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**Contested Autonomy:  
Professional and Popular Claims on Journalistic Norms**

Jane B. Singer

**ABSTRACT:**

Commitments to truth and to “transparency,” or public accountability, are two central normative aspects of professional journalism. This article considers ways in which both are challenged and complemented by popular communicators, particularly bloggers, in today’s media environment. While all professions claim autonomy over articulation and enactment of their own norms, definitions of professional constructs are now open to reinterpretation, and oversight of professional behavior is increasingly shared.

**Keywords:** accountability, autonomy, bloggers, ethics, journalists, norms, professionalism, transparency, truth

## **CONTESTED AUTONOMY: Professional and Popular Claims on Journalistic Norms**

The Internet alters the mass communication landscape in many ways, but perhaps none more profoundly than through its inherently open, participatory nature. Once-clear distinctions between “professional” and “popular” communicators merge and blend online as traditional dichotomies between message senders and receivers, producers and consumers are replaced by a vast, fluid, ongoing, multi-voiced discourse (Burnett and Marshall, 2003). The networked digital environment has meant an end to media forms that are discrete or concrete. And boundaries between journalists and their audiences have blurred as millions of people have discovered and begun to exercise the ability to express themselves online.

Although the framework used here comes primarily from the United States, the overall issues are relevant to journalists working within any political system that grants them independence from official oversight. This article focuses on two central normative aspects of professional journalism within such a system: voluntary commitments to truth and to “transparency” or accountability to the public. Bloggers serve both as points of comparison and as exemplars of newly empowered communicators in this media environment. Journalists and bloggers both value truth – but they define and express it in different ways. Both also value accountability. But journalists see internal vigilance as the best way to ensure it while bloggers gleefully take on the external role of watchdogs on the watchdogs.

The two norms are considered in the context of professionalism, particularly the ways in which professional autonomy in defining and enacting ethical behavior is challenged by popular communicators. A central claim of any profession, including journalism, is autonomy over articulation and enactment of its own norms, but the Internet has fostered a news environment in which definitions of professional concepts are open to reinterpretation and in which oversight of

professional behavior is shared. The article begins with background about the evolving role of bloggers as civic information sources, followed by a consideration of the nature of professional journalism and a review of the normative issues of truth and transparency. It then considers these two constructs specifically in the context of blogging and journalism, concluding with a consideration of how control over these aspects of professional ethics is shifting. In doing so, it seeks to lay the groundwork for research that can empirically assess such changes.

### **OVERVIEW: BLOGGERS and JOURNALISTS as INFORMATION SOURCES**

Although there are many different kinds of bloggers, this article is concerned with those who write about the same sorts of topics that journalists do, including politics, policy and other matters of public interest – including the media themselves. Some of these so-called “filter” or “A-list” bloggers have become a key resource for both citizens and journalists seeking cues about what matters in the world, and widely read bloggers see themselves as not just opinionated commentators but as influential opinion leaders (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005). As political scientists Drezner and Farrell (2004) write, “For salient topics in global affairs, the blogosphere functions as a rare combination of distributed expertise, real-time collective response to breaking news and public-opinion barometer.” Popular blogs have readerships rivaling those of media outlets; nearly 60 million Americans, or more than a third of U.S. Internet users, say they read blogs, and a sizable portion report that blogs now are among their sources for news (Lenhart and Fox, 2006).

Bloggers play a variety of roles in our information society, including roles of creator, collector and collator of widely disseminated civic information (Perlmutter, 2007) once dominated by professional journalists. Blogs have become “a key source of information and analysis for people who prefer to trust their own judgement rather than depend upon the spin, censorship and narrow agenda of the usual sources” (Coleman, 2005, p. 276). While some evidence suggests sites from

traditional sources are seen as more accurate, trustworthy or credible than those from individuals (Center for the Digital Future, 2005; Consumer Reports WebWatch, 2005; Project for Excellence, 2005), other research indicates that people who use blogs in fact consider them quite credible – but not by the standards with which they assess mainstream media. Users instead value blogs for being “opinionated, analytical, independent, and personal” (Johnson and Kaye, 2004, pp. 633-34).

