ETHICS FOR DIGITAL JOURNALISTS

EMERGING BEST PRACTICES

EDITED BY LAWRIE ZION
& DAVID CRAIG

ROUTLEDGE

ETHICS FOR DIGITAL JOURNALISTS

The rapid growth of online media has led to new complications in journalism ethics and practice. While traditional ethical principles may not fundamentally change when information is disseminated online, applying them across platforms has become more challenging as new kinds of interactions develop between journalists and audiences.

In *Ethics for Digital Journalists*, Lawrie Zion and David Craig draw together the international expertise and experience of journalists and scholars who have all been part of the process of shaping best practices in digital journalism. Drawing on contemporary events and controversies like the Boston Marathon bombing and the Arab Spring, the authors examine emerging best practices in everything from transparency and verification to aggregation, collaboration, live blogging, tweeting, and the challenges of digital narratives. At a time when questions of ethics and practice are challenged and subject to intense debate, this book is designed to provide students and practitioners with the insights and skills to realize their potential as professionals.

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Emerging Best Practices

Edited by Lawrie Zion and David Craig

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PREFACE

A headline on a blog post says a lot about what we hope this book will do for journalism students and journalists. As we were editing chapters from our contributors, Steve Buttry, then digital transformation editor for Digital First Media, was writing this: "Journalism ethics conversation needs one more thing: Detailed situational advice." Current discussions about ethical principles, he said, need to be accompanied by in-depth guidance on how to put them into practice. This book offers that kind of advice by media scholars from seven countries, all of them with a foot in digital and social media themselves and an understanding of the issues reshaping journalism.

The frame for the discussion is the idea of best practices. All of us writing are well aware that what's best is hotly debated in digital media—and that it will look different in different parts of the world and will continue to evolve over time. But talking about best practices can help to foster journalism that is of excellent quality and welcomes the contributions of both professionals and public. In Chapter 1, Lawrie Zion lays a foundation by examining the concept of best practices and how it relates to the development of digital journalism.

The book also connects best practices to ethics. In Chapter 2, David Craig looks at how three ethical perspectives—duty, virtue, and care—are relevant to the daily work of digital journalism. The chapter shows how these perspectives are connected with both scholarly thinking and the ways journalists and journalism organizations pursue excellent work. These frameworks of ethics provide a basis for readers to think about the issues raised in the rest of the book. In the final chapter of the introductory section of the book, Chapter 3, Ansgard Heinrich places discussion of best practices in the context of the global network of information flow that provides new opportunities for excellent journalism but presents significant challenges, as well.

The rest of the book examines best practices across a wide range of issues relevant to the daily work of digital journalists. In Chapter 4, Stephen J. A. Ward shows how transparency—a hot issue in digital journalism and an important value—is sometimes embraced without sufficient consideration about what it actually contributes in relation to other ethical principles. In Chapter 5, Alfred Hermida suggests several approaches to the sticky challenges of verifying information when it is flowing constantly in the digital network through social media users and others.

Juliette De Maeyer writes in Chapter 6 about best practices in linking, one of the fundamental features of digital presentation. Fiona Martin looks at aggregation—one of the most controversial areas in digital journalism—in Chapter 7 and offers detailed advice about doing "curatorial journalism" ethically. Chapter 8 (Neil Thurman) and Chapter 9 (Jonathan Hewett) discuss the evolving practices of live blogging and tweeting. In Chapter 10, Tim Currie discusses the ethics of what happens when things don't go right and mistakes have to be corrected.

Chapters 11 and 12 focus on elements of engagement with citizens. Lily Canter navigates the ethics of collaboration, and David Domingo focuses on fostering constructive engagement through online comments. In Chapter 13, Kelly Fincham examines best practices for navigating the ambiguous borders between the public and private self on social media.

Multimedia, a key dimension of online storytelling, is the subject of Chapter 14. Mindy McAdams looks at best practices in several areas including interactivity, animation, and navigation. In Chapter 15, Paul Bradshaw discusses another continually evolving area, data journalism, around a number of issues including accuracy, context, and privacy.

