Corrections Policies in Online Journalism:
A Critical Analysis, Ethical Discussion, and Typology

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Corrections Policies in Online Journalism

Introduction

Sixteen years ago, Allen Kraus was a deputy commissioner in the New York City Human Resources Administration who worked at uncovering welfare fraud. One particular fraud investigation resulted in several arrests. Kraus had actually resigned from his position six weeks before the investigation, due to disagreements with a new boss (over “budget and staffing”).

However, news of Kraus’ resignation was included in the same press release that announced the fraud- and bribery-related arrests. Later in the same day, a second press release was issued that said there was “no evidence of criminal culpability” on Kraus’s part – but that directors were concerned about “weaknesses” in his department. What’s worse, the next day the New York Times published an article stating that Kraus “resigned under pressure as a result of the investigation.”

Kraus contacted the Times, and a “much shorter” follow-up article told his side of the story. His boss ultimately went on record to declare that Kraus’ resignation and the investigation were not related.

However, when Allen Kraus’ name is Googled today, the first search result is a New York Times article called “A Welfare Official Denies He Resigned Because of Inquiry”. For Kraus, who now has a national healthcare consulting business, there is no telling how many potential clients have searched his name in Google and seen the misleading article – or even changed their decision to hire him.54
The rise of the internet has affected almost every aspect of modern life. Journalism has not escaped unchanged – quite the opposite; online journalism is now a legitimately separate field, with its own rules and regulations. But the transition from print to online journalism has not been smooth. Logistical questions abound: what is the appropriate staff size for an online newsroom? How can editors and reporters adapt to the new 24-hour news cycle? How will journalism survive, financially, now that consumers expect to get their news online, free of charge?

But beyond these first, obvious difficulties, ethical issues abound. A news outlet’s purpose is to disseminate accurate, reliable information to readers – in a timely fashion. Without credibility, a news outlet is nothing. Of course, no newspaper is perfect, and mistakes will (and do) happen. But the traditional methods of correcting errors are no longer sufficient.

Any American who has perused a print newspaper has probably noticed the “Corrections” box, usually located on the second or third page of the “A” section. For decades, this has been the standard practice for newspapers to correct their inevitable mistakes. However, online journalism provides no similar arena for rectifying wrongs. The fluid, fast-clicking nature of the internet means that once a reader has finished with an article, there is no guarantee (or reason, really) that they will ever return to the story. When one subscribes to a print newspaper, there is an understanding that said newspaper will appear in the consumers’ mailbox or driveway. With the internet, it is up to the reader whether or not they will pursue the news for that day. If the article contained erroneous information, how will the reader ever be made aware?
Furthermore, there is no well-known standard or model corrections policy for online news outlets to follow. As I discovered, this has resulted in an extremely inconsistent approach to online corrections.

The examination of how to properly manage online corrections must begin far before the mistake is even made. This thesis first explores the nontraditional timeframe of the internet and the constraints it places on newspaper editors and reporters. First of all, online journalism is by no means an established field. Executives at news organizations are still hesitant to bestow funding upon an area of journalism that has yet to prove profitable. Thus, the online counterparts of print newspapers are usually pitifully understaffed. Most online journalism outfits suffer from a dearth of both reporters and, more importantly, copy editors. Furthermore, the internet has obliterated the traditional news cycle. Historically, reporters scouted stories during the day, wrote at night, and readers received their newspapers the next morning detailing the previous day’s events. Today, with the real-time reporting capabilities the internet offers, consumers do not need to wait until the next day to find out the news – they do not even have to wait a few hours. It is now possible to read about an event within minutes of its occurrence. This nonstop demand for information has considerably narrowed editors’ time constraints, leading some to worry whether the majority of news outlets, when under pressure to break stories, will choose speed over accuracy. I will thus briefly describe a few tactics that some newspapers have put in place to (hopefully) reduce errors in the rush to report online.
However, as I will mention time and time again, mistakes in journalism are inevitable. Conversely, I cannot stress enough the importance of credibility; without it, journalism is nothing. The bulk of this paper is a critical analysis of several major news outlets’ actual and stated corrections policies. The publications I analyzed are a deliberate mix of major print newspapers with online counterparts (the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*); an online-only publication (*Slate*); and a former print publication that is now exclusively published online (*Christian Science Monitor*). I specifically chose the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* because they are two nationally-known print newspapers with equally prominent websites: both newspapers are in the top five in the rankings of both United States newspapers by circulation, and newspapers’ web sites by unique monthly visitors.79

Because there is no general standard for online corrections policies, the corrections policies of these four publications are by no means all-encompassing. I thus highlight a number of methods practiced by other online news outlets, in order to illustrate how wide and varied the current spectrum of tactics is. These examples also exist to inform the reader of the many options that exist for news outlets when deciding how to handle online corrections.

I then discuss the ethical implications behind various online corrections policies. I have framed my ethical discussion in the context of four of journalism’s most essential principles: accuracy, transparency, accountability and responsibility, and credibility. I will also discuss how credibility, though certainly a pillar of
journalism ethics, is not so much a principle but a culmination of the other values – it is the reward that results from a newspaper’s dedication to the first three principles.

Finally, I will present a typology of sorts, which assigns point values to different corrections-policy tactics. I will then evaluate the scores of the publications used in my critical analysis.

This thesis will address the following questions:

- How has online journalism affected corrections in journalism?
- Why are corrections policies tailored to the online realm necessary?
- What is the current state of online corrections policies?
- What are the ethical implications behind certain corrections tactics?
- What tactics are most commonly practiced?
- What lesser-known tactics exist that would benefit other news outlets to adopt?

**Why Corrections Policies are Necessary**

American journalism is in a state of uncertainty and change like never before.¹ With the Internet era and the advent of online journalism, almost every aspect of journalism is in transition. One of these aspects that has received little attention thus far is the idea of online corrections policies. There is, in fact, no standard approach in journalism when it comes to online corrections.⁹⁰

By online corrections policies, I mean the approach that a news outlet takes when there is an error in an electronically published article. These policies are different in the online world because the advent of online journalism has opened up an entirely new realm of ways to deal with mistakes. Most people are familiar with the standard “Corrections” or “Retractions” section in their print newspaper of choice. Essentially, mistakes in print journalism are dealt with by publishing an entirely new
item in the next edition of the respective news outlet. However, in online journalism, where stories can be “accessed by anyone, virtually, in perpetuity,” the practiced and possible policies available vary greatly. In the official corrections policies of the New York Times and Washington Post, for example, both newspapers neglect to specifically address online corrections whatsoever. Washington Post Ombudsman Andrew Alexander even admitted in a March 2009 article that “The Post must also figure out how to handle corrections online. Currently, policies at washingtonpost.com mainly address corrections for print stories that appear on the Web site”.

One year later, the situation at the Washington Post is still a topic of discussion. In February of 2010, Alexander again published an article detailing problems with the newspaper’s online corrections policies. A blog entry by Bill Turque that first appeared on the website January 27, 2010, later disappeared completely. When it finally resurfaced, the article’s tone was entirely different. It turned out that a managing editor requested that the entry be removed, rewritten and republished. In the meantime, however, readers “ridiculed the Post for its lack of transparency”.

The Washington Post is a perfect illustration of the undeniable need to implement and standardize online corrections policies. In Alexander’s February 2010 article, he noted that Post staffers were discussing how to revise online content as early as 2008. Now, finally, the Post is updating its guidelines – according to Alexander, a draft on online corrections is in the final review stage.
developments that took place in just the past year, as this thesis was researched and written, demonstrate that this issue of online corrections policy is undeniably relevant.

Some feel the need for published, publicized online corrections policies has not yet been universally addressed because there has not been a calamitous occurrence necessitating such guidelines. As Bill Walsh of the Washington Post puts it, “I keep fearing a disaster of some kind. I think it is only a matter of time.” St. Louis Dispatch Enterprise Editor Todd Stone sees things in more specific terms: “What will wake us up is going to be the first big lawsuit…it’s going to happen. And I’d bet you about 10 bucks it will be because of a lack of editing vigilance”.94

A Nontraditional Timeframe

Mistakes are, of course, inevitable. Perfection is impossible, and every newspaper or publication, print or electronic, will have errors. However, with the rise of online journalism, additional factors now affect the accuracy of the finished product.

Print periodicals generally go to press in the morning, allowing for a routine to be established – write all day, edit/copy-edit/fact-check/proofread all night. However, the online news cycle is on a nontraditional timeframe. Information is supplied (and demanded) twenty-four hours a day. Now consumers expect news to be supplied in the online realm in a continuous, nonstop cycle, so the time crunch increases exponentially. This, obviously, can lead to an increase in errors. 81
Common logic would tell us to simply increase the copy-editing staff in correlation with the increased workload. But most news media do not have the budget to hire additional staff – in today’s economy, it is quite the opposite; most organizations are actually cutting employees. One need only pick up a newspaper to read about the latest round of layoffs at any given paper. The increase in workload combined with a decrease in staff equates to an inevitable rise in mistakes. As Bill McClellan, a St. Louis Dispatch columnist puts it, “You never do more with less. You do less with less. You have fewer copy editors, more mistakes get through”. An ever-shrinking staff does not bode well for online journalism organizations, where newsrooms generally have always been understaffed.

Even if a newspaper does have a seemingly sufficient amount of copy editors, the nonstop timeframe again can render them somewhat useless. When articles are being published at all hours of the morning (and/or night), a copy editor simply may not be available. Mandy St. Amand of the St. Louis Dispatch estimated that nearly 50 journalists at the Dispatch can post directly to the newspaper’s website, “often remotely and without a second read”.

In addition, many journalists agree that speed is more important than accuracy when it comes to online journalism. Researchers John O'Sullivan and Ari Heinonen surveyed journalists in 11 countries about opinions on how the changing face of journalism has affected the “defining essentials” of journalism. Only 16 percent of participants agreed that they were “worried about sacrificing accuracy in the rush to publish”. The emphasis on speed, combined with the pressure of working in a 24-
hour news cycle, increased competition, and traditional push to break the story, have led to concerns about inaccuracies in internet journalism.

**Longstanding Skepticism**

A cohesive online corrections policy is also essential to bolster the precarious relationship between the media and the public. It is hardly a secret that trust in news media is lacking – it has been for years. Some public opinion polls show that trust has been declining for at least two decades: the percentage of “those who believe what they read in their daily newspaper” was at 59% in 2003 – down from 80% in 1985. A Gallup poll found a more straightforward answer – “only 36 percent of Americans believe news organizations ‘get the facts straight.’” Research on the public’s lack of faith in the media is extensive.

Unfortunately, much of this distrust is a result of errors in the news. In his own study on accuracy’s effect on credibility, Scott Maier cites a 1984 study in credibility by the American Society of News Editors which found that mistakes were the number-one reason for the public’s increasing distrust of the media. According to the study, the frequency of errors was one of the biggest reasons that readers have little faith in news outlets. Furthermore, the targets of media mistakes are the ones who care the most about the errors. According to the ASNE poll, “among the most distrustful of media were the people who had actual experience with the news process – those who had served as news sources or subjects.”
In addition, longstanding stereotypes about a negative relationship between editors and readers still seem to hold true. In their study "In the Interest of Full Disclosure: Transparency at The New York Times," Kyle Heim and Stephanie Craft found that although reader feedback can be extremely beneficial in spotting corrections, “[readers’] suggestions and complaints are often ignored.”

