

CORRECTING THE RECORD

The impact of the digital news age on the performance of press accountability

Nicole L. Joseph

Contemporary journalists are, on a daily basis, adopting new work practices to remain relevant in the changing media environment. This study examines these changing practices to determine if, and how, they have been accompanied by changes in journalists' abilities to enact traditional ethical standards in the newsroom. It posits that by examining the performance of ethics by news actors, as opposed to ethical standards themselves, the importance and impact of changing news practices can be realized and addressed. To illustrate these changes, I explore the use of news corrections as a means for maintaining journalistic accountability. The findings suggest that key attributes of the contemporary news environment, including the rapid speed with which online information is transmitted, and the increasing participation of news consumers in the media environment, can help journalists in their quests for accountability. However, other changes associated with the online news environment, such as the ease with which online information can be erased from history, and the continuous evolution of newsroom technologies, highlight the need for journalists' ongoing pursuit of new techniques to ensure that the standard of accountability is maintained.

KEYWORDS accountability; journalism ethics; news corrections; online journalism

Introduction

The practice of journalism is changing. While the nature of these changes has prompted much discussion and debate among media scholars and practitioners (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Matheson, 2004; Singer, 1998), the fact that the contemporary media environment looks, at least on the surface, very different than it did 20 years ago has rarely been disputed. New social practices in online environments, shifting expectations about the accessibility of information and evolving technologies have contributed to dramatic alterations in the news landscape (Brunns, 2004; Dahlgren, 1996; Deuze, 2001; Singer, 2003).

The changing news environment is not unprecedented. Scholars have detailed the ways in which similar social and technological changes—for example, the impact of the telegraph on news work in the mid-nineteenth century or even the rise in popularity of the television in the middle of the twentieth—have been the cause for concern among traditional news workers (Belson, 1961; Huntzicker, 1999). Even so, contemporary news headlines such as “Journalism’s Slow, Sad Death” (Gerson, 2009) or “The Beginning of the End for Newspapers” (Shafer, 2009) demonstrate the significance that many members of the media have attached to the current state of the industry.

Examinations of contemporary journalism have focused largely on changes to the processes and practices of news work—in particular, who is allowed to share information, and how they do so (Gillmor, 2006; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009; Thurman, 2008)—as well as the financial concerns of traditionally print news organizations (Alterman,

2008; Isaacson, 2009). Scholars and journalists have paid far less attention, however, to ways that the changing media environment has affected another fundamental aspect of traditional news work: the ethical foundations of journalism, principles established by news producers to ground the field.

These well-established standards—from the commitment to truth-telling to the need for journalists to avoid conflicts of interest—lend “professional integrity” to news work which, according to the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), is the “cornerstone of a journalist’s credibility” (SPJ, 1996). Described as such, journalism ethics would, arguably, remain largely unchanged in the face of shifting work practices. However, this presumes a very particular definition of news ethics: that ethics are a “desired result,” a moral goal or outcome of journalistic work.

Instead, I argue that journalism ethics should be examined as an integral part of journalism work processes. This study investigates changes in the practices of working journalists in an attempt to understand if, and how, they have been accompanied by changes in the *performance* of ethics in news work. Drawing on Glasser and Ettema’s (2008) suggestion of “ethics as a process rather than an outcome,” I suggest that a focus on ethical enactment creates space for the exploration of factors which may aid and hinder journalists in their attempts at ethicality.

Whereas ethics as broad moral outcomes for which journalists should strive emphasizes the responsibility of individual news workers, ethics as a process takes into account a host of factors that impact journalistic work. The day-to-day ethical concerns of most fair and hard-working journalists are not whether they can get away with lying, cheating, manipulating their sources or egregious plagiarizing (the limited examples of which often make headlines), but the more subtle, nuanced ethical difficulties that permeate daily news work. The study of ethics as a process shifts the emphasis from the normative questions of what a journalist should do to the pragmatic question of how she does it. In this light, examining ethics as a process requires focusing less on the *internal* morality of individual actors, suggesting that the performance of ethics can both benefit from, and be challenged by, *external* forces.

As an illustration of the performance of ethics, and the ways in which factors external to news actors may facilitate or obstruct this enactment, I examine journalists’ changing corrections practices in contemporary newsrooms. Drawing upon interviews with working journalists at a range of print, broadcast and online news outlets in the United States, I look at the practice of correcting errors in news content as a means for enacting accountability, and the ways that this journalistic practice has been affected in the digital age. The results suggest that key attributes of the digital news environment—the speed with which information moves online and the new, active role of media consumers—can aid in the performance of accountability in contemporary newsrooms. I argue that these attributes should be further explored and exploited to ensure that ethical standards are maintained.

