C.O.B.E: A Proposed Code of Blogging Ethics

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"Ethics is not censoring. No one is saying you cannot write whatever you want. The issue here is: are you deceiving the public…What we are talking about here is the people who do have ethics, the people who don't lie, gathering together to say that they are in agreement on a certain set of standards." – (Calcanis, Nov.18, 2004)

BLOGS AND BLOGGING

There are new rhetorical spaces on the Web called weblogs, or more popularly "blogs." Those communicating in these spaces call themselves "bloggers."   Gurak *et.al.*, offered what has become the most popular definition of blogs when they wrote, "At this point in their development, blogs are best described as web sites that are updated frequently, most often with links to other sites and commentary on the other sites' content." (Gurak et. al., 2004) A blog is defined by its form not its content. As blogger Elisa Camahort posted, "[I] think "blogs" are not just one thing. There are many different kinds of blogs. Blogging is, more than anything else, a tool."(2004) Indeed, Gurak *et.al.* wrote, "The content of blogs combine musings, memories, jokes, reflections on research, photographs, rants, and essays, though we would argue that it is not the nature of the content that defines it…What characterizes blogs are their form and function: all posts to the blog are time-stamped with the most recent post at the top, creating a reverse chronological structure governed by spontaneity and novelty." (2004) In addition, most blogs offer readers an opportunity to publish comments, also time-stamped, to each blog entry. This ritual of posting and commenting constitutes "blogging."

As blogs are defined by their form and function rather than content, it stands to reason that there are many conceptualizations of what a blog is. Though bloggers may agree on what constitutes the rhetorical artifact called "blog" they will likely disagree on how the "purpose" of blogging and the "function" of blogs are defined. The first step in the process of designing a code of blogging ethics is examine just what bloggers consider blogging to be. As blogger Fred Stutzman posted, "Blogs play distinctly different roles for different groups. Communities of teen bloggers may view the phenomenon differently from journalist bloggers. And journalist bloggers may view the phenomenon differently from sex bloggers. Communities of practice do adopt context-based standards for using the medium, though." (Stutzman, 2004) Blogger Jacob Kaufman laments that, "The function of the average blog would seem to be to allow fourteen year old girls inflict

terrible poetry on the Internet." (2004) Members of the mainstream media, often the target of blog criticism, often hold blogging in low regard as evidenced by this recent quote from retired CBS correspondent Eric Engberg who wrote this as a piece about bloggers covering the 2004 election: "[I] worked on a school newspaper when I was a kid and I owned a CB radio when I lived in Texas. And what I saw in the blogosphere on November 2 was more reminiscent of that school paper or a "Breaker, breaker 19" gabfest on CB than anything approaching journalism." (2004)

For the purpose of this analysis blogs will be divided into two general types: personal and journalistic. A personal blog is typically maintained by an individual as a personal exercise. It is similar in form to an electronic diary. Journalistic bloggers emphasize the information function of the medium as they function as the watchdogs of mainstream media and, on occasion, break their own original stories. Blogs of either type can be considered a commercial blog. No matter the subjectr, a blogger can work to build larger and larger reading audiences with the intention of selling advertising space on his or her blog and "go commercial." Any valid code of ethics that might apply to the blogosphere will necessarily need to take into to consideration values both unique to and shared among these different types of blogging cultures.

With so many different motivations for blogging and such a wide variety of blog contents, why even try to create a code of blog ethics? Because blogs are becoming popular. Even though they have been around in one form or another since the mid-nineties, it was the 2004 Presidential campaign that launched blogs from the sidelines of mainstream America to the center of the mediascape. Bloggers were invited to blog from the floors of both the Republican and Democratic national conventions. They were credited for breaking the story about Dan Rather's use of forged documents in a news story (Rathergate). The mainstream media have now started to feature blogs by their better known journalists and even use certain credible blogs to generate and validate news stories. It is evident that blogs have now become a recognized source of information and commentary for certain segments of the public. If bloggers are going to continue breaking stories, critiquing the mainstream media, and being used by political parties and advertisers to reach certain target markets, then a question ought to be asked regarding the responsibilities of bloggers.

This study is not the first effort to define blogging ethics. In her groundbreaking 2002 book, *the weblog handbook,* Rebecca Blood put forth six standards of ethical behavior for bloggers (See Appendix A). Blood's proposed standards stressed the importance of "transparency" in blogging. In 2004, Cyberjournalist.net founder Jonathan Dube, adapted the newly adopted code of ethics used by the Society of Professional Journalists for use by bloggers (See Appendix B). These codes have not yet been formally adopted for use in the blogosphere. A recent debate about blogging ethics erupted online when Nick Denton and Jason Calacanis, both successful commercial bloggers, called for both a blogging code of ethics and a blogging association to oversee the distribution of graphic seals that can be displayed on the blogs of bloggers who adhere to the code. The concept of commercial bloggers conceiving of a code of behavior has resulted in an uproar among bloggers who consider themselves champions of free expression. Critics of Denton and Calacanis accuse them of having a conflict of interest and of supporting the creation of a code and an association solely to attract and assuage advertisers who are considering investing in space on a new medium for the first time.

