The Transference of Print Media Ethics to Online Media

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Introduction

Journalists have been justifiably concerned with the ethics of their profession. In journalism, credibility is the most important professional asset and tool. It is important to ensure that every important professional judgment and the most routine practices are made in accord with a professionally developed code of ethics. This study assesses how well journalism ethics –initially derived for newspapers – are being transferred and adapted to the fairly new world of online journalism. The difference between the ethical rules thatguide a newspaper’s print edition and those in effect in its Web edition are well worth exploring in this first decade of the twenty-first century. An exploratory dialogue is just beginning among ethics scholars and professional journalists about the specific ethical issues raised by the professional practice of journalism on the Internet, but they do not seem to have reached a consensus yet on key problems. This study focuses on a few of the ethical concerns at issue with the rise of Internet journalism.

This study examines instances in which newspapers have made choices for their online editions that clearly would be unethical if they had been made in their paper and ink editions. The cases will be identified and analyzed based on the directives of the Code of Ethics created by the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). These are ethical guidelines that are widely accepted and used throughout the profession. Each case will be analyzed according to how it follows, or fails to follow, specific provisions of the code. For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that the code has four fundamental directives: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable. Within each are specific guidelines that aid journalists in making professional decisions that help them follow the fundamental
directives. Additionally, the study examines five main areas of ethical deviance: online advertising, the race to publish, newspaper blogs and social media, gatekeeping issues, and the way new journalists are being trained. Finally, this study reconciles what scholars and journalists are writing about these new ethical issues with analysis of new cases.
Journalism Ethics: Purpose and Origins

Professional ethics, now one of the keys to good journalism, have always had to grow and change with the profession. Newspapers as we know them, daily publications, became popular in the eighteenth century; the ethical directives that are now widely accepted did not appear until later (Ward). Stephen J.A. Ward, a journalism scholar and author of the book The Invention of Journalism Ethics, outlines six stages of journalism ethics that have been in place throughout history, and which are helpful in understanding how these ethics have evolved (Ward).

According to Ward, the first stage of journalism ethics was their invention, which coincided with the “periodic news press” that was developed in the seventeenth century. Ward goes on to say that during this period, “editors claim[ed] to adhere to such norms as impartiality, truth-telling, unbiased observation, [and] credible informants” (Ward). The second stage was the development of the “‘public’ ethic” in the eighteenth century, during which a more “diverse” and daily press was established (Ward). Ward also says that during this stage the idea of journalism as the “fourth estate,” that is, as a way of checking the government and protecting the public, was developed (Ward). The third stage of journalism ethics saw the idea of the “liberal press,” one that was accessible and provided “news for all” (Ward). Stage four, at the beginning of the twentieth century, includes the development of the idea of objectivity in journalism and ethos that can be “summarized by the mantra, ‘just the facts’” (Ward). Ward’s fifth stage is the “interpretive journalism” that came about as a response to objectivity, and can be exemplified by news magazines and tabloids, as well as “investigative and literary journalism” (Ward).
Most relevant to this study is Ward’s sixth stage, “global journalism ethics in the twenty-first century” (Ward). Ward admits that the major attribute of this stage is the question of ethics itself, and wonders if “interpretive journalism, in the form of blogging or citizen-to-citizen communication, [will] overwhelm the professional ethics of objectivity and verification developed by more traditional forms of journalism” (Ward). Ward’s is a legitimate question, and one that this study addresses. It is clear that over time the ethics and practices of journalism have evolved to suit new demands and problems, and that now is no different.
Findings

Online Advertising

One of the most important ethical directives for print journalists, laid out in the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, is the directive to “act independently” (SPJ Code of Ethics). Within this category are the directives to “avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived” and to “deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage” (SPJ Code of Ethics). It is widely understood that this is a call for reporters and editors to make sure that all advertisements are clearly labeled so they do not resemble news or other content created by journalists. Ads must not have an editorial appearance so that they will not be confused with news. There must be no question that a news organization is unaffiliated with and is not specifically promoting whatever is being advertised. Many prominent newspapers, including the New York Times and the Minneapolis Star Tribune, violate this tenet on the Web versions of their newspapers (Palser, Cluttered Web 50). Barb Palser, director of digital media for McGraw-Hill Broadcasting Company, points out this deviance from established ethical news practices. While “newspapers have a decades-long legacy of rejecting page-one ads in order to demonstrate their objectivity,” the front pages of Web sites are littered with ads numbering in the double digits and almost never labeled as advertisements (Palser, Cluttered Web 50). The New York Times.com has ads integrated in its masthead, seemingly a part of the design, and readers must occasionally click to remove intrusive full-page ads before they can even read a news story.

