

The journalist and the horse-race

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I've been talking to a lot of journalists lately, about a somewhat technical topic. Some make a real effort to delve and understand the topic. I like those interviews; they are fun. I get the sense that both sides learn something from them.

Others are of the following form:

Who supports [your position]?

Who opposes [your position]?

Who is lobbying Congress in favor of [your position]?

Who is lobbying Congress in opposition to [your position]?

That is, they ask about the horse race, not the topic itself. Halfway through one of these interviews, I finally understood what it is to be a journalist: every day, you come in and face a new topic, and have to invent new, insightful questions about those topics. It's hard. And if you want to coast, all you have to do is fill in the blanks above, and you're done. The article writes itself.

You also don't have to stick your neck out with factual statements about a hard-to-understand subject. Scientists taunt journalists all the time for getting facts wrong; think how freed the science journalist would be if s/he could just write about who supports the genetic link to Type I diabetes, who opposes it, and who's lobbying Congress to change it. They'd get 100% of the facts straight every time.

I work on the politics of certain issues, but most folks associate horse-race journalism with general elections: this week, candidate A is two points ahead of candidate B in Puerto Rico, but B is three points up in DC. Again, this is in lieu of actual discussion of where candidates A or B stand on any issues. The candidates probably don't actually have a position, but that's no problem, because nobody will press 'em to develop one.

I realize that there are reasons to write about the horse race. It creates drama in what may be an otherwise boring and technical topic. But there are a ton of ways to create drama—I've seen math textbooks that get a good emotional build over the course of a chapter. Some say that The People really want these sorts of articles. [Who supports horse-race journalism? Who opposes horse-race journalism? Who is lobbying Congress to change horse-race journalism?] In a major election, where there will be hundreds or thousands of articles written, some of those should be about the horse race.

In a short-circuited way, horse-race articles are a convenient way to help the reader make decisions. We often decide upon questions by who supports which side. This is efficient. If your politics-obsessed pal spent a week reading everything and concluded that Candidate X is the right choice, and you find that you generally agree with your pal, then why bother replicating all that work? As a variant, if your cantankerous uncle

(the one who hasn't yet gotten the memo about the "N-word") is confidently voting for Candidate X, then you can confidently cross X off your list.

But articles about who supports a candidate are an odd sort of double-redirection. By reading about who is or is not supporting X, you can use that to make a choice. But a well-written article will present the issue(s) in a sufficiently comprehensible manner that you yourself could make the decision directly. One article says 'here is the information so you can make a decision' and another says 'here are some people who have looked at the information and made a decision, and given those names you can now make a decision just as easily.'

At the end of the short-circuit article, you've successfully made a decision, but you haven't learned in the process. Your worldview is no different. You have nothing new to question why it is that you believe whatever it is that caused you to vote in consensus with your favorite nonprofit.