Though one would think the interactivity of the internet would lead to increased communication between journalists and readers, when 19 New York Times journalists with public e-mail addresses were surveyed, only four said they “discuss issues with readers via e-mail.” Readers often have difficulty making contact with an offending news outlet, and even when they do, “they may encounter journalists who are abrasive and arrogant.”

Heim and Craft also found that editors were often “defensive” when replying to readers’ questions – or even dismissed questions that were “ill-informed.” When a reader asked why the Times did not cover more NASCAR events, Sports Editor Tom Jolly responded, “I don’t mean to sound sarcastic, but you should read our sports section.”

Online corrections policies are another way for news media to proactively address general lack of trust in, and negative attitudes towards, the media. With the undeniable push towards online journalism to replace other media forms, the sooner this issue can be addressed, the better.
Bloggers as Watchdogs

In the internet era, bloggers have embraced the role of “media watchdogs.” Nary an error can slip through the cracks when there is a pack of bloggers ready and waiting to seize on the mainstream media’s mistakes. Dan Rather’s “Memogate” was one of the first examples of how journalists can now “expect that virtually anything they write or say will be scrutinized by someone somewhere in the world who is able and more than willing to instantly publish the outcome of that scrutiny.” The Monica Lewinsky scandal and Trent Lott’s resignation are two more examples of “investigative successes” by bloggers.

Other blogs exist only to fact-check the media and publicize mistakes. The sole purpose of Craig Silverman’s blog “Regret the Error” is to expose “media corrections, retractions, apologies, clarifications and trends regarding accuracy and honesty in the press.” Silverman posts corrections almost daily, and does not discriminate by size, scope or location – recent entries listed corrections from Golf Digest magazine, the Los Angeles Times, and the UK Mirror.

The fallout from being fact-checked and publicly flogged by a blogger can often garner more attention than the original error. If editors would place more emphasis on pre-emptive practices aimed at catching mistakes before they are published, these high-profile incidents of a major publication getting burned by a blogger would diminish – and the entire industry would benefit.
Step One: Stop Errors Before They Occur

Ways to Avoid Errors & Increase Accuracy, Credibility, and Truthfulness

“The Los Angeles Times experimented with rotating print-side copy editors into the online operation…and scheduled some earlier desk shifts so that print-side copy editors could work on online stories before editing the print stores.” Florida Today, a medium-circulation daily, turned print-trained copy editors into online producers, who are able to cover copy editing duties along with other online functions for most of the day. The Rocky Mountain News shifted two copy editors to 11:30 a.m. starting times so that much of the newspaper’s Web copy could be edited by trained copy editors. The Wichita Eagle, a newspaper that often publishes stories for the Web first and then repurposes them for print, restructured its copy flow so that online copy would go through copy editors rather than through assigning editors”. 

Prosecutorial editing/peer review

The Fairfax group, publishers of the Sydney Morning Herald, the Age, and the Australian Financial Review, attempted “prosecutorial editing,” which was “…designed to identify and check all ‘high risk’ stories through a process of ‘peer review’ in the newsroom.” However, the practice was extremely unpopular in the newsroom, highly criticized, and also did not prevent the SMH from “further embarrassing blunders”.

Checklists

Craig Silverman offers a “Free Accuracy Checklist” online. It is an actual checklist, with items to follow while reporting, such as “verify claims with reliable sources” and “save links and other research.” There is also a list of “Final Checks Before Submission,” with checkboxes next to items such as “Names,” “Locations,” “Compare quotes to notes/recording,” “URLs,” etc. It seems extremely elementary, but Silverman wrote an accompanying article explaining how helpful checklists can be. He notes that professionals in other fields employ them, but journalists do not – possibly because the industry emphasizes experience and earned wisdom, and “the assumption is that a veteran reporter or editor will make fewer errors than a rookie.”

However, pre-emptive practices are still no guarantee against errors – research proves the common-sense notion that mistakes are unavoidable. Scott Maier’s two-year study of 22 newspapers found that over 60 percent of local news and feature stories had at least one error found by news sources. This inaccuracy rate is one of the highest reported in 70 years of news accuracy research. For stories that were perceived as inaccurate, an average of three types of errors was found.

Mistakes will happen – they always have, and always will. Thus, there is no sense in trying to hide inaccuracies or corrections – pretending mistakes do not occur will undermine credibility. A policy that puts mistakes out in the open will make readers feel more informed, and the paper will show its commitment to taking responsibility for its errors. There is evidence that this positive correlation exists: an American Society of Newspaper Editors study found that “63 percent said they ‘felt
better’ about the quality of the news coverage they get when they see corrections.”
And as Aly Colón, a member of the ethics faculty at the Poynter Institute, has stated, “Everything you can do to convince your users that they can trust you will draw more users to you in the long run”.

**Current State of Corrections Policies**

I have analyzed the online corrections policies of four news outlets: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Slate*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Following Michael Bugeja’s method in “Making Whole: The Ethics of Correction,” I have divided the policies into two categories: stated and actual. The stated policies are official written policies that I was able to find on the respective news outlet’s website (with the exception of the *Washington Post*). For news media that did not have a stated policy, I analyzed articles with errors to determine what the actual and accepted (but unstated) practice was for dealing with mistakes and corrections.

Because stated corrections policies are rarely literal, I also included a description of the actual policy for news outlets that had a formal stated policy.

*New York Times*

*Stated*

In most matters, the *New York Times* refers to its Stylebook to answer questions about its corrections policy. There is no explicit allusion to online errors and/or corrections in the Stylebook.
The Stylebook states, “The Times recognizes an ethical responsibility to correct all its factual errors, large and small (even misspellings of names), promptly and in a prominent reserved space in the paper. A correction serves all readers, not just those who were injured or who complained, so it must be self-explanatory, tersely recalling the context and the background while repairing the error.” This is why the Times repeats the error, then corrects it – a crucial step, as discussed later in this thesis.\(^{53}\)

On the matter of where to place blame, it is written in the Stylebook, “Seldom should a correction try to place blame or deflect it outside The Times; the effort might appear defensive or insincere. But when an error has occurred under the byline or credit of a blameless staff member or news agency, the correction may cite an editing error or a transmission error. And if The Times has been misinformed by an institution or a reference work that should have been authoritative, the error may be attributed: ‘… included an erroneous profit figure from the company’s annual report.’ Note, though, that the attribution is light-handed, and given in passing (not, for example, ‘Because of erroneous information from the Karitsa Company …’).”

One of the last updates to the Times’ corrections policy was in September of 2004, when the paper split the corrections section into two parts, Corrections and For the Record. Corrections now only contains “substantive errors — those that have materially affected the reader’s understanding of a news development,” while For the
Record has “narrower errors — those involving spelling, for example, or dates and historical references”.53

The Times still practices occasional use of the Editors’ Note, for “‘lapses of fairness, balance or perspective – faults more subtle or less concrete than factual errors, though often as grave and sometimes graver’.53 The Editors’ Note process is further spelled out in the Stylebook:

“The note begins by recalling the date, placement and content of the faulty article, in a sentence or two. In another few phrases, it then summarizes the passage that created the problem. It goes on to state the fault, preferably in a terse way that sheds light on The Times’s journalistic practice without preaching…If possible, the note then supplies what was lacking earlier.”

The Times also has a section called the Public Editor, accessible online under the Opinion section. Here one can find Public Editor columns by current Reader Representative Clark Hoyt. These columns often reflect further on errors, corrections, and controversies involving the Times. There is also a link to the “NYT Ethical Journalism Guidebook,” billed as “A Handbook of Values and Practices for the News and Editorial Departments.” In respect to corrections, it states, “In print and online, we tell our readers the complete, unvarnished truth as best we can learn it. It is our policy to correct our errors, large and small, as soon as we become aware of them”.14 The guidelines also contain the following information: “If a reader asks for a correction, that request should be passed promptly to a supervisor. If the request threatens legal
action or appears to be from a lawyer, the complaint should be promptly referred to
the legal department through a department head.”

The Public Editor section also links to a document called “Assuring Our
Credibility” that reaffirms the paper’s standards and details certain measures to be
taken, all in the hopes of continually bolstering the Times’ credibility. This document
advises checking back with sources, repeatedly if necessary, to avoid mistakes.

There is also a section entitled “Reducing Factual Errors,” which repeatedly
stresses the importance of accuracy. It is recommended that “the website make a
routine practice of promptly substituting the final New York print version of news
stories in place of earlier versions.” This seems to advocate scrubbing, as there is no
mention of appending correction notices.

Actual

Corrections Page

The New York Times has an online Corrections page that is accessible from the
homepage, along the left-side menu. The page organizes corrections by the section in
which they occurred, and offers a link to the story at the end of each correction.
Correction

Each corrected article has a notice at the bottom, in italics, that reads: “This article has been revised to reflect the following correction,” followed by the date, and the actual correction.
This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

**Correction: March 22, 2009**

An article last Sunday about the One Taste Urban Retreat Center, a San Francisco commune devoted to the female orgasm, mistated the surname of a former resident. She is Judy Silber, not Silver. Because of an editing error, the article also misstated the commune’s location in one reference. As the article correctly noted, it is on Folsom Street, not Fulton Street.

*A New York Times correction*

How to Suggest Corrections

The Corrections page offers several avenues for readers to contact the *Times.* This boilerplate is included at the bottom of every Corrections page: “The Times welcomes comments and suggestions, or complaints about errors that warrant correction. Messages on news coverage can be e-mailed to nytnews@nytimes.com or left toll-free at 1-888-NYT-NEWS (1-888-698-6397). Comments on editorials may be e-mailed to letters@nytimes.com or faxed to (212) 556-3622. Readers dissatisfied with a response or concerned about the paper's journalistic integrity may reach the public editor at public@nytimes.com or (212) 556-7652.”

*Washington Post*

*Stated*  

The *Washington Post*’s corrections policy cannot be found on its website. The only place I was able to find any evidence of a corrections policy was within the PoynterOnline website. The Poynter listing is the page referenced by other sites and articles that discuss the *Washington Post*’s corrections policy.
The corrections policy states, “In some cases the easiest way to make a correction clear to all readers will be to repeat the original error, then correct it.”

It is also noted that “Occasionally, a mistake will be so fundamental that it undermines the entire original story. In such cases, editors may decide that a new story should be written.” This seems similar to the Times’ policy of discriminating between “Corrections,” “For the Record,” and the “Editors’ Note.” However, there is no further explanation of the exact distinction between the different types of corrections, so it is impossible for the reader to know if and how these “fundamental mistakes” will be identified and categorized.

In a March 2009 article, Ombudsman Andrew Alexander detailed the corrections process as thus: “Correction requests -- by phone call, letter or e-mail to corrections@washpost.com -- are entered into a database. Each day, new requests are routed electronically to the various desks at The Post, including National, Sports, Style, Foreign, Photo and Metro. The reporter who wrote the story and the editor who assigned it are then notified that a correction request is pending. If they think an error has been made, they draft a correction that is sent through top editors before being published”.

Interestingly, the first sentence of the boilerplate paragraph that appears on the corrections page reads, “The Washington Post is committed to correcting errors that appear in the newspaper.” It does not specify whether “newspaper” applies to all incarnations of the newspaper (online and print), or simply the actual print newspaper. According to Alexander’s remarks, it would appear to be the latter.
The *Washington Post* also has the Omblog, where ombudsman Andrew Alexander responds to reader concerns.

