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# Journalism Ethics and the Independent Journalist

Molly A. Dugan\*

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most high-profile cases of reporter error was exposed in September 2004, when writers of web logs, or bloggers, discredited documents related to President Bush's National Guard service.<sup>1</sup> Dan Rather, in a CBS News broadcast, used the documents to show that Bush had received preferential treatment in the National Guard. Bloggers questioned the authenticity of the documents based on the typeface.<sup>2</sup> The documents were forgeries.<sup>3</sup> Rather apologized on national television for the error and, two months later, stepped down as anchor of *The CBS Evening News*.<sup>4</sup> After a four-month independent investigation, conducted at the request of CBS and made available to the public, four CBS employees, including three executives, were terminated for their role in the story.<sup>5</sup> CBS has assured the public that it is working to implement the recommendations of the independent investigators to ensure greater accuracy and avoid future mistakes.<sup>6</sup>

This story, arguably more than any other, marked the beginning of greater prominence and credibility for bloggers and, hence, the term "citizen journalist."<sup>7</sup> Some traditional journalists, however, are quick to point out that while bloggers provided an important service in the CBS case, bloggers' ethical practices are not subject to scrutiny.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike many other professions, journalists do not need a license to practice their craft. What they do need is the public trust. To ensure their credibility with the public, journalists must follow an ethical code of conduct.<sup>9</sup> In traditional news

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1. Howard Kurtz, *After Blogs Got Hits, CBS Got a Black Eye*, WASH. POST, Sept. 20, 2004, at C1, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A34153-2004Sep19.html>.

2. *CBS Ousts 4 for Bush Guard Story*, CBS NEWS, Jan. 10, 2005, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/01/10/national/main665727.shtml> [hereinafter *CBS Ousts 4*] (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

3. *Dan Rather Statement on Memos*, CBS NEWS, Sept. 20, 2004, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/20/politics/main644546.shtml> (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

4. *See Dan Rather: Witness to History*, CBS NEWS, Nov. 23, 2004, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/11/23/entertainment/main657372.shtml> (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

5. *CBS Ousts 4*, *supra* note 2.

6. *Id.*

7. For a description of citizen journalism, see *infra* Part III.

8. Telephone Interview with Leonard Witt, Chief Blogger, Pub. Journalism Network, Distinguished Chair in Communication, Kennesaw State University, in Kennesaw, Ga. (Aug. 13, 2007) [hereinafter Witt Interview] (notes on file with the author).

9. In journalism, the "code" is handed down by other journalists and editors, as opposed to other professions where the code may be legislated or created by a governing body. See *infra* Part II.

organizations, failure to follow the accepted code of ethical conduct most often results in banishment from the industry.<sup>10</sup> The code of ethical conduct, according to The Society of Professional Journalists, consists of four main categories.<sup>11</sup> The first, “Seek the Truth and Report It,” requires journalists to be “honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting” the news.<sup>12</sup> The second, “Minimize Harm,” obligates journalists to treat sources and subjects with respect.<sup>13</sup> The third, “Act Independently,” mandates that journalists be free of any obligation or interest other than reporting the news.<sup>14</sup> The fourth, “Be Accountable,” forces journalists to stand by what they report and correct any inaccuracies as soon as they become aware of them.<sup>15</sup>

The ethical code ensures that news organizations take responsibility for what they report. In a climate of increasing public distrust of the media, the ethical code provides a foundation for accuracy, balance, fairness, and openness. News organizations that abide by the ethical codes of conduct and encourage open dialogue of their reporting practices generate more trust and credibility with the public. In several well-publicized cases of individual newspaper reporters who broke the ethical code of conduct, the news organizations provided the public with an immediate response.<sup>16</sup> First, the offending journalist was terminated.<sup>17</sup> Second, an internal investigation into their stories was published by the news organization.<sup>18</sup> Third, the news organization created new quality control measures to ensure greater adherence to ethical standards.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, news organizations adhered to the code of ethics by being open about and taking responsibility for errors. While the public may view these indiscretions as reason to further distrust the news media, the actions taken by the traditional news organizations demonstrate accountability.