However, the rapid and ongoing changes associated with online news practices have also raised new challenges that require equally rapid responses from journalists if traditional ethics are to be upheld. I argue that given the assumption that most news workers desire to uphold moral and ethical news standards, more emphasis should be placed on how they can reach these goals. Just as a focus on ethical performance can expose factors that help journalists remain ethical, such an empirical focus can also

highlight pitfalls to be avoided. I begin by examining the ethical standard of accountability and attempts at its performance in news work.

'Performing' Accountability in the Newsroom

One of the most widely cited ethical standards in journalism is that of accountability for news work—work that includes both the practice of journalism (interviewing etiquette and responsibility to sources, for example) and the resulting news product (Glasser and Ettema, 2008; Laitila, 1995; Strentz, 2002). Christians (1985–6) argues that there are multiple definitions for the term “accountability” in journalism, but writes that it generally means being responsible and answerable for one’s actions. “Accountability [in journalism] means disapproval for morally questionable activities,” he writes. “We intuitively recognize this form of accountability . . . though we are not breaking any laws, we have a moral obligation not to violate a commitment or dishonor a relationship” (1985–6, p. 16).

Discussions about what exactly journalists *should* be doing with respect to the ethic of accountability have been accompanied by conversations about the lack of means for actually *enforcing* this standard (Bertrand, 2000; Christians, 1985–6; Glasser and Ettema, 2008). These scholars argue that journalism ethics codes offer little practical guidance for the maintenance of ethics on a daily basis. Christians (1985–6) argues that options such as the forum provided by printing commentary and letters to the editor from readers may be more successful means for increasing accountability. Likewise, in his book *Media Ethics and Accountability Systems*, Bertrand (2000) describes the notion of media accountability systems (MAS). These, he argues, are “any non-State means of making media responsible towards the public” (2000, p. 107), including practices such as sending accuracy and fairness questionnaires to news consumers, staging highly publicized media events about ethical breaches and conducting ethical coaching in the newsroom.

Glasser and Ettema argue that the successful enactment of accountability in contemporary newsrooms requires journalists to defend their actions with “eloquence as a hedge against arrogance and indifference” (2008, p. 528). They suggest that accountability requires journalists to be able to engage in discussion with the public about their conduct. According to the authors:

Above all else, ethics . . . depends on the competence to communicate in a way that makes clear how judgments inform choices and how principles inform judgments; it depends, therefore, on eloquence among journalists commensurate with the eloquence of their most worthy critics. (2008, p. 512)

Glasser and Ettema’s view that the ethic of accountability is best viewed as a process of rationalization between actors leaves space for forces outside of individual journalistic morality to affect the successful performance of ethics. The following sections explore one long-standing means of performing ethics—the practice of news corrections—and the ways in which it may be affected by attributes of the changing news environment.

Corrections in the News

One widely discussed means for “practicing accountability” in news work is the use of corrections for errors in content (Bertrand, 2000; Bugeja, 2007; Christians, 1985–6). News corrections are typically published briefs explaining an error that has occurred and providing the accurate information. Corrections serve a dual purpose. They ensure that

news consumers receive the correct or updated facts, and they allow news organizations to demonstrate their acknowledgement of a gaffe—showing that they are, in other words, accountable for their mistakes. Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987) argue that demonstrating that one is accountable for one's errors in the news is imperative for "virtuous" journalism. They suggest that journalists should be proud of their efforts to be accountable for their errors, rather than viewing corrections as a source of shame.

Research on corrections practices in the media has focused on the existence of corrections policies at individual news organizations and the frequency and placement of corrections (Barkin and Levy, 1983; Fowler and Mumert, 1988). Cremedas (1992) found that most news organizations do not have formal, written corrections policies of their own, but that many have informal corrections practices which support the ethics codes of major industry groups, such as the SPJ and the Radio-Television Digital News Association (RTDNA). In its statement that journalists must be "accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other," the SPJ Code of Ethics states that journalists should, "admit mistakes and correct them promptly" (SPJ, 1996). Similarly, the American Society of Newspaper Editors' (1975) code of ethics notes that "significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly and prominently."

However, like most ethical standards, the maintenance of the ideal of accountability is left to individual news organizations. How can ethicality be performed in journalistic production in the contemporary news environment? Changing news practices have sparked concerns about how ethical standards can be upheld in the digital age. Like the two traditional industry groups mentioned above, the RTDNA—an organization which is committed to the advancement of digital journalism—also encourages its members to correct errors "promptly and with as much prominence as the original report" (RTDNA, 2000). The following section examines the potential impact of changing news practices on these ethical commitments.

Practicing Ethics in the Digital News Age

Two of the most important changes in contemporary news production that may affect the performance of ethics concern the speed with which news is created and disseminated, and the new roles of previously "passive" media audiences. First, scholars have examined the ways in which changing temporal patterns and the speed of online news have affected traditional patterns of news production in recent years (Boczkowski, 2009; Pavlik, 2000; Singer 2003). "The speed with which information is rushed onto the Web, a medium in which deadlines are perpetual and competition is intense, has been cited repeatedly as a problem" (Singer, 2003, p. 152).

