Online Journal

International Association of Online Communicators

Volume 3; Issue 1 2008

Selected Peer-reviewed papers presented at the

International Association of Online Communicators

2008 Conference

Reykjavik, Iceland, June 12-13, 2008

and submitted for publication in the IAOC Online Journal

Online Journal

International Association of Online Communicators

Volume 3; Issue 1 2008

Selected Peer-reviewed papers

The CEO as Celebrity Blogger: Is there a Ghost or Ghostwriter in the Machine?

Samuel A. Terilli, Jr., J.D. ***and*** **Liney Inga Arnorsdottir**
School of Communication, PO Box 248127, University of Miami
Coral Gables, FL 33124 USA; sterilli@miami.edu and lia1@hi.is

Loud Voices Silenced Voices: The Ethics of Online Content and Web 2.0 in Media Coverage of High-Profile Child Death and Child Disappearance Cases

Kathryn Quigley
Assistant Professor of Journalism, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ 08028 USA
quigleyk@rowan.edu

Student-Produced News Media, How Complex Have Their Online Efforts Become?

Rick Sykes
Professor, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, MI 48859 USA;
sykes1wr@cmich.edu

Using Google Applications for Online Teaching: Competition for Proprietary Educational Software in an Age of Fiscal Constraint

Dr. Kevin C. Lee
Western Carolina University, NC 28716 USA; drkclee@gmail.com

Issues of Organizational Commitment in the Era of the Virtual Office

Diane Holtzman, Instructor, Richard Stockton College and Rowan University; **Evonne Kruger, Ph.D.**, Associate Professor of Business, Richard Stockton College, **Asi-Nia Schoenstein**, Instructor, Rowan University
The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Pomona, NJ 08215 USA
Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ USA 08028

International Association
of Online Communicators

Where Content and Technology Meet
www.onlinecommunicators.org

The CEO as Celebrity Blogger: Is there a Ghost or Ghostwriter in the Machine?

Samuel A. Terilli, Jr., J.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Communication
PO Box 248127
University of Miami
Coral Gables, FL 33124
(sterilli@miami.edu)

And

Liney Inga Arnorsdottir
Master of Arts, Public Relations, Candidate (2009)
School of Communication
PO Box 248127
University of Miami
Coral Gables, FL 33124
(lia1@hi.is)

IAOC Int'l Conference 2008

ABSTRACT: **The CEO as Celebrity Blogger: Is there a Ghost or Ghostwriter in the Machine?**

By their very high-profile, corporate position, CEO bloggers raise the interest level in, as well as interesting legal and ethical questions about, their blogs. The digital communications revolution includes tremendous growth in blogs in the business as well as general news and information worlds because blogs provide an interactive, credible and varied means of reaching desired audiences. CEO and other corporate blogs exist, however, in a legal world in which the speech of corporations is generally deemed commercial speech and less protected by relevant laws. Therefore, a business must pay particular attention to the communications, including blogs, of its associated executives, particularly CEOs. This paper examines a sample of significant CEO blogs to determine whether those CEOs are attempting to distance their blogs from their businesses or are in fact generally embracing their corporate or business status and using the blogs not only as possible tools for their individual or personal expression, but as acknowledged and thus transparently business-oriented communications tools. The paper concludes the latter has occurred far more often than the former and that this result bodes well both for corporate credibility in blog-facilitated communication and for the growth of CEO and similar blogs generally.

Introduction

With the explosive growth of the Internet in the 1990's, blogs arrived as a new medium of business as well as social and news-oriented communication. In the world of business, marketing and public relations, blogs are now used by organizations for everything from guerilla marketing to attacking the competition (Weil, 2006). As blogging has grown, blogs associated with high profile names – names that by their celebrity might drive readership and page clicks – have also grown (Kerwin, 2005). Celebrity bloggers include such notables as Dave Barry (the humorist), Rosie O'Donnell, and the Dixie Chicks. Although some of the celebrities no doubt write their own posts, one can easily imagine that the demands placed on their time by galas and premieres might lead a few to pass off the often mundane, yet, risky, task of writing to an anonymous and undisclosed assistant or specialist. Celebrity blogging might be a harmless fan manipulation, even if ghostwritten, but in other contexts the high-profile blogger raises different legal as well as ethical concerns.

In the business world, some of these high-profile blogs are written not by dispassionate observers or even rank and file employees, but by Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) – the business equivalent of the celebrity. By their very corporate positions, these bloggers raise the interest level in, as well as interesting legal and ethical questions about, their blogs. The words of a CEO, or a stand-in, can affect markets, share prices, communities, employees and consumers. The conclusions one draws about the intelligence, experience or character of a CEO, or other significant corporate officer, can be affected by statements attributed to that individual. Falsely claiming the words of a ghostwriter were actually those of the CEO may even lead some to incorrectly evaluate the value of his or her leadership skills. The CEO might claim his blog merely reflects his personal thoughts without having any bearing on his business, but separation of the CEO-as-individual from the CEO-as-corporate-spokesperson may not be possible. Consequently, the blogs of CEOs, along with all of their other communications, should give boards of directors and their lawyers some pause.

The questions thus presented for businesses whose leaders want to blog are not as simple as those faced by some blogger whose identity is not so closely associated with a business. For example, what is the appropriate balance to be struck in writing a blog to protect the business? Should the CEO submit the blog to editing, if not actual writing, by professional communicators (often from the ranks of public relations professionals) or lawyers? What should be the disclosures made by the CEO? Should the CEO-blogger identify the business in any manner if he or she is attempting to speak only as an individual? The answers to these questions bear directly on the potential responsibility of the business for the blog of the CEO.

This paper addresses these issues in four sections. First, the paper surveys the development and use of blogs as a means of communication and particularly as a public relations tool. Second, the paper examines the legal context of CEO-blogs in the United States and does so because, though the United States is among the jurisdictions that is most protective of speech, the protection of commercial speech is complicated and diluted when compared with the protection afforded political and artistic speech in the United States, and because in the United States courts may be likely to view any speech by a CEO to be corporate and thus commercial speech. Third, the paper examines a sample of 45 significant CEO-written blogs to analyze the characteristics common to these blogs, specifically including any disclosed use of ghostwriters or editors, association of the blogs with the business entity for which the CEO works, and the use of any disclaimers or stated limitations to attempt to reduce corporate legal responsibility for the blog. Although the strategies might vary from organization to organization, the paper concludes that the fundamental values of disclosure and transparency in communication must define the methods used in each CEO-attributed blog because, famous or not, CEOs are much more than celebrities and their blogs are not simply meant for fan clubs. The paper also concludes that based on the sample examined, the typical CEOs who blog and whose blogs bear any direct identification of, association with or relationship to their businesses appear not to be taking any apparent or overt steps to claim their blogs are merely personal communications for which their businesses have no responsibility.

The Blogging Phenomenon and Growth as a Public Relations Strategy

Blogging increased in popularity in the late 1990's with the introduction of blogging services and hosting sites that made it easy for anyone with an Internet connection to create a blog and update it frequently (Messner and DiStaso, 2008). This software eliminated the need for complicated instruction or training and thus attracted more individuals to the practice of blogging (Byron and Broback, 2006). The facilitation of on-line communications with multiple individuals in many locations from a single point in space also spurred the growth of blogs, leading in 2004 to presidential hopeful Howard Dean's use of blogs and his web presence to raise millions of dollars in political contributions. A year later, corporate blogging caught on as well and citizen journalism through blogs also moved from a concept to reality (Weil, 2006).

The word blog refers to "Web Log" and means an online diary of posts, generally appearing in reverse chronological order (Herring, et al., 2005). They are written in an informal and conversational style. Blogs are public and therefore, most often, written with a particular purpose. Corporate blogging is defined as the use of blogs to further organizational goals (Weil, 2006). Ninety percent of blogs include an interactive feature that allows readers to comment on the blog and thus communicate with the blogger and with each other (Kent, 2008). Other important features are a permanent URL to encourage bloggers to link to your posts as well as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) that allows readers to subscribe to a blog and be alerted automatically when site are updated (Byron and Broback, 2006). Some of the advantages of blogs include the low cost of creation or publication, the ease of wide dissemination, and the fact that in terms of public relations value a blog is a pull rather than push communications tool. Furthermore, blogs are Google-friendly. Search engines' algorithms favor sites that are regularly updated, contain simple lingual terms and are linked by other sites. Blogs satisfy all of these criteria. Often, blogs related to an organization rank higher than an organization's Web site.

These obvious advantages account in part for the phenomenal growth of blogs. A new blog is created every two seconds and ninety-eight percent of those with a computer search online for information before making a purchase (Paine, 2007). The number of blogs has been doubling every five months since 2003. Determining blog statistics is a complex process but Technorati (an internet search engine for searching blogs) is currently tracking over 113 million blogs (although this does not include the 73 million blogs reported to exist in China) (Helmond, 2008). Blogging is among the fastest growing communications tools in history. The blogosphere itself is a constantly "on", 24/7 worldwide community. A blog allows a company entry into this global ecosystem whose defining feature is interactivity. The blogosphere consists of blogs that are loosely joined through each other by hyperlinks. The process of bloggers linking to each other and constantly conversing allows an organization to build buzz and as Robert Scoble, Microsoft Chief Blogger, called it, "Word-of-mouth on steroids." Public relations powerhouse Edelman states that good word of mouth in the blogosphere leads to coverage in the offline media (Scoble and Israel, 2006). A ripple effect can be created in a short time frame with often wide-ranging results. This is an especially valuable tactic for smaller companies that do not have large marketing budgets and want to build a brand (Bulik, 2006). Effective blogging is a very cost-effective way to reach stakeholders situated globally.

Although blogs have grown tremendously, only one in nine Americans reports having read a blog and Kent (2008) states that a blog has the potential of influencing less than 1 in 20 U.S. citizens. Thus, bloggers face the age-old need to attract an audience, particularly one desired by the blogs' writers or sponsors, and this is as true in the world of corporate communications as it is in the world of news and commentary (Messner and DiStaso, 2008). Less than five percent of blogs are corporate blogs (Weil, 2006) and fewer still of those are written by CEOs. While those blogs are not necessarily seeking the same sort of mass readership as the mass media, those blogs are often seeking to reach broad categories of stakeholders in the business: employees, customers, investors, communities, regulators and competitors – both current and future.

With many forms of modern communications available and with multiple modes for gathering and reporting news and information, the likelihood that a single corporate message will penetrate the clutter is unlikely. Organizations have therefore resorted multiple communications tools and to venues in which interaction is a principal component (Paine, 2007). Not only is direct contact with target audiences possible, direct feedback allows corporations of various sizes to hear their customer's voices first-hand. For large multinationals, this can be very useful.

A blog is not just another way of disguising a corporate message. It is a dialogue. It is a way to establish relationships with stakeholders that may or may not result in selling of a product. But selling of a product is not the main point of a blog (Paine, 2007). Blogs are useful for both issues management and issues framing purposes. Blogs allow a business to put its own version of a story on the web and solicit feedback and even influence the traditional news media (Messner and Terilli, 2007; Messner and DiStaso, 2008). A well composed blog can humanize a business, attaching a face and human voice to a corporate entity to enhance trust and loyalty. Consumers are more likely to transact business with a company they feel they know well enough to trust and consequently, credibility, trust and customer evangelism are essential (Scoble and Israel, 2006). The CEO blog can achieve all of these goals if well executed.

The ideal target reader of a CEO blog is the person who wants to receive a first-hand account of an organization's business -- an insider's look or peak behind the corporate public relations veil. What distinguishes a CEO blog from others is that it eliminates the third-party commentator or filter (such as a journalist) and instead comes from a primary and authoritative source within an organization. It potentially closes the gap between an organization and its customer or other stakeholder (Weil, 2006). A CEO blog allows a corporation to have access to individuals and groups that may be possible only in the blogosphere. This access is direct in nature, bypassing traditional mass media or filters of communication.

A blog is not a mass medium in the same sense of major metropolitan newspapers or television networks, which are more likely to used by the casual consumer of information, at least in the primary geographic area served by the particular medium. One must affirmatively search for a blog or otherwise know of its existence. Blogs are more likely, therefore, to attract a homogenous or interconnected group of readers (i.e., users) who have a pre-existing interest in the organization or industry or particular subject matter of the blog. This group includes interested professionals as well as laymen. Hence, blog readers often already have some knowledge of the issues discussed in the blog. To this target group, the enthymematic nature of a blog is highly appealing. Rather than directly stating a conclusion, a blog allows readers to discuss and participate, with self-persuasion consequently occurring. From a public relations perspective, blogs allow organizations to target the narrow group of coherent individuals and professionals who share a common interest. Importantly, this group often includes opinion leaders and early adopters (Kent, 2008). Specialized sites are rulers of the Web, and the more focused the content, the greater influence a company has in its niche.

A weakness of corporate blogs lies exactly in the nature of its target group. Readers are likely to be homogenous and therefore not representative of the majority or general population. Furthermore, the direct nature of a blog means that the CEO must be adequately trained in public communication, understanding the fine line between when to go public with an issue and when to stay silent. Unlike a meeting with specialized analysts or even employees, the CEO-blogger is communicating with a potentially unknown and unsophisticated public audience. The CEO-blogger must master, therefore, a new style of writing because he or she is essentially creating a permanent, archived and publicly available record.

Blogs can be used to promote identification between an organization and its publics via membership. This is a powerful persuasive technique that fosters trust and empathy. They also allow an organization to differentiate itself from competitors by positioning the organization as a thought leader. The ideal purpose of a corporate blog is the creation of the perception of the company as an entity in which innovators, experts, and influencers converge (Byron and Borack, 2006). Most CEO blogs fall under the thought leadership category.

Blogs written by CEOs, or at least those that purport to be written by CEOs, thus carry certain clear advantages in terms of persuasiveness among audiences already interested in the corporate message. The CEO-blog is not, however, a uniform method of communication and not without its legal as well as ethical risks. In 2005, approximately 70 percent of companies had no blogging guidelines (Weil, 2006). The nature, structure, tone, policies, style and content of CEO blogs can be as varied as are the personalities of the CEOs and the missions of their businesses. The content of these blogs is a critical issue not only because the CEO might have some legal liability or ethical responsibility for his or her published content (as might any other speaker under the law and customs of that particular jurisdiction), but also because the CEO by virtue of his or her high profile and position may be deemed a commercial speaker and thus subject to different, and perhaps less protective, speech rules and law. To address this issue, the next section of this paper examines U.S. law as one example of this problem.

Why The CEO's Corporate Status Matters Under the Law of Speech

The CEO blogger is unlike any other blogger in the world of corporate communications. When the CEO or other well-known corporate representative blogs it may not matter whether he or she thinks and insists that the opinions expressed and information conveyed are attributable to him or her alone and not the business. The fact is that even under U.S. law, which is quite speech protective, commercial speech receives diluted First Amendment protection and the speech of a corporate officer, if the connection with the business is apparent, will likely be termed commercial speech in many instances.

