JR: THE ONLINE JOURNALISM REVIEW

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What are the ethics of online journalism?

These principles help separate the good writers and publishers from the frauds and con artists online.

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The ethics of online journalism are, ultimately, no different than the ethics of journalism. The Society of Professional Journalists has articulated a comprehensive [policy of journalism ethics](#) that can help guide any consciencious online writer.

That said, here are some basic qualities that any good online writer ought content ought to demonstrate:

No plagiarism

By now, you've likely discovered that writing is hard work. You certainly don't want someone else swiping your effort and presenting it as his or her own.

So don't steal others' work.

Such theft is plagiarism. 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 you want to reference something on another website, [link it](#) instead.

If you 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. *("In a Sept. 20 report, the Wall Street Journal reported....").*

When in doubt, do both. There's no such thing as too much supporting information.

Disclose, disclose, disclose

Tell your readers how you got your information, and what factors influenced your decision to publish it. If you have a personal or professional connection to people or groups you're writing about, describe it. Your readers deserve to know what has influenced the way you reported or wrote a story.

Don't hide whom you work for, or where the money to support your site comes from. If your site runs advertising, label the ads as such. Let readers know if you are making money off links elsewhere on your site, as well.

No gifts or money for coverage

One common way journalists avoid conflicts of interest is by refusing gifts or money from sources they cover. Writers who accept gifts, payments or honoraria from the people or groups they cover open themselves up to charges that their work is a paid advertisement for those sources. Or, at the very least, that those writers are too "close" to these sources to cover them honestly. You can avoid controversy by politely declining such offers.

Most major news organizations do allow their writers to accept free admission to events for the purpose of writing a feature or review. But most of those organizations bar their writers from "junkets," where groups provide free travel and hotel rooms in addition to attendance at their event.

Many companies also send items such as books and DVDs to writers who review them. Items of significant value ought to be returned after the review. Less expensive items, such as books, can be donated to a local school or charity.

If you are writing about your employer, obviously you are accepting money from it. But let your readers know that. Identify yourself as an employee, even if you are writing anonymously, so people know enough about your background that they can make their own judgment about your credibility.

As writers should not accept money from sources, they also should not ask for it. If your site runs ads, do not solicit people or groups you cover to buy ads or sponsorships on your site. Find someone else handle your ad sales.

Check it out, then tell the truth

Just because someone else said it, this statement does not make it true. Reward your readers with accurate information that stands up to scrutiny from other writers. Check out your information before you print it.

Find facts, not just others' opinions, to support your comments. Start with sites such as our guide to reporting to learn how to find real data, not someone else's spin. Make sure that what you are writing isn't merely repeating some urban myth, either.

If you are writing about someone else, call or e-mail them for a comment before you publish. If your subject has a blog, link to it. That link will notify the subject that you've written about them, and will allow your readers to click-through and read the subject's side of the story.

If you want to write satire or spoofs, fine. But make sure your audience knows that what you are writing is not literal truth. Tricking readers won't help you develop the respect, credibility or loyal audience that truthful writers enjoy and rely upon.

Be honest

In summary, be honest with your readers and transparent about your work. If people wonder for a moment about your honesty or your motives, you've lost credibility with them. Don't let them do that. Answer those questions even before readers ask.

And most important is to never utilise your power of press for personal gains or simply annoying someone.