# Ethics and Credibility in Online Journalism

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## Introduction

The etymology of *journalism*, from the Latin *diurnalis*, suggests a daily account or record. The term has come to mean the collection and editing of news for presentation via one or more forms of media.  Intraday print issues and hourly broadcasts in the twentieth century distanced the practice from its Latin root. Nearly instantaneous transmission and updates through new electronic media forms further amplifies this divergence.

When print was the only medium available to the journalist, ample time was available for proper research, editing, and publication.  Indeed, only a few early publishers had access to a printing press with which to make product. As mass media progressed, and new forms of print and broadcasting appeared, the time allowed for journalistic reflection shrank.

The Internet allows news and information to move at tremendous dispatch, limited only by the speed of the electron or electromagnetic wave. The immediacy brought by the online environment, a medium where everyone is a potential publisher, allows for even less deliberation by the journalist and editor. Matters of anonymity, identity, access to information, and protection of intellectual property impact the practice of online journalism.

This paper will discuss how journalists and media organizations are dealing with the issues of ethics and credibility on the Web: how cyberjournalists can use personal, institutional, and technological tools to ensure the consistency, fairness, and believability of their product.

# Ethics

The speed and anonymity provided by the Internet can play fast and loose with journalistic ethics. The Internet has created a fourth kind of journalism next to radio, television, and print journalism. Online journalists have received little or no attention from researchers, perhaps because few, pure online journalistic efforts exist, compared to the wealth of trivia, entertainment, personal communication, and pornography. These bedfellows make adherence to an ethical code all the more necessary, particularly in a time when public trust in journalism has ebbed (Yeshua, 2000).

The pessimist:

> The newest news dispenser, the runaway Internet, makes a journalist out of anybody who has a modem. It values speed and sensationalism above accuracy. New media will not accept our standards. We are foolish to treat them as if they have. This is a grim time for newspapers.
>
> -- Portland Oregonian Editor Sandra Mims Rowe

The pragmatist:

> It's past time to retire the Internet as a scapegoat for journalistic ills, It's a medium, not a message, and it can be used as irresponsibly or as honorably as a printing press or a TV network can.
>
> --New York Times columnist Frank Rich
> (Welch, 1998)

Matt Drudge has his own self-published Internet scandal sheet (drudgereport.com). He is the poster boy for online journalism ethics, i.e., what can happen without concise ethical standards in a world where everyone is a potential journalist, broadcaster, columnist, commentator, and media critic (Grossman, 1999). See Blumenthal v. Drudge.

Brill's Content, Columbia Journalism Review, and American Journalism Review critique newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. Founded in 1998 at the Annenberg School of Journalism, the Online Journalism Review (www.ojr.org) critiques online media (Stern, 1999). The Society of Professional Journalists also maintains an ethics guide at spj.org/ethics.

New forms of journalism require new approaches to ethics. Many current ethical issues will remain, and others will emerge. Increasing consolidation of corporate media and the continued evolution of the Internet complicate the ethics of online journalism further. The need for a global approach, requiring a shared set of values, also poses a challenge for journalists in all media (Richards, 1999).

Graphic manipulation, banner ads placed atop a newspaper web site, and commingling of editorial and advertising content are just a few of the many ethical issues that new media raise for journalism. News organizations have built and maintain compelling web sites; they now seek to make these sites commercially viable.

Many online audiences expect content to be free, but some news organizations have turned to subscription services or paid access. Nevertheless, as the online advertising industry grows, so do the number of ads on these sites. Many media organizations maintain separate "new media" staffs, and a good number of these organizations use these "new media" staffers to create advertisements: Advertising and editorial content intertwine (Pavlik, 1997).

Hyperlinks are another issues for online publishers; should a story provide links to other web sites, even if these links are not fully investigated or endorsed by the news entity? Should retractions be posted, or does the webmaster simply overwrite the incorrect content? Professional groups such as the Online News Association may provide some leadership in these areas. Online

journalism will surely face a great many legal and ethical challenges in the future. Leadership

and ethical standards are musts for the maintenance of journalistic standards (Palser, 1999).