**Actual Corrections Page**

The Corrections page is not visible from the *Washington Post* homepage. In addition, no such page is listed in the site map.

Running a search for “Corrections” on the *Washington Post* homepage does produce a link to the day’s Corrections page. This page organizes corrections by date – a typical entry might begin, “A Jan. 7 Fed Page article about…” The correction is then explained. However, each Corrections page is listed as an article from the A Section of the Print Edition, suggesting that there is no exclusive Corrections page for the internet. This may be why the *Washington Post*’s Corrections page does not contain any hyperlinks to corrected stories.¹¹
The Corrections page that appears when one searches the Post website

**CORRECTIONS**

**Corrections**

Tuesday, May 4, 2010

-- An article about the Around the World Embassy Tour in the April 30 Weekend section incorrectly said that the Embassy of Trinidad and Tobago would serve rum at its open house on May 1. The embassy did not serve rum.

-- A photo caption with an April 30 Weekend article about spring theater productions misidentified the theater staging "American Buffalo." The play is at Studio Theatre, not Signature Theatre.

-- A technology Q&A in the April 25 Business section incorrectly said that a faulty update for McAfee anti-virus software affected only corporate and institutional users. Some home computers with the Windows XP operating system were also affected. McAfee has since posted a note on its Website (http://us.mcafee.com/en-us/landingpages/np5959.asp) that offers free tech support and free software to fix the problem. The company also says it plans to reimburse home users who hired other
However, I was able to find a link to an online Corrections page – via Craig Silverman’s “Regret the Error” site. The page title is “Corrections From The Post,” and contains the usual boilerplate about correcting errors. Stories are still organized by date; however, there is no explanatory paragraph. Instead, the story’s headline is listed, and also serves as a hyperlink to the corrected story. Following the hyperlink leads to the corrected article.\textsuperscript{18}
Correction

A corrected *Washington Post* article has the words “Correction to this article” in red font, above the headline, followed by a brief explanation of the correction.

How to Suggest Corrections

At the bottom of its Corrections page, the *Washington Post* also has a paragraph containing contact information. It reads as follows: “The Washington Post is committed to correcting errors that appear in the newspaper. Those interested in contacting the paper for that purpose can: E-mail corrections@washpost.com. Call 202-334-6000, and ask to be connected to the desk involved -- National, Foreign, Metro, Style, Sports, Business or any of the weekly sections. The ombudsman, who acts as the readers' representative, can be reached by calling 202-334-7582 or e-mailing ombudsman@washpost.com.”

*Slate*

*Stated*  
I cannot find any information on the *Slate* website related to editorial policy, journalistic or ethical standards, or even a mission statement. However, *Slate* is described as an “online publishing subsidiary of the Washington Post Co.” This may imply that the *Washington Post’s* policies and standards also apply to *Slate*. 
**Actual**

**Corrections Page**

*Slate’s Corrections page is accessible from the online magazine’s main page, along the left-side menu. It is also listed as a link in the “About Us” section (the link to “About Us” is located in the website’s footer). In addition, it is listed on the Site Map under the “On Hiatus” section. However, clicking the link shows that the Corrections page is up to date.**

Corrections are listed chronologically, and include the headline and a brief explanation of the correction. The headline is a hyperlink that leads to the corrected story.\(^{13}\)

**Correction**

In *Slate*, a correction is appended at the end of the story, but the actual text is also corrected. There is a hyperlinked asterisk at the end of a corrected sentence. Clicking this asterisk takes the reader to the end of the article, where an italicized statement explains what was corrected. The site even follows this explanation with an additional link that offers to return the reader to the corrected sentence.\(^{24}\)
Nowhere, usually. When an embassy shuts down for a couple of days, its staffers—Americans and local embassy employees—simply stay home. (Employees do not necessarily live within the embassy compound.*) Meanwhile, the embassy stops granting visas and other services. The goal is to keep people from gathering at the embassy, thereby making it a target for terrorists.

A Slate in-text correction

**Correction, Jan. 7, 2009:** This article originally suggested that a child born abroad needs two American parents to gain U.S. citizenship. (Return to the corrected sentence.) It also stated incorrectly that employees usually live in residences provided by the host country. Although employees do often live off the embassy compound, the host country rarely provides the accommodations, and never free of charge, as implied. (Return to the corrected sentence.)

The hyperlinked in-text correction leads to this text, below the story

How to Suggest Corrections

Like the New York Times and Washington Post, contact information for error submissions can be found at the bottom of the Slate Corrections page. It reads: “If you believe you have found an inaccuracy in a Slate story, please send an e-mail to corrections@slate.com, and we will investigate. General comments should be posted in “The Fray,” our readers discussion forum.”
*Christian Science Monitor*

**Stated**

The site’s Corrections page opens with the statement, “The Monitor promptly corrects factual errors and welcomes comments and information that may call for correction. Please e-mail us with any corrections.” The word “e-mail” links to an e-mail address.\(^{19}\) No further evidence of a written corrections policy can be found.

**Actual**

**Corrections Page**

The Corrections page is accessible from anywhere within the CSM website, via a link in the site’s footer. The Corrections page is organized by the dates the corrections were posted. The story’s headline is a hyperlink, followed by a one-line explanation of the error and correction.\(^{19}\)

**Correction**

At first look, a CSM story shows no sign of correction. The correction lies within the text. After the corrected sentence, the words “Editor’s Note” appear in bold text, followed by an italicized statement explaining what was written in the “original version.” Unlike other news outlets that use in-text citations, where a notice in either the beginning or end of the story notifies the reader of the mistake, CSM editors do not post any additional mentions of the error on the page.
The corrections are extremely vague. For example, in the story, “California voters will decide whether to legalize marijuana,” the correction reads: “Editor’s note: The original version of this story mischaracterized the situation involving Mr. Phelps.” Another story, “German children: what do they know about the Berlin Wall?” has an anecdote from a German girl explaining her family’s political involvement, and the correction, “Editor's note: The original misstated how her mother left East Germany.”

A Christian Science Monitor correction

The best explanation of why this is ineffective may come from the Washington Post’s corrections policy: “A correction might say: A story in the newspaper of Jan. 1 reported incorrectly that Sioux Falls is in North Dakota. It is in South Dakota. This is preferable to: A story in the newspaper of Jan. 1 misreported the state in which Sioux Falls, S.D. is located, a formulation that would be puzzling to readers who might wonder what state we had mistakenly put Sioux Falls in.” This is especially true now that CSM is exclusively published online, so no print record of the original story exists.
How to Suggest a Correction

As previously written, at the top of the Monitor’s Corrections page, the following is written: “The Monitor promptly corrects factual errors and welcomes comments and information that may call for correction. Please e-mail us with any corrections.” The word “e-mail” is hyperlinked.

Other [actual] Examples of How to Handle Corrections

Espn.com: Extensive Corrections page

In 2007, ESPN.com, the online home of 24-hour sports television network ESPN, released its updated corrections policy, which included new procedures tailored to the online medium. The Corrections page can be accessed at any time by a link in the site’s footer. In a seemingly obvious (but unfortunately rarely practiced) layout decision, the Corrections page doubles as the home of ESPN.com’s stated corrections policy. Thus, a reader interested in ESPN.com’s daily corrections easily becomes aware of the decision process behind said corrections.

The Corrections page also links to an online submission form where readers can quickly and easily report an error. A senior editorial staffer first reviews error submissions, then forwards them to the appropriate writer. The benefits of an online error submission form are discussed on page 34.

ESPN.com’s actual corrections also show a regard for the reader’s experience. A corrected story is prefaced with the sentence, “The story has been corrected. Read
below”. The words “Read below” are hyperlinked and lead to the end of the story, where an explanatory paragraph re-states the error and describes the correction.\textsuperscript{5}

\textit{Sports Illustrated: scrubbing}

In April of 2009, an article on SI.com, the online home of \textit{Sports Illustrated}, stated that B.J. Raji, then-defensive tackle at Boston College, was one of the players who tested positive for marijuana at the NFL Scouting Combine. After controversy and criticism – of both Raji and the story’s factuality – the story was scrubbed: deleted entirely from the site. When asked why the story was removed, \textit{Sports Illustrated}’s official comment was, “We have investigated the claims of Mr. Raji’s agent and although we have several credible sources for the report we have decided to take it down while we continue reporting the story”.\textsuperscript{35}

Eventually, \textit{Sports Illustrated} published a correction: “An SI.com report posted earlier this month incorrectly stated that Boston College defensive tackle B.J. Raji’s name would appear on the NFL’s list of players who tested positive for drugs at the NFL Scouting Combine in February. We regret the error”.\textsuperscript{10} But as Silverman notes, \textit{Sports Illustrated} offered no apology to Raji or explanation of how the mistake was made.\textsuperscript{88}

\textit{Boing Boing: scrubbing}

Generally, group weblog Boing Boing has been praised for its use of the strikethrough method.\textsuperscript{28} However, a Columbia Journalism Review article described
how a writer for Boing Boing, one of the world’s most-read blogs, removed all references to sex columnist Violet Blue. Also removed were any comments Blue had made on the site. The offending writer, Xeni Jardin, fueled the fire when she defended her actions by saying that the posts were merely removed from public view, and remained on the server. The articles are also still available on archival website such as Wayback.org. Clay Shirky, a former chairman of technical work for the Library of Congress’s digital preservation network, is quoted in the article deconstructing Jardin’s argument by reasoning that “If my mental model is ‘Oh, it’s on Boing Boing, I’m going to search Boing Boing’; my first thought if I don’t find it on Boing Boing is not going to be ‘I should search archive.org,’ it’s going to be ‘Did I misremember?”

Scrubbing demonstrates a disregard for responsibility and transparency. Those who read the original article and moved on have no way of knowing the information was false. Without a correction, the offended have nothing with which to combat the negative effects on their reputation (the way an official apology could be used to clarify any lingering rumors or questions). And if readers should search for an article they once read and come up empty-handed, the credibility of that news organization is completely undermined. Practices such as scrubbing completely negate transparency by reinforcing the ideas that the newsroom’s doors are closed to the public, and that what happens behind those doors will never be known. Most editors do believe that the practice is unethical, but instances of scrubbing can still be found in online journalism.
The Washington Independent: strikethroughs

Spencer Ackerman wrote a story for the Washington Independent on November 12, reporting on a teleconference in which Ambassador Karl Eikenberry addressed the National Security Council. Ackerman wrote that the meeting was described [to him] by a National Security Council staffer. After spokesmen for both Amb. Eikenberry and the Afghanistan Inspector-General denied their involvement in the meeting, Ackerman retracted the story the very next day, releasing a detailed statement:

I am retracting this post [hyperlink to original], published yesterday, titled “Inside This Morning’s White House Afghanistan Meeting: Anger With Eikenberry, ‘Beef’ With McChrystal.”

My original source for the post stands by the account provided. The individual, a National Security Council staffer who spoke on condition of anonymity, has provided truthful and verified information on past stories, and so I trusted the source for this one. Elements of the account have been subsequently borne out: yesterday afternoon, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said that President Obama will ask his Afghanistan-Pakistan advisers to provide him with an exit strategy for the eight-year war, which is congruent with but not identical to my source’s information that Obama has asked the team to derive timetables for troop withdrawal.
But there are greater problems with the post. For one, the source was not actually present for the video teleconference that is the post’s central scene, and passed information to me second-hand. Furthermore, not only has the White House’s Tommy Vietor denied, on the record, that Ambassador Karl Eikenberry participated in a video teleconference yesterday morning, but the other two individuals I named as being present for the meeting — the inspector generals for Iraq and Afghanistan — have, through representatives, denied being present. I cannot subsequently stand by this account.

