

# New Moral Dilemmas in Online Journalism?

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the main question is whether and, if so, to what extent online journalism raises new moral issues and, if any, what kind of answers are preferable. Or do questions merely appear new, since they are really old ones in an electronic wrapping, old wine in new bottles? And how does journalism deal with the moral aspects of online journalism?

The phenomenon of the Internet emerged in our society a few years ago. Since then, a large number of Dutch people have gone online, and the World Wide Web is now an integral part of our range of means of communication. Dutch journalism is online too, although certainly not in the lead. More and more journalists use the Internet as a source, especially for background information. Newspapers have their web sites, where the online version of the printed paper can be read. And that is it for the time being. There are no more far-reaching developments at present, certainly not on a large scale. Real online journalism is rather scarce in the Netherlands. The debate concerning the moral aspects of online journalism is mainly being conducted in the United States. First of all, by way of introduction, I will present an outline of online journalism. The first instance is the online version of the newspaper. Here, only to a certain degree new issues come up for discussion, since the reputation of reliability and accuracy of the papers, in spite of all criticism, also applies to their online versions. Besides, especially in the United States and increasingly in European countries as well, there is the so-called dotcom journalism, the e-zines, the online news sites without any relationship with printed newspapers. This may be the reason why these sites do not have a strong commitment to moral standards, at least as they have developed in the journalistic culture of the newspapers. After having outlined the moral issues arising in online journalism, the question will be addressed whether and, if so, to what extent it is meaningful and desirable to develop instruments of self-regulation for this new phenomenon of journalism.

**Keywords:** the Internet, ethics, media ethics, online journalism, moral dilemma, self-regulation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What implications does ICT, especially the Internet, have for journalism? Some expect that this new technology will add to the old intermediate frameworks rather than make them redundant. "A new allocation of tasks will develop in which the 'new' (meso)media will particularly enhance social communication at the meso level, while 'old' (mass) media, even more than at present, will

hold their gatekeeping and agenda function in political communication."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there will be a further split in journalism; roughly, this development will result in two kinds of journalism. On the one hand, an "orientation journalism" will develop concentrating on the provision of general background information and interpretation to a large public. This kind of journalism will especially be found in the traditional mass media. On the other hand, an "instrumental journalism" will provide specialized information to those interested. This kind of journalism will especially develop through the new information services.

The (need of a) direct function of journalism will become more and more important in the future, especially in organizing the public debate and in selecting and agenda-setting of relevant issues from virtual communities. At the same time, new technology provides the citizens themselves with the possibility of consulting information sources without the interference of journalists. Journalism will lose its monopoly on the news and journalists will gradually vanish as the exclusive links between citizens and the outer world. There will be greater autonomy for information users; for, citizens themselves can search very divergent sources (journalistic as well as non-journalistic) for information. By this changing 'balance of power' in social communication, the relationship of journalists and the media with their public is in a state of flux as well. Media consumers make ever higher demands, partly because of their higher education, and partly because there are more possibilities to choose from. This leads to the paradox that, on the one hand, journalists become superfluous and, on the other, remain highly necessary. Indeed, more and more they must trust having an additional value in future, as they lose their exclusive access to much of their source material due to new technological developments.

A second paradox of new technology is both that there are more opportunities for communication and dialogue between citizens and that, at the same time, dialogue and public debate are increasingly difficult to bring about in an individualized information society. There is a huge individual freedom of choice, which will inevitably be at the expense of the equality of citizens and of the possibility of dialogue and debate in society. Rather, there is a shopping mall where the modern mass media consumer can pick and choose.

Nowadays, online journalism is just a very limited thing; though many people have gone online in the meantime, the usage of the web for journalistically relevant applications is still relatively modest in the Netherlands. Besides, the journalistic use of the Internet is mostly still limited. Online journalism is still close to the existing ways of news provision. The online newspaper is very often not more than the discard of the printed paper. Online news often consists of a standard journalistic report with links to other and former reports and comments about the issue in question. This means that new possibilities such as continuous updating and layered writing and linking are not yet used to their full potential. One of the most important reasons is the fact, that online journalism is hardly profitable, so that there hardly is an ability to invest in journalistic applications.<sup>2</sup>

The working conditions of journalists will change as well. They will work at several offices and more often individually. This means that the editorial staff room will lose its significance as the place where journalistic rules and norms are being set, and that journalists will rely on their individual standards.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bardoel, Journalistiek in de informatiesamenleving, Amsterdam: Otto Cramwinckel Uitgever, 1997, p.17. (my translation)

<sup>2</sup> J. Bardoel, Journalistiek in 'cyberspace', Amsterdam: Het Persinstituut, 1998; idem, Publieke journalistiek in een private wereld, Den Haag: Ministerie van OC en W, 2000.