Each chapter in this book is designed to encourage discussion and application. Each one closes with a case study of "best practices in action" related to the chapter topic and a series of discussion questions. The focus on discussion underlines the fact that everyone reading this has a stake in thinking about what the best means in the open, collaborative environment of digital journalism.

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Thanks too to our colleagues at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, and the University of Oklahoma in Norman for providing supportive environments for this book to evolve through conversations with our students and colleagues.

And we'd also like to express our appreciation to the 13 other contributors from seven countries whose chapters follow in the pages ahead.

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WHY BEST PRACTICES?

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This book is about how journalists and journalism can realize their potential at a time of enormous change. It is a contribution to developing debates about the crisis of journalism—a crisis not just of business models or technologies, but also one of ethics. But the book also aims to point forward by examining how journalism might actually be improved by the changes that are transforming it as a profession and a practice. Amid the chaos stemming from both the collapse of the traditional business model for print journalism and the explosion of digital media, many practitioners are addressing questions about how journalism's mission to inform, enlighten, and entertain might be renewed in more open and collaborative ways.

This project, which features contributions from 15 academics and journalists from seven countries, is itself designed to be an example of this collaboration. It begins with an examination of the utility of the concept of "best practices" as a framing device for the application of ethical principles and for dealing with the practical challenges that have arisen in the wake of changes to journalism practice. It also discusses how the process of exploring emerging best practices might make journalism more open and accountable.

The book will explore themes of emerging best practices as they relate to network journalism sphere, transparency, verification, links and attribution, aggregation and curation, live blogging and tweeting, corrections and unpublishing, collaboration, moderation and audience participation, the private and public self on social media, and the challenges of multimedia storytelling and data journalism.

It will examine these topics by illuminating some of the new kinds of relationships being forged between individuals and organizations producing media and their audiences, and providing case studies that illustrate how emerging best practices in digital journalism can enhance the application of ethical principles and lead to better journalism.

Best Practices

> Question: Is it true, as one respondent confidently asserted, "If it's fact-checked, it's not a blog," and is this an existential or a definitional question? The issue is an important one because so many in the blogosphere insist that blogs have (and are entitled to) their own rules of the road. Subject for discussion: Why have earlier attempts at standardizing the world of blogs and social media notoriously failed? Is it, at long last, possible to identify best practices for using the tools and techniques of digital journalism?
>
> (Navasky and Lerner 2010, 42)

The term "best practices" has emerged relatively recently in discussions about journalism. But its origins can be traced back almost a century to Frederick Taylor's 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Taylor 1911) where he stated that "among the various methods and implements used in each element of each trade there is always one method and one implement which is quicker and better than any of the rest" (quoted in King 2007). This came to be called "one best way" (King 2007).

While the private sector and management provide one trajectory for the history of the term, another origin for "best practice" comes from the very different area of agricultural extension where research-based innovations in the United States were promoted at the county and state level early in the 20th century (King 2007; McKeon 1998).

The term has since gained currency in a broad range of professional fields including law, medicine, management, education, information technology, immigration, public policy, and in the nongovernmental organization (NGO) sphere (McKeon 1998; Bendixsen and de Guchteneire 2003) and continues to be used widely in diverse contexts (King 2007). UNESCO's International Migration program, which ran its own best practices project to realize its goal of promoting human rights for migrants, defines best practices as "successful initiatives which have a demonstrable and tangible impact on improving people's quality of life." Best practice activities, it is suggested, have the potential for replication, can lead to other ideas, and can inspire policy development and initiatives elsewhere (UNESCO 2014). Other "best practices" definitions include "a set of guidelines, ethics or ideas that represent the most efficient or prudent course of action" (Investopedia 2013) and "an industry accepted way of doing something that works" (itSMF Australia 2013).