In print newspapers, there has traditionally been a “Great Wall between content and commerce,” with people in the ad sales department being unable to discuss stories with
reporters (France 122). That means the ads would not be specifically tailored to look compatible with or complementary to a news article, thus supporting the product, and reporters wouldn’t be tempted to flatter their advertisers. However, in many newspapers’ online divisions this “Great Wall” is crumbling (France 122). Rather than only being able to sell fixed-rate ads, the Internet allows newspapers to “earn small transaction fees from some product sales,” which could give reporters incentive to promote some products (France 122).

While the ethical solution may seem obvious, the problem remains that these types of ads are becoming ever more profitable and economically more attractive. In 2006, for example, the amount of money newspapers made from print ads declined 1.7 percent while the amount made from online ads rose 31.5 percent (Stoff 18). When newspapers are having a hard time just breaking even, it is no easy task for them to turn down that kind of revenue, no matter how unethical it may be.

It is difficult to say why newspapers often ignore this long-held policy in their Web editions. It is somewhat perplexing that publications wouldn’t simply adapt their existing advertising guidelines for use on the Internet. There is nothing specific about the advertising policies that doesn’t lend them to Web use; simply, the policies insist that advertisements not be integrated into stories and that they are clearly labeled. It is notable, then, that even the most well-respected of American newspapers, the New York Times, completely shift gears in their online edition.

For example, on September 26, 2008 the New York Times online ran a front page advertisement for Apple Computers (New York Times 26 Sept. 2008) (Russo). The ad was formatted like a Times article – the same font, layout and picture placement. Additionally, the
ad was labeled “Editorial,” not “Advertisement” as the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics (as well as most newspapers’ internal codes of ethics) would require. At first glance, the advertisement did not appear to be anything other than another article linked off the front page of the New York Times Web site. Upon selecting the link, readers were taken to the Apple Web site, and only then did it become really clear that it was, in fact, an advertisement and not an editorial.

The Apple ad in question brings up many issues related to online advertising. Most Web savvy readers would no doubt be able to recognize the Apple ad, and others like it, for what they are – paid advertisements. But as more and more people begin to get their news from Web sites, it becomes more and more likely that there will be readers who cannot make the distinction between what is news and what is advertising. There are surely readers out there who are not familiar with the character of the Apple advertising campaign, and would be unable to recognize it easily. Additionally, the ad (and many, many others) are given prominent front-page placement, which has also been traditionally discouraged by the print media. Aside from insinuating the newspaper’s endorsement or affiliation with the product, a front-page ad takes up valuable news space. It both distracts from other stories and takes the place of an article that could fill the space. Finally, even if the New York Times staff had no hand in the design of the advertisement, the fact that they allowed it to run looking so similar to their articles implies a certain endorsement. Even if it is not intentional on the part of the Times, the style of the advertisement borrows from the newspaper’s credibility, and violates the SPJ Code of Ethics’ directive to “distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two” (SPJ Code of Ethics).
When this Apple ad (and, again, others like it) ran on the New York Times Web site, there was no controversy, or at least none that was widespread. However, recently the Los Angeles Times, an organization that does label its advertisements both in print and online, ran an ad for a new NBC television show, Southland, in its print edition (Los Angeles Times 9 April 2009) (Adalian). The ad ran below the fold, down the left column of the front page. It was enclosed in a thick, black border and was clearly labeled “NBC Advertisement” above the mock headline (Russo). Accompanying this “article” was a large picture ad running along the bottom of the paper.

Interestingly, the Los Angeles Times ad drew heavy criticism. Many people were upset about the advertisement’s placement and the fact that it was somewhat disguised as an article, even though it was quite clearly labeled as an advertisement for NBC, even including the network’s logo. Clearly, this was a gaffe on the part of the LA Times. They should have shied away from such a large front page ad and from allowing it to look like one of their articles, though in a different font. It is important to ask why there was such fuss over this incident rather than over the arguably more grievous mistake by the New York Times.

