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SHIFTING ROLES, ENDURING VALUES:
The CREDIBLE JOURNALIST in a DIGITAL AGE
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Abstract

When everyone can be a publisher, what distinguishes the journalist? This article considers contemporary challenges to institutional roles in a digital media environment, then focuses on three broad journalistic normative values -- authenticity, accountability and autonomy -- that affect the credibility of both the journalist and the content he or she provides. A set of questions that can help citizens determine the trustworthiness of the information available to them also is provided.

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Each semester, on their first day in the Online Journalism class at the University of Iowa, students are asked to do two things: define a "journalist" and access a "journalism site."

Over the years, the Internet has changed dramatically as a vehicle for journalism. It has evolved from a shaky experiment by a relative handful of enterprising news organizations in the 1990s to an increasingly dominant news source for a majority of Americans -- and a news production platform not only for journalists but also for millions of other people around the country and the world. But the students' responses have remained strikingly consistent.

Almost all of them go to the sites produced by major "brand name" news organizations -- CNN.com, nytimes.com, USATODAY.com and the like. And their definitions of a journalist boil down to "someone who gives me information I can trust."

So the distinction they have drawn between "journalists" and "everyone else" seems to be based partly on cultural habit -- certain names are associated in their minds with certain functions or products -- and partly on what seems to be a widely shared belief about the nature and value of journalism's role in our society. That role is not just to deliver information -- every one of the billions of posts or pages in the exponentially expanding online universe does that. And information in and of itself is not necessarily valuable; value is connected with the ability to place credence or trust in the content that is obtained. The value of information, in other words, derives from the values of those who create it.

Both habits and beliefs, along with roles and values, can translate to the online world, as the students' responses suggest. The challenge facing media organizations is to increase the

likelihood that they will in fact do so, even as alternative options multiply and audiences dwindle for traditional "offline" news products (Pew Research Center, 2006a).

A host of issues are involved, of course, many of them economic. But trust is inherently a matter of ethical social interaction, enabling people to feel confident that they are not being lied to. Trust in some degree of veracity is a foundation of human interaction (Bok, 1989); when it is shattered or worn away, both institutions and relationships collapse. For journalists, trust is earned through the regular provision of information that is credible, an inextricable interconnection of roles, values and the content itself.

This article begins by considering the recent information explosion and its implications, offering examples of current challenges to institutional roles and the difficulty of defining the journalist. It also provides a historical context from which journalism in our democracy has emerged, as well as some recent legal assessments related to journalistic roles and who is entitled to enact them. We then focus on three broad values that affect credibility in the rapidly shifting media environment in which journalists work today alongside other information providers such as bloggers, who are used here as exemplars of "digital native" communicators: authenticity, accountability, and autonomy.

Because this is an environment in which the roles of information producer and consumer are interchangeable -- and in which multiple voices can and do claim to be journalistic -- each individual must determine what he or she values in a news source and how to assess whether a particular source has fulfilled those desires. To that end, this article also incorporates a series of questions to help each reader determine who merits his or her trust. The complete set of questions is compiled in an appendix.

INFORMATION EXPLOSION

Over the past quarter-century, new mass media technologies have evolved to challenge the print and broadcast industries' control over gatekeeping, framing, agenda setting, and other traditional media roles. In doing so, they have redefined conventional notions of news and the types of individuals who gather, edit, and report it.

Cable television news offers an example. Before the advent of CNN in 1980, television news programs were allocated to a particular time slot and except in unusual situations, lasted no more than an hour. CNN was the first round-the-clock news network in the United States; within two decades, it had been joined by two others, MSNBC and Fox News Channel. Filling twenty-four hours of television programming with news seven days a week is neither easy nor cheap, especially if each story requires its own journalist, production crew, equipment and transportation. The cable news networks quickly began meeting their programming needs by relying on less-expensive talk shows and the journalism of argument and assertion, blurring the line between traditional objective news reporting and opinion (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999) and routinely offering something closer to theater than civic debate.

That's not journalism, media traditionalists argue. Yet by 2005, the public considered cable news about as credible as broadcast network news divisions (Project for Excellence, 2005). Moreover, even the cable news networks have been upstaged by other cable offerings, including "fake news" programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Younger citizens are particularly enamored of a format that satisfies what *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich (2006) calls our "lust for escapism," even (perhaps especially) when the topic is politics; in 2004, Americans under 30 mentioned comedy shows almost as frequently as newspapers and evening network news programs as regular sources of election news (Pew Research Center, 2004).