Second, media scholars and practitioners have explored the new role of the "active" consumer in the news dissemination and consumption process as an increasing number of "citizen-journalists" are contributing to the flow of news and information (Deuze, 2003; Pavlik, 2000; Sambrook, 2005). News consumers are no longer simply reading and watching what they are given; they are increasingly becoming an important part of the production process themselves. Deuze notes that in recent years, "thousands of mainstream newsmedia have started Web sites . . . but millions of individual users and special interest groups have used the internet as an outlet for their news as well" (2003, p. 204). Additionally, Pavlik notes that "e-mail has become a vital and instantaneous link

between readers and reporters, often shaping reporters' knowledge and attitudes as much as an initial report may have influenced the public," he writes (2000, p. 236).

These and other changes have caused concern about the ways in which new journalistic practices and new media formats for disseminating information may influence ethical news work (Arant and Anderson, 2001; Deuze and Yeshua, 2001; Garrison, 1999). The ethical standard of accountability has not escaped this concern (Hayes et al., 2007; Singer, 2003). Hayes et al. argue that accountability, a means for establishing credibility, is "challenged in today's media environment" (2007, p. 275). They state that journalists must work to adjust past ethical standards, such as accountability and autonomy, to fit into the current news environment.

There has been limited research on how the ethic of accountability is being upheld in the changing news environment. The present study examines corrections practices among print, online and broadcast news outlets in the digital news age. The few studies that have examined these practices have generally found little consensus about how journalists handle corrections in the digital age (Berkman and Shumway, 2003; Deuze and Yeshua, 2001). This study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by providing an empirical examination of the effects of changing news practices on the enactment of ethicality in journalism. It suggests that if ethics are examined as a process—a performance to be enacted by moral and virtuous journalists—then responsibility lies not only with individual news actors, but on a *host of factors that affect the process*. What are the concerns of working journalists about ethics in the digital age? How are traditional ethics maintained in contemporary society through the use of news corrections? How do changes in news production—particularly the temporal changes and the shifting role of multiple news agents—affect journalists' ability to remain accountable to their readers and viewers?

Methods

To address these questions, the author conducted a study to uncover the concerns that contemporary journalists have about the enactment of corrections in the digital news age, as well as their perceptions about the affordances and limitations of changing newsroom practices on journalistic accountability. The study draws upon data gathered in 2009 and 2010. Interviews were conducted with news editors and standards editors at a sample of large national and regional news organizations across the coterminous United States. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger, mixed-method study which also included a content analysis of published and aired news corrections in leading print, online and broadcast news outlets. Only the findings from the interview portion of the study are reported below.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 journalists representing 20 newspapers, magazines, online sites and broadcast news outlets across the United States. Interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, and in two cases via e-mail with journalists at the following news outlets: the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Slate.com*, UTNE Reader, *In These Times*, *Newsweek*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Boston Review*, NPR, WBBM, the Associated Press, *Chicago Tribune*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *USA Today*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and another popular news outlet that does not wish to be named. The news outlets were chosen for their status as prominent regional and national news publications.

Journalists were introduced to the project via e-mail and asked to participate in an in-depth interview regarding their current corrections practices.

The semi-structured interviews addressed a number of topics surrounding corrections processes, focusing on both specific organizational practices and news producers' perceptions of those practices. In particular, the interview protocol was designed to illuminate the concerns of working journalists about corrections as a vehicle for accountability, and the challenges in upholding that standard in the digital age. Additionally, it sought to uncover the actual ways that accountability is enacted through corrections in contemporary newsrooms. The interviews, which were, on average, 30 minutes in length, were transcribed and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to uncover and examine concepts and codes that reflected upon the research questions.

Findings

Discussions with working print, broadcast and online journalists uncovered four major patterns with regards to the ways that news workers "set the record straight" in the digital news age. The first two—the ways in which ethical news work is challenged by, and yet also benefits from, the speed of the Internet and the new, active role of news consumers and other members of the public—demonstrate that attributes of the digital news age can help journalists enact accountability in contemporary newsrooms. The other two patterns—journalists' uncertainty about the need to preserve online news content as a record of history, and the ongoing evolution of newsroom technologies—pose challenges to ethical performance, and reflect the continued need for news workers to adapt ethical practices in response to changes in the news environment.

Speed May Hurt Accuracy, Help Accountability

The first finding challenges the notion that the speed of the digital news age is, at all times, a detriment to news work and that it hinders journalists' ability to maintain ethical standards. Journalists do acknowledge the difficulties that the "need for speed" has imposed on their work. "[One of] the challenges in terms of keeping factual errors out of articles on Slate is the speed with which we work. Generally we're trying to get things up pretty fast," says Chad Lorenz, home page editor of *Slate.com* (personal communication, August 12, 2009).

