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The Great Blogging Ethics Debate

By Cynthia L. Webb

washingtonpost.com Staff Writer

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The war in Iraq put blogs in the public spotlight, but it also has given the blogosphere its first real scandal -- a scandal that is provoking a new debate among bloggers about what ethics, if any, apply to their medium.

[Yesterday's Filter](#) was devoted to the case of **Sean-Paul Kelley**, a Texas blogger who admitted to [Wired](#) that he copied material from a subscription service for his popular war blog, [The Agonist](#). Kelley lifted verbatim material from [Stratfor](#), a Texas-based intelligence firm, apparently to jazz up his own war posting and to curry favor with potential intelligence sources.

Filter readers have chimed in. The verdict? Many don't seem to think that Kelley's actions were that big of deal. They insist that blogging is free -- i.e. a free-flow medium and not a journalistic endeavor. But a number of voices have spoken up on the other side of the debate, including blogger **Ken Layne**, who has come down [squarely against Kelley](#).

Layne is joined in his view by blogger **Meryl Yourish** (www.yourish.com), who offers a slew of postings on her site about the Kelley incident. "Kelley's plagiarism is a blow to the credibility of the blogosphere. And it should be big news in the blogosphere. The Agonist has been a high-profile, high-visibility blogger since the start of the war. The war has caused his popularity surge. His seemingly uncanny line to information (now revealed to have been lifted whole cloth from Stratfor) helped him achieve that high visibility. And he still has it. The blogosphere has barely mentioned this," she [writes](#). Yourish also links to other bloggers who have piped in on the debate. Yourish, in an e-mail to Filter, wrote: "What Sean-Paul Kelley did was reprehensible, but worse, he isn't really taking responsibility for it. Nowhere in his apology can you even figure out what he did."

Yourish's comments come partly in response to blogger/professor **Glenn Reynolds**, who [noted](#) on his site, [InstaPundit.com](#), that he hasn't linked to the Agonist that much: "But the real reason I haven't linked to him a lot is simpler: most of his posts didn't have links to sources. I didn't suspect plagiarism, really, but I'm generally skeptical of secondhand reports without clear sourcing."

Blogger **Daniel W. Drezner** [writes](#) in a posting on his blog: "It does change my opinion of Kelley's ethics. ... The Wired story makes it clear that what Kelley did was plagiarism, pure and simple. He copied source material word for word without attribution. ... One could also argue that Kelley had a larger obligation to the Blogosphere, since he was one of the poster boys of the spate of recent coverage of warblogging by [MSNBC](#), the New York Times, the Financial Times, and [The Washington Post](#). As a graduate student in international relations, Kelley knew (or should have known) he was in the wrong as he was lifting Stratfor's content, and he was in the wrong again when he initially tried to deny the plagiarism."

As for Kelley, he has offered up [an apology](#) on his site: "I make no excuses for what I did." Kelley says that the situation has been corrected and that he has worked out some sort of arrangement with Stratfor. When another blogger [first questioned](#) some of the Agonist's work, Kelley [wrote](#) that he would be go back to attributing anything he could on his site.

The Professors' Take

Two media experts took the time to talk with Filter about their own thinking about the Kelley incident.

Larry Pryor, executive editor of the **University of Southern California's** [Online Journalism Review](#), said that while many bloggers maintain they are not journalists, "bloggers have become too important to brush off this question" of journalism ethics. While bloggers might be one-person shops, Pryor said he believes whether bloggers "like it or not, they have to follow ethics." He noted that bloggers seem to want it both ways -- to be taken seriously, to make an impact on discourse, all while being free of traditional rules. "If they are going to be taken seriously, they have to follow [ethical] rules." Those rules include providing attribution and avoiding plagiarism, he said.

Paul Grabowicz, director of the new media program at **UC Berkeley's** Graduate School of Journalism, said while "anything goes in Weblogs," he hopes that they adhere to principles like attribution, evaluating source material for links ("not just throwing up [a posting] because they saw it") and not plagiarizing. "It is not a question of regulation or control or rules, as much as do you want people to see you as someone who is credible and to that, definitely there are some rules," the professor said. But Grabowicz said there are limits to what should be expected of bloggers since weblogs are online conversations that complement, instead of compete with, mainstream journalism. "I don't think they need to be held to the same standards [as journalists]," he said. "I would rephrase it as expectations. If you are gong to be running a blog and you want people to listen to you, then it seems to me that you have some sort of internal standards ... or else who is going to pay attention."

