

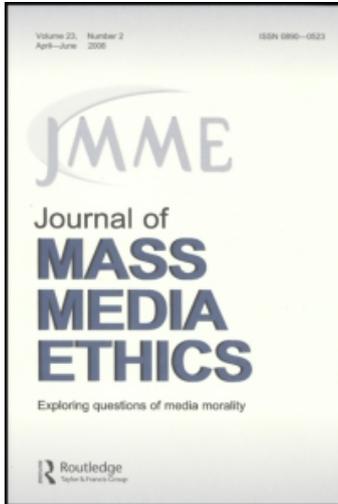
This article was downloaded by: [Bivins, Thomas]

On: 15 June 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 776121955]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Mass Media Ethics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t775653682>

“I Am Eating a Sandwich Now”: Intent and Foresight in the Twitter Age

Stacy Elizabeth Stevenson^a; Lee Anne Peck^b

^a School of Journalism and Mass Communication Kent State University, ^b School of Communication University of Northern Colorado,

Online publication date: 25 January 2011

To cite this Article Stevenson, Stacy Elizabeth and Peck, Lee Anne(2011) “I Am Eating a Sandwich Now”: Intent and Foresight in the Twitter Age', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 26: 1, 56 – 65

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/08900523.2010.512823

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08900523.2010.512823>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

“I Am Eating a Sandwich Now”: Intent and Foresight in the Twitter Age

Stacy Elizabeth Stevenson

*School of Journalism and Mass Communication
Kent State University*

Lee Anne Peck

*School of Communication
University of Northern Colorado*

Although the criteria of double effect is usually used with issues of warfare and human health, such as abortion and euthanasia, the authors suggest using T. A. Cavanaugh’s version of double effect reasoning when deliberating about cases that deal with the social media. With the creation of a modified version of Cavanaugh’s three criteria, both social media users and those who evaluate decisions in that medium will have an alternate ethical decision-making model to use. The authors show how one might use this model in the age of anytime, anywhere technology.

Social media use may require a fresh ethical framework for decision making and/or the evaluating of actions made online. Viral information spreads quickly and, in the case of Facebook and Twitter, is frequently disseminated with little thought as to the final results. News-gathering organizations and media professionals have suggested guidelines to consider when employing social media. But what of those who use social media who are not professionals—the untutored, so to speak? How are these communicators’ actions evaluated, or how might they evaluate their own actions?

The authors suggest a version of T.A. Cavanaugh’s Double-Effect Reasoning (DER) model—based on the moral norms of “doing good and avoiding evil”—

Correspondence should be sent to Stacy Elizabeth Stevenson, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Kent State University, 201 Franklin Hall, Kent, OH 44242. E-mail: spuzo@kent.edu

when thinking about social media ethics. The authors do not use double-effect reasoning as the sole path for ethical deliberations but rather as an additional tool. Cavanaugh's approach provides criteria to evaluate a social media user's actions, taking into account the intent of the agent as well as the foreseen and unforeseen outcomes of the action. Exercising due care is the basis for this model and also the mantra for the agent.

THE GOOD AND EVIL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

"Social media" speaks to the back-and-forth nature of social media tools and the community-building potential available for its users. Information consumers can participate and make known their likes and dislikes of information via blogs, Facebook, or Twitter, for instance, and participate in discussions with others. Social bookmarking allows users to share their Internet finds with others. Commenting on blog posts, newspaper articles, videos, and more has created a dynamic feedback loop.

The ability to access the Internet from nearly anywhere on a multitude of different devices has put the marketplace of ideas in more hands and in front of more eyes than ever before. For instance, U.K.-based CODA Research Consultancy released a study in early 2010 that reported WiFi-enabled mobile handset penetration in the United States will quadruple between 2009 and 2015, which means 149 million people will have the Internet in their hands ("WiFi enabled," 2010). However, as more people have this kind of access, the ethical dilemmas continue to grow.

