

what looks good. “Transparent” means you can always tell from a distance what you’re getting into . . . and you always know (as you read) where you are, how far you’ve come, and how much is left.”

Today’s Web newspapers allow readers to “search” them for specific subjects. But what readers mainly want to do, says Gelernter, is browse. “They want to be distracted, enlightened, entertained.”

A Web newspaper, he says, should be thought of as “an object in time,” and news as a “parade” of events. “Imagine a parade of jumbo index cards standing like set-up dominoes. On your computer display, the parade of index cards stretches into the simulated depths of your screen, from the middle-bottom (where the front-most card stands, looking big) to the farthest-away card in the upper left corner (looking small).” The parade is in continuous motion, as new stories pop up in front, and the oldest ones in the rear drop off the screen.

“Each card is a ‘news item’—text or photo, or (sometimes) audio or video,” he explains. The card has room for only a headline, a para-

graph, and a small photo. It can lead (with the click of a mouse) to a full story or transcript, but “the pressure in this medium is away from the long set-piece story, towards the continuing series of lapidary paragraphs.”

Instead of producing “a monolithic slab of text,” as in “today’s standard news story,” he says, reporters “will belt out little stories all the time, as things happen.” The new sort of news story will consist of “a string of short pieces interspersed with photos, transcripts, statements, and whatnot as they emerge. It is an evolving chain; you can pick it up anywhere and follow it back into the past as far as you like.”

Despite the competition from all-news cable channels, Gelernter contends, newspapers can still be first with the news—if they’re Web papers. “Because a Web-paper is a ‘virtual’ object made of software, capable of changing by the microsecond, lodged inside a computer where fresh data pour in constantly at fantastic rates, a Web-paper can be the timeliest of them all—and it can be a *great* paper if it plays to its natural advantages and delivers timeliness with style.”

Party Animals?

“Whispers and Screams: The Partisan Nature of Editorial Pages” by Michael Tomasky, *Research Paper R-25* (July 2003), Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard Univ., 79 JFK St., 2nd floor Taubman, Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Partisanship is no stranger on the editorial pages of the nation’s newspapers. But there’s a significant difference in the way liberal and conservative papers handle it, argues Tomasky, a former fellow at the Shorenstein Center who was recently named executive editor of *The American Prospect*, a liberal biweekly.

Tomasky examined 510 editorials from the liberal *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and the conservative *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Times*. The editorials dealt with 10 pairs of “roughly comparable” issues during the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The newspapers were about equally partisan in their treatment of “the other side” on matters of public policy, Tomasky writes. “For example, *The New York Times* opposed the [2001] Bush tax cut about as often, and about as strongly, as *The Wall Street Journal* opposed the [1993] Clinton stimulus package.”

But the papers’ treatment of “their own

side” was markedly different, he says. The liberal papers criticized the Clinton administration in 30 percent of the editorials, and praised it in only 36 percent. The conservative papers rapped the Bush administration in only seven percent of the editorials, while lauding it in 77 percent.

When the issue was secrecy, for example—in First Lady Hillary Clinton’s 1993 health-care task force and in the 2001 Bush Energy Task Force, chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney—the disparate treatment appeared again. *The New York Times* published four critical editorials about the Clinton panel’s secrecy, and five deploring the Cheney group’s. *The Wall Street Journal* printed eight editorials condemning the secrecy in the Clinton case, but only one about the Cheney panel’s secrecy—and it defended the vice president.

Tomasky thinks that the liberal papers take

“a traditional view of journalism as detached, independent, and unaffiliated (or at least less affiliated) with a particular political party,” while the conservative papers practice “a more ac-

tivist-oriented journalism,” closely aligned with a cause and a party. For the liberal papers, in his view, the question now becomes whether to follow the conservative example.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Limits of Philosophy

“Truth but No Consequences: Why Philosophy Doesn’t Matter” by Stanley Fish, in *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 2003), The University of Chicago Press, Journals Division, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

Philosophy *can* matter. It can clarify ambiguity or encourage altruism or help people understand why they might like a particular painting. And it can be used to create and criticize wide-reaching theories about truth and reality and human nature. But, Fish argues, one’s most “philosophical,” or abstract, beliefs about Being, say, or Time do not influence, *and indeed have nothing to do with*, one’s behavior and choices in life: “Whatever theory of truth you might espouse will be irrelevant to your position on the truth of a particular matter.” Your position will depend, rather, on “your sense of where the evidence lies . . . the authorities you trust, the archives you trust.” That is to say, when trying to prove a point about something real, you can refer to mundane facts, such as experimental data or ethnographies, but not (or at least not successfully) to philosophical maxims, such as “observations are subjective” or “love conquers all.” Maxims—that is, generalities—are notoriously impossible to disprove, for they can always be reinterpreted. And even when they’re correct, they still don’t explain anything; they merely gloss what’s already true. But regardless of your metaphysical view of historical agency, the Civil War ended in 1865.

The point made by Fish, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a prominent Milton scholar and cultural critic, is much more than methodological. He shows the impossibility of what he calls the “normative project of the Enlightenment,” the attempt to use philosophy’s supposedly unique powers, first, to abstract from everyday life to a universal, impartial perspective; then, free from cultural or historical distraction, to decide from that perspective how best to go about things;

and, finally, to apply those lessons to everyday life. But if you can’t derive universal ethical truths from day-to-day human interactions, and if you can’t influence day-to-day human interactions with universal ethical truths, the “special” capacities of philosophy are moot. Counsel on how to live is better sought in theology or literature.

This “normative project,” still pursued by individuals such as the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, is at the heart of contemporary cultural debate. Most people agree that a society’s values are contingent—based, for example, on “historical accident,” or “the apparently pressing priority of a political goal (to defeat an enemy, to stabilize the economy, to maintain the purity of the collective).” But because some find these chance, relativistic norms deficient or unsatisfactory, they propose “transcontextual” standards—global and eternal—to transcend or ground them. Are there deep guidelines for living, and if so, can we get at them?

Fish’s decoupling of mundane philosophy and lofty philosophy drops from the docket the “‘Everything is relative’ vs. ‘Values are universal’” case. It remands such questions to the court of the “merely academic.” Everything may be relative, or there may be universal values. But neither possibility matters when it comes to how people live their lives. The *philosophical* position you favor makes no difference to how judgmental you are or how moral you are.

Are philosopher-kings, then, destined to be lame ducks? Should philosophy majors resign themselves to flipping burgers? Not necessarily. Philosophy’s methods of analysis and tradition of criticism are as important as ever. It’s just that philosophy, Fish says, isn’t the über-discipline some practitioners want it to be, the arbiter of truth about everything else.