This book is based in part on the assumption that the speed of changes in journalism practice and the emergence of new kinds of journalism in the digital sphere necessitate new approaches to exploring and developing standards and guidelines within the media sphere, and that some of the approaches to this, to be discussed below, show a promising start.

But first it's useful to note how the issue of adopting best practices has been approached in another area. Writing about education, Denise McKeon (1998) suggests three approaches to strengthening the efficacy of best practices. The first of these, she argues, is to develop an exploratory framework:

> The one-size fits all approach to best practice does not usually work in medicine or law, and it is not likely to work in education, either. Therefore, what is more likely to work in education (as in medicine or law) is a more generative approach to the concept of best practice—with teachers asking questions, exploring the research, making educated guesses about the models that are most likely to fill the bill, trying those models, and observing the effect those models have on their classes and their practice.
>
> (498)

Second, McKeon advocates ensuring collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

> Could a collaborative research and development system be constructed in education? Could it include teachers as colleagues and partners in the research and development enterprise? Could it permit both formal research and practical inquiry (research conducted by practitioners to help them understand their contexts, practices, and students)? There is evidence to suggest that it could.
>
> (499)

Her final consideration in strengthening best practices in education is the importance of the dissemination or diffusion function. "Once there is some agreement about what constitutes best practice, how does that knowledge make its way to the people who need it most?" This is a particularly pertinent issue in the case of digital media, with so much now being published outside of the traditional professional domain of journalism.

Critiques of best practices also point to some of the challenges and limitations inherent in any attempt to develop useful outcomes. A 2007 policy brief focusing on best practice approaches by the Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training stressed that best practices

> are not fruits just waiting to be plucked. They need to be re-potted, grafted, and reworked for different soil conditions. . . . Our authors acknowledge that there is potentially good practice or best practice, but these can't just be borrowed and mainstreamed. Or if there is borrowing, there needs to be an awareness of the culture, "chemistry", history, and political economy of the education system that produced the innovation, as well as a recognition

> of the learning and adapting that has to take place, if these practices are to be effectively embedded in a new context. This is not just a requirement for a handful of policy-makers but for education communities more generally.
>
> (Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training 2007)

Best Practices in Digital Journalism

How might these considerations apply in the context of the media? A new set of problems arising simultaneously due to rapid technological developments and the emergence of new practices in everything from blogging to user-generated content, verification, correcting errors, and hyperlinking has created confusion, and in some cases, exasperation on a wide scale. Take linking for instance, which is the subject of Chapter 6. It's one thing to affirm the need to acknowledge sources, but how might this best be done using hyperlinks? What kinds of information require linking? What should you link to? Traditional ethics codes remain an important foundation for thinking about journalism, but can be hard to apply in emerging terrain.

Linking is just one of many best practice issues to be explored in this book. That the term "best practices" has turned up only relatively recently in discussions about journalism might be in part because of factors associated with the professional identity of journalists (including some resistance to being seen as "professionals"). As Ivor Shapiro suggests:

> the lack of a widely recognized framework for assessing quality or excellence in journalism amounts to a fog of aspiration whose origins presumably lie in journalism's historically feisty culture, which is largely hostile to corporate or institutional concepts such as "quality assurance" or even "best practices."
>
> (Shapiro 2010, 145)

Codes of ethics, Shapiro argues, "have been accepted, sometimes reluctantly, as a bulwark against abuses or against perceived threats to credibility, but words like "standards" raise the specter of journalism becoming a "profession"—a term associated, for some, with government-imposed collective self-regulation and with diminished individual autonomy and innovation." By contrast to doctors, lawyers, engineers and other professionals, "journalists, scholars of journalism, and others with interest in the field lack a common evaluative lexicon. This hermeneutic gap cannot but make a difference to quality in practice" (Shapiro 2010, 145).

But this is changing as journalists and scholars have continued to wrestle with the challenges of a rapidly evolving mediascape. The term "best practices" has been used—apparently at least partly coincidentally—in a number of recent initiatives involving the application of ethical principles online, as well as in discussions of how to optimize the capacities of technological innovations.

