Professional Blogging: Ethics and Rules

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Abstract

This research paper defines what a blog is and speaks about the conflicting morals and ethics that bloggers must face on a daily basis. It covers Weblog ethics versus print ethics and discusses how certain topics should be handled in a blog (what should and should not be posted). I researched the problems that a blogger faces with ethical issues because of the increased availability to the public; the freedom to say things in a blog that cannot be said in print leaves the writer struggling with what is right and what is wrong. I speak about several newspapers and how their blogs increase reader trafficking, as well as the pros and cons of the increased personal relationship a blogging journalist shares with his or her audience.
Review

A blog is a content management system, a Web site made up of frequent posts that are displayed in reverse chronological order (Holtz, Demopoulous, 2006, p.1). “To blog is to let go of your writing in a way, to hold it at arms length, open it to scrutiny…and let others…pivot you toward relative truth” (Sullivan, 2008). The functions of a blog vary from person to person because everyone uses their blogs for different reasons. Blogger Fred Stutzman posted in his blog about how teenagers view the blogging phenomenon differently from journalists who blog, such as professional bloggers will view blogging differently from sex bloggers (Kuhn, 2007, p. 18).

A blogger updates his or her blog continually posting new content for its followers. Professional blogger Andrew Sullivan, author of The Atlantic Web site’s The Daily Dish, updates his blog, andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com, at least once every hour between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m.; if a blog stops moving, it dies. Andrew Sullivan is a widely known news blogger, and in his article “Why I Blog,” he discusses the pros and cons of blogging. Sullivan describes a blog as “a log of thoughts and writing posted publicly on the World Wide Web” as “the spontaneous expression of instant thought” (Sullivan, 2008). Bloggers have very little time to gather their thoughts or check their sources or even wait for an event to pass. Bloggers must blog now—as the news emerges. The risk of error is great, and bloggers are held accountable by their audience, as well as by other bloggers, in exceedingly immediate and unavoidable ways (Sullivan, 2008).

A print journalist can take days, weeks, months, even years to gather information and confirm sources before their article goes to print, but for bloggers, the deadline is immediate. “The traditional method involves a journalist searching for key sources, nurturing them, and
sequestering them from his rivals. A blogger splashes gamely into a subject and dares the sources to come to him,” (Sullivan, 2008). Blogging is free form, accident-prone, informal, and more alive than print mediums; a blogger writes out loud and shares the moment with their readers, experiencing things together.

Bloggers often end up writing about themselves and reveal a lot about their character. A blog becomes a diary with raw honestly and dedication to dictating life as it happens. A blog is instantly public; it transforms “this most personal and retrospective of forms into a painfully public and immediate one” (Sullivan, 2008). No author has been exposed to his or her public quite like a blogger.

The fear of being exposed or undone is not available to a blogger. A blogger must be willing to take risks and cannot fear being proven wrong or hesitate to take a leap into the unknown. According to Sullivan, a reader’s personal responses to a blog are “more brutal than any editor, more persnickety than any copy editor, and more emotionally unstable than any colleague.” Writers are made up of thin skin, but the instantaneous, overly personal, and incredibly brutal criticism a blogger experiences does not allow for a softhearted journalist. “Bloggers [have] to walk the walk of self-correction in the same space and in the same format as the original screw up…there is nothing more conducive to professionalism than being publicly humiliated for sloppiness” (Sullivan, 2008). Unlike a reporter in a newsroom who only has their editor to answer to, and whose corrections often go unnoticed, bloggers are not safeguarded from the humiliation of their mistakes.

There are advantages to blogging, like the use of hyperlinks; the ability to link to the original source transforms the reading experience. Readers of print mediums do not have the opportunity to be able to read the original text of the story, but with reading online comes the
convenience of just clicking on a link and getting all of the story’s original content and ideas. “The ability to read the primary material instantly…can add much greater context than anything on paper…this innovation, pre-dating blogs but popularized by them, is increasingly central to mainstream journalism” (Sullivan, 2008). The disadvantage to using hyperlinks is how easily readers can check the original information and catch the blogger for inaccuracy.

Linking is important, especially when a blogger is speaking on high-profile topics, such as war. Sean-Paul Kelly, a blogger from Texas, began a blog about the Iraq war. He admitted to copying material about the war verbatim from Stratfor, a Texas-based intelligence firm, and posting the information on his own blog, The Agonist, without linking to the original material or stating where the information came from. Other bloggers, such as Glenn Reynolds who also blogs about the war, said he doesn’t link much to or promote Kelly’s site because he’s “generally skeptical of secondhand reports without clear sourcing” (Webb, 2003). Links are an important part of establishing a blogger’s credibility.

