

Weblogs and the Search for User-Driven Ethical Models

A Research Paper Submitted for the

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON ONLINE JOURNALISM

By J. Richard Stevens
School of Journalism
University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

The freedom of the Internet has led to the rise of “amateur reporting” in the form of weblogging. Around the world, thousands of individuals record their experiences, perspectives and opinions in online forums that reach large audiences.

But are bloggers journalists? Some claim they are amateur journalists, others claim they are something very different. Do they need their own code of ethics? How do traditional codes of journalism ethics translate to the Weblog environment? Can blogs contribute responsibly to the world of journalism, if they don't follow the Journalism Code of Ethics?

This paper sought to answer these questions in a qualitative fashion by reviewing the history of journalism ethics to better understand why journalists felt the need to establish their codes and determine how these reasons apply to the blogosphere.

Introduction

In America, the press has traditionally served as a link between the public sphere and the private. By raising issues and events into the public eye, journalists have provided a forum for critical debate and have granted the citizenry access to their government. Unfortunately, this access is most often unidirectional: the citizenry may perceive their world through the media, but their opportunities to add their individual voices to the debates are limited.

As the information revolution that began in the 1990s has made communication technology a commodity, the resulting products and services have allowed the citizenry to begin connecting to one another and to their political world in new and exciting ways. One of the latest examples of these innovations is the non-professional weblogs that have sprouted all over the World Wide Web in recent years. In his own blog, *PressThink*, Jay Rosen defines a weblog (or blog, as they are commonly called) in the following way:

What is a weblog? A personal web page, or online journal, updated easily by an author, that links outward to other material on the Web, and presents original content—typically, links and commentary—in a rolling, day-by-day fashion, with the latest entries on top.¹

Currently, there are hundreds of thousands of blogs written by journalists, students, teachers, professionals in all fields, clergy and even people who seem to have no discernable occupation of any kind. Blogging topics are equally diverse, covering just about any conversational topic imaginable, from intellectual debates to political news to sports to entertainment. There is even a blog titled “The Dullest Blog in the World” (<http://www.wibsite.com/wiblog/dull/>), in which the author chronicles such mundane events as his efforts to check his e-mail, his walks past his ironing board, and his thoughts about potentially making some food.²

Though some bloggers like to think about themselves as amateur journalists, many do not, choosing to see their writings as personal diaries, journals, essays, musings, social commentary, chronicles, logs and memoirs that just happen to be publicly viewable. However, as blogs have become more sophisticated, some of them have begun to compete with traditional news outlets for information, including one case where a blogger named Chris Allbritton raised enough funds from his online readership to rent equipment and travel to Iraq to cover the war first-hand.³

The war on terrorism brought a surge of “warblogs,” dedicated to covering different aspects of the conflict. Unfortunately, not all blogs of this type drew from sources as close and personal as Albritton’s coverage.

Sean-Paul Kelley is a Texas blogger who single-handedly composes and publishes a popular war blog titled *The Agonist*. Kelley, a former journalist who worked for about three weeks for a local paper, said he had created the blog because he “felt the media wasn’t doing a good enough job of covering the nuances of international relations.”⁴

How did the author generate his comprehensive coverage of the war occurring on the other side of the globe? By plagiarizing material from his subscription to the *U.S.-Iraqwar.com* newsletter published by Stratfor, a Texas-based intelligence firm. After repeated requests for clarification regarding his newsgathering methods, Kelley admitted the infraction in an interview with *Wired* magazine.⁵

Response to the incident within the blogger community was varied. Many bloggers removed their links from Kelley’s blog, while many more have insisted Kelley’s actions were a normal part of the blogging experience. As the discussion raged across the

blogosphere, the new medium had official found its first ethical scandal and led many authors to ask whether it was time for bloggers to draft and adopt a code of ethics similar to those adopted by professional journalists.⁶

But are bloggers journalists? Some claim they amateur journalists, others claim they are something very different. Do they need their own code of ethics? How do traditional codes of journalism ethics translate to the Weblog environment? Can blogs contribute responsibly to the world of journalism, if they do not follow the Journalism Code of Ethics?

This paper sought to answer these questions in a qualitative fashion by reviewing the history of journalism ethics to better understand why journalists felt the need to establish their codes and determine how well these reasons apply to the blogosphere.