In future, journalists will more expressly have to justify their way of working. More attention will be paid to carefully acting and to active responsibility. A variety of ethical issues will again come up for discussion and self-regulation will gain significance. As a result, the use of the Internet could lead to 'lazy journalism', as there will develop an increasing speeding-up of reporting with increasing possibilities for precipitous, unverified, and hyperventilating reporting. Research shows "that online journalism raises new ethical dilemmas that journalists react to in very diverse ways. This shows that it is necessary to redetermine the existing journalistic ethics in the light of new possibilities."<sup>3</sup>

As far as new organizations in the communication sector have less affinity with professional, journalistic norms and values, professional ethics must more explicitly be rooted in more general ethics and in the well-perceived self-interest of the customer. It is my belief that it is in business ethics that we must seek for points of contact for these new professional ethics. For, in the discipline of applied ethics the conditions and implications of socially responsible entrepreneurship are systematically reflected upon. Meanwhile, some notions such as 'well-perceived self-interest' have been elaborated.

## 2. ONLINE JOURNALISM ETHICS

What new moral issues are raised by online journalism? To what extent do real new questions show themselves? Or is it just a matter of old wine in new bottles, well-known ethical issues in journalism in a new electronic wrapping? To what extent could traditional journalistic standards be applied to the area of new media?<sup>4</sup> For some people this is not a serious question: standards are standards and ethics are ethics, regardless of whether old or new media are concerned. A journalist remains a journalist using a certain professional standard for any medium he works for. Others state that there is definitely a difference as to the medium a journalist works for. Every new invention in the field of ICT has its moral implications. Therefore, it is not correct to say that journalistic ethics are universal and do not depend on the medium used. ICT broadens moral issues, raises new ones, or is to be characterized by a mixture of old and new. The Internet is a brand-new medium without any tradition or routines.

Meanwhile, in the area of new media there are far more moral questions than answers. In such a situation it is tempting to transpose traditional journalistic values such as objectivity, reliability, balance, and accuracy to cyberspace, but it must be realized that this is not so easy. For, online media can take journalism to places it has never been before. In those places, traditional core values of journalism may be obstacles or antiques. Fixed norms in the world of the traditional media, such as the separation of editorial and commercial information, are not uncritically to be applied to the Internet. Here, it is often difficult to distinguish news and advertisements. For example, in traditional journalism it is common to correct errors, but in online journalism it is illogical to publish a correction as at any moment a corrected version of the original text can be published. There is also the classic effort of balanced, full, and fair reporting,

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<sup>3</sup> J. Bardoel, *Publieke journalistiek in een private wereld*, p.16. (my translation)

<sup>4</sup> J. Byrd, *Online Journalism Ethics: A New Frontier*, *The American Editor*, 1996, pp. 6-7, <<http://www.poynter.org/dj/Projects/newmedethics/jvnm2.htm>>

F. Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems, Poynter Institute, 1998 <[http://www.poynter.org/research/nm/nm\\_mann98.htm](http://www.poynter.org/research/nm/nm_mann98.htm)>

A. Heinonen, *Journalism in the Age of the Net*. Tampere: Acta Universitatis Tamperensis, 1999.

but if it is possible to simply publish all the journalist has at his disposal, does this automatically mean fair practice?

In the meantime, online journalism as a fully fledged fourth kind of journalism (besides press, radio, and television) is growing. This type of journalism is characterized by interactivity, hypertextuality and immediacy. Each of these raises its own kind of questions.

## **2.1 INTERACTIVITY**

The most important quality of online journalism is interactivity. In the 'shopping mall model' it is possible to go along with the personal wishes and preferences of the self-serving consumer. In this way, every news consumer can receive a tailor-made product. The primary initiative is no longer on the side of the one who is offering information, but the one who is asking for it; the citizen will look for information, and he will use both journalistic and non-journalistic sources as he pleases.

Editorial staffs connect chat rooms, forums, and bulletin boards to news sites to bring readers into contact with an issue, editorial staff, and each other. Thus, readers are invited to react to editorial content. But what about anonymous comments and 'hate speech'? Selecting previously might be too restrictive and, what is more, legally complicated. Refraining from selection could disturb the debate.