But cable news and even comedy shows still operate on a gatekeeping model. Because the startup cost of a Web site is small and the technology easy to master, just about any literate individual with computer access has the ability to reach a global audience -- potentially faster than traditional journalists, with their cumbersome technology and even more cumbersome ethical considerations, are willing or able to do. Proto-blogger Matt Drudge, for instance, has regularly scooped the mainstream media. Drudge famously beat CNN (by eight minutes) on the death of Princess Diana and *Newsweek* on President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky -- a story the *Newsweek* reporters had but were quaintly trying to verify before the magazine published it. Drudge, with no such self-imposed restraint, has seen both his popularity and credibility grow, even though many of his "scoops," such as the report of 2004 presidential contender John Kerry's alleged affair with an intern, prove false. His *Drudge Report* site reportedly generates a seven-figure income, and Drudge himself was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2006 by *Time* magazine (Cox, 2006), that quintessential member of the "MSM," or mainstream media. On Election Day 2006, more than 2.3 million people turned to the *Drudge Report* for information (Intermarkets, 2006).

Drudge, of course, is just one example among millions, albeit an influential one. As of late 2006, the Web hosted an estimated 57 million blogs, and roughly 100,000 new ones were being created every day (Sifry, 2006). They compete for attention not only with cable networks but also with everything from satellite radio to popular user-generated content such as YouTube videos and Flickr photos.

Citizens in a democracy have an inherent stake in knowing who brings them the news -- and the motivations behind that role. Journalism practitioners have defined their central role and purpose as providing the information that citizens need to be free and self-governing (Kovach &

Rosenstiel, 2001). But the vehicles that deliver such high-minded journalism have never been limited to a single role and certainly are not today. Mass communication offers manipulation and diversion—propaganda, public relations, advertising, marketing, and entertainment—as well as enlightenment and fact—news, information, and education.

The problem is that manipulation and diversion are too easily confused with the enlightenment and fact, weakening democracy in the process unless citizens are paying close attention. The ubiquity and variety of readily available information sources, as well as the propensity of many communicators to put a personal spin on what they disseminate, bring us to the first of our questions that today's media consumers might ask themselves in deciding what content to trust and from whom:

1. Do I want news and opinion that exclusively agree with my views?

2. Do I want news mixed with opinion?

3. Do I care whether news and opinion are clearly distinguished from one another?

Obviously, if the answers are "yes" to the first two questions and "no" to the third, it is easy to satisfy those desires with countless Web sites, television offerings, and print publications that have axes to grind and oxen to gore. If consumers have something more, well, traditional in mind for their news, they should seek other options.

DEFINITIONAL PROBLEMS

Many traditional journalists, watching audiences migrate to such newer sources of information, have complained that these sources were not adhering to established ethical practices and values such as verification of information, objectivity in its presentation, and disclosure of political and personal biases (Welch, 1998). Some of these concerns stem from a

fear of losing both audience and advertising revenues -- and, more broadly, authority over the ability to set the agenda of public discourse. Before returning to that notion of authority as a journalistic value, we need to wrestle briefly with the difficulty -- both contemporary and historical -- of defining just who is a journalist and who is not.

Many such attempts have rested on professional ethics and presumed journalistic values, but the traditionalists' foothold on moral high ground seems tenuous. In 2005 and 2006 alone, for instance, the Associated Press fired a bureau chief for conflict of interest; the *New York Post* let go of a gossip columnist under investigation for extortion of a source; a veteran *Baltimore Sun* columnist was fired for plagiarism; local and national media disseminated erroneous reports of a miracle rescue in a coal mine; and a *New York Times* reporter resigned over accusations she had helped the Bush administration's case for going to war with Iraq.

Such egregious breaches of widely accepted norms, in violation of guidelines clearly articulated in every code of ethical professional practice, challenge attempts to differentiate between journalists and everyone else by claiming the former are people who are "professionally dedicated to truth seeking," in the words of ethics professor Ed Wasserman (Thomas, 2005). Moreover, such a definition excludes not only the Matt Drudges of the world but also the unpaid writer of a published piece that exposes local government corruption. And it includes others dedicated to truth telling and even to public service -- but not to journalism; priests and medical doctors are two examples from disparate realms who have disparate concepts of "truth" and the means of ascertaining it. Indeed, both the legal and the regulatory systems have long struggled with defining who is a journalist and, more important, who is not, and a professed commitment to truth is little help; even characters as outrageous as shock jock Howard Stern claim dedication

to truth telling -- and the Federal Communication Commission even concurred that his broadcast met the standards for a news show (Farhi, 2003).