Researchers have begun to tune in to the buzz about blogs, notably their role in politics (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005; Perlmutter, 2006; Trammell et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2005). Of more direct relevance here, scholars are investigating blogs as a communications phenomenon in their own right, as perhaps a sort of “public’s journalism” that potentially offers an alternative both to traditional news media and to the “public journalism” concept of a public interest mediated by professional journalists (Haas, 2005). For example, Wall (2005) found that the credibility of “warbloggers” covering the 2003 war in Iraq derived not from their access to traditional powerful sources but conversely, and in contrast with journalists, from their distance from such sources and willingness to assert their own opinions. She suggests the result is a form of “postmodern journalism” that challenges elite information control and questions the legitimacy of mainstream news, encouraging ordinary people to discover their political voices apart from media influence.

McIntosh points out that bloggers raise uncomfortable questions about who a journalist is, what such a person does, and how he or she does it in a technological and cultural environment in which “unattributed rumours, hype and outright lies can be spread with little recourse to the wronged party except to join the cacophony” (2005, p. 387). They thus raise issues of professionalism, particularly in relation the construction and enactment of professional norms.

## **PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM and AUTONOMOUS JOURNALISTS**

The notion of professionalism is a sociological construct, in which certain occupational groups are seen as possessing, among other things, special power and prestige (Larson, 1977). Though the fit with the craft or occupation of journalism has always been problematic, most journalists consider themselves professionals in the important sense that they feel loyalty to the ideals of a profession and a particular assortment of shared norms (Patterson and Wilkins, 2005). Those norms, two of which are explored in more detail here, constitute the ways in which journalists fulfill their overarching commitment to public service, a foundational ethic for all professions (Vollmer and Mills, 1966).

Another central premise of all professions is that its members must have autonomy over their own behavior. The professional community thus claims sole authority for determining whether its members have behaved properly and for enforcing sanctions if they have not (Larson, 1977). This idea of autonomy is connected with accountability; holding oneself accountable is part of the professional's duty (Newton, Hodges and Keith, 2004). Journalists, particularly in the United States, have made independence a part of their ethical code (Society of Professional Journalists, 2006) and have fiercely fought any attempts, real or perceived, to encroach on this autonomy. They typically have framed their stance in terms of the need to fulfill their public service obligations of informing the citizenry, free from the influences of government or of obligations to any other external force (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; McDevitt, 2003). Just what might constitute an external force has been broadly defined. For instance, widespread professional resistance to the public journalism movement of the 1990s -- a movement that originated within the professional and academic journalism communities -- was based largely on the perception that it would undermine journalists' ability to make their own autonomous news judgments and report accordingly (McDevitt, 2003).

Members of a profession also define, shape and control their own work processes – in the case of journalism, the ways in which journalists “make news” through work routines, newsroom structures and decisions about what a finite product should contain. Most of those routines, structures and decisions are connected to – indeed, dictated by – the fact that journalism emanates from the social space of a newsroom within a news organization, a collective enterprise designed to streamline (and, typically, profit from) individual work. The hierarchical news work environment includes not only reporters but also editors, whose job involves ensuring that information reaching the public is ethically sound (Friend, Challenger and McAdams, 2000; Keith, 2005). In other words, while the profession itself seeks to exercise autonomy from outside control, individual professionals actually give up personal autonomy to a significant degree (Glasser, 1992; Merrill, 1974).

Technology challenges the notion of a journalist as someone engaged in a particular process in a variety of ways. For example, the professional journalist, and particularly the editor, has always played the part of a “gatekeeper,” choosing what merits inclusion in the day’s news product and what does not (White, 1950). This idea of the journalist as the person who decides what others need to know has become deeply ingrained over the years, largely in connection with the idea of serving the information needs of a democratic society (Gans, 2003; Janowitz, 1975; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001); of course, it also is a means of asserting power over the circulation of knowledge (Fiske, 1989a). Through those decisions, the journalist is able to actively shape political reality, an agenda-setting function that lets citizens know which issues and ideas are important to think about, as well as how to think about them (McCombs and Shaw, 1993; 1972).