From the start, the post should have a) more clearly indicated that my source wasn’t present at the meeting; b) more clearly indicated that the account provided was single-sourced; and c) verified the information provided before publication. My enthusiasm for a hot story outpaced my professional judgment. For that I take full responsibility, retract the story and issue a full apology for its publication.20

The original story can still be found on the Independent website – with several major differences: the word “RETRACTED” precedes the original headline, which is now struck through; Ackerman’s original updates detailing denials of the story as they occurred, with timestamps; and the original story is completely struck through. The story is prefaced with Ackerman’s official retraction.21
**DigitalJournal.com: crowd sourcing**

DigitalJournal.com users have the ability to suggest revisions to authors of articles on DigitalJournal. The writers receive the revision suggestions, and can either “Apply” or “Ignore” the changes. Thus, no changes are implemented without the writer’s and/or staff approval. The system allows for quick notification and implementation. Writers can also “Block” users who may be abusing the feature. DigitalJournal CEO Chris Hoggs says he has “seen [this feature] used with incredible success” and encourages using it to “keep the bar high for editorial accuracy and integrity”.  

**The Chicago Tribune: online error reports**

The *Tribune* has an online form where readers can report errors. The form is included as an integral part of the Corrections page. Readers are prompted to enter whether the error was online or in print; the date of the error; if it was in a story, video, graphic, or caption; the headline; byline; and any additional information. The benefits of this form are twofold. By standardizing error reports, the paper makes it much easier for editors to review complaints and quickly extract the information necessary to correct a mistake. An online submission form also encourages more readers to report errors, because it makes the process one step simpler: instead of composing an email, or picking up the phone, they need only fill in a few fields and click “Submit.”
Archives and “Unpublishing”

Many news media use search engine optimization to drive traffic to their websites. However, if any of the site’s content is inaccurate, some of the first results for associated search terms could contain misinformation.

This scenario is not merely hypothetical – examples abound of story subjects who are haunted by online archives. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Digital Media Director Freda Yarbrough of The Advocate dealt with such a situation in the case of a local man who was accused of sexually assaulting a minor. The Advocate ran a story detailing the arrest, and same story was posted to the newspaper’s website. Days later, police found that the entire incident had been fabricated by the minor. The Advocate’s online editors updated the story to include the new information. However, several months later, the accused applied for an out-of-state teaching position. When his prospective employers searched his name on Google, the first result was the teaser to the sexual assault story – without the update. The outdated search result created what Yarbrough called “a serious problem” for the accused and his employment prospects.38

Editors at newspapers across the nation have found themselves in circumstances comparable to Yarbrough’s – a similar incident at the New York Times is explained in this paper’s introduction. At first, the Times’ policy on correcting archived pieces was to do absolutely nothing, because any action was considered rewriting history. Craig Whitney, the assistant managing editor in charge of
maintaining *Times* standards, compared editing old articles to “airbrushing Trotsky out of the Kremlin picture”.\(^63\)

The latest policy is limited to “correcting even very old errors when a person can offer proof, like a university diploma.” However, this does mean that more substantive errors are left unchanged within archives. For example, a 2004 *Times* story “reported that the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez had been ‘charged with electoral fraud.’ As a subsequent correction noted, Chavez has been charged with fraud ‘by opposition politicians’ but not, as the published story implied, in a court of law”.\(^95\) The article is archived in its original wording, but following the aforementioned *Times* policy, “Editor’s Note Appended” appears at the top with the correction’s explanation at the end of the article. Toby Usnik, director of public relations for the *Times*, has openly addressed this policy. Usnik believes that anything that "require[s] something as intricate as an editors' note to explain are not something we even try to correct in the text…we just append the note and make readers aware that we have done so”.\(^95\) This method does allow the reader to take the original article into consideration, and make his or her own decision about whether the correction changes the context of the article as a whole.

Of special concern are situations involving criminal activity, especially if charges are eventually dismissed – such as the situation in Louisiana detailed above. Greg Brock, a *Times* senior editor, told Craig Silverman in an interview that due to “the explosion of people Googling their names,” an explanation is appended to any article where a person was charged with a felony if the *Times* did not run an article
when the accused was acquitted. But what are editors to do if, in the case of the *Advocate*, the explanation is not reflected in search results?

News organizations frequently receive requests to remove information from their archives. This practice is known as “unpublishing”. In her study “The Long Tail of News: To Unpublish or Not to Unpublish,” Kathy English eventually concluded that to remove information is to completely ignore transparency and thus diminish credibility. However, her survey of 110 newspaper editors found that 78 percent believe there are situations where online articles should be unpublished.

Brock explained that the *Times’* policy to never actually remove errors from their archives is necessary for legal reasons: “We also need on file… the article as it appeared in the event some issue is raised”.

The complexity of unpublishing decisions even prompted ethical journalists at the Poynter Institute to draft a new addition to their publication guidelines. It explains the factors they consider when deciding whether to unpublish an article, which include “potential harm to various stakeholders - the subject of the coverage, others who may have been involved in the incident or controversy, readers, etc”.

Another option Poynter recommends is “inviting the aggrieved stakeholder to attach his or her own comment to the original article”.

The lack of a cohesive policy means that many publications have created their standards through trial and error.
GateHouse Media, which owns nearly 400 daily and weekly newspapers and 250 local websites, uses a “sunset” policy for police blotter reports – six months after initial publication, the reports are removed from the organization’s online archives.

Editors at Microsoft Developer Network Magazine used to leave uncorrected stories online for “archival purposes.” However, it became clear over time that a new policy was needed, one that could “maintain the integrity of the original article while fixing any sections that could lead to unexpected problems.”

Now, updated MSDN articles have a message at the top of the article warning the reader that incorrect or outdated information follows, and links to newer, updated content that is related to the original article’s focus.

The Austin-American Statesman was a newspaper that ran a corrections column on page A2 of its print edition – and simply corrected the online versions to match, “because they still exist long after their initial publication.” As far as notifying online readers of any mistakes or changes, “with significant online corrections, [they] would sometimes run a correction at the top of the web story.”

Luckily, editors recognized the ambiguity of a policy that “sometimes” required notification of “significant” corrections. In a November 2009 Editors’ Note, Managing Editor Debbie Hiott wrote that any online story with a correction “beyond a typo” will include an explanation, so “people are aware that something has been changed.”
Both of these updated techniques represent publications putting the readers’ best interests first. In addition, both *MSDN* and the *Statesman* took transparency even further by publicizing the policy changes with an Editors’ Note.

Ultimately, English’s best practices report on unpublishing recommends generally avoiding unpublishing, establishing a clear policy and explaining it to readers, and making unpublishing decisions based on the consensus of several high-level executives.\(^85\) She also writes that “it’s fair to be humane” because in rare instances, “humanitarian” reasons may deem it necessary to unpublish. Editors at the *Advocate* eventually removed the original sexual assault story completely, in the hopes that it would disappear from Google’s index. However, English warns that in such situations, a “decision to remove content needs to be weighed against the public’s right to know, the historical record, and the reality that the article may be cached in search engines and might not disappear from the Internet”.\(^38\)

**Ethical Discussion**

The need for ethical guidelines in journalism is not a new or controversial idea. Any examination of journalism’s history would include the “transformation…from the nineteenth-century partisan press to the twentieth-century commercial-professional press.” During this fundamental shift in journalism, the American Society of Newspaper Editors was formed in 1912 by a group of editors that recognized the need for editorial independence and created a code of ethics for the journalism industry.\(^40\)
As is noted in “Journalism Ethics,” different ethicists weigh certain ethical values differently. The researchers Belsey and Chadwick do not include accuracy, fairness, responsibility or accountability in their index. Hurst and White mention accuracy, balance, fairness, and responsibility. Patterson and Wilkins cite bias, balance, fairness, and objectivity, but not accountability. In “Journalism Ethics,” Hirst and Patching mention accountability, accuracy, and balance and bias. They also declare that accountability is synonymous with responsibility (to the “news-consuming public”), and trust.51

Today, numerous media organizations and news outlets have their own forms of ethical guidelines unique to the publication or association. However, the core principles are usually similar, if not the same, and overlap with academics’ and ethicists’ ideas of journalism’s central ethical standards.

The Society for Professional Journalists’ current code of ethics was adopted in 1996.40 It contains four main principles: seek truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently; and be accountable.2 These principles can clearly be translated in terms of ethical guidelines: seek truth and report it - accuracy; minimize harm - responsibility; act independently - transparency; and be accountable - accountability.

A journalist exists to serve his or her readers.27 Therefore, the ethical principles of journalism are manifested in the ways that they serve the reader. First, a reporter must work to report accurate information because readers rely on this information to form opinions and perhaps make decisions. Accuracy is also essential because subjects of a news story have much to lose if they are misrepresented to a news medium’s
entire readership. Second, journalists must work to minimize harm, because of the
great amount of power they possess. As the Society of Professional Journalists’ code
states, sources, subjects and readers are all human beings that deserve respect. Thus,
reporters must report responsibly, and also consent to being held accountable for any
decisions they make. Third, transparency is essential in a field that relies on the trust
of its readers in order to exist. Any organization or profession that carries out its work
“behind closed doors” will create an air of mystique, skepticism and doubt. Readers
deserve to know where their information is coming from, how it was found, and why
is it (or is not) being presented to them. Adherence to these principles will result in a
fourth ethical principle, credibility. As I will explain, credibility is not so much an
actionable goal, but rather a necessary quality that is established by adhering to the
other norms.

There are obviously many ethical principles relating to journalism, or even
online journalism specifically, but I have chosen to focus on accuracy (sometimes
called truthfulness); transparency; accountability (used interchangeably with
responsibility in this paper unless specified); and credibility. These are the values that
are most clearly linked to the ethics of corrections – not just correcting errors, but also
making efforts to prevent them.

**Accuracy**

“The simple checking of names, places, dates, and so on…is the first line of
defense in the newsroom”. Dedication to accuracy is essential in preventing errors –
it is the first principle in the Society of Professional Journalists’ code of ethics (“test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error”). However, keeping accuracy in mind is also essential when deciding how to deal with corrections once the mistakes have occurred.

In “Setting the Record Straight,” Scott Maier’s study of newspaper accuracy, he states “inaccuracy in news copy is the cardinal journalistic sin.” It leads to a loss in credibility, and “without credibility we really haven’t got a leg to stand on. Imagine a manufacturing company that didn’t have a quality-control department. They would be in hot water pretty quick if things started going out defective.” And no mistake is too small to correct – even “minor” errors such as typos, grammar mistakes, and misspellings negatively affect the press’ image.

It seems obvious, but there are still news media that completely ignore the idea of accuracy by leaving errors uncorrected. The Post of Athens, Ohio is one such newspaper. In what seems to be a major ethical slip, The Post of Athens, Ohio has the obligatory Corrections/Clarifications section in its print edition – but no mention of the section whatsoever on the website. Even running a search for “corrections” on www.thepost.ohiou.edu yields no results. When two stories that were corrected in print in October of 2008 were retrieved from The Post’s online archives in January of 2010, both were still uncorrected.