PURPOSE

This author agrees with the critics of Denton and Calacanis. If there is a need for a new code, it should be proposed by a neutral party, such as an academic. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to propose a general code of blogging ethics. A review of relevant scholarship in the area of new communication technology ethics will be used to identify certain values and duties that have been considered important as new communication forms emerged in the past. These values and duties, defined by the academy, will be compared to the prevailing ethic in the blogosphere today, defined by bloggers themselves. A new code will then be created to assimilate the ethical values and duties identified by both groups. Blogger responses were collected from a survey blog designed and hosted by the author for the express purpose of gathering data for this paper. The blog is located at blogethics2004.blogspot.com, and all the posts and comments received as a result of this project are still there, unedited, along with any responses received since. Not every response is available on the site as bloggers were given the option of responding privately to the author via e-mail rather than by public post.

NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY ETHICS SCHOLARSHIP

Though not a new technology, blogging is a new type of discourse made possible by technological innovation. Low cost and ease of use have allowed hundreds of thousands access to what Habermaas would consider a new "third place" for free expression and virtual assembly. As more and more people look to these online journals for insight into news, old dilemmas faced by traditional media emerge once again. As *Journalism and Mass Media Ethics* editor Jay Black warned, "New technology and delivery systems make it necessary for journalists to develop new, more sophisticated, ethical decision-making skills…a balance must be struck between freedoms and responsibilities, between unlimited and irresponsible access to and utilization of information" (Black 1994, pg.133-134)**.** Some debate remains regarding whether so-called news-bloggers are in fact journalists, but they are disseminating information and they do have an audience. A few scholarly explorations that have been made regarding ethical issues and new communication technologies are discussed below and linked to the current debate.

Bloggers consider "truth" to be one of the core values and duties of those publishing weblogs. In the mid-eighties, communication ethics scholars focused on how new technologies enabled different types of deception. Scholars wrote about deceptive newsgathering as recording devices became smaller, more sensitive, and thus more easily hidden, and they also discussed how digital editing technologies were making it easier to manipulate the forms in which information was presented. Deceptive practices in the blogosphere include misrepresenting opinion as fact, plagiarism, conflicts of interest, and newer trends such as word of mouth marketing (WOM). In WOM, blogging forms, "personal musings…journal entries" and an informal atmosphere, are manipulated to hide commercial messages. In effect, blogs become conversational camouflage for marketing companies who hire bloggers to blog (promote) their products. Surprisingly, this debate over advertorials and conflict of interest has sparked more recent debate in the blogosphere than standard journalistic issues regarding sourcing and copyright violation.

Some scholars have explored the motivations behind deceptive behavior as enabled by new technologies. One, Don Tomlinson (1987), proposed four hypothetical scenarios in which the public was deceived by the use of digital editing equipment. He

then discussed the motivations behind these actions by media practitioners. Tomlinson warned that practitioners would be tempted to use this technology to advocate personal causes, compete with other media, advance their careers, and, by means of garnering a reputation for reporting on sensational stories, gratify their own ego. Similar motivations exist for many bloggers. As the blogosphere becomes more crowded, there is a naturally occurring competition for readers. The more entertaining or sensational a blog's content, the more "eyeballs" it will capture on a regular basis. As advertisers begin to invest in blog space, bloggers need to demonstrate steady readership and frequent comments to their posts in order to attract funding for their efforts. There are also more civically minded bloggers who strive to attract and retain readers, not so much to attract advertising dollars, but instead to advocate for a particular cause, raise donations, get someone elected, or call out activists to a demonstration. In the process of making an impassioned argument, bloggers may at times, intentionally or unintentionally, use technology to deceive readers. Thus, the same motivations that might drive a network reporter or newspaper journalist to manipulate photographs, plagiarize, or make-up sources are at play in blogosphere. For this reason alone an exploration of how bloggers make content decisions is warranted.

In the late eighties Lou Hodges was writing about the ethical considerations in newsgathering when reporters started to use secret taping and recording devices to surreptitiously tape sources. His work focused on the question of when it is necessary to disclose to a source that one is a journalist (Hodges, 1988). This debate has been reformed in the blogosphere. Just as reporters had the new-found ability to record sources without their knowledge, bloggers have the ability to access millions of websites and use text, images, audio files, and video without those who originally created the content being aware. Online discussions among bloggers regarding this practice stress the need for bloggers to be up front with sources, to provide links to the original source material, to get permission from the originators before using their material. Later in this paper, it is shown that many bloggers have ranked "factual truth" and "free expression" as the two highest duties of the "good" blogger. It would stand to reason that any workable code of blog ethics would need to address a balance between these values and encourage practices that would enhance both.