Logically, it doesn’t quite mesh. Newspapers certainly have more readers online than in print. They stand to gain more financially from (and thus potentially be influenced more by) online ads because of their ability to track reader interest and click-throughs. So, if the issue is one of journalistic integrity and credibility, readers and media watchdogs should be more concerned by online ad missteps. Yet, somehow, people still give Web sites more leeway, even if they are affiliated with newspapers. Perhaps readers and Internet users are so accustomed to
being bombarded by Web advertising that it doesn’t occur to them to expect something
different from an online edition of a newspaper.

**The Race to Publish**

In a journalism world where Web “traffic is the new circulation,” many news
organizations feel pressure to be the first and the fastest to publish something online (“A
Question of Velocity” 4). While the desire to “scoop” other news organizations is nothing new,
again the transition from print to online media causes problems. The editorial process of
articles to be published online is drastically truncated, with reporters often posting the articles
online themselves, rather than passing them to an editor first. This inevitably results in errors –
factual, grammatical and spelling (“A Question of Velocity” 4). In addition, reporters are often
asked for multiple posts per day. If a journalist is constantly writing and posting, they will have
less time for editing, fact-checking, and understanding a story’s nuances (“A Question of
Velocity” 4).

While new journalists are beginning to be trained for this constant publishing, most
established journalists are used to the cycle of assignment, deadline. Now there is no real
deadline; rather, there is *always* a deadline. Reporters work harder and longer hours for the
same pay; it follows that they will be more likely to make mistakes. Additionally, while it may
seem that cutting out the editor as middleman is more efficient, it is actually detrimental to the
quality and credibility of the news. Editors “ensure that…general policy is followed” and
consider “matters of style, content and the editorial budget” (Hanlin 45). Editors are also
subject to pressure to publish quickly and garner more advertising revenue, but there is still
some measure of editorial independence. At the very least, editors insure that stories are
without technical errors and fit in the editorial budget. This may seem like a small task, but it
does a lot to maintain a news organization’s credibility.

Perhaps the most important problem introduced by this still rather new never-ending
news cycle is that stories get published before they are ready. If an event occurs at 9:00 am, it
is shocking if there is not at least some mention of it online by 9:15 am. While it is a journalistic
duty to get as much information to the public as soon as possible, so that they are able to form
their own opinions and make their own decisions, the quality of the news presented surely
suffers because of the pressure of the news cycle. It is only logical; how can journalists be
expected to speak with everyone they need to speak with, research everything they need to
research, and fact-check everything they need to fact-check in a mere 15-, 30-, or 45- minute
period? This can lead to violations of the SPJ’s directive to “seek truth and report it,” as well as
the guidelines calling for reporters to “test the accuracy of information from all sources” and
“diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to
allegations of wrongdoing.”

As a result, journalists are becoming far too reliant on easy sources. Press releases,
statements, or leaked stories become the whole news story, with little actual reporting
involved. It is often easy to spot a press release story; they quote few sources, the statements
have obviously been prepared, not quoted in a personal interview, and they usually only
provide one side of the story. So too are leaked stories at times easy to spot; they quote
anonymous officials and also provide only one side of the story. This reliance on provided
materials lead to violations of SPJ guidelines like “identify sources whenever feasible” and “always questions sources’ motives before promising anonymity” (SPJ Code of Ethics).

Obviously, there is no crime in using these tools as the bud of a story. The problem comes when reporters fail to actually report the stories. When there is pressure to constantly publish stories, it becomes too easy for journalists to simply rework a press release into something printable when, in reality, far more legwork is needed. To publish a credible story, journalists must follow up on the press release, call sources who may oppose the information they have been given, and research the information to be sure that it is true and not just propaganda. Reiterating a press release is no different from advertisement, except that it is free of charge.

Yet another issue that arises with the constant and easily changeable nature of online news is one of corrections. The SPJ Code of Ethics calls for journalists to “admit mistakes and correct them promptly” (SPJ Code of Ethics). Each newspaper has its own policy for the print edition that usually involves printing corrections in the same place each day for mistakes, misspellings, and errors of fact. However, since it is so easy to fix some mistakes online – a typo, for instance – it is difficult to hold newspapers responsible for the corrections made in Web editions.