Journalism Ethics Resources

The discussion of whether blogs should follow ethics or not relies on an understanding of what journalism ethics entails. The **Poynter Institute** has a [comprehensive page of links](#) to all types of organizations and writings involving journalism ethics. The UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism also has [a page of links](#) related to ethics and online journalism.

Filter's Perspective

Blogs and bloggers of all stripes, whether or not they like this fact, have become part of the journalistic discourse. That hasn't stopped many bloggers from contending that they are not practicing pure journalism and therefore are not governed by the same ethics. This is a slippery-slope argument. Many bloggers say they want to be accepted by the mainstream media as another facet of public discourse, but this seems to be a hard goal to achieve if plagiarism, a cardinal sin in the world of journalism, is brushed off as a minor offense (or no offense at all). Just because blogs are a "free medium" doesn't mean that rules of playing fair need not apply. That's my two cents.

Sounding Board

Several Filter readers took the time to respond to my question yesterday, "Should the same standards of journalistic ethics be applied to blogs?"

- "Not at this point in the development of blogs. Readers know it's caveat emptor in that we don't purchase the information nor is it presented as any thing more than the blogger's editorial opinion. If one wants to read something quick, intimate and immediate, then one had better keep the antennae up and the filters on. And if a blog is outed as unreliable, that'll be the end of that." -- **Earnest Thompson, Falls Church, Va.**
- "The answer is 'No.' The difference is that bloggers make no bones of their biases. Examples: On the left -- TomPaine.com, TalkingPointsMemo. On the right - Powerline.com, Instapundit. However, mainstream media disseminates information under the guise of objectivity while their peculiar biases remain latent. If the latter want to operate under this fiction, then ethical standards need apply. ... Obviously, they should give attribution. Even Sean-Paul Kelly of the Agonist realizes this ... now. How about political parties and candidates posting and printing information that is clearly slanted and sometimes simply untrue? The recipient of this information, as recipients of blogging information, should be charged with the duty to filter out the obvious bias." -- **Cory Skluzak, Denver, Colo.**
- "I'm a weblogger. I'm proud of what I do. I go out of my way to credit sources whenever possible. Even when it's a reader to my site who just sends me an e-mail saying, 'Hey Dean, look at this!' and sends me a link -- I try to say, 'thanks ...for sending this my way.' As a blogger, I also immediately post corrections or retractions if someone points out a mistake or misstatement. I don't think it's about journalistic standards per se. It's about being a decent, ethical human being. You credit your sources, period. Weblogging should be viewed as opinion journalism." -- **Dean Esmay of Westland, Mich.**, publisher of the deanesmay.com blog.
- "My answer is: not always. In the case of Agonist.org, or any other count of plagiarism, the only excuse would be if the blogger did not know the source, or had seen the same information from multiple sources. Agonist knew the source, and knew that it was 'exclusive,' but did not attribute. Hang him by his toenails. Bloggers who are intent on providing information should always cite their sources, even if it is personal conversation. Bloggers who are doing analysis and/or opinion should be careful with their 'facts.' And, certainly, quoting other sources should have an attribute. But to hold them to the same standards as mainline journalists, who normally have an organization which includes people who just check facts and sources, is a bit much. I would expect bloggers to be held to the same standards as a high school student writing a term paper. Cite, with attribution, printed and Internet sources. Quotes or paraphrasing from media sources should be acknowledged." -- **Jim Teener, Alexandria Va.**
- "I think the premise of your question is wrong. You are using the word 'ethics' to mean the relations of property and the rules that reinforce those relations. Rephrasing the question to read, 'Should bloggers be subject to the same rules of property that govern people who profit from journalism?' The answer must be, of course not. The sole reason those bloggers are out there is that those rules prevent full access to information and to the discourse concerning the war. I think it would be worthwhile to ask a question about the ethics of proprietary journalism in a time of national emergency." -- **Mike Leffert, Albuquerque, N.M**
- "I think your question, 'Should the same ethical standards be applied to blogs as are applied to journalistic pieces?' is insufficient. Sure, where the function of a weblog is similar or identical to that of a traditional publication, or a weblog entry is like a traditional journalistic article, then similar ethical standards should apply. For instance, out-and-out plagiarism is wrong, whether one is a traditional journalist, a weblogger, or a college student. But the more interesting question is, 'Where the purposes and functions of weblogging are different from those of traditional journalism, what ethical standards should apply?' ... Journalistic ethics are a means to an end -- accurate, complete, and truthful reporting of the important issues of the day. Where webloggers vary from those ethics and still consistently achieve the desired ends, that's a challenge to traditional journalistic ethics." -- **John Adams of Atlanta**, whose blog is www.jzip.org.

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