**Prospects and challenges of online journalism**

**• Speed vs. Accuracy**

When print was the only medium available to the journalists ample time was available for research, publishing and editing. Indeed, only a few publishers had access to printing press with which to make the product. As mass media progressed, new forms of print and broadcasting appeared, time allowed for journalistic expression shrank. Internet allows news to move at tremendous dispatch limited only by the speed of electron or electromagnetic wave. The immediacy brought by the online environments everyone is a potential publishers, allows for even less care by the journalist and editor.

The speed and anonymity provided by the internet can play fast but loose with journalistic ethics and can affect accuracy and credibility.

Accuracy -- to get the facts and context of a story right -- is a fundamental norm of ethical journalism. Inaccurate reporting undermines important news stories and can mislead the public. Accuracy is the indispensable value in journalism and must not be compromised in Cyber Journalism.

Accurate reporting has never been easy, given journalism’s deadline- driven nature. But today, accuracy is further challenged, as news-making adopts the internet medium.

One of the greatest benefits of online journalism is its ability to reach millions of people almost instantaneously. But the pressure to keep news current – online within minutes of an event’s occurrence – can put at risk the accurate reporting of even the most ethically-conscious journalist. Adding to the pressure is the public’s increasing demand to see news as it happens. So it is certainly extremely – and increasingly – challenging. A balance is necessary between speed and accuracy. The public demands it, and so do journalistic codes of ethics. The consequences of disseminating falsehoods can be equally serious as the consequence of delayed news-dissemination.

**• Trained and multi skill able reporters**

Another challenge towards online journalism is the convergence. Convergence reporters must be trained to report in multiple media. They should be multi skill able to work in a converged media environment. If necessary, a convergence reporter might file a brief for the Web, edit video for television and then write a story for the next day's paper. Convergence reporters often specialize in a single medium, but their familiarity with other forms of storytelling gives them an edge in today's ever-changing media landscape. Furthermore, there is so much information available online that it can be difficult working out where to start and where to stop gathering it. With the change to a much broader reliance on the Internet and web for news, it will become increasingly important for journalists to be multi skilled able to work in more than one medium, and preferably in several, in what has become known as a converged media environment.

**From gate keeping to gate watching**

For a long time, gate keeping has provided a dominant paradigm for journalistic news gathering and news publishing in the mass media, both for journalists’ own conceptualization of their work and for academic studies of this mediation process. In media such as print, radio, and TV, with their inherent structures of available column space, air time, or transmission frequencies, it is necessary to have established mechanisms which keep watch over these gates and select events to be reported according to specific criteria of newsworthiness. Gate keeping is the process by which selections are made in media work, especially decisions whether or not to admit a particular news story to pass through the “gates” of a news medium into the news channels. Lately, however, the effectiveness of gate keeping has been questioned from a number of perspectives: on the one hand, increasingly ‘the practice of journalism is being contaminated from outside. The “fourth estate” is in danger of being overwhelmed by the “fifth estate”, the growing number of “PR merchants and spin doctors” influencing the news agenda’ (Turner et al. 2000: 29, following Franklin) and undermining the reliability of the gate keeping process itself. This is also related to the fact that ever since the emergence of 24-hour broadcast news services and even more so since the advent of online news the reporting speed required of news services has also increased steadily, which has made gatekeepers even more likely to rely on prepared material from this ‘fifth estate’ rather than spending time and money on their own, independent research. Further, the addition of the World Wide Web to the media mix has meant that news consumers are now far less reliant on what passes through the gates of the mainstream news organizations, but can bypass these altogether and turn directly to first-hand information providers. Technological advances are opening up opportunities for individuals to express themselves to a wider audience. The consumer is turning producer as the affordability and ease of operation of digital recorders, still cameras and DVCs make confident non-journalists to record and transmit coverage of news events.

This disintermediation has meant, therefore, that online the gates are now located with the information providers (ultimately, with anyone who publishes a Website with potentially newsworthy information) as well as with the end user.

