

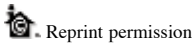
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### STOP THE PRESSES BY STEVE OUTING



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#### When Journalists Blog, Editors Get Nervous

*Personal Web logs are becoming a contentious issue in newsrooms across the country.*

By Steve Outing

(February 18, 2004) -- When I set out to write a column about staff journalists who write Web logs in their spare time, I found that there are two principal types of employed journalist bloggers:

1. Those who are very careful about what they blog, never getting too controversial and seldom expressing opinions. Their employers know what they're doing and support them as long as they don't do anything that might put the news organization in a bad light.
2. Those who feel stymied by their media-company employers from writing what they want -- who look at the larger blog world and feel annoyed at their managers because they're not allowed such freedom of expression.

The former group was more than willing to talk to me, on the record. But the latter group would only talk off the record -- for fear of reprisals. Some keep their blogging secret from their managers, or at least try to. They resent being told to live to a standard of near-absolute objectivity even when they're not on company hours.

#### Personal-blog policies

Outside of the news industry, bloggers are an opinionated bunch. Typically they write independently; they're usually unedited, unfiltered voices. Controversy is considered to be a good thing in the land of blogs.

But what happens when professional journalists enter this often contentious world? In many cases, their employers get uncomfortable. In a few cases, reporters have been fired or punished because of their personal blogs. A Houston Chronicle reporter a couple of years ago was fired after his employer learned he was writing an anonymous blog that offered often scathing commentary on the people he covered as a suburban-government reporter. Last year, a Hartford (Conn.) Courant columnist who was demoted to travel editor decided to continue his opinion columns in a personal blog, but Courant editors told him to shut it down.

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Personal employee blogs, it seems, are land mines for media employers. The nature of the Internet is why. A simple family blog written by a reporter might contain a reference to trouble at work, or discontent with a boss. It's so easy for such an item -- meant for a tiny group but accessible by the entire Web world -- to take on a life of its own and spread to a huge audience, embarrassing not only the employer but also the employee. The media operates in a Google-driven, Romanesko world now.

That's one reason that The New York Times tightly controls personal blogs by its journalists. Of the companies I surveyed for this report, the Times was the most restrictive, by far. NYTimes.com Editor-in-Chief **Len Apcar** puts it bluntly: "I don't like the concept of the personal blog in terms of The New York Times."

Blogs are a fine medium, says Apcar, and he's been introducing staff-written blogs to NYTimes.com in recent months -- and hints that more experiments are to come. But in terms of a staff member writing a personal blog: forget it, for the most part.

A Times reporter wanting to write a personal blog on bee-keeping might be allowed to do it, but the paper's policy is that even such an innocuous blog must be approved by newsroom management. The same goes for a family blog. A Times correspondent in Iraq might introduce topics or opinions on his family blog that if disseminated widely -- always a possibility online -- could call a reporter's objectivity and credibility into question.

"We're The New York Times," says Apcar. "With our leadership position in the industry comes a burden of complete transparency." When the Times makes a mistake, lots of people write about it, so the company tries to avoid putting itself in a position of potential conflict. "What makes us uncomfortable is getting into a situation where people erroneously divine motives for our coverage," he says -- something possible when a reporter speaks too freely on a personal blog and those words inadvertently reach a wider audience.

### A gentler approach

Most news organizations aren't quite that strict about personal blogging by staff. At The Spokesman-Review in Spokane, Wash., Managing Editor for Online and New Media **Ken Sands** is cautious, but accepting of staff members' private blogs.

"There's one big rule, what I call the 'no surprises' rule," he says. "If a staffer is going to start a personal blog, I want to know about it ahead of time. If they're going to do something in their personal blog that might raise a question about credibility or conflict of interest, I want to know about that, too." Issues that come up are handled on a case-by-case basis, rather than there being a formal written policy.

Sands, too, wants to hear even about family blogs -- but he would rarely have a problem with that. But not hearing from a staffer can cause tension when the personal blog is discovered. He relates the story of a summer intern who already had an online diary of "mostly innocuous" stuff. When Sands discovered it (because the intern started linking to her own stories), he noticed that she was occasionally posting disparaging remarks about her co-workers. Sands immediately let her know that he was reading her blog, "and she should act as if the whole world had access to it -- which it does." The intern was "horrified" to find out that her blog was read by anyone other than her friends.