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10. There are several high-profile examples in the newspaper industry, including, but not limited to, Jayson Blair, Patricia Smith, and Janet Cooke. See Sinead O'Brien, *Secrets and Lies*, AM. JOURNALISM REV., Sept. 1998, <http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=648> (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*) (detailing the problems with Patricia Smith, a writer for the *Boston Globe*, who was let go after she regularly participated in a system of fabricating news stories); *Editors' Note*, N.Y. TIMES, May 11, 2003, at 3, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/11/pageoneplus/11EDIT.html?ex=1197781200&en=166ed772083603cb&ei=5070> [hereinafter *Editors' Note*] (describing *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair's resignation after evidence surfaced that he plagiarized and falsified stories); Alicia C. Shepard, *Why Believe in Journalism If the R Sum is a Lie?*, STAR-LEDGER, July 8, 2007, at 1 (detailing the downfall of Janet Cooke, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, who was fired after she fabricated a Pulitzer Prize-winning article about an eight-year-old starving heroin addict).

11. SOC'Y OF PROF'L JOURNALISTS, CODE OF ETHICS (1996), <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp> [hereinafter CODE OF ETHICS] (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. See, e.g., *Editors' Note*, *supra* note 10 (responding to the Jayson Blair plagiarism scandal).

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

While citizen journalists have demonstrated the ability to gather news and serve as a watchdog for mainstream media, the question remains whether they will accept and abide by the same ethical standards that have guided the news industry for decades.<sup>20</sup> As citizen journalists become more prominent and integrated into mainstream media, media critics fear that what are now considered minor ethical breaches could become far more pronounced.<sup>21</sup>

## II. JOURNALISM AS A QUASI-PROFESSION

No formal licensing or membership agencies oversee the ethical conduct of professional journalists. Despite a growing emphasis on ethics in university journalism programs,<sup>22</sup> most journalists continue to learn about ethics on the job from more experienced colleagues.

Journalists, at times, are able to undermine the credibility of the profession by not following ethical practices.<sup>23</sup> But journalists affiliated with news organizations are watched by an entire staff of ethical police: editors. A news organization needs journalists to follow ethical guidelines to maintain its credibility, which is directly related to its financial success. This circumstance is arguably different from some other professions, in which corporate organizations with a financial motive sometimes undermine ethical conduct to save money.<sup>24</sup>

Citizen journalism advocates argue that the marketplace acts as an enforcer of ethical conduct.<sup>25</sup> However, the professional journalist is also accountable to the news organization; the citizen journalist is accountable only to a vast marketplace that may or may not provide an ongoing motive for ethical conduct.<sup>26</sup>

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20. Witt Interview, *supra* note 8.

21. Telephone Interview with Andy Schotz, Chairman, Soc'y of Prof'l Journalists' Ethics Comm., Reporter, The Herald-Mail, in Hagerstown, Md. (Aug. 18, 2007) [hereinafter Schotz Interview] (notes on file with the author).

22. The University of California, Berkeley's graduate journalism program and Northwestern University's undergraduate and graduate journalism programs require students to complete coursework in law and ethics. See U.C. Berkeley Graduate Sch. of Journalism, Program: Degree Requirements, <http://journalism.berkeley.edu/program/curriculum.html> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*); Medill Sch. of Journalism, Graduate Journalism Curriculum 2, 5, 7, <http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/WorkArea/showcontent.aspx?id=64255> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge School of Law*); Medill Sch. of Journalism, Undergraduate Journalism Curriculum 1-2, <http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/WorkArea/showcontent.aspx?id=64257> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

23. Witt Interview, *supra* note 8.

24. For a more in-depth discussion of the impact of financial motives on ethical conduct, see Peter Madsen, *Professionals, Business Practitioners, and Prudential Justice*, 39 MCGEORGE L. REV. 835 (2008).

25. Telephone Interview with Mark Potts, Editor, Recovering Journalist, in Washington, D.C. (Aug. 17, 2007) [hereinafter Potts Interview] (notes on file with the author).

