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.

The Allure of Speed

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."[1]

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

receiving a fair trial. That was debated angrily for a while, with McVeigh's attorneys charging improper behavior by *Morning News* reporters and the paper defending its news gathering. Eventually, that dispute evaporated, leaving the Internet issue as the focus of attention. Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Christopher Hanson said that "this was apparently the first time a major newspaper had used the Web page to uncork such a huge, explosive story." Until recently, noted Hanson, newspapers "had avoided breaking stories online to avoid scooping themselves." That concern, he said, may be outweighed by several advantages: "to ensure getting credit for a perishable exclusive and to have global impact even if one's publication is regional."[2]

Morning News editor Ralph Langer said the paper merely "did what CNN does. When the story was finished, we went with it."[3] Media critic Jon Katz said: "It's a long overdue recognition on the part of newspapers that if they want to stay in the breaking-news business, they need to use electronic media to do it. They can't just come out once a day and be competitive."[4]

In this instance, the *Morning News* achieved its purpose: by first presenting the story online, it beat the competition and received wider and more immediate recognition for the scoop than would have been the case had the report just been presented in the regular print editions. On the surface, this seems a straightforward matter of merely accelerating delivery of a story. But in a broader context, important ethical issues arise. Emphasis on speed is an integral ingredient of the news business, but for most newspaper journalists, the news cycle has been a daylong process, with a rhythm of reporting, fact-checking, and editing geared to meeting a well-established deadline for producing the next edition of the paper. Using the Web site, however, requires a significant alteration of this newsroom culture. The deadline is always NOW. When Langer compared the delivery of the McVeigh story to CNN's procedures, he was implicitly noting this change.

This is not a minor adjustment. It demands new systemic procedures to ensure the integrity of the news product. The responsibilities of print news organizations making this kind of change include establishing an enhanced array of editing capabilities to

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."[5]

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 *Drudge Report*, 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 *Newsweek* found the *Drudge Report* 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 *Newsweek* 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."[6]

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 *Newsweek* story by Isikoff about Monica Lewinsky's relationship with Bill Clinton. The magazine was not ready to publish, but when a *Newsweek* source told Drudge the gist of the story, he had no such reluctance. He told the world that *Newsweek* 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, *Newsweek'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."[7]

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."[8]

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. *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz has noted that "gossip is naughty, delicious, unverified—all the things that mainstream journalism is not."[9] *Newsweek'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 legitmate 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."[10]

Drudge sees himself as an "information anarchist," doing his work in a way that "makes me editor of the entire media world."[11] 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 take on the powers that be."[12] Drudge points out that everyone using the Internet has direct access to the news wires and other sources that previously were available only to newsroom denizens. Every day, editors take this mountain of information and shape it into a relatively small, tightly packed mound of news. Now,

says Drudge, "with a modem, anyone can follow the world and report on the world—no middle man, no big brother."[13]

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."[14]

The tension between Drudge and mainstream journalism is palpable. Drudge proudly says, "I am not a professional journalist,"[15] or, when he is feeling more prickly, "Screw journalism! The whole thing's a fraud anyway!"[16] Drudge's career benefits from fortuitous timing. His antipress attitude probably wins him applause from a scandal-weary public ready to believe the worst of the news business. He certainly has found an audience. He reported 115 million visits to his site during 1998, up from 31 million in 1997. The busiest day in 1998 was September 10, in the midst of the White House scandal, with 1,162,553 visits.

Drudge's success is a symbol of change and a warning about the difficulty of preserving standards. Beyond the Drudge example, perhaps the most important and most difficult adjustment that online journalism requires is systemic adaptation to the allure of cyberspeed news delivery. Solid news judgment is most threatened by the emphasis on speed. Instant availability of a story can come to be regarded as more important than its relevance. Disseminating it quickly may be rated more highly than making certain of its accuracy.