Corporate and public relations bloggers must consider the risk that any speech by them will receive, even if it is not related to the sale of goods, services or securities, lesser constitutional protection than would the same or similar speech by someone not tied, by choice or circumstance, to the business or commercial enterprise (Terilli, 2005). Commercial actors – be they corporations, public relations firms, or even individual business people – have to assume that any speech by them, if it even remotely relates to their commercial function, will be deemed commercial speech by the courts and therefore not as fully protected under the First Amendment as are other types of speech (e.g., political speech, the arts or the sciences) that might also be motivated, in some instances, by economic interests.

The prevailing law of commercial speech under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is set forth in *Central Hudson Gas & Electric Corp. v. Public Service Commission*, 447 U.S. 557 (1980). At issue in *Central Hudson* was advertising placed by a publicly regulated utility. The Court articulated a four-part commercial speech test that asked

1. if the advertising was deceptive, false or for an illegal product or service;
2. if the asserted governmental interest behind the regulation was substantial;
3. if the regulation directly served that substantial interest; and
4. if the regulation was narrowly tailored to that interest.

(Central Hudson at 564-67). Had the Court in *Central Hudson* limited applicability of this test to speech (i.e., advertising) that proposed or somehow directly affected a commercial transaction, the test (which by its nature and terms dilutes the protection of the First Amendment) would have been unobjectionable and even logical. Unfortunately, the Court muddled the commercial speech category and appeared to suggest that speech by any commercial entity with any economic motive was commercial speech and, therefore, less deserving of First Amendment protection (Terilli, 2005). Therefore, because a CEO is so often a high profile person clearly associated with his or her business, any speech by that individual that is potentially related to the business may well be deemed commercial speech under U.S. law.

Justice Powell, writing for U.S. Supreme Court in *Central Hudson*, began with language indicating the value of commercial expression, but he presupposed a definition of commercial speech that was broad and an invitation to judicial assessments of the interests behind speech:

> The Commission's order restricts only commercial speech, that is, expression related solely to the economic interests of the speaker and its audience. [Citations Omitted] The First Amendment, as applied to the States through the Fourteenth Amendment, protects commercial speech from unwarranted governmental regulation. [Citations omitted] Commercial expression not only serves the economic interest of the speaker, but also assists consumers and furthers the societal interest in the fullest possible dissemination of information.

(Central Hudson at 561-62). Justice Powell then applied this broad definition as if it were derived from a narrow distinction rooted in common sense:

> [O]ur decisions have recognized "the 'commonsense' distinction between speech proposing a commercial transaction, which occurs in an area traditionally subject to governmental regulation, and other varieties of speech." [Citations Omitted] The Constitution therefore accords a lesser protection to commercial speech than to other constitutionally guaranteed expression. [Citations omitted] The protection available for particular commercial expression turns on the nature both of the expression and of the governmental interests served by its regulation.

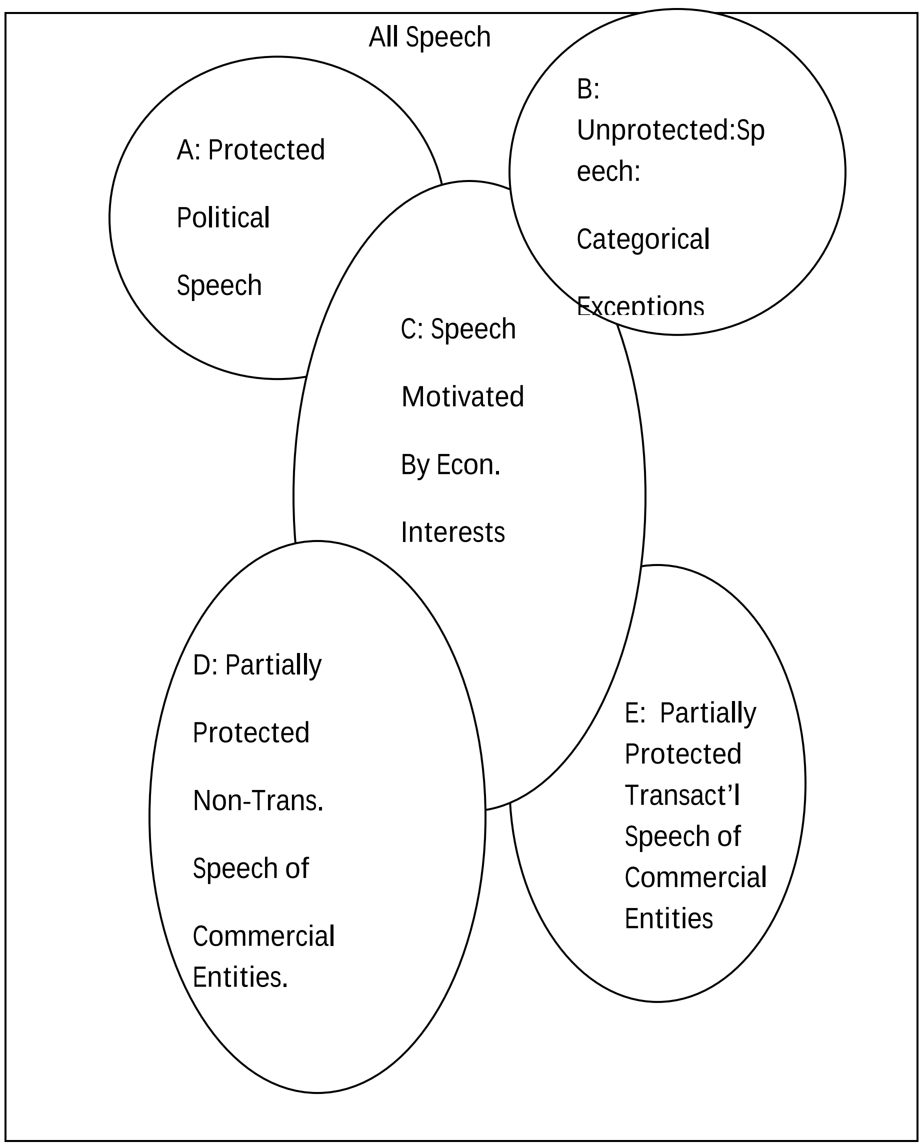
(Central Hudson at 562-63). This logic is problematic. The first paragraph above does not logically follow from or lead to the second. "Economic interests" is broad and not limited to the commercial transactions. If a public interest group had published advertisements encouraging the use of electricity rather than natural gas, it is hard to imagine any court seriously enforcing a state regulation prohibiting such speech. If, however, the utilities falsely or deceptively offered for sale or promoted electricity or appliances, it is easy to imagine courts enforcing state laws against deceptive commercial practices. The fact is the State was regulating the content of the advertisements to control expression, not to address deception, illegality or fraud. The attempt to straddle the fence by characterizing these advertisements as forms of speech related only to the economic interests and then basing a test on that characterization resulted in doctrinal confusion and ultimately the litigation in *Nike v. Kasky*, 539 U.S. 654 (2003).

The litigation in *Nike* arose following the company's public relations campaign responding to a mid-1990s public campaign criticizing its manufacturing and labor practices in Southeast Asia. Having been savaged in newspapers and on television by labor unions, labor activists and others accusing the company of underpaying and inhumanely treating workers through its contractors, Nike proceeded to respond with advertisements, mailings, columns, and other public relations efforts designed to tell its side of the story. Mr. Kasky, a resident of California, sued under the then existing version of California's false advertising and unfair competition laws,[i] though he admitted he had not been deceived or in any manner influenced in the purchase of any Nike products.

The trial court dismissed the case and the intermediate appellate court in California affirmed, holding the expression by Nike was not commercial and, therefore, was protected by the First Amendment.[ii] The appellate court held that lawsuit implicated a "public dialogue on a matter of public concern" –the question, among others, of "employing low-cost foreign labor for work once performed by domestic workers" –and therefore, was fully protected and was not merely commercial speech.[iii] The California Supreme Court, however, held that the issue-oriented advertisements could be deemed commercial. [iv] The 4-3 vote reinstated the Kasky suit because, according to the majority, (a) Nike was engaged in commerce, (b) the intended audience was likely to be actual or potential buyers or customers or persons acting on their behalf or with influence on such potential customers, and (c) the factual content of the messages described business operations, policies, products or services and for a significant segment of the buying public, labor practices do matter in making consumer choices.[v] The California Supreme Court thus defined commercial speech very broadly to include speech likely to influence the buying decisions of consumers. The Court rejected the argument that Nike was simply responding in the marketplace of ideas. The majority also dismissed the risk that its ruling would inappropriately chill commercial entities from making statements about their businesses.

This confused legal reasoning landed only briefly in the Supreme Court of the United States, which sent the case back to the California courts with no decision because a majority of the court concluded the case needed further development. The dismissal of certiorari in *Nike v. Kasky* did not resolve these conflicting arguments, but the dismissal was not a mere one sentence order either. Several justices vigorously argued the issue.

Figure 1: Fully Protected, Partially Protected and Unprotected Speech



The bottom line after years of the *Central Hudson* regime and after the failure of the Court to clarify the definition of commercial speech as a category of speech is that the content of any speech by a commercial entity or actor must be examined to determine its status under the First Amendment. Thus, in the context of corporate CEO blogging one cannot assume there is First Amendment speech protection for the blog even if the blog does not publish information related to a commercial transaction or possible transaction and even if there is no evidence the blog affected the buying actions of any consumer. In other words, even a blog about politics or art or science must be examined if it is a corporate blog because the very corporate status of the blogger (either direct or through agency law principles) makes that blog a candidate for reduced constitutional protection under the First Amendment. A blog written by the CEO of a business is, therefore, a form of communication that a court would likely view as a corporate and commercial communication.

As represented in Figure 1 above, the categories of speech are not mutually exclusive and many types of speech (some fully protected, some partially, and some not protected at all under the First Amendment) may be motivated by economic or financial interests. Corporate and CEO blogs are no different. Content about matters unrelated to commercial transactions – actual or intended – ought to have the same constitutional protection as other, non-commercial speech. It does not, however, and as a result the legal analysis of corporate and CEO blogs demands both an examination of all forms of content as well as the questions related to agency and vicarious liability. The place to begin is, therefore, the content of these blogs: Are the CEOs writing only about their personal lives and thoughts or about issues related, directly or indirectly, to their businesses and commercial interests and what, if anything, are they posting on the blogs to distance their writings from their corporations in terms of legal or ethical responsibility? To more adequately understand the range of methods and risks, this paper next examines a sample of noteworthy and illustrative CEO blogs to begin the process of developing the outlines of what real world CEOs are doing in their blogs.

Research Method

Because the questions examined in this paper involve qualitative matters regarding a relatively new and targeted form of communication (i.e., the CEO blog), the authors did not attempt to select a sample of blogs randomly among all blogs. The first criterion for selection was, of necessity, authorship (actual or apparent) by a CEO or equivalent executive. The second criterion was some evidence of an established, even if narrow, readership of the blog such that the blog might be indicative of trends or tactics that other CEO bloggers might adopt in terms of the legal and ethical issues inherent in CEO blogging. A opportunity sample drawn from widely recognized CEO blogs and a qualitative analysis of the blogs were thus most appropriate to the purposes of this paper.

Once the sample was selected, as explained in more detail below, the authors essentially used what Altheide (1976, 1987) termed an “ethnographic content analysis” to apply qualitatively certain categories to the content of each blog and allow for the development of additional categories as the examination proceeded. This form of textual analysis has been widely used by scholars, including, for example, Hindman (2008) who examined both the use by CBS News of forged National Guard documents in the 2004 election, Altheide (1976, 2002) who studied television news and media conceptions of fear, and Gormly (2004) who studied Christian television programs that covered Islam.

Unlike a quantitative analysis, content analysis through ethnography facilitates not only an examination of the content or text of the blogs, but also the discovery and evaluation of new questions or characteristics found by first reading the text with the initial, general categories present as evaluative tools. In ethnographic content analysis the first reading and the general categories of analysis do not exclude new patterns or categories that become apparent after the first reading. After this first pass at the material, additional readings of the material and deductive analysis are employed to verify or reject the patterns or categories. As shown below, once the sample was selected, the authors began reading the CEO blogs with key, general categories in mind and then refined and broadened those categories as they proceeded to arrive at the ethnographic content analysis.

Sample

The sample was drawn from a compilation of four lists of CEO blogs. These lists were identified using the search engine *Google* and Lexis-Nexis. The phrase “List of CEO blogs,” pulled up approximately 87 million hits on Google, for example. A search revealed that many sites were redundant, citing a few longer, prominent lists. Therefore, three of the four lists chosen were the so-called “master” or commonly cited lists that contained the greatest number of CEO blogs: *The Corporate Blogging Book* (http://www.thecorporatebloggingbook.com), *Digerata.net* (http://www.digerata.net), and the *New PR* (http://www.thenewpr.com). The fourth list, provided by the *Wall Street Journal,* was also chosen because it contained only blogs by CEOs of high-profile publicly-traded companies. The other three lists consisted mostly of small company CEOs. It was decided that for the purposes of this study, a mixture of small and large company CEO blogs would be the most advantageous as they tend to differ in format and content and thus represent a wide scope of different CEO blogs.

The next step included a review of the lists to eliminate repetitive blogs and blogs by high-ranking employees who were not CEOs. The second list (Digerata) was compared to the first (CBB) and all entries on the second list that were also on the first were removed from the second list. The third list (The New PR) was then compared to the second and duplicate entries removed from the third. None of the 11 entries on the WSJ list appeared on the other three.

To limit the sample to only CEOs, the lists were reviewed and those corporations with high-ranking employees that were not CEOs or presidents were removed. Examples of titles of other high-ranking employees include vice president, Corporate Operating Officer, and Chief Technology Officer. Although blogs by executives of this stature will present many of the same issues as blogs by CEOs, they were eliminated in this study for the sake of consistency and to avoid the necessity of evaluating each position in the context of different corporate structures. On the Wall Street Journal list, however, three blogs of other high-ranking officials were included because those positions were substantially similar in significance and profile to CEOs. They included: Mike Critelli executive chairman of Pitney Bowes, Robert Lutz vice chairman of GM, and David Neeleman chairman of JetBlue Airways. They were not excluded in part because these three companies are high profile publicly traded and blogs by these individuals would have similar effects or consequences as those written by the CEO. During the review process, blogs that were no longer active were also removed from the lists.