Spokesman-Review Online Producer **Ryan Pitts** also has a personal blog -- a group project he does with several friends around the country. After conferring with Sands about the blog, Pitts agreed it would refrain from commenting on any local issues and would steer clear of making any strong political statements. Sands reads Pitts' blog regularly, "always on the lookout for something that might cause a problem." Nevertheless, he says, there's a great deal of trust in the staffer as well -- to look out for the interests of the news organization when writing for his personal blog.

Pitts says he doesn't feel comfortable expressing fervent political views on his blog, The Dead Parrot Society, where he is identified as "a journalist from Spokane." Indeed, when tackling contentious issues (Dead Parrot covers a wide variety of topics, occasionally touching on politics but with more of a pop-culture orientation) Pitts says he tries to come across as even toned and non-partisan. He suggests that there's value in "helping to break down the myth that most journalists are hardcore, foaming-at-the-mouth liberals."

### Similar to freelancing rules

At MSNBC.com, personal blogging is covered pretty much by the same guidelines that cover outside freelance assignments by staffers. There's no specific policy about personal blogging, says **Dean Wright**, the Web site's editor-in-chief, but he has some clear rules in mind. Just as he wouldn't want to see a political reporter writing freelance opinion pieces for an advocacy magazine, an opinionated

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personal political blog would also be off limits. If the reporter wanted to do a blog on French sonnets or the history of the U.S. Civil War: no problem.

Wright agrees that family blogs could pose problems. If MSNBC.com's entertainment editor expressed an opinion in a family blog that Nicole Kidman was robbed of an Oscar, for instance, that could become known and call into question the fairness of the journalist.

Over at USA Today.com, Editor-in-Chief and Vice President **Kinsey Wilson** knows of a few staffers who maintain personal blogs. While not actively monitoring everything they write, he trusts them to know when something they publish on their own time puts the credibility of USA Today at risk.

Wilson's advice to staff journalists is to "assume that you are always speaking publicly" -- even on a blog meant only for family members. Personal blogs are covered not by a specific written policy, but rather in terms of the company's written guidelines for community activity and public expression. The rules governing personal blogs are the same ones applied to speaking in public or appearing on TV or radio.

### **The cautious bloggers**

The majority of journalists that I spoke with in reporting this column seem mostly content to blog under some limited restrictions from their employer -- mindful that what they publish on their own time could damage the credibility of their employers, and potentially cost them their jobs.

**Karen Mann**, an interactive news producer for The News & Observer in Raleigh, N.C., who also writes on technology for the newspaper, writes a personal blog about music, Mann's World. She says, "Since the N&O has a full-time music critic, I don't often have the chance to write music articles, so I decided to do this both as a creative outlet and to have an online place to show my work to magazines I'm pitching."

Her supervisor knows about it, "and his reaction was, if I'm not profiting, and I'm not in direct competition with the paper, it's OK." Mann is, however, "very careful about the language I use in my [blog] entries. There have been times when I've toned down the language just in case one of the higher-ups here sees it, which can be frustrating."

At the Omaha (Neb.) World-Herald, editorial writer **Geitner Simmons** is serious about his personal blog, Regions of Mind, which he's been writing since 2002. Regions is an academically minded Web log that touches on Simmons' personal interests -- including foreign policy and sometimes regional public-policy issues.

When Simmons decided to start his blog, he approached the World-Herald's editor and publisher, who gave him a green light after a discussion about the parameters of the online journal. What he's written on his own time has yet to cause a problem with his employer, because he's taken a conservative approach to his writing. During that initial discussion, a common-sense agreement was made that Simmons wouldn't contradict the newspaper's editorial stance -- an important point for an editorial writer. "I wouldn't want to draw a distraction from what the paper is trying to do institutionally," he says, especially since Regions states up front that Simmons works for the newspaper.

Simmons was influenced early on by contacts with some of blogging's early stars, like Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit. Simmons says that early on, his "rhetoric was a lot more tart" than what he writes now. Now he's found a moderate-conservative voice that he's comfortable with, and that doesn't conflict with the wishes of his employer.