Blogs are valuable to most professional news organizations because blogs are a minor cost with major financial gain, but because they are a business with salaries to pay and advertisers and audiences to please, they must be concerned with the integrity of their blogs—“lack of gatekeepers and the freedom from consequences” can compromise that integrity (Blood, 2009). Blogging is a good asset to a business, because it can help a company can “build goodwill, attract new business, improve customer relations, enhance [a] brand, recruit the best employees, weather a crisis, and build support for initiatives.” (Holtz & Demopoulous, 2006, p. 21). Over 95 percent of the top 100 newspapers in America, including the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, have reporter blogs (State of the Blogosphere, 2008). Newspapers often use blogs to encourage feedback from their audience. Blogs make the reader feel like they are
being spoken to, not just told the who, what, where, when, and why of a typical news story. Blogs encourage conversations between the journalist, in this case the blogger, and the readers, making the reading experience a much more personal one.

“Weblogs are the mavericks of the online world. Two of their greatest strengths are their ability to filter and disseminate information to a widely dispersed audience, and their position outside the mainstream mass media” (Blood, 2002). Blogs spread information based on their own criteria because blogging ethics have such a blurred line. A blog’s greatest strength is also it’s greatest weakness: The ability to be uncensored, unmediated, and uncontrolled (Blood, 2002).

It is impossible to determine what is right on the Internet and what is wrong to post when each blogger has a different moral code. Because the vast community of bloggers has different views as the functions of a blog, blogging ethics should be based on the specific culture of the blogger (Kuhn, 2007, p. 19). A responsible blogger should realize that they are publishing words publicly “and therefore have certain ethical obligations to their readers, the people they write about and society in general” (Beeson, 2005). A professional blogger should be held to the standards of print journalists, because a professional must know the rules and are held by the public to higher standards than non-professional, individual bloggers. All bloggers should be transparent with their blog—stating any bias or motivation that they may have—and transparency goes hand-in-hand with ethical decision making (Beeson, 2005), because being transparent and ethical is what gives a blogger his or her credibility. As a professional blogger, credibility is very important; a company is paying someone to write on behalf of their company or newspapers, and a non-credible blogger will lead to a lack of credibility in the company or newspaper.
According to Rebecca Blood’s *Weblog Ethics*, there are six basic ethical rules a blogger should follow. One: A blogger should publish only what the blogger believes to be true, and if there is any speculation, the blogger should state that speculation in their blog. Two: If there is material online about the topic being blogged, link to it—all of it. “Referencing material but selectively linking only that which you agree is manipulative” (Blood, 2002). Even if there is a site that a blogger has chosen to link to that it is morally reprehensible, the ethical thing to do would be to refer to the blog but not provide the actual link (Blood, 2002); if the reader wants to read it, then they can find it on their own. By not providing the link, the blogger does not have to worry about being responsible for morally compromising their public.

The third is to always publicly correct any misinformation. In blogs, the corrections can appear in either the most recent post or can be added as a note to the original entry. The original misinformation should also appear with a strikethrough so that the readers know the information is wrong but has been corrected (Blood, 2009).

The fourth rule in Blood’s *Weblog Ethics* is to write each entry as if it cannot be changed. A blog entry can be added to, but it should not be rewritten or deleted, because “anyone who comments on or cites a document relies on that document to remain unchanged” (Blood, 2009). If a blogger changes their mind about something he or she has posted, they should just make a note of it somewhere in their blog and move on.

The next rule goes back to the idea that a blogger should be as transparent as possible to let the readers know of any biases or conflicts of interests. For example, if you are a computer analyst, then your commentary on the merits of the latest operating system holds more weight because that person is a professional. If a blogger says they are impressed with a service or a product, then they should make a note if they hold stock in the company every time they promote
it on their blog (Blood, 2009). The readers should have no questions about who the blogger is or about the blog’s intentions. For example, a disc jockey on the radio network mentioned a columnist from Slate magazine as a source to what she was talking about; she failed to mention that the columnist was also her husband. The NPR regulators say the disc jockey should have disclosed that bit of information to public and say she should have also found another quote so the radio station would not get the reputation of playing favorites (Catone, 2007).

The final rule is to note any questionable sources. If a blogger links to a highly biased Web site, such as a Web site about abortion or religion, the blogger should clearly state the nature of the site they have linked to. Avid blog readers depend on the blogosphere to help them navigate the Web, and it is fine to link to a source that has a strong agenda, but it is unethical to not tell the readers about the nature of that article. Readers may cease to trust a blogger if they discover even once that you disguised—or didn’t make clear—the source of an article they might have evaluated differently had they been given all the facts,” (Blood, 2009). Blog readers put a lot of trust in the bloggers whose sites they read, and considering how unmonitored the Internet and blogs are, the smallest lie or lack of information could lead to the blogger losing that trust.