26. *Id.*

Citizen journalists do not have editors who question them prior to publication about whether they obtained information in an ethical manner.<sup>27</sup>

If a reader . . . loses trust . . . , the fundamental contract between audience and reporter is undermined, and the news organization cannot survive. It matters little if the news organization is a newspaper, magazine, radio, online site, or TV station; its credibility is paramount to its viability.<sup>28</sup>

### III. EMERGENCE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Definitions of citizen journalism abound.<sup>29</sup> Mark Glaser, host and editor of the blog *Media Shift* and contributor to the *Online Journalism Review*, describes citizen journalism as the following:

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. . . .

. . . .

One of the main concepts behind citizen journalism is that mainstream media reporters and producers are not the exclusive center of knowledge on a subject—the audience knows more collectively than the reporter alone.<sup>30</sup>

In summary, citizen journalists engage in reporting practices and spread information of community interest via the Internet. Most have received little to no training in ethical codes of conduct.<sup>31</sup>

Citizen journalism is emerging at a time when traditional media is in crisis.<sup>32</sup> For newspapers, print advertising remains the largest revenue stream.<sup>33</sup> At the

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27. JOSEPH R. DOMINICK, *DYNAMICS OF MASS COMMUNICATION* 300 (9th ed. 2007).

28. *Id.* at 297.

29. Mark Glaser, *Digging Deeper: Your Guide to Citizen Journalism*, MEDIASHIFT, Sept. 27, 2006, [http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2006/09/digging\\_deeperyour\\_guide\\_to\\_ci.html](http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2006/09/digging_deeperyour_guide_to_ci.html) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

30. *Id.*

31. Telephone Interview with Dan Gillmor, Founder, Ctr. for Citizen Media, in San Jose, Cal. (Aug. 29, 2007) [hereinafter Gillmor Interview] (notes on file with the author) (noting there are a few places around the country where people are being offered training in ethics).

32. Paul Farhi, *Under Siege*, AM. JOURNALISM REV., Feb.-Mar. 2006, [http://www.ajr.org/article\\_printable.asp?id=4043](http://www.ajr.org/article_printable.asp?id=4043) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

33. NEWSPAPER ASS'N AM., *BEST PRACTICES REPORT: HOW LEADING NEWSPAPER SITES MANAGE SALES* 9 (2007), <http://www.naa.org/~media/544FF71B682441ABA55CFE15BC5B445F.ashx> (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*) (noting that Internet revenue “still pales in comparison to the industry’s \$300 to \$600 in print revenue per subscriber”).

same time, fewer people are reading print editions; instead, they are increasingly looking to the Internet for their news.<sup>34</sup> The Internet, at most traditional news organizations, makes up less than ten percent of overall revenue.<sup>35</sup> Decreasing revenue has resulted in layoffs.<sup>36</sup> Layoffs at traditional news organizations have meant less coverage, particularly of local community news.<sup>37</sup> An emerging trend is to use citizen journalists to fill in the gaps left by the exodus of professional journalists.<sup>38</sup> Mainstream news organizations have become more interactive, allowing citizens to give feedback via the Internet on news stories.<sup>39</sup> Many have either hired bloggers or assigned blogs to their reporters and columnists. What is more significant is the use of citizen journalists to report the news in blogs. Some of the most prominent examples include *The Bakersfield Californian's* "Northwest Voice"<sup>40</sup> and *The Denver Post's* "Yourhub."<sup>41</sup>

However, current law holds that mainstream news organizations cannot be held responsible for libel if they do not edit the content of citizen journalists.<sup>42</sup> News organizations may pull offensive material from the website but cannot change the content of the blogs without being subject to libel laws.<sup>43</sup> If they decide not to edit the blogs of citizen journalists, under the law, they are

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34. Farhi, *supra* note 32.

35. NEWSPAPER ASS'N AM., NEWSPAPERS' ONLINE OPERATIONS: PERFORMANCE REPORT 2006, at 13 (2007), [http://www.naa.org/docs/Digital-Media/200710\\_NP\\_Online\\_Performance.pdf](http://www.naa.org/docs/Digital-Media/200710_NP_Online_Performance.pdf) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*) (reporting an industry average of five percent revenue from online sources).

36. PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM & RICK EDMONDS, THE STATE OF THE NEWS MEDIA 2007: AN ANNUAL REPORT ON AMERICAN JOURNALISM (2007), [http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2007/narrative\\_newspapers\\_newsinvestment.asp?cat=5&media=3](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2007/narrative_newspapers_newsinvestment.asp?cat=5&media=3) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

37. *Id.*

38. Telephone Interview with Mel Opotowsky, former Managing Editor, The Press-Enterprise, Adjunct faculty, Cal. State Univ., Fullerton, in Riverside, Cal. (Aug. 1, 2007) (notes on file with the author).

39. See Wash. Post, Feedback, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/opinions/feedback/> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*); L.A. Times, Online Services, <http://www.latimes.com/services/site/la-site-talk,0,2562859.htmlstory> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*); S.F. Chron., Community Blogs, <http://www.sfgate.com/community/blogs/> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*); Sacramento Bee, <http://www.sacbee.com/> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*) (providing a "Comments" section for each article).

40. Northwest Voice Home Page, [www.northwestvoice.com](http://www.northwestvoice.com) (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

41. Yourhub Home Page, [www.yourhub.com](http://www.yourhub.com) (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

42. Numerous cases have defined the differences between a publisher and a distributor. See, e.g., *Stratton Oakmount, Inc. v. Prodigy Servs. Co.*, 1995 WL 323710, at \*6-7 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 1995) (explaining that publishers have greater exposure to liability than distributors because publishers exercise greater editorial control); *Cubby, Inc. v. CompuServe, Inc.*, 776 F. Supp. 135, 140 (S.D.N.Y. 1991) (holding an online article database is a "distributor" for purposes of a defamation suit).

43. According to the Communications Decency Act of 1996, internet service providers are not liable for the content they carry unless they are the authors. 47 U.S.C. § 230(c)(1) (2008). "Section 230(c) of the federal Communications (Decency Act) provides broad protection to the 'provider of an interactive computer service' for statements or information provided by 'another information content provider.'" Al Tompkins, *Dialogue or Diatribe: A Look at How New Organizations Are Handling User Comments*, POYNTER, May 31, 2007, <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=103&aid=123905> (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*) (quoting Alan E. Korpady of King & Ballow).

distributors of the material and cannot be held responsible for content, much like an internet service provider such as America Online.<sup>44</sup> If they edit the blogs, the news organizations become producers of that content and can therefore be held responsible for any libelous statements.<sup>45</sup> The state of the law discourages news organizations from editing citizen journalists. Moreover, some traditional journalists argue that the work of professional journalists is subject to more scrutiny than that of amateur reporters when, ideally, the work of citizen journalists, who have not been trained in ethical news gathering procedures, should be subject to more examination.<sup>46</sup>

Mark Potts, founder of the now-defunct *Backfence.com*—a Washington, D.C. area community news website by citizen journalists—and Editor of *Recoveringjournalist.com*, consults newspaper companies who are working on “citizen-generated, hyper-local publications.”<sup>47</sup> Potts called the legal issues surrounding blogs on the websites of mainstream news organizations “un-charted water.”<sup>48</sup> He sees “a huge reluctance on the part of mainstream media to get involved in citizen journalism.”<sup>49</sup> He adds, however, that citizen journalism isn’t about replacing mainstream media—it’s about complimenting coverage:

“It certainly doesn’t replace [mainstream journalism]. It provides a way for news organizations to extend much more deeply into communities” and “cover [news] in ways they don’t have the staff to do it.” “The people in the community know an awful lot[,] and if you find a way to tap into it[,] you get [access] to some really interesting information.”<sup>50</sup>

#### IV. ETHICAL CONCERNS OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

While even the most passionate advocates for citizen journalism concede that none of the websites devoted to amateur news gathering have “gone gangbusters yet” and that citizen journalism is still in its infancy, they see the future of the traditional news media as being more closely linked to bloggers.<sup>51</sup> Many professional and amateur journalists are working to create rules and guidelines for citizen media.<sup>52</sup> However, some media experts say the traditional ethical codes of conduct will not work for citizen journalists.<sup>53</sup>

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44. *Cubby*, 776 F. Supp. at 140.