A Brief History of Journalism Ethics

Before delving into the questions of what a blogger code of ethics would look like, it would be helpful to remind ourselves how journalism became a profession and developed a need for such codes. Though journalists like to think their ethical codes were derived from high philosophical traditions, the creation of these codes had very practical origins. As Lance Bennett noted:

Journalism, like most professions, developed a set of business practices first, then endowed those practices with a set of impressive professional rationalizations, and finally proceeded to rewrite its history in ways that made the practices seem to emerge, as if through immaculate conception, from an inspiring set of professional ideals.⁷

The journalism that existed in the first 100 years of American history was not practiced according to set of professional norms or ethical guidelines. In fact, during that period, journalism as a profession did not really exist at all. Owing to the tremendous costs of

publication in early America, only the wealthy and elite could publish, and what was acceptable to appear in print was governed by the market and social influence.

However, the introduction of new technology brought the ability to produce clear, crisp type at rapid speeds, revolutionizing the way people wrote and even thought. Not needing to alter heavy type plates or drums to alter printed text, reporters were able to write more and write more quickly than ever before. In 1879, there were only 574 newspapers in the country; by 1899, there were 1,610.⁸

By the 1890s, advances in printing techniques and paper manufacturing made the entire newspaper production process much cheaper than it had ever been. The lowered entry cost into the newspaper industry led to the emergence of daily papers aimed at more of a mass audience than had previously existed. No longer did publishers need to target content solely at the wealthy portion of the populace. Suddenly America had hundreds of rural papers, party papers, socialist papers, labor papers and business papers.⁹

It was during this period that journalism became an increasingly valued and esteemed occupation in urban America.¹⁰ Between 1870 and 1890, the value of newsgathering increased and as a result, the salaries of professional reporters doubled.¹¹ More and more journalists entered the profession with college degrees (and often in a scientific discipline), raising the level of writing and the standards of ethics in the industry as a whole.

The impulse to ethics in journalism, and in journalism education, was less a high-minded sense of the republic, than the need to assert social control over the reporter, to deflect trade unions, and to make working class journalists into sober, responsible

working men and women who would not question the prerogatives of ownership and management.¹²

As the professional ties and camaraderie drew individual reporters to survey each other's work, reporters began to compete with one another, each scrambling for the next big story. Reporters began to be publicly identifiable by their personalities, and their adventurous exploits captured the attention of an ever-widening audience.¹³ To hold this attention, journalists began mixing cold, hard facts into an exciting narrative style that fed the public's taste for entertainment, social investigation became the new newspaper genre, and the new mandate of the professional journalist was to root out hypocrisy and corruption in society. As historian Gunther Barth explains it, the rise of the metropolitan press was largely brought about by a "shift in public values that replaced the minister with the editor as the conscience of the community."¹⁴

It is difficult to underplay the significance of mass media in the rise of standardization and cultural change. As media scholar Michael Schudson puts it:

The media are a central institution - one might even claim *the* central institution - in the cultural construction of American nationhood and cityhoods and communityhoods across the land. The eighteenth-century newspapers were key instruments of commercial and, later, political integration. The nineteenth-century newspapers were key instruments of urbanization, providing not only the advertising forum that made new institutions like department stores possible, but also providing a community identity that held a city together when it was no longer a face-to-face community or even a "walking city."¹⁵

Most urban areas supported several papers, with papers reaching to different demographics of people. As upper class-focused papers continued to cover the high-brow interests of their audience, more and more papers interested in reaching the common man were born. Enterprising publishers such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst began to base their financial model of production on sales and advertising rather than political party contribution. As a result, many newspapers began to play down their party

ties and began to think about providing balanced coverage of news in order to appeal to a larger audience.

In order to attract attention, such papers often resorted to sensational headlines and stories. This “yellow journalism” of the mass papers targeted at the lower class audiences was derided by the upper classes as the promotion of the vulgar in public discourse. As this trend continued, new sections of the paper were introduced to cover sports, fashion and comics. In addition, social commentary and gossip about prominent citizens crept into the papers of the lower classes, and the audience seemed to accept this with a gleeful empowerment they had not previously experienced.