Andrew Alexander, the ombudsman for the Washington Post, recently addressed problems with the corrections policy at his newspaper in March article (Alexander 1-2). His analysis of the problem mainly addressed issues universal to the paper, both in print and online, such as the huge backlog of correction requests the paper currently has (Alexander 1-2).
However, Alexander also pointed out the problems specific to publishing on the Web. He notes,

“Currently, policies at washingtonpost.com mainly address corrections for print stories that appear on the Web site. But what about correcting videos and other forms of online storytelling? It’s a challenge, but also an opportunity, because the Web offers perhaps the fastest way to correct an error and spread the correction far and wide. [Raju Narisetti, one of the Post’s managing editors] is thinking this way. ‘As new and faster forms of disseminating information become popular – live Tweets from events, for example – we owe it to our audiences to...make sure we are delivering fast and accurate information,’ [Narisetti] said, ‘and also a way to promptly correct errors” (Alexander 2).

Alexander and Narisetti seem to grasp the issues that develop when reconciling existing corrections policies with new media. While it is certainly encouraging that they recognize the problem, it is also clear that they are still searching for a solution. Readers expect instant coverage with real-time updates, so journalists must deliver or go out of business.

Newspaper Blogs

It now seems that everyone has a blog, including many journalists. For years, news reporters have been discouraged from editorializing, but now many are being asked to do just that – in addition to writing news stories. Though the SPJ Code of Ethics insists that journalists should “act independently,” which means “avoid[ing] conflicts of interest, real or perceived,” many reporters are now using new media to express opinions on subjects they may be asked to
report on, all in their official capacity (SPJ Code of Ethics). Blogging is informal, and can be a
great way to facilitate conversation on news issues. However, reporters shouldn’t be the ones
doing the blogging, they should be the credible source where bloggers get their information.
Since blogs by their very nature are rarely considered to be credible and trustworthy, journalists
should not be associated with them.

Newspaper blogs are often only marginally journalistic, and thus it is difficult for many
news organizations to decide whether to apply the same ethical rules to them. Some
newspapers, such as the *Spokane Spokesman-Review*, are amending their codes of ethics to
include rules and guidelines for blogging by reporters (Tallent 27). There are many issues,
ranging from how personal the entries can be, to whether or not the newspaper should edit
reader comments.

Others argue that news reporters should not be allowed to blog at all. In print
newsrooms, the opinion and editorial writing staff of the newspaper is absolutely separated
from the news staff. A board makes all editorial decisions, and reporters only deal with straight
news. Articles on the Op-Ed page have no byline; rather, they represent the point-of-view of
the newspaper at large.

Blogs, however, clearly represent the point-of-view of one person, often a news
reporter. While these journalist-bloggers may not go so far as to forcefully state an opinion on
a news issue, there is still the matter of the tone of their writing. Blogs generally have a casual,
conversational tone that is not appropriate for journalism. Essentially, a journalist’s goal should
be for the reader to not consider the writer of any given article at all. While it may seem harsh,
ideally a reader will not think anything about the writer personally, negative or positive. But
blogs certainly deal on the personal level, sometimes even publishing pictures of the author. It is not that journalists want readers to think of them as news-gathering machines; it’s just that reporters lose credibility, and thus readership, when readers begin to realize that news writers unavoidably have biases and personal opinions.

Some news organizations go to extreme lengths to encourage their reporters to spend more time blogging. Business 2.0, a monthly business magazine, recently launched a collection of blogs; this is reasonable, especially since its reporters essentially write one article a month and need to stay in touch with the subjects they are covering (Palser, Pay Per View 60). However, Business 2.0 has taken a step into an ethical gray area by paying reporters based on blog traffic (Palser, Pay Per View 60). Thus, the more people that read a reporter’s blog, the more money that reporter makes. Barb Palser says, “It’s easy to conjure numerous ethical concerns around the general concept of paying journalists for their work” (Palser, Pay Per View 60). Clearly, blogger / reporters will have some interest in writing the most readable articles, which are not necessarily always the most newsworthy. Palser does note, however, that Business 2.0’s new venture may not be as ethically dubious as it would be if it was undertaken by, say, the Washington Post (Palser, Pay Per View 60). Paying for popularity would obviously be a problem in a field like investigative journalism, where sometimes the most relevant news is what people want to hear the least (Palser, Pay Per View 60). What is most important to take from this case is that it can be dangerous when journalists are paid for “performance rather than participation” in Web work (Palser, Pay Per View 60).