45. *Stratton*, 1995 WL 323710, at \*6-7.

46. Schotz Interview, *supra* note 21.

47. Potts Interview, *supra* note 25.

48. *Id.*

49. *Id.*

50. *Id.* (quoting Mark Potts, Editor, *Recovering Journalist*).

51. *Id.*

52. Witt Interview, *supra* note 8.

53. *Id.*

Leonard Witt, the Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair in Communication at Kennesaw State University and the Chief Blogger for *Public Journalism Network*, says

“I don’t think we can lift up the old ethics codes and drop them right in and hope that they work.” “[But t]here should be ethical codes that citizen journalist[s] read and understand.” “The key is transparency,” “to be honest in what you’re doing.” “Most people on the internet try to do the right thing.”<sup>54</sup>

Proponents of citizen journalism argue that bloggers must be more transparent than traditional media.<sup>55</sup> Traditional news organizations value balanced reporting, but that isn’t necessarily an ethical mandate in the realm of citizen journalists. Even advocacy websites with a clear conservative or liberal point of view can be seen as reliable if the information they provide is substantiated.<sup>56</sup> They do not have a historic, trusted brand to give their stories credibility and, therefore, must follow ethical codes of conduct to earn a reputation for having honest, accurate reporting, which are keys to success in an increasingly competitive media environment.<sup>57</sup>

However, some media ethics experts say citizen journalists cannot act ethically if they don’t know or understand the traditional ethical codes of conduct.<sup>58</sup> Andy Schotz, a reporter for *The Herald-Mail*, a daily newspaper in Hagerstown, Maryland and Chairman of The Society of Professional Journalists’ Ethics Committee, said it is difficult for consumers of citizen journalism to discern what content has been thoroughly and ethically gathered and what content is inaccurate or biased:

“It [sic] think they need to be clear in what they’re doing. You can’t assume that people are going to be able to distinguish the news content on a citizen journalism site which is unedited and [un]filtered and a news site which is.” “There are a lot of considerations that go into covering the news, [such as] conflict[s] of interests [and] balance.” “[With citizen journalism, y]ou’re trying to pick up information from people you don’t know, and you don’t have any sense of how capable they are of meeting these standards.” “It might be a good idea for communities to report on

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54. *Id.* (quoting Leonard Wit, Chief Blogger, Public Journalism Network).

55. *Id.*

56. For example, Joshua Micah Marshall’s blog, Talking Points Memo, <http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008), a left-leaning news aggregator, has been credited by some media experts for shedding light on a pattern of federal attorney firings. See, e.g., David Glenn, *The [Josh] Marshall Plan*, COLOM. JOURNALISM REV., Sept.-Oct. 2007, available at [http://www.cjr.org/feature/the\\_josh\\_marshall\\_plan.php](http://www.cjr.org/feature/the_josh_marshall_plan.php) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*). The resulting high-profile scandal marred the tenure of former U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. *Id.*

57. Witt Interview, *supra* note 8.

58. Schotz Interview, *supra* note 21.



themselves but people who are reading them need to have an awareness.”  
“There’s no way to tell how accurate it might be or who the sources  
are.”<sup>59</sup>

One of the potentially more complicated ethical mandates of traditional journalists is to “[a]void conflicts of interest, real or perceived.”<sup>60</sup> Professional journalists must disclose any conflicts of interests and, if they fail to do so, will, at best, be reassigned or, at worst, face immediate termination. Citizen journalists, are under no such obligation of disclosure. However, citizen journalism proponents argue that conflict of interest issues are exaggerated by the mainstream media.<sup>61</sup> If a citizen journalist has a natural bias because of a conflict of interest, it will be obvious to the reader and, therefore, discredited.<sup>62</sup> Examples of conflicts of interest abound in citizen journalism, particularly in local community coverage.<sup>63</sup> There is no method of preventing a high school basketball coach from blogging about a game his team played without disclosing his status or a restaurant owner from writing a review of his own establishment.<sup>64</sup> Even professional journalists are sometimes confused by conflict of interest rules since there can be nuances to the ethical standards. For example, is it acceptable to write a one-time feature story about a non-profit organization to which you have contributed money? Is it acceptable to contribute money to a political campaign that you’re not covering but that your news organization has written about? Contrary to what citizen journalism advocates claim, some professional journalists argue that conflict of interest issues are some of the most important and nuanced ethical considerations in media.<sup>65</sup>

