



Online Media Ethics: A Needed Dynamic

Paper Presented at Conference
“Online Journalism in the Arab World:
Realities & Challenges”

University of Sharjah, UAE
College of Communication
November 22-23, 2005

by Magda Abu-Fadil

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be with you today and I'd like to extend a special thanks to the University of Sharjah and Dr. Muhammad Ayish for having invited me.

Online journalism is mistakenly equated with the print and broadcast variety, given the inclusion of elements from all known media on the Internet. But the nature of the beast is such that unexpected challenges have arisen in the very definition of what journalism is, who a journalist is and how one evaluates online journalism's performance and sets guidelines for good practice and behavior in cyberspace.

The proliferation of blogs (weblogs) in the Arab world has added to the choices of news consumers by turning some into news producers. But can anyone with the technical know-how be classified a journalist? Are we so overwhelmed by gadgetry and high-speed access as to have lost sight of solid content, context, balance, fairness and ethics?

The new media have spawned a new breed of citizens' media. How reliable are they? Can they, and do they, compete with traditional and well-established media? What are the ethical implications of blogging?

Haven't traditional media come under attack for publishing in print (and increasingly online) material considered objectionable by consumers? Should news consumers take matters into their own hands and turn the tables on the media by creating and producing their own content?

French author Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that if one wishes to know the real power of the press, one should pay attention, not to what it says, but to the way in which it is listened to. “It only cries so loud because the audience is becoming deaf,” he argued.

But today, the opposite may be the case, wrote Brad Badelt, adding that the audience has been crying loudly for some time and the mainstream media have been slow to respond. (*The Rise of the Pajama Clad Scribes; How Weblogs Are Reshaping the Not-So-Free Press*, Brad Badelt, *Thunderbird magazine*, University of British Columbia, <http://www.journalism.ubc.ca/thunderbird/archives/2005.01/blog.html>).

Although chat rooms have been a natural extension and complement to news sites, in June 2005, the portal Yahoo closed its user-created chat rooms following a TV exposé that showed an online service had attempted to exploit children for sex.

Key advertisers pulled their commercials from Yahoo's site because of the TV report. (*Yahoo Closes Chat Rooms After TV Sex Report, Mike Musgrove, The Washington Post, Friday June 24, 2005, p. D05*).

According to the press story, Yahoo's "terms of service" agreement stipulates that users must agree not to use any of the company's products or services to "harm minors in any way" or to email or transmit "vulgar" or "obscene" content.

It added that that was not the first time Yahoo's image had been brought to question and that in 2001 an FBI investigation had targeted certain Yahoo users and led to the arrest of over 100 people in the U.S. who were seeking to lure children or trade pornographic material involving minors. (*Ibid*)

Jordanian general security officials organized a workshop on computer/Internet crimes against children, the first such event in the Middle East, in a bid to help protect families, find missing children and prevent or lessen the adverse effects of cyber crime against minors. (*Workshop on Cyber Crimes Against Minors, Issam Al Majali, Elaph, August 29, 2005, <http://www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/InternetNews/2005/8/86901.html>*). It's a step in the right direction, but a drop in the ocean.

How does one legislate for the Internet, notably since one man's proverbial meat is another man's poison? If freedom of expression advocates in one country publicize their hardships on the Web to attract international attention to their plight, should legislators across their borders be passing laws barring the dissemination of such news if it could benefit others and bring about positive change?

News media analysts suggest that practitioners and organizations need clear ethical standards to guide behavior. But lawyers have shied away from formal codes because they provide other lawyers representing injured parties with documents and proof that can be used against journalists if the procedures and rules are not strictly followed.

Given the reach of globalization, the pervasiveness of satellite TV channels that transcend borders and the very changing nature of news as we have known it, I'd like to examine the evolving dynamics of online journalism and the concomitant challenge of trying to establish ethical standards and laws to define "do"s and "don't"s in cyberspace.

Moreover, I will examine whether new media and good governance are mutually reinforcing, and whether online news outlets have kept reporters in the office and off their beats, thereby depriving consumers from credible and ethical coverage.

But first, let's examine how journalism is being defined.

Citizen Journalism Emerges:

Media analysts are increasingly calling attention to an interesting fad called "citizen journalism." It seems everyone is being viewed as a potential reporter and/or editor, not just those who have degrees in the field or who work for news organizations.

I'd venture to say their discovery is a few millennia behind the times. Cave men and women were our first visual reporters, with their carvings on walls.

But we need not go that far: there's a rich history and heritage of "raconteurs" in Arab literature who expressed themselves through poetry and prose to recount their desert adventures.

Fast forward to the 17th Century in Restoration London, when English diarist, naval administrator and member of parliament Samuel Pepys (pronounced peeps) reported about the official and upper class life in that city.

The Pepys Diary is said to extend to 1,250,000 words and is considered a masterpiece of English writing. That's not something we're likely to see in cyberspace or our average daily newspaper.

"Pepys wanted to find out about everything because he found everything interesting," is the description offered by the Encyclopedia Britannica 2005.

It went on to say that he possessed the journalist's gift of summing up a scene or person in a few brilliant, arresting words. "Above all, Pepys possessed the artist's gift of being able to select the vital moment."

How often have we browsed sites where there was no context to the news, where content was badly presented, where the visuals and design were created by techno geeks with no clue about news value, ethics, common sense or user friendliness?

In the last three years or so we've become inundated with reports that the way to go is the "blog." Mainstream journalists have turned to this form of latter-day diary writing to record views and news they cannot publish elsewhere.

The "blogosphere" has become so crowded that one doesn't know where to browse anymore or what to believe.

This has spawned sites like www.technorati.com, a service that guides you through the thicket of endless fare by indexing more than 11 million blogs.

Blogs populi seem to have supplanted vox populi and the trend seems to be catching on in the Arab world, albeit at a slower pace than in the West.

But media academic David Perlmutter contends that blogging may be over-rated and will not necessarily replace traditional media (or even online outlets of established organizations) since bloggers represent a small percentage of the overall technology-challenged population.

He asked whether bloggers were truly "the people," and replied that they came from the higher income and better-educated segment of the population.

"This is as true in Egypt or Nigeria as it is in the United States," he said, arguing that peasants don't blog. He added that inflated blogging numbers don't account for the fact that countless blogs are rarely updated or are orphans. (*Will Blogs Go Bust? David D. Perlmutter, Editor & Publisher, August 4, 2005, http://editorandpublisher.com/eandp/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id-1001009362*).

Writing about the state of blog affairs, David Sifry said the blogosphere also suffered from the existence of untold spam (junk mail and content in lay terms) as well as fake blogs, comment and trackback spam that were misleading indicators of what was out there in cyberspace. (*State of Blogosphere, Posted by David Sifry, August 10, 2005, Tags: Blogosphere, <http://www.technorati.com/weblog/>*).

The posting volume of content on blogs also does not mean substance. While we've known cases of average citizens posting information online that scooped traditional media, their veracity, accuracy, balance and fairness were not always beyond question.

An interesting twist to the citizen journalism fad manifested itself in an experiment carried out by the Los Angeles Times when it introduced the "wiki," whereby browsers/readers could alter or edit any part of the paper's editorials, that became known as "wikitorials."

The term is derived from the Hawaiian word "wiki wiki," meaning fast. So these fast citizen contributors turned one of the editorials into an online free-for-all through a new technology enabling them to post their comments.

The downside was that unknown visitors added pornographic images and inappropriate material to the editorial, which prompted the paper to remove the "wiki."

According to online media expert Nora Paul, news outlets shouldn't shy away from this new form of communication and that ignoring them "may miss a rich opportunity to expand their influence and their brand."

She noted that a site could become a place where citizens share information under the auspices of a brand that cares deeply about accuracy. (*Wiki: Don't Lose That Number, Jennifer Dorroh, American Journalism Review, August/September 2005, http://www.ajr.org/article_printable.asp?id=3947*).