In 1985, Deni Elliot put forth a hierarchical arrangement of deceptive newsgathering practices, focused mainly on the decision of when it was necessary for the identity of a journalist to be revealed to a source. Each practice could be justified given the particular situation in which it was used (Elliott, 1985). Hodges proposed that this arrangement of deceptive practices (from least deceptive to most deceptive: concealment, passive misrepresentation, active misrepresentation, and masquerading) is ineffective because at each of the four levels the journalist's intent to deceive is the same and at each level the source is equally deceived (Hodges, 1988, p.30). Thus, the ethical use of deception and deceptive technologies in newsgathering (or blogging) should be determined on a case-by-case basis. As blogging has yet to evolve, in most cases, to the point of actually investigating potential news stories, deceiving sources is rarely an issue. However, the three-part test that Hodges conceived as a response to Elliott's hierarchical arrangement might be applied to bloggers as they decide whether or not to "borrow" content on the web. Ultimately, Hodges concluded deceptive (or dishonest) practices might be justified if: "First, the information sought must be of overriding public importance…Second, there must be no reasonable likelihood that comparably accurate and reliable information could be obtained as efficiently through conventional investigational techniques…Third, the deception contemplated must not place innocent people at serious risk" (Hodges 1988, pg. 31-32) Thus, if a blogger is commenting on an issue that meets these criteria, not getting permission to use or link to certain content might be justifiable. However, as is discussed below, bloggers should be as transparent as possible regarding such actions.

One key idea that surfaces in discussions of journalistic (and blogging) conflicts of interest and the use of deception is that of transparency, the ability of a journalist or blogger to reveal political leanings, commercial affiliations, sources, and methods so as to not to mislead readers. As the interactive nature of blogging ideally fosters one-on-one relationships between bloggers and their readers, the success of a blog will rely heavily upon trust. Trust relies strongly on identity. Jane Singer (1996) recognized a need to study the effect of virtual anonymity in online discussions (blogs are a direct descendent of the electronic bulletin boards studied by Singer). After a content analysis of political discussion boards during the 1994 campaign season, Singer concluded that discussion

board participants were mainly interested in developing their self-identities through this new form of participatory democracy, and they used this political dialogue to connect with others and build community. Singer wrote, "Anonymity raises ethical questions about identification and accountability to others in the online community, but it can also enable people to join conversations from which they might otherwise be excluded" (Singer 1996, pg.100). Bloggers were asked to rank accountability and transparency for the purpose of this study. Though both were considered vital, neither was the most highly held value.

Dualism, a common theory applied in Internet research, references the potential of an individual to have two separate identities: one in the real world and one created for use in the virtual world. Singer focused on this inherent duality in researching these online discussions. People have online identities, but these identities are easily abandoned. People are accountable for their online statements, but only as long as they stay visible. Ultimately, how does "accountability" exist as a construct in an e-environment wherein bloggers, if caught in a lie or misrepresentation, can simply delete their entire blog and reemerge with a new identity? One rule practiced by bloggers involves a suspension of disbelief wherein once a blogger makes a post, that post should be treated as if it were carved in stone and bloggers have a duty never to erase their posts…warts and all. Such a commitment to maintaining an identity in order to be accountable for statements made on a blog will need to be a central tenant to a proposed bloggers' code of ethics.

Some consider the blogosphere a fruitful resource for journalists as it offers direct access to public opinion. Singer saw the same potential for discussion boards in 1996 when she noted that these online dialogues were great journalistic sources because the sentiments of voters, consumers, and media audiences could be tapped directly. Her study illustrated the ethical challenges for journalists working in the online environment. Unlike the blog or discussion board participants, Singer contended that journalists must be accountable and online anonymity (dualism) works against this. Unlike the "negotiated" standards recognized by Elliott and Hodges in their discussion of journalists in the "real" world, Singer believed that ethical journalists should identify themselves while participating in online discussion boards. Bloggers are never compelled to identify themselves and many advocate the position that bloggers have a duty to protect the

anonymity of fellow bloggers who wish to protect their real life identity. An ethical code for bloggers must decide which value, accountability or anonymity, should be prioritized in the blogosphere if the new medium is to become a trusted source of news and information. For Singer, ethical journalism involved taking responsibility for what is published, so journalists must give up their online anonymity (and the control that comes with it) and accept accountability for their product. She concluded, "a journalist's responsibility only grows as he or she enters the online world" (Singer 1996, Pg.105). Thus, it can be assumed that Singer would consider transparency and accountability central to ethical blogger as well.

Ethicist Sissela Bok's notion of "publicity" as an ethical framework established the following three-part test: (1) can we live with ourselves if we carry out a particular action; (2) we should consult peers, colleagues, and friends about the action; and (3) an ethical action is one that can pass the scrutiny of all members of a society (Bok 1989). This standard is often evoked by members of the mainstream media in justifying decisions regarding stories they print or broadcast. They can also be applied to an individual's decision to post content on a blog. Singer asserted that by using Bok's standard, individual discussion board (blog) participants empower themselves and enhance their self-definition by opting to contribute honestly to the conversation. And second, they enhance their community by considering the impact of their statements on all who are part of it, visible or not (Singer 1996, pg.98). A central theme in new communication technology ethics scholarship is a consideration of whether a new technology or new form of discourse enhances the human "self" and community or does not. If a particular technology does not, its use is at the very least likely driven by an empty technological determinism and at the worst can be considered amoral.