Elite papers did not watch these changes in practice silently. A publishing war soon broke out, a war that pitted the high culture newspapers (such as the *New York Times*) against the common man’s press. As the sensational papers (such as the Pulitzer’s *New York World* and Hearst’s *New York Journal*) began to move away from a rational model of journalism and towards a sensational model, the change was met with revulsion by the upper classes. As Edwin Godkin of the *New York Post* wrote:

Nothing so disgraceful as the behavior of two of these newspapers has been known in the history of American journalism. ... It is a crying shame that men should work such mischief simply in order to sell more papers.¹⁶

Charles Dana, publisher of the *New York Sun*, gets credit for having created the first code of ethics for journalism. In 1888, Dana was asked to speak to the Wisconsin Editorial Association, and he used that invitation to call for a code of ethics to govern the behavior of journalists. Citing codes of ethics from other professions (law and medicine, for example), Dana listed the following tenets as a foundation:

Get the news, get all the news, get nothing but the news.
Copy nothing from another publication without perfect credit.
Never print an interview without the knowledge and consent of the party interviewed.

Never print a paid advertisement as news-matter. Let every advertisement appear as an advertisement; no sailing under false colors.
Never attack the weak or defenseless, either by argument, by invective or by ridicule, unless there is some absolute public necessity for so doing.
Fight for your opinions but do not believe that they contain the whole truth or the only truth.
Support your party, if you have one; but do not think all the good men are in it and all the bad ones outside it.
Above all, know and believe that humanity is advancing; that there is progress in human life and human affairs; and that, as sure as God lives, the future will be greater and better than the present or the past.¹⁷

Eventually, Pulitzer himself became disenchanted with the practices his paper had fallen to in order to keep up with Hearst. After reforming his own paper, Pulitzer offered Columbia University \$2 million in 1904 to start a school of journalism in order to educate the next generation of professionals to raise the standards of the profession.

In 1914, Walter Williams wrote his famous “Journalist’s Creed.” Williams’ creed took for granted that journalism was a profession (its opening line was “I believe in the profession of journalism.”)¹⁸ and as such, called all journalists to behave according to the tenets of service of the public good and fairness in reportage.

Soon, many news organizations began writing and adopting creeds. As journalism began to more closely resemble a profession, voluntary industry associations, such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Society of Professional Journalists, were created. ¹⁹In 1923, ASNE created and adopted its *Canon of Ethics* at the organization’s very first meeting, and SPJ adopted its code of ethics in 1926.

Though these codes and other industry norms gave journalism the appearance of a profession, its status as a profession remains under question to this very day.²⁰ Regardless of its official status, the field of journalism adopted ethical guidelines in reaction to the developments in society. As more of the citizenry gained access to the technology enabling them to enter the field, norms in the form of ethics were created to give

“professional” journalists an air of credibility needed to distinguish them from their “yellow journalism” competitors.

Media and Cultural Changes in Online America

Is online media truly mass media? Dennis McQuail, professor of mass communication at the University of Amsterdam and one of the leading authorities in mass communication theory, raised an interesting point on the subject of new electronic media, suggesting that when looking at audience factors, media such as the Web may not technically be classified as mass media at all. In his book *Mass Communication Theory*, when discussing electronic media, he writes:

The very concept of mass medium is threatened, since no one will be obliged to accept the same package of information at the same time as anyone else. Arguably, without a mass medium there is no audience, only chance similarities of patterns of media use.²¹

This point was important, as the changing nature of such communication types will warrant changes in the nature of the norms that govern them. McQuail also noted a shift in control when dealing with new media. New media, he argued, are “restoring a human scale and individuality to mediated social communication, reasserting the equality of power of the receiver at the periphery with the dominant centralized sender.”²² As Internet-based communication moves away from its textual roots, there has been an increased inclusion of interactive forms of communication into the delivered messages. Interactivity in this context simply means the greater inclusion of the receiver in the content production process, more of a two-way exchange than earlier mass media messages.²³ The rise of interactivity has been attributed to the realization that the user’s contributions to a message can increase both the quality of the message itself and the impact of the information presented.²⁴

As Americans began connecting to one another in new ways, they began to think about the boundaries between public and private appropriateness in new ways. Several media controversies in the late 1990s sparked further debate about these norms, including the death of Princess Diana and the death of John F. Kennedy, Jr. But one story in particular demonstrated that Americans were becoming increasingly confused about the boundaries of public and private sphere: the scandal involving Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky.