So here we have citizens writing, editorializing, editing and contributing to the news community and seeing what others have to say, almost in real time.

Do-it-yourself journalism saw a sharp rise post-September 11, 2001, with eyewitness accounts and amateur analyses adding to the traditional media fare.

A study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project cautions that such accounts do not necessarily adhere to the tenets of good journalism, such as fact checking, obtaining opposing views to provide balance and seeking impartiality. In short, they may rely more on rumors to fuel already raging fires.

"Many stepped into the role of amateur journalist, seeking out sources and sometimes assembling these ideas for others," wrote Alex Halavais from the University of Buffalo's School of Informatics.

His chapter "The Rise of Do-it-Yourself Journalism After September 11" in the study touches on the Internet as an alternative and complementary news source to what consumers have been accustomed to in recent years.

In referring to citizens' post-9/11 cyber contributions on blogs and non-news sites, Halavais said: "This democratization of journalistic sources, while in no way rivaling the contacts of established journalists, provided new opportunities for individuals to explore the space of news and information more extensively.

It also provided new sources of error, rumor, and propaganda.” (*The Rise of Do-it-Yourself Journalism After September 11*, Alex Halavais, *One Year Later: September 11 and the Internet, September 5, 2002*, Pew Internet & American Life Project, <http://www.pewinternet.org>).

He added that the legacy of 9/11 for online news was that increasing numbers of Americans seem eager to supplement material from traditional media and that Internet users were becoming journalists themselves, but that their only outlets were their own sites on which they posted their self-generated content.

“In the long run, the most significant effect of this do-it-yourself journalism might be its value to historians. They will be able to seek all kinds of stories, detail, and data that might have been lost without a medium like the Internet on which to record it,” he concluded. (*Ibid*).

But proponents argue that blogs have established themselves as a key part of the online culture and that U.S. readership has risen exponentially.

American teenagers are fully engrossed in all things technological and are becoming part of the information landscape by creating their own sites, blogs, content and data environment. If emailing isn't enough, there's instant messaging.

We in the Arab world are only too familiar with SMS, email and websites and, are increasingly, being exposed to blogs from some of the most unlikely places – dissidents in Syria, commentary from war-torn Iraq, and pro-democracy advocates in Egypt hoping for regime change, to name a few.

In Lebanon, the independence “intifada” (uprising) following the assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri spawned countless outlets that provided content, graphics, photos, MP3s and various forms of communication to spread the word about the revolt against Syrian dominance.

The confluence of satellite channels carrying live footage of momentous rallies and demonstrations and of online information drew international attention to a country long forgotten and relegated to the realm of Syrian vassal and following years of association with civil strife or the kidnapping of foreigners.

“Thanks to a new wave of political websites and discussion groups, with the click of a mouse, Lebanese are discovering new avenues to express their views and displeasure with their leaders,” wrote Raed El Rafei. (*Political Web Sites Offer Lebanese Open Platform to Express Views*, Raed El Rafei, *The Daily Star*, June 11, 2005, p. 5).

Since the “independence uprising,” there had been a growing interest in websites addressing Lebanese political issues, he said, adding that surfers could vote virtually, sign petitions and post their opinions on unfolding events online.

He quoted Samer Abdullah, the operator of www.libanvote.com, as saying that he “wanted to create a free space for people to communicate, break taboos and go beyond social and political sectioning.”

WWW.Alistiklal05.com, another site with chat rooms for political debate, is considered an empowering tool by its founder, Rawad Yaakoub. It is one of a dozen sites listed in the feature.

A young user said news from the media and his immediate surroundings were lies and rumors, whereas political online forums enabled him to understand political views, even if he disagreed with them. (*Ibid*)

What's noteworthy is that common interests between the media and politics in Lebanon may have exacerbated the confusion since key politicians are also the owners of the major media in the country. Those who do not own outright leading newspapers or TV stations are constantly trying to own journalists through gifts, bribes and other forms of conflict of interest.

Which may explain Lebanese youths' draw to alternative sources of news and communication such as email, chat rooms, personal websites and blogs. (*Abu-Fadil, Magda. Lebanese Youth & the Media: Social & Political Influences, paper presented at conference entitled "German-Arab Media Dialogue" organized by the German Foreign Ministry's External Cultural Relations Institute in Berlin, Germany, November 29-30, 2004. <http://ipj.lau.edu.lb/outreach/2004/11-youth/berlin.php>*)

We have ample examples of bloggers pre-empting traditional media and toppling icons off their pedestals when their reports proved more accurate or less questionable than the mainstream experts.

CBS News anchorman Dan Rather was forced to resign when a segment on the show "60 Minutes," for which he was responsible, was aired questioning President George Bush's National Guard record based on a memo from a former commanding officer, which later proved to be false.

Key daily papers published the story, based on the CBS report, but a network of bloggers produced convincing evidence from typographic experts that the memo was misleading and that it was produced by a machine more recent than one in use at the time of the National Guard incident. So a potentially damaging story to Bush's re-election campaign backfired on the media and lent credence to alternative citizen journalism. (*The Rise of the Pajama Clad Scribes; How Weblogs Are Reshaping the Not-So-Free Press, Brad Badelt, Thunderbird magazine, University of British Columbia, <http://www.journalism.ubc.ca/thunderbird/archives/2005.01/blog.html>*).

Interestingly, CBS News is looking to establish a 24-hour online news operation with video coverage to lure younger audiences. It's also meant to target the 45 million people who check news online at work and a generation or two younger than those who watch the network's nightly news show in the U.S.

The broadband news network is meant to "compete with traditional cable news channels and grab a bigger share of the booming online advertising market," according to the Financial Times.

The site will also feature an in-house blogger who will provide viewers with a glimpse into the network's editorial deliberations, it said. (*CBS News to Launch 24-Hour Broadband Network Service, Joshua Chaffin, Financial Times, July 13, 2005, p. 28*). How successful that is, remains to be seen.

Quoting the author of "The Social Impact of Computers," Brad Badelt said Dr. Richard Rosenberg believed access to a personal printing press was an important motivator for blogs.

“They used to say that if you want to control the world, own a newspaper,” Rosenberg said. “The Internet offers, for a relatively low price, the possibility of making your voice heard around the world.” (*The Rise of the Pajama Clad Scribes; How Weblogs Are Reshaping the Not-So-Free Press, Brad Badelt, Thunderbird magazine, University of British Columbia, <http://www.journalism.ubc.ca/thunderbird/archives/2005.01/blog.html>*).

Moreover, Badelt equates bloggers with “pamphleteers” of yesteryear and the blogosphere with a latter-day town square, “a forum in which people can actively participate in the current political issues.” (*Ibid*)

“From photo- and calendar-sharing services to ‘citizen journalist’ sites and annotated satellite images, the Internet is morphing yet again,” wrote John Markoff, adding that impressive software systems have simplified instant file sharing and enhancement.

But, he noted, the U.S. Supreme Court was now concerned that using peer-to-peer software may violate copyright laws.

“Indeed, the abundance of user-generated content – which includes online games, desktop video and citizen journalism sites – is reshaping the debate over file sharing,” he wrote. “Many Internet industry executives think it poses a new kind of threat to Hollywood, the recording industry and other purveyors of proprietary content: not piracy of their work, but a compelling alternative.” (*Web Content by and for the Masses, John Markoff, The New York Times, June 29, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/29/technology/29content.html>*).

But such an age of computerized “augmentation,” whereby the skills of tens of thousands of individuals are factored into the mix through collaborative news writing projects, for example, may also lead to antisocial behavior, he cautioned. (*Ibid*)

This is particularly noteworthy in the Arab world where rumors are rife and our proclivity to exaggeration and inaccuracy make us run the risk of adding to the cacophony and congestion of blurry journalism.

Precision is something children learn to ignore because the example set by their parents and adults in general is abysmal in our region.