Traditional news organizations are not immune to ethical gaffes, as citizen journalism advocates point out. The difference is that professional journalists are subject to quality control. Editors question the accuracy, objectivity, and sourcing of stories.<sup>66</sup> Traditional news organizations routinely punish journalists who do not adhere to ethical guidelines.<sup>67</sup> For professional reporters, the personal stakes of making ethical mistakes are far greater than for citizen journalists. “Even the mainstream best newspapers aren’t pure in what they do,” Witt said.<sup>68</sup> But there’s “[m]ore chance for abuse with citizen journalism.”<sup>69</sup>

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59. *Id.* (quoting Andy Schotz, Chairman, Soc’y Prof’l Journalists’ Ethics Comm.).

60. CODE OF ETHICS, *supra* note 11.

61. Potts Interview, *supra* note 25.

62. *Id.*

63. *Id.*

64. *Id.*

65. Schotz Interview, *supra* note 21.

66. O’Brien, *supra* note 10.

67. See *supra* notes 10, 16-19 and accompanying text.

68. Witt Interview, *supra* note 8.

69. *Id.*

## V. QUALITY CONTROL OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

While quality control of traditional media is handled by the news organizations themselves, citizen journalism is subject to the litmus tests of the community of readers. The idea is that the community will “turn off” bloggers who are inaccurate and biased and will confront those who have plagiarized material.<sup>70</sup> Reputable websites with citizen journalism require that all bloggers register, which means disclosing their names, if not for publication, at least for the editors or website moderators.<sup>71</sup> Many websites use profanity filters to avoid publication of obscenities and hate speech.<sup>72</sup> Within the stories, links to supplemental information further ensure the reporting is accurate and balanced.<sup>73</sup> Even the strongest advocates of citizen journalism acknowledge that bloggers with extreme viewpoints and nefarious motives occasionally find a forum but say the barriers of registration and filters make it difficult for them to find a voice on a reputable news-based website.<sup>74</sup> “It’s a very different kind of journalism,” Potts said.<sup>75</sup> “All the voices are heard. No one person can dominate what’s going on. In this system, the rest of the community will correct inaccuracies. The community acts as the editors in this case. People tend to be less outrageous than [traditional] editors fear.”<sup>76</sup>

While Potts, a professional journalist, published corrections to inaccuracies on his citizen journalism website, there is not an accepted industry-wide standard for making corrections to blogs.<sup>77</sup> In most traditional news organizations, inaccuracies on a website are corrected within the story and an addendum is added that clarifies the mistake contained in the previous version. This process functions much like a traditional newspaper in which corrections are published in the next edition after the mistake is discovered.<sup>78</sup>

Some professional journalists argue, however, that community policing of accuracy and balance is not enough to ensure adherence to ethical standards. “The idea that you’re going to let something go up unfiltered and wait for the

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70. Potts Interview, *supra* note 25.

71. Posting of Mark Potts to Recovering Journalist, [http://recoveringjournalist.typepad.com/recovering\\_journalist/2006/12/corraling\\_comme.html](http://recoveringjournalist.typepad.com/recovering_journalist/2006/12/corraling_comme.html) (Dec. 18, 2006, 14:18 PST) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

74. *Id.*

75. Potts Interview, *supra* note 25.

76. *Id.*

77. For example, compare Potts’ website corrections page to another webpage. Because there are no standards for blog corrections, citizen journalists handle errors in several ways, often by either removing the error—with or without note—or correcting it in a subsequent post.