Other experts point to professional training as a way to separate bloggers from journalists who are "trained to report nonfiction events to an audience" (Turow, 2003). Yet the First Amendment protects "untrained" individuals' right to publish as firmly as it does the rights of a journalism school graduate or news organization employee (Marshall & McCown, 1979). Any formal certification of training -- that is, a license to practice journalism -- is untenable under the First Amendment.

In fact, all such attempts at definition lead in circles. Instead, the proper starting point for our inquiry into roles and values is with the content itself: Is it based on facts, and does it add to a public discourse that allows citizens to protect and promote their liberties (both in the sense of equality and of freedom from compulsion) and freedoms in realms including the political, artistic, cultural, sexual, religious, and economic? A philosophy of moral values guiding journalists is shaped by the journalist or journalism organization's need to be perceived by its audience as contributing to the public discourse by supplying factual, reliable, and meaningful information. That contribution constitutes journalism's central role and anchors its values.

HISTORICAL and LEGAL PERSPECTIVES

In *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond*, Ward (2004) calls this approach a "public philosophy of journalism" -- and points out that it is far from new. He says that although journalistic assertions of factuality and impartiality abounded even in the 18th century, a new element emerged around that time:

> The reader became an actor in a public sphere that increasingly took on a
> liberal spirit. … Newspapers called themselves 'public watchdog,' 'tribunal

for the people,' 'instrument of public opinion,' and a 'bulwark' of the
public's liberty. The journalism ethics of the eighteenth century is that of a
press conscious of its enlarged role in shaping public opinion (p. 129).

This public ethic of journalism was forged in England in an era when the practice included

partisan and reformist advocacy, gossip, advertisement, and essays on politics, fashion, science,

and polite society -- all of which may sound quite familiar. Who was a journalist during this

period? Ward identifies three roles: the partisan, the spectator, and the register. *Robinson*

*Crusoe'*s Daniel Defoe and *Gulliver's Travels* Jonathan Swift wrote partisan essays for weekly

newspapers. John Addison and Richard Steele's *Spectator*, a model for early papers in colonial

America, offered commentary without incitement. Samuel Johnson also practiced "spectator"

journalism. Samuel Buckley's *Daily Courant*, the first daily paper, spawned the vocation of

register, or newsgathering, journalism (Ward, 2004).

Were we to construct contemporary boundaries between journalism and non-journalism

based on such 18th century Anglo-American standards, there would be no categorical distinctions

between partisan blogger and so-called objective print reporter, for instance. Many bloggers,

with their mix of commentary and reporting, are present-day partisans and spectators,

contemporary versions of earlier pamphleteers (Gillmor, 2004; Kochan, 2006). If essayists

Defoe, Swift, and Addison and Steele played vital roles in creating the practice and its public

ethic, their modern-day counterparts must surely be "journalists," too. Similarly, from the early

1700s to today, journalism in Western democracies has included not only objective reporting but

also partisan, ideological, advocacy, and investigative journalism, along with political parody

and satire, all contributing meaningfully to the public interest. Such diverse content performs a

host of public functions but shares a central characteristic: It furthers civic discourse.

This historical perspective suggests another question consumers may ask themselves in

determining whose work merits their trust:

4. Does my source of information facilitate public discourse?

Legal rulings also support the argument that journalism is a verb (Jarvis, 2005) -- that is, one "does" journalism, and the process involves individual decision-making. Again, the importance of identifying journalism by the democratic role that its content serves in facilitating public discourse is underscored. For example, in determining what is a bona fide newscast, news interview, or news documentary for purposes of exemption from equal opportunities requirements in the Communications Act of 1934, the FCC has ruled that Stern's radio program, satirist Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect*, and talk shows *Donahue*, the *Sally Jessy Raphael Show*, and *Jerry Springer* qualify for exemption. The FCC reasoned that Congress created the exemptions to increase news coverage of the political process on television, where the majority of Americans get their news. Subsequently, the FCC has focused on whether the content in question serves the interest of public political discussion and participation. Congress, the FCC noted, recognized that interview formats less formal than *Meet the Press* or *Face the Nation* also contribute to engaging voters (*In re Request of Infinity Broadcasting Operations Inc.*, 2003). Using the same rationale, some have concluded "there should be no doubt that the *Daily Show* interviews would qualify for an exemption … even though it is an entertainment show" (Blitz & Corn-Revere, 2004).