Let’s take the examples of 9/11, the London underground (subway) bombings and a series of bombings that has occurred in Lebanon following the Hariri murder. We find that investigators, historians, journalists and people who lost loved ones in New York continue to piece together information made available through traditional media, online alternatives, and emergency services’ audio tapes chronicling firefighters’ and police officers’ valiant last moments trying to rescue others and to escape the cataclysmic event.

In London, citizens provided live footage through video cell phones and their own accounts of what happened in the underground tunnels that became burial grounds. It was something the professionals couldn’t have accomplished, given the situation and inaccessibility to the victims.

Alexander Chadwick became an instantaneous international celebrity when his picture of a train’s evacuation made it onto the BBC, and ultimately all other media. Just like when amateur video of the Concorde crash landing at Paris’ Charles de Gaulle airport a few years ago was what traditional media relied upon for their initial reporting.

In fact, some media, like SkyNews even asked average citizens to send in their pictures and other materials for inclusion in newscasts and webcasts or postings.

But that also has a dark when citizen journalists become voyeurs and thrill seekers at the expense of victims.

A London blogger who survived the train blast near Edgware Road was horrified that bystanders with cameraphones outside the underground station had been shooting pictures of the worst victims as the latter were being treated or hauled off to hospital. "Were those people taking photos helping or were those people shocking the world?" (***Did London Bombings Turn Citizen Journalists into Citizen Paparazzi? Mark Glaser, Online Journalism Review, posted: 2005-07-12, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050712glaser>***)

In another instance, a witness shot dozens of pictures with his cell phone and posted several of them online at *flickr.com*, alongside hundreds of others taken by non-professional photographers and often beating professionals in the race against time. Flickr is a site owned by Yahoo that lets people post pictures for free and boasted 300 photos just hours after the first London attacks.

When is using other people's photography acceptable? According to U.S. copyright laws on the redistribution of images, "you legally cannot take a full image from someone else's site, dupe it, and put it on your own site," wrote Robert Niles, in response to a query submitted to the Online Journalism Review March 8, 2005. (***www.ojr.org***)

Disasters bring out the best and worst in people and it becomes somewhat tricky when journalists find competitors from the public at large. When the tsunami struck Asia earlier this year, media had to complement their coverage with input from tourists vacationing in exotic locations in Thailand, Malaysia and other countries of the region. Thanks to news circulated through cell phones, SMS messages, emails and other methods alongside traditional media, children were reunited with their parents, injured victims were evacuated to safety, and relatives of the disappeared mourned their dead.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the United States' Gulf Coast, devastating several states along the way, bloggers jumped into action to help with disaster relief and dissemination of news while journalists relied mostly on their news organizations' websites to publish their reports because their printing presses were destroyed or flooded.

"In a profession that survives on its credibility and consistency, this is proving vital in the wake of the hurricane," wrote Robert MacMillan. (***Gulf Coast Journalists Hold Heads Above Water, Robert MacMillan, The Washington Post, August 31, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/31/AR2005083100895.html>***).

He quoted a New Orleans newspaper's report on the coverage that said the Internet, as a decentralized communications network, could be more resilient than traditional media when natural disasters occur.

Traditional media also welcomed participation by citizen journalists, with CNN.com and others asking browsers to send stories, photos, audio or video of the disaster within a set of guidelines proscribed by the network. (***http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2005/hurricanes/feedback/index.html***).

In covering the looting that took place after the hurricane, *flickr.com* users uploaded two news photos showing flood victims wading through chest high water dragging bags of food, beverages or other items.

An Associated Press picture showed an African-American man dragging a black bag. The caption read: “A young man walks through chest deep flood water after **looting** a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 20, 2005. Flood waters continue to rise in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina did extensive damage when it made landfall on Monday.” The photo was shot by Dave Martin.

An Agence France-Presse/Getty Images picture shows a white man and a white woman, also wading through water dragging consumer goods. The caption read: “Two residents wade through chest-deep water after **finding** bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana.” The photo was shot August 30 by Chris Graythen.

A third picture taken by AP on August 30 shows a white man running ahead of a black man who was jumping out of a broken window. Both were heading out of a convenience store. The caption read: “As one person looks through their shopping bag, left, another jumps through a broken window, while leaving a convenience store on the I-10 service road south, in Metairie, La., Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.” (<http://www.mydd.com/story/2005/8/31/1339/04941>).

The pictures and their captions created quite a stir given the obvious racial/racist connotations. So much so, that the Yahoo news site removed the AFP picture of the white man and woman in the water at the request of the news agency and issued a statement saying:

“In recent days, a number of readers of Yahoo! News have commented on differences in the language in two Hurricane Katrina-related photo captions (from two news services). Since the controversy began, the supplier of one of the photos – AFP – has asked all its clients to remove the photo from their databases. Yahoo! News has complied with the AFP request. (<http://news.yahoo.com/page/photostatement>).

Islamist bloggers, for their part, added to the variety of questionable journalism by launching an anti-U.S. tirade, saying the storm was God’s revenge for American misdeeds.

“Soldiers of God, Hurricane Katrina demolishes America. Don’t think that God doesn’t care about the injustices of tyrants,” the site said. Agence France-Presse, which reported the story, did not identify the bloggers.

Bloggers also drew parallels between the storm’s destruction and that initiated by U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq and lambasted President George W. Bush.

“America fights Islam in the name of the war against terrorism, kills innocents in Afghanistan and Iraq and supports the Zionist entity (Israel),” said one site, then listing two dozen curses – habitually used by Islamic radicals at the end of prayers – against the U.S.

(Islamic Bloggers Hail “Allah’s Soldier” Katrina, Habib Trabelsi, AFP, September 4, 2005, http://www.mg.co.za/articlepage.aspx?area=/breaking_news/breaking_news__international_news/&articleid=249937).

Across the miles, in Lebanon, traditional media were sometimes late in arriving at the scene of explosions around Beirut and its suburbs in recent months, while amateur “reporters” pitched in with handheld cell phone cameras, emails and a heavy dollop of unsubstantiated details.

In the case of journalist/author/academic Samir Kassir, who was blown up in his car, a story made the cyber rounds like wildfire about his being with a woman other than his wife at the time of the explosion, notably since his wife was out of the country. No other corpse was found and his wife was the first to denounce this “reporting.”

Was such news dissemination professional, accurate, balanced and ethical? How can one disprove it in cyberspace, in print or on the air after the damage has been done?

And what of closed circuit television cameras that monitor streets, buildings and the like? While professional and amateur photographers usually operate their cameras, these fixed devices don’t require humans to operate them but may provide the missing link in a crime scene, which can be supplemented by citizen and/or professional journalists’ reports and pictures.

In the Hariri case, a closed circuit TV’s 90-second exclusive footage of a white pickup truck thought to be the murder weapon carrying a ton of explosives was aired by Al Arabiyya TV in April 2005 and was further disseminated on other networks and online for days after the broadcast. It was used as evidence gathered in the assassination case.

The footage, recorded instants before the blast that killed the former prime minister, and 20 others, was obtained from a nearby bank’s CCTV security camera that was pointed at the street where the assassination occurred and indicated the vehicle was moving six times slower than other cars in the vicinity. (*Al Arabiya Airs Exclusive Footage Shot Moments Before Hariri’s Assassination, March 27, 2005, <http://www.alarabiya.net/article.aspx?v=11654>*).

Countless websites proceeded to report that Al Arabiya’s footage showed the vehicle used in killing Hariri, debunking earlier reports that the explosives were placed underground and targeted his convoy as it passed over the ton of bomb-making materials.

Was that adequate evidence in an ongoing investigation? Should online news organizations, like their print and broadcast counterparts, rely on exclusive sources?

In Egypt, authorities have slammed the media for what they claimed were “overplayed” reports of attacks on activists opposing a referendum on adopting a new system for presidential elections.

