

The Quote, the Whole Quote and Nothing but the Quote

By DANIEL OKRENT

THE first true blizzard of the first public editor's first season began Sunday, Dec. 21. The lead headline on the front page of The Times declared, "Strong Support Is Found for Ban on Gay Marriage." Reading the article over my morning coffee, I wondered why a single poll — The Times's own, co-sponsored by CBS — was itself considered news (at least one other released around the same time showed substantially different results). But for the next two weeks, rising drifts of e-mail provoked by the piece made me realize my attention belonged elsewhere.

Most correspondents felt that the 55 percent of those polled favoring a constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage did not constitute "strong support." Many others, called to arms by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, objected to the phrasing of the poll questions, and to the unequal number of pro- and anti-amendment respondents quoted in the article (three to one). Additionally, read the complaint posted on Glaad's Web site, "the story sensationalized and misrepresented poll results, failing to ask basic poll questions that would have allowed respondents to consider the full range of issues at play."

These are substantive objections, but each seems arguable: a 55-40 split (the rest had no opinion) would constitute a landslide in any election this side of Beijing. I'm not convinced that any poll questions on so volatile an issue can be truly nonprejudicial. And as for the imbalance of interview subjects, when man bites dog, you talk to the dog: the news here was the increased support for the proposed amendment relative to previous polls.

I'm still puzzled by the notion that a poll conducted by The Times is front page material. Without a detailed explanation of methodology, how can a reader figure out why this poll is more reliable than those conducted by competing news organizations? And wouldn't a thorough piece of journalism at least report on other polls that have different results? The Times isn't alone in this habit, of course, but when any news organization touts its own polls while failing to note reputable polls conducted by others, I pat my pocket to make sure my wallet is still there. This isn't news; this is awfully close to promotion.

But my gravest concern about the piece, shared by scores of my correspondents (both supporters and opponents of the amendment), has to do with a dicier journalistic issue: the fair representation of quotations. In this case, the problem was not the alteration of words, but their absence. Seven paragraphs into the article, reporter Katharine Q. Seelye, who shared the byline with Janet

Elder (one of the editors who supervise The Times's polling operation), quoted a comment President Bush had made a few days earlier: "I will support a constitutional amendment which would honor marriage between a man and a woman, codify that."

But the president had actually teed up his statement, made to Diane Sawyer in an ABC News interview, with a potent qualifier: "If necessary," he said, "I will support. . . ." I cannot believe that these were words the president uttered lightly. I imagine they were arrived at with a great deal of forethought, analysis and even calculation. The rumbling they evoked from pro-amendment as well as anti-amendment partisans indicates how fragile a hedge the president was cultivating. "If necessary" could suggest that the president wouldn't support a constitutional amendment if the recent Massachusetts court decision were reversed by the Legislature; or if the Supreme Court got involved; or who knows, maybe not if "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" dropped out of next season's Bravo lineup. Politically, you could reasonably assume that the truly necessary part of the president's statement was "if necessary."

The elision in the Seelye-Elder article was not, as several of my correspondents insist, "politically motivated," or "unethical" or a "blatant manipulation of the facts." It was a simple mistake. When first reported in The Times by White House correspondent Elisabeth Bumiller on Dec. 17, the president's comments appeared in two separate sentences: the news ("I will support") followed immediately by the qualification ("But Mr. Bush said he would support an amendment only 'if necessary' to preserve traditional marriage"). Washington editor Rick Berke asked Seelye to freshen the poll data (it was more than a week old) by referencing the president's recent comment. After searching the Times database, Seelye told me via e-mail, "I took the quote directly from Elisabeth Bumiller's story, which, unbeknownst to me, was foreshortened." No one caught it during the editing process, and foreshortened it remained.