An assumption of autonomous professional power is inherent in both the gatekeeping and agenda-setting concepts. However, such roles are more difficult to identify online, where an infinite number of participants simultaneously serve as sources, audiences and information providers, and the journalist no longer has much if any control over what citizens will see, read or hear (Singer,

2006; Williams and Delli Carpini, 2000). The Internet thus is moving all our media away from previous distinctions between professional and popular communicators, and toward what at least theoretically is a populist form of communication. It allows millions of people all over the world to exert a form of “bottom-up power” to create meaning that is explicitly resistant to the meaning created by news organizations; as the power to create knowledge becomes diffused, it creates an open invitation for an active, and argumentative, public (Fiske, 1989a, pp. 172, 177).

The fact that all these people are expressing and sharing their ideas and opinions is a joyous -- and raucous -- celebration of free speech. But it also raises ethical issues. The rest of this article focuses on two norms of particular concern. An overview of the ethical concepts of truth and transparency is followed by a discussion of how they are enacted by journalists and by bloggers, as well as the ways in which notions of professional autonomy over defining and enacting normative behavior are being reconfigured.

### **NORMATIVE CONSTRUCTS: TRUTH and TRANSPARENCY**

For thousands of years, philosophers have wrestled with the difficulty of defining “truth” and its relation to the equally nebulous term “reality.” The terms therefore have held wildly disparate meanings for people living in different times and places. The oral society of the ancient Greeks defined truth as what is memorable and handed down; Plato instead linked truth to human intellect, proposing that reality was an ideal, distinct from the material realm in which we live and knowable only in an imperfect and distorted way. Medieval ethicists said truth was what the king, the Church or God declared it to be; Milton challenged that orthodoxy by proposing that competing notions of truth should be allowed to battle for supremacy in what later was called a marketplace of ideas. Enlightenment philosophers defined truth as what is verifiable, replicable and universal, the definition on which most journalistic conceptualizations rest (Patterson and Wilkins, 2005). But the



“god-terms” of journalism – facts, truth, reality – are called into question by contemporary notions of relativity, subjectivity and construction (Zelizer, 2004). Twentieth-century pragmatists asserted the importance of individual perception on truth and its utility, and post-modernists have gone a step further, claiming that the concept of truth itself is devoid of meaning apart from a highly subjective contextual understanding (Patterson and Wilkins, 2005).

Others have proposed conceptualizing truth in terms of a continuum of intent on the part of the communicator, in which the selective use of information lies somewhere between the intent to be fully honest and the intent to deceive (Deaver, 1990). Truth also can be seen as having different levels, from the transcendental “Truth with a capital T” that is beyond human comprehension to the more concrete levels of truth reported by one communicator or understood by another (Merrill, 1996, pp. 113-115). A more practical definition is that truth is the version of the world that subsequent information cannot discredit (Black, Steele and Barney, 1999).

Despite the epistemological difficulties, truth is a central norm for journalists worldwide. For example, Hafez (2002) compared journalism codes from Europe and the Islamic world and found a broad intercultural consensus that truth and objectivity should be central journalistic values. An earlier comparison of European codes found that an emphasis on the truthfulness of information was a source of widespread commonality – but that truthfulness was commonly framed in a broader context of accountability to both the public and the journalists’ sources (Laitila, 1995). These findings support Cooper’s earlier exploration of what he called “pervasive essences” in journalistic codes; he found the “quest for truthfulness” to be the most dominant theme, closely followed by a notion of responsibility that incorporated concepts of accountability and loyalty (1990, p. 11).

Accountability, along with openness, is a core component of the broader and more recently articulated concept of transparency, which in turn is closely connected with truth – that is, being honest about the nature of what is known and how that knowledge has been generated (Kovach and

Rosenstiel, 2001). Although tied to political philosophies that emphasize the public's ability to scrutinize government, transparency also entails normative connections to broader notions of social accountability and responsibility -- the expectations, relations and obligations among people operating within a set of cultural and situational norms (Scott and Lyman, 1968). Accountability and responsibility are not synonymous; ethicist Lou Hodges points out that the latter has to do with defining proper conduct, while the former is more closely connected with compelling such conduct (Newton, Hodges and Keith, 2004). Nonetheless, there is a close connection among all these ideas.

Perhaps their most direct applications to professional journalism have come from social responsibility theory, which seeks to unite ideas of democracy, responsibility and truth-telling. In order to be effective political actors, citizens must have reliable information – and it is the responsibility of the journalist to provide the public with “a substantial and honest basis of fact for its judgments of public affairs” (Hocking, 1947, p. 169). The journalistic view of this process gives the media a central role, making the public the target of information and thus of influence by sources of power -- including the media themselves. Such a view is not necessarily appropriate; as Nordenstreng (1998) points out, in a true democracy the public actually is the source of influence and power. At a minimum, the relationship must work in both directions.