Witnesses said activists who urged a boycott of the referendum were beaten, kicked and punched by the ruling party’s henchmen. These incidents were widely reported in Arab, Western and Egyptian opposition media. And yet the government said the reports, over which Human Rights Watch called for an investigation, were exaggerated.

How do journalists use their judgment in covering such incidents? Are there rules or do they operate based on their instincts and the heat of the moment?

The relentless campaign to end the decades-long regime of President Hosni Mubarak, manifested in the “kefaya” (enough) movement and other dissident groups has blossomed into a cyber community active in reporting demonstrations, news of arrests and harassment of protesters and in providing visual proof of the authorities’ heavy handedness that is not covered by mainstream and state-run media.

The proliferation of blogs, SMS messages and emails by Egyptian activists has brought police brutality to the attention of the world thanks to camera phones, digital devices of all types and eyewitness reports that are updated on a regular basis.

Egypt’s opposition forces have rallied the faithful by using the Internet and email. An outspoken opponent and his wife have set up Manal and Alaa’s Bit Bucket, a blog that documents abuses, protests and publishes censored content in Arabic and English.

“We also offer Drupal-based free hosting space and free aid developing a Web site for any cause we find worthy or interesting and for any speech that is censored or prosecuted in Egypt,” says an introductory passage on the home page. (<http://www.malaaa.net>).

But English-only blogs have a limited audience since more than half the Egyptian population is illiterate and those with means to own computers are the minority. So the English-language cyber protests are thought to be fodder for Cairo-based diplomats too scared to venture out of their fortress-like embassies and are used to juice up otherwise sterile diplomatic reports to their headquarters, according to media observers in Egypt.

Additionally, Egyptian bloggers use pseudonyms for fear of reprisals against them or their loved ones. “Some anonymous bloggers feel it gives them more freedom to write about politics,” reported Mark Glaser. (*Blogs, SMS, e-mail: Egyptians Organize Protests as Elections Near, Mark Glaser, Online Journalism Review, posted: 2005-08-30, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050830glaser>*).

This is critical when bloggers run headline links to stories like “No to Mubarak, father or son; no to the tire or the spare” in colloquial Egyptian. The <http://www.malaaa.net> blog is particularly catchy since the Arabic language in use is colloquial and the narrative reads like a popular Egyptian movie or television serial.

Another move to promote regime change in Egypt has been an online campaign calling for a boycott of the country’s key state-run newspapers given their purported lack of balance.

The Internet-based calls targeted the dailies Al Ahram, Al Akhbar, Al Goumhouriya, and Rose El Youssef magazine in their print and online incarnations.

The campaign, a personal initiative, entitled “Don’t Read, For Egypt’s Sake,” was triggered by an anonymous 25-year-old Egyptian activist whose aim was to pressure those publications’ CEOs into refraining from absolute support for a particular policy or given individual. (*Call for Boycott of Egypt’s National Papers, Zeinab Ghosn, As-Safir, Sep. 2, 2005, <http://www.assafir.com/iso/oldissues/20050902/world/98.html>*).

But critics argue that anonymity also provides a platform for abuses, distortion of facts and opinions passed off as news, notably since diarists are akin to editorialists and often cross the fine line between news and opinion.

We’ve also had our share of coverage of events in Iraq and Palestine.

A cartoon in the International Herald Tribune had President George Bush sitting at his desk in the Oval Office replying to angry people wearing turbans and veils at his door protesting about abuse and torture and asking who would take responsibility for a report that U.S. troops had flushed copies of the Holy Quran in Guantanamo Bay toilets to intimidate and soften up prisoners by saying: “Newsweek has apologized.”

The report was magnified tenfold online through websites calling for “jihad” against anything having to do with Americans, the war on Iraq and Afghanistan, and snowballed beyond all proportion. Riots erupted in several cities around the world leading to the deaths of innocent civilians.

Newsweek later retracted the story and a tense period ensued with the Pentagon denying the incident had occurred then later admitting maybe some offenses were committed. But the damage was already done.

“The value system rewards scoops,” said Tim Porter, author of the journalism blog First Draft, at a panel discussion on media credibility at Stanford University’s Knight Fellowships program. “It’s internally based. It’s journalists valuing the work of other journalists, rather than a value system based on benefit to the community or benefit to the reader.”

He was commenting on the desecration story that appeared in Newsweek and said he hoped the decline in the public’s confidence in the news media would prompt a long-term shift in priorities away from speed and exclusivity towards context, collaboration and accuracy.

“One thing I’d like people to think about is how few news organizations left aspire to and have the resources to do foreign news coverage,” said Newsweek’s San Francisco bureau chief Karen Breslau at the same panel. “I don’t ever want Al-Jazeera to be my news source.” (*Journalists Address Media Credibility, Will Oremus, Stanford Daily, May 17, 2005, http://daily.stanford.org/tempo?page=printable&repository=0001_article&id=17386*).

The charges and counter-charges by media and officialdom have further undermined the fourth estate’s noble cause as the watchdog of government by holding decision-makers accountable. In a case like this, we’d have to go back to the basics about accurate sourcing, credibility, double-checking facts and acting professionally when all hell breaks loose.

Tragically, in this case, the outraged reactions to the reports led to the deaths of over a dozen people.

How does one factor that into a code of ethics? Who’s at fault? The one who commits the abuses and offenses or the one who reports them and starts a conflagration?

Columnist/correspondent Raghida Dergham wrote in Al Hayat that just as Newsweek deserved prosecution if it erred, the Bush administration should also have been held responsible for the heinous acts committed at Guantanamo, and Arab media should be criticized for their shortcomings, instigations to violence and kowtowing to governments, intelligence services and fundamentalism.

The editor of the American Journalism Review wrote that this was an awful time for journalism. “Each day brings new revelations of ethics breaches: fabrication, plagiarism, lifted quotes, rampant inaccuracy.”

This, too, is something from which we suffer in the Arab media. Sources are often referred to in very watered down and foggy terms, accuracy falls victim to expediency, tight budgets, or personal attacks.

If we can't afford to pay for the subscription to the feature service providing the story, or if our correspondent is unable to handle that and other stories from the scene, we see no harm in making things up or using other people's hard work and taking credit for it.

It's not all like that, but there's enough of it to cause major concern.

On the matter of Iraq, Arab media have provided both good and bad coverage but have certainly been a needed supplement to Western organizations constrained by the embedding of journalists, information management, and worse, on the part of the U.S. administration.

In their attempt to present Arab news consumers with more than the sanitized Pentagon versions of events, some outlets may have gone overboard in focusing on blood, gore, tragedy and mayhem in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. We see that online and on the air.

They do it in the name of Arabism, patriotism, journalistic balance and other convenient clichés.

“We have a policy at Asharq Al-Awsat not to publish bloody and gruesome pictures but others don't have a specific policy to deal with tragedy, such as the Internet and email which isn't controlled, which makes them more dangerous,” opined Tarek Homeid. (*Behind the Battle for Pictures, Tarek Homeid, Asharq Al-Awsat, May 12, 2005, <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=298823&issue=9662>*).

An issue raised by Nora Paul is that the Web isn't being used for substantive and in-depth reporting and that newsrooms are allocating fewer resources for such journalism, relying instead on wire copy.

“Pack news judgment reigns in most news organizations. No wonder there has been a rise in niche news sites, bloggers who consult esoteric sources and discussion areas where people intensely interested in particular topics can get more and different news than they will from their still geo-focused local newspaper,” she said. (*“New News” Retrospective: Is Online News Reaching its Potential?, Nora Paul, Online Journalism Review, posted 2005-03-24, <http://www.ojr.org/stories/05032paul/print.htm>*).

She remarked that the harshest reality news organizations had to face was that readers were finding each other and cutting out the “middle man.”

Perhaps just as critical is the question raised by the Los Angeles Times earlier this year: “Do Bloggers Deserve Basic Journalistic Protections?”