The New York Times has taken blogging to a more extreme level by publishing excerpts from some of its blogs in the print edition of the paper (Dumenco 30). Simon Dumenco, a
contributor to *Advertising Age* magazine, says of this move, “The first time I read Bits [the *Times* business blog] in print it was jarring not only because of the informal, frequently first-person approach, but because it unselfconsciously references the reporting of competitors, including The Wall Street Journal” (30). Dumenco is in favor of the print versions of blogs as the way of the future, saying that the *Times* is making an effort to “respect readers’ time poverty” (30).

But *MediaWeek* contributor Bill Gloede disagrees, praising the writing quality in the traditional *Times* (17). Gloede argues that “the Web is not the way of the future,” and that good writing “is absent on the Internet” (17). He worries about the integrity of news writing, and that “if the *Times* goes, there will be nothing to replace it” (Gloede 17).

A ubiquitous feature of most newspapers’ online editions now is the live blog. Whether of a press conference or a presidential briefing, most newspapers have reporters constantly updating in real-time during important news events. The concept is good and seems well-intentioned. It is a source for a reader who may not be able to see the news event or who may appreciate a little background for what they are watching or hearing. However, the live blog presents another situation where journalists are expected to very little actual reporting.

Often, live blogs are simply line-by-line repetition of what is happening. While there is not necessarily anything inherently dangerous or unethical about this, there is nothing inherently useful or newsworthy about it either. It is little different from a transcript. Other times, live blogs feature on the spot fact-checking and background research. News consumers may find this useful, but it borders on being dangerous. If reporters are simply using Internet searches to produce quickly check facts or research something, they risk writing something untrue or not credible. While one such mistake may seem harmless, it can detract from the
Finally, since live blogs are rarely (if ever) run by editors or anyone else at all before publishing, they risk mistakes and objectivity issues. It is all too easy for a journalist to simply react personally to something they see or hear when they have to publish something immediately.

For example, Los Angeles Times reporters Don Frederick and Kate Linthicum liveblogged a presidential debate for the newspaper’s Web site in September of 2008 (Frederick and Linthicum). There was no blatant editorializing by the reporters, and they stuck mainly to play-by-play analysis. There were, however, certain nuances to the blog that probably wouldn’t have passed in a straight news article. Frederick and Linthicum used words like “calming” and “hammering” to describe the candidates’ demeanors, and make a joke about the president of Iran “laugh[ing] with glee” about a certain comment (Frederick and Linthicum). The use of these may not seem harmful, but they cast a certain tone to the article that, again, would likely not pass in a straight news article, in print or online. When used in the context of news, words like that can lead to the perception of bias in the reporter, which in turn can lead to a decrease of credibility for the journalist and his or her organization.

Additionally, many journalists have also taken up the new fad of “tweeting,” that is, using a Web service called Twitter to send out frequent, short (140 characters or less) status updates to anyone who cares to see them. Most often, these journalists seem to be acting of their own accord, rather than at the request of their news organizations. This is yet another circumstance that holds no inherent ethical violation, but that opens the door for many. Even if these “tweeting” journalists are not acting in their official capacity when updating with Twitter, their names still carry the weight of their own credibility and that of their news organization.
Personal details or offhand comments run the risk of permanently damaging their ability to report the news.

Twitter and other social media Web sites, such as Facebook, have become so popular among journalists that the Craig Whitney, the *NY Times* assistant managing editor who “oversees journalistic standards,” recently released their new ethical guidelines dealing with the sites to the Poynter Institute (*New York Times‘ Policy on Facebook and Other Social Networking Sites*). The guidelines show that the *Times*, at least, understands the problems such Web sites can present; the standards caution reporters that outside Web sites, blogs, and “‘tweets’ represent [journalists] to the outside world just as much as an 800-word article does” (*New York Times‘ Policy*...). Additionally, the guidelines encourage reporters “not to write anything on a blog or a personal Web page that [they] could not write in The Times – [they shouldn’t] editorialize, for instance, if [they] work for the News Department” (*New York Times‘ Policy*).