The Clinton-Lewinsky investigation was significant for two reasons: first, because the scandal broke on the Internet and the medium proved to be a significant factor in the course of the investigation and dissemination of findings; and second, because the depth of disclosure caused even the traditional journalism outlets to revisit earlier notions of journalism ethics and practices.

Because the scandal hinged on the differences in testimony between several of the actors involved (pertaining to events that happened outside the public's view), traditional media outlets were slow to report on the rumors that began to float around Washington D.C. In fact, the story that finally broke on an exclusively online news source, *The Drudge Report*, was simply that *Newsweek* was working on a story involving President Clinton and a federal employee.²⁵ In the following months, *The Drudge Report* broke the initial stories connecting Kathleen Wiley, Linda Tripp and Clinton.

According to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, during the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, more people turned to the Internet for news than ever before.²⁶ For the first time, online media played a major role in informing the public. In addition, when the investigation was nearing completion and the final report to

the House of Representatives was to be released to the public, the House decided to distribute the report from the Library of Congress's Web site. As Matt Drudge quipped, the scandal "began on the Internet," and "I guess [House Speaker Newt] Gingrich made the decision to end it on the Internet. It's come full circle."²⁷

The release of the Starr report showed that in special moments, the Web could be a medium that reaches a mass-market audience. Within the first 24 hours of the 453-page Starr report's release more than 750,000 copies were downloaded from America Online alone.²⁸ According to NetRatings, the California-based online ratings firm, 3.1 million unique users viewed the report the first day, including 22 percent of all Internet users during business hours.²⁹ Another market research company, Relevant Knowledge, estimated that 5.9 million people downloaded the report within the first 48 hours.³⁰ By the end of the third day, CNN reported that an estimated 20 million Americans had viewed the report, either by downloading the file or by browsing it online.³¹

The introduction of online media as a competitor for news outlets had a profound effect on the ethical behavior of traditional media outlets. According to a study designed by the Committee of Concerned Journalists, in the first six days of the scandal's coverage, less than 1% of the coverage in major newspapers, television network programs and major magazines contained statements based on two or more named sources. Even more startling, 41% of the coverage was statements of journalistic analysis (23%) or punditry (18%).³² Figure 1 breaks down the remainder of these sources.

Sources and attribution of statements:	
2 or more named sources	1%
1 named source	25%
2 or more anonymous sources	13%
1 anonymous source	8%
Reporting attributed to other media sources	12%
Journalistic analysis	23%
Journalist punditry	18%

Figure 1: Sources and Attribution for News Stories during 1st six days of coverage³³

Because of the accelerated rate of information dissemination of online outlets, traditional news media were abandoning their standards of ethics to keep up.

Changes in Media Use: The Origins of Weblogging

Life on the Web did not only reorganize offline life through online interfaces, it also created completely new forms of media spectacles and social exchange. Just as the forms of Internet-based communication were disseminated in a variety of distribution patterns, different forms of Internet-based content began to emerge with differing levels of interaction.

One of the most well known examples of new interaction was the *JenniCam*. From 1995 to December 2003, Web surfers who pointed their browsers to www.jennicam.org could watch Jenni Ringley living her life in her Washington, D.C. apartment.³⁴ Every two minutes a fresh image was posted, and the cameras covered Ringley's life 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Most of the content displayed the subject sleeping, eating or reading, but Ringley eventually installed more than a dozen cameras throughout her apartment to allow access to other daily events (including showering and bathroom activities).

The *JenniCam* phenomenon was merely one of a series of the public blending of privacy and voyeurism. And certainly not the first: daytime talk shows like *Oprah*, *Jerry Springer* and *Sally Jessy Raphael* had been marketing the revelation of intimate facts for years before the *JenniCam*. Nor was the *JenniCam* to be the last such blending: network television was soon to follow the trend with “reality television” programs like *Survivor* and *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*.