Indeed, journalists state that the need to get articles up quickly may hurt accuracy because there is less time for errors to be caught before a story is published. Says Bert Robinson, managing editor of the *San Jose Mercury News*:

You definitely make more errors when you're moving fast—there are not as many layers of editing. There are more grammatical errors online than there are in the newspaper just because of the number of eyes that see them, [and] because of how quickly you're moving. (personal communication, March 2, 2010)

Because the speed with which online copy moves lends to it being fact checked less rigorously than print copy, greater responsibility is placed on reporters to ensure that their work is error free. "We don't go through the research desk, we go through the copy

desk," says Mark Coatney, an editor at *Newsweek.com*. "Reporters and writers are kind of expected to do their own research" (personal communication, August 14, 2009).

However, news workers note that the speed of the digital news age means that they are able to *correct* information more rapidly than in the past. Contrary to their concerns about accuracy, many journalists expressed satisfaction with the immediacy with which they are able to present news consumers with correct information once an error has been found. According to one newspaper editor, when "dealing with the newspaper, you're correcting something the next day or however many days later . . . you can immediately fix the error [online]" (personal communication, January 25, 2010). Similarly, Henry Fuhrmann, assistant managing editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, provides the following example:

Let's say a story came out Friday and we found a mistake. People getting their papers off the doorstep Saturday morning [could] go to page A4 of our main section and see the correction. With the immediacy of the Web, one can say, "this is a mistake that we want to correct now for the record," so we write the very same correction to go in tomorrow's paper and just append it to the story online right now. We could therefore address something, whether it's serious or not, [and] have a complete, clear, accurate story for the reader who's checking it out online now. (personal communication, October 23, 2009)

The benefits of being able to correct copy quickly may be even more pronounced for weekly news magazines. "With a weekly magazine, if there is an error, it takes another week in print to [make] the correction," states Coatney. "I think the Web is so much nicer in that way" (personal communication, August 14, 2009).

However, the most striking benefit of speed to the practice of corrections may exist for online-only content. Journalists repeatedly stressed that online-only copy could be corrected in a way that print could not—the incorrect information can potentially be removed before any news readers have laid eyes on it.

Information about incorrect material can . . . be corrected in real time, so you can correct the story before a lot of people see it. As long as you're being responsive, you've got an opportunity to correct that error before tens of thousands people see it, which isn't true in print. So that is better. (Robinson, personal communication, March 2, 2010)

Journalists consistently argued that the speed with which information moves online allows them to correct errors more quickly and with more efficiency than in more traditional news formats. Because of this, news workers argued that they are able—and expected—to be more accountable for their errors, and to fix them quickly and honorably. The following section explores the ways in which another attribute of the digital age, the active involvement of online news consumers, is helping to increase accountability in journalism.

The Public as a Fact-checking Body

Whether journalists like it or not, news consumers have taken a more hands-on role in monitoring online news copy and alerting news workers to their mistakes. According to the editors, this increases accountability since pressures to respond to error notices are often made visible in comments sections. "There's a larger group of people who will not hesitate to let you know if there is a mistake which means it's incumbent upon you to pay attention, and if it is wrong, to fix it fast," says Margaret Holt, standards editor at the *Chicago Tribune* (personal communication, October 16, 2009).

The emergence of a public fact-checking body is largely made possible by the increased number of people viewing online copy. According to Jeremy Gantz, Web editor and associate editor at *In These Times*, a monthly print and online news magazine, “the Web makes people aware just . . . because it’s a larger audience. And I think more eyes in tune to what we’re publishing theoretically should, and often does, result in us being held more accountable” (personal communication, February 23, 2010).

Additionally, the sheer ease of contacting journalists may affect people’s tendencies to alert journalists to errors. For example, many Web stories now contain the contact information of the writer directly above or below the story. Says Lorenz of *Slate.com*:

They’re commenting anyway, and there’s a lot less effort involved [online] than [for] somebody who is maybe reading a newspaper or a magazine—who [has] to pick up the phone, or do a written letter. The Internet nature of our readership just makes it very quick and easy for them to report that they found something. (personal communication, August 12, 2009)

The digital age has given structure to a very responsive and active external fact-checking body that can assist journalists in their efforts to remain accountable in the digital news age. Though news consumers make up a large portion of this group, there are other actors that play a role in discovering and pointing out errors. The public fact checking body also consists of other journalists, independent bloggers and, importantly, the sources quoted in news stories.