Moreover, there are problems inherent in defining accountability as a means of compelling responsibility; for instance, definitions will shift depending on the philosophical approach used to determine the nature of that responsibility, with implications for the extent to which autonomous action is part of the determination. For those who believe the best route to effective democracy lies in an unfettered press, accountability will be connected to the extent to which free-press ideals of independence are upheld; communitarians, on the other hand, will seek to broaden the concept to encompass social and cultural consequences (Plaisance, 2000). Along the latter lines, Christians and Nordenstreng (2004) have argued for the centrality of social responsibility as a worldwide ethical

commitment, noting that accountability becomes especially vital as the media become simultaneously more citizen-based and more globally oriented.

Truth and transparency both are fundamental to notions of trust in a society. Trust is another normative concept with sociological implications; it is a public good, essential for stable relationships, the maintenance of cooperation and indeed for overall social welfare (Misztal, 1995). Trust in the basic truthfulness of the communication we receive from others is central to choices and actions needed to maintain social order; a society whose members were unable to distinguish truthful messages from deceptive ones would collapse (Bok, 1989). Flip that proposition around, and it becomes a statement about responsibility, the positive commitment of an individual not to deceive or act in other ways detrimental to the social good, and accountability, or the related notion of being publicly answerable for one's actions. Transparency takes accountability a step further, covering truthful disclosure before and during an act as well as after it has been taken.

A number of scholars recently have explored issues of truth, trust and transparency in a new media environment. Tompkins (2003) points out that online communication raises concerns because the medium makes it difficult to assess the truthfulness of what someone says against reliable reference points; the asymmetrical nature of online communication and the fact that communicators are not physically present to one another contribute to the difficulty of determining both truthfulness and trustworthiness. Gunkel and Hawhee (2003) argue even more forcefully that a computer-mediated environment reconfigures prevailing ethical systems based on truth and identity. Truth, they say, "is not a quality or a value that is indigenous to the computer. Instead, it is the 'will to deception' that best characterizes its operations" (p. 183). Cooper earlier suggested forty ethical issues created by new media technologies, with both deception and accountability high on the list in an environment that magnifies questions of responsibility for what is published (1998, p. 74).

The philosophical and normative interconnections among truth, transparency and trust, particularly in an online media environment, are clear. But while both popular and professional communicators may see these norms as central, they can and do articulate that perception in different ways. The next two sections move away from ethical theory to draw on observations of journalists and bloggers, followed by a conclusion that attempts to unite the normative concepts and notions of autonomy with the media transition now under way.

### **JOURNALISTS, BLOGGERS and TRUTH**

As suggested above, the explicit application of philosophical principles of ethics to the practice of journalism is a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon tied to earlier notions about the ability of rational individuals to pursue and reproduce civically important truth. Just what “truth” might be and how best to arrive at it, however, became increasingly difficult to define from the century’s beginning to its end. The certainty of Enlightenment and Victorian views of scientifically verifiable facts gave way to the relativity of Einstein and quantum physics. Coverage of wars and social upheavals through successive new media forms -- film, radio, television, the Internet -- brought the power of persuasion and propaganda to public attention (Severin and Tankard, 2001; Lasswell, 1927). Modernism was overtaken by post-modernism, colonialism by post-colonialism, structuralism by post-structuralism, with each “post” version calling into question previously accepted truths.

As the intellectual world was questioning the notion of truth as something that can be perceived and rationally verified, journalists were reaffirming and eventually codifying that notion. In the first decade of the century, the first dean of the first U.S. journalism school wrote the nation’s first widely cited journalistic ethics code. The “Journalist’s Creed” declared journalism a profession and a public trust; a journalist should “write only what he holds in his heart to be true” based on “clear thinking and clear statement, accuracy and fairness” (Williams, n.d.). Barely a decade later,

the newly formed American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) developed its “Canons of Journalism,” affirming a commitment to truth and accuracy (2002). The Society of Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi (SPJ) used the ASNE principles to develop its own ethics code in 1973, stating in the first sentence that members believed “the duty of journalists is to serve the truth.” The code’s emphasis on truth-telling has remained paramount through several modifications; the current version, adopted in 1996, offers journalists four guiding principles for optimal performance, of which the first is to seek truth and report it (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