**Gatekeeping**

Journalists have traditionally acted as gatekeepers of information, and certain ethical tenets regarding the sanctity of this role have been untouchable. However, the rise of independent blogs, and even gossip sites, has tempted some reporters to violate the most unimpeachable guidelines. There is an attitude of, “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,” though the SPJ Code of Ethics calls for reporters to “minimize harm,” which can include making decisions for or against publishing certain information (SPJ Code of Ethics). Though journalists have always had the duty to choose what information is newsworthy and what should be
disseminated to the public, these choices are becoming ever more difficult when non-journalists have access to the same information as reporters. The general maxim is that reporters generally should give the public as much newsworthy information as possible, but there are times when it is ethically correct to withhold newsworthy information.

For instance, for years it has been the policy of nearly every newspaper to withhold the names of rape victims, even in high profile cases. The name of a rape victim is certainly newsworthy information, thus, withholding the victim’s name is, in fact, something of an ethical violation. However, releasing the victim’s name would violate another ethical tenet, the directive to minimize harm. In this case, minimizing harm wins out over disseminating a bit of newsworthy information. There are arguments on both sides; some say that refusing to name rape victims perpetuates the stigma of rape, while others say that as long as the stigma exists it is wrong to name victims without their permission.

While newspapers have practiced this policy for some time with little conflict, it is yet another protocol that is difficult to enforce with the rise of the Internet media. Sally Dadisman wrote about this issue in regards to the Duke lacrosse team rape case for the American Journalism Review. A woman, later identified as Crystal Gail Mangum, accused three members of the Duke University lacrosse team of raping her at a party (Dadisman 22). She was kept anonymous in the media for some time, following protocol, but eventually a tape aired on the Fox News Channel in which the prosecutor said her name (Dadisman 22). The tape did not air again, and most newspapers chose to ignore the incident. However, Mangum’s name was all over blogs and other Web sites; bloggers have no real ethical duty to follow journalistic code. At that point, newspapers were faced with a decision: to name or not to name? Since the
woman’s name was already released, some argued that it would be doing readers a disservice not to publish it (Dadisman 23). Others argued that the prevalence of Mangum’s name on the Internet made no difference, and that her name should not be printed. Dadisman writes that the Durham Herald-Sun, a newspaper based near the university, chose not to name the victim, even though it would have been of particular interest to their readers (23). The Herald-Sun’s managing editor, Bill Stagg, said, “There was just no factor that overrode our normal policy” (Dadisman 23). Most major news organizations also chose not to name Mangum, including the New York Times, Washington Post, and the Associated Press (Dadisman 22). Other newspapers, however, decided to go the other way. The Raleigh, North Carolina, News & Observer, another paper local to the university, chose to name Mangum, even though they at first withheld her identity in accordance with their standard policy (Dadisman 22).

It is clear that pressure from the Internet plays at least some role in pushing newspapers to break their long-standing rules. Rape cases aren’t the only instances where this is true; newspapers often feel obligated to publish sensational stories of little news value if they are making waves on the Internet. In the past journalists, as gatekeepers, have been able to make all the decisions about what is news. Now, according to Geneva Overholser, a professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, “There is no sense in being gatekeepers if there is no fence” (Dadisman 23). As media scholars and news organizations look for the answer to this dilemma, journalists must keep in mind that they still hold at least a modicum of power in deciding what is or is not news, and they must continue to exercise news judgment even in the face of competition from the Internet.
A New Generation of Journalists

Students of journalism today are being trained to deal with all of its challenges, old and new, including, at least theoretically, ethics. College newsrooms and classrooms emphasize the need to be proficient in broadcast, print, and online journalism. This is the only way for new journalists to get jobs since the media are converging and downsizing. However, new reporters are now being forced to consider whether there is still a place for old-fashioned, hardscrabble journalism.

One issue that must be examined is whether journalism schools are sufficiently preparing journalists for the current media climate. The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) is responsible for deciding which schools have accredited journalism programs. While accreditation is essentially what gives a school of journalism its credibility and standing, it is interesting to note that in the preamble to its Accrediting Standards, the ACEJMC says that it:

“does not define specific curricula, courses or methods of instruction. It recognizes that each institution has its unique situation, mission and resources, and this uniqueness is an asset to be safeguarded. The Council judges programs against the objectives that units and institutions set for themselves and against the standards that the Council sets forth for preparing students for professional careers in journalism and mass communications” (ACEJMC Accrediting Standards).

The closest the ACEJMC’s Standards come to addressing the Internet and new media is in stating that graduates from accredited schools should be able to “apply tools and technologies
appropriate for the communications professions in which they work” (ACEJMC Accrediting Standards). However, the Standards offer now “indicator” or “evidence” requirement that would prove students are being specifically taught new technologies (ACEJMC Accrediting Standards).