I could not find one instance of a story being corrected on the Post’s website – even when an error prompted an Opinion Letter from a reader. On January 5, 2010, an article about actress Piper Perabo ran under the headline, “Alumni actress Perabo
shares pearls of wisdom”.

The very next day, a brief letter from Athens resident Bobbie-Jo Harris was printed that read: “It's hard to believe that a college student (a journalism student?) wrote this front page headline. Perabo is not an ‘alumni,’ but she is an ‘alumna.’ It's pretty bad when educated people don't know the difference. If Perabo were a male, she would be an ‘alumnus’ and if she were two people she would be ‘alumni’.”

The letter appeared on page two of the Post, where most opinion letters and reader responses are found. The paper’s website posts every piece that runs in the print edition, and these two are no exception. Both can still be found by performing a simple search on the site. However, as of March 2010, the original article’s headline is still uncorrected in the electronic edition. With no announced or actual corrections policy, no Corrections page, and no apparent mentions of any inaccuracies in the articles, a reader who uses the internet as their sole method of reading The Post would come away with the impression that the paper gets everything right, all the time – a statement that is far from the truth. Furthermore, The Post’s website shows that accuracy in the digital realm ranks extremely low on the paper’s list of priorities. The nonexistent corrections section also demonstrates a disregard for transparency that will be addressed later in this paper.

However, with no standardized approach to corrections, accuracy can be interpreted differently by each publication. Some publications that practice “scrubbing” may actually feel they are being as accurate as possible - “[they] advocate simply deleting anything that wrong and replacing it, so that all accessible versions of...
a story are correct". However, as discussed on page 30, scrubbing represents indifference towards another ethical principle – transparency.

**Transparency**

Definitions of transparency, when they exist, refer to either the availability of information, or the disclosure of it. The former involves, for example, the posting of a newspapers’ code of ethics online so it is available to readers. The latter pertains to journalists disclosing sources, exposing conflicts of interest, and notably, correcting errors. Some would argue that of all the traditional ethical values associated with journalism, transparency has become the most important in the context of online journalism. For example, Rebecca Blood, in a comment on Jonathan Dube’s “A Bloggers’ Code of Ethics” on CyberJournalist.net, wrote that while creating “The Weblog Handbook”, she not only discarded several ethical principles such as accuracy and fairness in favor of transparency, but actually shaped each of her guidelines around transparency.

Furthermore, in 2005, when the *New York Times* created a “Credibility Committee” in response to the widely accepted belief that public faith in the media was eroding, the committee determined that transparency was “necessary to win and keep reader trust”. According to veteran journalist Sydney Schanberg, “lack of openness about [journalistic methods] – this non-transparency – is really the mother of most of the press’s troubles”. Researchers have proved that a lack of transparency can have a detrimental effect on the public’s perception of the media as a credible
news source, especially in regards to the way corrections are handled (see “Longstanding Skepticism”, page 8).

Kyle Heim wrote in his study, “Editor’s Notes and Transparency,” that in a society where “public disclosure has become the norm in everything from monetary policy and international politics to food and tobacco labeling,” a call for increased transparency from journalists is merely a reflection of a worldwide trend.49

In another study by Heim and Stephanie Craft, "In the Interest of Full Disclosure: Transparency at The New York Times,” a case study of the New York Times forms the crux of the researchers’ argument that readers want to know more about the “processes and judgments” behind editorial decisions, and that increased openness is never detrimental to anyone.48

Transparency in corrections can be translated in a number of different ways. Whether or not a news outlet posts an official corrections policy; the ease with which readers can find the Corrections page; and actual placement of the correction can all be considered measures of transparency. The correction itself is also a degree of transparency – is the error restated and explained, or simply corrected? Readers deserve an explanation, albeit a brief one, of exactly how and why an error occurred.23

In an interview with the Washington Post, online ethics expert Kelly McBride cited transparency as having the biggest effect on credibility. When newspapers are not clear about why a story was altered, or even fail to alert readers that a change was made at all, “people start to not trust you and it damages your credibility”.23
Washington Post’s January incident with blogger Bill Turque, as explained on page 6, resulted in readers’ denouncing the Post for its lack of transparency.23

Blogs or other forums produced by newspaper editors are another way to increase transparency. For the Dallas Morning News, explaining the editorial process led to positive feedback from readers commending the paper’s openness.40

Heim concluded that apologies and willingness to admit error can only increase an audience’s confidence in news media. He supports the Times’ use of an Editors’ Note to level with readers about particularly disastrous errors: “Although the editor’s note could not undo any damage caused by the earlier reporting, it signal[s] that the Times editors were owning up to lapses in their newspaper’s coverage and were leveling with readers about what they knew and did not know. Through transparency, the editors were demonstrating a commitment to truth and accountability…Rather than reporting what is happening in the world, journalists also explain how and why they reported a particular event”.49 The same goes for corrections – rather than simply correcting a mistake, journalists should explain what exactly the mistake was, and how it occurred.

Accountability and Responsibility

When it comes to the “news-consuming public,” accountability is synonymous with responsibility and trust.51 In “Online Journalism Ethics,” Friend & Singer write that accountability is the most controversial of journalism’s guiding principles,
especially with the transition towards online journalism. Journalists could learn a lot from bloggers, and the online realm in general. Bloggers are often more straightforward about any personal conflicts they have with a story, and also heavily employ hyperlinks within a blog post to provide the reader with means to access additional evidence.40

In addition, bloggers’ “embrace of interactivity” translates to a much more transparent corrections process. Most blogs allow commenting, which creates an easy avenue for readers to question details of a story. Most bloggers also display their corrections prominently.40 For example, top-ranked blog Boing Boing uses the strikethrough method, where incorrect text is struck through with a line, and the corrected information immediately follows.

Responsibility is more closely related to traditional ethical underpinnings and theories that discuss the treatment of fellow man. Philosophical theories such as the Golden Mean or utilitarianism lend themselves to analyzing whether a news medium’s correctional actions are responsible.51

In a more specific example, a recent situation with the Orange County Register involved a column that many believed was in poor taste. Sportswriter Mark Whicker wrote a piece called “Many odd things have happened in sports the past 18 years.” The article was purportedly written to inform Jaycee Dugard – a woman who was then in the news for her rescue after being abducted 18 years prior – of a number of “funny” or “unusual” events that occurred while she was held hostage.98 Obviously, outrage ensued. However, when Whicker and the Register’s editors apologized, their letters
were aimed at readers and subscribers of the Register. No apology was made to Jaycee Dugard, whose personal tragedy was used as the shtick for Whicker’s column. By explaining to their readers how the column managed to get published, they were working towards credibility and transparency – but completely shirked the responsible and ethical approach, which would be to apologize to Dugard.

Research shows that readers generally feel insignificant or ignored by newspaper staffs. The general stereotype of an arrogant reporter loath to admit mistakes still largely stands true (see “Longstanding Skepticism,” page 9).

Michael Bugeja quotes Craig Silverman in saying that many corrections fall short because they seem “geared towards absolving the publication rather than truly correcting a mistake”, thus neglecting the idea of responsibility or accountability in the sake of correctness.

In online journalism, much attention has been given to the idea of “collectively derived truth.” The immediacy of the internet and the increase in competition means that the approach is often to report first, and correct later – suggesting that the best course of action is to “give [the information] as wide a hearing as possible and to allow the presumably wiser collective to prevail.” However, in the interim period between publication and correction, any amount of damage can be wreaked on the main subject, be it a person or an organization, of the post. Ignoring the possible repercussions of inaccurate information on a story’s subject(s) could also be considered forsaking accountability and responsibility.
News media should take note of the Poynter Institute’s policy, which, as discussed on page 23, includes considering “potential harm to various stakeholders.” In the case of Allen Kraus, the subject of this paper’s introduction, the affected “stakeholders” included Kraus himself; his family; his employees; past, present and potential clients, and more. The consequences of incorrect information can reach far beyond the subjects of the original article, and news media must consider their responsibility to all potential “stakeholders” in a story when making corrections.

Brad Dennison, Vice President of News and Interactive for GateHouse Media, believes the organization’s “sunset” policy takes stakeholders’ well-being into consideration: “How long does something minor like a shoplifting charge have to follow someone on the Web? My moral barometer tells me that’s not fair. There’s no rule that says this stuff has to live forever”.

Credibility

A common definition for credibility is “the believability of the story”. On a larger scale, credibility is the “believability” of all information that a news medium releases. Journalism exists to supply information to the general public. It is thus undeniably essential to journalism’s existence that this information is considered accurate and reliable, so both the individual news organization and the media as a whole will be considered credible.

Unfortunately, trust in mainstream media is consistently decreasing. This fact has been extensively measured, studied and reported. Meanwhile, the number of
people who get their news online continues to rise. Thus, establishing credibility is crucial for online journalists and publications.\textsuperscript{55} A news medium’s credibility factor is more a culmination of its efforts to uphold the other values discussed above – it is the ultimate goal. As quoted in “Online Journalism Ethics”, Chris Willis and Shayne Bowman wrote in their book “We Media” that in the online realm, “a synthesis of consistency, accuracy, and frequent comparison by the reader” are key to achieving a positive, and credible, reputation.\textsuperscript{55}

Credibility has also become more important in an age where the internet has destroyed the traditional sender and receiver model on which newspapers used to rely. Now, there are countless senders and receivers of information. The power of editorial agenda setting by a few large, powerful news media is also disappearing.\textsuperscript{29} In today’s increasingly crowded marketplace, news media must make even more of an effort to stand out as a positive, reliable information source – and establishing credibility is the paramount way to do so.

Credibility is the ethical value that is most influenced by how news media dedicate themselves to the other principles. Multiple studies show a correlation between accuracy and credibility. “Getting names, dates, ages right, attributing information correctly…are all essential to the story’s credibility”.\textsuperscript{51} Using the “filter-then-publish” model – editing information before publication – is a way of using accuracy to boost credibility.\textsuperscript{15} In the converse model, the “missing layer of editorial oversight” might negatively affect credibility.\textsuperscript{55}
As stated in previous sections, transparency is directly related to credibility. Readers become distrustful of the media when they are not privy to the editorial process. Editors should shed light on how decisions are made by making a publication’s practices and guidelines public, and all members of a news organization must be willing to explain and be held accountable for any mistakes. By offering avenues through which readers can ask questions and engage in conversations – whether through online forums, Editor’s Notes, an ombudsman column, or any of a number of other methods – the newsroom becomes more accessible, and the publication as a whole is a more transparent, and thus credible, resource.

Maier’s two-year study reported that inaccurate stories have a measured negative effect on both newspaper credibility and “source willingness to cooperate on future stories.” Furthermore, “by every measure, story and newspaper credibility significantly declined in relation to the frequency and severity of errors.” The relationship is undeniable – a news outlet that not only makes mistakes, but is careless in its corrections, will lose the trust and dedication of its readers. And without readers, a newspaper is nothing.

**Potential Corrections Strategies**

“Reverse Trackback”

Craig Silverman proposes some sort of automatic notification system that would inform websites of corrections to articles they’ve linked to. He refers to this as the “Reverse Trackback.” A trackback is “a way of automatically notifying a site that
its content (usually a blog post) has been linked by someone else”. He suggests that the correction notification could take the form of a comment on a post. This approach would require little effort on the part of the reader, as there would be no need to search for corrections that automatically appear.\(^{80}\)

Alerts for Correction Requests

According to Andrew Alexander, correction requests at the *Washington Post* are entered into a database, which are sent electronically each day to the respective desks. At the time of Alexander’s article, there were over 160 requests “pending” in the database, some of which were years old. Alexander suggests that “the database might be tweaked to pester reporters and editors to address correction requests, sort of like a car’s annoying chimes when a seat belt isn't fastened”.\(^{22}\)

RSS Feeds for Corrections

Almost any website that is continually updated offers an RSS feed. However, at this time, no news sites offer an RSS feed for corrections. The service, which would be extremely easy to implement, would be another way to make corrections easier to find.