These creeds, canons and codes constitute a professional commitment to a special set of obligations tied to providing citizens the information they need to be free and self-governing -- and foremost among those obligations has been a commitment to truth (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). The fact that those citizens can choose from an increasingly broad array of different information has changed neither the commitment nor the obligations. But it has shifted perceptions about how best to fulfill them -- and bloggers have been, so far, the poster children for a society that has now been nurtured on postmodern rather than Enlightenment sensibilities (Wall, 2005).

Bloggers also are committed to truth – but they have quite different ideas of how best to attain it and what to do with it. They do not see truth as resting on the decisions of one autonomous individual or group of individuals within a news organization or anywhere else. Instead, bloggers see truth as emerging from shared, collective knowledge – from an electronically enabled marketplace of ideas (Singer, 2005). A blog “depends upon a different model of its authority, establishing itself as a site of multiple knowledge and of breadth of knowledge of the world.” Knowledge thus evolves through connections, rather than being contained within one entity such as a newspaper or newscast (Matheson, 2004, p. 460).

Moreover, bloggers see themselves as the opposite of gatekeepers. Despite challenges to the gatekeeping role, journalists do continue to see their job as collecting and verifying information as

best they can before disseminating it – or not. The news product then offers as truth the information that has survived the rigorous scrutiny (ideally) of a journalistic process in which verification determines veracity (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Nunez Encabo, 1995). In contrast, bloggers offer a space for all comers to post what they know or think; to receive a hearing; and to have their ideas publicly debated, modified, and expanded or refuted. The blogger's truth is created collectively rather than hierarchically. Information is not vetted before its dissemination but instead through the process of disseminating multiple views: Truth, in this view, is the result of discourse rather than a prerequisite to it (Singer, 2005).

Among other things, this means that trust and credibility, which for journalists often rests primarily with the reputation of their media organization and its enactment of professional norms over time, must be earned by each individual blogger (Kramer, 2004), who acts autonomously -- and is judged by those autonomous acts. Reputations in this environment are based on “a synthesis of consistency, accuracy and frequent comparison by the reader,” say Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis in their book, *We Media* (2003). They quote Internet veteran Howard Rheingold, who points out that “people who are dedicated to establishing a reputation for getting the story right and getting it first don't necessarily have to work for the *Washington Post* or *The New York Times*.”

Fair enough, though while journalists at the *Post* or the *Times* face consequences if they publish lies – think Jayson Blair – bloggers do not. Bloggers' ethics are almost wholly personal and revolve around freedom of expression, which a majority cited as their strongest value in a recent small-scale study (Kuhn, 2005). They can choose to commit to the creation of a vehicle that engages in the collective pursuit of truth. Or they can publish whatever outrageous nonsense strikes their fancy. Either way, they will still be blogging tomorrow (if they feel like it). The ethics of the professional journalist actually are both personal and social, given their place within an occupational group with a public commitment to the responsible pursuit of the truth.

In summary, both bloggers and professional journalists believe in the importance of truth and in their own autonomy in pursuing it. But they define and exercise that autonomy differently, based on fundamentally different philosophies and with significant implications for notions of autonomy. The journalist puts great stock in the ability to pursue truth independent of external control over how that pursuit should be undertaken, but the journalist also cedes individual autonomy over the process to normative oversight by both an employer and the profession at large. The blogger has greater individual autonomy over defining and articulating truth; to the extent that it exists at all, external control over the blogger comes from a loose, fluidly structured collective not bound to any particular set of normative priorities. The blogger also has an effect on the journalist's autonomy, a subject to explore following consideration of the normative concept of transparency.

## **BLOGGERS, JOURNALISTS and TRANSPARENCY**

The section on truth used journalistic codes of ethics as a springboard for discussion because truth has been the paramount principle for professional journalists over the years. Although collective norms exemplified by ethics codes may seem inimical to bloggers' inherently libertarian nature, quite a few such codes and other formal guidelines have been proposed and debated in the blogging community. Virtually all treat transparency as a central principle. Arguably, what truth is to journalists, transparency is to bloggers – their own “golden rule” (Lasica, 2005). Prominent bloggers are especially likely to engage in substantial “self-presentation,” or sharing information about themselves (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005). So this section starts with them.