Online chat rooms and bulletin boards, where readers can post messages, draw on the credibility of online news as well, according to some people. Questions come up for discussion such as: To what extent is a site owner legally or morally responsible for what is being posted? And what about the reputation of a site when visitors are being bombarded with obscenities? And how big is the risk that individual opinions, posted in chat rooms, are being confused with objective news? On the other hand, others think that there are no specific moral dilemmas at stake here, as long as news sites clearly point out what content belongs to their site and what does not. Blurring limits between news, ads, and hearsay are at issue just as much as strip cartoons and horoscopes in traditional newspapers.

Patterson and Wilkins<sup>5</sup> raise some moral questions that are interesting in this regard. The question whether a journalist participating in a discussion list for journalists is allowed to use remarks made by other participants for his own publications. Is it a matter of remarks made off the record and therefore unfit to be published without the permission of the persons involved? A discussion list not being accessible for the general public, but only for professional colleagues, is it a public or a private place?

To what extent is a chat room or a bulletin board on the web site of a paper comparable with traditional letters to the editor? Are the same rules of the game in force here? What should be a paper's policy concerning the removal of remarks made in the public forum of its web site? And concerning statements that are incorrect? And what about information that could be found to be offensive, racist or sexist expressions or abuse of homosexuals?

## **2.2 HYPERTEXTUALITY**

The second characteristic is hypertextuality. This means that there is a possibility to stratify information or to link to other sources. In this way, the news consumer can satisfy his need for deepening or broadening the news supply.

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<sup>5</sup> Ph. Patterson and L. Wilkins, Media Ethics: Issues and Cases, Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Online news looks different from the news elsewhere: it can contain text pictures, sound, or videoclips plus hyperlinks to other web sites, and besides that, a chat room or bulletin board where readers can discuss the news. Links to underlying documents allow more elaborate reporting, but also raise the question whether and to what extent links must be placed to ads, sites of pressure groups, hate groups, charities asking for financial support, or to other news media. To what extent does an editorial staff take responsibility for the search of the visitor? And what about links leading to deceiving, offensive, or otherwise destructive content?

Byrd<sup>6</sup> indicates that readers may verify the journalist's research through hyperlinks, enabling them to judge it at its true value. Thus, the full coverage of an interview can be read online, which raises the question whether the source should be informed about this.

## 2.3 IMMEDIACY

A serious moral question relating to online journalism is the risk of publishing too fast ("being premature"). In an area that is characterized by 'immediacy', the pressure to publish is very strong, which can easily go at the expense of working in a fair, accurate, and unprejudiced way. The consumer can take his information at the times he decides to do so. Thus, traditional journalistic key notes such as time, periodicity, and topicality are becoming less important.

The public does not know when a report is complete and when only a compilation of raw facts. For a medium where news with one button pressure can be sent around the world, it is the key issue to delay publishing till all facts have been verified. There is a strong tendency to publish the information available immediately. As a result of the continuous deadline, there is practically no time left to discuss, double-check, or otherwise strengthen the report - let alone to reflect.

Although there is widespread agreement that speed may lead to erroneous reporting, scoops have always been chased. Indeed, there is the fear that the speed of online news will lead to an acceleration in all news media; journalists of the press and of broadcasting corporations could feel forced to publish reports that have not yet been checked entirely, for fear of somebody publishing the news on the Internet.

Byrd<sup>7</sup> points out the "paradox of time and space". On the one hand, space is the limit, offering the opportunity to journalists to provide background information, context, and nuances, while on the other hand this must happen in a medium moving with the speed of light.

Traditional standards of accuracy and completeness, are they to be maintained without concessions in an online context characterized by speed?<sup>8</sup> And what about verifying information? The report that meanwhile a story has been published elsewhere, is it sufficient justification for publishing as well without verifying the truth of the story?

What is to be done with corrections, as a mistake can immediately and simply be corrected by publishing the corrected report again? By the way, what happens with the original, uncorrected report when it disappears into the archives? Should an online journalistic medium have a column of "errors and corrections" as many printed media do?

Some newspapers going online show little concern as to their reliability: "There is some sort of assumption that if we are newspapers and we're going online, well, we'll act like

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<sup>6</sup> Byrd, Online Journalism Ethics.