Journalism ethics have been revised throughout the years. Sigma Delta Chi adopted the first Code of Ethics from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. Sigma Delta Chi later wrote and revised its own code in 1984 and again in 1987. The Society of Professional Journalists’ current Code of Ethics was adopted in 1996 (SPJ Code of Ethics, 1996). CyberJournalist.net’s Jonathan Dube later created A Blogger’s Code of Ethics when the issue of blogging arose and controversy began over how much of the print journalism ethics should be carried over to the Web considering these are two completely different mediums. A Blogger’s Code of Ethics is modified from the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics.
CyberJournalist.net considers these rules to be more like guidelines, not the law, because, in the end, it is up to the blogger to adopt the practice that suit them best. “Integrity is the cornerstone of credibility” and by putting these standards into practice, bloggers establish themselves not only as ethical writers, but also as someone their readers can trust (Dube, 2003). The following rules are rules specific to blogging:

- “Identify and link to the sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible.”
- “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 [you] know is inaccurate—and if publishing questionable information, make it clear it’s in doubt.” (A rule also mentioned by Andrew Sullivan and Rebecca Blood as being very important to being a trustworthy blogger.)
- “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 line between the two.”
- “Explain each Weblog’s mission and invite dialogue with the public over its content and the blogger’s conduct.”

In *Blogging for Business: Everything You Need to Know and Why You Should Care*, the authors, Shel Holtz and Ted Demopoulous, discuss legal issues surrounding business blogs. Legal problems in blogs have nothing to do with the technology or the format; it has everything to do with the content. There is always the chance that a person will feel libeled because of something posted on a blog, and in the United States, that individual is able to bring a lawsuit whether or not the posted information is justified (Holtz, Demopoulous, 2006). Business and newspaper blogs are trafficked by many more people than an individual’s blog; therefore, their blogs must be carefully monitored.
Some businesses may think it smart to have a legal staff review the post before the blogger pushes the ‘post’ button, but this is a bad idea for a number of reasons. The first reason is that it will delay the publication of information that readers may be awaiting—one of the perks of blogging is the swiftness of the posts and the ability to get information out as it happens. Attorneys would also change the jargon, and blogs “must be written in the genuine, authentic voice of the author” (Holtz & Demopoulous, 2006, p. 222). A particular situation involves Vice Chairmen of General Motors Bob Lutz wanting to start a blog. GM attorneys insisted on reviewing the blog before it was published, but Lutz stood firm saying that “by the time someone achieves the level of vice chairman, they should know what can and cannot be said” (Holtz & Demopoulous, 2006, p. 222). So, when starting a business blog, the higher the blogger ranks in the organization, the more reliable to not only follow the rules, but also be more knowledgeable about the topic at hand they are.

Many companies have had problems with their employee’s personal, private blogs, and many companies have fired their employees for what they have published in their blogs. The best-known case involved Ellen Simonetti, a former Delta Air Lines flight attendant who was fired for posting personal photos in her blog, Queen of the Skies, in which she wore her flight attendant’s uniform while “striking some mildly suggestive poses” (Holtz & Demopoulous, 2006, p. 229). Google also fired employee Mark Jen for what was believed to be an innocent post about the company. This was said about the situation: “Employee blogging is on the rise, sparking increasing clashes between workers and management over the line between appropriate and inappropriate commentary” (Hansen, 2005). Google did not release the contents of Jen’s blog, putting ethics above profits, because being such a hugely trafficked
Web site that is known worldwide, Google must hold itself to much higher standards than the average Internet company.

From these events, any smart blogger can conclude that they should not be posting information about big-name companies that have high expectations and reputations to uphold. This is where a blogger’s personal ethics and common sense come into play when posting information for the world to access. There are no true ethics to follow; blogging is all about what the individual feels is right. A blogger risks opposition with any idea they post, and because there are no definite guidelines or laws, blogging poses a huge dilemma to the Internet user’s world.

Professional bloggers can have the same legal issues as print journalists—libel or defamation of disclosure—but the risk of having ideas and information copyrighted is the easiest to handle. Lawyer and professor Lawrence Lessig created the Creative Commons license. The Creative Commons lets a blogger establish a license that grants certain permissions for use of content. All a blogger must do is apply the Creative Commons logo to their blog, and anyone can then see what they are or are not allowed to copy. There are licenses for twenty different jurisdictions, and the blogger must simply specify whether or not they will allow commercial use of their blog content or if the blogger wants to be credited for any information taken from their blog. The Creative Commons license is a simple way for bloggers of all kinds to articulate to the blogging community the rights they are willing to grant the public (Holtz & Demopoulous, 2006, p. 225-226). Using the Creative Commons license to protect a blog’s information is very important to a professional blogger, especially. When a company hires a blogger to write about the future plans of a company or about issues
arising within a company, it is important to have the rights to those words protected; the Web is full of people trying to steal ideas.