Keen (2007) ponders the "destructive impact of the digital revolution on our culture, economy, and values"; he says the destruction comes from ignorance, egoism, bad taste, and "mob rule" (p. 1). He writes: "For the real consequence of the Web 2.0 revolution is less culture, less reliable news, and a chaos of useless information. . . . One chilling reality in this brave new digital epoch is the blurring, obfuscation, and even disappearance of truth" (p. 16). Who and who not is using due care in this anytime, anywhere new world of technology? Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, and Soon (2009) surveyed the ethical beliefs and practices of more than 1,200 personal and nonpersonal bloggers (i.e., those who blog for their professions) and found that personal bloggers, who can be anyone, have no barriers to what they will post—but that "accountability exists in the form of feedback, which is often vigorous" (p. 591).

An August 2009 study by Pear Analytics found 41% of Twitter's tweets were "pointless babble" (www.pearanalytics.com). Consider a search of Twitter with the keywords of "eating sandwich." One will get dozens of hits—posted within the past three hours—and while you look at those keywords just searched, 20 more "eating sandwich" tweets come through. In the Pear study's intro-

duction, however, the authors note: “Twitter recently re-vamped its homepage, moving away from ‘What are you doing now?’ to ‘Share and discover what’s happening right now, anywhere in the world.’ . . . It also prompts new users to ‘Join the conversation’—but is that really what Twitter users are ‘tweeting’ about?” (p. 2). The Pear study questions the dissemination of useful, accurate information and the intentions of Twitter users.

DOUBLE EFFECT

Double effect has many interpretations and many names, including double effect doctrine (DED), doctrine of double effect (DDE), and the principle of double effect (PDE), which all consider the actor’s “intention” as crucial to ethical thinking. Scholars have used the theory for ethical analysis concerning topics such as warfare and health issues, including abortion and euthanasia. Double effect was labeled until the 20th century, but most double effect scholars point to 13th century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas, an Italian priest, as creating the first criteria; therefore, the origins of double effect lie in the Catholic faith.

Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* differentiates the actor’s intention from mere choice and discusses what determines the good or evil of an act. Aquinas writes that intention by definition means “to tend to something” (Aquinas, I:II Q.12 A.1). He puts the actor’s will as a starting point because it “moves all powers of the soul”; will is an act of absolute volition toward the “enjoyment” of the ends through ordained or related means (Aquinas, I:II Q.12 A.1). Intention, therefore, is the ending point of the movement of the actor’s will. Aquinas says humans can have intention of an end result without having previously determined the means by which that end will be achieved; choice, however, is how an actor uses the will to determine the means to acquire the intended ends (I:II, Q.12, A.4). Aquinas addresses the issue of killing in self-defense, an issue philosophers and theologians frequently use to show how double effect is applied. Aquinas states that “nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended while the other is beside the intention” (II:II. Q.64, A.7). In this example, an agent’s intention to defend himself against an intruder can have the accidental effect of killing that intruder with the accidental effect being beside the intention. Aquinas’s embryonic account of what would later become double effect became the basis for the work of successive moral theologians, including the 15th century St. Antoninus and the 19th century casuist Jean-Pierre Gury, and has informed law and policy over the years (Cavanaugh, 2006, p. 196). In fact, Gury departed from using the account for virtuous actions to using it when considering lawful actions.

Knauer (1969), exploring historical formulations of double effect, believes double effect “brings into usage a criterion which is implied in every decision

of conscience” (p. 56), and he presents a fundamental version of double effect: “One may permit the evil effect of his act only if this is not intended in itself but is indirect and justified by a commensurate reason” (p. 29). He notes the modern interpretation differs from Aquinas’ in that Aquinas required an act be in proportion to its end (p. 29). Shaw (2006) points out, however, that “generally speaking, intention is discussed without any articulated definition, leading to a great deal of confusion about what it should be taken to include” (p. 187). While an agreed-upon definition of intention remains elusive among scholars, there is an understanding that to understand and apply double effect reasoning an analysis should separate what the agent intends by his or her actions from what the agent might foresee through the awareness of causal relations.