The Apple computer company brought a lawsuit charging that three bloggers had published confidential product information about it, in violation of state law. The company wanted to track down its employees who had leaked the information to the bloggers, in violation of the firm's nondisclosure agreement with Apple and of the California Uniform Trade Secrets Act.

“In other words, Apple wanted the bloggers to identify their confidential sources,” said the paper, and the bloggers responded by saying they were reporters (journalists). Are they?

According to the story, a judge ruled in favor of Apple, noting that nobody (blogger or traditional journalist) had the right to publish information contained in “stolen property.” (*Do Bloggers Deserve Basic Journalistic Protections, David Shaw, Los Angeles Times, March 27, 2005, <http://www.latimes.com/technology/la-ca-shaw27mar27,1,6615897,print.story>*).

The writer went on to ask whether bloggers were entitled to the same constitutional protection as traditional print and broadcast journalists, arguing that they did not, since bloggers require no journalistic experience.

“All they need is computer access and the desire to blog. There are other, even important differences between bloggers and mainstream journalists, perhaps the most significant being that bloggers pride themselves on being part of an unmediated medium, giving their readers unfiltered information. And therein lies the problem.” (*Ibid*).

But in the Arab world where blogs have complemented, and sometimes substituted for, traditional media sources of information, notably in matters of national security, freedom of expression and people’s empowerment, such restrictions would be the death knell of citizen journalism.

Media Ethics:

We hear a lot about the need for a professional code of ethics to regulate media, in the Arab world and in the West, but how often do we consider the consequences of such a call to arms and whether it is the ultimate solution to all the media’s ills?

The word “code” as defined by Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary gives us “a systematically arranged collection of existing laws.” So, we’re assuming that we already have media laws in the Arab world and that they need to be arranged systematically.

We’re also assuming that one code of ethics will monolithically regulate Arab media in all their permutations.

The first lesson I used to teach my students, based on 25 years of experience as a foreign correspondent and editor, is “never assume anything.” If you do, it’s a key ingredient for trouble.

In war situations, when we talk of ethics, when are pictures of POWs considered propaganda? Should journalists be versed in the Geneva Conventions?

As with Iraq and Afghanistan, Palestine has had its share of tragedy and daily deaths. Numbers often fall victim to unethical or sloppy journalism. Which sources provide us with the best body counts? Are they the bloggers slaloming through Israeli army checkpoints to stories traditional journalists across “The Wall” are unable to cover, or stringers for international media, themselves constrained by security measures?

When Israeli troops attacked the city of Jenin, human rights activists and members of NGOs with digital cameras, Internet connections and access to the sites of destruction and death sent furtive and frenzied reports to mainstream media and to their own public affairs departments describing the horrors. Israel countered by issuing statements denying the casualties were as high as had been claimed. It was hard to establish accurate body counts in the heat of battle in narrow streets and warrens.

Numbers in Arab journalistic parlance tend to be fluid, which is problematic when one is covering wars, disasters, tragedies and the like. How often have we seen exaggerations in numbers, only to be corrected later, and to throw a reporter's credibility to the wind?

If a demonstration attracted half a million people, there is no point in saying the crowd was a million and a half, as occurred during one of the rallies in downtown Beirut following the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. Satellite pictures, good mathematics, engineers' and official estimates and satellite pictures from above belied reports by certain media.

What about trying to attract world sympathy and support for something that is inherently immoral by mobilizing all media, including online outlets, to sway international public opinion?

A case in point is the Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Gaza Strip and the dismantling of illegal settlements that had caused untold hardship for the Palestinian people living therein.

World media focused on how traumatized the settlers were in having to give up their manicured lawns and spacious houses on land confiscated from Palestinians – which the Israelis claimed was their God-given right – while Palestinians received scant notice and stories like their being subjected to humiliation at checkpoints, being deprived of much-needed scarce water and other indignities were not on the Western media's agenda, given the public relations blitz launched by Israel.

In cyberspace, an Israeli blogger wrote that the evacuees were experiencing emotional aftershocks and “the rape of a lifestyle, brotherly betrayal,” and wholesale abandonment. That this lifestyle was at the expense of a population that had already been living on that spot of land before the settlers came in was not factored into the contextual equation.

On the flip side, a Palestinian blogger wrote that he was fed up with too many images of weepy settler theatrics for his own sanity, adding that the story was not about dismantling organic orchards and pretty developments, but about 30,000 Palestinians who had lost their homes and lives to Israeli bulldozers, sometimes with no advance notice, to make room for the settlements. (*Gaza Disengagement Coverage Splintered by Factional Views Online*, Mark Glaser, *Online Journalism Review*, posted: 2005-08-23, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050823glaser>).

“Both sides seem more obsessed with showing their pain and suffering to the world than trying to end the conflict,” wrote Glaser. “The AP reported recently that some settlers insisted that soldiers drag them from houses in front of TV cameras. According to the story, one settler cried and wailed while the cameras rolled, and when the cameras were off, he stopped crying and walked away.” (*Ibid*).

Where does that leave our journalists? Do they shoot the pictures and footage and report all these details?

On another note, an analysis in *The Economist* in February pointed to the perils of using journalists as propagandists. All governments try to get away with it, using coercion, intimidation, blackmail, friendly persuasion, or the drying up of sources. Having worked in the media in Washington and the Middle East, I've seen the practice on both sides of the so-called cultural divide.

It also becomes dangerous when the old boundaries between reporting and commentary/punditry disappear, as noted by *The Economist*. It endangers ethics.

“Veracity is paramount in the synaptic ricochet of the online news environment,” wrote Bradley Osborn, a University of Memphis graduate student, in a study on the issue. “Retaining credibility in this new psychologically intuitive medium is critical.” (*Ethics and Credibility in Online Journalism, Bradley Osborn, Jour 6702 Current Issues in Journalism, the University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, Spring 2001*).

At the second media ethics conference organized by the Institute for Professional Journalists – we've since had a third – a former correspondent from Australia who teaches journalism said you can't do ethics in 250th of a second, the time it takes to shoot a standard picture.

But what of the unseen pictures? Is it ethical to hold back on them?

Images of thousands of dead American soldiers helped turn the tide against the Vietnam War. To avoid a repeat of that, the Pentagon banned photojournalists from covering the funerals of U.S. troops, or the return of caskets aboard military transport planes at Dover Air Force base in Delaware for many months and only recently resumed the practice.

On the other hand, how much does one dwell on tragedy? Is a kidnap victim's plea for mercy worth extensive coverage? Should video footage of hostages be posted on websites, or, more gruesomely, should their executions?

Former CIA Director George Tenet called for tougher cyber security rules to guard against attacks on the U.S. using the Internet. He told an IT security conference in Washington last December that cyberspace's “Wild West must give way to governance and control.”

His speech mirrored other intelligence and security officials' concerns that telecommunications, particularly the Internet, represented “a backdoor through which terrorists and other enemies of the United States can attack the country, even though some progress has been made in securing the physical infrastructure.” (*Analysis: Tenet Calls for Tough Cyber Security Rules, Shaun Waterman, United Press International, December 1, 2004, <http://www.upi.com/view.cfm?StoryID=20041201-065625-4642r>*).

Covering trauma and tragedy requires special care, sensitivity, professionalism, guts, instincts, empathy, sympathy, courage, stamina and every possible human emotion known to us.

The Asian tsunami disaster and Hurricane Katrina are perfect examples. The figures alone of how many people perished were the first and greatest challenge. You want to be accurate fast and ahead of the competition. You face daunting obstacles, communications are difficult, and victims seek you for help.

What do you do? Help a victim or film him in his hour of misery, or both? Will your stories lack context because of the logistical problems?