One of the things that happens online is you get kind of instant feedback. If the police department tells you something [and] you post it online, [then] the police department [may] read it and say, “hey, that’s not quite right. . .” (Robinson, personal communication, March 2, 2010)

Coatney of *Newsweek.com* notes that the conversational nature of online news sites contributes to a new relationship between journalists and their news consumers and sources:

Readers respond better with the feeling that it is more of a conversation and not just a broadcast that’s out there. And honestly this helps us . . . we’re a big site with not a lot people doing it. We’ll make mistakes. Those are the people who will tell us, and that helps a lot. (personal communication, August 14, 2009)

Finally, news workers also note that readers help hold journalists accountable for their work by demanding that errors get fixed—quickly. Greg Brock, a senior editor at the *New York Times*, says that when readers alert his staff to errors in online content, it comes with the expectation that the fix will be made immediately:

When they write and point out, “you’ve got a typo in the third paragraph,” they expect it to be fixed right then. I [will] send a note to the website, and they fix it as quickly as they have a chance. But readers will keep going back to the site, looking to see if their typo has been fixed. (personal communication, August 11, 2009)

Like the affordances of the changing temporal patterns of online news, the passive turned active news consumer has opened new avenues for the maintenance of accountability in contemporary journalism. These findings demonstrate that the re-popularization of the “wisdom of crowds” notion inherent in the success of collaborative filtering sites, and social-recommender sites like Digg.com, is also an important tool for

traditional news workers in today's fast-paced news environment. Journalists expressed their beliefs that the presence of an active and engaged news public can and should be an integral part of the news process—particularly in an age of reduced budgets for fact-checking and copy-editing. But while the emergence of an active and fact-checking readership may help journalists maintain ethical standards, other aspects of the changing news environment have raised new *challenges* for enacting accountability. The following subsections explore these aspects in detail.

Online-only News Content as a Record of History

One challenge raised by the changing practices of contemporary journalism is the need for news workers to determine whether or not a record of online news content should be maintained and archived in a way that mirrors print content. Journalists argued that while print content is typically viewed as a lasting record of history, the impermanence of online copy makes it easy for erroneous copy to be removed forever.

Indeed, print content is described as something that lasts forever, and which hence must be treated with special care. "If it appeared in print, it's obviously permanent; it's a part of the permanent record," says one newspaper editor (personal communication, March 1, 2010). Lorenz from *Slate.com* contrasts this with the impermanence of Web content:

That's one extremely huge advantage which is part of the reason why we work with such speed—we can always change things after they've gone up. Completely different from a print publication, because once it's on a print page, it's there forever. (personal communication, August 12, 2009)

In some ways, these views are based on technical factors—the sheer ability to change something online does not exist in print copy. "It's impossible to edit a piece once it's set in ink," notes Simon Waxman, managing editor of the *Boston Review* (personal communication, February 22, 2010).

However, the interviews with journalists uncovered that this is more than a technical concern; the differences between the perceptions of print and Web copy have become ingrained in the ways that journalists treat the two types of content. For example, according to Reid Sams, an editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the Internet is sometimes used as a means for vetting content that will later appear in an expanded version in print (personal communication, January 27, 2010). One content editor for a Florida newspaper echoes this sentiment:

If we have something wrong, we'll usually hear about it earlier in the day. For example, if there is an ongoing crime story that we printed on the Internet . . . if we get something wrong early in our Web reporting, we'll usually hear about that from a reader or from a source, or both, and we can correct it through the appropriate cycle. But we can make sure that we don't get it wrong for print. (personal communication, March 2010)

Additionally, when referring to online content, journalists often stress that the development of facts in a story is an ongoing, evolving process, which may result in the need to make changes to the copy on the Web. "Stories repeatedly get updated . . . that's just fine tuning and perfecting as you go; those wouldn't affect a reader's perception of the facts," says Fuhrmann of the *Los Angeles Times* (personal communication, October 23, 2009).

The “impermanent” nature of Web-only content raises concerns about how important it is for there to be a lasting record of online news. Print journalism is typically thought of as an archived account of world events that can be referenced decades, even centuries, later. Should online journalism also exist as a record of history? The responses to this question are mixed. Some journalists feel that Web content should be treated like print content in terms of its archival permanence. Says Shawn McIntosh, public editor at the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*:

We have requests from people who were accused of a crime . . . and then, two years later they want us to take down the accusation, and that becomes a challenge because you’re altering what was published if you take it down. (personal communication, March 4, 2010)

However, according to Fuhrmann of the *Los Angeles Times*, online-only copy is not a part of the *Times*’ permanent archive: “On the Web we’re allowed to change the fact, but we have to tell the reader we changed it. It’s not a permanent pristine record of our archive because it hasn’t been published in the paper yet” (personal communication, October 23, 2009).

McIntosh notes that decisions about altering archived content go beyond the correction of past mistakes. She describes, for example, a request she received from someone who wanted her to remove a review of a play from the paper’s online archive—not because it was incorrect, but because it was unfavorable. McIntosh is sympathetic to the fact that the review, though outdated, is easily retrievable given the affordances of the Internet, and that it might have a negative effect on the play’s success—yet, removing the review would alter what is likely to be the only record of its existence.