Beyond Drudge's behavior, those interested in the ethics of the news business are more concerned about the way mainstream journalists use the Internet themselves. On February 4, 1998, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter called the White House for comment about the newspaper's information that a White House steward had told a federal grand jury that he had seen President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky alone together in the President's study. White House spokesman Joe Lockhart told the reporter he would have to check, but moments later the reporter told him that the story had just been posted on the *Journal's* Web site. The report, which cited unnamed sources, also was quickly put on the *Journal's* wire service, and the

paper's Washington bureau chief talked about it on cable news channel CNBC. Within 90 minutes, the steward's lawyer issued a statement calling the *Journal's* story "absolutely false and irresponsible." The paper, while standing by the basic information in the story, later changed its report to say that the steward had reported his observation to "Secret Service personnel," not the grand jury.[17] That is a significant difference.

Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz wrote that this case illustrated "the increasing velocity of the news cycle," and noted that one of the *Journal* reporters had explained the rush by saying, "We heard footsteps from at least one other news organization and just didn't think it was going to hold in this crazy cycle we're in."[18]

The Internet itself and its "crazy cycle" should not be blamed for lapses such as in the *Journal* case. Jack Shafer of the online magazine *Slate* said that "critics seem to think the Internet has an especially demonic power to distort. . . . But technology is neutral. It makes as much sense to blame modems and the Internet for distorting the spread of news as it does to blame telephones."[19]

Nevertheless, the Internet's rapid delivery is so appealing that it could foster ethical anarchy unless news purveyors pay close attention to the responsibilities that accompany speed. Tom Rosentiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, wrote: "At a minimum, newspaper organizations will begin to make more mistakes—if only on their Web sites. But that alone will affect the public's perception of them. More mistakes equal less public trust."[20]

The Allure of Convergence

Journalists who deliver the news on line work in several ways. Some redo material that has been published in another venue, such as in a newspaper or on a television newscast. Others are devoted to creating the online news product. Virtually all of these people who are doing serious journalism consider themselves members of the same profession. There are, however, some differences in the ways they do their jobs.

How their audiences get the news is a factor in these differences. A significant number of online news consumers go on line at the workplace. That environment affects expectations about the news product.

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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."[21] 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 population.[22] Similarly, e-mail discussion lists can provide useful insight into opinions and agendas, but, again, these lists by definition encompass relatively narrow constituencies.

This is just one cautionary note for journalists intrigued by the Internet as a wellspring of information. The Internet's value in this regard is indisputable, but, as with any source, it is far from flawless.

Given the vast volume of material available on the Internet, determining trustworthiness of online information is a daunting challenge, but the medium's fundamental characteristics may foster self-policing. Interactivity expert Edwin Schlossberg wrote: "The astonishing speed and connectivity of the Internet provides the opportunity for the online community to become more adept at evaluating the truth of what they are told, the meaning of what they see, and the conclusions that can be drawn from the material. If a scientist fakes an experiment and posts the results on the Internet, many other scientists will test it and will immediately post their own results. That's the way it should work with all ideas. This kind of collective response expands all our knowledge simultaneously."[23]

Although its newness dazzles, the Web really is little different from other media in terms of its potential to abuse and be abused, and its capability for self-governance. If its quality and standards are taken for granted, a journalistic and ethical mess will certainly be the result. If, on the other hand, the medium receives the thoughtful attention that its potential merits, many problems can be resolved.

In every aspect of the news organization's online product, the primary commitment should be to news content. This is not just a call for journalistic responsibility as an esoteric matter of principle. The arrival of the new media brings with it the need for reassertion of some old journalistic functions. First among these is the exercise of editorial discretion. With an almost infinite supply of information flowing through the Internet, the public may have a greater need for the filter of journalistic judgment and standards to help sift through

the mass and separate news from propaganda and falsehood. Intellectual anarchy can thrive in cyberspace. The Web has already proved to be a fertile ground for rumor.