On a smaller scale, let's take the example of the Terry Schiavo case where the whole world watched as an incapacitated woman died a slow death following protracted illness that was brought to an end with euthanasia. Websites were created for and against euthanasia. How ethical was the method of her death? How ethical was the coverage? Are there rules covering such tragedies? How does one prepare for them?

Conversely, is the barring of material that could serve the common good, under the pretext of protecting morality, advisable? Gulf News ran a special report in which it referred to the blocking of sites by the UAE's government-run Etisalat communications company.

It seems plastic surgeons wishing to do Web research about reconstructing women's breasts and downloading pictures for a medical conference hit a dead end and got a message stating it was "due to content being inconsistent with the religious, cultural, political and moral values of the United Arab Emirates." (*Isn't it time to stop kidding? Mahmood Saberi and Mariam Al Serkal, Gulf News Special Reports, 12/2/2005, <http://www.gulfnews.com/Articles/SpecialReportsNF.asp?ArticleID=151585>*).

Interestingly, the UAE blogosphere is growing at a rapid pace, despite continued attempts to block blogs considered offensive by the authorities. (*Blogging in the UAE, Piers Grimley Evans, Gulf News Feature, 10/9/2005, <http://www.gulfnews.com/Articles/FeaturesNF.asp?ArticleID=180988>*).

Internet access in the Dubai Internet and Media Cities and in the trade free zones is not filtered as it is in cyber cafés and other locations, I'm told. Why? Are journalists and business people more entitled to this privilege than others?

Over the years we've also faced double standards in Arab media when referring to news sources for our reports. If the source is foreign, like The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, or the BBC, it's been given more weight than a story from a local paper or network.

That may be symptomatic of how little faith Arabs have in their own governments, and, by extension, Arab media.

Freedom and Governance in Online Journalism:

We're toying with the Arabization of URLs and Arabic domain names, in a move endorsed by the League of Arab States. It's part of an overall plan to produce Arabic domain names (www.arabic-domains.org) across the region and aided by the Saudi Center for Web Information at the King Abdel Aziz City for Science and Technology.

Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and several Gulf countries are enrolled in the scheme that was expected to be launched on an experimental basis in November 2005. (*Arab League Endorses Arabization of Domain Names, Al Ali Khaled, Elaph, Aug. 28, 2005, <http://www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/InternetNews/2005/8/86628.htm>*).

In 2004, the Arab League organized a conference in Egypt aimed at promoting Arabic-language search engines.

According to a survey conducted by Spot On, a public relations firm based in Dubai, Internet use in the Arab world hasn't been fully realized through cell phones (SMS) because users were still unaware of the potential this vehicle provides them for obtaining online news and information.

The shortfall was also attributed to poor marketing of available services, despite the immense potential for revenue generation and competitiveness vis-à-vis other information carriers in the region. (*Internet Use in Arab World Still Weak, Sada Al Balad, June 13, 2005, p.11*).

Will competitiveness necessarily lead to Internet governance and more press freedom online?

Activists are urging press freedom advocates to resort to the Net, particularly blogs, to get their message out, saying it's a substitute for missing democracy. But analysts concede that language may still be an obstacle in trying to bridge the cultural divide between the Arab world and the West – read America – since few Americans know Arabic and Arabs are not always well versed in the nuances of American parlance.

Moreover, many U.S. media have for years been accused of stereotyping and denigrating Arabs and Muslims, a tendency that has been exacerbated by the events of September 11, 2001 and the resultant hostility and mis-communication between the two sides.

(Abu-Fadil, Magda. Is Coverage of Arabs, Muslims Good? Western Media Under Scrutiny, lecture presented at International Press Institute's World Congress & 54th General Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, May 21-24, 2005.

http://ipj.lau.edu.lb/outreach/2005/05_unfairpotrayal/nairobi.php).

But Arab media representatives in the U.S. have also been remiss in arguing their case vis-à-vis the West, lamented longtime Arab-American activist Jean Abinader. Their lack of relative freedom to openly explore many issues makes them resort to their own stereotypes, he said.

He urged Arab media to do more to develop ties with American media.

“There is a need for more Arab media in the U.S. to have a dual role – to report the news and to build networks of relationships with U.S. media that will lead to greater awareness of Arab sensibilities, concerns and perspectives on the part of reporters and editors,” he said. “This may also in time lead to greater access beyond news features for Arab media in the U.S., for example, stories in English on Arab society, reform, cultural issues and similar topics that could be featured on American media outlets.” (*Tethered Media: Content Without Context,* Jean Abinader, *Expert Briefing, The Daily Star, January 27, 2005, p.11*).

He complained, as do many of us, that Arab media and Arab journalists quite often lack the basic language skills to communicate with “the other,” although they often lambaste “the other” for failing to understand them.

“If reaching American audiences is a priority, then Arab media will have to develop a competency in English reporting that will allow them to be fed directly into the American media,” he added. (*Ibid*).

It should also be a priority to evolve into knowledge societies in the Arab world through the development of adequate and equitable information and communication technologies (ICTs).

UNESCO has been campaigning for such a goal and has given much thought to restrictions on information flows.

A UNESCO-organized conference on Freedom of Expression in Cyberspace held in Paris in February 2005 stressed that the free flow of information was a fundamental premise of democratic societies, where individual freedom was respected and honored.

It premised one of the sessions on the belief that everyone had the right to freedom of opinion and expression, which includes the right to seek and receive information. It also discussed the sensitive issue of the choice between security and openness and where limits should be placed to the free flow of data, as well as the need for free media.

But participants were faced with the challenge of determining whether creativity should be hampered by codes and restrictions.

Censorship, the great Arab bugaboo, is a matter of interpretation, depending on the country one is dealing with. In Myanmar (Burma), it may mean one thing, while in Egypt quite another.

“Egyptian law censors content to defend ‘public morals,’ regulating faulty or ill-motivated rumors or agitating news if the objective thereof is to disturb public order, induce fear in people or cause harm to public interest. The Egyptian laws have been invoked frequently.” (*The Bordering and Restraining of Global Data Flows, Politics of the Information Society, UNESCO Publications for the Politics of the Information Society, 2004, p.23*).

So is there room for Internet governance given the Arab world’s media landscape?

Not only do developing countries need to get a grip on production of good and professional content, they also need to be well versed in, and capable of handling the technical administration of the Net, or at least their part of it.

Unfortunately, many countries are not even up to par on that front and have different standards of operation.

“To date, the involvement and participation of developing countries on most ICT and Internet governance issues and mechanisms has been scant and certainly not consistent over time,” reads a task force report on the subject issued last year.

That’s because developing countries often confuse government with governance and end up having government officials representing them to decide on matters perhaps better left to private or quasi-governmental organizations. (*Internet Governance: A Discussion Document, Prepared for the United Nations ICT Task Force, George Sadowsky, Raul Zambrano, Pierre Dandjinou, March 15, 2004, p. 23*).

A “Report of the Working Group on Internet Governance” (WGIG) meeting at Chateau de Bossey in June 2005 recognized that one of its overarching priorities “was to contribute to ensuring the effective and meaningful participation of all stakeholders from developing countries in Internet governance arrangements.” (p. 10).

It further recognized that any organizational form for the governance function/oversight function should adhere to: no single government having a pre-eminent role in relation to international Internet governance; a multilateral, transparent and democratic form of governance by governments; full involvement of governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations in the process; and, involvement of all stakeholders.

Which brings us to the question: Who rules the Internet? And should they?

The Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) is the U.S.-based organization established in 1998 to oversee the system of Web addresses.

Perhaps the prickliest issue is who runs ICANN and whether its hegemony on the Internet should remain undisputed, since it is not accountable to governments but, critics claim, is under the control of the U.S. government since most Internet regional registries are located in America.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), begun in Geneva in 2003, and followed up in Tunis in November 2005, has had to grapple with the issue of governance.

“Some groups fear that the Internet is controlled by commercial interests instead of being a global resource that is equally available to all; on the other hand, others fear that calls for reform of Internet governance mask a desire on the part of some governments to control content and limit freedom of expression on the Internet,” according to the Panos Media Toolkit on ICTs.