Communication technologies that build identity and community would be moral under Clifford Christians' dialogic theory. In most new media technology ethics scholarship, the tendency toward building community is highly valued in solving ethical dilemmas. George Gladney drew on both Christian's dialogic theory and Pacey's philosophy of technology (which centers on the notions of technological determinism and a technological imperative), when he examined tech effects at the community and cultural level. He concluded that media forms that allow users to select and receive only

content that interests them, and thus cater to the individual, will eventually erode one of the key community building function of the media. Defining this dissemination process as the "target model," Gladney argued "With the target model, a [medium] is a private outlook and individualistic in focus, seeing the community as a fragmented assortment of private affairs. For those of us concerned about the media's contribution to so-called 'eclipse of community,' the target model is a negative foreboding" (Gladney 1984, pg. 244). In Gladney's study of audiotext, he illustrated how the "form" of communication, as enabled by the technology in question, affects the "function" of communication in human society (1984). With audiotext, newspaper customers were able to call a pay-number to access a menu of news. It also used voice recognition software to replace receptionists, secretaries, customer service personnel, and even journalists with push-button menus and voicemail. The ethical concern was that in replacing human agents, newspapers themselves became less "human" and more removed from the community they served. Our culture changes and adapts with innovation, and thus will adopt new communicative behavior and technologies in the medisacape at the expense of the "human."

In 1991 Gladney critiqued five scholars whose work has been central to a theory which placed the history of media technologies at the center of the history of civilization. It asserted that media transformations have resulted in social change, and suggests that changes in the form of media have altered the structure of consciousness (Gladney 1991, pg.93). He discussed the theories of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Neil Postman, and Jacques Ellul using Clifford Christians' dialogic theory and the work of J. W. Carey. He determined theoretically that the more basic a form of communication, the more human and communal it is considered. In these discussions, the closer to "face to face" interpersonal communication a particular form of communication is, the more it enhances humanity and community and the more morally superior it is in principle. Gladney's examination of these scholars determined that each new generation of media technology increased the "complexity" of communication and thereby stripped the "humanness" and "community" from society. This progression represented a movement from Christians' "I-thou" dialogue to an "I-it" dialogue and is amoral because human concerns are subjugated to technocratic concerns. Function is being subjugated to form,

a recurring theme in new communication ethics scholarship. Gladney used Pacey's concept of technological determinism which identifies the needs that serve technocratic ends (form) as "virtuosity values" and needs that serve human ends (function) to be "user values." Gladney concluded that using media to serve user values will serve to build the "self" and community and is ethically superior to using new technology to the detriment of human and societal development.

It might be argued that blogging is a rhetorical forum serving user values as it fosters self-definition, one-to-one dialogue (while simultaneously maintaining a one-to-many), and it encourages community building. Nevertheless, since qualities such as identity and accountability are not solid constructs in the virtual world, interactivity may not equal interpersonal communication. Also, since the majority of communities created and served by the new medium exist solely in virtual space, do blogs really build community as discussed by Gladney, Christians, *et. al.*? The great diversity of blogs results in an answer of "sometimes." It ultimately depends on the values of the blogger. A blog is a tool that can be used to serve "user values" if bloggers recognize and embrace blogging "duties" likely to encourage one-to-one communication, relationship building, and, by extension, community building. A carefully conceived blogging code of ethics might well frame these duties and values and serve to foster the creation of a moral and "human" blogosphere.

In studies such as Gladney's, the value of the role of the media in building geographically-based communities is highly valued as is the role of human communication in building self-identity. However, the nature of the Internet lends itself more to the creation and maintenance of online communities and online identities. A number of scholars have explored "who" comprises these new virtual communities. Peter Horsfield (2003) wrestled with issues of access (the digital divide) and questions of whose worldview is shaping the virtual world. He identified five ethical questions about digital virtual reality (DVR): [T]o what extent is DVR not a not a genuine virtual reality that facilitates human creativity, but a technologically constructed artificial reality that inhibits rather than facilitates human development? (pg. 165); [T]o what extent does engagement with virtual reality becomes a distraction from addressing issues of practical reality. (pg. 165); [W]hat are the typical contents of these constructed realities, how

diverse are the opportunities they present to participants, and what is the nature and possible consequence of the constraints placed by these constructed realities. (pg. 167); Who has access to these technologies and the benefits they bring, with what consequences; and who is excluded, with what consequences; and whose narratives, world views, and political and economic interests are the source of these digital realities and whose narratives, world views, political and economic interests are excluded and with what consequences.

Thomas Bivins and Julianna Newton asserted that the real world and the virtual world inform one another and both have the potential to foster our moral growth (2003). At its foundation, their paper was another treatment of dualism. Their teleological study concluded that the development of electronic virtual reality is essentially good because it has the potential to improve what it is to be human. This echoed Horsfield's conclusion that there is an extension (or continuity) from the way virtual reality (imagination) has traditionally been used in real space to the way individuals will use computer mediated virtual reality to make decisions now. In that capacity, DVR will assist us in making decisions that will help to improve ourselves and our communities in the "real" world. Thus blogs and communities of bloggers, in providing a virtual space in which to discuss and debate have the potential to improve the human condition: the potential to do good. This positive potential will only be realized if bloggers recognize the problems of access and power discussed by Horsfield and adjust their practices to compensate for those weaknesses, or in Pacey's terms, to better serve user values.