> The rules of copyright and ownership still apply to the Internet. Some sites upload
> a revised story, noting the time of the revision but leaving no trace of the original.
> Often, no attempt is made to correct information for those who read the flawed
> version earlier. Ethical challenges never end. The debates still rage over the
> application of standards to real life. It will be no different for the Internet as it
> struggles to find its balance.
>
> --(Kelly, 2000)

Codes of journalistic ethics ( www.asne.org/ideas/codes/codes.htm) have been written in a

broad manner to transcend time. Codes of ethics have framed professional careers.

> Most journalists contend that traditional values remain relevant online. They
> disagree sharply about how those values play out in a medium defined by
> immediacy, interactivity, burgeoning competition, and unflagging pressure to
> produce revenue. Such ethical uncertainty has not slowed the rush to cyberspace.
> The problem, say some editors and ethicists, is that the online environment
> changes rapidly and unpredictably. Decisions are made in a culture still uncertain
> of itself, and the clamor for profits too often drowns out other concerns.
>
> --(Lynch, 1998)

## Credibility

Journalism credibility has taken some hits of late. The public view of news media is on

the wane compared with recent decades. A 1999 survey of journalists by the Pew Research

Center for the People & the Press found a profession in commotion. The poll included journalists

from national print, broadcast, and online news organizations; about half said that the press lacks

credibility with the public, a reason for declining audiences. Also noted was the eroding

distinction between reporting and commentary (Witt, 1999).

Also in 1999, editors and reporters at eight newspapers undertook projects intended to

help shore up trust within readership circles. The efforts were products of the American Society

of Newspaper Editors' credibility study, which found that "factual, grammatical, and spelling errors in stories undermine credibility; that the reading public suspects sensational stories are overplayed." Further findings: "…many think journalists are manipulated by powerful people and advertisers. Admitting errors and running corrections helps, not hurts, credibility" (Truitt, 1999).

The Internet provides the news content equivalent to thousands of newspapers each day through web sites, emails, instant messengers, listservs, discussion groups, or personalized homepages. The Internet also provides a lot of information of dubious value. John Pavlik asks if online journalism is little more than another delivery system for "old" media. He defines news content on the Internet as having gone through three stages.

1. "repurposed"content from a traditional parent medium
2. original content augmented with hyperlinks
3. content designed specifically for the Web as a new medium of communication for an online community

Pavlik notes that news organizations are aware that young people seek news from online media.  Future audiences will be drawn by a website's content and perspective, as well as its quality (Pavlik, 1997).

Open-source journalism makes news stories available to online communities for scrutiny and corrections before final publication; some say it is the "new journalism," others strongly oppose it. It is not clear how this technique will jive with tight deadlines (Moon, 1999).

Dyed-in-the-wool journalists think mainstream news organizations should not lower their standards in the rush to get online. The role of the gatekeeper has changed, however. Traditional news organizations no longer have the exclusive power of publication (Lasica, 1998).

Online reporters struggle with credibility because many who publish on the Web are

untrained in journalism or industry standards. Striving for accuracy c an help. There is a pressure

on journalists to break news, to scoop.

> …abandon the scoop culture of 100 years ago. Net journalists are taking even less
> time to check their stories than they did in the old media. The rush to put these
> online is undermining journalism everywhere.
>
> <div align="right">--Media analyst Ellen Hume<br>(Hyland, 1999)</div>

Many news stories self-criticize reportage, but they only scratch the surface. Taking

exceptional care to be late rather than wrong can increase credibility, something difficult to

regain once it is lost. The loss of balance and fairness  through undersourced and inaccurate

reporting will make it much more difficult for the press to perform its watchdog function

(Cowan, 1998).

## Academia

Journalism is at a juncture where staid social systems and new technologies converge,

placing an unprecedented onus of credibility and objectivity on gatekeepers. Editors wield

tremendous social power. Mass media are no longer linear. Communication once directly

conveyed messages related to survival. Such data now pass through subjective media filters,

ending with a product called "news."