Judicial rulings on a reporter's privilege also stress the activity of journalism and its public nature as touchstones. As a result of four court rulings, engagement in investigative reporting or newsgathering, with the purpose at the inception of the process "to disseminate this news to the public," has emerged as a test to determine who can invoke the privilege of reporter-source confidentiality (Schmidt & Goldberg, 1999). Courts have ruled that individuals working as

documentary filmmakers, authors of technical publications and professional investigative books, and unpublished writers may qualify as journalists if they start their projects with the intent to publish or broadcast to the public. Again, the narrowly defined role is overridden by the broader public service value implicit in the communications activity.

In 2006, bloggers for the first time won recognition as journalists for the purposes of invoking the reporter's privilege under a state shield law, in a case involving online publication by a site called the Apple Insider of what Apple Computer Inc. described as trade secrets. While declining to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate journalism, a California appeals court noted that the shield law's purpose is to "protect the gathering and dissemination of news and that is what [Apple Insider] did here" (*O'Grady v. Superior Court of Santa Clara County*, 2006, 1457). A court-drawn distinction between legitimate and illegitimate journalism, the appellate body ruled, "would imperil a fundamental purpose of the First Amendment, which is to identify the best, most important, and most valuable ideas not by any sociological or economic formula, rule of law, or process of government, but through the rough and tumble competition of the memetic marketplace" (*O'Grady*, 1457). [1]

History and recent jurisprudence thus support the thesis that at its core, journalism concerns itself with public affairs for the public's consumption and must seek public validation as being factual, reliable, and original. The effort to forge and maintain trust between journalist and audience member drives practitioners toward identifying and adhering to core ethical values. The arrival of new breeds of journalists—paid or unpaid, citizen or corporate, blogger or staff reporter, objective reporter or advocate—does not eliminate the imperative to gain public currency as a disseminator of verifiable information. We began with a look at cable news. The U.S. networks have now been joined on many cable systems by an international voice: that of

Qatar-based Aljazeera. In moving beyond its previous realm of influence and onto a global stage, Aljazeera sought a way to establish credibility among an extended audience. To do so, it opted to adopt a code of ethics -- one that looks much like those of established Western news organizations (Aljazeera, 2004). So, too, do nascent blogging ethics codes, as discussed below.

Definitive statements of who is or is not a journalist, then, are problematic; the focus instead is best centered on core values and on roles involving the dissemination of credible content that furthers public discourse. How do the values of authenticity, accountability and autonomy hold up in the world we have described, one saturated with both information and information providers?

AUTHENTICITY: INSTITUTIONS and INDIVIDUALS

In a traditional media environment, journalism is, by and large, contained within the products of entities that employ journalists: newspapers, magazines, broadcast news stations and the like. In legal terms, most journalism is "work for hire," something prepared by an employee within the scope of his or her employment (U.S. Copyright Office, 2004). In practice, this means that outside of their own professional community, journalists derive much of their credibility from that of their employer. The individual journalists' dealings are primarily with sources and with other journalists; to members of the public at large, they are part of the media company and their work is seen as what the organization -- not the individual -- reported today.

Although it raises ethical concerns, which we'll return to shortly, this sort of institutional authenticity is what students draw on when they equate "a journalism site" with a site produced by a mainstream media outlet. That they consider Christiane Amanpour's reporting from the Middle East for CNN to be credible or that they have come to trust what Adam Nagourney tells

them about political campaigns in the pages of *The New York Times* may or may not be a part of

that mental equation, but at best, it is only a part, and probably a small one at that. The overall

association, and the degree of trust that goes with it, attaches primarily to the organization, not

the individual journalist. In effect, CNN and the *Times* each represent the aggregated credibility

of hundreds of journalists who, as individuals, may come to public attention only, or at least

primarily, when they screw up. In other words, journalists in a traditional media environment

derive most of their credibility from the reputation of the organization they work for. They

become part of a "brand" that has, over time, succeeded in gaining public trust as a source of

credible information. The actions and ethical decisions of individual practitioners can strengthen

that trust or undermine it, but in terms of public perception, it is the institution that generally

takes the credit -- or the hit.