<sup>7</sup> Byrd, Online Journalism Ethics

<sup>8</sup> Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems.

newspapers and try to be fair and balanced and accurate."<sup>9</sup> The matter of reliability and credibility should, however, be taken extremely seriously. "How to regain the public's trust? Here's one way: Tell readers about your standards and values. If you have an ethics policy, post it online. Do you have a code of conduct for employees, or a set of guiding journalistic principles? A policy to prevent the intrusion of advertising influence in editorial content? A disclosure statement about your publication's corporate parentage? Let's see it."<sup>10</sup>

What will be the result for moral standards of the mainstream media when everybody has the opportunity to put on his own web site what he sees fit, taking the wind out of everybody's sails as people involved wanted to wait for checking the facts? Here I refer to the role played by Matt Drudge and Newsweek in the Monica Lewinsky case. Matt Drudge was the one who, in January 1998, indirectly published the Lewinsky affair by smartly reporting in his Drudge Report that the Newsweek editorial staff at the very last moment did not dare to present the scoop that a White House intern had had a sexual affair with president Clinton. Newsweek wanted to consult more sources before publishing. After the reports in the Drudge Report, the stories about sexual adventures of the president immediately were the global village's gossip.<sup>11</sup>

This affair serves as a model for the struggle of established mainstream media, especially in the United States, with the question what they should do with all these rumours, unchecked assertions, non information, and pieces of news that are circulating on the Internet. Due to the Internet, the information flow is no longer to be checked, regardless its extent of truth.

The issues mentioned so far, strongly connect with the characteristics of online journalism: interactivity, hypertextuality and immediacy. Besides, in this new kind of journalism the same moral questions can be distinguished as in traditional journalism. One of the key moral issues in online journalism is the hazy separation between editorial and commercial information.

### **3.1 EDITORIAL AND COMMERCIAL INFORMATION**

Many sites contain 'sponsored content'. Advertisements are placed all over the page, sometimes even within an editorial text. There are editorial links and links that are paid for. Buttons lead visitors to adjoining articles or commercial sites. When a button is placed next to a book review or a travel report, connecting with a company where the book or ticket can be ordered, it may be explained as a manner of service to the public. But to what extent is the reliability of a news site at stake if the public does not know that the site owner receives a percentage of each product sold?<sup>12</sup> Critics claim that visitors can no longer spot the difference between fact and fiction. A link to the web site of a book store in a book review may blur the separation between information and advertisements. In this way, a link in a news report to the home page of a fan club could erase the distinction between news and rumor or gossip.

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<sup>9</sup> Mann, F., 'Do Journalism Ethics & Values Apply to New Media?', Poynter Institute, 1997, <<http://www.poynter.org/dj/Projects/newmedethics/jvmann.htm>>

<sup>10</sup> J.D. Lasica, 'Ethics Codes: A Compact of Trust', *The American Journalism Review*, October 1998 <<http://www.well.com/user/jd/coloct98.html>>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.drudgereport.com>  
J.D. Lasica, 'The media's Matt Drudge syndrome', *The American Journalism Review*, April 1998 <<http://www.well.com/user/jd/colapr98.html>>

<sup>12</sup> Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems

In traditional journalism, journalistic independence is laid down in the editorial statute of a newspaper; the responsibility for the editorial part of the newspaper exclusively rests with the editor-in-chief and the editorial staff. Editorial and commercial areas are explicitly separated. In online journalism this is different. "Transaction journalism" is Lasica's term for this fading dividing line between editorial and commercial interests.<sup>13</sup> In his opinion, here the key moral issue in online journalism is under discussion, as the integrity of online journalism is hit in the heart. Concretely, the combined action of online publications and the interests of advertisers and business relations is the problem.

Lasica predicts that the traditional separation of editorial and commercial products will no longer hold. Essentially, he has no problem with the fact that a book review also contains a link to the book store where the book can be ordered; however, according to him, in such a case explanation on the nature of the agreement is due. The reader should not get the impression that a review is positive because of the revenues that can be expected for the newspaper.

Almost all online media are (to this day) freely accessible. They do not depend on subscriptions, but on advertisements. Thus, a 'banner' of a company can be placed on the front page of the online paper. The question is whether, for an experienced user, the distinction between news and advertisements is blurred. Byrd wonders whether it makes sense to keep news and ads clearly distinct in the lay-out of a page as well.<sup>14</sup> Does the consumer need to know that the paper is paid for every order? To what extent are these issues specific for the Internet? Some point out that the limits between editorial and commercial information are fading away everywhere and that the definition of news is changing: see the advertorials, the infomercials, the television news shows and the talk shows.<sup>15</sup>

An online news site often has closer connections with trade and industry than printed papers. The emergence of so-called e-commerce stimulates all these developments. This raises the question as to the effects of critical stories concerning site partners, or concerning the telephone company providing the Internet access to the site, or concerning the bank offering services for online banking on the site. Suppose travel pages of the news site are sponsored by an airline company and suppose a journalist knows that other companies have better offers. In this case, would fair consumer information prevail even if this would not be well received by the sponsor? In the traditional newspaper world too, an advertiser can withdraw his ads or orders, but online the sponsor contract of a whole site can be broken.