In a study I undertook for a paper presented at the 2012 International Symposium on Online Journalism (Zion 2012a) which is the genesis of this book, I examined a number of best practice initiatives undertaken by media organizations, including the American University's Center for Media & Social Impact formerly known as the Center for Social Media. One of the conclusions of its report "Scan and Analysis of Best Practices in Digital Journalism in and Outside U.S. Public Broadcasting" was that "Although the nature of technology, audiences, and journalism itself continues to change, recent reports . . . begin to suggest a set of emerging best practices, principles, and norms that can guide how public broadcasting outlets and producers adapt to the digital landscape." The term "best practices," it points out, is "more than a buzz phrase":

> In any professional sector or industry, researchers commonly identify a set of activities, principles, themes, norms, or routines that appear to aid industry members in meeting common challenges or achieving shared goals. Best practices are intended to be generalizable across organizations and settings, though the decision to adopt any recommended activity will depend on the needs, resources, and goals of a particular organization.
>
> (Aufderheide et al. 2009)

Another Center for Media & Social Impact report, "Copyright, Free Speech, and the Public's Right Know: How Journalists Think About Fair Use," found that journalists are facing ever-greater challenges to applying the doctrine of fair use in daily life, in part because of confusions associated with the growth of digital media. "Social media, video, and user-generated content pose new challenges and unfamiliar choices. Online aggregators, bloggers and citizen journalists copy original material and further destabilize business models" (Aufderheide and Jaszi 2012).

The report concluded that

> until journalists establish their own best practices in fair use, journalists and their institutions and gatekeepers will continue to be haunted by fear, letting unfounded risk-management calculations substitute for a clear understanding of what is normal and appropriate in employment of fair use. As new opportunities develop with the evolution of digital culture, the very mission of journalism is at stake.

Another organization that has been proactively developing best practices initiatives in response to the evolution of digital media is the Canadian Association of Journalists. In 2010 it published "The Ethics of Unpublishing" report, which offered guidelines on the issues of correcting online content and handling public requests to "unpublish" material (English, Currie, and Link 2010).

This is significant because the capacity to "unpublish"—that is, to remove material from a website—is something that was not possible in the print era, and traditional ethical codes don't really equip publishers with guidance about circumstances in which it might be considered ethical to unpublish. Further complicating the issue is that while it's technically simple for an editor or blogger to erase content from a specific site, this does not eliminate the many echoes that may exist all over the web on search engines, blogs, and news sites (Fisher 2010).

This report's recommendations, to be discussed further in Tim Currie's chapter, were underpinned by three key unpublishing principles that became the basis of a subsequent report on best practices in digital accuracy and correction, which began with the suggestion that while the principles outlined in its unpublishing report all reinforce normative ethical practices, they also raise some "relatively new issues." These are:

- Is there a difference between corrections and updates to digital content in a 24/7 publishing cycle?
- When digital content requires an update, amendment or correction, should changes be made to in the article text and the content republished, or . . .
- Does transparency demand that corrections note are appended to tell audiences when content has been updated/amended/corrected?
- Should corrective notes explicitly acknowledge the changes made to content?
- Are varied measures of corrective action required, depending on the nature of the error?
- How do news organizations ensure consistency across publishing platforms as information is updated, amended and corrected?

(English 2011)

This is just one example of how new technological advances lead to discussions of best practices in journalism. In my 2012 study I found that the best practice initiatives I had analyzed shared most of the following characteristics. They:

- Identified emerging situations—in each instance the case studies are attempted to address moving targets.
- Shared findings—the guidelines, and in all cases here, the rationale behind them, are accessible by the public.
- Foster collaboration—none of these projects could have been realized solely through the expertise of a single group.
- Suggested rather than prescribed—problems were addressed and discussed rather than solved.
- Consulted—all of these projects used expertise and engagement with communities to develop guidelines.

