is that covering Britney is cheaper. And this lack of global coverage is all the more disturbing when we see where people go for news. Local TV news looms large, and unfortunately only dedicates 12 percent of its coverage to international news.

And what about the web? The most popular news sites don't do much better. Last year, Pew and the Columbia J-School analyzed the 14,000 stories that appeared on Google News' front page. And they, in fact, covered the same 24 news events. Similarly, a study in e-content showed that much of global news from U.S. news creators is recycled stories from the AP wire services and Reuters, and don't put things into a context that people can understand their connection to it.

So, if you put it all together, this could help explain why today's college graduates, as well as less educated Americans, know less about the world than their counterparts did 20 years ago. And if you think it's simply because we are not interested, you would be wrong. In recent years, Americans who say they closely follow global news most of the time grew to over 50 percent.

The real question: is this distorted worldview what we want for Americans in our increasingly interconnected world? I know we can do better. And can we afford not to? Thank you.