The Newsmakers

When they contacted 48 small news-media outlets in 2011, Weatherhead University Professor Gary King and his colleagues were well aware of the peculiarity of their proposal. Asking professional journalists to allow a group of researchers to tell them what topics to cover, and when to publish stories, was something that had never been done before, and contradicted any reputable outlet’s code of ethics. But King felt certain that such cooperation was necessary to prove a correlation between issues the American news media choose to write about and the subsequent national conversation.

To measure the impact of news-coverage tone and topics on public discourse, the researchers had to find a way to listen in on conversations taking place all over the country. Twitter proved an excellent forum, because users publicly engage with one another on topics like race, immigration, and education—and by doing so, King believes, those Americans are the ones who are ultimately shaping the national conversation. “In the past, we would have run a public-opinion survey,” he says. “But we weren’t interested in hearing just anyone’s opinions. We wanted to specifically look at Americans who are willing to publicly express their opinions on important issues” through social-media platforms like Twitter. King says the challenge of finding news outlets willing to participate in the study was made easier due to a shared interest in the study’s results: “Journalists want their stories to shape the national conversation— who wants to write stories no one is reading or talking about? Our work presented an opportunity to really quantify their impact.” Because the outlets weren’t willing to sacrifice their reputations for the project’s sake, King and his researchers had to find a way to make their research goals compatible with the inherently competitive nature of newswriting. To this end, his team drew inspiration from “pack journalism,” a process in which competing outlets occasionally collaborate to get as many eyes on an important story as possible. They appoint a project manager from within the group to coordinate and share reporting resources leading up to publication—the Panama Papers coverage was a re-
The Emergent Mind

What goes on in the minds of babies? A lot, it turns out: long gone are the days when psychologists believed infants couldn’t use abstract thought. Recent research from the lab of Elizabeth Spelke, Berkman professor of psychology, suggests that babies can understand things about social behavior, preferences—even about people’s objectives and values. According to a new paper in *Science* coauthored by psychology Ph.D. candidate Shari Liu, Spelke, and colleagues at MIT, infants seem to infer how much people value different goals based on how hard adults are willing to work to attain them. The research sheds light not just on the developing infant mind, but on the fundamental process that allows humans to learn and reason.

The study relied on a set of three cleverly designed experiments that use the length of time babies spend looking at an object to make inferences about their cognition. Ten-month-old babies were shown a series of animated videos where the main character—a smiley, bright-red sphere—must move through physical barriers of varying difficulty to reach two different objects. The character eyes each object up and down, making a cooing “mmm” noise of acknowledgement.

In the first experiment, the character must choose which one to approach. When the character chose the object that had previously required less effort to reach, the babies looked at the screen longer. In some trials, the character glances at the object that’s hardest to reach but refuses to visit it because of the perceived barrier.

Then the babies were shown a new scene in which the character is faced with a choice. Standing equidistant between two objects it had visited previously—a yellow triangle and a blue square, for example—the character must choose which one to approach. When the character chose the object that had previously required less effort to reach, the babies looked at the screen longer. The team says this shows babies were surprised by choices of objects that

toward activism. For example, a journalist who feels that the pollutants being released into the atmosphere aren’t receiving sufficient attention could choose to cover climate change in order to increase discussion about the topic. The journalist may also espouse an opinion about companies that refuse to divest (in order to influence public opinion) and refer to the issue as “climate danger,” thereby pointing the agenda in the desired direction. Such power, King says, also comes with great responsibility. “Our research shows that one journalist can really shape the national conversation, which is why it’s so important that journalists adhere to strict ethical standards. If just one person skimps on those ethics, it can really have a noticeable impact.”

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