



ETHICAL ISSUES

Bloggging

Like websites, blogs became ubiquitous virtually overnight. A blog is a weblog or online journal. Most blogs are interactive and provide for feedback from readers. Whereas most bloggers write about mundane matters, the blogosphere has also emerged as a viable alternative news medium. Blogs are having an increasing impact on the public, sometimes supplementing or correcting reporting of the mainstream media. For example, in 2004, blogs quickly exposed the inauthenticity of the documents used in a *60 Minutes* story about President George W. Bush's National Guard service. Many other blogs consistently provide a unique and unconventional perspective on the local and national news.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the audience for alternative media is expanding: "The number of Americans reading blogs jumped 58% in 2004 to an estimated 32 million people . . . with about 11 million looking to political blogs for news during the [2004] presidential campaign."⁷ By March 2008, the number of people globally who read blogs was 346,000,000.

But blogs are not just for online journalists or political commentators. There are personal blogs, like the one being kept by the grandson of one of the authors. He is taking a year off after college to travel; his blog keeps family and friends in touch. There are corporate and organizational blogs, which enhance the communication and culture of the organization. Blogs can be sorted by genre, such as political blogs, travel blogs,

and classical music blogs; the list is endless. Blogs can be sorted by media type: They can contain videos, music, sketches, and photographs. Blogs also can be characterized by the device used to create them.

Of course, the blogosphere is not without its share of controversies. One such controversy erupted in 2005 after some bloggers posted confidential Apple Computer documents about an unreleased Apple product. Apple demanded to know the source of this information, but the bloggers argued that they were journalists, so they should be protected under federal and state laws from revealing their sources. A California judge disagreed, however, and ruled that the bloggers must reveal their sources.

Unfortunately, the judge in this case did not address the central question: Do bloggers deserve the same privileges to protect their sources that are accorded to journalists? On the one hand, these bloggers are acting just like journalists by reporting the news, so why shouldn't they have the same privileges as journalists? On the other hand, "the prospect of 10, 20, or 50 million bloggers claiming journalistic privilege terrifies judges and First Amendment lawyers alike, [since] they fear that anyone who has a website, if called to testify by a grand jury, could claim the privilege and refuse to cooperate."⁸

In early 2014, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco rendered a verdict that gives bloggers the same protection as journalists.



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Bloggging (CONTINUED)

Because blogging is still a fairly new phenomenon, there has not been much debate about "blogging ethics." But such debate is surely needed. What are the responsibilities of bloggers, especially those who operate alternative news sites? Do they have the same obligations as the conventional media? Should they be held to the same standards of objectivity? Although it may not be a good idea to put too many restrictions on bloggers, they are, of course, subject to the same ethical rules as anyone who communicates information: They must strive to be truthful at all times. They also have an obligation to check their sources and to identify those sources whenever possible so that readers are fully informed. In

an online environment, this can often be done by providing links to other sites.

Bloggers also have a duty to avoid unjust accusations and to retract erroneous information as quickly as possible. Finally, bloggers should consider disclosing any conflicts of interest in cases where their objectivity may be compromised. Sometimes it may be necessary for a blogger to disclose who pays his or her salary, or who provides funding for the website's operating costs. As one blogger explained, "The audience should be able to come to your blog and assume you're not on the take."⁹ If bloggers can follow these simple rules, they will engender trust among their readers and the weblog will have a bright future.

KEY TERMS

Antivirus software	Cryptography
Authentication credentials	Decryption
Availability	Denial of service
Back door	Digital certificate
Biometrics	Digital signature
Buffer overflow	Encryption
Caesar cipher	Fingerprint analysis
CAPTCHA	GPS (Global Positioning System)
Cipher	Information security
Confidentiality	Integrity
Cryptanalysis	Logic bomb