78. For example, readers can find the *Sacramento Bee*’s corrections policy each day on page A2. The policy, *Errors in Reporting*, states that the *Bee* will “acknowledge errors promptly. Corrections will appear on page A2 as well as in the section where the error occurred.” *Sacramento Bee, Errors in Reporting*, <http://guide.sacbee.com/105/story/20.html> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

correction is absurd,” Schotz said.<sup>79</sup> “The truth should be verified before publication.”<sup>80</sup>

The debate between citizen journalism advocates and professional journalists over ethical issues is crystallized by *Wikipedia*, an online encyclopedia that relies for its information on contributions from readers.<sup>81</sup> Some citizen journalism advocates argue that the information contained on *Wikipedia* is no less authoritative than the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.<sup>82</sup> *Wikipedia* is a classic example of community policing of accuracy. But fans of the website acknowledge that once an inaccuracy is published, it is difficult to remove from the public consciousness even after it has been taken down from the website. Traditional journalists, however, say the website is not a reliable source.<sup>83</sup> They point to a case in which a Tennessee newspaper editor was accused of assassinating President John F. Kennedy.<sup>84</sup> The notation has since been removed from the website, but, according to Schotz, it took more than a month.<sup>85</sup>

Some citizen journalism advocates are encouraging bloggers to uphold traditional media ethics.<sup>86</sup> One of the few places where citizen journalists can receive training in ethics is at the *Center for Citizen Media*, a website containing special ethical codes of conduct for citizen journalists.<sup>87</sup> Dan Gillmor, best-selling author of *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* and one of the nation’s leading experts on citizen journalism, oversees the website, which receives about 25,000 hits per month.<sup>88</sup> He views ethics as a place where traditional journalism and citizen journalism should be working together.

“[Ethics] is an area where we need to do a lot of evangelizing and outreach. I particularly think this is a role the traditional media should play.” “They have a platform and ought to use it.” “I don’t think it’s that complicated. If people behave honorably, we can get a lot done.”<sup>89</sup>

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79. Schotz Interview, *supra* note 21.

80. *Id.*

81. See Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*). Wikipedia’s website states, “Wikipedia’s articles have been written collaboratively by volunteers around the world and the vast majority of them can be edited by anyone with access to the Internet.” *Id.*

82. Potts Interview, *supra* note 25.

83. Schotz Interview, *supra* note 21.

84. *Id.*

85. *Id.*

86. Gillmor Interview, *supra* note 31.

87. Ctr. for Citizen Media Home Page, <http://www.citmedia.org/> (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

88. Gillmor Interview, *supra* note 31.

89. *Id.*

The Principles of Citizen Journalism found on the Center for Citizen Media's website are similar to the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, if not as well-known. The five principles are accuracy, thoroughness, fairness, transparency, and independence.<sup>90</sup> The Citizen Media Law Project, a joint affiliation of the Harvard School of Law's Berkman Center for Internet and Society and the Center for Citizen Media, is also in the process of creating a legal guide for citizen media.<sup>91</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

Few media experts dispute that adding more voices to news coverage and civic debates is a worthwhile endeavor. A wealth of reasoned voices enhances dialogue within communities and promotes the spread of information. But journalists must be careful to ensure that ethical standards are followed by both professional and citizen journalists. If the public does not trust the news media, it loses credibility and, therefore, the ability to gather information and perform the watchdog role essential to our democracy. Citizen journalism can be a compliment to what professional journalists do, but it is not a replacement for professional reporting nor is it a panacea to growing reader concerns about traditional media's credibility. "We can all benefit from hearing more insights from the community we cover," Schotz said.<sup>92</sup> But "[y]ou don't just pick up a pen and start reporting the truth. It's not as easy as it looks."<sup>93</sup>

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90. Ctr. for Citizen Media, Principles for Citizen Journalism, [www.citmedia.org/principles](http://www.citmedia.org/principles) (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

91. Ctr. for Citizen Media, Citizen Media Law Project, [www.citmedialaw.org](http://www.citmedialaw.org) (last visited Mar. 22, 2008) (on file with the *McGeorge Law Review*).

92. Schotz Interview, *supra* note 21.

93. *Id.*

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