

Balancing the Blogosphere:

The Imperative of Establishing a Social Contract for the Blogging Community

Kaylee Walters

College of Charleston

It's a trend that's growing nearly as fast as the Internet itself. Blogs can be found in multiple forms with numerous interpretations and endless subject matters. This computer-mediated movement has introduced new terms to our vocabularies, including Blogosphere, blogroll, and even blogroach (which, in case you didn't know, is someone who infests the comments section of a blog with obnoxious postings). In 1999 the Internet contained dozens of blogs, but the trend rapidly expanded to millions of blogs in only a few short years (Welch, 2003). Blogging has become a favorite pastime to many, yet this innovative trend in computer culture has been met with harsh criticisms regarding its limitless boundaries and liberal admissions of information.

Blogging tools have introduced some of the first available technology that allows nearly anyone to create their own personalized editorial product. It has opened the doors for outcasts, nobodies, and outsiders to not only voice their opinion, but to also have it heard anywhere an Internet connection can reach. Bloggers have become the latest innovators, entrepreneurs and whistleblowers. They have helped bring down public foes like Trent Lott, heightened anticipation for presidential hopefuls like Howard Dean, and criticized the left and right wing politics of Michael Moore and Bill O'Reilly respectively (Welch, 2003).

However, with strong convictions and increasing influence comes societal backlash. Most of the unrestrained voices found in the Blogosphere are voices of amateurs "performing many functions that mimic professional newsrooms" (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007, p. 38). While reputable journalists and newspapers do not shy away from the use of blogging to convey information, a large number of bloggers tend to blur the distinction between fact and fiction in an often frivolous or even strategic manner. Although blogging may appear to have struck a chord

with the public, criticism and reform are necessary collective actions when following lopsided views and imprudent disclosures.

There are several ethical issues surrounding the Blogosphere, and they for the most part can be categorized in one of two categories: the old and the new. The ‘old’ problems are associated with the type of issues print journalists also have endured. “The same motivations that could drive a network reporter or newspaper journalist to manipulate photographs, plagiarize, or make up sources are at play throughout the Blogosphere” (Kuhn, 2007, p. 22). In addition, this category encompasses defamation and liability, personal safety concerns, legal issues and endeavors, manipulation or elimination previous texts for selfish purposes, as well as accepting funds from business or organizations without disclosure (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007).

The “new” ethical dilemmas are more directly related to blogging, itself. This category includes many issues prompted by the constraints of the Internet. They primarily concern misrepresenting ones identity or affiliation, and the blogger’s burden of restraining face-to-face human communication. In regards to bloggings impact on human communication, M. Kuhn (2007) claimed:

Engaging in discourse in a virtual environment as cyborgs moves us away from Christians’s idealized “I–thou” communication model toward the “I–it” model.

Therefore, blogger duties that might mitigate the deceptive nature of CMC [Computer Mediated Communication], that prioritize the human presence in blogging, should be core components in a blogging code of ethics. (p. 26-27)

One of the biggest issues of ethics of the Blogosphere, however, lies in the absence of a distinct ethical code. The necessity of such a code has become increasingly clear. The limitless reigns of the blogging industry has a necessity to form a sort of social contract with its viewers in

order to ensure the quality of information, or at a minimum to understand the quality of said information. In a world where drama and sensationalism reign, order and ethos have an obligation to take hold. This argument is best summed up by a recent post from respected blogger Russell Beattie:

The Blogosphere at large is hurrying down this same path, and I think everyone who's participating in that cycle needs to look around at what's happening, and help stop it before it gets worse. No? I'm a true believer in blogging as an advanced form of a communication and publication, direct from the source without intermediaries to muck it up. I can hear straight from a domain expert on a variety of topics, and I can contribute my knowledge and insight (for what they're worth) as well. I learn something new every day from my readers and the blogs I subscribe to, and that's great. But now this sort of benefit is getting lost in a continual din of rumor mongering, grandstanding and "scoops." (Beattie, 2006)

Yet, the concept of an ethical code applying to bloggers has been met with contempt in the majority of the Blogosphere. The notion of ethical implementation would incite a chorus of cringes among many bloggers who tend to see an ethical code as restrictive or even synonymous with the ideals of censorship that plague most communication mediums. Yet in 2004 the Media Bloggers Association was developed to facilitate the development of blogging as a distinct form of media. The formation of this company and their desire to extend the legal protections of journalists to bloggers indicates the umbrella of journalistic standards, at least to some extent, should also cover bloggers (Neal, 2007).

