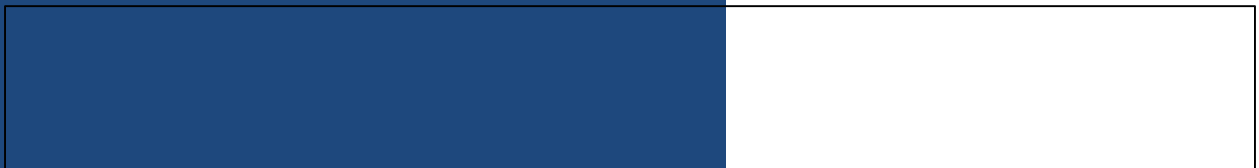


Number 12  
2001



## Teaching Online Journalism Ethics

As online journalism has become an increasingly important part of the news business, journalism educators have begun to adjust curricula to make certain that the next generation of journalists will be well versed in this field. Much of the academic emphasis has been on “how to do it”: how to navigate the World Wide Web; how to use the Internet for research that will assist reporting; how to design a news Web site that will attract an audience. All these are important elements of the new news, but there may be a tendency to plunge into the intricacies of online journalistic technique without first addressing fundamental journalistic principles. As is the case with practitioners of other kinds of journalism, online news should require its journalists to have a firm grounding in ethics and to possess a thoughtful appreciation of the influence they wield.

This paper discusses some of the topics that might be integrated into journalism and other communications ethics courses as part of an online component. There are no grand revelations here; to a considerable extent, ethics is ethics, and the issues of online ethics are in many ways similar to those of traditional journalism. Many of the examples cited and issues raised may stimulate valuable debate in the classroom.

### Acknowledgments

For those who like to have specific dates to mark historic transitions, February 28, 1997, is worth remembering. One writer hailed it as “a kind of journalistic Bastille Day. Newspapers were liberated from the time constraints of printing press production, empowered to break news instantly.”<sup>1</sup>

The event was the publication of a *Dallas Morning News* story about Oklahoma City bombing defendant Timothy McVeigh confessing to his lawyers that he had indeed set off the bomb that killed 168 people. What made this story particularly significant was not what it said but how it was delivered—on the paper’s Web site seven hours before the regular edition was printed.

The story was immediately caught up in controversy about whether the *Morning News* had behaved ethically in revealing information that could prejudice the jury pool and impede McVeigh’s chances of



ensure that accuracy and context are not lost in the rush to be fast and faster. Ted Koppel said of this issue, “If we are moving into an era in which reporters are pressured to get it online before we have a chance to check and edit the material—if speed is the main criterion of putting something on line—then I think that’s dangerous.”<sup>5</sup>

Even among the Internet’s biggest fans, few would contend that a journalistic utopia is in the offing. As evidence of online journalism’s frailties, the new medium already features an inviting villain: Matt Drudge.

Casting himself as a latter-day Walter Winchell, Drudge has used the Internet to disseminate information, which he pointedly says is not the same as practicing traditional journalism. Getting started on his own and with almost no money, just a computer in a small apartment, Drudge offered a tiny audience items that he retrieved from trash cans at the Hollywood CBS studio where he worked. Gossip will always find an audience, and Drudge’s following grew. He charges no fee to access his Web site, and in addition to his own tidbits provides links to news organizations and the work of individual journalists. Unconstrained by the practices of journalism, he presents entertaining—if sometimes nasty and not always accurate—stories. He writes about people while only occasionally seeking comment from them. If a rumor is “out there,” floating along the edges of the political or media mainstream, he deems it publishable.

While a reporter or news organization is carefully verifying a story, Drudge may pounce. For him, absolute truth matters less than absolute speed. He has his own sources within the news business, and he constantly scans news Web sites to find out what news organizations around the world will be presenting when they next go to press or go on the air. Then he blithely scoops them. This is the inherent danger in using the Web to offer previews of coming attractions. It might seem to be a good way to advertise stories, but a pirate such as Drudge may kidnap the previews and be the first to get them to the public.