(<http://www.panos.org.uk/communication>).

According to the document, the Internet does not have a system of governance and is a humongous, and sometimes unruly body of information.

Opinions differ on whether the Internet’s governance system should address the question of controlling undesirable content – pornography, hate-content, crime, etc. – or whether this is covered adequately by existing legislation in each country, the toolkit said.

In the post-9/11 climate of fear and everything being laced with terrorism, the International Federation of Journalists has expressed concern that media freedoms may have been curtailed on both sides of the divide for misguided reasons.

It prefaced its “Journalism, Civil Liberties and the War on Terrorism” report by quoting Ben Franklin, who said: “Those who sacrifice liberty for security deserve neither liberty nor security.” *(<http://www.ifj.org>).*

In its Middle East and North Africa segment, the report said that the media in most Arab states “continue to exist in a twilight world of harsh regulation and governmental influence, despite the excitement and undoubted progress that has accompanied the growth of independent satellite television (and websites) in the region.”

Equally frustrating to the IFJ is that following 9/11, the United States and Canada introduced anti-terrorism laws “which were supposedly implemented to protect citizens against terrorist threats. However, the impact of national security measures and restrictions on basic rights and freedoms appear to be both disproportionate and repressive.”

The IFJ's secretary general, Aidan White, told a UNESCO conference marking World Press Freedom Day in Dakar, Senegal, in May 2005 that governance was about rights, the rule of law and the manner in which they were administered.

Not only were good administrators required, he said, but there's also a need for "journalism practiced in an atmosphere of access to reliable information, where reporters can use a variety of sources and where they have the freedom to work safely."

He added that it was difficult to speak of good governance when journalism was under such pressure.

"Governments appear oblivious to the fact that the mechanisms they choose to fight terrorism – military action, increased power for police, risk profiling, immigration controls, propaganda and manipulation of media -- also nurture anxiety and more fearfulness within society," he explained.

Touching on calls for responsible journalism by government officials, a euphemism for "don't rock the boat," Larry Kilman, communications director at the World Association of Newspapers, told the same conference that what media contribute to good governance was exactly what some government officials find revolting: "freedom to be annoying, to make trouble, to embarrass, and, yes, to be obnoxious and insulting."

He said the free press' role is not to cooperate with government but to question and be skeptical, to dig beneath the surface, and to take nothing at face value.

But to thrive in a free environment requires a certain amount of government cooperation – an increasingly rare commodity in our day and age.

A year after 9/11, Reporters Without Borders issued a report entitled "The Internet on Probation," in which it said that cyberspace can be added to the list of "collateral damage" caused by security measures. ***"As a result, basic cyber-freedoms have been cut back."*** (*The Internet on Probation, 11 Septekmber 2001-11 September 2002, Reporters Without Borders, Internet Desk, Contact: Loick Coriou, loick.coriou@enduring-freedoms.org*).

Add to that copyright matters and the environment could be stifling.

A paper prepared by the U.S. Congressional Budget Office in August 2004 on "Copyright Issues in Digital Media" saw obstacles to copyright enforcement such as infringement by individuals and on the international level.

"The ease of replication and redistribution of creative works in digital form facilitates the instantaneous, global availability of copyright-infringing works. Consequently, the effectiveness of any nation's efforts to protect the rights of its copyright owners depends increasingly on international coordination of enforcement efforts and the harmonization of copyright law across countries," it said.

But developing countries already pinched by their inability to attain governance of the Internet may be reluctant to go along with such a high-minded request.

Recommendations:

Which brings us full circle to the debate over whether we need strict rules or codes of ethics to keep us on the straight and narrow.

Yes and no.

Our institute has had three media ethics conferences focusing on the need to improve news coverage through more ethical journalistic behavior. But the word code, as mentioned earlier, is not something we encourage because it suggests laws that are imposed by governments that are themselves often quite unethical.

That's why we preferred coming up with what we called "guidelines for good journalistic practice" and limited them to a simple set of eight so that journalists can remember them and abide by them voluntarily. We're also working on employers to convince them that by adopting these guidelines it's not only good PR, it's good business.

The eight points are available in the downloadable proceedings from our conference in June 2004 on our institute's website and can be summarized as: **fairness, integrity, honesty, commitment to the public, courage to pursue the truth, awareness of diversity, solidarity with fellow journalists treated unjustly and skill development through continuous training.**

I'd like to add the following 10 questions journalists should ask to make good ethical decisions. They were submitted by Bob Steele of the Poynter Institute in Florida (<http://www.poynter.org>), which is a great school for professional journalists.

1. What do I know? What do I need to know?
2. What is my journalistic purpose?
3. What are my ethical concerns?
4. What organizational policies and professional guidelines should I consider?
5. How can I include other people, with different perspectives and diverse ideas, in the decision-making process?
6. Who are the stakeholders – those affected by my decision? What are their motivations? Which are legitimate?
7. What if the roles were reversed? How would I feel if I were in the shoes of one of the stakeholders?
8. What are the possible consequences of my actions? Short term? Long term?
9. What are my alternatives to maximize my truth-telling responsibility and minimize harm?
10. Can I clearly and fully justify my thinking and my decision? To my colleagues? To the stakeholders? To the public?

In all of this it also helps to be armed with a dose of humility. Journalists are conduits through which the story is told. They should not become the story.

Conclusion:

While we don't want cowardice in the newsroom from journalists unable or unwilling to take bold steps to tell the story, we also don't appreciate cowboy reporters being parachuted into dicey news situations with the sensitivity of a bulldozer, shoving microphones and cameras into people's faces asking crude questions, or correspondents padding their salaries with gifts and money from sources they cover as clear examples of conflict of interest, or editors using headlines and terminology that parrot official pronouncements in mindless unison.

I'd like to remind my Arab media colleagues that we should temper our calls for press freedom to report with a measure of responsibility. Should kidnappings and beheadings define the news? In our eagerness to fill the 24-hour news cycle, where do we draw the line between news and sensationalism? Do we have the luxury of time to decide?

Self-regulation is the best solution, but it should be adopted widely and voluntarily. If regulation is imposed, it could backfire and be counter-productive.

As for citizen journalists, the sky is the limit but we should also recognize some of that limit.

Andrew Locke, director of product strategy at MSNBC.com said: “Over time we want to turn those passing relationships into lasting bonds (with citizen journalists). Once you have a real, ongoing relationship, then you can start sharing information and wisdom back and forth. You can develop a code of conduct that means something and can stick. It’s not simply about mentoring citizen journalists like cub reporters, it’s about the community itself developing norms and standards of propriety.”

“Yes, we’ll always act as a gatekeeper, but once you’re in the gate as a citizen journalist, you should be an empowered member of the storytelling community. We still have a long way to go, but for citizen journalism to grow to its full potential we have to get there.” (*Did London Bombings Turn Citizen Journalists into Citizen Paparazzi? Mark Glaser, Online Journalism Review, posted: 2005-07-12, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050712glaser>*)

In traditional journalism, experts said, credibility amounts to accuracy, being in context and being fair. “In the blogosphere, credibility may borrow from those values but is likely also shaped by what the individual blogger – or groups of bloggers – stands for,” wrote Bill Mitchell and Bob Steele in a paper for a blogging conference at Harvard Law School in January 2005.

Traditional journalists and bloggers face significant challenges in terms of credibility and ethical conduct, they said, adding that for the traditional journalist it’s a matter of “measuring up to existing, generally accepted standards,” while for bloggers, “who have not yet addressed the issue, it’s first a matter of figuring out what their standards might be – and then measuring up.” (*Earn Your Own Trust, Roll Your Own Ethics: Transparency and Beyond, Bill Mitchell & Bob Steele, The Poynter Institute, January 15, 2005, p.3, paper presented at the conference Blogging, Journalism and Credibility: Battleground and Common Ground, Harvard University*).