With the current standards of blogging lacking a concise ethical code, many blogs have found themselves in predicaments concerning the existing ethical grey areas (Soja, 2007). A

recent example illustrating the effect of this ‘gray area’ occurred in response to Prince Harry’s recent confidential deployment to Afghanistan. As a result of his deployment and the necessity for secrecy due to his royal status, an agreement was made between the Prince’s camp and the press to keep the deployment out of the news completely. Unfortunately, due to an irresponsible and ill-advised blog post by a U.S. gossip blogger, whose source was the gossip magazine’s Internet report, Prince Harry’s classified cover, along with his military safety, was blown out of the water (Preston, 2008).

Prince Harry’s case is particularly disturbing and frustrating due to the bold and courageous effort on behalf of the prince of going to war in the first place. However, Harry is not alone; there have been multiple other negligent decisions made by bloggers. It is obvious that bloggers are in need of a well-designed ethical code to put into play. Essentially, a form of contractualism ought to exist online in order for the web community to thrive and function together in peace.

To determine what this ‘cyber contract’ ought to consist of, one must first determine the options that could be feasibly implemented. Probably the most broad means of creating a cyber contract would be to have a universal blogging contract, encompassing all blogs and containing a rigid, inflexible set of rules. This would involve a deontological approach similar to the concepts of Kant’s categorical imperative (Kuhn, 2007). However, this sort of cyber contract would, by necessity, need to be quite ambiguous and more flexible, as the multifaceted Blogosphere would not be able to tolerate an all-inclusive comprehensive set of specific ethics. M. Kuhn (2007) does a palpable job of rationalizing the downfalls of universalism in the Blogosphere:

The myriad conceptualizations of blogs by bloggers limits the potential of any blog ethic that is anchored in only one specific function of blogs, journalism for instance, to be useful in moral decision making in the greater Blogosphere.

This means that blogging ethics should be predicated upon a broader understanding of the blog form and the resulting blog culture. (p. 19)

In order to better heed the blog culture, it would seem that a more efficient way of handling the cyber contract would be to introduce distinct categorical codes: A specific ethical code applying to each exclusive category of blogs. Divisions could, for instance, involve: (a) political; (b) entertainment; (c) niche; (d) personal/independent; (e) opinion; (f) professional; and (g) journalistic/news. Rather than a universal code, a category-based code would allow for more specific guidelines with further agreement from the Blogosphere.

It is, however, possible that the categorical code would not be completely accepted by the Blogosphere. If met with any disapproval, there is another solution that, while it may decrease some of the cyber contracts jurisdiction, could make for a pragmatic compromise. This solution would entail a separatist option to bloggers, meaning, essentially, they could opt into the social contract, or they could opt out. While not completely ideal, this solution would still provide a constructive step in the right direction.

In this situation, those who accepted a categorical code would have an optional 'seal of approval' stamp posted on their blog. However, the greater necessity of this particular proposition entails the idea that those who opt out of the blogging/cyber contract would have an obligatory distinct message posted visibly on their blog dictating the unverifiable nature of the content in the site. This 'stamp' would, in and of itself, serve as a deterrent for the audience, and

would most likely be considered unfavorable to the blogger. Offering it as an option would allow the blogger more rhetorical and creative freedom.

In sum, the Blogosphere is growing very fast and ethical ambiguities are intensifying at the same rate. With such a powerful and rapidly expanding communication medium in our hands, it is our responsibility, beginning with the Media Bloggers Association, to enhance with technology as efficiently as possible, beginning with an expansion of our ethical codes. While there are multiple options for creating a social contract for blogs, the categorical-separatist model seems to rise above the rest, due to its justifiability, feasibility, and cooperative resolution. One way or another, some sort of ethical code needs to be implemented swiftly; before libel becomes commonplace and news becomes a story based loosely on an occurrence.

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