Ron Gleason, director of news and programming at WBBM Newsradio 780, states that his station faces similar dilemmas when posting content online, noting that all Web content lives in a constant state of flux. However, this impermanence of news content is not unusual for broadcasters—errors caught in broadcast reports can be updated and edited prior to later reports. According to Stu Seidel, deputy managing editor for news at NPR:

If we did make an error, [we] get a hold of the reporter; if it’s in an intro they redo the intro, or they . . . have the reporter retract the part and make it right. For the next feed they air the correct version. (personal communication, October 23, 2009)

However, Seidel notes that though transcripts of the report will contain the accurate information, NPR still runs corrections on its website because “we still want to acknowledge that at some point, we made a mistake.”

The permanence (or lack thereof) of news content raises questions about the best ways to enact ethicality in contemporary newsrooms. Uncertainty about how to adapt corrections processes can lead to ethical lapses, even if moral intent is present. The final section examines a broader range of external factors that may challenge the performance of ethics by news workers.

Corrections of Online-only Content is an Evolving Process

Journalists’ need to determine whether or not online news content should be permanently archived in a fashion similar to print content is one example of a more general need to continue to adapt ethical news practices to the changing journalistic

landscape. New technologies and evolving practices make it such that yesterday's corrections policy may no longer be relevant tomorrow. For example, Fuhrmann notes that the use of technologies like Twitter in the newsroom is deserving of more attention:

When some of these [ethics] policies were written a year ago, Twitter was just a glimmer of what it is now. Now Twitter is a big part of what we do as a business, so we have to have Twitter specific bullets added to some of our guidelines. Facebook was pretty big a year ago, but was nowhere at all in 2006. So as these things come to form [and] become popular and relevant to us as a business, as journalists, we have to adapt to this. (personal communication, October 23, 2009)

Coatney questions the best way to address a mistake on Twitter. Though he says it has not happened at his news organization, he speculates about what one might do if an egregious error was made in a Tweet. "If we Twitter something out, you can't really take it back . . . in an extreme example, you'd send another tweet saying, 'I really screwed that up'" (personal communication, August 14, 2009).

The incorporation of blogs on more traditional news sites has also raised concerns about corrections policies. Journalists state that they must continue to adapt corrections policies to take into account the dynamics of the blogosphere. David Schimke, editor-in-chief of UTNE Reader, says that his news organization plans to start allowing guest bloggers to post on the site. Because this blogging may take place outside of the newsroom, it may be more difficult for accountability standards to be enforced by in-house news editors. "It's going to be interesting to see what happens," says Schimke. "It [will] warrant a serious conversation about how we police the guest bloggers" (personal communications, February 25, 2010).

The use of new technologies in the newsroom creates new challenges for journalists who wish to maintain the ethic of accountability in their work. Journalists and scholars must seek to illuminate these practical challenges to uncover ways to ensure that the *process* of ethicality continues to be supported.

Discussion

This study has found that attributes of the digital news age can be both beneficial and challenging for journalists who seek to enact ethicality in contemporary newsrooms. It focused on journalists' concerns about the use of news corrections to both enact (by physically altering inaccurate information) and signal (by demonstrating responsibility for one's mistakes) accountability in journalistic work.

The speed with which information moves online helps journalists put accountability into practice by allowing them to fix mistakes quickly and efficiently and claim responsibility for their errors; and, the new, active role of news consumers in the digital environment has fostered the emergence of what I have described as a public fact-checking body, a group that demands a high level of ethicality among news workers. The latter is particularly important in a news environment where economic restrictions have meant smaller news staffs, and hence fewer eyes to manage and police ethical standards.

In contrast, other aspects of the online news environment may inhibit journalists' attempts to put ethical standards into practice. As demonstrated, attributes such as the impermanent nature of online copy and the continuously evolving state of new media technologies, create new and difficult questions for news workers who strive to include

ethical practice as an integral part of daily news work. These findings suggest that journalists and media scholars would be well served to view ethics in the newsroom as a set of moral actions that must be performed. When instead viewed only as a set of moral standards and desired outcomes, ethical responsibility is placed largely on the morality and values of individual news actors. By understanding ethics as an evolving *process*, the importance of other actors—e.g. sources outside of the newsroom who point out errors—and of external structures is illuminated.

In other words, I argue that the *how* of media ethics is as important as the *what*—in fact, how ethics can be, and are, enacted in practice may affect *news workers' conceptualizations of what it actually means to be ethical*. For example, without a clear understanding of the challenges that the new media environment brings to the practice of corrections, news workers may have only a vague idea of what accountability means in online news environments.