In Lasica's opinion, the key question should not be whether you sell things on your site and you are honest with your users. Instead: "Are you giving us enough information so we can make our own judgment of whether we should trust the content on your site? Do you have editorial safeguards in place to ensure that business interests don't override the interests of your users? Do you disclose when money changes hands? Disclosure is such a large part of keeping faith with your readers." Lasica states that these issues are too important to leave them to the editorial staffs and management teams of the news sites themselves. "The users need to participate in a deep and meaningful way. ( ) Our challenge is to figure out how to shape and tame this amazing intersection of content and commerce so that we maintain the kinds of

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<sup>13</sup> J.D. Lasica, 'Preserving Old Ethics in a New Medium', The American Journalism Review, December 1997 <<http://www.well.com/user/jd/coldec97.html>>

<sup>14</sup> Byrd, Online Journalism Ethics: a New Frontier

<sup>15</sup> M. Kessler, 'The Ethics of Online Journalism', <<http://www.earthkam.ucsd.edu/~mkessler/jour/>>

divisions between editorial and business interests that have served old media so well for generations."<sup>16</sup>

All in all, he makes a plea "to embrace the enduring standards and values of traditional journalism: editorial integrity, balance, accuracy, respect for others, and fairness. The Net won't improve on those."<sup>17</sup>

### **3.2 COMMUNITY PUBLISHING**

Another delicate affair, according to Mann even one of the most urgent questions<sup>18</sup>, is 'community publishing': everybody can publish local information on a news site and frequently update that information and provide it with context. But who is responsible for the correctness of the information? Is every bit of information to be checked by a web site editor beforehand? And what about certain groups in society having the opportunity to publish their own information on a news site? From the point of view of service to the public and customer relations, nothing is wrong - and probably not at all from a commercial point of view. But what happens if this information is of bad quality or offensive to some people? And what if bulletin boards appear to attract reactions of the worst sort?

### **3.3 PRIVACY**

The content of the privacy concept is changing. There are web sites where publicly available information concerning private citizens is being collected and ordered. Against payment, everybody can receive a file on everybody. Are news-oriented web sites allowed to engage in this lucrative business? Are journalists allowed to use this method for gathering information?

There are also web sites where everybody can see what kind of messages have been placed by somebody to one of the groups of the Usenet. Any remark, ever casually made about any subject, can re-emerge at wrong places years later.

With new ways of news gathering, e.g., with an online webcam installed in a public place, citizens can be permanently observed. Are news-oriented web sites going to enter these areas? Are discussion forums and chat boxes connected to news sites becoming fertile soil for the creation of files on individuals?

Ever more new and more sophisticated methods emerge to track, map, and record a person's search on a site. 'Cookies' are the best known 'markers'. Very tricky indeed is the possibility of recording media usage of consumers and making user profiles on the basis of these data for the benefit of commercial companies.

Should a news site make clear to its visitors how and why their search is being tracked and recorded? Lynch clearly points out: "Don't fool your readers has always been the best standard. People now are doing things on the web that they'd never have the nerve to do in print. (Journalistically-based) web sites need to adapt ethical thinking .. fast."<sup>19</sup>

### **3.4 DIGITAL MANIPULATION**

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<sup>16</sup> J.D. Lasica, 'Ethics Debate: It's Time to Move on', Online Journalism Review, March 12, 1999 <<http://www.well.com/user/jd/OJR-berkeley.html>>

<sup>17</sup> J.D. Lasica, 'Preserving Old Ethics in a New Medium'

<sup>18</sup> F. Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems

<sup>19</sup> Dianne Lynch, quoted in Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems



ICT offers many possibilities to manipulate pictures digitally. In the world of advertisements and publicity, this has already happening for years. The point is whether and, if so, to what extent digital manipulation with news pictures is acceptable.

