

## PRESS &amp; MEDIA

# The Zen of Spell-Checking

**THE SOURCE:** "Who Checks the Spell-Checkers?" by Chris Wilson, in *Slate*, Dec. 31, 2008.

EVEN THE COCKIEST GRAMMARIAN can be intimidated by the wavy red underline that signals a misspelled word in most word processing programs. But when Microsoft Word's spell-check routinely suggested that future president Barack Obama's last name be "corrected" to "Boatman" well into 2007, it made the widely used software program seem ridiculous.

Spell-checking doesn't need to be so backward, writes Chris Wilson, an assistant editor at *Slate*. All the technology needed to produce a timely spelling database already exists in search engines such as Google and Microsoft's own Live Search. Part of the reason for the disparity between the nimbleness of Google and the torpor of Microsoft Word's spell-check—and even that of Google's online word processor Google Docs—is that word processors and search engines try to do different things. Search engines tackle inquiries as broad as human curiosity; word processors are conservative, limiting their lexicons to words that are strictly kosher.

The two technologies update their dictionaries differently, Wilson says. Ten years ago, word processor

spelling lists were compiled from web pages or old Internet queries and scrutinized by human editors in software companies. Now, Microsoft keeps on top of change by scanning trillions of words in e-mail messages sent through its Hotmail service, gleaning such terms as "Netflix," "Radiohead," "Lipitor," and "all-nighter," but its spell checker—still overseen by relatively slow-moving humans—makes surprising errors.

Google automates its word harvesting, trolling the Web to discover new words that show up with "any appreciable frequency." Wilson found that Google offered alternate spellings for a word after it appeared only a small number of times, and was able to correct several misspellings of the unusual word "theothanatology"—the study of the death of God—when it had appeared online only 829 times.

A word is spelled correctly more often than not, so frequency of its usage is Google's first cut for correctness. The best algorithms can identify a mistake—and suggest a cure—even when each word is spelled correctly but the context is wrong. Typing "golf war" into a Google search box returns some results for "Gulf war" as well, Wilson notes. The method does have its pitfalls, though. If it were used as a spell-checker, more naughty

words might make it through; plus, a few instances of "Dalmation" (coast or dog) might turn up because the incorrect spelling with an *o* is almost as common as the correct "Dalmatian."

But it would produce much better results than the primary "edit distance" method used by most word processors. That method offers corrections by changing the fewest number of letters needed to get to a word deemed legitimate, such as "boatman" for "Obama."

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## City of Niche News

**THE SOURCE:** "The New Face of Washington's Press Corps" by Tyler Marshall and the Project for Excellence in Journalism, in *journalism.org*, Feb. 11, 2009.

THE NUMBER OF U.S. NEWSPAPERS with a reporter based in Washington has plunged by half. The number of states with a Washington newspaper presence has fallen by a third. The number of television network correspondents and Washington-based TV bosses has shrunk from 127 to 84 in a generation. But the Washington press corps hasn't shriveled up. It's merely been transformed from a sea of journalists covering news for the general public to a fourth estate increasingly reporting for niche publications and foreign audiences.

Publications such as *Climate-Wire*, *Food Chemical News*, and *Bloomberg News* offer more specialized and detailed information to smaller elite audiences often built

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around narrowly targeted financial, lobbying, and political interests, write Tyler Marshall, a former *Los Angeles Times* foreign correspondent, and the editors at Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Newsletters covering Washington alone have increased by nearly two-thirds. Niche publications are frequently financed by high-priced subscriptions or image advertising from corporations trying to influence policymakers.

The effect of the change from mainstream to niche media is likely to be that people who seek to influence policy will have access to more information than ever, while those affected by it but not organized to shape it will have less, the authors write.

Meanwhile, the size of the Washington contingent of reporters for

foreign media outlets has mushroomed. In 1968, the U.S. State Department reported the presence of about 160 foreign correspondents in the capital. Last year, there were 1,490. The Washington bureau of the Arab satellite channel al-Jazeera has grown in eight years from zero to a staff of 105—nearly as large as that of CBS News's radio and television operations combined, according to Pew.

The foreign correspondents—who typically have little access to policymakers in Washington—are likely to explain American political events to their audiences in considerably different terms than the American news agencies that as recently as the 1990s dominated the dissemination of Washington news.

Viewing American events through the prism of the national and cultural interests of foreign

correspondents' home countries certainly makes a difference in what is considered newsworthy. On February 5, the BBC World Service gave prominent website display to Senate votes to soften a "Buy American" clause in the economic stimulus proposal. Al-Jazeera featured remarks by former vice president Dick Cheney that the new administration might be going "soft" on Al Qaeda by closing Guantánamo Bay. Al-Arabiya, another Middle East satellite channel, focused on how upcoming U.S.-European diplomatic talks might deal with Iran.

On the same day, CNN International featured a story on the president's push to pass his economic package, and his effort to expand the office of faith-based initiatives.

## HISTORY

# The First Civil War

**THE SOURCE:** "An Evenly Balanced County: The Scope and Severity of Civil Warfare in Revolutionary Monmouth County, New Jersey" by Michael S. Adelberg, in *The Journal of Military History*, Jan. 2009.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION was not a simple matter of downtrodden colonists rising up as one against their British oppressors. Revolutionary fervor was a minority sentiment. President John Adams later estimated that the population split into thirds: one-third loyalist, one-third revolutionary, and one-third neutral. Throughout the colonies,

neighbor was pitted against neighbor in a series of local civil wars.

An analysis of thousands of records in a single New Jersey county by historian Michael S. Adelberg has produced a somewhat different picture of the split, with considerably more residents trying to be neutral than Adams estimated, some of them "trimmers" or "flip-floppers" who changed sides during the course of the conflict. Among the committed, supporters of the Revolution outnumbered Loyalists in Monmouth County, a relatively prosperous

jurisdiction of about 12,500 people along the Atlantic coast. It was a military frontier, only nominally under patriot control, and close enough to British encampments that Loyalists had ready access to supplies and sanctuaries. The last great battle of the war in the North was fought at Monmouth Courthouse in 1778, when a British general marched his troops and their 12-mile-long baggage train across the county to reach the safety of New York. After a dramatic battle waged inconclusively in 100-degree heat, the British escaped under cover of night, but the colonists had fought them to a standoff.

Throughout the war, Adelberg found, the county's population was split, with 1,933 individuals favoring