Terms: "News" was first delivered after Gutenberg (c. 1457), and "journalists" began

expressing themselves around 1833.   Reporters and editors soon became powerful distillers of

information. The medium of data transfer was print on paper, readily subject to quality control.

Accuracy and balance were valued and controlled.

The Internet has brought a multiplicity of senders and receivers, destroying the linear paradigm. A blow was dealt to editorial agenda setting. Veracity is paramount in the synaptic ricochet of the online news environment. Retaining credibility in this new psychologically intuitive medium is critical. Control of content and quantity of the news appears to slip from editors' control.

"Pathfinder" is coined as peers evaluate newsworthiness. Perhaps future gatekeepers will be dubbed "information specialists."

A paper from the Netherlands reports the findings of a pilot project involving online journalists and online journalism graduate students who relate their experiences and views on ethical dilemmas in the new medium; new media ethics are analyzed (home.pscw.uva.nl/deuze/publ15.htm).

Loyola University Chicago houses the Ethics Advice Line for Journalists; this is a free service for journalists to call and talk about ethical dilemmas. Volunteers staff the phone lines. Three volunteers teach ethics and two are on the university's ethics advisory board. The center will log calls to identify areas where journalists are having ethical dilemmas (Garcia, 2001).

The University of Florida recently filled its Knight Chair in Journalism with an online news professional, Mindy McAdams. The university has a thriving J-school utilizing interactive media. Areas of research include gatekeeping theory, diffusion of innovation theory, sociological perspectives, and a perspective that explores the idea of journalism as a cohesive force in society (Singer, 1998).

The developments of online relationships have been viewed as virtual communities. Findings from an ongoing case study of web-based news suggest the early ideals of democratic community-building on the Web are encountering resistance as media organizations define "virtual geographic space" and stake out "territory" on the Internet. The traditional press is fusing with computing and telecom to create a new medium of human communication. The World Wide Web is a space allowing global community-building without regard to geography or time. Online journalists and media organizations would do well to mine this resource. Common interests make connections; tapping into these connections makes profits (Riley, 1998).

In The Printing Press as an Agent of Change, Elizabeth Eisenstein hints that credibility of the printed word accrues through reputation and print quality—two components inherently absent from much of today's online reportage. Post-publication manipulation of electronic copy and lack of editorial control are also cited for credibility concerns.

Some authors speculate on the future demise of press objectivity and ethics, while journalists align with special interests, advocacy groups, and titans of commerce. They see a dismantling of the firewall between advertising and news: Ads, opinion, marketing, and news will become intertwined as the audiences lose their faith in journalistic objectivity.

Advertisers have a long tradition of influence peddling with regard to editorial content; it is a vested interest. Media are often susceptible to this pressure. Online news reporting is now dynamic and often "pre-verified." Print journalism is more static. This disparity fuels the fragmentation of news consumers into readily targetable audiences or niches. These niche targets are sometimes labeled as communities defined by shared interests rather than simple geography. Ambient ads, commercial links, a gauntlet of promotional data, and the ever-

coalescing media empires threaten traditionally objective reporting. News and entertainment blur together, as do news and opinion.

The marketplace of ideas and audiences are fracturing, i.e., subdividing into mini-markets.  Terms used include infoharvesting and demographic nuggets. Each new communications medium presents challenges to marketers. Tailoring messages and content to audiences is key in the electronic media marketplace. Vertical integration of communications corporations, the social implications of online journalism, and their facilitation of these niche audiences are significant (Borden, 1998).

Journalism schools are tapping talent from other disciplines and from online newsrooms. "…but case after worrisome case…marketing and advertising discussions…slopped over into the newsroom" (Harvey, 2000).

Content is King says Mark Deuze. Content influences the public agenda. It helps to determine perception. Journalists and editors are responsible for content acquired through media, and thus set an agenda. "…a new type of communicator has arrived: the online journalist" (Deuze, 1998).