Coverage of the 1998 White House sex scandal was a testing ground for Drudge, as it was for Internet journalism. This medium has an egalitarian appeal as the latest version of the basement printing press on which anyone has the right to propound his or her views and

disseminate them as he or she chooses. The great difference, of course, between the basement printing press and the Internet is reach. Matt Drudge can sit in his apartment, crank out his *D . . . R . . .*, and instantly make it available to millions. His expenses are negligible, his reach enormous.

Drudge is proudly cavalier about fact-checking, which has earned him the disdain of mainstream journalists, but many of them still read him for entertainment and as a source of lurid tips. He has become a minor celebrity, a figure both treacherous and comic, often referred to in mocking terms.

For the journalists whose stories Drudge scoops, he is not to be lightly dismissed. In 1998, Michael Isikoff of *N . . .* found the *D . . . R . . .* was carrying parts of a story he was working on about Kathleen Willey, who accused President Clinton of sexual misconduct. The story had not yet appeared in *N . . .* because it was not judged ready for publication, a fact that apparently did not bother Drudge. Isikoff said: "He's rifling through raw reporting like raw FBI files, and disseminating it. He doesn't conform to any journalistic standard. This is not harmless fun; it's reckless and ought to be condemned. . . . It's hard to do real reporting in an atmosphere that's been polluted like this."<sup>6</sup>

More importantly, Drudge has affected the rules of news delivery. He can take a story that has been judged by a news organization as not yet ready for publication, shine his own spotlight on it, and force it onto the public news agenda. His most famous piracy was the initial *N . . .* story by Isikoff about Monica Lewinsky's relationship with Bill Clinton. The magazine was not ready to publish, but when a *N . . .* source told Drudge the gist of the story, he had no such reluctance. He told the world that *N . . .* was sitting on the story. It was now "out there" enough to find a home on quasi-news venues, such as Rush Limbaugh's radio talk show and Jay Leno's "Tonight Show" monologue. Once the huge audiences of these and similar programs learn about a story, many in the mainstream media rush to catch up.

Some journalists, however, have not abandoned restraint. Ann McDaniel, *N . . .*'s managing editor and Washington Bureau chief, anticipated being scooped on the Lewinsky story: "When we

didn't publish Monica in the first weekend, we knew there was no chance that in the seven days that followed somebody would not break the story. But it did not meet our standards, and we chose not to publish. It was an extraordinarily difficult decision. We like to be first. But we like to be accurate. . . . We weren't going to violate our standards just to get out there with it."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to raiding other journalists' work, Drudge presents his own "world exclusive" that he hammers together from leaks and leftovers. When he is wrong, he is unrepentant. Asked about not checking out a story that proved incorrect, he simply said, "It's the nature of what I do—I move quickly."<sup>8</sup>

That cavalier attitude about the truth can infect the larger news gathering process. News on the Internet becomes a stimulus to the rest of the news business. Print, broadcast, and cable converge with Web news carriers in the effort to match whatever the frontrunner is offering. There is nothing new about journalists trying to best someone else's scoop, but when the "someone else" is Drudge and the scoop is gossip, not verified news, journalistic standards may be knocked askew. . . . *Post* media critic Howard Kurtz has noted that "gossip is naughty, delicious, unverified—all the things that mainstream journalism is not."<sup>9</sup> *National Journal*'s Isikoff, whose Willey and Lewinsky stories Drudge preempted, offers a harsher appraisal of Drudge: "He's a menace to honest, responsible journalism. He's clearly willing to go with anything, whether he's got any legitimate sourcing, anything approaching legitimate verification. He doesn't conform to any journalistic standard or convention that I'm aware of. And to the extent that he's read and people believe what they read, he's dangerous."<sup>10</sup>

Drudge sees himself as an "information anarchist," doing his work in a way that "makes me editor of the entire media world."<sup>11</sup> He says: "Clearly there is a hunger for unedited information. . . . We have entered an era vibrating with the din of small voices. Every citizen can be a reporter, can

says Drudge, “with a modem, anyone can follow the world and report on the world—no middle man, no big brother.”<sup>13</sup>

There will be no editors in the Internet world, says Drudge, as individuals publish on line whatever they choose. “What is civilization to do,” he asks, “with the ability of one citizen—without advertisers, without an editor,” to reach millions? “The conscience,” he says, “is going to be the only thing between us and communication in the future.”<sup>14</sup>





Time pressures may force Web readers to check only the top of a story, maybe coming back to the rest later. The teasing leads that are much in vogue in newspaper writing today may be met with impatience by the workplace news consumer.