Anscombe (1957) distinguishes “expressions of intention” from “predictions” and suggests that by asking the “why” of a situation, the intention of a person can be determined. Anscombe views intention as “interior” in nature, and while it might seem easy for one to lie about his or her interior intentions, discovering the “truthfulness” in a person’s answers can be determined by observing the facts. However, Anscombe notes intention is private, and a person’s true intention can never really be known (p. 43). Therefore, a discussion of intention is important to employ the first criterion of double effect: that “the act considered independently of its evil effect is not in itself wrong” (Cavanaugh, 2006, p. 36).

Because double effect allegedly allows for one act to have two outcomes, one intended and one other than the intention, a distinction between the “intended” and “unintended” can arise, just as Aquinas outlined. Shaw (2006) believes, however, that Anscombe has a “tendency to assimilate intentions to intentional action” (p. 216). A lack of intention does not imply a lack of moral responsibility, he says (p. 216). He believes intention should not be confused with terms such as “foresight, cause, desire, motive, moral responsibility, and intentional action.” Keeping these distinctions in mind can help avoid confusion.

Cavanaugh (2006), whose revised model of double-effect reasoning the authors employ, stresses the importance of the clarification of terms involved in double effect and prefers the terms “intended/foreseen” (p. 74). “Intended” is the clear choice for the first part of the distinction because “this is precisely what means and ends share: being intended” while “‘foreseen’ aptly indicates that the agent knows or believes something about the side effect” (p. 75). Intention indicates agents have an awareness of possible cause and effect relationships between the means through which they achieve their ends and possible foreseen, but unintended, results. It also helps dissuade those who try to deny responsibility for any harmful, foreseeable but unintended outcomes. According to Cavanaugh, the distinction has ethical relevance because the terms relate to the awareness of the agent of the action (p. 75).

Cavanaugh's original evaluation criteria are:

1. The act considered independently of its evil effect is not in itself wrong.
2. The agent intends the good and does not intend the evil either as an end or as a means.
3. The agent has proportionately grave reasons for acting, addressing his relevant obligations, comparing the consequences, and, considering the necessity of the evil, exercising due care to eliminate or mitigate it. (p. 36)

DOUBLE EFFECT AND OTHER THEORIES

Cavanaugh (2006) says proponents of double-effect reasoning reject the consequentialist notion that in evaluating an act, consequences alone matter (p. xxiii). Although consequentialists find the quantity of goodness or badness morally relevant, he says they "err in their act-evaluations . . . in entirely ignoring the different volitional states bearing upon the outcome . . . they rush on ahead, as it were, impatient to evaluate the magnitude of the effect and abandoning as insignificant the different ways in which an effect can be willed" (p. 136). Therefore, Cavanaugh says, "DER presents one of the principal conflicted points regarding consequentialism's foundation" (p. xxiii). Cavanaugh says that by having a consequentialist commitment, his intent/foresight distinction cannot have moral relevance in act evaluation because intent and foresight can result in otherwise similar consequences (p. xxiii). Double effect is inherently anti-consequentialist.

Instead, Cavanaugh (2006) argues for the Kantian ends-not-means principle when considering his version of double effect, for it is wrong to treat another human being, an end-in-itself, merely as a means to further some other end. Kant writes in the *Grounding*: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (1998, p. 38). Cavanaugh says Kant's imperative relates to the ethical relevance of the intent/foresight distinction. It must be noted, though, that he believes that the act itself lies roughly on Aristotelian-Thomistic foundations because "it mirrors the basic truth that what makes an act to be an act in part makes it to be a good or bad act"; variations in volition, for instance, particularly the difference between intent and foresight, "makes otherwise comparable acts better or worse" (p. 134). Double-effect reasoning evaluates not only an agent's actions but also an agent's character.