MediaBugs

Scott Rosenberg of Salon.com is launching MediaBugs.org, a site that will post mistakes spotted by readers who may not know how to reach the offending media
outlet. Visitors fill out a simple form reporting a media bug— that is, “an error or problem [found] in a newspaper or magazine article, broadcast news report or online posting.” The bug will be posted on the website, and site operators will “do [their] best to notify the media outlet involved and obtain a response from them.” Corrected bugs will be marked as such. Rosenberg said he wants to change the frame of mind with which journalists react to errors—which is stereotypically with shame or anger, as opposed to software programmers, who are thankful to receive bug reports. He states that both the public and journalists are targets for the initiative, which will help set up a “virtuous cycle of accuracy”—thus giving media “a big chance to win back the public’s faith.”

hNews

hNews is a microformat currently under development with the goal of making it easier for computers to display much more detailed information about news stories. In addition, hNews will “provide people with the back story and context of an article they’re reading.” It could also be used to create “version histories” to track changes to a story—a more advanced method of the “UPDATE 10:58 A.M.” method that so many news outlets currently use. Readers might also sign up for notifications about the stories they read—including changes and corrections. Craig Silverman envisions the use of hNews as such: “you visit one of your favorite news sites and the homepage displays a notification that an article you read yesterday has been updated with new information, and a story you read last week has been corrected… each story includes a
box of information explaining the type of sourcing used within the story (anonymous, etc.), as well as a link to the organization’s relevant policies and standards. If you spot an error in an article, you can easily submit a request for correction via that same info-box. And if the article is corrected, you’ll receive a notification during a future visit to the site”.

Django-correx

Django-correx is a code that allows a correction to be a “stand-alone entity” instead of existing solely as an addendum to whatever is being fixed. The correction is attached to the content that contains the error, but can also be published as part of a nonstop corrections feed. The creator, Ben Welsh, says that the problem is that “corrections aren’t viewed as part of the stream” of information that news media produce. Many websites feature a section with the latest stories and/or photos – the latest corrections could also be an option.

Limitations

I chose not to discuss the legal implications of corrections policies. The legal side of online retractions is still extremely undeveloped - according to Hoefges’ article, “the statutes and judicial rulings that have emerged over the years to give guidance to journalists on how to steer clear of libel suits often don't mention the Internet.” However, the author suggests that web publishers “promptly post corrections and retractions in a place that is as conspicuous as the content that could
give rise to [a] libel suit.” Currently, there is very little legal precedence for internet publishers to follow: “Apparently, no court to date has addressed this specific issue in a reported opinion. Two court opinions bear on that issue. In the first, a court said that online information services are the same in function as traditional print newspapers. In the second, a court refused to apply a state retraction statute in an online defamation case”.

However, it is worth noting Thomas Burke’s observation that “timely corrections not only limit a plaintiff’s potential recovery, mitigate any damages, and demonstrate an absence of malice, they also will have a substantial effect on whether the plaintiff will choose to litigate”.

I also omitted, for the most part, blogging ethics and corrections policies. There is still controversy as to whether bloggers should even be considered journalists, and thus held to the same standards that reporters traditionally have been. The discussion of blogging ethics is a complex one, with no concrete answers. In addition, the blogosphere is extremely diverse, and it is hard to imagine holding such widely-read and influential blogs like the Huffington Post to the same standards as a bored college student’s Wordpress blog that averages three viewers and one post a month. Until the blogosphere is more clearly and decisively stratified, it will be difficult to make recommendations that would logically apply to both reaches of the blogging spectrum.
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<th>Corrections Policies in Online Journalism: A Typology</th>
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<td>Corrections policy</td>
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<td>Stated</td>
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<td>Accessible to reader</td>
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<td>Delete entire article (scrubbing)</td>
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<td>Do not correct</td>
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<td>Correct with no notice</td>
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<td>Correct with notice</td>
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<td>Restate original error</td>
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<td>Explain how/why of error</td>
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<td>Visibility of individual correction</td>
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<td>Addendum to original story</td>
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<td>Hyperlink to previous or corrected version</td>
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<td>Strikethrough method</td>
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<td>Visibility of corrections in general</td>
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<td>Linked from main page</td>
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<td>Distinction between types of errors</td>
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<td>Clarification/retraction</td>
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<td>Editors’ Note</td>
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<td>Ease for readers to submit correction</td>
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<td>Information on corrections page</td>
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<td>Information in each correction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phone/email</td>
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<td>Online submission form</td>
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<td>Totals</td>
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This typology works in an additive manner – for each additional step that a news outlet employs when dealing with corrections, it is rewarded. This method mimics the current state of online corrections policies, which can be considered a spectrum. At one end there are the news outlets that do absolutely nothing about corrections and/or do not have a corrections policy. From there, each news outlet has its own wide-ranging collection of strategies that are employed. The lack of an overarching standard for online corrections has led to this extreme variation in policy from one news outlet to the next. For this reason, I have simply decided to award points for each tactic a news outlet employs.

However, not all strategies are equal. For example, whether or not a newspaper corrects a mistake at all is far more important than where within an article a correction is located. Thus, I weighted the points system to reflect how fundamental each measure is to the overall goal.

The point values have been determined by analyzing a number of current corrections policies. Recommendations and suggested practices, such as Rebecca Blood’s Webl og Handbook, were also taken into consideration. Ideas that are found in multiple codes and policies, such as “Admit mistakes and correct them,” are weighted more heavily than practices that, though useful, are not widely used, such as differentiating between major and minor errors.

Deleting an entire article, known as “scrubbing,” is a largely derided practice. Most journalists disprove of the practice, but national newspapers such as the Washington Post have been found guilty of scrubbing as recently as February of
Rather than punishing a publication for scrubbing by subtracting points, they are simply awarded zero points, which remains consistent with the additive nature of the typology.

The idea of not just correcting a mistake, but restating the original error and explaining the context, has been mentioned by both academics and editors. Bill Borders, a senior editor at the New York Times who is in charge of the corrections process, explained in a question-and-answer on corrections at the Times that in repeating the erroneous information, “the goal is to avoid having someone unfamiliar with the original mistake read the correction and think, What in the hell was THAT about?” A similar justification is included in the Washington Post’s corrections policy (explained in the discussion of the Christian Science Monitor on page 27).

There are numerous ways to include a correction in the original article. Some, like the New York Times, post the correction as an addendum to the bottom of the original article. The Poynter Institute also endorses the practice of “publishing a correction, attaching it to the article in the online database and including a prominent ‘CORRECTION APPENDED’ alert, usually at the beginning of the article”. Slate places a hyperlinked asterisk at the end of a corrected sentence. Clicking this asterisk takes the reader to the end of the article, where an italicized statement explains what was corrected. The site even follows this with an additional link that offers to return the reader to the corrected sentence. This method takes almost all the work of the readers’ hands, which is ideal. Ease and speed are essential on the internet, where it takes only a split second, and the click of a mouse, to lose a reader. If a reader
has to leave the original story location for a new page that lists the correction, the paper runs the risk of losing them. Including the correction within the story, and adding hyperlinks for easy switching between story and correction, increases the likelihood that the reader will remain on the page. In addition, including hyperlinks in a story greatly increases the readers’ sense of credibility in a news web site.\textsuperscript{55}

The strikethrough method has been endorsed by Rebecca Blood, among others.\textsuperscript{3} Writers for the popular blog Boing Boing use this method (with one famous exception, explained on page 30). Incorrect text is struck through with a line, and the corrected information immediately follows, so the mistake and its rectification are both blatantly obvious.

It is also necessary to examine how a news outlet publicizes its corrections. Eugene Volokh wrote in his article “What’s Wrong with Slate,” the problem with “correcting an article on its original Web page will only reach those readers who visit an old article—for instance if a Google search takes them to that piece.” But most readers will never see this correction – because they read the article when it was first published, and have no reason to re-visit an article they’ve already seen. Volokh believes that online media should put some sort of notice on their front page when an error is corrected, because “including an extra item on the variable-size Slate daily front page … [is] not as great a cost as adding a new story to a fixed-size newspaper front page”.\textsuperscript{97} Thus, a news outlet received points if the website includes a corrections page where all of the most recent corrections are collected, and additional points if the front page of the news outlet’s website has a steady link to this Corrections page.
Different categories of mistakes should also be recognized. The *Times*, for example, discerns between typographical errors and informational or contextual errors. The former fall under the For the Record category. The latter are labeled Corrections: these are “substantive errors — those that have materially affected the reader’s understanding of a news development”. The 2004 article, “New Corrections Policy,” that announced the policy stated that the change was “prompted by readers’ suggestions to give greater prominence to corrections of the most serious errors.”

Like many newspapers, the *Times* also makes use of the Editor’s Note. The Editor’s Note is for the gravest reporting errors – usually “lapses of fairness, balance or perspective,” according to the *Times* Stylebook.

Finally, it is important to analyze how easy it is for a newspaper’s readers to submit corrections. According to a previously cited ASNE poll, the readers that are most likely to notice, and be affected by, errors are the sources and subjects of the offending story itself (the “stakeholders”). Furthermore, readers are by nature a newspapers’ strongest aid in correcting errors – they are a legion of proofreaders with a collective knowledge that surpasses any newsroom’s. It is thus essential – and truly in a news outlet’s best interest – that readers can quickly and simply report mistakes and submit corrections. Newspapers receive points for including submission information on the corrections page, but more points for including this information within each individual correction. An online submission form, which benefits both editors and readers, merits even more points.
Conclusion

It is clear that the emergence of online journalism has affected the way in which journalists correct their mistakes. The transitional timeframe, in addition to the lack of a guarantee that readers will ever return to an online news article (or even the news outlet’s website in general), means that mistakes and their ensuing corrections can quite literally become lost in cyberspace. These changes, as explained in full in the introduction to this thesis, indicate that it is time to address the issue of how best to deal with corrections in online journalism.

Moreover, I found that the current state of online corrections policies is a wildly inconsistent situation. Some newspapers, such as the Athens Post, have chosen to disregard the matter entirely; online mistakes live on in the archives, unaddressed and uncorrected. Other publications may correct mistakes, but confuse the reader by neglecting to restate the error and/or explain the context, as is the case with the Christian Science Monitor. Corrections may appear before a story, hovering between the headline and byline; after a story, where they are easily ignored by readers who simply skim articles; or within the text of the story itself.

There is one trend that should not be overlooked: it appears that the size and scope of the publication has little to no effect on the state or effectiveness of its online corrections policy. Veritably unknown organizations such as CyberJournalist.net or the Microsoft Developer Network Magazine have some of the most progressive policies, while industry titans such as the Washington Post experience fallout time and
time again due to irresponsible and inconsistent actions in dealing with online corrections.

