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Online Ethics: The Beginning Of the End of the Ad Hoc Era?

Navigating the complexities of online ethics

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Editor's note: *This article is an analysis of a recent conference held at The Poynter Institute in an attempt to kick-start a conversation about drafting a set of guiding principles for online ethics. The author of this article was not a participant in the conference, but rather an observer, and reports his impressions here.*

The 25 professionals who convened at Poynter recently for an online ethics conference seemed no longer willing to settle for "making it up as we go," as Poynter's [Kelly McBride](#) put it. Following a format with no speeches and no panels, the group jumped right into detailed discussion of the dilemmas facing online publishers and began drafting the kind of guidelines that may lend some order to what remains an often chaotic landscape.

Without putting too historic a sheen on the event, the gathering almost recalled a certain meeting in Philadelphia during the sweltering summer of 1776. The work was worthwhile and hard -- addressing a task that could be approached but hardly completed during the two days of the conference. Unfortunately, there was no Thomas Jefferson in the house to eloquently draft the sense of the meeting.

Even if full answers are to come later, the conference did succeed in raising the most burning ethical questions from the front lines. And the group came up with starter sets of principles and protocols across five main areas: voice and tone; revenue and content; credibility and accuracy; resources and capacity and user-generated content.

Small groups of participants tackled each of those areas and, in the process, found a common issue sparking more debate than resolution across four of the five: the ethics of linking.

The work is still very much in progress, and it's unclear when finished documents will emerge. What follows represents one observer's take on several of the issues, beginning with the hottest one of all.

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Linking

If you provide a link to an external source, what are you saying about its reliability, taste and transparency?

On the one hand, participants agreed, links represent a core strength of the Web with potential to make any entry richer and more complete. Traditional commercial concerns about sending customers to external sites no longer make sense as a rationale for staying out of the linking game altogether.

But if accuracy, transparency (about where the information is coming from) and taste are ethical values of an organization -- and part of what the "brand" stands for -- how should those values inform decisions about links? Isn't linking to below-standard material just another way of publishing it?

There are further complicating factors. Links to such recent hot potatoes as the [Nicholas Berg](#) beheading or the anti-Islamic Danish cartoons were generally rejected on grounds of taste. But, as [James Brady](#) of [The Washington Post](#) and other participants asked, isn't it something of a cop-out if you let readers know where they can find the sensitive material online while withholding the clickable link?



Is there a slightly reduced threshold for links from blogs? Should the standard be relaxed further if the links come from user-generated blogs?

Many -- but not all -- of the groups seemed to believe that, at risk of some stodginess, journalistic Web sites need to be sure links are vetted before being

posted. But that formulation raised a further question: How to balance such often-conflicting considerations as editing resources available, the volume of material to be linked and the role of the reader in assessing the linked material for himself or herself? And just how thorough a vetting are we talking about?

Conference leader [Bob Steele](#) made clear he was not looking for a rulebook from the group. Instead, as in earlier Poynter sessions that developed guidelines on such matters such as photo manipulation and privacy, he urged the participants to define the issues, relevant principles and the right questions to ask.

So, for instance, links may fall under the general principle, as one working group put it, that "we commit to presenting as accurate and complete a picture of our world as possible" and "taking full advantage of emerging media and technology" to do so.

General online publishing protocols could include asking such questions as:

- What purpose will be served?

- What harm might be caused?
- How much of this content is verified?
- How reliable and comprehensive are the sources?
- Are we giving proper context?

That's a beginning, but hardly a complete list. What do you do if you find out, after the fact, that a link is badly flawed? Of course, you can take it down. But do you also owe readers some species of a correction, an explanation of what had been there and why it was pulled?

Longtime bloggers and other online writers routinely pepper their copy with links as a form of documentation. In opinion pieces, links can also be a handy reference to an opposing viewpoint (for the sake of scope and balance). But neither of these is a convention of newspaper or broadcast stories -- so there is a question of whether writers and users will be clear on the purposes of a link. Maybe a policy, once established, needs to be published?

The conference closed with a discussion of Poynter Online's own painful case in point -- a link to a [blog item](#) on the [death](#) of a young photographer in [The Indianapolis Star](#) newsroom. *Star* editor Dennis Ryerson, who took part in the conference, reiterated his earlier complaints that parts of the blog account were flat wrong and hurtful to the company's reputation and to him personally.

Looking back, as Poynter Online editor [Bill Mitchell](#) did in a published [enquiry](#), it is clear that the account was flawed. And yet it was written by a recently retired reporter, new to blogging, and in a quick read seemed to hang together. Nevertheless, the item had no named sources, contained implausible allegations, displayed extreme anti-Gannett animus and appeared to have been posted without giving the accused a chance to reply.

Those factors help define the circumstances when alarm bells should go off for the vetting editor in a hurry. The conference concluded with participants wanting a fuller exploration of the issues and protocols. The issue of links has been added as a separate topic for follow-up work.