News ethics codes often highlight the importance of transparency in news work—yet, the statements of journalists in this study demonstrate the ways that the digital news environment both facilitates and challenges transparency. The rapid flow of information in contemporary newsrooms means that journalists can correct and expose their errors immediately, arguably aiding transparency. However, the impermanence of Web content may allow news workers to behave with *less* transparency as there is (for the most part) no record of past errors should news organizations take them down without running a correction. Journalists are now tasked with the responsibility of navigating these new opportunities—both the challenges to, and greater promotion of, transparency online—in order to demonstrate accountability to news consumers.

It is important to note that the present study is based on the perceptions of journalists about the affordances and challenges of the digital news age on their use of corrections to enact accountability. News workers' perceptions are important because they help to shape the journalistic product. However, further research may wish to adopt other methods for examining real-time fact-checking and corrections processes in US newsrooms. Additionally, while this study used a grounded theory approach and relied on theoretical saturation as evidence of the above findings, the low number of broadcast journalists included in the study limits the author's ability to make generalizations about the ways in which corrections processes have shifted for broadcasters in the digital age.

The focus on journalistic perceptions, particularly those regarding the evolving role of news consumers in contemporary society, gives weight to two important assumptions that are deserving of further examination: (1) that consumers pay close enough attention to content to notice mistakes and (2) that they are willing and *motivated* to contact editors and reporters to notify them about errors. However, the sheer volume of online information sources may create an environment in which it is easier for news consumers to move to a different news outlet instead of putting in the effort to increase accountability on the part of a particular organization. The extent to which the two assumptions are true requires further research. News consumer interest in journalistic accuracy may be signaled by reactions from readers in comments sections, or the recent prevalence of sites which serve a watchdog function in the press, such as RegretTheError.com and MediaBugs.org. More research is necessary to understand whether or not online errors are viewed by news consumers in the same way as print errors; for example, how do online news readers feel about process journalism, the notion of publishing journalism "in progress," as opposed to only publishing the final, perfectly edited news

product? The amount of leeway (in terms of quality) that news consumers allow journalists for the sake of speed can and should be taken up in future research.

The intent of this study is not to argue against the importance of studying ethics as outcomes, or as standards of moral excellence in news work. Indeed, such work is valuable for understanding the fundamental ethics and values of journalism. I argue instead that the examination of the practice of ethics is equally deserving of scholarly attention because it illuminates the real-life factors that make ethicality tangible.

After examining ethics in practice, journalists may wish to revisit their codes of ethics—whether organization-specific, industry, or even unwritten codes—to ensure that their proposed corrections practices address the new concerns of the digital news age. As evidenced by this study, ongoing changes to the practice of news work require constant consideration of the ways that journalists can, and do, behave ethically in practice. Attempting to anticipate future challenges can help journalists stay one step ahead, allowing them to avoid on-the-fly ethical decision-making when faced with an unforeseen challenge (e.g. how to correct an error in a Tweet). Approaching these ethical concerns from a process vantage can allow for real-life adaptations of ethical practice, but it can also offer new avenues for the conceptualization of traditional ethical standards.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to offer sincere thanks to Pablo Boczkowski for his insight and guidance in this project. Additional thanks to James Ettema and Eszter Hargittai for their helpful comments at various stages of the project's completion. Finally, thank you to the many journalists who offered their time, and their perspectives, to this study.

REFERENCES

- ALTERMAN, ERIC (2008) "Out of Print: the death and life of the American newspaper", *The New Yorker*, 31 March, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/31/080331fa_fact_alterman, accessed 7 June 2010.
- AMERICAN SOCIETY OF NEWSPAPER EDITORS (1975) "ASNE's Statement of Principles", <http://asne.org>, accessed 14 July 2010.
- ARANT, M. DAVID and ANDERSON, JANNA Q. (2001) "Newspaper Online Editors Support Traditional Standards", *Newspaper Research Journal* 22(4), pp. 57–69.
- BARKIN, STEVE M. and LEVY, MARK R. (1983) "All the News That's Fit to Correct: corrections in the *Times* and the *Post*", *Journalism Quarterly* 60(2), pp. 218–25.
- BELSON, WILLIAM A. (1961) "The Effects of Television on Reading and Buying Newspapers and Magazines", *Public Opinion Quarterly* 25(3), pp. 366–81.
- BERKMAN, ROBERT I. and SHUMWAY, CHRISTOPHER A. (2003) *Digital Dilemmas: ethical issues for online media professionals*, Ames: Iowa State Press.
- BERTRAND, CLAUDE-JEAN (2000) *Media Ethics and Accountability Systems*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- BOCZKOWSKI, PABLO J. (2009) "Rethinking Hard and Soft News Production: from common ground to divergent paths", *Journal of Communication* 59(1), pp. 98–116.