Using authenticity as a framework for assigning credibility has its advantages for the

public, the news organization, and the journalist. The journalist gains a ready-made reputation

rather than one that has to be built up word by word, story by story. The news organization has a

mechanism for both addressing and surviving the ethical lapses of individual employees. And

members of the public do not have to expend the cognitive energy to assess the work of each

individual reporter or photographer; the effort needed to pay such close attention to what each

journalist does over time would be considerable, and Americans simply are not all that tuned in

(Mindich, 2004). It is far simpler to fit the work of individual journalists into a broader schema:

"I trust the *Washington Post* to tell me what's going on in the nation's capital" or "I'll watch

ABC World News to see what happened in Iraq today."

However, institutional authenticity as a basis for credibility works a lot better in

yesterday's media environment than it does in today's. Students may still associate the web sites

of traditional media with "journalism," but that doesn't necessarily mean they are going there for news themselves. By the end of 2005, Yahoo! News had overtaken both CNN and MSNBC as the most heavily used online news site, averaging 27 million unique visitors a month (Project for Excellence, 2006a). Although the sites affiliated with traditional media companies remain major news sources for online users, nearly half of Americans who often get news online regularly visit such aggregator sites as Google News, AOL News or Yahoo! News (Pew Research Center, 2006b). And nearly 10 percent of Americans get news from blogs, 6 percent from "alternative" news sources, and 5 percent from list serves (Horrigan, 2006).

While there is much to be gleaned from such sources, their nature as aggregators and re-packagers should raise caution flags for consumers, who might ask themselves two more questions about their information providers:

5. Does this source break news itself or merely aggregate?

6. Are some articles based on first-hand observation rather than secondary sourcing? Commentary on what others have said is of course valuable, and early forms of journalism often revolved around such secondary evaluations, as described above -- but a diet of nothing but commentary increases the volume of discourse without necessarily adding to its quality, as the world of cable talk shows amply demonstrates. Similarly, aggregation can be helpful, and the ability to personalize information is a key benefit of the Internet. But aggregation relies on algorithms rather than the individual judgment that is required en route to an ethical definition of journalism; for instance, aggregators are as likely to highlight material from sources that do not care about credibility as from those that do.

Moreover, aggregation is a double-edged sword: It excludes as well as includes, and much of what is excluded may be valuable to civic knowledge. Of course, the same is true for

journalists -- aggregation is, in essence, a gatekeeping role. Relegating that responsibility to a computer program removes it from the ethical realm, which rests on human choice. The role, in other words, is stripped of the values that, within an actual newsroom, inform it.

That said, those values are not universally or uniformly upheld, and consumers are keenly attuned to journalists' all-too-human transgressions such as those mentioned above. Most major news organizations have suffered a steady decline in public assessment of their credibility over the past decade. In one recent survey asking opinions of various local and national media, not a single outlet was seen as credible enough for even 30 percent of the respondents to say they believed "all or most" of what it reported. Outright distrust was correspondingly high. For example, while 20 percent said they believed all or most of what they saw in *The New York Times*, nearly as many -- 18 percent -- said they believed almost nothing (Pew Research Center, 2006c). A Gallup poll taken during the 2004 fall election campaign found that just 44 percent of Americans were confident in the media's ability to report news accurately and fairly, the lowest level of confidence in the media since Gallup first asked the question in 1972 (Gillespie, 2004). Nearly three-quarters of Americans see the press as slanted; almost two-thirds see it as politically biased (Project for Excellence, 2006b). In short, relying on the authenticity provided by institutional reputation as a hallmark of journalistic credibility is risky business.

It is also dubious from an ethical perspective. For thousands of years, from the time of Aristotle to that of Jean-Paul Sartre and beyond, philosophers have emphasized the role of the individual in choosing among alternatives to enact an ethical decision. The existentialists, in particular, remind us that authenticity is an individual attribute; ethics must be personal, a matter of free choice rather than conformity to institutional or other group norms (Merrill, 1996). In

other words, from an ethical perspective, authenticity is a matter of individual moral responsibility (Stoker, 1995), not something conferred by or derived from an employer.

For both practical and philosophical reasons, then, as well as the legal ones encountered earlier, being seen as an authentic provider of news based on employment by a news organization will only take the journalist so far.