One widely discussed set of ethical guidelines was offered by blogging pioneer Rebecca Blood in her 2002 book, *The Weblog Handbook*, among the first to systematically explain blogs and explore their connections to the media and the larger culture. Blood suggests “the blog's greatest strength – its uncensored, unmediated, uncontrolled voice – is also its greatest weakness.” Although

media organizations and the journalists who work for them are far from perfect, they do have a stake in upholding certain standards in order to retain both audiences and advertisers. In contrast, she says, the lack of gatekeepers and bloggers' relative freedom from the consequences of publishing may compromise their integrity and thus their value. She offers a set of six principles, each incorporating the notion of transparency. Bloggers, for instance, are encouraged to link to any material they reference in their posts; to publicly correct any misinformation; to disclose conflicts of interest; and to note the nature of any questionable or potentially biased sources (Blood, 2002).

Jonathan Dube of the American Press Institute's Cyberjournalist site proposes another widely cited set of ethical guidelines for bloggers, one that draws heavily on the SPJ code for journalists. He argues that although blogging is a more casual form of publishing than journalism, it is still publishing – and bloggers therefore have ethical obligations to readers, to people they write about and to society in general. Dube (2003) emphasizes the bloggers' obligation for disclosure and accountability, urging bloggers to “explain each Weblog's mission and invite dialogue with the public over its content and the bloggers' conduct.” Scholar Martin Kuhn (2005) draws on both these proposals, as well as on philosophical approaches to ethics, in formulating his own suggested code of blogging ethics. In addition to transparency, he incorporates notions of truthfulness, accountability and a minimization of harm. Blogger and online journalist J. D. Lasica (2005) emphasizes transparency and disclosure as central to a “loose-knit set of general tenets” for bloggers, urging that actions, motives and financial considerations be shared with readers. *Online Journalism Review* (2005) similarly emphasizes the importance of disclosure, urging bloggers to tell readers “how you got your information and what factors influenced your decision to publish it.”

These and other examples highlight the importance of transparency in the nascent norms of the blogosphere. For journalists, in contrast, a call for accountability has been the most controversial of the guiding principles outlined by SPJ, largely because of the perceived potential for a conflict



with autonomy described above. The current version of the ethics code was adopted only after two years of debate, much of it about the nature and extent of journalists' responsibilities (Black, Steele and Barney, 1999). Eventually, journalists agreed they are indeed accountable to their audiences and to each other. Related responsibilities include clarifying and explaining coverage; inviting dialogue with the public about journalistic conduct; encouraging the public to voice grievances about the news media; and admitting and promptly correcting mistakes (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). Nonetheless, the eventual inclusion of the principle in the professional code had minimal impact on journalists' behavior, at least initially (Black, Steele and Barney, 1999).

Journalists today are pooh-poohing the idea of accountability less than they did just a few years ago. It would be simplistic to credit bloggers for the change. A host of interrelated events and trends has contributed to expanded media efforts to examine and explain themselves. These include declining audiences, demanding shareholders and other economic pressures; a string of public embarrassments at major news organizations; highly visible moves toward expanded accountability by industry leaders, such as the management shakeup and addition of a public editor at *The New York Times*; and a desire to distance "journalism" from the increasingly entertainment-oriented "news media." To this litany can be added the cumulative effects of an antagonistic White House and a hostile public. Despite some recent evidence of public support for the media's role as a neutral social institution, the overall trend over the past 25 years has been a public perception of the news media as decreasingly professional, accurate, caring or moral (Project for Excellence, 2006b).

Still, it would be a mistake to exclude from the equation the pressure for greater accountability exerted by the culture of the Internet, an environment that potentially constitutes "a new trust situation" in which old rules and roles are open to challenge (Rosen, 2005). Expectations of transparency and accountability online seem to be growing and are manifested in a variety of ways, including desires for clear separation of online news and advertising content, for more

prominent display of corrections and clarifications, and for the ability to contact both editors and reporters through e-mail (Project for Excellence, 2006c).