In 1997, the Supreme Court made a landmark decision to establish the Communications Decency Act (CDA). This was the first time the Supreme Court considered the Internet to be a unique medium entitled to the protections of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, thus giving the Internet “the same free speech protections as print,” simply because there are low access barriers, an abundance of information, millions of different speakers, and no gatekeepers (Communications Decency Act, 2009). The CDA later came into play with two major questions that arose amongst the Internet world: “Can an Internet service provider (ISP) be held responsible for a statement made in it’s discussion forums or on Web pages it provides access to? Can a news Web site be liable for statements made by its readers in its discussion forums?” (Foust, 2009, p. 218) A federal district court in New York held the 1991 case Cubby v. CompuServe, which stated that the CompuServe ISP was not liable for the defamatory statements that a subscriber posted on one of its forums, because CompuServe had no editorial control over the information. However, in the 1995 Stratton Oakmont, Inc v. Prodigy Services Co. case, Prodigy was held responsible for libelous statements, because they reported themselves as a family-friendly ISP by stating that they engaged in the screening of the content of its online bulletin boards (Foust, 2009, p. 218-19).

The uncertainty these cases caused over the liability of ISPs led to the addition of section 230 to the Communications Decency Act, which was passed as part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act has become the defining law for ISP liability issues; it reads: “No provider or user of an
interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider” (Foust, 2009, p. 219). Several courts have extended section 230 to include online journalistic organizations, and Yahoo! has been provided immunity from postings made on user profiles and in its chat rooms (Foust, 2009, p. 219).

Unfortunately for bloggers, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act does not always protect them from libelous statements readers might post on their sites. In 2008, Christopher Grotke was sued by a woman who was accused in a comment on Grotke’s citizen-journalism Web site of having an extramarital affair. The woman sued the Web site, iBrattleboro.com, for failing to delete the comment (Yusuf, 2008). What the CDA does protect is this: Suppose someone has a blog, and a person leaves a defamatory comment on that blog, and a third party person links to that blog. The third party person cannot be sued for the defamatory comment. Now, if that person changes the comment in a significant way, then the court may claim them as an “information content provider,” and they would not be protected under the CDA (Facchetti, 2008).

The Communications Decency Act of 1996 also prohibits obscenity on the Internet. Obscenity refers to any sexual material that is “designed to cause arousal” and lacks artistic, literary or scientific value. This section of the CDA states that “any comment, request, suggestion, proposal, image, or other communication that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measure by contemporary community standards, sexual or excretory activities or organs” posted by a Web user could be subjected to a $250,000 fine (Foust, 2009, p. 221). This covers pornography as well; as long as pornography keeps to the standards of society and does not exceed the limit of obscenity, measured by the Miller test.
that dictates the community’s standards, then it cannot be banned from the Internet. As long as the content of pornographic Web sites is not knowingly being distributed to minors, then the site cannot get into trouble with Communications Decency Act (Legal Status of Internet Pornography). This rule is why many pornography Web sites make the user submit their birthday to access the site, but this opportunity is not available to a blogger, and it would be morally wrong for a blogger to post pornographic items on their page.

Although blogs are personal and individually edited, bloggers are still held accountable to the Communications Decency Act. According to the Media Law Resource Center in New York, since blogging became popular in 2004, 159 bloggers have been the victim of civil and criminal court cases totaling $18.5 million (Yusuf, 2008). Overseas blogs face even bigger threats. The World Information Access Report published by the University of Washington states that since 2003, 64 bloggers have been arrested in Egypt, China and Iran for criticizing the government or pointing out the abuse of human rights—the United States has only made two blog-related arrests in the same time period (Yusuf, 2008).

Whether as professionals—people who get paid to blog—or just an individual voicing opinions, bloggers face dilemmas when deciding what is right and what is wrong to post on their sites. There are no firmly established laws or code of ethics specifically for bloggers. Sure, there are codes that are suggested, such as Rebecca Blood’s advice, as well as Jonathan’s Dube’s A Blogger’s Code of Ethics, and there is also the Communications Decency Act to be taken into consideration, although it more specifically covers Internet companies. Everything that is said and done in a blog is based off the individual blogger’s own code of ethics—a moral blogger is trustworthy and not offensive with their ideas and posted materials, but not all bloggers have set morals. Many lawyers just expect bloggers to
figure out for themselves what they should and should not post, and this lack of a law involvement causes problems for those who struggle with right and wrong, or who just have strong opinions. This research paper was supposed to discuss the ethical issues that bloggers face every day and discuss what is right and wrong, but because there are no unwavering laws or guidelines, what a blogger should or should not post in their blog is completely up to that individual. With each post, a blogger takes a risk.
References