A finalized list sectioned in four parts by authors was then compiled (see appendix i). To edit the sample further and arrive at the final 45 entries to be used in the study, a more systematic sampling procedure was used. In each of the three sections of the lists (all 11entries on the Wall

Street Journal list were used), each eighth CEO blog was chosen until the number ten from each was reached. The final sample therefore contained ten blogs from the *Corporate Blogging Book*, ten entries from *Digerata.net*, ten from *the New PR*, and 15 from the *Wall Street Journal* (11 from the list and four from reader comments that responded to the *Journal's* list). If a blog chosen had been discontinued, that entry was deleted and replaced by the next entry on the list. The final sample provided a diverse list of CEO blogs that included high and low profile companies as well as examples from various industries.

Analysis

The authors began the analysis by reading each blog to determine if it prominently identified the business of the CEO or appeared to be presented as merely the personal writings of the individual. On this first reading the authors also examined the blogs for the disclosure of other writers or editors of the content. Following the initial reading, the authors concluded that because many of the blogs have existed for lengthy periods of time, allowing the sites to accumulated many posts as well as archives, and because many readers will not necessarily comb a blog for a buried disclosure in an old post or toward the bottom of the web page or embedded in a link, the examination would have to focus on that which one would might deem to be a prominent disclosure, such as something at the top of the blog (on the initial one-to-three screens) or otherwise prominently or conspicuously labeled. To this end, a list of ten questions was created to reveal any underlying trends in the content and format of the sample CEO blogs. Each blog was analyzed and the results recorded. The questions were as follows:

1. **Is the URL corporate or unrelated?**

Determining whether the URL a part of the organization's home webpage (i.e. officialcorporation.com/CEOblog) or hosted on an unrelated *database* (i.e. john.typepad.com).

2. Is the corporation identified?

Identification was defined as being located anywhere on the blog.

3. If so, is it prominent?

Prominent was defined as being located in the opening screenshot, in the top three blog entries, or on the sidebar. If the viewer needs to open another window, such as *About Me*, or scroll down the website, the item was classified as not prominent. Prominent was also defined as being represented by a company logo or color scheme.

4. Does the writer post business entries?

Business entries were defined as a top three blog entry concerning the organization, industry, or related business topics.

5. Are there links to the corporation on the blog?

Links were defined as being located in the opening screenshot or on the sidebar.

6. Does the writer post personal entries?

Personal entries were defined as a top three blog entry concerning anything other than business related information. Examples include movie reviews and stories of recent vacations. These non-business-related entries often appeared alongside business-related entries.

7. Is there a prominent statement that the blog is personal?

For definition for prominent, see question three above. Personal statement was defined as being a clause that specified that the blog was the view of the CEO and not of the corporation. Terms such as “opinions of CEO” and “random musings” were excluded.

8. Are readers able to comment?

Comments were defined as opportunities for readers to state their views after each blog.

9. Does the blog identify other writers/editors?

Identification of other writers/editors was defined as a statement or clause located anywhere on the blog that others than the CEO had authorship of the blog.

10. Is there a Terms and Conditions section?

A “terms and conditions” section was defined as one setting forth certain procedures and policies for use of the blog and specifications regarding posts by readers.

Results

Several trends were found during the blog analysis (see appendix ii). Almost all blogs identified the corporation (44) although nine of the 44 did not do so prominently. Therefore, 35 blogs prominently displayed an identification of the organization. The CEOs typically wrote in their blogs about their businesses or some aspect of the industries (42). They also generally included prominent links to their organizations (39). Forty-one blogs allowed readers to comment after each blog entry.

On the other hand, few (five) of the blogs reviewed included a clause stating that the blog reflected the personal views of the CEO and were unrelated to the organization. Similarly, only five included a Terms and Conditions section. Forty blogs did not identify other editors or writers and were therefore assumed to be solely written and managed or edited by the CEO. Interestingly, none of the blogs affirmatively represented to the readers that only the CEO wrote the entries, without input or contributions from others, though five of the CEOs did generally portray their blogs as personal statements, apparently allowing the readers to judge for themselves.

The only categories or questions in which the authors found nearly even or at least closer to even splits among the 45 blogs included use of the corporate URL and blog content that was personal as well as business related. Approximately as many blogs had a corporate URL as an unrelated one (28 corporate vs. 17 unrelated). The same was found for personal entries (22 personal vs.23 non-personal). Of the blogs that included personal entries, however, only three of those were exclusively limited to personal entries, as opposed to including a mix of personal and business issues.

Figure 2. Summary of blog analysis (see appendix ii).

	Corp. URL	**Identif. of corp.**	**Prominent**	**Business entries**	**Links to Corp.**	**Personal entries**	**Personal statement**	**Reader comments**	**Other editors/ writers**	**T&C**
Yes	28	44	35	42	39	22	5	41	5	5
No	17	1	10	3	6	23	40	4	40	40

In summary, although the URLs of some blogs were unrelated to an organization, the majority of the blogs prominently identified the corporation and provided links to it. Most of the CEO bloggers predominately discussed matters pertaining to their organization or industry. However, few had clauses, statements, or a Terms and Conditions section explaining that the blog reflected opinions of the CEO and not of the organization. This trend is ultimately the only one that differentiated the high-profile CEO bloggers of the Wall Street Journal list from the others. The former blogs were more likely to include legal statements or a Terms and Conditions section stating that the blog reflected the views of only the CEO. What was found, however, was that in some blogs, the terms “opinions of a CEO,” “random musings,” or “thoughts from a CEO” were displayed close to the title.

The name of an organization that was not prominently displayed was usually found in the "About me" section. Of the five blogs that identified other editors or writers, none disclosed that an editor reviewed the blog before publishing. Instead, some CEOs allowed other high-ranking officials to co-blog with them. There were only three blogs that were strictly personal in nature, meaning that all of the entries concerned topics other than the business or industry. Except for these, all others focused primarily on organizational topics.

Conclusion

The majority of the CEO blogs examined not only failed to distance the blogs from the businesses of the CEO, but acknowledged and even embraced the corporate connection. The use of corporate logos and names, web domain names, and corporate resources (from information to sources and related links) was quite common. All of this suggests that the CEOs who blog largely accept their role as corporate spokespersons, if not icons, and the resulting legal liability and ethical responsibility that will likely inure to the business for the words published in the blog by the CEO. The blogs that included terms and conditions or policies that might be used to attempt to limit corporate liability were actually efforts more to ensure decorum among users posting comments, to comply with applicable laws such as securities regulations or to promote fair disclosure to readers about the content.

The results of the survey show that businesses see the value in open communication with stakeholders, be they consumers, employees, investors, communities or whomever else might find the CEO's blogs. Some of the blogs are clearly promotional. Some are more general or conversational. But nearly all of them were positioned as public relations tools aimed at humanizing the CEO and his or her business and encouraging two-way communication. This transparency in operation of the examined CEO blogs may result in an increase in CEO blogs or similar forms of business communications strategies for the following reasons:

- With the growth of blogs continually increasing, companies that do not include blogging as part of their integrated marketing plan are likely to miss out on opportunities as their competitors adopt this platform that others are using to build credibility and connection with stakeholders.
- Outside of the blogosphere, a company cannot proactively respond to allegations and solicit responses. It cannot proactively initiate conversations. Even though complete control of a message is not possible in the blogosphere, participation allows an organization to participate more directly in the shaping of what is being said about it.
- A blog complements existing channels. It allows for the opportunity of reaching a different target group than traditional media and reaching them in a novel manner.
- It can be argued that a personal CEO blog with no connection to his company does not exist. If the name of the CEO is known, the blog will always represent the business in some way in at least the circle of stakeholders who know that name.

Although this research began with the concern that CEO blogs might lead to unanticipated corporate responsibility for the writings, perhaps personal in nature, of the CEO, the research has shown by the very fact that the CEO blogs typically embrace their corporate connections that CEO blogs will not be viewed by businesses as speech distinct from their commercial speech or advertising generally, but as integral parts of their communications strategy. Not having such a blog, either written by the CEO or someone with similar star power, may be viewed in the future less as a prudent way of avoiding risk than as an imprudent way of failing to engage stakeholders, critics and others. This should not be understood to mean that a one-size-fits-all approach to high-profile corporate blogging is necessary. The CEO blog or similar tool can and should be tailored to the skills, interests, and personalities of the CEO as well as the nature and goals of the business and it might as well be so tailored because it will be almost certainly viewed as one with other commercial speech of the business. As Gilbert Ryle argued nearly 60 years ago in a different context and with greater philosophical elegance and import, there is no ghost in the machine (Ryle, 1949).

NOTES

[i] Cal. Bus. & Prof. Code 17200 et seq. (2003) and Cal. Bus. & Prof. Code 17500 et seq. (2003)

[ii] Kasky v. Nike, Inc., 93 Cal. Rptr. 2d 854 (Cal. App. 1 Dist. 2000).

[iii] *Id*. at 860-61.

[iv] Kasky v. Nike, Inc., 45 P.3d 243 (Cal. 2002).

[v] *Id*. at 257-62.

REFERENCES

Altheide, D. L. (1976). *Creating Reality: How television news distorts events*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Altheide, D. L. (1987). Ethnographic content analysis. *Qualitative Sociology*, 10 (1), pp. 65-77.

Altheide, D. L. (2002). *Creating fear: News and the construction of crisis*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

Bulik, B. S. (2006). When celebs leverage their online identities. *Advertising Age*, 26 June, p. 6.

Byron, D.L. and Broback, S. (2006). *Publish and Prosper: Blogging for your Business*. CA: New Riders Publishing.

Gormly, E. (2004). Peering Beneath the Veil: An ethnographic analysis of Islam as portrayed on the 700 club following the September 11th attacks. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 3 (4), pp. 219-38.

Helmond, A. (2008, February 11). How many blogs are there? Is someone still counting? *Blog Herald*. Retrieved May 19, 2008, from http://www.blogherald.com/2008/02/11/how-many-blogs-are-there-is-someone-still-counting/.

Herring, S., Schiedt, L., Wright, E. and Bonus, S. (2005). *Weblogs as a bridging genre, Information, Technology & People* 18 (2), pp. 142-71.

Hindman, E. B. (2008). Black Eye: The Ethics of CBS News and the National Guard Documents. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 23 (2), pp. 90-109.

Kent, Michael L. (2008). Critical analysis of blogging in Public Relations, *Public Relations Review*, *34*, (1), pp. 32-40.

Kerwin, A. M. (2005). When celebrities blog. *Advertising Age*, 14 March, p. 29.

Messner, M., and DiStaso, M. (2008). The Source Cycle: How traditional media and weblogs use each other as sources, *Journalism Studies*, 9 (3), pp. 447-63.
Messner, M. and Terilli, S. (2007). Gates Wide Open: the impact of weblogs on the gatekeeping role of the traditional media in the 2004 Presidential Election, *Florida Communication Journal* 35 (1), pp. 1-14.
Paine, Katie D. (2007). How do blogs measure up? *Communication World*, *24*, (5), pp. 30-33.
Ryle, G. (1949, 1959).*The Concept of Mind*. NY: Barnes & Noble.
Scoble, R. and Israel, S. (2006). *Naked Conversations: How Blogs are Changing the Ways Businesses Talk with Customers.* Hoboken N.J.: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
Terilli, S. (2005). Nike v. Kasky and the Running-But-Going-nowhere Commercial Speech Debate, *Communications Law & Policy*, 10, pp. 383-428.
Weil, D. (2006). *The Corporate Blogging Book: Absolutely Everything You Need to Know to Get It Right*. NY:Portfolio Hardcover.

Appendix i

Wall Street Journal

1. Jonathan Schwartz, "Jonathan's Blog" — CEO of Sun Microsystems
2. Bill Marriott, "On the Move" — CEO of Marriott International
3. Mike Critelli, "Open Mike" — executive chairman of Pitney Bowes
4. Robert Lutz, "Fast Lane" — GM vice chairman
5. David Neeleman, "Flight Log" — chairman of JetBlue Airways
6. Michael Hyatt, "From Where I Sit" — CEO of Thomas Nelson Publishers
7. Mark Cuban, "Blog Maverick" — Internet entrepreneur and owner of the Dallas Mavericks and Landmark Theaters
8. Richard Edelman — CEO of Edelman
9. Paul Levy, "Running a Hospital — CEO of Deaconess Beth Israel Hospital in Boston
10. Nick Jacobs — CEO of the Windber Medical Center in Windber, Pa.
11. Bob Parsons, "Hot Points" — CEO of GoDaddy.com

Wall Street Journal reader's response

1. Garo H. Armen – Antigenics, http://www.antigenics.com/news/ceoblog/
2. Tom Glocer – Reuters, http://tomglocer.com/default.aspx
3. Alan Meckler, Jupiter media, http://weblogs.jupitermedia.com/meckler/
4. Gregory Olsen – PatinaCare, http://patinacare.blogspot.com/

Corporate Blogging Book

1. Buzz Bruggeman – Active Words, http://buzzmodo.typepad.com/buzznovation/
2. Gil Friend – Natural Logic, http://blogs.natlogic.com/friend/

3. John Andrews – Evans Data Corporation, http://www.evansdata.com/blog/viewBlog.php?blogID=1
4. Matt Blumber – Return Path, http://onlyonce.blogs.com/
5. Steve Spangler – Steve Spangler Science, http://www.stevespangler.com/
6. Chris Baggott – Compendium Software, http://blogging.compendiumblog.com/blog/blogging-best-practices/
7. Greg Milliken – Alibre, http://alibre.typepad.com/alibre_ceo_blog/
8. Karen Chistensen – Berkshire Publishing, http://www.berkshirepublishing.com/blog/
9. Pat Matthews – Webmail, http://patmatthews.typepad.com/
10. Bill Nussey – Silverpop, http://emailmarketing.silverpop.com/

Digerata

1. Beth N. Carvin – Nobscot, http://nobscot.blogspot.com/
2. Tim Dyson – Next Fifteen, http://siliconvalleypr.blogspot.com/
3. Kathleen Gilroy – Otter Group, http://www.ottergroup.com/?cat=1
4. Kingsley Idehen – OpenLink Software, http://www.openlinksw.com/blog/~kidehen/
5. Jim Lejeal – Oxlo Systems, http://jimlejeal.typepad.com/
6. Katie Delahaye Paine – KDPaine&Partners, http://kdpaine.blogs.com/
7. Scott Ryan – Architel, http://pd.architel.com/
8. Mena Trott – Six Apart, http://www.sixapart.com/about/corner/
9. Brock Blake – FundingUniverse.com, http://brockblake.com/
10. Brian Dear – Eventful.com, http://www.brianstorms.com/

The New PR

1. Steve Goldstein – Alacra, http://www.alacrablog.com/
2. Kenneth D. Makovsky – Makiovsky & Company, http://blog.makovsky.com/
3. George F. Colony – Forrest Research, http://blogs.forrester.com/colony/
4. Nicholas Jacobs – Windber Medical Center and Research, http://windberblog.typepad.com/
5. David Manaster – ERE Media Inc., http://www.ere.net/blogs/Hire_Calling/
6. Philliđ Blumberg – American Ventures, http://www.blumbergblog.com/philip_blumberg/
7. Leslie Jump – Jump Walker International Group, http://www.marketerblog.net/
8. Lester Wunderman – Wunderman, http://lesterchroniclesblog.wunderman.com/
9. Jamie Lewis – Burton Group, http://www.burtongroupblogs.com/jamielewis/
10. Lai Kok Fung – Buzzcity, http://gammalife.blogspot.com/2007/06/connecting-unwired_07.html