- Enhanced media literacy—the reports were designed to provide guidelines to journalists and other content producers that will improve interactions with their users/audiences.
- Regenerated—the case studies connected back to the practices linked to tradition by exploring emerging practices.

(Zion 2012a)

We can also see here how the approaches of the Center for Media & Social Impact and the Canadian Association of Journalists are in keeping with McKeon's suggestion that "best practices" can best be realized if they are envisaged as generative, collaborative, and broadly diffused and disseminated. In this respect they are different from many codes of practice or ethics that are intended for members of specific organizations.

Another noteworthy development is the newly established Tow Center for Digital Journalism's $2 million research initiative "to study best practices in digital reporting." Announcing the initiative in 2012, Center Director Emily Bell explained:

> We are focusing on funding research projects which relate to the transparency of public information and its intersection with journalism, research into what might broadly be termed data journalism, and the third area of "impact" or, more simply put, what works and what doesn't.
>
> (Bell 2012)

The discussion about what works and what doesn't has also been developing elsewhere. Iyer (2010), for instance, suggests that the decline of print means that a best practice culture is more likely to evolve in an online environment:

> Best practice has a good reason to exist under normal circumstances, outside of the journalism of prize-winning efforts. It does not need the incentive of accolades to prevail. But it does need some groundwork: it can only survive within an organizational culture of excellence. . . . [Websites] . . . are benefiting from increased competition. It is quite likely that best practice definitions will emerge from them.
>
> (Iyer 2010, 31)

It's not simply a matter of competition. An array of niche websites discussing the changing journalism landscape is constantly engaged with discussions about best practice issues. These include PBS Mediashift, 10,000 Words, Reportr.net, Nieman Journalism Lab, and Poynter.

In late 2012 the Tow Center released "Post-Industrial Journalism: Adapting to the Present," which discusses the skills, structures, and systems now needed to provide the best chance of creating good journalism (Anderson, Bell, and Shirky 2012). The report emphasizes five core beliefs:

- Journalism matters.
- Good journalism has always been subsidized.
- The internet wrecks advertising subsidy.
- Restructuring is, therefore, a forced move.
- ***There are many opportunities for doing good work in new ways.*** (Emphasis in the original.) Here, the authors argue that "If you believe that journalism matters, and that there is no solution to the crisis, then the only way to get the journalism we need in the current environment is to take advantage of new possibilities." They go on to suggest that "the most exciting and transformative aspect of the current news environment is taking advantage of new forms of collaboration, new analytic tools and sources of data, and new ways of communicating what matters to the public."

The report concludes: "The past 15 years have seen an explosion of new tools and techniques, and, more importantly, new assumptions and expectations, and these changes have wrecked the old clarity."

This wrecked clarity extends to journalism ethics in two main respects. First, new kinds of journalism practice spawned by technological innovation often aren't covered by traditional codes. It is one thing to acknowledge the traditional ethical imperative of correcting errors; quite another to gauge how this might be achieved across of a range of digital practices.

The other ethical conundrum stems from the increasing volume of journalistic content being produced and disseminated by people who do not identify as journalists and whose practices often take place outside of the kinds of institutional and professional milieus within which codes of ethics were developed. As Stephen Ward argues elsewhere: "a once-dominant traditional ethics, constructed for professional journalism a century ago, are being questioned. Journalism ethics is a field where old and new values clash" (Ward 2011b). In his book *Ethics and the Media* (2011a), he suggests that the changes go to the core of media ethics:

> The challenge runs deeper than debates about one or another principle, such as objectivity. The challenge is greater than specific problems, such as how newsrooms can verify content from citizens. The revolution requires us to rethink assumptions. What can ethics *mean* for a profession that must provide instant news and analysis; where everyone with a modem is a publisher? (p. 208)

Ward is not alone in emphasizing the significance of this development. As Jay Rosen put it to a group of Australian journalism educators at Sydney University: "What we need to do is completely explode the question of ethics, so that it includes new actors like bloggers and citizen journalists" (Rosen 2010). For Rosen, ethics are "the practices that lead to trust on the platforms where users actually are. That's what we should care about. How can we find them, and refine them and teach them to people?" (Rosen 2010).