Ethicists David Gunkel and Debra Hawhee were not as receptive to the role of virtual space and CMC in enhancing the "human." In 2003 they argued that technology, in extending available virtual realities to such a great extent, has de-humanized the "human" and has made humans over into "cyborgs" (Gunkel and Hawhee 2003).   They asserted that humans have a natural "will to truth" while machines possess a "will to deceive" as both strive to represent a human reality. For instance, humans will tend to desire to know "truth" and to discover their own self identity. In the online world, the mechanics of CMC attempt to replicate one-to-one communication, to fool participants in online discourse into thinking they are interacting with a genuine human agent rather than a preconceived online avatar of a human agent (blogger) communicating in a mediated

virtual space (blog).   This attempt to make the artificial more "real" is by nature deceptive and thus amoral. When we engage in discourse in the virtual environment, according to Gunkel and Hawhee, we do so as cyborgs, partly as humans and partly as machines, which moves us away from Christian's idealized "I-thou" communication model toward the "I-it" model.

Also refuting some of the positive assertions about blogging, namely that it is an egalitarian space that fosters political discourse and thus betters the democratic process, a 2004 study by Koch concluded that the Internet will actually erode the ethic of Western democracy because through virtual environments we have become, as Gunkle and Hawhee have asserted, cyborg participants rather than human participants in self-government. Koch's argument is based on the premise that Democracy is an activity requiring not only the collection of information but also the interactions of large numbers of individuals, in public forums, during which their ideas "can be examined and weighed against other ideas and policy options" (Koch 2004, pg.). For Koch, cyborgs who have been conditioned and thus altered by interacting in cyberspace are not the rational, politically engaged human agents, required for successful self-government. This argument can be traced back to Gladney's (1984) assertion that we are conditioned by the form of media in our society. According to Gunkel and Hawhee and Koch, humans have been transformed by CMC into cyborgs with no concrete human identity, no geographical similarities, and no accountability. As a form of mediated communication between cyborgs, blogs can be considered amoral at the core, but can a code of behavior designed to enhance identity and accountability inject enough of the "human" into blogs to make them morally justifiable?

How can the public trust blogs absent identity and accountability? In 2003, Paula Tompkins conducted a study predicated upon the concept that a public must trust a media institution to disseminate truth. In this paper, that can be restated as, to meet user based needs bloggers need to perform such duties as will allow their readers to trust them more freely. Tompkins wrote, "Cyberspace raises new concerns about truth and trust in communication because reference points for checking our perceptions are difficult to discern. If recognizing the truthfulness of what others say becomes problematic, trust fundamental to relationships and community is weakened, making ongoing

communication difficult and sometimes impossible" (Tompkins 2003, pg.196). In her study, Tompkins applied the concepts of "rhetorical presence" and dialogic "presentness" to CMC. She asserted that when one is in a state of telepresense (when a person does not recognize that the messages she/he is receiving have been filtered through a technology), message recipients will read human scripts into (humanize) machine script, attempting to approximate face to face communication. Tompkins concluded, "[C]ompetent computer-mediated communicators need to be cognizant of how the form of computer mediated communication (CMC) not only influences messages and relationships, but encourages us to draw inferences mindlessly—to trust too much or too soon and to create hyperpersonal relationships, or to distrust too much or too soon and engage in flaming" (Tompkins 2003, pg. 208). The key is to avoid trusting online journalists or bloggers too much or too soon. According to Tompkin's work, we must determine which blogging behaviors might provide more "human" cues to blog readers. How do we "humanize" the blogger and the discourse taking place in the virtual space of a blog, and whether such steps will serve to facilitate communication more so between humans rather than cyborgs.

This brief review of new communication technology ethics scholarship has uncovered several important values that should be addressed in the code proposed by this study. They are: reduce deception, increase transparency, disclose and maintain a singular identity, promote equality, emphasize the human elements in blog discourse, promote community, be accountable for posted content, credit sources, and ask permission from creators before linking to items on the Web. Having identified these duties in the media ethics scholarship, the next task is to determine what values and duties are recognized by practicing bloggers. These two data sets should provide the core set of duties for the new code of blogging ethics.

THE PREVAILING BLOGGING ETHIC

In order to ascertain the prevailing ethic in the blogosphere, the author created a blog (available at blogethics2004.blogspot.com) that featured five questions aimed at active bloggers. Three of the questions were framed by ethical constructs put forth by philosophers John Rawls, W.D. Ross, and Immanuel Kant. When a decision is to be made by a blogger, it is logical to ask who might be affected by his or her decision.

Rawls would consider those groups and individuals "stakeholders" in the blog. The question inspired by Rawls read, "Who are the "stakeholders" with regard to your blog? Who will be affected by what you post?" W.D. Ross recognized the necessary existence of *prima facie* values, none of which could be a universal imperative or prioritized in all instances. Instead, when making decisions, individuals must weigh these values in relation to one another and make the decision on the most important value in that instance. Using this construct, bloggers were asked the following question, "When making decisions about your blog, do any of the following values or duties cross your mind? If so, which? Can you rank them?" They were given a list of the following values: transparency, accountability, minimizing harm to others, free expression, factual truth, and etiquette. Bloggers were also asked: "Are there any values/duties you feel should be weighed in a discussion of blogging?" This would allow participants to add their own values to the list. Lastly, the third question was inspired by Kant's concept of the categorical imperative. It read, "Are there certain duties ALL bloggers should fulfill... all the time... in order to be "good" bloggers? Are there certain things bloggers should NEVER do?" The two remaining questions on the survey site attempted to discern both how respondents perceived the function of blogging in society and the specific reasons, if any, that they started to blog.