Appendix ii

	URL	Identification of corporation	Prominent	Business entries	Links to corp.	Personal entries	Personal statement	Reader comments	Other editors/writers	Terms & Cond.
Schwartz, Sun Microsystems	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	yes
Marriot, Marriot International	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	yes
Critelli, Pitney Bowes	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Lutz, GM	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes
Neeleman, Jet Blue	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no
Hyatt, Thoman N. Publishing	Unrelat-ed	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Cuban, Mavericks	Unrelat-ed	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Edelman, Edelman PR	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Levy, Hospital	Unrelat-ed	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Jacobs, W. Medical Center	Unrelat-ed	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
Parsons, GoDaddy.com	Unrelat-ed	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Armen, Antigenics	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	yes
Glocer, Reuters	Unrelat-ed	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Meckler, Jupiter Media	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Olsen, Patina Care	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	no
Kempner, MWW	Unrelated	yes	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes	no	no

Bruggeman, Active Words	Unrelat-ed	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Friend, Natural Logic	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Andrews, E. Data Corporation	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Blumber, Return Path	Unrelat-ed	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Spangler, Spangler Science	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Baggot, C. Software	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Milliken, Alibre	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no - "opinions"	yes	no	no
Christensen, B. Publishing	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Matthews, Mailtrust	Unrelat-ed	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Nussey, Silverpop	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Carvin, Nobscot	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no - "random musings"	yes	yes	no
Dyson, next fifteen	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no - "random thoughts"	yes	no	no
Gilroy, Otter Group	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Idehen, Software	Corpo-rate	yes	no	yes	no	no	no	yes	no	no
Lejeal, Oxlo systems	Unrelat-ed	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	no
Paine, KDP&Partners	Unrelat-ed	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Ryan, Architel	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Trott, Six Apart	Corpo-rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Blake, Funding Universe	Unrelat-ed	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no

Dear, Eventful.com	Unrelat -ed	yes	no	no	no	yes	yes - fine print (about me)	yes	no	no
Goldstein, Alacra	Corpo- rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes	no
Makiovsky, Makiovsky & Co	Unrelat -ed	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Colony, Forrest research	Corpo- rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no
Manaster, ERE Media Inc	Corpo- rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no - "thoughts from ..."	yes	no	no
Blumberg, American Ventures	Unrela- ed	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Jump, JWI group	Unrelat -ed	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Wunderman, Wunderman	Corpo- rate	yes	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	no
Lewis, Burton Group	Corpo- rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no - "opinions"	no	no	no
Kok Fung, Buzzcity	Corpo- rate	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	yes	no

**Loud Voices Silenced Voices:
The Ethics of Online Content and Web 2.0 in Media Coverage of
High-Profile Child Death and Child Disappearance Cases**

**By Kathryn Quigley
Assistant Professor of Journalism
Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ
U.S.A**

**Presented to the International Association of Online Communicators
2008 Conference
Reykjavik, Iceland, June 12-13, 2008**

Loud Voices, Silenced Voices:
The Ethics of Online Content and Web 2.0 in Media Coverage of High-Profile Child Death and Child Disappearance Cases

Abstract:

This pilot study is a content analysis exploring the ethics of online information regarding media coverage of high profile disappearances and deaths of children. In the United State, the suicide of teen Megan Meier over a hoax on MySpace garnered intense media attention, while the murder of little Ricky Holland of Detroit at the hands of his adoptive parents led to calls for change after a multi-part series in the Detroit Free Press.

Meanwhile, the disappearance of a 4-year-old British girl, Madeleine McCann captured the media's attention throughout the United Kingdom. In addition to the stories in print, the newspapers covering the case posted supplemental material online.

In each of these high-profile cases involving children, aspects of Web 2.0 played a role, especially with online newspaper forums in which readers could respond. This paper will examine ethical issues involving the online content and Web 2.0 reader-responses when the cases involved child deaths and disappearances.

Introduction and Background:

A bloody shirt. A noose in a bedroom closet. An empty bed. All signs of dead or missing children. All stories were covered relentlessly by the media in the last three years. These high-profile cases of child deaths and disappearances captured the attention of newspaper readers and stirred up their ire. While such stories frequently garner intense media attention (especially if the children are white and middle-to-upper-middle-class), the difference is that the advent of the Internet has meant that much more information about these cases are also posted online at the newspaper's websites. Photo galleries, timelines and message boards are now commonplace.

But ethical issues remain, especially when such cases involve children and their families and especially because the permutations and effects of Web 2.0 are still unknown. As defined by Tim O'Reilly of O'Reilly Media, Web 2.0 involves the trend of using Internet technology to enhance creativity and collaboration among users.[1]

Stories about child deaths and disappearances are ripe with possibilities for online content and Web 2.0 sharing. Take the Megan Meier case for example, one of three that this paper will examine. Megan, a 13-year-old girl from a suburb of St. Louis, hung herself from a noose in her closet in 2006. She had been using the social networking site MySpace to write to a teen boy named "Josh." She thought they were close, but then he turned on her. ""I don't know if I want to be friends with you anymore because I've heard that you are not very nice to your friends," read the message from "Josh." [2]

It turned out that there was no Josh." Instead the persona was created by Lori Drew, the adult mother of one of Megan's friends, and her employee.[3] Drew thought Megan had not been nice to her own teenage daughter and wanted to upset Megan. Instead, Megan – who struggled with depression and self-esteem – hung herself while her mother cooked dinner.[4]

The story sparked so much response on the Suburban Journals website (http://suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/articles/2007/11/13/news/sj2tn20071110-1111stc_pokin_1.ii1.txt) that it would take 166 pages of paper to print out all the comments posted by readers after the initial Nov. 13, 2007 story. [5]

Many of the comments were heartfelt:

> *"My deepest condolences to Megan's family. That's the horrid dark secret about online life---anonymity cultivates the absolute worst in people---and I've seen it before with online forums. It's insane. This should be pursued and those people punished. A law should be made to protect others against this type of cruelty. Those heartless adults deserve the eternal justice that will eventually come to rest on their doorsteps. God does not take inhumane treatment of children lightly."* [6]

Some were scathing:

> *"This has to be the worst case of adult behavior that I've seen in a while. Those parents should be sent to jail and/or made to spend every last waking moment making amends for what they have done to that poor family. It's a shame they are now divorcing..."* [7]

Others were just plain mean:

> *"That mother is horrible. She deserves to burn in HELL! And she was not smart at all..!!! and she is a lier. She aid those things in anger of her daughters friensdhip with Magan. She should go to flippin hell "*[8]

And that comment was not even among the worst. Andrea Hurley, online editor of the website YourJournal.com, was in charge of moderating the comments. In an e-mail interview, she said she deleted numerous comments that were "obscene or viciously cruel."[9] However, she saved them all in a file and sent a sample to me.

Here are a few that were deleted:

- *"ur evil. i hate u. the whole world hates u. go on live ur shitty life.(thats what YOU SAID TO HER. i hope u will commit suicide too)"*
- *"Kunt - Lori Drew indicted this week! Kunt - Lori Drew indicted this week! Kunt - Lori Drew indicted this week*
- *"Lori Drew and her husband aren't human. They're niggers."*

The Megan Meier story by itself in the print version struck such a chord with people that it was picked up by bloggers and made news around the world. The Suburban Journal's website is far from fancy and doesn't include many "bells and whistles." However the fact that the story was online and the website allowed comments, helped to propel the story into the national spotlight.

But at what cost, especially to real people involved, like Megan's parents or the Drew family? At what point do online comments stop being part of the news process and start being unethical? This paper will examine that question, among others.

The child abuse death of Ricky Holland did not generate as many over-the-top reader comments. But the series "Could You Have Saved Ricky?" by reporter Jack Kresnak, which appeared in seven parts in the Detroit Free-Press, is an excellent example of how a newspaper can add to its reporting and writing with online content. Most newspaper websites are already effective at placing additional content online for sports, political and breaking news stories. This paper will examine how coverage of child death and disappearance cases can also be effective online.

Kresnak, a veteran reporter who specialized in covering juvenile justice, spent more than a year reviewing 1,000 confidential documents in the case. He also analyzed 3,000 pages of police reports and interviewed more than 30 people. [10] The result is a gripping, heartbreaking story of an adopted boy whose new home turned out to be his death place and whose new parents were far less than loving.

The resulting series involved 14 parts, plus audio, video and photos. Kresnak won numerous awards for the series, including the 2007 Michigan AP Editorial Association's award for Public Service writing and was a finalist for the 2007 Investigative Reporters and Editors award. As a result of Ricky's death, Ricky's parents were sentenced to prison, several social workers involved in the case were disciplined or fired and the state revised its procedures.

The third story to be examined is the disappearance of a British toddler, 3-year-old Madeleine McCann. This case, unlike the other two, is still unresolved because Madeleine is still missing. The case just marked one year since McCann's parents, Gerry and Kate, left their three children sleeping in a vacation bungalow in Portugal in May 2007 while they went out to dinner with other adults.

Madeleine's disappearance captured the attention and imagination of the United Kingdom, as well as the rest of the world. But as often is the case in coverage of child disappearances, public and media sympathy for the parents quickly turned to suspicion and finger-pointing. This paper will examine the online coverage of Madeleine's disappearance as well as the ethics of media scrutiny and insinuation of her parents. In fact, the coverage of Gerry and Kate McCann became so brutal in the U.K. that they sued for libel. In March, a British court awarded them 550,000 British pounds and public apologies from two newspapers, the Daily Express and the Daily Star.[11]

Research Questions:

The literature indicates there is very little in-depth analysis of comparison of online newspaper coverage of child deaths and disappearances. Such stories often get prominent play in print editions of newspapers, but it is unclear whether that prominence has translated to increased coverage on the Internet. Also, the increased use of Web 2.0 in online newspaper content raises ethical consideration, especially because these stories involve children and families. Care is always supposed to be taken in coverage of issues involving children, according to the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics.[12] This pilot study attempts to fill that void by asking the following research questions:

RQ1: Are there examples of online newspaper content being used to enhance coverage of high-profile child deaths and disappearances?

RQ2: What types of content are online to enhance the stories? (I.e. photo gallery, videos, message boards and timelines)

RQ3: What are some of the ethical considerations in posting online content of such stories, especially because the subject matter involves children and families?

Method:

A content analysis was conducted to examine the online coverage of these three high-profile child death and disappearance cases. To select the cases, several high-profile cases currently in the news were considered and the Megan Meier suicide case and the Madeleine McCann disappearance case were selected.

In addition, the "Daily Summary" of the Journalism Center on Children and Families at the University of Maryland was used. The Journalism Center (www.journalismcenter.org) is a non-profit resource center for reporters and editors covering children and families issues. The Center provides help with sources, administers awards and organizes conferences. It also produces a daily summary of notable stories from the children and families' beat. The Ricky Holland story was selected from one such daily summary.

After the three stories were collected, each one was analyzed for its online coverage and specific aspects. Also the online content was scrutinized for its ethical implications, especially related to online message forums for readers and whether or not they were moderated. A checklist was compiled for each of the three stories.

Results and Discussion:

RQ1: Are there examples of online newspaper content being used to enhance coverage of high-profile child deaths and disappearances?

RQ1: Yes, there were at least good examples of newspaper websites using online content to enhance coverage of high profile child deaths and disappearances. Coverage of the child abuse murder of 7-year-old Ricky Holland, the suicide of 13-year-old Megan Meier and the disappearance of 3-year-old Madeleine McCann are all examples of that.

- ***Ricky Holland***

The 2005 murder of 7-year-old adopted child Ricky Holland at the hands of his parents was covered by Jack Kresnak for the Detroit Free Press in a 14-part series that ran in the print edition from Dec. 2-14, 2007.

RQ2: What types of content are online to enhance the stories? (i.e. photo gallery, videos, message boards and timelines)

URL of online content: "Could You Have Saved Ricky?" www.freep.com/ricky.

Archived articles: Yes

Photo gallery: Yes

Video: Yes. Interview with reporter Jack Kresnak

Audio: Yes. Interview with a state police sergeant assigned to the case who discovered Ricky's remains.

Timeline: Cast of characters; Key dates in the case

Scanned documents: Yes. PDF of statement read by Tim Holland at his sentencing and scanned copy of note sent by Lisa Holland to another jail inmate.

Message Board: Yes, but the comments did not transfer when freep.com switched its software in 2008.

The online content for this story was impressive. The special section the Free-Press' website was well-organized and easy to navigate. All 14 of the articles were easily accessible as were photos, cast of characters and timelines. Including such "extras" as a scanned copy of a note from Ricky's adoptive mom, Lisa, to another jail inmate made the story even more poignant. Here is part of Lisa Holland's note: "I think it's too late now but I have to tell someone. The truth needs to be told. It was an accident. I didn't mean to."[13] The note helped convict her for murder and she is serving a life sentence in prison.

Tim Holland pleaded with the judge for leniency at his sentencing hearing in 2006. He was eventually sentenced to 30 years in prison. The Free Press' special online section about Ricky Holland contains a PDF of the note Tim Holland read at his sentencing. Such documents lend weight and credibility to already solid reporting.

Here is some of what Tim Holland wrote:

> *"I failed my son, failed as a father and failed as a human being when I did not stop my wife from abusing my son which led to his death. I can not undo what has been done…I allowed the abuse to go on and did nothing to stop it, which culminated in me driving my son's body to the chosen hiding spot….I stand here today to say I'm sorry for what I did and ask that this community, my family and most of all my son find it in their hearts to forgive me one day. My actions are my cross to bear."*[14]

The main problem in analyzing coverage of the Ricky Holland case by the Free Press is that the message board comments have all been erased. Omari Gardner of the Free-Press said the links to the online comments are now gone. "We were under a different software system then. We have switched to a new system, and the comments did not migrate to the new one," said Gardner in an e-mail. Therefore, the nature and tone of the online comments can't be examined for content or ethical issues.

- **Megan Meier MySpace Suicide.**

This story made headlines around the world. Reporter Steve Pokin of the Suburban Journal in Missouri first wrote about Megan in November 2007, about a year after her suicide. The story gained national attention after being posted on the Gawker-Jezebel blog (http://jezebel.com/gossip/hell-is-other-people/if-you-can-handle-a-really-depressing-teen-suicide-story-right-now-322888.php)

At first, Pokin did not release the names of the mother or daughter involved. But bloggers quickly did and soon the name, photo, address and phone number of Lori Drew were all over the Internet.[15]

RQ2: What types of content are online to enhance the stories? (i.e. photo gallery, videos, message boards and timelines)

URL: http://suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/ (There is no dedicated section for this case online at the Suburban Journals website)

Archive of articles: Available through "Search" function on website

Photo gallery: No

Video: No

Audio: No

Timeline: No

Message Board: After each of the articles, readers could post comments.