The ACEJMC simply requires ability to use technology. It does not seem to worry about the nature of the application of these technologies. At least in its stated Standards, the ACEJMC requires no training on how to use these technologies efficiently, but not to rely solely on them. New technologies and tools are invaluable, but only if they are used in conjunction with real reporting and personal contact.

Marilyn Greenwald says that today’s new crop of journalists all “grew up with millions of facts at their fingertips, dozens of cable television stations and a 24-hour news cycle that demands constant feeding” (Greenwald 25). There is some concern in the journalism community that new reporters will never learn to do the “legwork” necessary to be a reporter (Greenwald 25). Here the Internet presents a different threat to traditional journalism. Rather than acting as competition, the Internet is a valuable, and sometimes dangerous, resource. It is extremely tempting for reporters, particularly young reporters who have been using the Internet since childhood, to look online for resources and answers rather than tracking down sources (Greenwald 25). It is possible for a reporter write an entire, seemingly accurate and credible, story without ever leaving his or her desk.

At first, it is not easy to identify why this is necessarily a problem. The Internet certainly has a lot of credible information and is a priceless resource, but in the case of journalism, it’s more trouble than it’s worth. There is the ever-present threat of plagiarism, which has been
made all too simple (and almost acceptable) by the Internet (Greenwald 25). When information is already in front of a reporter, in print, it is all too easy to cut-and-paste or rearrange the words (Greenwald 25). Greenwald also notes the danger of e-mail interviews (25). First of all, in an e-mail interview, the reporter loses all sense of the subject. What is his or her mood, tone, expression? These are nuances that a reporter can put into a story to make it more full and expressive and, thus, more true. Most importantly, though, in an e-mail interview there is no way of knowing if the answers one receives is actually from the person the interview is intended for (Greenwald 25). For instance, an e-mail can easily be answered by an official’s assistant, rather than the official himself. When this happens, a reporter’s story automatically becomes untrue, whether the reporter is aware or not. Quotes are attributed to the person the e-mail was intended for. Additionally, e-mail interviews give the subjects time to neatly package, and perhaps even research, their quotes and answers; the spontaneity and realness of a face-to-face or telephone interview is entirely lost.
Conclusions

Credibility is a journalist’s most important asset, and trust is the essential aspect of the reporter-reader relationship. If the public doesn’t trust a reporter, they will not trust the information he or she gives them. If the public doesn’t trust the information, they won’t buy the newspapers, or visit the Web site, and the reporter won’t be able to provide those professional services that are so essential to a properly function democracy. While there are many ethical problems with online journalism, they all boil down to issues of credibility. Anyone can say anything; without credibility, a journalist is just another person saying something.

It seems clear that journalists now have little choice; anyone being hired by a newspaper today will be expected to contribute to print and online editions. It is also clear that ethical guidelines for online media must be developed. While today some online media practices may seem ethically questionable, it’s not that they are breaking the rules – there are no rules that have been developed specifically to deal with online media. As far a journalism scholarship is concerned, right now the majority of resources simply identify problems and present case studies and examples. Moving forward, journalists and scholars must look for solutions to these problems. Whether these solutions will be an integration of print and Web content or whether each will be treated as a separate entity remains to be seen.

It is inevitable that a code of ethics that is geared specifically toward online media must eventually be created. At a base level, however, the ethical issues that arise with online journalism do have counterpoints in traditional media. Before the Internet, newspapers could still have made more money by compromising their advertising policies and allowing unlabeled
or misleading ads in their print editions. Newspapers have always run the risk of getting
scooped whether by one day or one hour, so the race to publish is not a new issue, either.
While blogs are new, reporters have always had to hide their own opinions in biases in
reporting. Newspapers have always faced gatekeeping issues, too, though in the past they may
have only had to refrain from publishing information heard in gossip or in another media outlet,
not from amateur bloggers or Internet journalists. Finally, reporters have always had to adapt
to new technologies and methods, whether it be a telephone or Twitter. Thus, while the
medium is new, the crux of the issues is not. While Internet journalism must eventually have its
own set have ethical directives, it is perhaps more important for reporters to focus on
developing professional practices that follow the core values of journalism while still
recognizing the new demands on the news media in the new century.
Works Cited


