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The New News: Ethics' Place in the Digital World

02/16/2015 Isabelle Lim Opinion

"Do you guys all have an ethics policy?"

With the [six-month suspension of Brian Williams](#) of NBC still fresh on the pages of major news outlets, ethical journalism was naturally one of the topics covered during a panel discussion entitled "[The New News](#)," held on Wednesday evening at International House on the University of Chicago.

The panelists, a who's who of the new media scene, had varying answers.

Shani Hilton, Executive Editor for [News for BuzzFeed](#), cited the [ethics policy](#) that their news division had put out not two weeks before. Rocco Castoro, (in a [shock announcement](#) at the event) *former* Editor in Chief of [VICE](#), said simply "...if you lie you die", but conceded the ethics of new media remained traditional, stressing the importance of public interest.

And [Gawker's](#) Editor-in-Chief, Max Read – well, his reply was to the point: "We don't."

With Gawker's reputation as a new media pirate brandishing the kind of rogue journalism that touts "today's gossip (as) tomorrow's news", the response was not unexpected. And after general laughter from the audience had settled, Read continued, stating:

"I mean I have a personal set of ethics. I hope my writers do too. My sense of ethic codes is that they tend to be used to trap us. That the idea is to give us a sort of box that we are then publicly held accountable against."

The comment, given that nearly [30 percent of Americans now receive news from Facebook](#), on which new media dominates, cannot be construed as anything less than unsettling, even coming from a publication that deems gossip, news.

While Read cannot be held to represent *all* of what the digital journalism era is ushering in, the notion that standardized ethics codes are seen by some in the

industry as a "trap," is nonetheless worrying.

The issue of ethics in journalism is a deep-seated one, and while its specificities are often debated, it is, as a whole, a recognized necessity of the profession and industry. Ethics has been enshrined in codes of practice by general journalism societies, the Society of Professional Journalists' [Code of Ethics](#) for instance, and also by various national and international news organizations like the [New York Times](#), [NPR](#), and [Reuters](#), in their various ethics policies. To suggest that an overall code of ethics is irrelevant to any news organization, or that personal ethics (variable and, possibly, divergent) are sufficient in ensuring truthful, accurate and valuable news reporting is not just questionable, it's irresponsible.

The fact of the matter is that journalism and journalists, especially those that purport to report the news or present the truth, perform a function in society that calls for an additional standard of ethics, beyond the merely personal. To think that it can be otherwise is to undermine the integrity of the profession and threaten the public good with possible misinformation. The ability to affect change through journalism and how an ethical transgression in that process can compromise real-world process was a matter of national interest in the [Rolling Stone debacle](#). A striking [exposé](#) on campus rape seemed to slowly unravel when further investigations into its journalistic process came to light.

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Ethics policies aren't used as a "trap." They're instituted to ensure that fair practice and ethical standards are applied to journalists *across the board*. To be satisfied with coincidental personal ethics codes as sufficient for an "informal" ethics code is to be hugely optimistic about writers' infallibility – something that any growing news company, including those in new media, can ill afford to do. Not because we should assume the worst about people's personal ethics, but because leaving information that does, or at least claims to, inform the public, to entirely self-moderated and fallible individuals is assuming an unrealistic level of accountability that will be, intentionally or unintentionally, overlooked at some point.

In those situations, a standard ensures that there is a cohesive and continuous ethical attitude for journalistic decisions, including the sourcing of information (made all the more complicated with the advent of digital-age hacking and other techniques) and its method of presentation.

Ethics policies filter the dross and make sure that what comes through has been a product of legitimate means. And while exceptional cases may arise – phone-tapping, national security – there is no doubt that ethical sourcing and practice *always* makes information more valuable.

Undoubtedly, the digital era has challenged this.

It's easy to see how new media may see ethics policies as archaic, and as an impediment to new voices that clamber to be heard on platforms that traditional media had previously held firmly within its control.

Citizen journalism, bloggers, and the new media sites represented at the panel discussion, have risen to the fore as contemporary voices of a generation influenced less by what media leaders spout than by what their friends think. Information dissemination is no longer restricted to media elites and traditional platforms, and as a whole, an unprecedented egalitarianism has overtaken the face of journalism in its current permutation.

Yet, why should this challenge lead to the conclusion that ethics policies be abandoned entirely or replaced by laxer standards? Why should we choose to lower ethical standards so that new digital voices can easily rise to the fore, rather than demand that these voices be wielded with the same responsibility? Why should ethics policies be seen as antithetical to the fostering of yet more vigorous, but productive discourse?

The advent of digital journalism with its accessibility has stripped away all but the most fleeting notion of a centrally controlled news and information machine. But this progression should not be seen as the opportunity to take on every, and any, less-than-qualified opinion, but rather, an opportunity to foster responsible debate, opinion and ethical methods of communicating information.

Crafting any sort of over-arching guideline, no matter how general, will always

present a challenge to flexibility, spontaneity and what may seem like the space needed for truly important voices to emerge in this new age of journalism.

But arguably, guidelines are exactly what the digital medium needs if it wants to define itself as journalism, as the new media panelists on Wednesday evening did.

A clearly articulated ethics policy is not just preferable to the anarchy of personal policies – it's essential. Any publication worth its salt, even in (and probably even more so in) the digital age, must be willing to be held accountable to a standard of ethics, and ready to tussle with reporting responsibly if it wants to stay above the mire of unqualified information now readily available.

If new media journalism wants to claim the title of journalism, it needs to have a standard that differentiates itself from any Internet user with an unqualified opinion, or risk being drowned out in the sound.

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