For audience members who have the time and inclination to use online news for in-depth journalism, a non-linear approach might work best. Readers will survey the array of relatively short blocks of text, then choose those that most interest them. From these blocks, they can proceed to links—electronic digressions that amplify the elements of the basic story. The task for the online journalist is to provide enough solid information (meaning that it has been verified and merits the imprimatur of the news organization) and then offer the news consumer access to additional material through internal and external links. The former might include a connection to the news organization's own archives, and the latter might offer an array of primary and secondary sources that were used in writing the original story.

Another factor for all journalists to consider is the speed of reaction—individual and collective—fostered by the Internet. As a major story unfolds, Web chat rooms are likely to be crowded with attendees ready to expound on the events at hand. As Lisa Napoli observed in the *New York Times*, by making available these cyber gathering places for expressing opinions, the Net is “the soapbox—and barroom—of our times.”<sup>21</sup> The existence of these forums does not affect how basic reporting is done, but for journalists it opens a window on public sentiment.

This can be useful in fashioning further coverage, but only in a decidedly unscientific way. Ease of access to chat room discourse is alluring, but sampling chat room sentiment should not be considered a legitimate replacement for properly done opinion polling. Chat rooms may be used by people simply interested in the news, or they may be populated by those with a common interest or ideology. Some chat rooms allow anonymity, which is usually not allowed in a newspaper's “Letters to the Editor” section.

Particularly until Internet use becomes much more widespread, journalists should keep in mind that the online constituency differs significantly from the overall population. A Pew Research Center

study of online polling (conducted in October 1998) found “significant attitudinal differences between the general public and those who participate in online polls.” Although the Internet user base is steadily expanding, this group (especially the true devotees) is still younger, better educated, and more affluent than the overall American





The larger issue in these matters is far from new: maintaining a wall between editorial and advertising content, separating the journalistic and business sides of the news organization. If keeping the wall in good repair is taken seriously, direct sponsorship of specific news sections might not become common, because it will be difficult to create a formula for it that satisfies both editors and advertisers. On the other hand, this wall may be like the Maginot Line: impregnable in theory, but inconsequential in practice.

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As the material discussed here illustrates, sophisticated news technology demands sophisticated news ethics. A good way to teach these topics is to do so in a computer-equipped classroom, so students can look at the online news product as these issues are discussed. Even if that is not possible, ethics should be part of every discussion about online journalism, just as it should be in other journalism fields. Given the increasing popularity of “cross-training” in journalism education, students should be made aware of the common ethical ground that print, electronic, and online journalists share. That may be the best way to ensure that the next generation of journalists, whatever media they work in, will understand their professional responsibilities.

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- 3 Stacy Jones, "Free Press vs. Fair Trial," *Electronic Privacy*, March 5, 1997, 34.
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- 7 Larry J. Sabato, Mark Stencel, and S. Robert Lichter, *Privacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 36.
- 8 David McClintick, "Town Crier for the New Age," *Boston Courier*, November, 1998, 118.
- 9 Howard Kurtz, "Out There," *Electronic Privacy*, March 28, 1999, F 1.
- 10 Todd S. Purdum, "The Dangers of Dishing Dirt in Cyberspace," *Network*, August 17, 1997, E 3.
- 11 Kurtz, "Out There," F 1.
- 12 Matt Drudge, "Anyone with a Modem Can Report on the World" (speech to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., June 2, 1998), 4.
- 13 Ibid., 5.
- 14 Ibid., 16, 10.
- 15 Ibid., 18.
- 16 McClintick, "Town Crier for a New Age," 127.







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