Revenue and Content

I've written [often](#) about how online revenue growth is the bright spot for otherwise flat newspaper and broadcast operations. It also stands to reason that bringing more readers to the sites and getting them to stay longer with expanded editorial offerings will help sell more advertising.

All true, to a point. But those in the trenches are beginning to experience heightened revenue pressure. The business side is asking their counterparts in news to produce the kind of content that will support "vertical" categories such as health and real estate. Editors are faced with signing off on various specials, the online equivalent of advertorials, which may or may not be clearly described as something other than independent news content.

The pressure is most intense at the biggest, best-established sites -- [Yahoo!](#), [MSNBC](#), the [Los Angeles Times](#). But the sense of the conference was that this 21st-century version of the old tensions of newsroom vs. business-side is beginning to surface at smaller operations, too.

A complicating factor is that the newness of the Web and frequent site redesigns have created publishing formats without the physical and visual boundaries that are fairly obvious in a printed edition. In other words, it may not be clear, just by looking, what is editorial, what is advertising and what is some sort of hybrid.

One more complication. It is easy to measure which stories generate the most traffic. But the editors agreed that serious public service journalism needs to remain part of the mix even if crime, sex and celebrity get the heaviest readership online.

The draft guidelines offered a nod to the notion that "the enterprise needs to make money to sustain itself." But a Wild West leniency on ad placements and sponsorships could undermine the consumer experience and credibility of the brand. The guidelines called for "a defined process for decision-making" to revolve disputes between news and advertising. Time ran out at the conference before the working group could get specific about what such a process would entail, but the work continues.

User-Generated Content

A more predictable hot-button topic was what to do with user-generated content. Embracing it, at least to a degree, comes with embracing online and the platform's potential for broadening content and debate and connecting people of like interests.

And it provided a nexus for a broad issue that ran through the entire discussion: How do you import the most important values of the parent news organization, while at the same time recognizing what is different in some online content and, as several put it, "just letting go" of traditional strictures?

One guideline doesn't fit all situations. Lea Donosky of [The Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) said she has grown comfortable with shooting for a different tone in a discussion site about politics and one focused on dating. Joe Michaud of [MaineToday.com](#) said he was inclined to ask less of a one-time, "drive-by comment" than of a user who had become a blogging regular.

On the one hand, user-generated content is integral to a broadened mission of developing community as well as reporting the news. It positions a newspaper or broadcast outlet as getting attuned to multi-directional conversation in which the audience becomes a valued contributor.

But, boy, are there landmines. One working group discussed at length whether guidelines should invite contributors to say what they want but at the same time be "respectful." After some debate the group concluded

that users can be rude, flippant, hostile -- snarky, in short -- at least to a degree, in expressing their opinions.

Then there is the question of anonymity, increasingly frowned on as sourcing for news stories and prohibited in letters to the editor, but accepted -- even preferred -- in many Web-based discussion forums. Another working group took this first pass at a guideline and protocols:

Publishers need to weigh the value of anonymous postings against their internal values. On considering the risks and rewards of anonymous posts ask the following:

- Are there personal safety and privacy issues?
- Will it increase the flow and exchange of ideas or enhance the diversity of conversation by allowing anonymity?
- Do you have the capacity to monitor or clean up inappropriate posts?
- Are there categories of content where anonymous, user-generated content is essential? Where it is unacceptable?
- Is the community clear on the conditions under which the anonymity is granted/limited?
- Does anonymity damage the credibility of the information or debate?

Plus, there is a complicated mix of editing possibilities. Foul-language blockers can do part of the job. Before-the-fact editing is possible, but generally rejected as impractically expensive.

After-the-post editing catches some problems. So does self-policing through reader complaints. But all that is a little haphazard and a shock to the system of traditional organizations where layers of editing are the essence of quality control.

The three issues highlighted here were by no means the sum of the discussion. Others included how to balance speed (especially in spot news posts) with thoroughness and accuracy. Should online corrections be handled differently than traditional corrections? It would be good to involve audiences in the process of formulating the guidelines and protocols, the group agreed, but how? Limited resources should not be an excuse for shoddy work -- but limited resources are limiting.

One other meta-question hovered over the proceedings. Of the 25 participants, 24 were representatives of traditional media organizations. Then there was Robert Cox, president of the 1,000-member [Media Bloggers Association](#). The work product was bound to be dominated by concerns of preserving the best of traditional values while finding a way to embrace the potential of new media.

Would the guidelines be applicable, too, for independent, unaffiliated bloggers? Draft wording made some gestures in that direction, but Cox indicated he would be content if the finished guidelines were simply available to those bloggers to make their own decisions about following

them or not.

"We have an ethics policy, but we don't call it an ethics policy," Cox said. "We have a statement of principles ... Some feel it (an ethics code) is contrary to the spirit of blogging."

That gets to the heart of the matter, of course: How to develop guidelines that would be worth considering by a range of stakeholders that includes traditional news organizations, individual bloggers, and the millions of people who read, view and use content on the Web.

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=111806

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