ACCOUNTABILITY: OPEN MEDIUM, OPEN WINDOWS

Information providers not associated with traditional media are establishing authenticity in other ways, and one of those ways is through a greater emphasis on accountability for their information. As touched on briefly above, accountability and the associated notion of "transparency" offer an avenue to credibility and the creation of mutual trust that is more in line with the demands, not to mention the zeitgeist, of today's media environment. This journalistic value takes two general forms: One involves personal disclosure, and the other involves evidentiary support. We'll take the latter first.

Unlike the finite space and time of the print or broadcast news product, the online medium offers limitless opportunities for expansion. The structure of the Internet, a global network of computers whose content is seamlessly joined together through hyperlinks, not only facilitates but also demands connections. The deconstructionists have been saying for a while now that boundaries among texts are vague because meaning depends on references and allusions to other texts; the Internet gives that rather esoteric notion a very real and recognizable form (Fredin, 1997). A news story no longer need be a discrete entity; instead, it becomes part of a multi-sourced network of information about a given topic.

In a traditional environment, journalists simply ask readers or viewers to trust them -- to trust that they are being truthful, that they have been both diligent and open-minded in their information gathering, that they have captured the most important part of a story in the 10 inches or two minutes allocated to it in their employer's news product. It is a lot to ask -- perhaps, as the steadily declining reputation of the news media described above suggests, too much. In an online environment, on the other hand, journalists have a technically enabled capability to show where their information comes from, provide background about their sources, expand the depth and breadth of any given story, and solicit additional input and feedback from readers.

The unbounded and interconnected nature of the medium gives journalists an unprecedented opportunity to build credibility through a form of information transparency that has never before been feasible. Too few are taking advantage of this opportunity yet (Paul, 2005). More should -- not only for ethical reasons but because other information providers online do. And linkages matter. Google's page ranking algorithm, for example, uses hyperlinks-as-votes as a method of determining relevance and thus prominence of display for search results (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

In this open environment, consumers should be able to easily ascertain who provided the information and what sorts of standards that provider feels are important. They also should be able to clearly identify any sources used in an article -- and, ideally, check out those sources for themselves. These capabilities suggest additional sets of questions news consumers might ask about their information providers, questions related to news "sources" in both senses of the term:

6. Is my source of news transparent? Can I easily find out about the news organization and its staff members? Does my news provider publicize its own principles -- and adhere to them?

7. Are the sources used in articles clearly identified? Are unnamed sources used sparingly if at all? If unnamed sources are used, is it clear why?

Bloggers, meanwhile, have made the link part of their craft and their creed. As blogging pioneer Rebecca Blood (2002) puts it in her *Weblog Handbook*'s ethical guidelines: If it exists online, you should link to it, enabling readers to "judge for themselves the accuracy and insightfulness of your statements." In other words, linking creates credibility.

Bloggers also have taken to heart the other aspect of accountability or transparency facilitated by the online medium, personal disclosure. Perhaps because of the intimate nature of the participatory blog format (Bowman & Willis, 2003), bloggers tend to be more upfront about their biases; moreover, they have greater autonomy to speak from the heart than journalists, constrained by institutional norms of objectivity and distance from any given subject (Lasica, 2004). Those who have attempted to put together an ethical framework for bloggers, in fact, have given pride of place to the overall notion of transparency. This "golden rule of blogging" includes disclosure to readers about the blogger's actions, motives, and financial considerations (Lasica, 2005). Prominent bloggers seem especially likely to offer substantial "self-presentation" or information about themselves online (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

This sort of transparency is harder for journalists, both because their individuality is subsumed within larger media organizations, as described above, and because long-standing norms of objectivity rest on the premise that the journalistic method involves a suppression of individual biases. But many journalists are finding ways to enhance credibility through transparency -- on, for instance, their own blogs. Media organizations began providing "j-blogs" several years ago; early efforts, most of which came from columnists, varied widely but were characterized by links that went primarily to mainstream media content and disclosure limited

mostly to the sort of opinions typically found on an op-ed page or a section-front column

(Singer, 2005). By 2006, blogs had become commonplace among the online offerings of major

media outlets, with as many as 80 percent of the top 100 U.S. newspapers providing at least one

reporter blog (Teeling, 2006). Although no comprehensive study of these blogs has been

conducted as of this writing, anecdotal evidence suggests their content is contributing to

journalistic accountability in at least two ways:

    * Explaining the rationale behind the news, particularly of editorial decisions. Editors are

now blogging at a number of news outlets large and small. At the *Dallas Morning News*, the

editorial board discusses its decisions on its group blog, DallasMorningViews.com. At the

Greensboro (NC) *News and Record*, editor John Robinson posts religiously to The Editor's Log

blog. *The New York Times'* public editor, or ombudsman, has a blog; at CBS News, a Public Eye

blog has the "fundamental mission" of bringing transparency to the news operation, enabling the

organization "to be more open about how and why it makes editorial decisions" (Meyer, 2005).