Moderated: Yes.

The online aspect of this high-profile case is minimal. It is the flip side of the Ricky Holland coverage in that there is very little online content, but extensive message board comments from readers. Each story about Megan's suicide – and there are dozens – generated numerous online posts from readers, eliciting the desired community effect of Web 2.0. Their responses were usually quite emotional, and sometimes libelous, causing Online Editor Andrea Hurley to often use her "Delete Comment" option. All comments to the YourJournal.com website are approved before they are posted, Hurley said in an e-mail interview. Here is more of what Hurley said:

> *"Obviously because a comment is unpleasant, we can't censor it. But if it is obscene or viciously cruel, I either block them or edit them. What I sent you are comments that were not posted for various reasons. We received hundreds of comments on the Megan Meier story –many of them angry, many of them just plain ugly…It was one of those stories that brought out the best and the worst in people. I take some comfort in knowing that for every unkind comment (some of which were directed at the deceased teen), we received a dozen comments from people who were heartbroken and offered their heartfelt prayers to the Meier family."*[16]

Trebor Scholz of the University of Buffalo explored ethical standards on social networking sites (SNS), like MySpace and Facebook in a presentation called "The Ethics of Web 2.0: Good Practices on the Social Web." [17]

(http://www.slideshare.net/trebor/web-20-ethics)

He discussed how "emotions (are) created through social relations when a social object enters a corporate platform." The pros of SNS like MySpace include the pleasure of creation, sharing life experience and the ability to make new friends, he wrote. But the cons include intrusion into personal life and breach of social contract. Social networking sites create "captive audiences," meaning their friends, contacts and gizmos are only available on this one place – the website. In Megan's case, her "friend" Josh was only available on MySpace and it turns out, he wasn't even real there.

- **Madeleine McCann**

The disappearance of the adorable little blonde girl from a resort in Portugal while her physician parents ate dinner in a nearby restaurant has grabbed headlines throughout the U.K. and the world. All the daily newspapers in the U.K. have covered the case, but four have online sections dedicated to the McCann case. They included: [18]

1. The Sun (http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/maddie/)
2. Guardian (http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/madeleinemccann)
3. The Daily Telegraph (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/madeleinemccann/)
4. The Times (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/system/topicRoot/Madeleine/

For the purposes of this paper, research was focused on The Sun's coverage of the Madeline case, especially its online material. The Sun is the U. K.'s largest circulation newspaper, with a daily circulation of more than 3.13 million, according to the latest ABC figures. It has covered the Madeleine case extensively and has a wealth of supplemental material online, including a lively message board on the topic.

RQ2: What types of content are online to enhance the stories? (i.e. photo gallery, videos, message boards and timelines)

URL: http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/maddie/)

Archived articles: Yes. At least 38 articles have separate sections and links.

Photo gallery: Yes. (“Maddie Pic Special”)

Video: Only with special report, “Maddie One Year On”

Audio: Same as above

Timeline: Yes. (“Hunt for Maddie, Day by Day”)

Message Board: Yes. There is a discussion board, the second one created since her disappearance last year. “Missing Madeline, Continued Part 2” with nearly 26,000 posts and 571,258 views since it was created on Feb. 19, 2008.
http://www.thesun.co.uk/discussions/posts/list/Missing_Madeleine_~40~continued~44~_part_2~41~-56618.page

Moderated: Yes.

Online coverage of Madeleine’s disappearance was extensive and impressive in the Sun’s website. No story seemed too small for this section (“Maddie’s Sad 5th Birthday”), no topic too trivial (“Maddie Grab Flat to be Rented”). Each of the 38 sub-sections of the Madeleine McCann area of the webpage invited readers to “Add a Comment” or “Join the Discussion.” Those comments number in the thousands.

The website had so many posts in its general discussion of Maddie’s disappearance that it had to start a second thread. The posts vary in tone. Here is one from Paula999 on Feb. 19, 2008: “Sighting of Madeleine in France last Friday. Unconfirmed by french (sic) authorities as yet. Lady apparently saw her eye.” [19] (Madeline’s eyes are different colors.)

Other reader debated among themselves the veracity of Kate McCann’s story that she constantly checked on her sleeping children the night of Maddie’s disappearance. Another train of thought among readers involved the use of cadaver dogs and what exactly they could sniff out.

On June 4, 2008, The Sun reported that the McCann family planned another vacation. This brought out the snarkiness in some of the 28 comments posted by readers. “Please get a babysitter this time!!!!!!!!!!!!!” read one comment. “These people are still in the news? I don’t care if they are going on holiday,” read another. An interesting aspect of The Sun’s message board is that readers who post comments must register and create personas, complete with hometown and age, which makes it easier to track comments. This is quite different from the Suburban Journal’s message board for the Megan Meier case where reader comments could only be tracked by the Online Editor through their ISP addresses.

So after reviewing all three high-profile stories of child deaths and disappearances, the following conclusions can be made:

1. Online aspects of newspapers can and do play an important role in coverage of such stories involving children. Content such as video, audio, archived articles and photo galleries enhance and explain the complexity of these stories which too often, can be boiled down into quick headlines or synopses (i.e. “The McCanns Lives of Torment”).
2. Readers respond to these stories and will flock to online newspaper message boards. But the tone and content of these messages range from thoughtful to irate to insane.
3. Jack Kresnak’s coverage of the Ricky Holland murder in the Detroit Free-Press and Steve Pokin’s coverage of Megan Meier’s suicide were professional, thorough and compassionate to all parties involved.

4. Coverage of Madeleine McCann's disappearance in The Sun newspaper in the U.K. had elements of professionalism and thoroughness but also took on a sensationalistic tone, as befitting the style of the popular tabloid newspaper.
5. Such stories can take on a life of their own and make news far out of their geographical region, mostly thanks to the Internet.

RQ3: What are some of the ethical considerations in posting online content of such stories, especially because the subject matter involves children and families?

In all three of these stories, the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics is useful in determining and examining the ethical issues in the online content. There are four tenets to the SPJ Code of Ethics: Seek Truth and Reporter it; Minimize Harm; Act Independently and Be Accountable.

The Code of Ethics is very clear that extra care must be paid to stories involving children. This goes under the tenet of Minimize Harm, in which the code specifies: "Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects." In all three cases, the children are either dead or missing, so they can not be interviewed. But their families and siblings remain.

Other parts of the Minimize Harm tenet that apply to these cases include:

- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.

Those three directives could be applied directly to The Sun's coverage of the Madeleine McCann case. The Sun's coverage is unethical because none of those points were followed. The headlines were sensational, the McCanns every utterance and action has been called into question and the McCanns are constantly photographed.

The Detroit Free-Press was more ethical in its reporting on the arrest and murder trials of Ricky Holland's parents. Kresnak stuck to the facts and kept an objective tone when reporting on the grisly details revealed in police records and at the murder trials of Ricky's parents.

The Suburban Journal's articles about Megan Meier were ethical because reporter Steve Pokin and his editor did NOT initially name Lori Drew or her daughter. Since no charges had been filed at the writing of the first article in Nov. 2007, Drew was not named, especially out of concern for Drew's daughter who was not involved in the hoax. (The paper named the family later when details of the case were printed in public records. Lori Drew has since been indicted by federal prosecutors in Los Angeles on "cyber-bullying" charges.[20]

That decision by the newspaper caused such outrage among some readers that they quickly deduced the name of the other mother (Lori Drew) and soon posted Drew's address, phone number and e-mail online. Hurley said she deleted all those references from the website. But they popped up on blogs across the country...

In Online Journalism Review, author Robert Niles wrote about how "The Reader Has the Final Word" in regards to bloggers "outing" the Drew family's name, address and phone number. The Megan Meier story, he wrote, drive(s) home the lesson that the journalism media no longer provides the final word on the day's news, thanks to the Internet." [21] (http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/071116niles/)

Niles continued:

"The lessons for journalists? First, we can't restrict access to information anymore. The crowd will work together to find whatever we withhold.

Second, I wonder if that the decision to withhold the other mother's name didn't help enflame the audience, by frustrating it and provoking it to do the work of discovering her identity. That frustration may have helped amplify the negative feelings toward this woman, further aggravating up the virtual lynch mob.

Interestingly, no blogger or commenter I've found has said anything about the other mother's daughter, the girl the Journal was trying to protect. And I find it hard to believe that the kids in the local community didn't already know the identity of all the persons involved. By withholding the name, the Journal might have created a larger controversy from an already tragic incident."

In his blog "Rough Type," Nicholas Carr is even blunter: He says Web 2.0 and all its aspects are "amoral." Carr, an author and former executive editor of the Harvard Business Review, wonders if all the things the Internet was supposed to represent, like participation and collectivism are actually being used for evil and NOT good. Carr writes: "To see Web 2.0 as a moral force is to turn a deaf ear to such questions." (http://www.roughtype.com/archives/2005/10/the_amorality_o.php)

"Like it or not, Web 2.0, like Web 1.0, is amoral. It's a set of technologies - a machine, not a Machine - that alters the forms and economics of production and consumption. It doesn't care whether its consequences are good or bad. It doesn't care whether it brings us to a higher consciousness or a lower one. It doesn't care whether it burnishes our culture or dulls it. It doesn't care whether it leads us into a golden age or a dark one. So let's can the millenialist rhetoric and see the thing for what it is, not what we wish it would be." [22]

However, it is the ethical tenet of "Seek Truth and Report It" where the online content fails in coverage of these cases, especially in the online message boards. Here are several points under that tenet. In each case, the comments on the message boards are shown to be unethical:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.

Clearly, much of the messages posted on the discussion boards for the Megan Meier and Madeleine McCann stories are unethical. Most readers who post comments do so anonymously; they write opinions and half-truths; they assert their own values and religious beliefs onto the behavior and words of others and they usually don't admit when they are wrong.

The standard reply would seem to be that these are readers, not journalists. But their opinions are given an enormous amount of space on the websites of these newspapers and their comments are encouraged. This is a truly gray area where online content is in jeopardy ethically. Even if readers' message boards are clearly labeled and distinguished from actual "reporting," their placement and prominence on the newspaper websites suggests complicity on the part of the newspapers and therefore, the authors of the articles. And that may not be the case.

The opinions of two philosophers can be applied here. Immanuel Kant espoused the "categorical imperative" in which he said that each of us must act as if what we do will be made into universal law. For example, every child that goes missing should get as much coverage as Madeleine McCann, under Kant's belief. Kant also wrote about the "Golden Rule," which is similar to Jesus' preaching "Do unto others." To follow that thinking, each journalist involved in online coverage should ask themselves: "If my child went missing, would I want to be treated like the McCanns are treated in the press?" The answer would probably be "No."

Aristotle spoke of a "Golden Mean," in which virtue lies at the mean of two extremes. One way in which the message boards can be seen as ethical is that some are moderated. If allowing no comments from readers is on one extreme and allowing complete chaos and unfettered posting is another, an Online Editor who uses the "delete" button for the most offensive and obscene posts is the mean of those two extremes.

Coverage of a Similar Case:

Eerily, a similar child abuse death is in the headlines right now (June 2008) in Raleigh, N.C. Lynn Paddock is on trial for the murder of her adopted son, Sean. She is charged with suffocating him with blankets to keep him from roaming around the house at night. The case gained even more prominence when investigators learned that Lynn Paddock was following the teachings of Michael Pearl, an evangelical minister who espouses tough-love in teaching parents to raise "docile, God-fearing children."[23]

The Sean Paddock case is receiving prominent coverage in the Raleigh News & Observer (www.newsobserver.com). The online content includes aspects similar to the other mentioned cases (archived stories, audio, photo gallery, timeline) but also live, streaming video from the courtroom.

The N&O website also has a readers' forum about the case. Just as with the other cases previously mentioned, child deaths and disappearances bring out violent reactions in readers. The comments got so vicious on the message boards, that the N&O's Public

Editor, Ted Vaden, felt compelled to write a column about the ethics of allowing the comments. (http://www.newsobserver.com/opinion/vaden/story/1092044.html)

These were a sampling of some of the more vicious comments:

- *"Fry the crazy bitch"*
- *"Paddock is a child murderer. Execute her and do so swiftly."*
- *"She sould be skinned alive, Put her in a coffin full of rats and buried with an air line so that she stays alive until the rats have had enough time to eat her."*[24] (http://share.triangle.com/node/15847)

Vaden wrote that the forums do allow the public to "participate directly in the story." But at what cost? The comments would never be allowed in the print version of the N&O in the Letters to the Editor, Vaden noted. So why the different standard for online content? [25]

He points out that, despite the brutality of the crime, Lynn Paddock is innocent till proven guilty. The online editor does moderate the comments and tries to remove the racist, sexist or extremely offensive ones, according to Vaden. That appears to be taking the SPJ Code of Ethics of Minimize Harm into account.

On the other hand, the story attracts comments and comments attract readers. In fact, the Lynn Paddock story "produced one of the highest online responses of any forum this year …2,250 hits from May 15 through May 30." [26]

Still, caution should be taken, Vaden advises. The extreme viciousness of the comments "detracts from, rather than contributes to, productive community dialogue about the case."[27] Those are words all online editors should heed.

Online newspaper coverage of child deaths and disappearances is an area that has not been greatly explored. Further research into this topic is warranted and encouraged.

Special thanks go to freelance journalist Maureen Stapleton, an expatriate living in London, who provided me with valuable research assistance in assessing online newspaper coverage of the Madeleine McCann case.