Easy to use and pervasive in its reach, the Internet amplifies speech. That is a wonderful thing when it means bringing truth to people who have been deprived of it. But it is far less wonderful when the Web's messages are false or hate-filled. One of the news media's traditional roles has been to be an arbiter of public discourse. That task is even more important in the cyber age.

There will be much debate about policing the Web. Pornography and protecting children have been the biggest initial concerns, and legal measures are being designed to address them. But what should be done about a neo-Nazi Web site that provides bomb-making instructions? And should a news organization that does a story about a group and its Web site provide a link? Would this be an appropriate adjunct to the news story, to let the public see for itself what the issue is, or would the link only amplify hatred?

As convergence takes place, all news organizations, regardless of their original venue, will have to redefine their ethical duties in accordance with the demands of evolving news technology. Stepping into cyberspace means taking on responsibilities that may have received little notice previously. Television stations, for example, might provide a forum for their audience by formalizing their "letters to the executive producer" policy and allotting space for it on their Web site. Newspapers will need to address issues related to video content (such as graphic violence) when they offer it on their sites.

Convergence will be accompanied by a collapse of walls between the various news media in terms of their distinct professional ethics. It will also change the public's expectations about how much news will be available. Television has long excused the lack of depth of most of its news offerings by pleading format limitations. In the Internet era, that excuse will no longer be credible.

The Allure of Money

Advertising on the Internet is becoming a huge and profitable enterprise. At first glance, it appears to be just a variation on the traditional display advertising that is a mainstay of print media. But

several new wrinkles have been introduced. First is sponsorship. This has existed for some years. PBS news programs, for example, list their sponsors, and some local television stations sell segments to sponsors. ("Sports is brought to you by. . . .") Newspapers, however, have resisted this kind of formalized tie because of wariness about seeming to give an advertiser an ownership stake in editorial content.

This issue becomes more acute when the online news page includes a link to the sponsor. Initially, this has been most common in feature sections rather than as part of hard news pages. For instance, an online travel section might be sponsored by a travel agency. The reader interested in a particular story can reach the agency through a link on that page. There may seem to be little difference between this connection and that of a display by the travel agency on the printed page of the newspaper's travel section. The advantage for the online sponsor, however, is the prospect of immediate response by the reader. Given the ease of getting information through the link, that sponsor may well be purchasing a competitive advantage far superior to that which can be acquired by advertising in the traditional print format. That is a fundamental part of the appeal of advertising on line.

Complicating the ethics picture is the news organization's stake in this advertising. In 1997, CNN and MSNBC began running ads for Barnes & Noble's online book selling. The ads offered to sell books related to the news stories that appeared onscreen adjacent to the ads. A story about Russian economic problems, for example, would link to books about post-Soviet Russia. Each book sold through these ads would generate a commission to the site's proprietor.

This relationship between news reporting and product selling is an enticing enough business opportunity to lead to changes in the informal rules governing such ties. CNN even sent Barnes & Noble a daily rundown of top news items to give the bookseller guidance about what titles to recommend. Television may offer similar openings to advertisers.[24] The *New York Times* has been criticized for its stake in Barnes & Noble ads with links adjacent to the *Times's* online book reviews. If a *Times* site visitor bought a book through this link, the *Times* received a commission. This kind of arrangement might create a temptation to review those books most likely to sell, rather than those chosen for literary merit or other noncommercial reasons.

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.

Online Ethics in the Classroom

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.

Endnotes

1   Christopher Hanson, "The Dark Side of Online Scoops," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June, 1997, 17.

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4   Tom Kenworthy, "The McVeigh Story and Its Impact," *Washington Post*, March 2, 1997, A 7.

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6   Howard Kurtz, "A Reporter's Net Loss," *Washington Post*, August 11, 1998, D 1.

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13 Ibid., 5.

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15 Ibid., 18.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility
Southern Methodist University
PO Box 750316
Dallas TX 75275-0316
214-768-4255
www.smu.edu/~ethics_center