True, the impetus behind such moves -- particularly at organizations with very public ethical

lapses in recent years, including the *Times* and CBS News -- is at least partly defensive. But they

clearly are finding the medium to offer a viable venue for explaining themselves to readers, for

meeting the ethical guideline of clarifying and explaining news coverage and inviting dialogue

over journalistic conduct (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

    * Humanizing the reporting behind the news. Growing numbers of reporters -- not just

editors or columnists -- have joined the ranks of bloggers. Many of these, particularly among

television reporters, actually are group blogs; the reporter's name is on the blog and he or she

sometimes contributes to it, but people who play behind-the-scenes roles in traditional media do

much of the posting. For example, Anderson Cooper's "360" blog and Brian Williams' "Daily

Nightly" blog typically contain posts from producers and editors, as well as other CNN or NBC News correspondents. Others are the products of individual journalists, particularly at newspapers now offering blogs associated with many of their traditional news, sports, and feature beats. Many, though not all, of these often offer "how we got the story" information, such as descriptions of the difficulties of lugging cameras in and out of a war zone -- or the tedium of sitting around an airport waiting for clearance. Others seem to serve primarily to give the journalist a human voice, allowing him or her to talk about what covering a particular story feels like or about personal reactions to news events. They are, in short, a peek at what "making news" is like to the human beings behind the byline.

Some observers have suggested that these sorts of new media forms inherently foster trust among users, that they are "credible by nature" thanks to their egalitarian access to publishing platforms, their encouragement of an open marketplace of ideas, and even the speed with which feedback can be provided (Bowman & Willis, 2003). We're not convinced by the technological determinism implicit in that idea. The people using these media forms can choose to use them in a way that enhances the transparency of communication and thus builds trust in the communicators -- journalists included -- over time. The medium provides the capability; it's up to humans to provide the credibility.

And then it's up to the community to say it's so.

AUTONOMY: INTERNAL and EXTERNAL OVERSIGHT

A third area in which long-standing values underlying journalistic credibility are being challenged in today's media environment is autonomy. In this country, journalists' independence has been interwoven with their social obligation to be loyal first and foremost to the citizens who

rely on them for the information needed to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Indeed, all professions share a claim to autonomy, and all frame that claim in terms of their members' desire and ability to determine for themselves how best to serve the public (Larson, 1977). Journalists have positioned their fiercely protected freedom from external oversight as a fundamental perquisite to the credibility of a "Fourth Estate" able to report impartial truth.

In a traditional media world, one in which news organizations controlled access to the means of distributing information to large numbers of people, such claims to autonomy were relatively difficult to challenge. U.S. print media, in particular, are protected by the First Amendment from direct government oversight; except in a few limited areas, their decisions about what to publish rest on ethics, not law. And journalists' ethical guidelines make much of independence, leaving the matter of acting responsibility up to practitioners (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). Even toothless calls for greater social responsibility by the media, such as those from the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press in the 1940s, have been generally disdained or ignored. News councils, which are relatively popular in other democracies, have never caught on here; only Minnesota and Washington State currently have such councils, media participation in their hearings is voluntary, and the organizations' moral authority is ambiguous at best (Ugland & Breslin, 2000). In short, journalists have staked a claim to autonomy on legal, ethical, and professional grounds, and have called it good.

In today's world of open and ubiquitous publication, that claim has come in for new challenge. Oversight of professional behavior has become a team sport, and journalists no longer control who gets to play. The Internet essentially is moving the media away from previous distinctions between professional and popular communicators and toward a far more populist

form of communication. In this environment, a virtually infinite number of participants simultaneously serve as sources, audiences, and information providers. And a considerable number of those people are challenging the journalist's exclusive right to deem a particular piece of information credible or not. Indeed, journalists today find their autonomy challenged not so much by government, the threat they have guarded against for centuries, but by the very citizens to whom they owe their primary loyalty (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Singer, 2007).