One premise of this book is that the development of best practices initiatives could facilitate different ways of thinking about ethics in the senses that Rosen and Ward identify above. The pursuit of best practices in digital media is conceptually related to three emphases in ethical thought—duty, virtue, and care—that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter by this book's co-editor, David Craig. These concepts provide ways to frame discussions of best practices that connect both with scholarship in media ethics and the reality of how journalists and news organizations have discussed and pursued excellence. The concepts, while rooted in a long history of ethics scholarship, are relevant to the transforming world of digital media in which both professionals and public play a key role.

One issue with the term "best practices" is the potential for conceptual confusion. Could it be that this is just another way of saying "ethics"? To quote Ward again: "Ethics is sometimes identified with an inflexible set of rules and self-righteous moralizing. It is said that rules are rules—an action is either right or wrong. It either breaks a rule or it doesn't. This view over-simplifies ethical thinking" (Ward 2012).

But perhaps one advantage of "best practices" is that it circumvents this potential misconception. Tonally, the term "best practices" is normative without seeming too prescriptive. And perhaps this open-endedness of the term is not a bad thing. The web is crawling with sites claiming to provide lists of "best practices" that don't necessarily imply ethical behavior or ethical content—the term can relate to questions of efficiency, expediency, and commercial considerations of market share—see, for instance, Facebook's best practice guide for journalists (Lavrusik and Cameron 2011), or "6 Best Practices for Modern SEO" (Everhart 2011), which, like many other posts on the popular site Mashable, points users to what are claimed to be the most effective ways to enhance their visibility online.

Yet the content of these posts exploring best practices in the nonethical sense of the term isn't necessarily incompatible with the quest to enhance ethical practice. Indeed, perhaps the blurring of the different connotations of the term "best practices" could help synergize elements of ethics and efficiency. For bloggers and other content producers who are not professional journalists, the term "best practices" may be more tangible than "ethics," but by following "best practice" principles, all kinds of practitioners also contribute to more ethical outcomes. Think of a blogger publishing material about how best to attribute sources. Won't she be more effective in sharing her views with a broader audience if she understands which keywords to embed in her URL, or what hashtag to include with her tweet about the article, or what tags will enhance searchability?

This isn't a call to dumb down ethics, but rather to open them up and broaden the discussion about realizing the potential of digital media at a time when most people publishing content online have no training in or professional experience of mainstream journalism. Writing about ethics codes and privacy in the digital media age, Ginny Whitehouse concludes that "citizen journalists, bloggers, and even those making comments on mainstream news pages do not have the same expectation to follow journalism ethics codes" (Whitehouse 2010, 324). But, she argues, if these standards can be embedded into journalism practice, "then expectations about privacy and nonmainstream digital forums might be strengthened" (p. 324).

Even established journalists must grapple with the fact that traditional codes often lag behind media practices, especially when content is produced outside of the institutional norms, processes, and structures of traditional media. Therefore, notions of "ethics" become difficult to operationalize without ongoing explorations of emerging best practices. This book is an attempt to contribute to those explorations.

Building such a framework of thinking requires us to recognize what kinds of initiatives are pointing forward through their approaches to both technology and ethics. In other words, how can these practices be put into action? The case study that follows provides one possible example.

Best Practices in Action: *The Conversation*

The Conversation (http://theconversation.edu/au) is an Australian-based publication that examines issues in the news by harnessing academic expertise. It is also an interesting incubator of emerging best practices in digital media. Since launching in March 2011 it has built a readership of 1.5 million unique visitors a month in Australia alone with a subsequent reach through Creative Commons republications of 5 million unique page views (The Conversation 2014); 87 percent of all articles are republished elsewhere, with 8,000 websites having republished the site's content. (The Conversation 2014). And many of the 10,000 academics registered with the site (including this author) have found new audiences for their ideas and analysis—around 80 percent of the readership are nonacademics.