Q1: John Rawls

Here is a brief exchange between two bloggers responding to Jason Calcanis' (the commercial blogger mentioned above who is proposing the creation of a blog ethics committee): *Dave*: "It's my domain; I pay the bandwidth, I say what I want, I take the consequences. No need for an ethics board." *Michael*: "Dave - that's like saying that the *NYTimes* owns the paper and ink it uses, so it doesn't need an ethics board either. Actions and decisions in blogging indeed have ethical import. Why do so many here feel there are no stakeholders in the blogosphere other than the bloggers themselves?" (Dave & Michael, Nov. 22, 2004) Is it true? Do bloggers see themselves as the only stakeholders in how they publish and what they publish on their blogs?

The answer appears to be yes…..and no. When the responses were tallied regarding the Rawls-based question the results indicated that respondents did see themselves as the primary and in some cases the sole stakeholder. (See Table 1.) The

second most common answer was their "readers." These two responses were far more frequent than any of the others.   Other groups who were consistently mentioned were: people the blogger knew in the "real" world such as family members, friends, and co-workers who read the blog; regular commentators on the blog (individuals who provide feedback publicly to the blogger); co-bloggers when the blog in question is published by a group rather than by a single blogger; and advertisers. Only one respondent mentioned "society at large" as a stakeholder which is very different than journalists in the mainstream media who tend to see their function as vital to the functioning of our Democracy.

Stakeholders	Q1	Q4	Total
The Blogger	14	3	17
Readers	14		14
Readers who know the blogger in "real" world	5	1	6
Members of a specific geographic community*	5		5
Regular Commentators	3		3
People who are the subjects of blog entries	3	1	4
Co-bloggers in a group blog	3		3
Bloggers listed in a blog's blogroll or otherwise linked to	2		2
Mainstream Media	2	7	9
Advertisers (Businesses)	2	1	3
Society at large	1	7	8
New communities		3	3
Minority groups with no political voice		3	3
Politicians		2	2
Consumers		**1**	1

(Table 1.)
* for instance: librarians, Helsinki, members of a particular church, but not society as a whole

If an analysis of the perceived stakeholders is restricted to answers to the Rawls question (Q1), a conclusion might be errantly drawn that bloggers publish primarily for their own self-satisfaction. It is hard to generalize from the high preference for wanting to satisfy one's self and one's readers because "who" these readers are varies widely from blog to blog. Given the form of a blog, a public diary, soapbox, or pulpit, it is accurate to assume that bloggers want readers, and that keeping their readers interested enough so that they will return to the blog must be a priority. Worthy of note is that a number of the groups mentioned in response to Q1 are those who know the blogger's real world identity

and are thus able to hold the blogger accountable for their online communication. Anonymous readers might decide to not return to a blog, but friends, family members, and co-workers, can be angered or upset, and they will not go away if one changes his or her user name. Anonymity is a highly valued commodity in the blogosphere, ethical bloggers should surrender it (ala Singer) in an effort to humanize discourse and be accountable for blog content.

Only one blogger indicated that they felt a duty to society at large. After a campaign during which blogs were credited with playing an active role in providing election coverage, it might be expected that bloggers would sound more like social or political activists. Instead, respondents primarily identified those in their immediate social network as the only stakeholders in their blogger decisions. Moreover, a number of these categories could likely be collapsed into the "The Blogger" category when one considers that the blogger may not want to upset those who know him/her because they want to avoid conflict in their social circles. After analyzing the answers to Q1, it is all about the blogger.

The third column in Table 1 tallies responses to the fourth question asked on the survey blog: "On a societal level, what role do blogs play?" The responses tended to be the exact opposite of those in the "stakeholder" question. The mainstream media and society at large were mentioned the most with minority groups, politicians, newly formed communities, and, again, the blogger themselves, mentioned next most often. Granted, in answering this question, respondents were trying to define what "blogs actually do in our society," so the query itself asked respondents to look beyond their own social circles. However, it is interesting when you compare the responses side by side in Table 1. When bloggers were considering their own blog, they didn't see it having much effect outside of their immediate circles. However, when discussing blogs in aggregate, bloggers seemed to recognize blogs as a vehicle for social change, a challenge to our mainstream media, a tool that can be leveraged for political and social gain. Table 2 lists the categories into which responses to the fourth question fell, the stakeholders listed in Table 1 had to be derived from these answers.

Purpose of Blogs in Society	Q4
To provide a "check" on the mainstream media	4
To bring stories to the public that would not be covered in the mainstream media	4
To become a new and accepted form of journalism	3
To allow minority groups who are typically not heard to express their views/concerns	3
To Create new communities of interest	3
To allow for unbridled self-expression	3
To compliment the mainstream media by providing additional views and sources	1
To allow direct access to public opinion	1
To be a platform for political and social activism	1
To give consumers a voice in the marketplace	1
To help readers understand the world (like an opinion column or editorial)	1
To maintain existing social networks in the "real" world	1
No special Role	1

(Table 2.)