- BRUNS, AXEL (2004) "Reconfiguring Journalism: syndication, gatewatching and multiperspectival news", in: Gerard Goggin (Ed.), *Virtual Nation: the Internet in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, pp. 177–92.
- BUGEJA, MICHAEL (2007) "Making Whole: the ethics of correction", *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 22(1), pp. 49–65.
- CHRISTIANS, CLIFFORD (1985–6) "Enforcing Media Codes", *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1(1), pp. 14–21.
- CREMEDAS, MICHAEL E. (1992) "Corrections Policies in Local Television News: a survey", *Journalism Quarterly* 69(1), pp. 166–72.
- DAHLGREN, PETER (1996) "Media Logic in Cyberspace: repositioning journalism and its publics", *Javnost: The Public* 3(3), pp. 59–72.
- DEUZE, MARK (2001) "Online Journalism: modeling the first generation of news media on the World Wide Web", *First Monday* 6(10), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/893/802>.
- DEUZE, MARK (2003) "The Web and Its Journalisms: considering the consequences of different types of newsmedia online", *New Media & Society* 5(2), pp. 203–30.
- DEUZE, MARK and YESHUA, DAPHNA (2001) "Online Journalists Face New Ethical Dilemmas: lessons from the Netherlands", *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 16(4), pp. 273–92.
- FOWLER, GILBERT L. and MUMERT, TOMMY L. (1988) "A Survey of Correction Policies of Arkansas Newspapers", *Journalism Quarterly* 65(4), pp. 853–8.
- GARRISON, BRUCE (1999) "Journalists' Perceptions of Online Information Gathering Problems", paper presented to the Newspaper Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Southeast Colloquium, Lexington, KY, March, <http://com.miami.edu/car/lexington.pdf>, accessed 15 July 2010.
- GERSON, MICHAEL (2009) "Journalism's Slow, Sad Death", *Washington Post*, 27 November, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>, accessed 25 February 2010.
- GILLMOR, DAN (2006) *We the Media: grassroots journalism by the people, for the people*, Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media.
- GLASSER, THEODORE L. and ETTEMA, JAMES S. (2008) "Ethics and Eloquence in Journalism: an approach to press accountability", *Journalism Studies* 9(4), pp. 512–34.
- HAYES, ARTHUR S., SINGER, JANE B. and CEPOS, JERRY (2007) "Shifting Roles, Enduring Values: the credible journalist in a digital age", *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 22(4), pp. 262–79.
- HUNTZICKER, WILLIAM E. (1999) *The Popular Press, 1833–1865*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- ISAACSON, WALTER (2009) "How to Save Your Newspaper", *Time*, 5 February, <http://www.time.com>, accessed 25 February 2010.
- KLAIDMAN, STEPHEN and BEAUCHAMP, TOM L. (1987) *The Virtuous Journalist*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- KOVACH, BILL and ROSENSTIEL, TOM (2001) *The Elements of Journalism*, New York: Crown.
- LAITILA, TIINA (1995) "Journalistic Codes of Ethics in Europe", *European Journal of Communication* 10(4), pp. 527–44.
- MATHESON, DONALD (2004) "Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News: some trends in online Journalism", *New Media & Society* 6(4), pp. 443–68.
- MITCHELSTEIN, EUGENIA and BOCZKOWSKI, PABLO (2009) "Between Tradition and Change: a review of recent research on online news production", *Journalism* 10(5), pp. 562–86.
- PAVLIK, JOHN (2000) "The Impact of Technology on Journalism", *Journalism Studies* 1(2), pp. 229–37.

- RADIO TELEVISION DIGITAL NEWS ASSOCIATION (RTDNA) (2000) "Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct", <http://www.rtdna.org>, accessed 14 July 2010.
- SAMBROOK, RICHARD (2005) "Citizen Journalism and the BBC", *Nieman Reports*, Winter, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100542>, accessed 26 May 2010.
- SHAFER, JACK (2009) "The Beginning of the End for Newspapers", *Slate.com*, 29 May, <http://www.slate.com>, accessed 25 February 2010.
- SINGER, JANE B. (1998) "Online Journalists: foundations for research into their changing roles", *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 4(1), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol4/issue1/singer.html>, accessed 14 July 2010.
- SINGER, JANE B. (2003) "Who Are These Guys? The online challenge to the notion of journalistic professionalism", *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 4(2), pp. 139–63.
- SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS (SPJ) (1996) Code of Ethics, <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>, accessed 14 July 2010.
- STRENTZ, HERB (2002) "Universal Ethical Standards?", *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 17(4), pp. 263–76.
- STRAUSS, ANSELM and CORBIN, JULIET (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 2nd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- THURMAN, NEIL (2008) "Forums for Citizen Journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media", *New Media and Society* 10(1), pp. 139–57.

Nicole L. Joseph, Media, Technology and Society, Communication Studies, Northwestern University, 2240 Campus Drive, #2-168, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.
E-mail: nicolejoseph@u.northwestern.edu

Copyright of Journalism Practice is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.