Fred Ritchin, a New York Times press photographer, proposed to provide every digitally manipulated picture with an icon. Could this proposal also be applied to pictures published online? Critics point out that, doing so, tells us nothing about the extent to which a picture has been changed. And what is more, placing such an icon could raise suspicions with the public even if it concerns just a small technical adaptation to a picture that otherwise reflects reality excellently.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, digital technology offers opportunities for manipulation, e.g., for making pictures of 'virtual events', events that have never taken place. These pictures can immediately be distributed world wide.

### **3.5 INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY**

On the Internet, everyone can download as much as he or she wishes. To what extent are we concerned with plagiarism here? And what about "frames"? When the content of one news site can be seen in a frame in another one, and advertisement space is sold on this site, is it just a matter of using the possibilities of the web or of illegally appropriating other people's products?<sup>21</sup> Then there is the question of correctly using materials, not only in the sense of copyright, but also of lifting materials from the original context.

### **4. POSITIVE ASPECTS**

This tentative and certainly not exhaustive listing suggests that Heinonen is right when he points out that the Internet is usually seen as a source of new moral problems, while there are positive aspects as well from journalistic-ethical points of view, e.g., the fact that interactivity makes journalism much more accessible to the public.<sup>22</sup> This leads to a situation where the public can react to publications easier and faster. Correcting mistakes, providing additional information, and commenting are of course possible in traditional journalism as well, but doing so online implies a different relationship between journalists and their public, and therefore a new challenge to journalism.

Hypertextuality enables publishing additional materials online. Background information and documents that the journalist availed himself of are open for consultation. This means a service to the public, as in this way everyone can draw his own conclusions and check the journalist's work. Indeed, this is not an uncomplicated procedure either, as Mann states.<sup>23</sup> For, the journalist may overwhelm his reader with a large amount of rough materials that do not make sense. If the journalist is selective, the reader runs the risk of only hitting on those online documents that support the tendency of the article.

If journalists provide their public with insight into their sources and documents, a more transparent journalism will grow, as the public can be informed about the journalistic procedure and rough materials. Journalism is able to make transparent both reporting and judgments without

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<sup>20</sup> Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems

<sup>21</sup> Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems

<sup>22</sup> Heinonen, Journalism in the Age of the Net

<sup>23</sup> Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems

getting excited over precious space, as Byrd points out, e.g., by means of sidebar links explaining news weights and guidelines, so that responsibility is to be taken to the readers.<sup>24</sup>

Besides all moral questions, a further advantage of online journalism is that much attention can be paid to points of view that are being neglected by the mainstream media. Kessler points out that online journalists feel incorrectly and unfairly assailed by Internet amateurs. Sometimes, online journalism as a whole is discredited by reference to Matt Drudge. If printed matter can not all be ethically assessed, nor can online products.

## 5. (SELF-)REGULATION

In a democratic society, the media have a free and independent position with regard to government and therefore great responsibility. For, the press has great power and influence, which can be used to inform the public well and adequately, but also can be misused by disseminating false or insinuating information. If the press performs a public function, one should be able to trust that this information provision is reliable, complete, and correct.

The law offers possibilities to take action against offensive expressions and false information by the media. The courts will balance the interests of the aggrieved party against potential constraints of the freedom of press. First of all, regarding press publications there are legal instruments to weigh others' rights, e.g., the protection of honor and reputation against the media's freedom to report on abuses. If a publication is found unlawful by a court, the press can be ordered to place a correction and/or to pay damages. There is also the possibility of a criminal sanction, which is hardly ever used.<sup>25</sup>

In many countries, there is a system of self-regulation by the press. Self-regulation is complementary to regulation by government. The profession itself defines professional standards and controls observance of the rules. The underlying consideration is the belief that putting professional practice to the test of professional ethical standards is the responsibility of the profession itself, of course within the legal framework.

A first, gentle way of self-regulation is a written code of ethics, a set of professional ethical standards formulated by the profession itself. Drafting and accepting a code is mostly connected with implementing a way of control by colleagues, e.g., disciplinary law, so that colleagues can control observance of the duties drawn up in their code and can firmly deal with offenders. People can lodge complaints with these disciplinary councils, e.g., the Press Council or Code of Advertising Practice Committee if they consider the professional involved to have acted negligently.

In journalism, there is also the newspaper ombudsman, acting as an intermediary between the public and the paper. The ombudsman checks complaints, and often has his own column in the paper to deal with complaints and to react to criticism. Some papers hold their columns to publish corrections, with or without a connection with the ombudsman's column. Moreover, papers have their pages with letters-to-the-editor and articles written by experts, where all groups can present their opinions and where the public debate can take place.