Despite the fact that they ultimately are autonomous communicators answerable only to themselves, bloggers do move the notions of accountability and transparency to the foreground for all public communicators in at least two ways. One is by constantly holding journalists' feet to the fire, discussed further in the concluding section. The other is by their own publishing practices, which generally follow the norm of disclosure of the principles they hold, the processes they follow and the people they are off-screen (Mitchell and Steele, 2005; Perlmutter, 2006; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005). The open and participatory nature of the medium is integral to blogging in a way it has not historically been to professional journalism.

Bloggers are transparent in both their motive, including their biases, and their process. They have greater autonomy to speak from the heart than journalists, constrained by institutional norms of objectivity and distance from any given subject. And blogs are characterized by extensive use of links to documents, sources and other evidence to buttress their views and, ultimately, establish their authority (Lasica, 2004). The two work together: Bloggers tell us who they are and what they find interesting or important, then invite us to see for ourselves if we agree. The emphasis on "prioritizing the human element" of blogging explicitly incorporates concepts not just of connection but also of community (Kuhn, 2005). "To be interesting, the blog must have a discernible human voice," says one journalist turned blogger. "A blog with just links is a portal" (Lennon, 2003, p. 77).

The result is not inherently more transparent; bloggers typically provide very little information about who is behind those linked sites, what their backgrounds are and "what if any expertise, relationship or bias they may have on the subject at hand" (Project for Excellence, 2006a). But it is at least a step toward backing up statements with evidence that can be

independently assessed. It is, somewhat ironically for this most postmodern of media forms, a step in the direction of Enlightenment notions of truth as independently verifiable.

So bloggers and journalists both value truth highly but take different paths toward it. They both profess an adherence to transparency but enact it in practice in different ways and with different degrees of dedication and enthusiasm. And they both fervently stake claims to autonomy, but the claim leads them in different directions. Yet there is considerable common ground.

### **CONCLUSION: COMPLEMENTARY NORMS, SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

The above discussion suggests that the direct application of journalistic norms to bloggers or vice versa is difficult, given differences in what they do and their underlying philosophies of doing it. That said, just as norms of truth and transparency are intertwined with notions of trust, the two forms of public communication, each emphasizing different approaches to those norms, have a symbiotic relationship with significant implications for shifting ideas about autonomy.

Perhaps the most obvious point of overlap involves bloggers' self-appointed role as watchdogs of the watchdogs. Bloggers tend to rely on journalists as primary sources for their information -- but they are quite fond of biting the hands that feed them. Journalists 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 and Rosenstiel, 2001). Many of the most widely read bloggers carefully and continuously monitor what journalists report and how they report it -- and call attention to perceived problems. These cover a broad spectrum but commonly include hypocrisy, bias, inaccuracy and inattention to potentially big stories. "For lazy columnists and defensive gatekeepers, it can seem as if the hounds from a mediocre hell have been unleashed," says *Columbia Journalism Review* contributor Matt Welch (2003). "Journalists finally have something approaching real peer review, in all its brutality."

Both the synergies and tensions between professional and popular oversight of media practitioners' normative behavior are readily apparent. Did CBS News executives lose their jobs because other members of the professional community determined that they had inadequately verified information about President George W. Bush's disputed Air National Guard service as a young man? Or were they victims of bloggers, who vociferously challenged the leaked memos at the heart of the fall 2004 story, a challenge that eventually led to an internal inquiry by CBS (Kramer, 2004; Pein, 2004)? Or both? Did *New York Times* Executive Editor Howell Raines step down because the professional community determined he was at fault for a series of management missteps that facilitated reporter Jayson Blair's lies – or because bloggers demanded, and got, unprecedented transparency to the inner workings of the *Times* newsroom (Hewitt, 2005, Regan, 2003)? Or both? Did *Newsweek* magazine's internal codes of professional ethics demand retraction of an item about Guantanamo Bay guards flushing the Koran down a toilet – or was the posting of explanations and apologies by two top editors, a forum for reader comments, and a podcast of journalists discussing the magazine's actions a response to howls from bloggers (Smith, 2005)? Or both? These are just some of the recent examples of U.S. journalists' responses to their own ethical lapses stemming from what surely is the joint exercise of autonomous professional oversight and external demands for accountability iterated and extensively reiterated in the blogosphere.