For its first two years, it was wholly based in Australia. But since mid-2013 a UK edition of the site has also been operating at http://theconversation.com/uk. In both countries, The Conversation is a not-for-profit that is mostly funded by partner universities, and so, unlike many digital publications, does not rely on advertising or paid subscribers.

The site has been designed to facilitate public discourse and provide a means of extending and measuring the impact of academics in the public sphere. In so doing, it has also made its mark in developing best practices for online journalism not only for its readers, but also for its editors and writers, says co-founder, Executive Director and Editor Andrew Jaspan, who previously edited the Melbourne daily the *Age* and several British newspapers (Zion 2012b).

The Conversation's charter (The Conversation 2011b) sets out how it aims to fulfill its mission:

- Give experts a **greater voice** in shaping scientific, cultural and intellectual agendas by providing a trusted platform that values and promotes new thinking and evidence-based research.
- **Unlock the knowledge** and expertise of researchers and academics to provide the public with clarity and insight into society's biggest problems.
- Create an **open site for people around the world** to share best practices and collaborate on developing smart, sustainable solutions.
- Provide a **fact-based and editorially-independent** forum, free of commercial or political bias.
- Ensure the site's **integrity** by only obtaining non-partisan sponsorship from education, government and private partners. Any advertising will be relevant and non-obtrusive.
- Ensure **quality, diverse and intelligible content** reaches the widest possible audience by employing experienced editors to curate the site.
- Support and foster **academic freedom** to conduct research, teach, write and publish.
- Work with our academic, business and government partners and our advisory board to ensure we are operating for the **public good**.

To facilitate these aims, *The Conversation* has developed "author dashboards" for contributors that provide details of the impact of articles by recording a range of metrics including the numbers of readers each article receives, where they're from, comments, "likes" on Facebook and tweets on Twitter, and republications through its Creative Commons license.

While many academics already have established media profiles, *The Conversation* also nurtures experts who have yet to contribute to newspapers or websites. "We started with saying a lot of academics either don't enjoy engagement with the media or they are shy or some of them just need the experience and help," says Jaspan (Zion 2012b). The site employs professional editors who work with contributors to ensure that their material can be understood by a general audience.

Technological innovations also help the site to realize its mission. All authors write on a specially developed collaborative writing platform which is designed to enhance transparency and trust. Contributors must register to demonstrate that they have credentials in a particular area. "We only allow people to write in the area that they know about, and we want the reader to know that that person really has deep expertise," Jaspan explains (Zion 2012b). Contributors must also fill out a disclosure statement "because we need to know who is funding them," says Jaspan, who adds that sometimes the perception of conflict of interest can be best dealt with just by being open about a relationship or connection, while, conversely, hiding the fact that you're affiliated to something can diminish trust.

Another notable feature of the site is its community standards (The Conversation 2011a), which were designed to enhance the quality of discussion for not only its readers, but also its writers and editors. These standards were developed after examining best practices in sites such as ProPublica, Nieman Journalism Lab, *The Guardian*, NPR, and Newser. As Jaspan explains:

> If you want to actually rebuild trust you need to demonstrate how you're doing that. Make sure you know who people are, the provenance of that person, the funding of that person, what they actually know about it. Make sure that you can actually deal with complaints properly, and make sure you have proper process in place to have people engage with the authors.
>
> (Zion 2012b)

Discussion Questions

1. How does *The Conversation* present a new approach to technology and ethics?
2. What best practice innovations has it developed that are specific to a digital environment?
3. Which of these might be applicable in other digital publications?
4. How does it provide for new kinds of collaborations between journalists, academics, audiences, and communities?
5. Overall, how could *The Conversation* be seen to ethically strengthen journalism in the digital era?

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