Sharing that view of personal blogging is **Lex Alexander**, who is enterprise team leader at the News & Record in Greensboro, N.C. His Blog On the Run is a mixed bag, with items on everything from his kids and sports to odd pop-culture stuff. Blog postings occasionally touch on work-related topics, but he's careful about what he writes and how he writes it.

Alexander doesn't express political opinions (though he considers analysis fair game as long as it's kept non-partisan), and he tries hard not to exploit his employer's brand. As a name known to be connected with the News & Record, Alexander says he's always conscious that online readers might think that he speaks for the newspaper, even though it's made clear on Blog On the Run that views expressed there are entirely his own.

### **Not everyone's happy**

Of course, towing the company line in your spare time doesn't sit well with every staff journalist. Not surprisingly, disgruntled employed personal bloggers didn't want to go on the record for this article. I found resentment and morale problems from those who consider the blogs they publish on their own time to be an important part of who they are.

The solution in some cases is that personal blogs continue to be published, but supervisors are not told. Blogging anonymously (or with just a first name) seems to be a common trick to keeping nosy

editors out of your personal publishing. A close examination of any newsroom is likely to find at least a handful of personal bloggers that management knows nothing about.

One newsroom-employed blogger, who has had personal Web sites since the mid 1990s and who's morphed them into a regular blog (without informing his employer), complains about the common restriction on staff journalists expressing opinions. There's much that journalists know or have keen insight into that they can't express -- even on their own time. This journalist suggests that blogs are perhaps a way to get that voice out. Most newspapers, trying to maintain an aura of objectivity, are bland. In time, he hopes that the voice of blogging will enliven newspapers and humanize journalists.

News managers should have personal blogging on their radar screens during the hiring process. I spoke with another staff journalist who had maintained a blog prior to being hired by a major news organization. The topic didn't come up at hiring, but after starting the job the journalist was asked to stop writing on a variety of issues. The restrictions ended up being onerous enough that the personal blog was pretty much squashed; it's seldom updated any more. That journalist told me that had it been known that the blog was a problem, she might not have taken the job.

### **Getting your policy down on paper**

My reporting for this column reveals that plenty of news organizations have not yet devised policies regarding personal blogs. If you're contemplating one, a starting point could be a new ethics policy that will be published by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies next week. (Disclaimer: I work part time for Poynter.) Written primarily by Poynter's Bill Mitchell, Roy Peter Clark and Aly Colon, the policy includes a section on personal publishing (including blogs).

Mitchell says the policy is written with the unusual position of Poynter -- an educational institution that also practices and publishes serious journalism -- in mind. Ergo, he does not tout it as a model for the news industry.

Still, a lot of thought has gone into this document. Its wording relating to personal publishing might work for news companies wishing to establish their own guidelines. The Poynter policy states:

"We ask Poynter employees and contributors to keep their Poynter role in mind as they pursue personal publishing. ... In the case of Poynter employees, Poynter asks that they avoid personal publishing that would compromise their ability to fulfill their Poynter responsibilities in the seminar room or in Poynter publications. Such conflicts would diminish their value to the consumers of Poynter publishing and, as a result, to Poynter."

That strikes me as a workable middle ground: not so specific as to outright prohibit any type of personal blog; clear enough to get across to employees that strong opinions online could have a negative impact on the news organization (and thus on a career).

**Andrew Nachison**, director of the Media Center at the American Press Institute, agrees that blanket prohibitions by news organizations on personal blogging are too draconian for this Internet age. "To stifle your most creative and energetic staffers, who seek outlets for that energy through blogs or other creative work produced on their own time, will lead to only one thing: those highly desirable employees will seek work elsewhere," he says.

Nachison concedes that there are inappropriate external activities that news companies should monitor for the sake of credibility -- e.g., the city-hall reporter who by night publishes an anti-mayor blog. "But there's plenty of room for external blogging that's beyond reproach and external to the commitments of a reporter's day job," he says.

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*Steve Outing (steve@poynter.org) has covered the online news industry for E&P since August 1995. He is also senior editor at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies.*



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