Only two of the categories in Table 2 refer to benefits at the *individual* level: *to allow for unbridled self-expression* and *to maintain existing social networks in the "real" world*. The remaining categories speak to functions at the societal level. These two different sets of priorities demonstrate that if bloggers are going to adopt a code of ethics, that code will need to guide decision making that will protect the individual, the individual's immediate social network, as well as society at large by not restricting a blog's ability to shape public opinion.

Q2: W.D. Ross

The second question on the survey blog was designed to identify those values that are important to bloggers. Given the wide variety of blogs in the blogosphere, it would be helpful in the creation of a code to ascertain what types of behavior are valued. This question also yielded responses that could be compared to the values discussed in the new communication technologies ethics scholarship above. Table 3 is a summary of those values that were discussed by respondents. Though bloggers were asked to rank the six values listed on the site and add any they felt should be included, some just selected those values they felt were most important, some just added their own value(s), while others actually provided a ranking. The "total" column in Table 3 notes the total number of times a value was at least mentioned in a blogger's response. In columns one thru six, the number of times the value was ranked first, second, third, etc. is indicated. The

column headed by "N/A" indicates the number of times a particular value was intentionally not ranked by respondents. For instance, if a respondent wrote, "In my opinion Transparency does not apply in any way to the blogosphere," then transparency would get a note in the N/A column.

Prima Facie Duties	Total	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	N/A	Gen.
Transparency	13	3	2	2	1	1	1	3	
Accountability	9	2	2	1	3			1	
Minimizing Harm	13		4	4	1			1	
Free Expression	13	9	2	1				1	
Factual Truth	17	5	6	4				1	
Etiquette	13	1	1	3	2	3	2	1	
Entertainment	3	2			1				
Regular Posting	2								2
Serve the Greater Good	1								1
Promote Interactivity	**2**								**2**

(Table 3.)

An analysis of the data in table 3 yields some interesting findings. "Factual truth was mentioned most often overall, with "etiquette," "free expression," "minimizing harm," and "transparency" all mentioned next most often. This indicates that these four values are important enough to justify their inclusion in answering the question, but a very different picture develops when the rankings are examined. Free expression is the most highly valued among respondents with nine of thirteen rankings placing it in the number one spot and twelve of the thirteen in the top three places. Factual truth was the second most highly ranked followed by transparency, accountability and minimizing harm to others. Etiquette, though mentioned often, was ranked low with eight respondents ranking it lower than third.

Three values were added to the six that were posted on the survey blog: post on a regular basis, promote interactivity, and serve the greater good. As a new form of rhetoric, blogging does have its own performance rules. Blogging is interactive. Its interactivity is what differentiates it from a static webpage. It is framed as an ongoing discussion or debate central to which are frequent posts and comments. Bloggers are not only publishers. They are consumers. There is a duality to being a blogger. They must be actively engaged in the blogosphere, for without such interaction blogs will cease to

function at all. This interactivity mimics one-to-one communication and thus functions to "humanize" blogs. Interactivity needs to be a prioritized value in any code of blogging ethics.

Q3: Kant

Is there a categorical, blogging imperative, some duty that every blogger must perform or some action that a blogger should never take? Table 4 provides a summary of the responses posted regarding those questions. Ranked second among both universal do's and universal don'ts is that there are no universal do's or don'ts. As free expression has been shown to be the most highly valued construct among bloggers it is logical that any universalized rule might be perceived as a constraint on free expression and be rejected as such. The second most highly valued construct was "factual truth." Table 4 shows further evidence of this in that the top four "do's" include providing credits and links from other blogs and in that the "don'ts" include both knowingly spreading misinformation or lies and violating copyright laws. Thus the values of truth and transparency are reinforced by Q3.

Bloggers Should Always	#	Bloggers Should Never	#
Post on a regular basis	4	Erase posts	3
There are no "always" duties in blogging	3	There are no "nevers"	2
Be entertaining	3	Knowing spread misinformation/lie/exaggerate	4
Provide credits/links when using materials from other blogs	3	Violate copyright law/Plagerize	3
Be honest and ground opinion in fact	2	Bore people	1
Disclose political/ideological bias	1	Post something you can't back up with fact	1
Make your blog easy to read	1	Reveal the identity of an anonymous blogger publicly	1
Correct your blog posts if they are in error	1		
Actively participate in the blogosphere	**1**		

(Table 4.)

Posting on a regular basis was considered by four respondents to be a blogging imperative and that one must be entertaining was noted three times. Under Q2 above, two values were added to the list on the survey blog: *post regularly* and *promote*

interactivity. These values now reappear in Table 4. This categorical blogging imperative might be discerned and defined as: bloggers have an imperative to sustain the discourse on blogs. They must also do certain things to encourage others to continue to participate in the ongoing dialogue. As noted in table 4, bloggers should be entertaining, they should make their blogs easy to read, and they should actively participate in the blogosphere. Conversely, they have an imperative to never do anything that might detract from the dialectic. Thus, under the "nevers" appear: *never bore people* and *never erase posts*.