---

[1] Wikipedia definition. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0
[2] Pokin, Steve (Nov. 13, 2007) 'MySpace' hoax ends with suicide of Dardenne Prairie teen. *Suburban Journals*
[3] Pokin, Steve (Jan. 11, 2008) Grand Jury issues subpoenas in Megan Meier case. *Suburban Journals.*
[4] Pokin, Steve (Nov. 13, 2007) 'MySpace' hoax ends with suicide of Dardenne Prairie teen. *Suburban Journals*
[5] Pokin, Steve (Nov. 13, 2007) 'MySpace' hoax ends with suicide of Dardenne Prairie teen. *Suburban Journals*
[6] http://suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/articles/2007/11/13/news/sj2tn20071110-1111stc_pokin_1.ii1.txt
[7] http://suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/articles/2007/11/13/news/sj2tn20071110-1111stc_pokin_1.ii1.txt
[8] http://suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/articles/2007/11/13/news/sj2tn20071110-1111stc_pokin_1.ii1.txt
[9] E-mail interview with Andrea Hurley (AHurley@yourjournal.com), online editor of YourJournal.com. Interview conducted May 20-23, 2008 by Kathryn Quigley.
[10] Detroit Free Press website. www.freep.com/ricky

[11] Smit, Martina (March 3, 2008) Madeleine McCann parents win apology from Express papers. *Telegraph*
[12] http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp
[13] http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071215/NEWS06/712150358
[14] http://www.lansingstatejournal.com/assets/pdf/A3496651115.PDF
[15] Niles, Robert. (Nov. 16, 2008) The Readers Will Have the Final Word. *Online Journalism Review.*
[16] E-mail interview with Andrea Hurley (AHurley@YourJournal.com) from May 20-23, 2008.
[17] Scholz, Trebor. "The Ethics of Web 2.0: Good Practices on the Social Web" http://www.slideshare.net/trebor/web-20-ethics

[18] Research conducted by freelance journalist Maureen Stapleton, an American expatriate in London, April – May, 2008
[19] http://www.thesun.co.uk/discussions/posts/list/16/Missing_Madeleine_~40~continued~44~_part_2~41~-56618.page
[20] Glover, Scott and Huffstutter, P.J. (May 16, 2008) L.A. files 'cyber bully' charges against Missouri mother in connection with girl's suicide. *Los Angeles Times*
[21] Niles, Robert. (Nov. 16, 2008) The Readers Will Have the Final Word. *Online Journalism Review.*
[22] Carr, Nicholas. (Oct. 3, 2005) The Amorality of Web 2.0 http://www.roughtype.com/archives/2005/10/the_amorality_o.php
[23] Locke, Mandy. (May 19, 2008) Trial in Child's Death to begin. *The News & Observer*
[24] Vaden, Ted. (June 1, 2008). Child abuse trial brings out worst online. *The News & Observer*
[25] Vaden, Ted. (June 1, 2008). Child abuse trial brings out worst online. *The News & Observer*
[26] Vaden, Ted. (June 1, 2008). Child abuse trial brings out worst online. *The News & Observer*
[27] Vaden, Ted. (June 1, 2008). Child abuse trial brings out worst online. *The News & Observer*

Student-Produced News Media, How Complex Have Their Online Efforts Become?

Rick Sykes
Professor
Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, MI 48859 USA;
sykes1wr@cmich.edu

Student-Produced News Media, How Complex Have Their Online Efforts Become?

As aspiring journalists move through their academic training at scores of colleges and universities across the country, working for a student newspaper or a student-produced radio or television news program is one of the supporting activities that students use to expand their knowledge about the business. The experience gained from these student-run operations is often seen as a positive addition to the overall academic preparation for the field of print or broadcast journalism. However, as the online world becomes an increasing part of efforts by both print and broadcast journalists to engage readers and viewers, the question becomes how well are student-run operations incorporating online elements in their journalistic efforts?

It is an important question because the online news world requires a combination of skills traditionally found separately in print and broadcast journalism. So students who are only involved in student-run traditional print or broadcast operations may find themselves at a disadvantage when competing for positions in the world of new media. According to Jack Telfer, Editor at the Midland Daily News in Midland, Michigan the online employee must be multi-talented. Telfer says, “They must be able to shoot video, record an interview to create a podcast and also write a story for the newspaper” (J. Telfer, personal communication, May 22, 2008). This study analyzes student-media websites to determine how well the student-produced sites are reflecting the increasing complexity being displayed on the websites of professional news organizations.

Background

According to study released by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “A decade ago, just one-in-fifty Americans got the news with some regularity from what was then a brand new source the internet. Today, nearly one-in-three regularly get news online” (Pew Research Center, 2006, Overview, para. 1). The study goes on to say that the growth of the online news audience has slowed considerably since 2000 particularly among the very young. The study suggests for the most part that online news has evolved as a supplemental source that is used along with traditional news media outlets (Pew Research Center, 2006, Overview, para. 2).

The fact that traditional news media have seen declines in audience numbers has made the potential to engage new viewers through the use of the Internet very attractive. The latest Pew news consumption survey finds that newspapers, “…are now stemming further losses with the help of their online editions” (Pew Research Center, 2006, Overview, para. 4). On the broadcast side, a 2007 RTNDA/Ball State University survey revealed that nearly every TV station, regardless of market, had a website and local news was an integral part of the content on each of those sites (Papper, 2007, p. 13). The survey also revealed that there was a huge jump in the complexity of the TV websites with many using live cameras, still pictures, audio and news video on their sites (p. 13).

The evolving complexity of news websites has been the subject of two extensive research projects by The Bivings Group, a Washington, DC-based Internet Communications firm. The first project examined the news websites of the country’s top 100 newspapers by circulation. The sites were evaluated based on their use of 14 different Web 2.0 features.

The study included the use of reporter blogs, video, podcasts, message broads and RSS feeds. It found that 80 of the nation's top 100 newspapers offered reporter blogs with 67 of those newspapers allowing readers to post comments on the various blogs. Seventy-six of the top newspapers offered RSS feeds on their websites. Video was the most common form of multimedia found on the websites and was offered by 61 of the newspapers. Only 31 of the papers offered podcasts on their sites. (theBivingsreport, 2006, para. 1).

The study's authors felt the reporter blogs were popular because blogs were an easy way for newspapers to expand their opinion sections. It also removed the formality of editorials and other articles that commonly appeared in the papers. The authors also suggested that blogs increased the interactivity and stickiness of newspaper websites and encouraged readers to visit them on a consistent and regular basis (theBivingsreport, 2006, II.Blogs, para. 2). Kirkland Crawford, an Internet Sports Producer for the Detroit Free Press, says blogs by sports columnists are very big draws in the sports sections of the online edition. He argues that sports website viewers want to see the opinions of others when they visit the site (K. Crawford, personal communication, May 23, 2008).

In 2007 the Biving Group published a follow up study with the top 100 newspapers exploring what changes, if any, had taken place in terms of the web 2.0 features employed by the websites. The study found that overall, "the use of interactive features by newspapers websites increased across every category from 2006 to 2007 with the exception of blogrolls (list of external links)" (theBivingsreport, 2007, Executive Summary, p. 2).

One of the key differences uncovered in the 2007 survey was that newspapers were evolving away from the "online repository" format, where newspapers websites provided regurgitated story content from print editions, to a more full-featured model of news (p. 2).

The decision to change to a different model of presenting content on the web has not been limited to the top 100 newspapers; in March of 2008 the Midland Daily News announced that the newspaper was changing its approach to its online coverage. The readers were told, "In the past, we have basically republished the daily newspaper online shortly after the print product went to press. That still will be done, but the number of stories will be scaled back while the number of unique content features will continue to increase" (Telfer, 2008). Midland Daily News editor Jack Telfer says that once the online viewers got use to the changes on the site the response was very good (J.Telfer, personal communication, May 22, 2008). The Biving Group 2007 study found that 95 percent of the newspapers offered at least one reporter blog compared to 80 percent in 2006. Ninety-two percent of the top 100 newspapers offered video on their websites compared to just 61 percent a year earlier. Almost half of the newspapers in 2007 included podcasts online; in 2006 it was 31 papers (theBivingsreport, 2007, para. 1).

While the Midland Daily News website included many of the features mentioned in the Biving Group study, Telfer says photos and photo galleries have been one of their most successful features. They also encourage viewers to send in user-generated video in addition to the video that the newspaper posted on the site. The newspaper staff tries to look for content that drives viewer interest. It might be a photo gallery, an interesting angle to a story featured in the print edition or breaking news (J. Telfer, personal communication, May 22, 2008).

Sam Licavoli, Manager of Interactive Media for the Meredith Broadcasting Group says local content and timely updates are a must for attracting viewers to his stations' websites. He says he has noticed that even when he has done a live webcast of an event, the web traffic is often higher when viewers watch the material on their own timetable. He asserted that web features like video, slideshows, podcasts, blogs and more updates at different times can be keys to successful websites (S. Licavoli, personal communication, May 21, 2008).

Methodology

Two online directories for college and university newspapers were analyzed in addition to a sampling of institutions from the 2007 Broadcast Education Association membership roster. The listings covered colleges and universities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The analysis was conducted between January-April 2008. The web features displayed on the student media sites were grouped into categories consistent with those discussed in the literature and with interviews with industry professionals.

For the purposes of this study, site complexity was determined by the number of features displayed on the website. The more features displayed on the site, the higher the likelihood the site would be considered to be complex. Spreadsheet software was used to record the features observed on the sites. In the cases where multi-media links were present the researcher explored the links to determine what was included under the term multi-media. In some situations the links included video and in others it referred to photo slideshows with or without audio. Only those sites that were clearly supported by student activity were documented, whether part of a course assignment or a stand-alone student media operation. Sites that were institutionally supported and only discussed student media activities were not included in the analysis. Sites that were identified as student-supported but for some reason were not operational were also counted in the total number reviewed.

Results

A total of 287 websites were reviewed. Of those 287 sites**,** 59 sites were not operational for various reasons. Some of them were under construction while others appeared to have incorrect or inoperative addresses, leaving a total of 228 active sites. Twenty five sites were purely text-based with no other web features. Some of the text-based sites appeared to be copies of the print version of the institution's student newspaper. Two hundred sites included photos as an available feature. Many of these sites had other web features in addition to the photos. The photo-based sites ranged from one or two photos for specific stories to photo slideshows with audio.

Forty-six sites included podcasts as an option for viewers and another 63 sites offered blogs. Some blogs were editorial in nature, while others were primarily sports related. In all cases, the sites with podcasts and blogs also included other elements, most often photos to engage the viewers. Sites that displayed at least three or more features also were more likely to display some form of video. Seventeen sites offered video via an Associated Press link. This option is available for a fee to student-media that have a relationship with the Associated Press. The most widely used video feature for student newspaper websites was Top Video**.** Ninety-two sites allowed viewers to access video through Top Video, a service offered to student newspapers supported by Collegepublisher Network.

Twenty-one sites included links to other student media operations on campus, while only three sites used YouTube as their video feature. Twenty sites featured video podcasts on different issues. On some sites the student-driven videos appeared to be course assignments while on other sites the videos consisted of long interviews. A small number of student newspaper sites, seven to be exact, had student reporters filing stories specifically for the site. There were a total of five sites that included other web features like webcams and message boards.

Discussion

When the raw numbers were analyzed some interesting trends surfaced. Nearly 90 percent (87.7 %) of the active websites offered photos in one form or another. The literature and industry professionals have consistently cited the use of photos as a successful strategy for engaging viewers. Additionally, nearly 28 percent (27.6 %) of the active websites offered blogs in some form. Industry professionals and the literature have highlighted blogs as another useful feature for the web audience. About 16 percent (15.7%) of the active websites included four or more web features, a good indication of very complex sites.

Neil Hopp, Director of Student Media at Central Michigan Life, a student newspaper at Central Michigan University argues that anyone who is not being very aggressive in putting together a complex interactive site to engage the online viewer is behind the curve.

Hopp asserts the move to become much more interactive really began to accelerate about two years ago. He is currently changing the mindset of his student reporters from a three times a week print publishing mode to a 24/7 online filing framework (N. Hopp, personal communication, May 28, 2008). While nearly 16 percent of the websites analyzed had four or more web features, less than one percent (.03%) of the websites featured staff-reporters doing online specific reports.

Conclusion

As news professionals' understanding of how to engage the online viewer grows so does their desire to maximize those opportunities. While many news organizations still publish what's often known as "shovelware" on their websites which according to the authors of Advancing the Story, Broadcast Journalism in a Multimedia World, essentially means taking what has been published in the daily paper or aired on the evening's newscast and posting it online, other news outlets are learning that you have to do more. Sam Licavoli from the Meredith Broadcasting Group predicts that in the next five to 10 years online viewers will be able to see video on websites as clear as traditional broadcast. He argues that the journalists of the future must have strong writing skills, good technical skills, an understanding of video formats, video editing and good news judgment. What he would like to see more of at the college and university level are student-run news operations where those skills can be developed in an online environment (S. Licavoli, personal communication, May 21, 2008).

While it is encouraging to see that almost 90 percent of the student media websites analyzed were using photos in their online presentations, less than a quarter of the sites were offering their online viewers at least four web features which is rapidly becoming the standard level of complexity for professional websites.

References

College and University Newspapers>U.S. States. Retrieved June 3, 2008, from http://dir.yahoo.com/News_and_Media/College_and_University/Newspapers/By_Region/U_S__States

College Newspapers Online. Retrieved June 3, 2008, from http://studyworld.com/college_newspapers_online.htm

Online Papers Modestly Boost Newspaper Readership, Maturing Internet News Audience Broader Than Deep. Retrieved May 20, 2008 from The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press Web site: http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportlD=282

Teeling, E, (2006, August 1). The Use of the Internet by America's Newspapers. Retrieved May 22, 2008, from http://www.bivingsreport.com/2006/the-use-of-the-internet-by-america%e2%80%99e-new

Teeling, E, (2007, July 19) . American Newspapers and the Internet: Threat or Opportunity? Retrieved April 10, 2008 from http://www.bivingsreport.com/2007/american-newspapers-and-the-internet-threat-or-opportunity

Telfer, J. (2008, March 24). Big changes coming to ourMidland.com. *Midland Daily News*. Retrieved May 21, 2008, from http://www.ourmidland.com/articles/2008/03/24/opinion/1019931.txt

Wenger, D.H.,Potter, D. (2008). Advancing The Story Broadcast Journalism in a Multimedia World. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Using Google Applications for Online Teaching:
Competition for Proprietary Educational Software in an Age of Fiscal Constraint

IAOC 2008 International Conference

Dr. Kevin C. Lee, Western Carolina University, NC USA 28716; drkclee@gmail.com

Computer applications available free from Google are being used by university educators in lieu of subscription enterprise educational software (Welcome 2008). Drawing on literature regarding web-based learning (Atjonen 2005) and the author's anecdotal evidence from multiple courses, this paper will discuss the benefits and challenges of using Google Groups and affiliated software applications as a replacement for proprietary online software purchased and supported by university IT departments.

An Age of Fiscal Restraint

Less than a week ago, *The Wall Street Journal* front page trumpeted that crude oil experienced its largest price jump *ever* as the dollar fell and U.S. stocks dropped more than 3 percent, reigniting fears of inflation and recession (King 2008). The *Economist* devoted a recent cover story to "The End of Cheap Food" as riots erupt in developing nations and First World families turn away from restaurant meals to bulk food retailers. "The Economist's food-price index is higher today than at any time since it was created in 1845. Even in real terms, prices have jumped by 75% since 2005" (The End of Cheap Food, 2007).

Declining home values in the U.S. and the U.K. combined with skyrocketing energy prices and tightening credit markets globally have curbed spending in every sector. The continuing financial crisis is strengthening trends toward fiscal restraint in the budgets of individuals, businesses, governments and educational institutions.

