

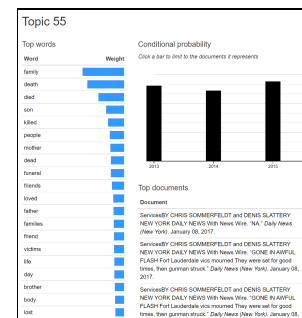
The high proportion of obituaries mentioning the humanities is one sign of how the humanities radiate through ordinary life (and death).

As we observe in our [KF-5-8](#) finding, "The humanities are robustly public in everyday events and activities." (See also [KF-5-3](#) on the humanities in "ordinary life.") Another dimension of the "everyday" and "ordinary" concerns normal, but life-changing, personal and family events such as a wedding or a death. What motivates people to mention the humanities explicitly – whether as a theme or more typically as incidental background (e.g., a humanities degree or award) – in a wedding announcement for themselves or an obituary for a loved one? And why is it that the humanities are mentioned at an anomalously high rate in such documents?

In the case of obituaries, for example, we studied our [Collection 32](#) (204,617 articles representing a random sample from 15 top U.S. newspapers in 2012-2018) by using a [text classifier](#) to identify 2,162 documents that are obituaries (of both ordinary and notable people). Then we assessed those documents in a number of ways, including with a [topic model](#) at the granularity of 250 topics and a text-concordancer and -analysis tool ([AntConc](#)). The topic model guided us to specific "obituary" topics and articles to examine closely (such as topics [#55](#) and [#107](#) for ordinary people, and [#14](#) for notable people). And the AntConc tool allowed us to evaluate the relative frequency of words like *humanities*, *science(s)* [subtracting "social sciences"], *history*, and *literature* (and the phrases in which they often appear) in obituaries.

What we found is that while in our corpus mentions of the sciences generally far outnumber those of the humanities (e.g., the

ratio of documents mentioning *science(s)* vs. *humanities* in the longer time span of 2000-2018 we canvassed to build our [Collection 21](#) is about 25 to 1), the number of obituaries mentioning the sciences vs. humanities in Collection 32 identified by our classifier was roughly on a par (407 vs. 476 documents; 579 vs. 573 discrete mentions). Of course, our study does not include demographic data allowing us to normalize these statistics against how many actual people with science versus humanities backgrounds die each year. So our results tell us only about the relative prominence of mentions of each group in obituaries.



Key words & obituary notices in topic #55 ([larger view](#))

In our internal project discussions, we used a metaphor for the radiation of the humanities in ordinary life that is ironically scientific. We called this phenomenon the "cosmic background radiation" of the humanities. An interesting extension of our analysis would be to compare the levels of such "humanities radiation" in the media of different nations.

Document collections studied: [C-32 \(start page\)](#)

Topic model studied: [C-32.250](#) (250 topics)

Interesting sample topics: [#55](#), [#107](#), [#14](#)

Representative articles: [a](#), [b](#)

Reports & lab notes behind finding:

Lab-5 documentation, DOI [10.5281/zenodo.4831113](#)