These open ended questions successfully identified a number of highly held values and duties prevalent in the blogosphere. Table 5 compares values identified in the review of the ethics literature on new communication technologies to those reported on the blog survey site. When redundancies are eliminated from Table 5, the remaining values constitute the core values of the code proposed by this study.

Duties from Ethics Scholarship	Prevailing Ethics in the Blogosphere
Reduce Deception	**Increase Transparency**
Increase Transparency	**Be Accountable for Posted Content**
Disclose Identity	**Strive for Factual Truth**
Promote Equality	**Minimize Harm To Others**
Emphasize the Human	**Protect Free Expression**
Promote Community	**Honor Blog Etiquette and Protocol**
Be Accountable for Posted Content	**Be Entertaining**
Credit All Sources	**Promote Interactivity**
Get Permission Before Linking	**Post Regularly**

(Table 5)

As established above, the endless variety of blogs and bloggers makes impossible the existence of a categorical, blogging imperative; however, a review of previous research and responses from practicing bloggers indicate that some duties or values are more highly prioritized than others. Additionally, some of these duties can be incorporated by other, broader, duties. For instance, minimizing harm to others can be listed as a function of emphasizing the human. The author proposes the following code of blogging ethics:

A PROPOSED CODE OF BLOGGING ETHICS (C.O.B.E.)

Promote Free Expression by posting on your blog on a regular basis as well as visiting and posting on other sites in the blogosphere. Avoid restricting access to your blog by certain individuals and groups and never remove posts or comments once they have been published.

Be as transparent as possible by revealing any personal affiliations that might effect the opinions you express on your blog.

Emphasize the "human" elements in blogging by revealing and maintaining as much of your identity as is deemed safe; promote equality by not restricting specific users or groups of users form your blog; minimize harm to others by never knowingly hurt ing or injuring someone with information you make available on your blog; and build community by linking your blog to others, maintaining a blogroll to encourage visitors to your blog to visit others, and by facilitating relationships between you and your readers.

Strive for factual truth and never intentionally deceive readers. Make yourself accountable for information you post online. Cite and link to all sources referenced in each blog post, and secure permission before linking to other blogs or web content.

Promote interactivity by posting regularly to your blog, honoring such etiquette and protocol policies that are posted on blogs you visit, and make an effort to be entertaining enough to inspire return visits to your site.

A PROPOSED CODE OF BLOGGING ETHICS (C.O.B.E.)

Promote Free Expression

Be as transparent as possible as to personal biases and affiliations

Emphasize the "human" element in blogging
       Reveal identity
       Promote equality in the blogosphere
       Minimize harm to other
       Actively promote community building

Prioritize factual truth
       Never intentionally deceive readers
       Be accountable for information posted on your blog
       Cite and link to all sources
       Secure permission before linking other blogs or web content

Promote Interactivity
       Post regularly to your blog

Respect blog etiquette and protocol
Be entertaining and interesting,

CONCLUSION

This proposed code of ethics combines duties determined by both objective academic inquiry and by listening to the opinions of active bloggers. No code of ethics can be effective if it is not adopted by its target population. To that end, and in the communal spirit of the blogosphere, this paper will be posted on the survey blog site in January 2004 so that bloggers who participated in this study will have an opportunity to post their comments regarding my conclusion.

APPENDIX A

Rebecca Blood's proposed six standards of ethical behavior for bloggers (Each of these standards is developed more fully in her book:

1. Publish as fact only that which you believe to be true. If your statement is speculation, say so.

2. If material exists online, link to it when you reference it. Linking to referenced material allows readers to judge for themselves the accuracy and insightfulness of your statements.

3. Publicly correct any misinformation.

4. Write each entry as if it could not be changed; add to, but do not rewrite or delete, any entry.

5. Disclose any conflict of interest.

6. Note questionable and biased sources.

<div align="right">(Blood, 2002)</div>

A BLOGGERS' CODE OF ETHICS

Be Honest and Fair
Bloggers should be honest and fair in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.
Bloggers should:
• Never plagiarize.
• Identify and link to sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
• Make certain that Weblog entries, quotations, headlines, photos and all other content do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
• Never distort the content of photos without disclosing what has been changed. Image enhancement is only acceptable for technical clarity. Label montages and photo illustrations.
• Never publish information they know is inaccurate -- and if publishing questionable information, make it clear it's in doubt.
• Distinguish between advocacy, commentary and factual information. Even advocacy writing and commentary should not misrepresent fact or context.
• Distinguish factual information and commentary from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.

Minimize Harm
Ethical bloggers treat sources and subjects as human beings deserving of respect.
Bloggers should:
• Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by Weblog content. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
• Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
• Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of information is not a license for arrogance.
• 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 an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
• Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects, victims of sex crimes and criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.

Be Accountable
Bloggers should:
• Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
• Explain each Weblog's mission and invite dialogue with the public over its content and the bloggers' conduct.
• Disclose conflicts of interest, affiliations, activities and personal agendas.
• Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence content. When exceptions are made, disclose them fully to readers.

• Be wary of sources offering information for favors. When accepting such information, disclose the favors.
• Expose unethical practices of other bloggers.
• Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

(Dube, 2003)

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