Thus, for the online context gate keeping may no longer be the most appropriate newsgathering paradigm; instead, it is replaced with an alternative approach to gate keeping altogether that is gate watching. This practice of monitoring the content of external sites and alerting the community to new developments can usefully be described as ‘gate watching’ I: users-as-journalists watch the gates of other publications to see what material passes through them – but they have no ability to prevent that material from being published, or to keep other users from reporting material which they themselves might have considered less than newsworthy.Gatewatching is a significant modification to the power structures of journalism; the focus has shifted away from a strict selection of ‘all the news that’s fit to print’ (leaving anything else unpublished), to the alerting of readers to the most relevant of information from all the content which is currently available. Gate watchers fundamentally publicize news (by pointing to sources) rather than publish it (by compiling an apparently complete report from the available sources). While maintaining the benefits of gate keeping (specifically, the ability to provide readers with an overview of current key news), this addresses several problems inherent in the gatekeeper approach:

* Stories have the potential to be more deeply informative, since readers are able to explore the source materials directly, and in full;
* The speed of news reporting increases since new stories can be posted as soon as source information is found anywhere on the Net, without a need to wait for journalists to file their stories or gatekeepers to complete their evaluation;

the newsgathering process becomes more transparent, and readers are not prevented from checking a report’s sources for themselves, but instead encouraged to do so; the news gatherer’s personal bias may still affect their own report, but since readers are more likely to consult original sources this bias will have a reduced effect; Gate watchers do not require significant journalistic skills, but instead need to have more general online research skills.

This is linked to the new media-driven shift from news as information to news as myth. Some downsides or challenges are clearly visible:

* + Gate watching relies almost entirely on the availability of existing news sources
  + It evaluates and publicizes news, but does not create news reports itself.
  + Misinformation and bias in the original sources will therefore be passed through to the reader.
  + Gate watching also requires more work of the reader, who (in line with general trends for online audiences) really must be an active user rather than a passive recipient of news, and takes on some of the role of the traditional gatekeeper-journalist themselves: by passing through the gates pointed out by the gate watcher, the user in their search for information and their evaluation of what they find becomes their own gatekeeper. But people in developing countries are not much aware and are passive users.
  + Finally, gate watching also continues to rely on the gate watchers’ intuition of what news topics might interest their users. News as myth is myth, after all – but at the very least the plurality of gate watcher sites enables a plurality of divergent myths. ‘People are increasingly able to seek out stories and storytellers who challenge and reject views of the state scribes [i.e., of the major political and economic interests]. People tell each other news as myth. News as myth is myth, after all – They must have the ability to find others who share and confirm their views of the world.
  + People must have the research skills and their ability to make the most of electronic networks and cheap digital equipment for news production and distribution.

**Ethical and legal challenges**

Following re the ethical and legal challenges of online journalism and must not be compromised to maintain the issues of credibility and reliability.

**Accuracy:**

Cyber journalists must deliver error-free content. They must ensure that their content is a verifiable representation of the news. Those who depend upon them for information should never be intentionally mislead. Journalist must be accurate with their target audiences. Sometimes it's OK to print information that they haven't confirmed with multiple sources. Just make sure that you label it as such. Never ever publish information that you know not to be true.

**Corrections:**

Cyber Journalists should admit mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Correct what we get wrong as promptly and as clearly as possible. Establish systems to enable readers to alert us to mistakes and hold us accountable.

**Copyrights and never plagiarism:**

Journalist must value original thought and expression. Their work should be free from fraud and deception. That includes plagiarism and fabrication. They must attribute content and honor copyrights. It includes not just cutting and pasting whole articles, but copying photos, graphics, video and even large text excerpts from others and putting them on your web page as well. If they want to reference something on another website, link it instead. If they are concerned that the page you're linking to will disappear, give your readers the name of the publication that published the page, its date of publication and a short summary of its content. Just like news reporters used to reference other content before the Web.

**Identify and link to sources:**

Cyber journalist should act honorably and ethically in dealing with news sources. He/she should Identify and link to sources, whenever feasible. The public should entitle to as much information as possible on sources' reliability. He/she should always question sources’ motives before promising secrecy. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information.

**Privacy:**

Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only a dominant public need can justify interruption into anyone's privacy. Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.