Hills (2003) explains that although the traditional doctrine of double effect may be linked to an absolutist deontological ethic, she says, in short, that "an agent intends some state of affairs if she is *committed* to bringing it about; she merely foresees it if she is aware that she will bring it about, but she is not

committed to bringing it about” (p. 134). Hills says it is “morally worse” to bring about an intended harm than to bring about “the same amount of merely foreseen harm” (p. 134). She explains that a virtuous agent does not aim at suffering and is not committed to making it happen; a virtuous agent will “*disdain*” suffering and will not make suffering an end (p. 138). An agent will also be “repelled” by evil in the world; an agent should never treat evil as if it were “valuable for its own sake” (p. 145). An agent cannot have harm as an end; if one does, then it seems as if evil is valuable for its own sake (p. 146). “It is morally worse to treat harm as if it were valuable for its own sake than to treat harm as bad,” she says (p. 149). In other words, creating harm is not an acceptable norm—and according to Cavanaugh (2006), “one’s commitment to the norm leads one to employ double-effect reasoning” (p. xxii).

The second component in Cavanaugh’s model takes into account the victim or victims and, therefore, has Kantian roots; people are treated as ends in only a positive manner. With this component, intent is considered. Therefore, Cavanaugh explains, “the ends-not-means principle—not itself offering an account of intention—necessarily implies and relies on such an account.” The Kantian principle relates to the ethical relevance of the intention/foresight distinction because it denotes the variation “between objectionably relating harmfully to some person as a means and relating to some person harmfully and volitionally but not as a means and, therefore, not necessarily objectionably” (p. 158).

The authors propose altering Cavanaugh’s model to work for ethical deliberation with social media. Although the first two criteria are similar to Cavanaugh’s, the third is changed to fit social media because Cavanaugh’s version addresses life and death issues; the authors chose good and evil instead.

1. The act considered separately from its unintended harmful effect is in itself not wrong.
2. The agent intends only the good and does not intend harm as an end or as a mean.
3. The agent reflects upon his/her relevant duties, considering accepted norms, and takes due care to eliminate or alleviate any foreseen harm through his/her act.

DISCUSSION

Ethical deliberations in social media may be tackled by evaluating of an agent’s intent and foresight. As Cavanaugh (2006) explains, his approach is “an analysis of how one may both do good and evil in those instances that initially appear to admit only of either doing good or avoiding evil . . . Employing DER, one can live in accordance with this aspiration” (p. 201). In terms of morally acceptable

actions, the authors turn to Gert (1989), who presents a list of basic evils, a list he says that rational people will avoid unless they have sufficient reason for not evading them; the list includes death, pain, disability, loss of freedom, and loss of pleasure (p. 56). His list of the “good” includes the following: abilities, freedom, and pleasure (p. 56). One must always provide an adequate reason for intentions, Gert says. “A reason is a conscious belief that you or someone else will avoid suffering an evil, or will gain a good” (p. 56).

Cavanaugh (2006) would agree; he does not establish norms with double-effect reasoning, he assumes them (p. 201). Doing good and avoiding evil are fundamental moral norms. For instance, the agent accepts that some norms are reasonable and, therefore, acceptable. “One who accepts such norms aspires to do good while avoiding evil,” Cavanaugh explains (p. 201). Therefore, if one commits to the norm to not harm the innocent, for instance, this leads to employing double-effect reasoning (p. xxi).

In today’s Web 2.0 environment, we have examples of propagandists, Neo-Nazis, and campaign staffers who post misleading information online (Keen, 2007, p. 67). Cavanaugh’s criteria could be helpful in determining the moral justification of an action by evaluating the intent of the person disseminating the information. Rumor and lies disseminated online—intentional or not—can tarnish a person’s or organization’s reputation or ruin someone’s career or livelihood (p. 72).

