

Online ethics and the bloggers' code revealed

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Whatever their reason for posting their thoughts online, bloggers have a shared ethical code, according to a recent study published in the journal *New Media Society*, published by SAGE. Key issues in the blogosphere are telling the truth, accountability, minimizing harm and attribution, although the extent to which bloggers follow their own ethical ideals can depend on the context and intended audience.

Creating weblogs (blogs) is often viewed as a form of [citizen journalism](#), open to anyone with Internet access. As it grows in prevalence and influence, communication scholars, news media, governments and bloggers themselves have raised questions about blogging's ethical implications. Some academics propose that bloggers should follow an ethics code, based on standards journalists follow. But few researchers have examined ethical standards bloggers themselves aspire to, and whether they adhere to their own ethical standards.

Blog tracking site Technorati tracked some 113 million blogs in early 2008, although not all blogs are active or updated frequently. A blog can be a personal journal for family and friends. But many bloggers aspire to reach a wider audience and create non-personal blogs, which cover everything else from commerce or politics to entertainment and technology.

Andy Koh, Alvin Lim and Ng Ee Soon of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore used a web survey of 1224 international bloggers with active, text-based blogs to find out more about bloggers, their ethical ideals and how they put these into practice. Of those surveyed,

more than half were male (51%), most were under 30 (65%). Most were well educated, and the majority were from the USA (65%), with no other country accounting for more than eight percent of the participants.

Sharing thoughts and feelings or creating an online diary is the main drive for personal bloggers, who are mainly students (39%) and information technology industry workers (9%). These bloggers often feel they know their readers very well (62%) with many blogging for those they know personally (39%).

Non-personal bloggers are more likely to be male, older, married and better educated. Students (18%) and information technology workers (12%) still make up the largest proportions of this group. The non-personal bloggers' main reasons for blogging are to make commentary (36%) or provide information (21%). Among their diverse blog topics, government and politics (28%) and news (10%) are most common. Their primary intended audiences tend to be people that they do not know personally (48%), or no particular intended audience (38%). Despite this, almost half still feel they know their readers well.

The researchers identified four underlying ethical principles important to bloggers: truth telling, accountability, minimizing harm and attribution. Truth telling involves honesty, fairness and completeness in reporting. Accountability involves being answerable to the public, bearing the consequences of one's actions and revealing conflicts of interest, and minimizing harm underlies issues involving privacy, confidentiality, reputational harm, consideration of others' feelings, and respecting diversity and underprivileged groups. Attribution covers issues such as avoiding plagiarism, honouring intellectual property rights and giving sources proper credit.

The researchers found that personal bloggers valued attribution most, followed by minimizing harm, truth telling and accountability

respectively. Non-personal bloggers valued both attribution and truth-telling most, followed by minimizing harm, then accountability. For both groups, attribution was most valued, and accountability least valued. But between these two groups, truth telling was most valued among non-personal bloggers, whereas personal bloggers valued minimizing harm more than non-personal bloggers did.

"This first large-scale survey of blogging ethics revealed no shocking lack of ethics in these areas," says Koh. But he adds: "Ethics codes may be little more than a set of ideals, unless they have 'teeth' in the form of sanctions".

Attribution was paramount for both groups (non-personal bloggers valued truth-telling as much as attribution). Attribution is vitally important among bloggers for building community. But did they put this into practice? Where the non-personal bloggers were concerned, attribution was practised as frequently as truth-telling and minimizing harm. But despite the importance they placed on attribution, personal bloggers were actually better at minimising harm than at attribution.

Credibility counts. The authors suggest that non-personal bloggers practise truth telling, attribution and minimizing harm with similar frequency because they want their content taken seriously. As in journalism, offering readers sources and providing links makes for more convincing blogging than just telling the 'truth' alone.

Accountability was valued and practised least by both groups of bloggers. Some reasons for this may be a belief that bloggers cannot be sued for blog content, or a perception that the social risk of a failed relationship with readers is fairly low compared to a failed face-to-face interaction.

The study also highlights how a personal blog on thoughts and feelings is

necessarily more subjective, and so a belief in telling the truth ranks behind attribution and avoiding harm. When your primary audience is more likely to consist of people you know, minimizing harm may be a higher priority than telling the truth.

The present findings revealed no significant difference between personal and non-personal bloggers' agreement on the need for a blogging ethics. But even a self-imposed bloggers' ethics code may constrain the free expression championed in much of the blogosphere, or interfere with bloggers' autonomy to make ethical decisions.

The exceptionally large, diverse and informally linked blogosphere may not be particularly suited to self-regulation. But in reality bloggers profess that they value the principles and adhere to the practices explored in this study. Less ethical bloggers can also expect payback: the blogosphere is more interactive than traditional media, allowing instant and often vigorous feedback to bloggers that violate readers' standards. This 'sanction' on unethical behaviour may replace the need for a formal blogging ethics code.

More information: Doing the right thing online: a survey of bloggers' ethical beliefs and practices by Mark Cenite, Benjamin H. Detenber, Andy W.K. Koh, Alvin L.H. Lim and Ng Ee Soon is published online today in *New Media Society*, published by SAGE (2009; 11; 575).

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