The *JenniCam* was unusual in the production’s simplicity: one ordinary, non-famous young woman simply allowing silent visual access to her daily routine to millions of viewers. Just by allowing the natural-seeming access to private life, Ringley seemed to be meeting some unarticulated need of many people. As psychologist John Suler explained:

The *JenniCam* phenomenon is a unique example of how cyberspace addresses such needs for belonging and the social affirmation of self. There was an overwhelming response to Jennifer Ringley when she set up a live, continuous video broadcast of her dorm room, and then later her apartment. People who idealized, even worshipped, Jenni banded together in groups to talk about her, speculate about her, share screen captured pictures of her. She became the focal point of their camaraderie. Their collective admiration of her - a kind of idealizing transference - served to bolster their sense of self. Even though unable to communicate with her, some admirers set up a second computer monitor next to their own, so they could “be with” Jenni as they went about their work. This contact with her - a kind of twinning transference - created a feeling of companionship.³⁵

JenniCam has been referred to as the first blog,³⁶ though others have cited Tim Berners-Lee’s original “what’s new” page³⁷ at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva, Switzerland as the first blog.³⁸ Regardless of which blog was the original, in the following years, hundreds of thousands of blogs have been created, each allowing its author to publish without the constraints of editorial control or peer review.

This lack of restraints has given amateur writers a freedom they could not find in the traditional media outlets, but has led to the aforementioned issues about credibility and acceptable behavior. Even traditional media outlets with online offerings have tried

to involve readers in the news production cycle, and this interaction has created yet another source of ethical problems. At many online news sites, users can read the news and log into related chat rooms and post-it forums to discuss and debate the events among themselves. However, this content can become a headache for editors, as users are often not aware of the ethical issues involved in mass media practice.

A striking example of these issues came in 1999, when the online news site *Austin360* began to cover the Texas A&M bonfire tragedy. When the bonfire collapse occurred, the site was among the first to post information. But it was on the post-it forums where the power of the new medium (and the new ethical challenges) appeared. As scant details began to slowly be released, online visitors began to discuss the tragedy, support one another and even mourn with those who said they had lost loved ones in the tragedy. However, as users began to post information on the post-it boards, they soon began to cite information that had not been released to *Austin360* by the authorities.

“People we posting that they had found out so-and-so had died or that someone had been found,” one of the content managers of *Austin360* said. “We just didn't have any way to verify the information. So, we had to contact these users and ask them not to post any more names. We monitored the boards and restricted the content to general sentiments and condolences. It was tough, but we can't be held responsible for that content.”³⁹

Cases like *Austin360's* coverage of the bonfire tragedy represent a new relationship between the professional journalist and the audience. When the audience is involved in the newsgathering function, and the journalist become merely a disseminator,

the application of traditional journalism ethics becomes difficult, if not at times impossible.

Discussion and Conclusions

In their analysis of the ethical failings during the Clinton/Lewinsky coverage, Bill Kovach and Tom Ronsensiel list five characteristics of the “mixed media culture” that led to them: never ending news cycles, sources gaining power over journalists, the decline of the gatekeeping function, the overwhelming of reporting by argument rhetoric and the “blockbuster mentality.”⁴⁰ Though all five of these observations have implications for the blogosphere, three of them help explain why blogging has become such a popular staple in many people’s media diet, and why professional journalism has struggled to meet this demand.

The first relevant observation, sources gaining power over professional journalists, represents a shift in power that encourages journalists to yield on their ethical standards in order to obtain quotable content. Bloggers, on the other hand, are bound by no such standards, and therefore are free to make arrangements with sources and publish content that traditional news outlets will not.

Secondly, the decline of the gatekeeping role has been one of the strengths of the blogging phenomenon. Though journalists have seemed rather panicked at their inability to control the flow of information into the public domain (think about the *Drudge Report* publishing the withheld *Newsweek* account of the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal), bloggers thrive on this freedom. No longer is information tied up by “official” channels of distribution. No longer are lengthy editorial protocols governing what is published and

what is withheld. But with this freedom comes a loss of credibility and trust. Generally, Americans still seem to trust professional journalists more than bloggers. Whether or not this trend continues remains to be seen. In one of the classic definitions of role of journalists, Walter Lippmann wrote in 1920:

The news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumor suspicion, clues, hopes, and fears, and the task of selecting and ordering that news is one of the truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy.⁴¹

This description of journalists as the “priests of democracy” raises the image of the authoritarian disputes in the religious culture of another age. Just as the Protestant Reformation led to the dissolution of much of the Catholic Church’s authority over religious doctrine, so the democratization of the ability to publish into the public domain has been seen by some as leading to the liberation of news production from the mainstream media outlets. Like that religious revolution, small groups of writers are assuming some of the “priestly duties” of professional journalists without becoming a part of the professional orthodoxy.

