

Public Abstract

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When someone wants to convince you of something, you usually go through a few steps before accepting what they say.

You try to understand what their conclusion is. You look for the reasons and evidence they use to support it. You explore counterarguments. Eventually, you decide whether you can accept the conclusion given what you've heard.

In other words, when someone wants to convince you of something, you ask, "how strong is the argument?"

Every day, journalists try to convince people of something about the world. What happens when we ask, "how strong is their argument?"

This thesis asks that question of the arguments in journalism that won Pulitzer Prizes in 2011.

Knowing the strength of journalists' arguments is important because it helps us confront a core question of living in a democracy: What should we do?

People in democracies who want to answer "what should we do?" need ways to study how the world is and how it should be. Journalists, in their reports, attempt to describe the world and occasionally also contemplate how the world ought be.

But journalists are only one potential source for descriptions of and ideas about the world. We could get our fill of descriptions and ideas by, say, studying government reports, or reading philosophy, or talking with our neighbors.

Given these options --- and given the limited time available to do any of them --- we must choose which option to pursue. By asking "how strong is the argument?" in stories awarded American journalism's most prestigious prize, we can get a sense of whether journalism is worth our time when seeking out arguments to use in our democracy. For if the nation's best journalism provides us with weak arguments, then we have good reason to suppose that the rest of journalism will, too, and vice versa.