Esther Dyson's Prophetic Vision

"Intellectual Property on the Net" is an extraordinarily prescient article in the December 28, 1994, issue of *Release 1.0*. The author is Zurich-born Esther Dyson, daughter of physicist Freeman Dyson and mathematician Verena Huber. Esther Dyson was founding chairman of ICANN (1998-2000), a founding member of the *digerati*, chairman of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and founder of emerging technology firm EDventure Holdings. She writes a bimonthly *New York Times* column and has a blog on Flickr.

The intrinsic value of content in the aggregate will remain high, but most individual items will have a short commercial half-life on the net. The problem for providers of intellectual property is that although under the law they can control the pricing of their own products, they will operate in an increasingly competitive marketplace where much intellectual property is distributed free and the number *of suppliers is exploding…Content (including software) will serve as advertising for services such as support, aggregation, filtering, assembly and* ***integration of content modules, or training****…The likely* ***best defense for content providers*** *is to exploit that situation – to* ***distribute intellectual property free*** *in order to sell services and relationships. The provider's task is to figure out what to charge for and what to give away for free – all in the context of what other providers are doing and what customers expect.* (Dyson 1994, pp. 1, 2; parentheses in original, bold added).

Since Dyson's article, sales of music CDs have plummeted as Limewire downloads proliferate. Musical artists today earn money selling concert tickets and t-shirts. Last week's favorite TV show now is available for no charge 24/7/365 on the Internet, along with university courses from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, thousands of copyright-free books and the transcript of Senator Obama's latest speech. Citizens in the global village can make phone calls via Yahoo and engage in video chat over Skype, free. It is the operating models of Google and Open Source and Wikipedia that are prevailing. Financial constraints will accelerate these trends.

Google Applications

Free Google applications are myriad, and include a cadre of programs that mirror many of the subscription educational software functions found in course management software (CMS – it overlaps with a software category known as LMS, learning management system). Google Apps and related software include: email that is nearly spam-free, word processing, presentations, spreadsheets, synchronous chat, voice chat (VoIP), blog creation and hosting, photo/image management and web hosting, video archive, academic internet search, RSS reader, web site creation and hosting, and private online groups (featuring asynchronous discussion threads, document sharing, email message subscriptions, and web tools).

Bundled as Google Apps Education Edition, a core of free online software was adopted January 2007 campus-wide by the 65,000-student Arizona State University (Arizona 2006). Online higher education giant University of Phoenix, with 200,000 students globally, is moving early 2008 to Google email (University 2008). Google's Education Edition software suite includes a calendar and start page specific to the institution, a student opt-out for text-based ads in the email, mobile access, and IT support via the Internet and telephone (Welcome 2008). Google offers a similar package of applications to corporations and small businesses. Google's educational foray complements the trend of free non-credit online courses from MIT and others.

Free versus Proprietary Educational Software

In the realm of proprietary educational software Blackboard, recently merged with WebCT, is "the most widely adopted course management system among U.S. postsecondary institutions" and sells language versions in Chinese (simplified), English, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish" (Elevating Education 2008). Blackboard's suite includes course groups and websites, word processing, email, synchronous chat and, for instructors, syllabi templates, test/survey software and grading tools.

Financial benefits of online course instruction abound both for universities and individuals, including savings of time and energy to facilitate student/faculty commutes to a building and savings of energy to heat/cool and light classroom spaces. Additionally, an early hypothesized gap between quality of instruction live versus online has closed in the research literature. Antjonen (2005) discovered that students in two sections of a course with the same instructor – one with WebCT and one without – rated the content and mode of the course the same. Also, no significant differences in learning outcomes between the two cohorts was found.

The IT director at our university would not divulge the cost per student for WebCT. In an online forum I found figures ranging from $2 to $15 per student. Many factors influence the cost, including total number of students, number of courses that use WebCT, and software add-ons selected. Also, universities negotiate deals with Blackboard/WebCT.

To a certain degree, comparing Google Apps – even the Education Edition – with Blackboard/WebCT is an apples to oranges exercise. I have culled together Google software to parallel the features of a CMS for course use. However, free Open Source CMS programs are available that more closely compete head-to-head with Blackboard/WebCT. Moodle, for instance, has doubled its market share in the last year among community colleges surveyed by American Association of Community College's Instructional Technology Council (Feldstein 2008). Moodle now is second in that market, ahead of fee-based AngelLearning and Desire2Learn (D2L). Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment is the term to which the Moodle acronym originally referred. A software for producing internet-based courses and web sites, Moodle now boasts nearly half a million users in 193 nations speaking 75 languages (Moodle Community, 2008). Angel offers K-12 and Corporate LMS in addition to CMS for higher education. Angel was launched in 2000, based on research and online pedagogical experience at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (Angel Learning 2008). Launched in 1999, Ontario, Canada-based D2L counts Marquette, the Georgia Department of Education and the Minnesota university systems among its users. D2L also markets to K-12 and corporate clients.

Benefits and Challenges

The primary benefit for using Google Apps is financial. As educational institutions roar into a fiscal environment with escalating operating costs led by energy and healthcare budget lines, the appeal of educational software for free, versus software for a fee, clearly is increasing. Oracle product manager for Academic Enterprise Solutions, Michael Feldstein, notes matter-of-factly in his blog “Blackboard is losing market share rapidly” (2008). Metaphorically, paying for the purchase and upkeep of even a Volkswagen software well may seem like a luxury when free bus service is available.

Interestingly, Blackboard/WebCT is constructed with educational constraints based on geographical and cultural biases. Michael Feldstein quotes an educator from Dublin City University, touting the benefits of free open source models: “Like many commercial products, WebCT is driven by an American/Canadian pedagogical paradigm; there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this model, but it is not entirely compatible with UK and Irish teaching and learning methodologies” (Feldstein 2004).

Although the free online software bundled as Google Apps Education Edition is free, many of the challenges are similar to those experienced by university users of proprietary software. One challenge is the remarkably fluid and unstable nature of the software itself. Perpetual upgrades, tweaks and fixes for software are driven in part by a desire to “stay current” in an extraordinarily competitive marketplace. Also, changes in operating systems – Microsoft and Apple – mandate revisions and adaptations.

Google introduced a live chat addendum to its Gmail service two semesters ago. I tested it with students in two courses. The software apparently was released before it was fully operational. Our students experiences regular problems with it. In this arena, Google actually was competing not only with proprietary chat functions, but also with veteran online applications such as AIM and AOL Instant Messenger. Veteran student IM users noted that it compared poorly with those other applications. Additionally, Google would spontaneously announce that it was adding functions to chat after it launched. Users were not told these features were in the pipeline. One day users logged on to find new emoticon buttons added to the interface. Another day users logged on to an announcement that multiple persons could chat simultaneously. The latter feature was one for which students and faculty openly in class had expressed a desire. Then, there it was! However, in our live class tests, it did not function well. Not long afterward, compatibility between Gmail Chat and AIM was announced.

Even though fee-based CMS companies may trumpet forthcoming features, paying for CMS does not guarantee prompt, effective customer service. Our university’s WebCT is regularly taken offline for repairs, often with little or no forewarning, for unpredictable periods of time. Faculty at our institution who have leaned heavily on WebCT, using it to administer tests online for example, have reported losing completely the answers of numerous students after a crash. One said he would no longer use the service.

Ironically, free commercial-based applications from Google -- as well as AOL, Yahoo and others – could not afford to be offline for such long periods so regularly. If their frequency and duration of repairs mirrored Blackboard/WebCT, the costs to advertising revenue, and the loss of reputation, and the loss of customers would be devastating. When AOL's email crashed for a day some years ago, it was global front-page news. Many corporations had been relying on AOL for their email services. Observers might argue that this mistake caused AOL irreversible damage. This is hardly the case with the comparatively miniscule Blackboard/WebCT, a service that suffers from interruptions on campuses a half dozen or more times per semester, sometimes for several days. The sheer magnitude of the difference in scale between the free software of the online giants and Blackboard/WebCT points to a remarkable vulnerability of the latter.

Google exists to make a profit from advertising revenue. Student, faculty and staff users of Google Apps are subjected routinely to advertising. Therefore the software is not truly free – the university essentially is selling Google's advertisers access to the mass of eyeballs and earlobes of its learners, educators and administrators. However, as universities sell naming rights to their athletic stadiums and business buildings, one professor joked recently that he would be glad to sell ad space on the dress shirts he wears to class. Today's university is not an advertising-free zone. This does not negate the ethical quandaries, though, associated with mixing learning and commerce. When Channel One appeared in United States schools some years ago, similarly, there was plenty of controversy. Should students, who represent a key demographic for corporations, be captured and delivered to advertisers for certain periods of time during the educational day?

Conclusion

The repercussions for higher education of the economic decline and the move to free Internet content is not unlike an earthquake in magnitude. Old structures are crumbling and new structures are bubbling up from subterranean sources.

Shortly before the China earthquake, by happenstance I checked out from the library a detailing of the massive 1906 California quake by an Oxford-trained geologist titled *A Crack in the Edge of the World*. It has only been in recent decades that geologists have used plate tectonics to draw the connection between the San Andreas Fault and the gargantuan North American Plate…which continues all the way to building in which we meet today!

The New Geology began 6,000 miles from the western American coastland and San Francisco in the middle of 40,000 square miles of fire and snow and black, black North Atlantic rock known as Iceland…It is known, and has been known since the late 1960s, that Iceland sits astride – indeed is created by – a ridge where material from the mantle wells up and spills out between two plates that are moving apart from each other, under the influence of the almighty convection currents that drive the earth's outer engine. It is in Iceland that one can see…the thick lava, the raw material of the inner planet…continues to well up to such a degree that earthquakes, among a whole host of other phenomena, are triggered. …[Iceland] is a crucial first part of a jigsaw puzzle, important to visit, essential to understand (Winchester 2005, p. 64).

The trend towards no-fee educational software is being driven by institutions like the online giant University of Phoenix as it moves to the free Gmail service for its 400,000-student enterprise, and by bricks-and-mortar Arizona State University as it forges ahead with free Google Apps Education Edition on its 65,000-student campus. In any context, quality content and applications offered free have a great appeal for organizations wrestling with limited fiscal resources. Whether driven by advertising or supported by open source network volunteers, Esther Dyson's vision is rapidly being embraced in the realm of higher education.

References

Angel Learning (2008). About us. *AngelLearning*. Accessed 06.06.08 from http://www.angellearning.com /media/about_us/default.html

Arizona State University success story. (2006 Oct. 10). *Google Apps for Education*. Accessed 02.01.08 from http://www.google.com/a/edu.

Atjonen, P. (2005 Nov.). Effective studies of pedagogical ethics with computers. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 49(5): 523-542.

Dyson, E. (1994, Dec.) Intellectual property on the net. *Release 1.0: Esther Dyson's Monthly Report*.

Elevating education (2008). *Blackboard*. Accessed 02.01.08 from http://www.blackboard.com/company. Melrose, S. (2006 Sep.). Facilitating help-seeking through student interactions in a WebCT online graduate study program. *Nursing & Health Sciences* 8(3): 175-178.

Feldstein, M. (2008). Bad news for Blackboard, good news for Moodle. *E-Literate*. Accessed 06.06.08 from http://mfeldstein.com/bad-news-for-blackboard-good-news-for-moodle/

Feldstein, M. (2004). Course management systems and pedagogical models. *E-Literate*. Accessed 06.06.08 from http://mfeldstein.com/course_management_systems_and_pedagogical_models/.

King, N. (2008, 7-8 June). Markets slammed by oil, dollar. *The Wall Street Journal*, A1.

Moodle Community (2008). *Moodle*. Accessed 06.06.08 from http://moodle.org/

The End of Cheap Food (2007, 6 Dec.). *The Economist*, cover story. Accessed 06.07.08 from http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10252015

University of Phoenix partners with Google. (2008 Jan. 17). *University Of Phoenix*. internal email.

Welcome to Google Apps (2008). *Google*. Accessed 02.01.08 from http://www.google.com/a/help/intl/en/ admins/edu_benefits.html.

Winchester, S. (2005). *A crack in the edge of the world*. N.Y.: Harper Collins.

Issues of Organizational Commitment in the Era of the Virtual Office

Diane Holtzman, Business Studies Instructor, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and Public Relations/Advertising Instructor, Rowan University; Evonne Kruger, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Business, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Asi-Nia Schoenstein, Public Relations/Advertising Instructor, Rowan University

Abstract: Organizations are finding that both Gen X and the Millennial workers, who are technologically savvy, are not predisposed to establish strong organizational loyalty and commitment. This is being exacerbated by hybrid structural forms where younger employees' demands for flex time and working from satellite locations place them at greater physical distances from their organizations. It is assumed that technology alone can not engender organizational commitment. A certain degree of in-person interaction is required to build organizational commitment. The combination of personal attributes of Gen Xers and Millennials and evolving organizational structures intensifies the need for organizations to address organizational commitment. This paper presents a model, adapted from Dessler, of elements critical to the development of organizational commitment that employers need to consider if they wish to strengthen the organizational commitment of these generations.

Profiles of Generation X and Millennials in the workplace are increasingly appearing in the literature (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, Holtzman, *et al*, 2005, Bell and Narz, 2007, Patota, Schwartz, and Schwartz, 2007). Although there is difference of opinion as to the dates for both Generation X and the Millennials, this article uses the following dates for all four generations currently in the workplace: Generation X was born between 1965 and 1980; Millnnials are born after 1980; Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964; and the Great Generation (or Swing Generation or Veterans) were born between 1922 and 1945 (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke, Raines, & Pilipezak, 2000).