The most important motive behind every self-regulatory instrument is the requirement that professionals act in accordance with opinions and standards prevailing in their profession. A

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<sup>24</sup> Byrd, *Online Journalism Ethics: A New Frontier*

<sup>25</sup> G. Schuijt, 'Media en vrijheid van meningsuiting', in: C. van der Linden (ed.), *Communicatie en informatie. Een stand van zaken*, Houten: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum, 1994, pp. 223 - 236

second motive is the effect of moral cohesion in professional circles and the improvement of moral judgment, which will produce a positive result on the profession's status. Furthermore, a well-functioning self-regulatory system will prevent government intervention. Professionals drafting rules for responsible practice themselves is preferable to a government authority doing so. Self-regulation is also more efficient and effective than litigation; it is more efficient, as testing can take place faster and cheaper, and it is more effective, as criticism of professionals hurts more than a court verdict.

Moreover, self-regulation is complementary to the law and its criteria are broader. This means that disciplinary councils have more possibilities to decide than courts do; e.g., they may not only deal with illegal actions, but also with legally unexceptionable, but socially unacceptable actions.<sup>26</sup>

The above outline of moral dilemmas that arise in online journalism raises the question to what extent it is meaningful and desirable to create self-regulating instruments for this new kind of journalism. In the world of the Internet in general and online journalism in particular, it is rather awkward to draw up effective self-regulation instruments such as codes of ethics, as the participants in the global network come from a wide range of countries, each with his or her own language and moral notions, while Internet sites all over the world emerge and vanish without a central point.

Nevertheless, organizations such as ONA (Online News Association) and ASNE (American Society of Newspaper Editors) drew up protocols and guidelines in reaction to moral questions as mentioned above. The ICC (Internet Content Coalition) drew up a draft as well for a set of guidelines for online advertising to keep clear the distinction between editorial and commercial information, and to guarantee the reliability of online news.<sup>27</sup>

A working group, initiated by the Poynter Institute and the ASNE drafted five protocols that may serve as models for editorial staffs of news-oriented web sites willing to develop their own policies and guidelines. These protocols refer to following issues:

1. guidelines for the reliability of online content;
2. guidelines for the usage of information from databases;
3. guidelines for linking;
4. editorial control of potentially hurting or harmful content;
5. journalistic integrity and commercial pressure.<sup>28</sup>

By way of example, here are the guidelines for the usage of hyperlinks:

- Links should be clearly identified as editorial or commercial, meaning links that the site has received money to include.

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<sup>26</sup> H. Evers, Media-ethiek. Morele dilemma's in journalistiek, voorlichting en reclame, Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1994, pp. 42 - 55

H. Evers, 'Codes of Ethics', in: B. Pattyn (ed.), Media Ethics. Opening Social Dialogue, Leuven: Peeters, 2000, pp. 255-282.

<sup>27</sup> <http://ojr.usc.edu/content/print.cfm?print=73>

J.D. Lasica, 'A Credibility Gap for Online News?', Online Journalism Review, December 16, 1998 <<http://www.well.com/user/jd/OJRdec16-98col.html>>

<sup>28</sup> F. Mann, "New Media" Brings a New Set of Problems

- The relevance and value of all editorial links should be evident from context or explicit annotation.
- All sites referred to in text, either by URL or site name, will be reviewed for taste, relevance, currency and accuracy.
- We will respect the privacy of individuals by weighing the public interest value of disclosing sensitive information. In some instances we may choose not to link to information that is highly invasive of an individual's privacy.
- Before linking to a potentially offensive site, editors should explore alternatives, including increased storytelling, listing URLs in text, and posting intermediate pages providing a synopsis of the offensive materials. If necessary, editors should take steps to warn users of the content to which they may be exposed.<sup>29</sup>

Beside ethical guidelines, the decisions of the Press Council can be essential as well for testing online journalistic practice and for setting standards in this respect. Tillmanns, the managing director of the Presserat, the German Press Council, made a plea for the extension of the council's competencies in the *Message* magazine.<sup>30</sup> This board, which is only to consider the press, should get the possibility to decide on online journalistic publications as well. In the Netherlands, the Raad voor de Journalistiek (Press Council) is competent to decide on journalistic practice, which means any acting or neglecting of professional journalists and of non-journalists, who frequently and against payment contribute to the editorial content of mass media. Until recently, the regulations included a list of the mass media that are within the 'jurisdiction' of this council. That is why the council dismissed a complaint against a journalist of the *Algemeen Dagblad*, a Dutch daily. On her private web site, she had published an open letter that film maker Louis van Gasteren greatly objected to.<sup>31</sup>

Because of a recent modification of regulations,<sup>32</sup> this list is no longer there. Without further limitations the council may deal with the 'mass media', which includes online journalism. Indeed, until now, to my knowledge, no complaint about an online medium has been lodged with the council yet.

