

Around the World in Weighty Phrases
By Roger Lippman
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US spies have been “conducting surveillance in the on-line games played by millions of people across the globe.” Thus were my eyes assaulted by a story in the *Seattle Times* before breakfast on a recent morning.

A few days earlier, a *New York Times* headline read “A Moment of Unity as the Tributes Flow From Across the World” – modified, mercifully, to “Around the World” in the paper’s on-line edition.

How is it that the flat-earth society is suddenly resurgent, I wondered. Maybe it's an infection caught in journalism school? Or something in the newsroom coffee?

The last time I used such a medieval phrase was as a young child, and I was quickly corrected by my mother.

Don't know much about geography ...

Where does this outbreak of retrograde geography come from?

Many people, perhaps even a majority, believe that the earth is round.

As a member of the round faction, anyway, I wondered if the media could be softening us up for the next Republican presidential campaign, which is likely to be dominated by flat-earthers, if the last campaign is any indication. After the early defeats of quasi-rational contenders in 2012, the remaining candidates were described in *The New Yorker* as “a kick line of clowns, knaves, and zealots,” and as it looks from here, there’s no reason to expect anything different next time.

When this occurs, the media will have already positioned themselves to give balanced coverage to both positions. Thus:

The GOP feels strongly that ocean-going ships could sail over the edge, so of course we need to increase the defense budget even more. Mrs. Clinton, what is your position on this controversial issue?

Well, I thought, this might just illustrate the risks of attempting too much serious thinking on an empty stomach. And upon looking into it, my worst fears were assuaged – perhaps.

Curious, I did a little research.

How often in the past, I wondered, were the phrases “across the world” and “across the globe” used in the *New York Times* (as an indicator of the media in general), as opposed to the “around” versions. Using the *Times* on-line search facility, I came up with some illuminating results:

For most of the 20th century, the annual frequency of “across” normally rested comfortably in the one to five percent range, with an occasional anomalous year. An exception was the World War II period, when there was a spike to nearly 10%, but that increase tapered off by mid-century.

Rashes of stories about Jules Verne's "Around the World in 80 Days" and Howard Hughes' flight around the world did not skew the results. On the other hand, reviews of the 1940 movie "Across the world with Mr. and Mrs. Martin Johnson" produced a visible blip in the data.

Then, suddenly and inauspiciously, with the inauguration of George Bush the Lesser, the rate of "across" leaped from its long-time range to the double digits, peaking out above 30% for Bush's final two years.

As suddenly as Bush was out of office, the rate dropped back to 16%, and, as the Obama years have progressed, back into the single digits - though the damage seems to have been done, and we're still hovering around 9%.

So, OK, maybe the *Times* is not already working to manipulate the next election. But how about making a geography class a prerequisite to using the newspaper's word processor?

"Across the world" plus "Across the Globe"
as a percentage of total instances of
Across or *Around* the *World* or *Globe*