Without stretching this imagery too far, the Reformation analogy suggests it is safe to say that some bloggers will practice their craft in a manner very similar to that of professional journalism, while others will choose to adopt different value systems and standards by which to govern their efforts. And like the Catholic church of today, journalism will survive this challenge to its cultural authority, though it may become one option among many for information dissemination.

Finally, as the reporting culture is increasingly overrun by the “argument culture,” more of what is presented in the media is based on analysis, opinion and assertion than on fact, verifiable evidence and sourced material. In other words, there has been an increase in the amount of comment about the news presented in place of some of the news.

While this trend is disturbingly at odds with the various ethical codes of most professional media outlets, much of the blogosphere was created to give users a space to present and respond to each other's opinions. One might say that commentary is the most essential component of a blog, so this threat to professional journalism equates to a benefit for the blogging phenomenon.

So, what exactly is the relationship between journalism and blogging? Do the two forms of communication share common goals? Should they share common ethical codes? Based on the reflection upon the review of literature and discussions, the following observations and conclusions were reached.

1. Weblogging is not online journalism.

Though many bloggers would like to think of themselves as journalists, blogging and online journalism are not synonymous. In the first case, the phenomenon of blogging covers too many online activities to be generalized as online journalism. Secondly, while it is true that some bloggers do voluntarily submit themselves to the standards similar to the ethics of journalism, even these attempts more closely resemble the pre-professional journalism of the 19th Century.

Bloggers, for the most part, have seen no reason to adopt the balance and attempt at objectivity that many journalists strive for, and nor should they. The blogosphere was built around a culture that values personality and opinion over detachedness. The degree to which professional journalism resembles this culture speaks to a decline in journalism professionalism, not as an indicator of a need for the professional trappings for bloggers.

2. Like journalism of the 19th Century, blogging will need a compelling reason to adopt ethical standards.

Despite many beliefs to the contrary, American journalism did not begin as a profession, nor did its practitioners operate under a code of ethics for the first 100 years of our country's existence. Market forces drove the journalists of the last century to desire a status of professionalism. A similar incentive will need to present itself before a majority of bloggers will see the need for a standard code of ethics. The bloggers who have expressed interest in adopting a code of ethics have most often cited increased credibility as the desired outcome of such an action. Perhaps as time goes by, more bloggers will also seek credibility and create an incentive for ethical standards.

3. Blogging fills an important niche between consumers and professional media.

Blogging provides an outlet for the civic participation that has proved problematic for traditional mass media outlets. Because of its responsive format, where a user can post a comment or respond to specific statements offered, blogging empowers the individual citizen's voice in ways other than merely informing an audience. Professional journalism still is necessary to provide much of the content to be commented upon, but blogging is a medium better suited to engage the actual critical debates of our democratic system.

4. Those bloggers who desire a heightened level of credibility can learn from the examples of professional journalism outlets.

Some bloggers desire to build up credibility can learn a great deal from the actions and behaviors of professional journalists. Following the discussions concerning

the breakdowns of professional journalism during the Clinton/Lewinsky coverage, *New York Times* bureau chief Michael Oreskes concluded:

There is an old piece of advice I think every young reporter in a good news room gets: Do your own work. And I think the lesson of this whole thing for reporters comes down to some pretty simple standards like that one. That's what worked here. The people who got it right were those that did their own work, who were careful about it, who followed the basic standards of sourcing and got their information from multiple sources. The people who worried about what was "out there," to use that horrible phrase that justifies so many journalistic sins, the people worried about getting beaten, rather than trying to do it as well as they could as quickly as they could, they messed up. It's amazing really how some simple virtues are re-proven by this whole thing. I think fundamentally the people who tried to do it themselves and did their own work came out of this fine.⁴²

Keeping Oreske's observations in mind, one sees a lesson for the blogging community. In the case of the plagiarism of Sean-Paul Kelley, his first defense was one of being overloaded with the amount of content he was trying to present to the public. "I really do wish I could cite all the sources here ... please understand the time constraints I am under," Kelley wrote in a post defending his actions.⁴³ In both cases, the authors (whether professional or amateur) became caught up in a desire to present more material than they had time to collect themselves. The desire for speed over confirmation led to a loss of credibility by transgressors in both instances.