In such an environment, the inclusion of as many voices as possible becomes not just a nicety but also a necessity for credible journalism. That means voices within the journalist's story, and it means voices supplementing that story. Consumers have two more related questions to ask themselves in considering the trustworthiness of their information providers?

9. Are all sides asked to comment within an article? And can I comment myself about the article -- can I exercise my own "social response-ability"?

Bloggers, in particular, seem to have taken on the self-appointed role as watchdogs of the watchdogs, making an editorial stance of arrogance or aloofness very difficult to sustain (Mitchell & Steele, 2005). Bloggers embody the idea that democratic power is essentially distributed rather than concentrated (Nordenstreng, 1998) and that the pursuit of truth works best as a collective enterprise. The journalist no longer has a lock on the role of declaring what information is and is not credible; some blogger, somewhere will be waiting to "fact check his ass" (Lasica, 2004).

And how the journalist responds is important. In fact, the increased attention to errors is another sign of trustworthiness that consumers may find useful in evaluating a news provider, suggesting a final question for them to ask:

10. Are errors corrected promptly and prominently?

Of course, it's not just bloggers, who are merely among the first waves of digital natives likely to be developing participatory media forms and formats for a long time to come. It's the medium itself that opens previous journalistic claims of autonomy to challenge:

> The Internet is a network -- an environment in which no single message is discrete and in which message producers and consumers are not only interchangeable but also inextricably linked. All communicators and all communication in this environment are connected. The notion of autonomy therefore becomes unavoidably contested. Professional communicators lose control over their messages as those messages become freely copied, exchanged, extended and challenged by anyone with a mind (and a modem) to do so. … As this happens, the professionals also lose control over their ability to be the sole determiners of whether their own norms have been adequately met (Singer, 2007).

Notions of professional autonomy thus become quite problematic in an online world. But the baby need not go down the drain with the bathwater. Journalistic autonomy is not prized for its own sake, or at least it should not be. Rather, it is prized as a means of safeguarding the credibility of what journalists produce, ostensibly free from outside pressures that might shape information toward ends that serve vested interests rather than those of the general public. As such, autonomy continues to have a purpose. But as a boundary between the professional journalist and the public, it ceases to have either value or much meaning. The shift in media form is perhaps merely a reminder that autonomy is neither a guarantee of truth nor a surrogate for it; rather, it is an avenue that can take journalists in a desirable direction.

The same goes for accountability and authenticity. The overall goal remains what it has always been: to provide credible information that citizens in a democracy need to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). This article has highlighted the fact that those three traditional routes to journalistic credibility are challenged in today's media environment. That does not mean they are no longer useful. It does mean they are different and that old assumptions about journalistic roles and values can no longer be accepted uncritically nor old approaches to

them continued indefinitely. The roles are changing; for the values to endure, journalists must figure out how best to adapt their articulation to the new media environment.

The students with whom we started this article are not necessarily giving a lot of thought to their responses to questions concerning the nature of journalists and journalism. But their gut reactions do suggest that traditional forms and functions are associated in people's minds with a valuable commodity: not mere information, but information that is credible. It is up to journalists and the organizations they work for to figure out how to preserve what's left of that credibility, and then to expand on it, in a media environment that demands both more and better from them.

ENDNOTE

1)   A meme refers to "a replicator of cultural information that one mind transmits (verbally or by demonstration) to another mind," including everything from tunes and fashion to ideas, theories, opinions, beliefs, practices, and habits (Wikipedia, 2006).

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Appendix: Questions for News Consumers

In today's world of multiple voices, many claiming to be journalistic, consumers must determine what they want and how to assess whether news sources fulfill those desires. Here are questions that consumers can ask on their own way to determining who is a journalist and, as a result, who deserves to be believed. They are discussed in context within the article.

1. Do I want news and opinion that exclusively agree with my views?

2. Do I want news mixed with opinion?

3. Do I care whether news and opinion are clearly distinguished from one another?

4. Does my source of information facilitate public discourse?

5. Does this source break news itself or merely aggregate?

6. Are some articles based on first-hand observation rather than secondary sourcing?

7. Is my source of news transparent? Can I easily find out about the news organization and its staff members? Does my source publicize its own principles -- and adhere to them?

8. Are the sources used in articles clearly identified? Are unnamed sources used sparingly if at all? If unnamed sources are used, is it clear why?

9. Are all sides asked to comment within an article? And can I comment myself about the article -- can I exercise my own "social response-ability"? **

10. Are errors corrected promptly and prominently?

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