A search for “Facebook” on Google News quickly highlights the growing number of questionable incidents taking place in the realm of social media. Many professions are revising their ethics codes to encompass social media and provide at least a rough guide for employees. The medical field, for instance, is struggling with new ethical dilemmas. Physicians, medical centers, and medical schools are trying to keep pace with the potential effects of such networking as part of clinical practice. In an e-mail to students and faculty of Harvard Medical School, Dean for Medical Education Jules Dienstag wrote: “Caution is recommended . . . in using social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace. Items that represent unprofessional behavior that are posted by you on such networking sites reflect poorly on you and the medical profession. Such items may become public and could subject you to unintended exposure and consequences” (Jain, 2009).

An East Stroudsburg University sociology professor submitted Facebook posts—allegedly in jest—during spring semester 2010 that referred to hiring a hitman and killing students. Apparently, she had no idea Facebook users other than her “friends” could read what she wrote. She was suspended from her job for a month; university officials cited that concerns came from the recent shooting at the University of Alabama (“Facebook Posts,” 2010). In another of the many examples of questionable behavior, in early March 2010 an Israeli raid on a West Bank village was canceled after an Israeli soldier posted the

location and time of the planned raid on his Facebook page; the soldier was court-martialed and sentenced to 10 days in jail (Rubin, 2010).

For example, the double-effect model could be used in evaluating YouTube's "Lonelygirl15" phenomenon. In May 2006, "Bree" appeared on YouTube and divulged to the world insights into her life, diary-style, two minutes at a time. Captivated by this cute, offbeat girl who claimed to be 16 years old and home-schooled by her fanatically religious parents, Lonelygirl15's audience grew to more than 2 million viewers (McNamara, 2006). Early on, however, some viewers did question Lonelygirl15's authenticity but had no proof of a hoax. In September 2006, after many assumptions and accusations, Bree was "outed" as an actress from New Zealand, and two filmmakers admitted to producing the videos; some fans were devastated that this answer to their geeky prayers was not real at all (Heffernan & Zeller, 2006).

News reporters called the video diary everything from a hoax or a prank to a new form of art while some ranked it as a kind of "false document" and, therefore, gave it the same status as Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" (Zeller, 2006). Being labeled a false document would give Lonelygirl15 some credibility as a work of art, but Eileen Pollack, an English professor at the University of Michigan, told the *New York Times* the determination in this case would lie in the intention of the creator. "If the intent is just to say 'gotcha,' it's a prank," but if the authors of legitimate false documents, in literary terms, want the audience to figure out the hoax at some point, they simply want to make the audience consider the nature of reality (Zeller, 2006).

As for the intent of the creators in this case, Ramesh Flinders, a screenwriter and filmmaker from California, and Miles Beckett, a doctor-turned-filmmaker, released a statement defending themselves: "Our intention from the outset has been to tell a story—a story that could only be told using the medium of video blogs and the distribution power of the Internet—a story that is interactive and constantly evolving with the audience" (McNamara, 2006). Because the truth about the series brought disappointment to many and exposed the nature of trust in online communities, the filmmakers in pursuit of their new art form should have foreseen the potential harm of misleading the audience (the model's third criterion), and this foreseen outcome should have been considered before content creation began. Did the filmmakers meet the first two criteria? The preliminary answer would be yes. The filmmakers' choices, however, could not survive the test of the third criterion. Cavanaugh would say that the filmmakers caused harm by not following an accepted norm—avoiding evil. They could not justify their actions. It is always wrong to hurt the innocent—the innocent being those viewers who believed the woman on YouTube was a real person with real problems.

One could critique the professor who posted on Facebook her so-called humorous "wishes" to hire a hitman to take out her students using the model in

this fashion. The act considered separately from its unintended harmful effect is in itself not wrong; she thought she was sending the message to only her Facebook friends. The professor intended only the good (humorous insight into teaching) and did not intend harm as an end or as a mean; she did not want to alarm students or administration. Finally, the professor considered accepted norms (which would be known by her Facebook friends). She did not foresee any harm.