Each generation has been shaped by shared events and circumstances (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Research has revealed that Generation X distrusts hierarchy, prefers more informal arrangements, and tends to judge on merit rather than on status. They are computer savvy, having grown up with computers. Since many are children of divorce, they are protective of their families and adamant about balancing their work and personal lives. Most important, Xers are “far less loyal to their companies” than Boomers (Conger, 1998). Howe & Strauss (2007) report that Xers prefer free agency over corporate loyalty. While they did not appear originally to be motivated by the need for either affiliation or identification, as they age, the workplace may be emerging as the context for the social development they need. Their loyalties may not be to the abstract organizations for which they work, but to their teams, projects, and coworkers. (Nyhof, 2000). Their independence make Xers are the greatest entrepreneurial generation in U.S. history. They show less ideological passion and are extremely pragmatic; they will be known as a generation characterized by alienation and disaffection (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

The Millennials are even less organizationally loyal than Gen X (Underwood, 2007). They are optimistic, individualistic, and technologically ultra-savvy, multitask experts who celebrate diversity (Thielfoldt & Scheef, 2004) and are innate planners (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Children of Boomers, the Millennials, are eager to learn, have tremendous spirit, a good sense of team-work, and demand that their employers be both ethical and eco-friendly. They are particularly comfortable with Boomers, as their Boomer parents have given them great attention and confidence (Tilin 2008). However, because they know they will probably live to be over 100 and have possible 80 year employment histories, they are in no hurry to become serious about their careers, a phenomena being termed “extended adolescence”, “Odyssey” and “emerging adulthood” (Underwood, 2007). Observers have found that Millennials are moving toward large institutions and government agencies, “seeking teamwork, protection against risk, and social work-life balance” (Howe & Strauss, 2007). They are projected to develop community norms based on rules and standards that demand personal responsibility (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

Boomers acknowledge that Xers and Millennials work well on teams; they know how to communicate and divide tasks. They also love recognition for their contributions. But Boomers are very troubled by Xers' and Millennials' weak identification with their organizations and lackluster organizational loyalty, that is, their inability to demonstrate strong organizational commitment. Millennials in particular tend to leave as soon as they identify new employers who can add more to their resumes (Underwood, 2007). Generation X, according to Nyhof (2000), “think security comes from transferability of skills rather than corporate loyalty.” Ragins’ (quoted by Berfield, 2007) assessment of the Millennials is not much different; “Gen Y’s psychological contract is with the relationships embedded within the organization, not the organization itself.” Both Xers and Millennials are much more independent, believing in self-development and marketable skills. At issue is whether or not they can develop loyalty to organizations that support their development, or just view them as stepping stones to their next jobs. Given the high cost of employee turnover, this is a critical question.

Since members of Generation X and the Millennial cohorts tend to be independent and technologically driven, the physical office frequently becomes the virtual office, whether de facto or de jure. Unless Gen Xers and Millennials are actually meeting with their work groups, Xers and Millennials prefer to sit in their cubicles and do their work, effectively and efficiently utilizing cutting edge technology. One of the greatest complaints that the authors hear from Boomers is that the Xers and Millennials across or down the hall, would rather send emails to them than get up and approach them in person. In response to these trends, office space is being rethought. With totally portable technology, designers are arranging worksites to promote informal interaction. Collaborative, multitasking workspace is paramount is a world of teamwork. Numerous private offices are becoming dinosaurs (Massey, 2007). The office of the future may not even have assigned workspace, as employees carry their laptops and other electronic devices from one collaborative work site to another. Whereas Boomers worked independently an estimated 80 percent of the time, Millennials are working independently only 20 percent. Approximately 70 percent of today's office is committed to personal space and 30 percent to collaborative space; with the Millennials' team skills this ratio is expected to reverse (Suttell, 2006).

The proliferation of the virtual workplace does not support commitment, either. When organizations determine that functions can be geographically and temporally separated, opportunities for flex time and virtual offices are created. Although there are reasons why organizations do not want to become virtual, such as the lack of opportunities for in-person professional collaboration and creative stimulation, constraints of workflow interdependence in real time, and need for in-person feedback, globalization and generational demands are strong driving forces. Structure, however, is not either-or. A newer hybrid structure is fast emerging composed of a physical office hub with a series of virtual nodes, frequently composed of younger workers with flex schedules working in distant locations (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Communications hardware and software also impact organizational identification by stretching managers' effective spans of control and reducing the number of organizational levels. Outsourcing, which is projected to continue, has further served to keep organizational size in check along with opportunities for lateral moves within organizations. The result has been the flattening of the organizational pyramid, and concomitant shrinking of advancement opportunities for (Cetron and Davies, 2008, 47).

Communications technology makes possible both the hybrid structures that attract and meet the personal needs of Gen Xers and Millennials, as well as the resulting shift in organizational structure and loss of advancement opportunities. Add the dynamic of these two generations that are fiercely independent and a “perfect storm” is created with unknown impact on organizational commitment.

Traditional Advice on Organizational Commitment

The classic definition of organizational commitment is provided by Buchanan (1974). Organizational commitment is composed of three components: a) identification with the organization through the adoption of the organization’s goals and values; b) psychological immersion into the activities of one’s job in relation to the organization’s goals and values; and c) loyalty to the organization. (Buchanan 1974). Dessler (1999) elaborates upon the theoretical work of Buchanan and recommends a number of organizational programs and policies aimed at increasing organizational commitment. We have adapted Dessler's recommendations for strategies specifically intended to increase the organizational commitment of Xers and Millennials. It should be noted that two major unarticulated assumptions appear to underlie the organizational commitment literature. First, it is assumed that a certain degree of in-person interaction is required to build organizational commitment, although it has not been fully explored to date. Second, the benefits of organizational commitment have not be challenged: a) reduction in costs associated with higher turnover (hiring, orientation, training, etc.); b) decrease in the risk of behaviors at odds with the organization's core values (i.e., unethical actions resulting in fines, loss of market share and even organizational destruction); and c) increased efficiency and effectiveness. The following model, based upon Dessler's work, is discussed in terms of its applicability to Xers and Millennials.

- **Values-driven mission and ideology**
  Hire based upon compatibility with the mission and ideology (Dessler, 1999)

The first element of organizational commitment is identification with the values of the organization. Values-driven missions and ideologies will be easier to communicate to Millennials than Xers. Millennials have been involved with voluntary and mandatory community service since kindergarten in most public and private schools. Colleges provide structured service learning opportunities through courses, as well as numerous opportunities for more open-ended community engagement. In fact, community engagement activities are now measured on an annual basis on many college campuses. Emphasis on values also has been made more explicit for Millennials through diversity training, leadership training, discussions of academic honesty, and participation of substance abuse educational programs. Millennials, in turn, demand strong values and ethics, including being eco-friendly, from their employers. They expect to see the mission and values in writing and will read this literature before agreeing to be hired. In short, they are motivated by work they find meaningful (Tilin, 2008). Mission and values statements need to help Millennials see their work as such.

The elementary and secondary education experiences of Xers were not as structured with volunteer activities as those of Millennials. Their formative years, marked by social isolation, included less experience with values-driven volunteer efforts and social organizations (Putnam, 2001). Missions and values will need to be more carefully communicated to Xers, with the relationship to their personal values, particularly the need for work-life balance, made more explicit.

- **Commitment to people-first values**
  - ✓ Written statements of the values the organization places on its employees
  - ✓ Managers should have people-first values
  - ✓ Walk the talk: meetings, open-door policies, team orientation, and emphasis on employee self-actualization
  - ✓ Life-friendly work culture
  - ✓ Organizational Justice (Dessler, 1999)

Unlike the Boomers before them, Xers place great personal emphasis on home-work balance. People-first values that stress a more holistic commitment to employees should therefore resonate with them. Both Xers and Millennials respond to clear guidelines for organizational justice. Millennials in particular are used to flatter organizational structures with open-door policies. As one college administrator describes them, “The world is a flat hierarchy to these kids” (Tilin 2008). When flaws are perceived in the organization’s system of justice, dissatisfied Xers are prone to walk, but Millennials will stay and press for issues to be resolved (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

- **Employee Development**
  - ✓ Workshops, lateral moves, tuition reimbursement
  - ✓ First year job challenges
  - ✓ Extensive two-way communication: listen, solicit feedback, involve
  - ✓ Enrich and Empower
  - ✓ Promote from within whenever possible
  - ✓ Provide employee security without guarantees
  - ✓ Mentoring (Dessler, 1999)

Adoption of the organization’s goals is facilitated through both experience with people-first activities and employee development strategies. While the organizational literature has been consistent that the first year of employment is crucial in terms of getting established and feeling efficacious (see Buchanan 1974 for a review of the earlier literature), with Millennials and Xers the time frame is even more critical. Because of the confidence instilled by their Boomer parents and mentors, Millennials expect to hit the ground running and to be given meaningful assignments. Neither Xers nor Millennials have the patience to "pay their dues" in the way that the Boomers did. Perhaps this is because Boomers had to wait for positions in the workforce that the Great Generation had earned, while Gen X feels more threatened by the Boomers because Gen X is a much smaller cohort than the Boomers, they have been told repeatedly that the Boomers will bankrupt Social Security and Medicare, and they see the Boomers welcoming and mentoring the younger Millennials, who are more likely to be their children's ages.

Development, however, becomes a double-edged sword for the organization. On the one hand it communicates people-first values and meets the Xers' and Millennials' focus on skills and resumes. On the other hand, in today's flatter organizations, it serves to help Xers and Millennials acquire the skills needed for the next job. Cetron and Davies (2008) note that opportunities for organizational advancement are shrinking as the focus shifts from the depth and breadth of the organization to employees' specialties. In 2001, for example, only one person in 50 was promoted, while in 1987 the figure was one in 20 (Cetron and Davies, 2008).

However, never underestimate the long term impact of goodwill generated by employee development. Employees may return to the organization at later stages in their careers, or work for suppliers or customers and act upon favorable images of their former employers. They may even work for a sister-unit as the boundaries of organizations keep expanding and contracting with mergers and de-acquisitions.

Millennials, in particular, are seen as more confident, trusting and teachable in the workplace, although they may be considered pampered, risk averse, and dependent. They need socialization and mentoring in terms of punctuality, dress, and independence. When goals are clear and they are permitted to work in groups, performance can exceed expectations (Howe & Strauss). With age, hopefully their need for constant performance feedback will abate.

- **Develop a Strong Sense of Community**
  - ✓ Workforce based on values
  - ✓ Share and share alike: profit sharing
  - ✓ Teamwork, job rotation, self-managing teams
  - ✓ Group meetings, regularized contacts
  - ✓ Strong culture through symbols, stories, rites, ceremonials, etc.
  - ✓ Mentoring (Dessler, 1999)

As there is increasingly less physical contact in the twenty-first century office, other elements that positively impact a sense of community increase in significance. Millennials, and to some extent Xers, are used to being physically apart when they work. Laptops, smartphones, and Blackberries, coupled with flextime scheduling provide the means to work while not physically in contact with other employees in the office. Yet organizational commitment requires organizational loyalty apart from acceptance of its values and actually incorporation of those values into one's work. The formation of a strong organizational culture is critical to organizational commitment.

While a lot has been written about the use of virtual communities such as Myspace, personal Web pages, Craigslist and Freecycle by Millennials, these do not engender the same level of "organizational commitment" required by employers. If the Xers and Millennials are in the "virtual" office, where are the opportunities to develop a strong culture through symbols, stories, rites, ceremonies, etc.? If the organization does not create specific meaningful opportunities to transmit culture in real time settings, all the corporate symbols and mission/values cards in employees’ wallets and Web banners will not be sufficient. While we do not recommend a specific timeframe for physical meetings/social contacts, the organization should be aware that a regular schedule of physical contact should be a major goal, and that such opportunities should always include community building elements: personal check-ins, sharing, organizational stories, recognition ceremonials, etc. But how can culture be fostered between physical meetings? Even virtual meetings can begin with a story/report that reflects what the company is all about. Special messages can convey elements of personal recognition, and support. All organizational communications should reinforce mission, values, and people-first values. Opportunities for social time outside of the office can be created. As discussed above, the organization of the office environment to promote socialization and collaboration is crucial.

Within the organizational worlds of GenXers and Millennials, organizational commitment needs to be strategically nurtured in ways unknown to Boomers, who enthusiastically embraced all aspects of organizational life when they entered the work force: values, hierarchy, commitment, etc. (Perhaps the Boomers’ present disillusionment is a result of the naiveté of their youth that led to such a complete identification with their organizations.) Information technology creates a web of information and relationships, but organizational commitment may require more than technological contact. It requires the absorption of organization values, adoption of those values in the daily work lives of employees, and loyalty to their organizations apart from their work. These need to be continuously monitored and tweaked, and perhaps even completely rethought as Millennials progress in their careers.

Works Cited

Bell, N., S. and Narz, M. (February 2007). "Meeting the challenges of age diversity in the workplace," *The CPA Journal, 77*(2), 56-60.

Berfield, S. (September 17, 2007). "Bridging the generation gap," *BusinessWeek*, 60-61.

Buchanan, Bruce II (1974). "Building Organizational Commitment: The Socialization of Managers in Work Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 19 (4), 533-546.

Cetron, M. J. and Davies, O. (2008). "Trends Shaping Tomorrow's World: Forecasts and Implications for Business, Government, and Consumers (Part Two)," *The Futurist*, 42(3), May-June 2008, 35-50.

Conger, J.A. (1998). "How 'Gen X' Managers Manage," *Strategy & Business*, First Quarter: 21-29.

Dessler, G. (May 1999). "How to Earn Your Employees' Commitment," *Academy of Management Executive*, *13, no 2:* 58-67.

Holtzman, D., Kruger, E., and Srock, C. (2005). "Generational Diversity Role-Play Exercise" in C. P. Harvey and M. J. Allard, *Understanding and Managing Diversity*: *Readings, Cases, and Exercises, 3rd edition.* Upper Saddle Ricer, New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall. 129-137.

Howe, N. and Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials Rising: The Next Generation*. New York: Vintage.

Howe, N. and Strauss, W. (2007). "The Next 20 Years: How Customer and Workforce Attitudes Will Evolve," *Harvard Business Review*, 00178012, Jul/Aug2007, Vol 85 (7/8), cited from Business Source Premier.

Lancaster, L. and Stillman, D. (2002). *When Generations Collide*. New York: Harper Business.

Massey, Liz. (2007). "Office Space: 10 Tips from the Future," *Office Solutions*, 24(3): pg.16.

Nyhof, P. (May 22, 2000). "Managing Generation X the millennial challenge," *Canadian HR Reporter: Toronto, 13*(10), 7-8. Retrieved on December 17, 2007 from http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?vinst=PROD&fmt=3&startpage=-l&ver=l&vname=PQ...

Patota, N., Schwartz, D., and Schwartz, T. (September 2007). "Leveraging Generational Differences for Productivity Gains," *Journal of American Academy of Business, 11*(2): 1-10.

Putnam, Robert D. (2001). *Bowling Along: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Robbins, S. P. and Judge, T. A. (2009). Organizational Behavior. New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

Suttell, Robin. (Dec 2006). "The Future of Commercial Interiors," *Buildings*, 100(12), pg 66, 3 pgs.

Thielfoldt, D. and Scheef, D. (August 2004). "Generation X and the Millennials: What you need to know about mentoring the new generations," in *Law Practice Today*. Retrieved on December 17, 2007 from http://www.abanet.org/lpm/lpt/articles/nosearch/mgt08044_print.html.

Tilin, Andrew (2008). "What Is a Millennial?". "BNET Briefing," http://www.bnet.com/2403-13059_23-201716.html?tag=nl.e713.

Underwood, Chuck (December 17, 2007). " "Mils" in the workplace: Re-defining 20-Something" on *The Huffington Post.* Retrieved on December 17, 2007 from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chuck-underwood/mils-in-the-workplace-_b_77141.html?view+...

Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipezak, B. (2000). *Generations at work: Managing the clash of veterans, boomers, Xers, and nexters in your workplace.* New York: American Management Association.