Thank you.

Sources:

The Rise of the Pajama Clad Scribes; How Weblogs Are Reshaping the Not-So-Free Press, Brad Badelt, Thunderbird magazine, University of British Columbia, <http://www.journalism.ubc.ca/thunderbird/archives/2005.01/blog.html>.

Yahoo Closes Chat Rooms After TV Sex Report, Mike Musgrove, The Washington Post, Friday June 24, 2005, p. D05.

Workshop on Cyber Crimes Against Minors, Issam Al Majali, Elaph, August 29, 2005, <http://www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/InternetNews/2005/8/86901.html>.

Will Blogs Go Bust? David D. Perlmutter, Editor & Publisher, August 4, 2005, http://editorandpublisher.com/eandp/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id-1001009362.

State of Blogosphere, Posted by David Sifry, August 10, 2005, Tags: Blogosphere, <http://www.technorati.com/weblog>.

Wiki: Don't Lose That Number, Jennifer Dorroh, American Journalism Review, August/September 2005, http://www.ajr.org/article_printable.asp?id=3947.

The Rise of Do-it-Yourself Journalism After September 11, Alex Halavais, One Year Later: September 11 and the Internet, September 5, 2002, Pew Internet & American Life Project, <http://www.pewinternet.org>.

Political Web Sites Offer Lebanese Open Platform to Express Views, Raed El Rafei, The Daily Star, June 11, 2005, p. 5.

Abu-Fadil, Magda. Lebanese Youth & the Media: Social & Political Influences, paper presented at conference entitled "German-Arab Media Dialogue" organized by the German Foreign Ministry's External Cultural Relations Institute in Berlin, Germany, November 29-30, 2004.
<http://ipj.lau.edu.lb/outreach/2004/11-youth/berlin.php>.

CBS News to Launch 24-Hour Broadband Network Service, Joshua Chaffin, Financial Times, July 13, 2005, p. 28.

Web Content by and for the Masses, John Markoff, The New York Times, June 29, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/29/technology/29content.html>.

Did London Bombings Turn Citizen Journalists into Citizen Paparazzi? Mark Glaser, Online Journalism Review, posted: 2005-07-12,
<http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050712glaser>.

Gulf Coast Journalists Hold Heads Above Water, Robert MacMillan, The Washington Post, August 31, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/31/AR2005083100895.html?referrer=email>.

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2005/hurricanes/feedback/index.html>.

<http://www.mydd.com/story/2005/8/31/1339/04941>.

<http://news.yahoo.com/page/photostatement>.

Islamic Bloggers Hail "Allah's Soldier" Katrina, Habib Trabelsi, AFP, September 4, 2005,
http://www.mg.co.za/articlepage.aspx?area=/breaking_news/breaking_news__international_news/&articleid=249937.

Al Arabiya Airs Exclusive Footage Shot Moments Before Hariri's Assassination, March 27, 2005, <http://www.alarabiya.net/article.aspx?v=11654>.

<http://www.malaaa.net>.

Blogs, SMS, e-mail: Egyptians Organize Protests as Elections Near, Mark Glaser, Online Journalism Review, posted: 2005-08-30,
<http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050830glaser>.

Call for Boycott of Egypt's National Papers, Zeinab Ghosn, As-Safir, Sep. 2, 2005,
<http://www.assafir.com/iso/toldissues/20050902//world/98.html>.

Journalists Address Media Credibility, Will Oremus, Stanford Daily, May 17, 2005, http://daily.stanford.org/tempo?page=printable&repository=0001_article&id=17386.

Behind the Battle for Pictures, Tarek Homeid, Asharq Al-Awsat, May 12, 2005, <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=298823&issue=9662>.

“New News” Retrospective: Is Online News Reaching its Potential?, Nora Paul, Online Journalism Review, posted 2005-03-24, <http://www.ojr.org/stories/05032paul/print.htm>.

Do Bloggers Deserve Basic Journalistic Protections, David Shaw, Los Angeles Times, March 27, 2005, <http://www.latimes.com/technology/la-ca-shaw27mar27,1,6615897,print.story>.

Gaza Disengagement Coverage Splintered by Factional Views Online, Mark Glaser, Online Journalism Review, posted: 2005-08-23, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050823glaser>.

Ethics and Credibility in Online Journalism, Bradley Osborn, Jour 6702 Current Issues in Journalism, the University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, Spring 2001.

Analysis: Tenet Calls for Tough Cyber Security Rules, Shaun Waterman, United Press International, December 1, 2004, <http://www.upi.com/view.cfm?StoryID=20041201-065625-4642r>.

Isn't it time to stop kidding? Mahmood Saberi and Mariam Al Serkal, Gulf News Special Reports, 12/2/2005, <http://www.gulfnews.com/Articles/SpecialReportsNF.asp?ArticleID=151585>.

Blogging in the UAE, Piers Grimley Evans, Gulf News Feature, 10/9/2005, <http://www.gulfnews.com/Articles/FeaturesNF.asp?ArticleID=180988>.

Arab League Endorses Arabization of Domain Names, Al Ali Khaled, Elaph, Aug. 28, 2005, <http://www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/InternetNews/2005/8/86628.htm>.

Internet Use in Arab World Still Weak, Sada Al Balad, June 13, 2005, p.11.

Abu-Fadil, Magda. Is Coverage of Arabs, Muslims Good? Western Media Under Scrutiny, lecture presented at International Press Institute's World Congress & 54th General Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, May 21-24, 2005. <http://ipj.lau.edu.lb/outreach/2005/05-unfairportrayal/0521/nairobi.php>.

Tethered Media: Content Without Context,” Jean Abinader, Expert Briefing, The Daily Star, January 27, 2005, p.11.

The Bordering and Restraining of Global Data Flows, Politics of the Information Society, UNESCO Publications for the Politics of the Information Society, 2004, p.23.

Internet Governance: A Discussion Document, Prepared for the United Nations ICT Task Force, George Sadowsky, Raul Zambrano, Pierre Dandjinou, March 15, 2004, p. 23.

<http://www.panos.org.uk/communication>.

The Internet on Probation, 11 September 2001-11 September 2002, Reporters Without Borders, Internet Desk, Contact: Loick Coriou, loick.coriou@enduring-freedoms.org.

Earn Your Own Trust, Roll Your Own Ethics: Transparency and Beyond, Bill Mitchell & Bob Steele, The Poynter Institute, January 15, 2005, p.3, paper presented at the conference Blogging, Journalism and Credibility: Battleground and Common Ground, Harvard University.

Magda Abu-Fadil is director of the Institute for Professional Journalists (IPJ) at the Lebanese American University and a 25-year veteran of international media in the U.S. and the Middle East, including Agence France-Presse, United Press International, Defense News, Asharaq Al-Awsat/Arab News dailies, Al-Riyadh/Al-Riyadh Daily, The Middle East magazine and Events magazine, to name a few. She taught journalism in Washington, D.C. and Lebanon and has trained journalists in the U.S. and Arab world.

IPJ aims at helping reporters, editors and managers in various print, broadcast and online media improve their operational skills in Arabic and English and at familiarizing them with the latest developments in their respective areas. IPJ also focuses on issues of media laws, ethics and freedom of expression in the Lebanese and Arab contexts. It offers programs such as workshops, seminars and conferences geared to familiarizing journalists with the tools of computerized newsrooms for writing and editing as well as capitalizing on information sources through the Internet.

Magda Abu-Fadil
Director, Institute for Professional Journalists
Lebanese American University
P.O. Box 13-5053
Chouran Beirut 1102 2801
Lebanon
Tel: (01) 786456 x. 1273
Fax: (01) 867098
Email: mafadil@lau.edu.lb
ipj@lau.edu.lb
<http://ipj.lau.edu.lb>
www.lau.edu.lb