> Some academic links: http://www.aejmc.org/pubs/onlinejournals.html
> http://www.aejmc.org/pubs/webcourses.html
> http://www.worldinternettimes.com/

## Vocational Journalism

The recent spate of firings at, and the downsizing or disappearance of, many online news outlets not associated with major media companies are a concern. Important points to consider about these endeavors and their employees' job security, financial viability, and journalistic

independence. Advertisers, venture capitalists, and investors have pulled back from these web

sites, as have many subscribers. APBnews.com was gone (now reborn), and a sleeker Salon.com

survives on a shoestring, while Slate Magazine and MSNBC.com, et al, motor on with backing

from their huge corporate parents. Niche sites, such as those targeting African-Americans, have

struggled in the past, but hopes are that, given sufficient promotion, they can flourish on the

Web. Promotion and new technology are also essential.

Listservs, web-based tip sheets, and electronic databases are the tools of the new,

computer-assisted reporter (CAR). It is difficult to envision a world without email, the Internet,

and web sites for most every niche. The field of online journalism is still young.

> When Congress released the Starr Report on the Web, making it instantly
> available to the public, the game changed. No waiting for journalists to digest
> material before telling you about it. It was right there, right away (Rieder, 1999).

Lack of diversity plagues online journalism, claims Adam Clayton Powell III.  A 1999

Freedom Forum survey showed that a majority of journalists of color at U.S. dailies expects to

leave the news business. "There's not just a glass ceiling, but brick walls and hostile gatekeepers"

(Powell, 1999).

Recently the Seattle Post-Intelligencer set about the task of recruiting an online producer

to help energize its web site, but the job announcement was "purposely vague," said Lee Rozen,

the new media manager at the Post-Intelligencer. Salary, education, and experience levels were

omitted. "Perhaps a tolerance for ambiguity is one of the skills I seek," said Rozen. Lack of job

standards creates confusion (Perlman, 1999).

In "We're All Nerds Now" (1999), Joel Simon and Carol Napolitano synopsize the advent, status, and future of computer-assisted reporting. They discuss the availability of some electronic databases, as well as software used to manipulate these data. Computer literacy is seen as a challenge for inclusion and improved credibility, rather than an obstacle to progress without specialization. This article serves as a primer for modern CAR.

On 27 March 1999, Congress's Standing Committee on Correspondents voted to reinterpret its rules on who qualifies for accreditation as a Washington reporter to include online reporters. "The press pass not only provides preferential seating in congressional hearings but also helps open doors to the inner sanctums…" (Meddis, 1999).

> http://ajr.newslink.org/special/
> http://onlinejournalism.com
> http://isyndicate.com/
> http://www.netcontent.org/

## Conclusion

One of the most easily accessible theories is the journalist as gatekeeper, a role that clearly seems threatened by a medium in which users can put their fingers on virtually any piece of information at will. There exists a proposal to certify web-based news by establishing a "dot news" (.news) domain.

Electronic media certainly can be credible, but their advantages of speed and audiovisual enhancements tempt the journalist to hasten his/her copy. The Internet can deliver in-depth stories and news, as well. However, audiences mostly look to this medium for the quick news bites rather than more detailed information.

In the last century of mass media, we have heard predictions as to the demise of certain media manifestations whenever a more complex form emerges. Generally, each older form falls back into a workable niche, when a new one appears. Just when we feel assurance that we have reached a static pinnacle of communications technology, we are surprised (www.journalists.org).

The evolving medium of the Internet provides journalists a fresh means of communication and research. Companions to these new capabilities are potential pitfalls. The definitions of journalists and publisher become skewed. Legally, anyone who posts information on the World Wide Web is a publisher; the people who compose the information are journalists, regardless of training or experience. Both are subject to the same privileges and liabilities of their conventional counterparts. The Internet spans the globe, encompassing all manner of geography and political/governmental entities.

Today we see online webcasts of news (www.freedomforum.org) and even the injection of audience input in breaking news (www.cnn.com/cnn/programs/news.site). It is a brave new world in the field of online journalism. Adhering to conventional ethics and credibility can help ensure its success.

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