This theory is evident in the results of my typology. ESPN.com, the website of a cable sports network, received the highest score, with 37 out of a possible 46 points. The New York Times, an actual newspaper and arguably the largest and most influential publication included in this typology, has the second-highest score. Rounding out the top three is MSDN Magazine, the online version of the Microsoft Software Developers’ Network Magazine. A sports website and a software developers’ magazine – two niche publications! – are more committed to correcting online errors than national news outlets such as Slate and the Christian Science Monitor. The Washington Post, whose website averages 10 million unique visitors a month, received the second-lowest score. The only publication that fared worse was Slate, which ironically is also the only included publication that was created exclusively for the internet.

The disparity between scores, which ranged from 18 to 37 points, further illustrates that there presently is no standard approach to rectifying errors in online journalism. In addition, each news outlet included in the typology received points for the most basic measures: having an actual corrections policy, making note of corrections, including an online Corrections page in the website, and offering a way for readers to report mistakes. It is thus evident that certain publications lost points by failing to employ more specific measures, such as including a link to the Corrections
page on the website’s home page, or differentiating between typographical and informational errors. Truly, it is the little things that count.

What is most striking about this idea is that most of these tactics would require little to no effort by editors and reporters. For example, most publications’ Corrections pages contain information on how to report an error. However, no publication included this information within each individual correction. Moreover, not a single publication even included a link to the online Corrections page within an actual correction. Appending a hyperlink to any corrected story, that led to the Corrections page, would be a simple and proactive tactic that would only further increase the likelihood that corrections are noticed by readers.

This technique has zero drawbacks – which seems to be common among many of the minor tactics related to dealing with online corrections. Many of these ideas would have only positive effects on a newspaper’s readership. There is no reason not to use them. In fact, at a time when media credibility is at an all-time low, as discussed on page 9, news outlets should be pulling out all the stops when it comes to taking measures to improve their credibility. When said measures are as simple as including a well-placed hyperlink, or making a correction slightly more obvious to site visitors, it is almost embarrassing that major news outlets have performed so poorly in a measure of their dedication to online corrections. Online corrections policies may seem to be an obscure sector of online journalism, but as demonstrated in the ethical discussion, they can translate into major implications about a newspaper’s dedication to accuracy, transparency, and accountability and responsibility – and in turn, bolster or diminish a
newspaper’s perceived credibility, which is again necessary for any newspaper to justify its existence.

Self-Reflection

As I am sure is consistent with any thesis, this topic was not without its difficulties. The most significant challenge was dedicating a year to researching a subject in which new developments occurred almost every week. For example, over the past year, editors at the Washington Post made several adjustments to the online corrections policy. I tried to integrate these modifications as best as possible, but had to eventually draw the line, or I would have been re-writing my entire thesis every month. This means that my thesis will undoubtedly be outdated as soon as its publication – and will only become more out of date as time passes and news outlets continue to alter their corrections policies. However, this is a very good thing. My thesis demonstrates the need for newspapers to pay more attention to the manner in which they correct errors. If, in five years, most of the information in my critical analysis is still accurate, it will be an extremely damning portrait of the journalism industry and its inability to evolve where progress is most necessary.

The ever-changing state of online journalism also meant that I dedicated far more time to research than I expected. I planned to complete most of my reading and research fall quarter, write the bulk of the paper winter quarter, and spend spring quarter editing and revising. However, I was still stumbling across new sources and information as late as March and April. I could not in good conscience ignore major
developments in my topic, so I spent a lot of time making sure such changes were at least pointed out somewhere in this paper. Menion

I also did not initially realize what a wide-sweeping topic this thesis aims to cover. There are several areas I would have liked to cover more in-depth, such as the longstanding skepticism between media and consumers, especially readers’ perception of journalists’ and editors’ attitudes. The idea of archiving stories, and how newspapers can and should handle requests to remove information, could have developed into an entirely separate thesis. However, I wanted to make sure that I at least mentioned every major aspect of the current situation. Thus, I feel my thesis has developed into more of an informational overview of online corrections policies, rather than the hyper-focused analysis I originally envisioned.

Anyone with an interest in journalism or the news has cause to feel concern about the future of journalism. There seems to be a collective wringing of the hands by all those in the field when anyone raises questions about falling subscription rates, dwindling advertising dollars, and how to monetize online journalism when readers seem to expect information for free. These are all valid and worrisome issues, but attention must also be paid to seemingly smaller matters associated with the transition to online journalism. Standardizing online corrections policies is a simple matter when compared to some of the other issues that face the journalism industry. At a time when so much is hanging in the balance, it would serve editors, reporters, academics and others well to implement strategies that could only have positive repercussions for the entire industry.
Annotated Bibliography


The authors relate traditional ethical dilemmas to the online realm. Especially relevant is how the immediacy of the Internet can affect accuracy, and thus, credibility. First, a model online media code is offered, from the website CNET, which at the time covered technology and computing. The “Corrections” section reads, “No error brought to the attention of an editor or reporter will be allowed to remain…Everything from a misspelled name to a gross material error will be corrected in a story’s original file so that no inaccuracy remains in our permanent archive. We will also provide clarifications of stories that contained no clear error in fact but whose wording or headline is open to misinterpretation.” The book also has an entire section devoted to discussing if correcting online mistakes is “changing history.” It is noted that there is “little consistency among online news sites” in handling the matter. The authors also make note that there are also certain advantages in corrections when it comes to online journalism, because the immediacy of the medium means that when attentive readers point out errors, they can be changed extremely quickly.


This book is cited in almost every online journalism or media ethics textbook. Blood explains the structure and ideology behind blogs, and also makes recommendations for blogging best practices. She offers her own version of a blogging code of ethics, which includes the rules, “Publicly correct any misinformation,” and “Write each entry as if it could not be changed; add to, but do not rewrite or delete, any entry.” Blood believes deleting an inaccurate blog entry “asserts that the whole incident didn’t happen – but it did. The record is more accurate and history is better served if the weblogger notes beneath the original entry that the writer has made the corrections and the article is now, to the weblogger’s knowledge, accurate.” However, she also notes an exception to these rules, in the case of revealing someone else’s personal information. Then, it is “only fair to remove the offending entry altogether, but note that you have done so.”

Bugeja, after analyzing a large amount of literature on the subject, prefaces his study with seven "core components of a correction." They include: correct the record; do so as soon as possible; provide an explanation to the audience; issue an apology to those damaged. His recommendations neatly tie into different ethical theories, such as accuracy, timeliness, transparency, and responsibility, respectively. His study compared corrections in different media platforms by using three case studies: 60 Minutes and the Bush memos (broadcast), Intel’s Pentium chip crisis (print), and Google in China (online). He cites two newspaper studies that found only “one quarter of outlets had formal written [correction] policies, although more than two thirds gave an explanation and/or had a standard location or format or corrections.” I would like to see if this holds true online – if there are no written guidelines, perhaps a site would at least have a common method they follow.


Collins, addressing the Times’ ever-evolving corrections policy, writes that “mistakes of significance are much more urgent than minor ones. They need to be corrected quickly, and in a way that guarantees the fix is seen by as many people who read the original piece as possible.” Now, history is the driving factor behind corrections, because “Everything we publish is stored not only in the Times archives and commercially available archives, but in the files of an army of search engines.” She also differentiates between informational errors and misspellings, and “Godzilla from hell kind of correction[s] that generally requires lengthy explanation and often appears under the heading of Editor’s Note.” Minor errors are listed in a separate “For the Record” column, which “makes it easier for readers to notice the [major] corrections.”


This text covers general ethical dilemmas found in journalism and relates them to the niche of online journalism. There are several discussions of how to ethically approach corrections, and the authors also make a case for why bloggers should be included in any journalism discussion.

This talks more about the process of correcting an article. Glaser believes contact information for editors should be easy for readers to find, because they are most likely to find an error. He also talks about placement state of corrections pages and declares that newspaper site corrections are in a “poor state.” He also implies that attitude may be a factor in corrections: one anecdote recounts a reader’s experience trying to report an error to the New York Times’ Op-Ed page, where the Times representative’s first questions were, “Who are you with? Do you have an axe to grind?” The author stresses that newspapers’ relationships with “skeptical readers” is at stake, and a “more transparent and open process” is the first step in improving the state of corrections.


This book is a collection of essays. The contributors are all media ethics professors. Each author chose a song, speech, movie, or other art form, and analyzed it for its ethical values (as they pertain to journalism). Essays such as “When Journalists Become Their Sources” and “Ethical Contradictions in the Information Age” provide good insight into the ethical dilemmas that the entire journalism community faces, not just those exclusive to online media or corrections policies. I understand a number of ethical theories more thoroughly now after reading about them in new contexts, such as the entertainment industry.


Haas examines news coverage of the 42nd president’s extramarital affair in the context of SPJ’s ethical code. She believes that the “be accountable” principle means that “journalists should…account for their actions to the public…and abide by the same standards to which they hold others.” She makes note that in news coverage, 24 percent of statements attributed to sources were only attributed to one source. And that “the extremely low percentage of reporting based on…multiple sources, made it difficult for the public to assess the reliability of information provided.”


Hart makes the bold statement that “mistakes are the rule, not the exception” when it comes to journalism. She believes that one major deterrent to corrections is an author’s attitude; when she found significant errors in a piece written by a Pulitzer Prize winner, the author’s reaction “moved from impatience to outright anger.” Hart calls the intense stigmatization of mistakes a Catch-22: “…some reporters and their
editors start to believe that unless a reader or listener telephones with a correction, they've made no mistakes. Then enough time goes by and they think they've gotten beyond mistakes. So then why double-check facts, especially the most basic ones?” She also feels that readers do not feel “connected enough” to reporters and editors to point out mistakes, “except perhaps in smaller markets where they feel they know [reporters] personally.”


Heim analyzed the use of the Editors’ Note at major U.S. newspapers. He found that while use of the Editors’ Note was increasing for several years, it has now tapered off and may even be declining. Heim breaks the possible nature of an editors’ note into several categories, including: Supplemental information; Author identification; Instructions to readers; Correction or clarification; and explanation of reporting or sourcing methods. Research also found that “the most common purpose of editor’s notes in 2005 was providing supplemental information,” and least common was explaining reporting and sourcing methods. Overall, it was determined that there is “little support for the claim that large U.S. newspapers have made an aggressive effort to promote transparency by opening up to readers about the people, processes and principles behind their stories.”


This paper stresses the importance of transparency in journalism. The New York Times is used as the case study that forms the crux of the paper, but the overall message is that readers want to know more about the “processes and judgments” behind editorial decisions, and that increased openness is never detrimental to anyone. The authors reiterate that although reader feedback can be extremely beneficial in spotting corrections, “[readers’] suggestions and complaints are often ignored.” The “down of the ‘modern era in transparency’” is traced back to September 2000, when an editor’s note acknowledged a controversy over whether reporting of the Wen Ho Lee case was too harsh. A few years later, the Times used a lengthy editorial explanation and apology in its handling of the Jayson Blair scenario. The authors examined placement of the Times’ “Talk to the Newsroom,” an online forum where readers can ask editors
questions. They found that by placing the feature under “Media & Advertising” in the Business News section, it “underscores that [the paper] is a commercial enterprise, immediately placing distance between the reader and the newspaper.” In addition, there is no information about how questions are chosen, the newspaper’s motives in creating this feature, or editors’ goals for the forum – so the “processes and motives behind the project are not made transparent.” It is also worth noting that the authors found that editors generally tended to be “defensive” and that “readers essentially told that the newspaper’s coverage speaks for itself.”


