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31 Aug 2009 05:09 pm

I Got a Horse Right Here...

by Julian Sanchez

First, thanks to Andrew for inviting me to play Garry Shandling while he's off being an international man of mystery. Out of respect for the august reputation of the *Atlantic*, I promise not to let my posts degenerate into a series of LOLcats and obscene limericks before Wednesday at the very earliest.

I see that [Paul Krugman](#), [Matt Yglesias](#), and [John Sides](#) have been pondering the much-lamented predominance of horse-race reporting over more substantive policy analysis. Much of Krugman's analysis will sound familiar to fans of [James Fallows](#) and his excellent book *Breaking the News*: To wit, it's a hell of a lot easier to do strategic handicapping than to get into the policy weeds, and less risky as well, since you don't have to imperil your appearance of objectivity by taking a stand on whose claims are—if you'll forgive the quaint terms—"true" or "false."

Sides and Yglesias add that this may to some extent genuinely reflect audience preference. The most voracious consumers of news, after all, are disproportionately likely to be partisans who already have fairly strong opinions about which policies—or at least, which policy *makers*—they support. Which is to say, they're fairly sure they know who's got the best ideas; what they want to learn is whether and by what means their side can win.

Recently, though, I had a conversation with a reporter friend that illuminated another cause of the strategic focus: the high premium reporters place on breaking news. My friend, you see, has spent years accumulating some pretty deep policy expertise as a health care reporter; you could say he's been waiting his whole career for the present moment, as his issue becomes the central topic of our national political debate. Yet he's found himself incredibly frustrated, because most of the contacts he's built up over the years are, well, health care people. But it's his colleagues with a network of sources on Capitol Hill who are scoring the scoops that make page one.

That may just sound like a restatement of the problem—the strategy obsession—rather than an explanation, but the driving force here is not just a desire to cover the power struggle; it's the desire to break news, to beat the competition to some new revelation. This creates a bias against a policy focus in a couple of ways.

First, off-the-record access to Hill staffers is still a much more scarce commodity than access to

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proposed legislation. You can have a reasonable expectation that the tidbit you wheedled out of some LA at the pub will still be an exclusive in the morning when the papers hit the stands. There's no similar guarantee that some nimble blogger won't have a thorough analysis of the latest draft out of committee before you can go to press.

Second, in [the immortal words of Moz](#), these things take time. If a court ruling was handed down in the morning, your editor probably wants 800 words filed by afternoon, and while the good ones will be flexible when you explain that this is not always going to be compatible with giving a densely-argued 80-page opinion a close reading, it puts you at a disadvantage vis a vis the guy who skimmed the syllabus and got a couple pithy quotes. When it's a thousand-page piece of legislation that interacts with dozens of other statutes, a serious close reading can take days. And if everyone else had the story on Tuesday, your thorough and thoughtful analysis on Thursday is more likely to get a chorus of cricket-chirps than a round of applause.

One final and more speculative thought is that the ratio of horse-race to policy coverage may be a rough gauge of our cynicism about the political process. If you think of American democracy as a fundamentally deliberative enterprise—citizens gathering in a great Norman Rockwell painting to reason together about the common good—obviously it's going to be important for citizens to be well informed about the details of policy so they know who to support, what to say when they write their senators, and so on. If that's all a lot of crap and there's really just a big mud wrestling match between interest groups to see who gets to turn the crank on the sausage machine, you may as well forget about the sausage ingredients and watch the bout.

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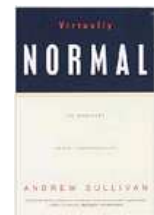
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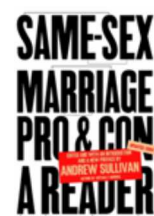
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