Journalists today can expect that anything they write or say will be scrutinized by someone able and more than willing to instantly publish the outcome of that scrutiny. Bloggers famously have fact-checked everything from war correspondents' stories about Iraq to opinion columnists' use of quotations (Welch, 2003). An editorial stance of arrogance or aloofness becomes impossible to sustain (Mitchell and Steele, 2005). In short, while journalism as a profession claims the autonomy to seek and report truth in its own way and to hold itself accountable for the results, bloggers challenge that claim. Instead, they articulate Nordenstreng's point (1998) that democratic

power is essentially distributed rather than concentrated. Bloggers have taken possession of a portion of the very process of verification that the professional journalist has identified as the essence of truth-telling (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001), and they have been vociferous in demanding media accountability when they believe the profession is falling short.

Of course, media watchdog organizations have existed for a long time. A number of attempts have been made over the years to create media accountability systems to encourage more thorough truth-telling and greater transparency (Bertrand, 2000). And academics have been criticizing press behavior since well before the Hutchins Commission for Freedom of the Press issued its report calling for greater media responsibility half a century ago. Journalists have been generally successful in deflecting or ignoring such criticism, typically citing professional autonomy as a rationale and, in the United States, falling back on legal First Amendment protections when necessary. Why should bloggers – unorganized, relatively powerless, often outrageous individuals, at least some of whom some of the time must literally be working in their pajamas – break through?

The answer perhaps lies in the inherent nature of the medium that this article began by describing. 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 – a process at which bloggers excel and in which they exult. This article has suggested that 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.

Popular communicators in the online environment who both share the norms and take them in new directions may not essentially challenge – and perhaps may even strengthen – the dominance

of mainstream media as primary news gatherers and information providers (Haas, 2005). Yet they do encroach on the professional journalist's territory and challenge the professional's autonomy – perhaps much in the same way as French semiotician Roland Barthes (1972) described earlier forms of populist expression, such as avant-garde art, as challenging both the ethics and the aesthetics, the morals and art of those in control of the status quo. A redistribution of power and resources within a system need not be dramatic to affect the ways that power is exercised (Fiske, 1989b). Such seems to be at least the potential with online media today.

The shifting media terrain offers not only a challenge but also an opportunity for journalists to strengthen their norms, to publicly articulate them -- even to use them to differentiate themselves from those who do not follow them. Ultimately, as traditional distinctions between professional and popular communicators become less clear in this open, participatory, interconnected media environment, “professional” journalists will not be distinguished by the products they produce nor the processes through which they do so. Rather, their norms will become increasingly definitive.

The fact that their claims to telling the truth or to being accountable for their actions and decisions, as well as their claims to independence, are not exclusive does not make those norms less important. On the contrary, the vocal presence of bloggers underscores the need for verification and truth-telling, both because bloggers will let journalists (and everyone else) know when those norms are not enacted and because bloggers also happen to see them as vital – even though their methods of verifying information and arriving at truth are different. As for accountability, it is past time for journalists to pay the construct more than lip service in a code of ethics adopted a decade ago but too easily honored in the breach. If bloggers offer an impossible-to-ignore grassroots motivation for journalists to understand both the meaning and the importance of social responsibility in an interconnected world – and to take seriously, on a daily basis, the central role that an open exchange of both information and criticism plays -- so be it.

The article has suggested that there is considerable synergy between the norms of bloggers and journalists. Indeed, those who have thought through what ethical guidelines for bloggers might look like are finding that they look a whole lot like ... ethical guidelines for journalists, particularly in relation to the normative value of truth and transparency considered here. In the words of online veteran Steve Outing (2004) “bloggers and mainstream journalists should be looking to one another for ideas on how to navigate our newly revised media world.” After all, they enjoy an inherently symbiotic relationship. Interconnected blogs and their readers – including journalists -- form a community that discusses, dissects and extends the stories created by mainstream media, as well as producing their own commentary, fact-checking and grassroots reporting. Professional journalists in turn feed upon this material, developing it as a pool of tips, sources and story ideas (Lasica, 2003) – not to mention bringing blogs and the issues raised by bloggers to the public’s attention by covering them as newsworthy. As the forms intertwine, notions of professional autonomy may become increasingly problematic, but the goals of truth and transparency are both advanced. Empirical research now is needed that can systematically explore the many ways in which that is happening.

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