**Distortion of the content of photos and videos:**

Never distort the content of photos without disclosing what has been changed or digitally alter photographs to mislead the audience. Image enhancement is only acceptable for technical clarity. Montage and photo illustrations should be label. Any attempt to confuse readers or misrepresent visual information is prohibited. In photographing news, do not stage or restructure events. Similarly, in editing video, do not insert words or splice together statements made at different times so as to suggest that they were uttered at the same time. Pieces of an interview or address generally should be presented in the order that they occurred. If an interview is presented in question-and answer format, the questions must be presented as they were asked. Reaction shots may not be altered after the fact. Staging is prohibited.

**Distinguish factual information and commentary from advertising:**

Cyber journalists should distinguish factual information and commentary from advertising and avoid hybrid or mixture that blurs the lines between the two.

**Distinguish between advocacy, commentary and factual information:**

Even advocacy writing and commentary should not misrepresent facts or context of the news event. So, Cyber journalist should strive to distinguish between advocacy, commentary and factual information.

**Define and clearly Label, news and opinion:**

Journalists and news organizations should understand the necessity of defining, and clearly labeling, news and opinion. In an open environment like the Web, consistency in presentation can help the reader see clearly where the lines are drawn between news and opinion. Whenever journalists or organizations blur or blend those roles, they need to recognize the risk and consider the consequences.

**Linking decisions:**

The linking decision requires more specific considerations, including the relevance and reliability of the material that might be linked. Linking decisions should be based on serving the audience with as accurate and as complete a picture of the world as possible. Such decisions should not be restricted by commercial concerns about sending customers to others' sites. Linking is at the core of the Web experience, tying together content that allows readers to discover unexpected treasures and contextual information that can't comfortably fit into print and broadcast paradigms. But linking also comes with challenges for media organizations. Until now, content was easily classified -- it was in the paper or it wasn't; it was broadcast on the air or it wasn't. Linking has created a netherworld in which media companies can point to sites without assuming responsibility for their veracity or standards. So how do media sites embrace linking without compromising their core values?

**Principles & Values**

* A link to an external site does not signify an endorsement of that site or its point of view. It is merely a signal to the reader that there may be content of interest on the destination site.
* Despite this, media sites should make it clear to their readers -- in the user agreement, site guidelines or via some other method – that there's a difference in standards between the content that resides on their own site and the content they link to.
* Because of the spider-like nature of the Web, media sites can't be expected to apply even these relaxed standards to the content of sites that are linked to from sites we link to (the two-click rule).
* When readers put their own links to content in message boards, blog posts, etc., those links should be considered user-generated content and subject to the same controls.
* All media sites should to link to external sites. Linking off-site is an extension of your site's user experience and fosters a feeling of openness that's conducive to repeat visits. Trying to keep readers within just your site is a losing proposition.
* When linking, sites should not be forced into including links that support all sides of an issue. While news articles themselves should adhere to the traditional standards of fairness and accuracy, assuring balance in links run counters to the concept of providing only useful links to the reader.

**Protocols**

When deciding whether to links to other parts of your own site, ask yourself the following questions:

* Is this content being linked to relevant to someone who would be reading/viewing this content?
* When choosing whether to include a link to another site, ask yourself the following questions:
* Is the linked content relevant for someone who would be reading/viewing this content?
* Does the content being linked include content that could potentially fall within the area of defamation or libel?
* If the content being linked to falls outside the standards of your site, should you include notification of that fact (i.e., notify users of profanity, nudity, etc.)?
* Are you responsible when you link to something offensive?
* What about when that link links to something really offensive?

**How do you decide when a user should be banned from publishing on your site?**

This question raises a fundamental tension for journalists working in digital media: the need for a news organization to accommodate conflicting views at the same time it creates and maintains a community of civil discourse and debate. News organizations should create terms of service for users contributing content to the news organization's digital editions. Such terms cover such issues as the use of obscenity, personal attacks, etc. in material published by non- staffers. Publishers should also be clear about the consequences for violating terms of service, e.g. immediate banning from further posting, suspension, etc.