Bloggers who wish to learn from the mistakes of journalists can adapt some general principles from the ethical codes of professional journalism outlets to their own medium. Whether or not journalism is a profession, it is clear that Weblogging in its current form is not. Basic tenets like doing one's own work, citing sources, storing alterations or corrections and generally striving for transparency in how they assemble their content may enhance a blogger's credibility with his or her readers. Other aspects of journalism ethics, such as pursuing an objective viewpoint, being representative in the balancing of perspectives or distancing oneself from his or her cultural values do not

seem to apply to the culture of the blogosphere, so pursuit of these values may turn a blog into journalism.

Several bloggers have looked to journalism codes of ethics for inspiration for a blogging code of ethics. Two examples of these codes appear below:

Six Rules of Blogging ethics

1. Publish as fact only that which you believe to be true.
2. If material exists online, link to it when you reference it.
3. Publicly correct any misinformation.
4. Write each entry as if it could not be changed; add to, but do not rewrite or delete, any entry.
5. Disclose any conflict of interest.
6. Note questionable and biased sources.⁴⁴

A Blogger's Code of Ethics

Be Honest and Fair

Bloggers should be honest and fair in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Bloggers should:

- Never plagiarize.
- Identify and link to sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Make certain that Weblog entries, quotations, headlines, photos and all other content do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of photos without disclosing what has been changed. Image enhancement is only acceptable for technical clarity. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Never publish information they know is inaccurate -- and if publishing questionable information, make it clear it's in doubt.
- Distinguish between advocacy, commentary and factual information. Even advocacy writing and commentary should not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish factual information and commentary from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.

Minimize Harm

Ethical bloggers treat sources and subjects as human beings deserving of respect.

Bloggers should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by Weblog content. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
 - Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
 - Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of information is not a license for arrogance.
 - Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
 - Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects, victims of sex crimes and criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.

Be Accountable

Bloggers should:

- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.

- Explain each Weblog's mission and invite dialogue with the public over its content and the bloggers' conduct.
- Disclose conflicts of interest, affiliations, activities and personal agendas.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence content. When exceptions are made, disclose them fully to readers.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors. When accepting such information, disclose the favors.
- Expose unethical practices of other bloggers.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others. ⁴⁵

Each of these models borrows from the ethical ideals of professional journalism. The first is a generalization of the core ideas compatible with journalist-style blogging. The second is adapted directly from the SPJ Code of Ethics.

It is clear that journalistic blogging and professional journalism will continue to share some basic functional goals and attributes in the online search for information. How these two information entities will affect each other remains to be seen. Will blogging's rising popularity help in the erosion of journalistic standards the way the Web did? Or will blogging become a lightning rod of argument rhetoric, freeing professional journalism to return to a more thoughtful system of reportage?

Only time will tell. But one thing is certain: practitioners of both forms of information dissemination will likely continue the great ethics debate, each in their respective forums.