CONCLUSION

The three criteria make sense when used with ethical deliberations concerning social media, and as Gert (1989) stresses, there is value in using a theory or model that is accessible and does not require taking a philosophy course to understand it. This is one reason the authors have chosen a modified version of Cavanaugh's double effect reasoning for analyzing social media cases. Both those who are considering their actions and those who are critiquing their actions can employ this approach.

Social media is new territory for some older users, but younger users are growing up with it; therefore, it is even more important to address ethical actions when disseminating information on the Internet, and many school districts are creating guidelines for their students. Of course, the common-sense factor is useable; most users usually know the accepted norms, but instances of lethal cyber-bullying and myriad scams still plague the social media world. Cavanaugh, however, with his intention/foresight distinctions help social media world inhabitants discern more clearly cause and effect relationships between the means through which users achieve their ends and the possible foreseen, but unintended results. More insight into moral psychology may also help strengthen the importance of intention and the "what was that person thinking?" question. Using Cavanaugh's double effect reasoning model may help social media users who need to evaluate their actions as well as those evaluating those actions once they are posted on the Web for all to see.

REFERENCES

- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1957). *Intention*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Aquinas, T. (1921). *The "summa theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.; 2nd rev. ed.). London: Burns Oates & Washbourne. (Original work published 1274)
- Cavanaugh, T. A. (2006). *Double-effect reasoning: Doing good and avoiding evil*. New York, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Cenite, M., Detenber, B. H., Koh, A. W. K., Lim, A. H. L., & Soon, N. E. (2009). Doing the right thing online: A survey of bloggers' ethical beliefs and practices. *New Media & Society*, 11(4), 575–597.
- Facebook posts leave Pennsylvania college professor in trouble. (2010, February 26). The Associated Press. Available from <http://www.courierpostonline.com>
- Gert, B. (1989). Morality vs. slogans. *Center for the Study of Ethics in Society*, 3(2).
- Heffernan, V. & Zeller, T. (2006, September, 13). *Well, It Turns Out That Lonelygirl Really Wasn't*. New York Times, Section C, p. 1. Retrieved March 5, 2010, from http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/13/technology/13lonely.html?_r=1
- Hills, A. (2003). Defending double effect. *Philosophical Studies*, 116, 133–152.
- Jain, S. H. (2009). Practicing medicine in the age of Facebook. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 361, 649–651. Retrieved March 5, 2010, from <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/361/7/649>
- Kant, I. (1998). *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press.
- Keen, A. (2007). *The cult of the amateur: How today's Internet is killing our culture*. New York: Doubleday/Currency.
- McNamara, M. (2006, September 13). *Lonelygirl15: An Online Star is Born*. Retrieved March 3, 2006, from <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/11/blogophile/main1999184.shtml>
- Pear Analytics. (2009, August 24). *Twitter study*. Retrieved February 7, 2010, from <http://www.pearanalytics.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Twitter-Study-August-2009.pdf>
- Rubin, S. (2010, March 3). Israeli raid called off after Facebook slip. The Associated Press. Retrieved March 12, 2010, from <http://home.knology.net/news/>
- Shaw, J. (2006). Intention in ethics. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 36(2), 187–224.
- Sternbergh, A. (2006, August 28). Hey there, Lonelygirl. *New York Magazine*. Retrieved March 10, 2010, from <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/19376/>
- Thompson, L. A., Dawson, K., Ferdig, R., Black, E. W., Boyer, J., Coutts, J., & Black, N. P. (2008). The intersection of online social networking with medical professionalism. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 23(7), 954–957.
- Wi-Fi enabled handset penetration in the U.S. to quadruple by 2015. (2010, February 10). Retrieved February 15, 2010, from <http://www.codaresearch.co.uk/wificellular/pressrelease.htm>
- Winn, P. (2009). *State of the blogosphere 2008*. Retrieved February 12, 2010, from <http://technorati.com/blogging/article/state-of-the-blogosphere-introduction/>
- Zeller, T. (2006, September, 17). Lonelygirl15: Prank, art or both. *New York Times*, p. 16. Retrieved March 8, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/17/weekinreview/17zeller.html>