In the months before I started in this job, two instances of Times columnists' truncating or eliding quotations made some readers apoplectic. I'm trying to stay away from issues that arose before I started here, except insofar as they relate to running stories, so I'll

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What the president said about an amendment to ban gay marriage wasn't what The Times said.

leave further discussion of those incidents to critics, polemicists and the columnists' loved ones. But deciding when a quote begins and when it ends is something that nearly every writer faces in nearly every story, and there are no firm rules to follow. Even The Times's detailed policy on quotations doesn't address this. "Readers should be able to assume that every word between quotation marks is what the speaker or writer said," according to the paper's "Guidelines on Our Integrity." "The Times does not 'clean up' quotations." (I'd better play by strict rules here: The policy continues for another eight sentences, but none concerns the beginning or ending of quotations. Trust me.)

Whether plucked from a press conference or a bar-room conversation, quotes are not just reported — they're selected. Subject goes on at length; reporter picks a few especially revealing, juicy or simply interesting sentences; presses roll; and, later, the subject cries, "Taken out of context!" But except when a newspaper prints verbatim transcripts, all quotations are taken out of context. The context is the actual conversation or press conference in which words get uttered; the printed pages of a newspaper can only rudely duplicate it.

The business of quoting is inherently artificial. Selection is editing. Ask any film critic who sees his words misappropriated for an advertisement. Newspaper reporters and editors may be more conscientious than movie studio promotion departments (and they don't slap an exclamation point on the tail of every sentence), but the hunt for words to put between quotation marks may be a relic no more vital than the hardened city editor of long ago, green eyeshade on his brow and Lucky Strike hanging from his lip, barking to the trembling cub reporter, "Go back and get me a quote!" A worthy quote? A revealing quote? A quote for its own sake? Doesn't matter — just get me one. When Joe DiMaggio was a young ballplayer and a reporter asked him for a quote, he didn't know what the man was talking about. "I thought it was some kind of soft drink," DiMaggio remembered.

Defenders of quote-chasing say it's necessary for verisimilitude (even if the selection process is arbitrary), for color (if so; that's an unhappy comment on a writer's ability to render a scene vividly) and, crucially, for balance. But even this last motivation often leaves us listening in on banter that wouldn't dignify an elementary school playground, especially during a political season. Just last week, a Howard Dean spokeswoman told a Times reporter asking about a John Kerry criticism, "What you're seeing is a career politician desperate to save his political career." This is not to knock the spokeswoman, whose rebuttal was no less dignified than those made by her counterparts in the other candidates' camps, but for all the enlightenment this provided Times readers she might as well have said, "And so's your mother." Wouldn't it be sufficient — and maybe even raise the level of the public conversation an inch or two — for the reporter simply to write, "A Dean spokeswoman dismissed Senator Kerry's charge as political?"

BUT I'm afraid we'll see reporters stop chasing quotes around the same time dogs stop chasing cars. Until then, we just have to hope that quotations are rendered accurately and fairly. (Is this a shot across the bows of columnists, editorial writers and the public editor? You bet it is.) The Times seems to be pretty good about rectifying misquotations; in early December, when Mississippi State football coach Sylvester Croom's spoken "ain't" was prettified into standard English, a correction appeared swiftly. So too with the missing "if necessary," restored to the president's lips three days after its unfortunate disappearance.

But the two instances are different. In addition to being rendered inaccurately, Coach Croom's words may have lost a little of their flavor in the process; President Bush's were stripped of a crucial part of their meaning. Deputy national editor Alison Mitchell told me that "as soon as we became aware" of the shortened Bush quote, "we made a correction, and we believe the correction was sufficient." But maybe there's a new category of correction needed for errors that distort meaning, as distinct from errors that fumble facts. There's a difference between misspelling St. Catharines, Ontario (not "St. Catherine's," readers of the corrections column learned on Christmas morning) and misreporting the president's words. Judging by the reader mail that snowed me under in the days after Dec. 21, it's partly the paper's grudging unwillingness to acknowledge the relative importance of an error that makes some readers think that innocent missteps, like the dropped "if necessary," are willful misdeeds. All quotations may be created equal, but all misquotations are not.