Notes

- ¹ Jay Rosen, "The Weblog: An Extremely Democratic Form in Journalism," *PressThink*, (March 8, 2004). Available at: http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/03/08/weblog_demos.html, accessed March 28, 2004.
- ² Tom McNichol, "And Here's Where It Gets Uninteresting," *The New York Times*, (May 15, 2003): G5.
- ³ Jay Rosen, "Emerging Alternatives: Terms of Authority," *Columbia Journalism Review*, (September/October 2003). Available at: <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2003/5/alt-rosen.asp>, accessed April 2, 2004.
- ⁴ Stephen Levy, "Bloggers' Delight" *Poynteronline*, (April 25, 2003). Available at: <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=60&aid=27560>, accessed March 25, 2004.
- ⁵ Daniel Forbes, "Noted War Blogger Cops to Copying," *Wired*, (April 7, 2003). Available at: <http://www.wired.com/news/conflict/0,2100,58346,00.html>, accessed March 25, 2004.
- ⁶ Cynthia L. Webb, "The Great Blogging Ethics Debate," *The Washington Post*, (April 9, 2003). Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A63407-2003Apr9>, accessed March 26, 2004.
- ⁷ W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 2nd edition, (New York: Longman, 1988): 123.
- ⁸ And by 1909, there were 2,600. See Alfred McClung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America: the Evolution of a Social Instrument*, (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1937): 716-17.
- ⁹ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, (New York: Basic Books, 1978): 60.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955):190-191.
- ¹² James Carey, "Journalists Just Leave: The Ethics of an Anomalous Profession," in Maile-Gene Sagen, ed., *Ethics and the Media*, (Iowa City, Iowa: Iowa Humanities Board, 1987): 12.
- ¹³ Schudson, 69-70.
- ¹⁴ Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980): 59.
- ¹⁵ Michael Schudson, *The Power of News*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995): 42-43.
- ¹⁶ Kenneth Stewart and John Tebbel, *Makers of Modern Journalism*, (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952): 111.
- ¹⁷ Candace Stone, *Dana and the Sun*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1938): 52.
- ¹⁸ Ronald T. Farrar, *A Creed for My Profession: Walter Williams, Journalist to the World*, (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1998): 202-203.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ For arguments about whether or not journalism is a profession, see John Merrill, *The Imperative of Freedom: a Philosophy of Journalistic Autonomy*, (New York: Hastings House, 1974); Joan C. Callahan, ed., *Ethical Issues In Professional Life*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Jeffrey Olen, *Ethics in Journalism*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1988): 29-31; Philip Seib and Nancy Fitzpatrick, *Journalism Ethics*, (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997): 17-19; Jeremy Iggers, *Good News, Bad News: Journalism Ethics and the Public Interest*, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998).
- ²¹ Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 1994): 293.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 292.
- ²³ John V. Pavlik, *New Media Technology: Cultural and Commercial Perspectives*, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, c1996): 137.
- ²⁴ Andrew Sather, Ardith Ibañez, Bernie DeChant and Pascal, *Creating Killer Interactive Web Sites: The Art of Integrating Interactivity and Design*, (Indianapolis: Hayden Books, 1997).
- ²⁵ James Hanback, "Maybe Matt Drudge Did Us a Favor," *Scandal.com*, (September 21, 1998).
- ²⁶ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press Survey, "Event Driven News Audience, internet News Takes Off," (June 8, 1998): 3. Quoted in Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media*, (New York : Century Foundation Press, 1999): 55.
- ²⁷ Linton Weeks and Leslie Walker, "Net Holds Up Under Weight of Report," *Washington Post*, (September 12, 1998).

-
- ²⁸ “Sex, Lies and the Internet: A Medium’s Watershed,” *atnewyork.com* (September 11, 1998).
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ “Starr’s Report a Hit on the Net,” *Canoe*, (September 15, 1998).
- ³¹ Hanback.
- ³² “The Clinton Crisis and the Press: A New Standard of American Journalism,” reprinted in Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media*, (New York : Century Foundation Press, 1999): 99-116.
- ³³ Ibid., 99.
- ³⁴ Terry Teachout, "Jenni's Footnote: The First Blog of Sorts Shuts Down," *National Review Online*, (December 11, 2003). Available at: <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/teachout200312110800.asp>, accessed January 27, 2004.
- ³⁵ John Suler, "To Get What You Need: Healthy and Pathological Internet Use," *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 2, (1999), 385-394. Available at: <http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/getneed.html>, accessed January 27, 2004.
- ³⁶ Teachout.
- ³⁷ Archived at <http://www.w3.org/History/19921103-hypertext/hypertext/WWW/News/9201.html>
- ³⁸ David Winer, “History of Weblogs,” *Weblogs.com*, (May 17, 2002). Available at: <http://newhome.weblogs.com/historyOfWeblogs>, accessed April 2, 2004.
- ³⁹ Grant Tait, personal interview with author, (April 28, 2000).
- ⁴⁰ Kovach and Rosenstiel, 6-8.
- ⁴¹ Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920); reprinted (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995): 44.
- ⁴² Committee of Concerned Journalists forum transcript, (October 20, 1998). Quoted in Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media*, (New York : Century Foundation Press, 1999): 90.
- ⁴³ Forbes.
- ⁴⁴ Rebecca Youngblood, “Six Rules of Blogging Ethics,” *Rebecca’s Pocket*, (November 5, 2002). Available at: http://www.rebeccablood.net/handbook/excerpts/weblog_ethics.html, accessed April 2, 2004.
- ⁴⁵ Jonathan Dube, “A Bloggers Code of Ethics,” *CyberJournalist.net*, (April 15, 2003), Available at: <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/000215.php>, accessed March 27, 2004.