This takes a look at the legal side of retractions and defamation law. Though I do not plan to really go into legal repercussions, I believe I should have some familiarity with the subject. Hoefges believes that to avoid libel suits, web publishers should place corrections in an extremely noticeable spot. Currently, 31 states have retraction statutes, but “most of these statutes were enacted when online information services were unheard of or embryonic, and were intended to apply to defamation claims against traditional media.” In regards to whether a retraction statute applies to an online newspaper, “Two court opinions bear on that issue. In the first, a court said that online information services are the same in function as traditional print newspapers. In the second, a court refused to apply a state retraction statute in an online defamation case.”


Hoyt discusses how the Times deals with correcting articles in its archives. He says “people are coming forward at the rate of roughly one a day” to complain about old news articles, complete with errors, appearing in search engine results. Seemingly small mistakes could potentially wreak disastrous consequences: a woman whose wedding announcement listed the wrong university for her degree is worried that “prospective employers who Google her will suspect résumé inflation.” Traditionally, the Times’ response has been, “There’s nothing we can do. Removing anything from the historical record would be, in the words of Craig Whitney, the assistant managing editor in charge of maintaining Times standards, “‘like airbrushing Trotsky out of the Kremlin picture.’” Hoyt discusses several options, and their pitfalls, like “a technological fix that would push articles with problems lower in search engines,” or
programming archives to “forget” less important information, such as news briefs, which “generate a surprising number of the complaints.”


The authors performed a study on what aspects of a story could influence readers’ credibility of the overall web site. They define credibility as the believability of a news story. The variables used to measure participants’ perception of credibility included type of story, providing author information along with the story, using hyperlinks, and whether the hyperlinks were clicked. It was found that including writer information and hyperlinks in a story greatly increased the readers’ sense of credibility in the news web site. The authors concluded that “including a picture of the person who created the content, information about the person, and hyperlinks are all important first steps in improving credibility perceptions.”


This two-year study of 22 newspapers found that over 60 percent of local news and feature stories had at least one error found by news sources. This inaccuracy rate is one of the highest reported in 70 years of news accuracy research. The authors note that “among academic studies, the proportion of stories that sources found with errors has ranged from a low of 41% to as high as 60%”. For stories that were perceived as inaccurate, an average of three types of errors was found. The majority of errors were factual. However, over 47% of the stories contained subjective errors – “information considered technically correct but misleading.” The most common subjective error was that essential information was left out. This study also found no correlation between newspaper size and likelihood of error. Inaccurate stories had a measured negative effect on both newspaper credibility and “source willingness to cooperate on future stories.” Furthermore, “By every measure, story and newspaper credibility significantly declined in relation to the frequency and severity of errors.”


Nieman first states that he found that 97 percent of factual errors went uncorrected in a study of 10 daily newspapers. He then suggests that errors occur because journalists are unaware of how often they err; and readers and sources feel a sense of futility in
reporting errors because their requests are often ignored or denied. He says that “research shows that error rates fall markedly when two things happen: reporters take the time to recheck their work sentence by sentence [and] reports and editors are held accountable for mistakes when they occur.” In a response to the piece, CEO of DigitalJournal.com Chris Hogg explained his site’s use of crowdsourcing for corrections. Writers are notified of any “revision suggestions” submitted on their articles, and can either “apply” or “ignore” the changes. Writers can also “block” those who may be abusing the feature.


Maier’s study examines the likelihood of sources of a story to report errors to the publishing newspaper once the article hits the press. It can be used to make a case in favor of (or against) citizen journalism – does relying on the public truly work? Will they pick up the paper’s slack in error tracking? He follows Mitchell Charnley’s model of classifying factual errors into several categories: misquotes, spellings, names, dates, ages, other numbers, titles, addresses, other locations, time and dates. He also cites a “factual-subjective dichotomy” that includes errors of overemphasis, under-emphasis, omission, and misleading headlines. There is also support for the argument that corrections should be easy to find and prominent: two study participants said, “Reporters cannot stop what readers have already read. Whenever corrections are made they usually are in places barely seen,” or that “[a] two line apology in next day’s edition [is] not worth the effort.”


This study examined the increasing practice of the traditional media and the blogosphere using the other as a legitimate source. The authors examined both the frequency of weblogs being cited as sources in the mainstream media, and the quality of sources used by weblogs over the same time period.


The authors surveyed journalists in 11 countries to find out their opinions on how the changing face of journalism has affected the “defining essentials” of journalism. Journalists agreed that unreliable information is much more common online than in print journalism, but that the interactivity of the internet increased accountability. In addition, the majority of participants agreed that in online journalism, accuracy is sacrificed for speed. Interestingly (and perhaps worringly), only 16 percent of
participants agreed that they were “worried about sacrificing accuracy in the rush to publish”.


Pavlik believes that the changing landscape of media has positive and negative consequences. He examines a number of new technologies including blogs, podcasting, peer-to-peer file sharing, and on-demand entertainment. He also looks into “Ethical considerations in the digital age.” He defines ethics specifically in journalism and the media as “a set of practices, a code of things that journalists and other media professionals should or should not do.” He also defines two different ethical errors: errors of commission, when journalists commit improper acts such as plagiarizing or inventing sources, and errors of omission, which would include neglecting to correct errors. His opinion is that “…when corrections occur online, they are often simply made to the offending copy with no indication of and no link back to the original error. Such an electronic paper trail is important for the public to understand what happened and when and how it was corrected,” making the case for both accuracy and full transparency. In addition, Pavlik cites digital manipulation of photos as an ethical breach. The American Society of Magazine Editors’ online ethics code is cited as an example of an admirable code.


NYU journalism professor Jay Rosen posted this piece in his blog “PressThink,” in which he writes about the ideas behind journalism and conflicts modern journalists face today. This particular entry is about the *Washington Post’s* temporarily shutdown of its forums after readers’ calls for corrections to a story turned into rampant criticism of the writer and paper. Rosen uses the incident as an angle to talk about transparency in the press, especially as it relates to corrections. He believes that “Factual errors require correction, not excuses or explanations, and the internet requires that such errors be corrected promptly.”


Ms. Rosen’s article explains several instances of plagiarism and how they were dealt with, and also makes recommendations for other newspapers to follow should plagiarism occur within their pages. She emphasizes the ever-present danger of plagiarism – “it could happen to anyone.” She also states that the *New York Times’*
handling of the Jayson Blair incident “set a new standard for burned papers: you confess, you're contrite, and then you clean house.” This makes a case for why newspapers should be prepared and have a policy ready in case this unfortunate event should occur. At a 2004 American Society of Newspaper Editors/Newspaper Association of America convention, New York Times publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger “urged the hundreds of editors and publishers…to work with the assumption that someone in their organization is cheating.” A sidebar notes that there are new plagiarism detection software applications, such as iThenticate and MyDropBox, that are specifically marketed to newspapers. iThenticate is from the makers of Turnitin.com, a plagiarism-detection service for colleges and high schools.


Russial surveyed online copy editing practices at 155 U.S. newspapers. He found that in regards to copy editing stories before they were posted online, only half of the newspapers’ stories were “always” copy edited. More than 15 percent of respondents said that they are “never” copy edited. Most respondents said that online stories would not be copy edited because “it would delay posting” or “[there is] not enough copy editing staff for print and online,” indicating that both timeliness and lack of resources are major causes of errors. Only 12.9 of the newspapers had at least one online copy editor. Russial also found that newspaper size has no effect on the likelihood of online editing. In fact, the largest newspapers were more likely to report that they “never” copy edited online stories before publication.


The author details a situation where he wrote to Family Weekly, a Sunday newspaper supplement, about a glaring error in “Ask Them Yourself,” a feature comprised of “gossip-type bits.” After two letters to Family Weekly went unanswered, he took it upon himself to write each paper that distributed the supplement, informing them of the error. Out of 364 newspapers, only 51 printed his letter. Schneider’s concern is not with legal implications, but more of the reader’s right to know, which is claimed as the “primary raison d’etre by most newspapers” but blatantly ignored when it comes to situations like the one he encountered. Although the error was only in a supplement to the paper, it was a serious one, and Schneider wonders how responsible newspapers should be for mistakes in content that they do not produce, but for which they do serve as a distribution vehicle.

This book, by the author of the “Regret the Error” blog, not only examines how, why, and when mistakes are made, but also the implications that they have on the entire media industry. He “calls out” two significant causes of error: unreliable sources and malicious reporters. He not only separates errors into broad categories, like name errors, but also finds divisions within the categories. For example, a name misspelling is different from a situation where two individuals share the same name – and usually, one has been charged with a crime. Silverman laments that when corrections are published, “many are often too vague, or they lack the original context that would enable readers to understand them and the original mistake as well,” or their location is not prominent enough. He also believes the Internet is “in fact a better medium for correcting errors, but it isn’t yet being used to its full potential.” He cites the New York Post, New York Daily News, USA Today, San Diego Union-Tribune, and Detroit Free Press as several larger newspapers that don’t have a specific corrections page online. Actions Silverman suggests include RSS feeds and e-mail alerts just for corrections and a corrections-only search box.


This is a general introduction to journalism ethics. The most relevant section of the book compares print and online corrections. Smith cites the Chiquita Banana case and the San Jose Mercury News’ retraction of its “Dark Alliance” series as two examples of major retractions that affect the entire story (or series of stories). The book also states that “[newspaper]place their corrections in a set place in the paper every day…often that’s the second or third page of the front section.” It offers examples of papers that deviate from this mean, such as the Mobile Register, which places all corrections on the front page. The News-Sentinel of Fort Wayne puts corrections on the page where the error occurred. Smith also notes that corrections at most papers have increased in recent years. A reader representative from the San Diego Union-Tribune is quoted, echoing a sentiment found in other research, as saying, “I don’t think [we’re] making more errors…It’s just that correcting errors – both big and small – is a priority.” This book also states that online editors only have two options for making corrections: to edit the page when the error is discovered or to add corrections boxes. He notes that some sites combine the two by editing for minor errors and using boxes to explain major mistakes.


Stepp’s article has many firsthand anecdotes from journalists that currently work for the St. Louis Dispatch and Washington Post, mostly related to shrinking staffs and increasing frequency of errors. His piece provides great reasoning for why corrections policies are necessary—it “sets the stage,” so to speak, by demonstrating that errors are a very real, and common occurrence, and thus must be dealt with. The article cites the nontraditional timeframe of online journalism as one reason corrections are more likely. He uses Mandy St. Amand, the continuous news editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, as an example—at 5:30 a.m., when she is posting to the paper’s web site, no copy editor is available, so her work goes online unchecked. Stepp lists buddy editing (“where you ask the nearest person to read”), back editing (“where copy is edited after posting”), and previewing (“where copy goes to a holding directory for an editor to check before live posting”).


This book outlines situations where erroneous stories that originated in low-level blogs managed to penetrate the mainstream/traditional media. These occurrences may be somewhat rare, but when they do occur, the consequences (usually disastrous) are so widespread that the issue deserves attention. In 1998, the Drudge Report exposed President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky. “For a time, Drudge’s feat put online news on par with elite media...he had briefly succeeded in having online news influence public opinion and public policy.” The authors write that the scandal “illustrated how quickly a sensational news story could spread from the political fringes to the mainstream media through the Web with little time for critical appraisal and for the victimized party to repair or at least respond to the news.” A different situation occurred when an Associated Press prewritten obituary for Bob Hope was mistakenly released online. By the time the story was removed, it had already been picked up by other news media.
Footnotes


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