

## PRESS &amp; MEDIA

## Chop Chop

**THE SOURCE:** “Cut This Story!” by Michael Kinsley, in *The Atlantic*, Jan.–Feb. 2010.

A LITTLE ADVICE FOR NEWS-paper editors: Cut to the chase, says Michael Kinsley, an *Atlantic* columnist. Crusty conventions prevent reporters from quickly getting to the point, and it's little surprise that readers don't hang around to trudge through excessively long articles and instead head in droves to Web sites that are eating print's lunch.

For example, a *New York Times* piece reporting the passage of a health care reform bill in November begins, “Handing President Obama a hard-fought victory, the House narrowly approved a sweeping overhaul of the nation's health care system on Saturday night, advancing legislation that Democrats said could stand as their defining social policy achievement.” In Kinsley's estimation, fewer than half the words in this lead sentence say what happened. It includes unnecessary and unsurprising information. Unnamed Democrats bragged about their accomplishment? Really?

It's not just the leads that have problems. Stories are peppered with generic, unsurprising quotes from people no one cares about. Often, Kinsley says, these quotes are used because convention for-

bids reporters from stating their opinions, so they find someone who will speak for them, as though quotation marks “magically turn an opinionated story into an objective one.” This ritual gesturing to objectivity also makes appearances when reporters qualify even the most mundane assertions, as in a story about how “the crackdown on some Wall Street bonuses may have backfired.”

In the software industry, “legacy code” is what's left in updated programs so that they will still work with older operating systems. “The equivalent exists in newspaper stories,” Kinsley writes, “which are written to accommodate readers who have just emerged from a coma or a coal mine.” If someone doesn't already know that passing health care reform involves a “sweeping overhaul of the nation's health care system,” or that Hillary Clinton tried and failed in this project during her husband's administration, then that person probably isn't going to be reading the article. The problem is that now, those who do know these things may not either.

At a time when newspapers are carefully watching their bottom lines, ditching outdated conventions may kill two birds with one stone by saving costly space and keeping readers coming back for more.

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## Linking to the Obvious

**THE SOURCE:** “Online Information Sources of Political Blogs” by Mark Leccese, in *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Autumn 2009.

ARE BLOGS THE FUTURE OF journalism? Today, a number of the most popular political blogs have far more readers than prestigious print publications such as *The Nation* or *The New Republic*. But though many bloggers fancy themselves cutting-edge journalists, they aren't doing the heavy lifting required by actual reporting, writes Emerson College journalism professor Mark Leccese.

Leccese looked at six top political blogs—three conservative (Michelle Malkin, Instapundit, and Power Line) and three liberal (Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, and Crooks and Liars)—over a one-week period in January 2008, at the beginning of the presidential primary season. Of the 2,087 links that appeared on the front pages of these blogs, nearly half (46.5 percent) directed the reader to mainstream media outlets, such as CNN or MSNBC. *The New York Times* was far and away the most linked-to source, with nearly nine percent of all links pointing to a page somewhere on its site.

Only 15.5 percent of links pointed to primary sources (in-

cluding government Web sites, think tank reports, and candidate's pages). Daily Kos and Power Line both outdid their competitors, with 26 and 18.8 percent of links, respectively, pointing to primary sources. Twenty-three percent of links went to other blogs and 15 per-

cent connected to a blog's own prior posts.

When it comes to news gathering, blogs aren't a good replacement for mainstream newspapers. They are more like op-ed pages, digesting the day's news and spitting out commentary and analysis. But is that really jour-

nalism? Rebecca Blood, a longtime blogger and author of a handbook on blogging, writes, "Frankly, no. I am not practicing journalism when I link to a news article reported by someone else and state what I think—I've been doing something similar around the water cooler for years."

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

# Who's to Blame?

**THE SOURCE:** "The Future of Blame" by James Q. Wilson, in *National Affairs*, Winter 2010.

"DOES THE FACT THAT BIOLOGY determines more of our thinking and conduct than we had previously imagined," James Q. Wilson asks, "undermine the notion of free will?" Science is still a long way from reducing everything we do to genetic predisposition, but, Wilson wonders, if current trends continue, will it someday be "impossible to hold people accountable for what they do?"

The short answer is no. No matter what our genes influence us to do, Wilson argues, we always respond to other factors in our environment. "Many motorists drive faster than the speed limit," he points out, but "few will speed when they are being followed by a police car." Wilson, whose many books include *The Moral Sense* (1993), and who teaches political science at both Pepperdine University and Boston College, also argues that "no understanding of individ-

ual genes and brains—however sophisticated—could fully encompass all human behavior." That, he says, is "an important justification for a system of law grounded in personal accountability."

Where biology comes into play is in the degree to which we hold people accountable for their misdeeds, and how punishment is assigned. If a motorist suffers an epileptic seizure while driving and kills someone, the law will likely dictate some criminal charge, though probably less than murder. But the charge may be more severe if the motorist knew at the time of the accident that he or she had epilepsy.

Indeed, even if someone's predisposition makes that person

If biology explains behavior, virtue and depravity become equally meaningless.

commit a crime, laws (and sentences for breaking them) ought to retain a punitive component, in Wilson's view: "A punishment is fitting only if it incapacitates known offenders, deters would-be offenders, increases the chances of rehabilitating offenders, and expresses a solemn moral judgment about the wrongness of the criminal act." This system, on the surface, may seem unfairly harsh to someone biologically predisposed to commit a crime, but Wilson argues that it actually benefits such a person. "If we allow ourselves to think that explaining behavior justifies it, then we will have reduced the incentives for people who are likely to behave wrongly to avoid bad behavior," as well as eliminate any benefits to others already acting correctly.

It is this very yardstick, Wilson concludes, that "helps us define not only bad behavior but also good. If we believe modern science has explained malevolent behavior, we must also argue that it has explained praiseworthy behavior. Virtue then becomes just as meaningless as depravity—a state of affairs in which no society could hope to remain ordered or healthy."