It would be good if online mass media that consider themselves journalistic media, draft their own editorial statutes and mention on their home pages that the public can lodge a complaint with the Press Council - which many newspapers do in their colophons.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Old wine in new bottles? That was the key question in this article. Does online journalism raise new moral dilemmas? Or is it a matter of old issues, now appearing in a new, electronic shape? And what about the meaning and desirability of creating self-regulating instruments for this new kind of journalism?

The tension between speed and accuracy is not a moral issue evoked by online journalism. On the contrary, in traditional journalism too there is a tendency to rapidly, sometimes too rapidly, publish under the pressure of murderous competition, certainly in the world of

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.elon.edu/andersj/ethicsappendix.html>

<sup>30</sup> L. Tillmanns, *Die Reform reformieren. Kodex für Online-Medien*, *Message* 2000/2, <[http://www.message-online.com/arch2\\_00/02till.htm](http://www.message-online.com/arch2_00/02till.htm)>

<sup>31</sup> Van Gasteren/Hemelrijk, *De Journalist* 24-9-1999

<sup>32</sup> *De Journalist*, 16-6-2000

broadcasting journalism. The phenomenon of the 'mediahype' shows that outside online journalism there is a tension as well between rapid publishing and accurate reporting. There certainly is a commercial motive that underlies this fear of publishing later than one's competitors. It could be said, indeed, that in online journalism this dilemma is even more acute as there is the possibility of immediate publishing.

As regards the blurring of boundaries between editorial and commercial information, the situation is similar. Here too, there is no direct question of an issue exclusively connected with online journalism. In other areas of journalism, the classic separation between editorial and commercial interests is also under pressure. It could be said that in online journalism there is an increasing dependence on advertisers. Moreover, the online practice of banners, buttons, and links in editorial texts results in an increasing interwovenness of editorial and commercial information.

Hypertextuality presents dilemmas that are specific to online journalism. Linking to complementary information or to other web sites evokes the question of the limits of editorial responsibility.

Interactivity and connecting moral questions are also specific to online journalism. Chat rooms, bulletin boards, and mailing lists offer new possibilities, but also present new food for the debate on moral and legal responsibility of online media, on the boundaries of the public and private domains and on the acceptability of certain methods of news gathering.

The content of the 'privacy' concept is changing under the influence of the Internet in general and online journalism in particular. Mass media have always struggled with the question when and how someone's privacy is to be protected, but now new aspects are under discussion, e.g., by new methods of news gathering and because of the "infinity of space".

A fully new issue is the tracking and recording of someone's search, certainly if making user profiles is commercially interesting.

Digital manipulation of press photos is a new and important question as well. This certainly applies to moral issues concerning what is called 'virtual reality'.

The matter of plagiarism in journalism is not exclusively restricted to online media, though the practice of "framing" evokes new issues in this respect.

Critics are very sceptical about the possibility of drafting a practicable system of regulation on the Internet. Such scepticism certainly exists with regard to the opinion that online journalists can be held accountable to the public and to professional standards, through a system of self-regulation. First, "the number and variety of online journalism sites is growing by leaps and bounds, and encompasses an enormous variety of content, practices, entities, and motives. Absent the professional homogeneity that ensured adequate norm regulation in the world of offline journalism, I suspect that it is unrealistic to think that a self-regulatory body can do the job adequately."<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the freedom of speech embedded in the Dutch Constitution implies that journalism can not be a closed profession, a so-called 'closed shop', and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to sanction breaches of the professional standards. Undoubtedly, these considerations apply to online journalism as well.

Nevertheless, in my opinion self-regulation, however hard to realize it may be, is the only way to create online standards and to control the observation of moral rules. Online mass media - at least those media that want to be considered journalistic media - should draft and publish

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<sup>33</sup> from (unpublished) comments by Julie E. Cohen on the draft of this article.

ethical guidelines, so that the public can find whether avowals are fulfilled. The Press Council will contribute to drafting the standards and to the control of their observance by deciding on complaints against online media. In this way, online journalism may grow and become more professional, and adequate 'online ethics' may be realized.

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