

## **BEST PRACTICES IN DIGITAL ACCURACY AND CORRECTIONS**

*Report of the Ethics Advisory Committee of The Canadian Association of Journalists*

PANEL MEMBERS: KATHY ENGLISH (CHAIR), BERT BRUSER, TIM CURRIE, ROD LINK, CRAIG SILVERMAN, SHAUNA SNOW-CAPPARELLI, SCOTT WHITE

*In recognition of the obligations of journalists to pursue accuracy and to be accountable for their work, the Canadian Association of Journalists' [Principles for Ethical Journalism](#) states: "When we make a mistake, we correct it promptly and ungrudgingly, and in a manner that matches the seriousness of the error." This is not a new idea, but digital publishing raises new challenges for defining best practices in corrections. Accordingly, the Ethics Advisory Committee of the CAJ asked this panel to propose best practices in digital accuracy and corrections as a follow-up to this same committee's 2010 work on [unpublishing digital content](#). That earlier report asserted three key principles about unpublishing from which this work on digital accuracy and corrections builds.*

### ***These principles are:***

- 1. Published digital content is part of the historical record and should not be unpublished. News organizations do not rewrite history or make news disappear.*
- 2. Accuracy is the foundation of media credibility. Though we should resist unpublishing, we have a responsibility to ensure the accuracy of all published content. If we err, or if new relevant facts emerge, we should publish correctives and/or update online articles as soon as we verify errors and/or new information.*
- 3. Transparency demands that we are clear with audiences about changes that have been made to correct/amend or update digital content. We should not "scrub" digital content, that is, simply fix it and hope that no one has noticed.*

**These principles raise questions about both policy and practice in digital accuracy and corrections. Among the questions this panel considered were:**

- 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?

These are relatively new issues. In coming to its recommendations, the committee looked at available literature and considered the emerging policies and practices of several major news organizations. These include The Canadian Press, the Toronto Star, the BBC, National Public Radio, the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. Media lawyer Bert Bruser provided a perspective on the legal issues to consider in correcting and amending digital content.

## THE ISSUE

Accuracy, correcting errors when we are wrong and being transparent about correcting mistakes are vital to journalism's credibility. But how do these foundational principles of journalistic credibility play out in a digital context?

In a 2009 Nieman Reports paper "[Confessing errors in a digital age](#)", Scott R. Maier, associate professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon, argues that the speed of digital journalism and the reality of less pre-publishing scrutiny affects the accuracy of digital content.

"News accuracy is an age-old challenge, now heightened by online realities of real-time, multi-media reporting by citizens as well as professional journalists," Maier writes. "While it's not plausible or perhaps even desirable for every news error to be detected and corrected, clearly the profession – in print and online – can do better.

"The corrections system is often flawed in print journalism, but the checks and balances needed to ensure accuracy are arguably even more haphazard with the journalism that news organizations display online.

"A clear standard for handling online errors is lacking."

Maier's article cites the work of this committee's Craig Silverman, author of *Regret the Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech* and founder of the website, [regrettheerror.com](#). As quoted by Maier, Silverman contends that acknowledging inaccuracy is even more essential in the digital world because errors are "now forever" as they are cached online and spread worldwide through search engines and social media.

## **EMERGING BEST PRACTICES**

### **(1) Helping readers report errors**

Digital technology makes it easy to quickly update, edit and correct online content. Digital technology can also be used to make it relatively simple for audiences to report inaccuracies. To that end, Silverman is a co-founder of a new organization called the Report an Error Alliance, which encourages news organizations to create “Report an Error” links on all digital content.

Giving readers an easy way to report errors in effect makes every reader a fact checker and far more readers report errors now than ever before. At the Toronto Star, which has included a “Report an Error” link on all digital content since 2006, dozens of reader reports of possible error are investigated daily by the public editor’s office. (Kathy English, chair of the panel that authored the present report, is the Star’s current public editor.)

To enhance accuracy and also build reader engagement, the Washington Post’s 2011 website redesign included a corrections/feedback link on all content. The form asks readers to identify the type of error they believe they have spotted. It also asks: “How can we fix it?” and “What do we need to know to improve future stories on this topic?”

Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Times has begun experimenting with using social media to encourage readers to report errors through its Twitter site, “@Latimes correx.”

### **(2) Transparency in corrections**

How do news organizations respond when reports of errors in digital content are verified and require correction?

Generally, leading news organizations aim to correct significant online errors and to be transparent in telling readers what has been amended/corrected.

The New York Times, long an industry leader in vigorously and openly correcting its errors in print, both fixes and acknowledges its digital errors with the same vigor. “Our basic philosophy is if we make a factual error online, we need to both acknowledge the error and fix it in the copy,” says Phil Corbett, associate editor of standards. “That applies to everything from news articles to blog posts, regardless of how short a time the error appeared on the website.

Corbett says the key to online corrections at the Times is “that we should acknowledge the error – not just go back and quietly fix it hoping no one noticed. Someone has always noticed.”

In February 2010, The Canadian Press updated its corrections and correctives policy in recognition of the reality that the longtime wire service practice of issuing a “writethru” that corrected a story and including a non-publishable editor’s note explaining the mistake no longer serves readers who access the wire service’s content via the web or mobile devices.

CP now aims to be “up front about the fact that we got something wrong and have since corrected it.” Content is corrected within the text of the article and also includes a publishable note to readers spelling out precisely what was corrected. Example: “Note to readers: This is a corrected story. An earlier version misspelled Raphael Brunwiler’s last name.”

The BBC’s corrections policy addresses the issues related to amending and correcting breaking news stories in which information and facts “often emerge piecemeal and change as the story develops.”

Here, the BBC also aims for transparency in telling audiences when significant changes have occurred throughout the reporting process. “Where there is a significant change in the account we are giving, we should signal that by saying something like, ‘earlier reports had suggested that’ to indicate there has been a change in the account as new information has emerged.”

The BBC also acknowledges that significant errors, defined as those inaccuracies “which alter the sense of any part of the account” in both breaking and archived stories call for corrective measures that go beyond republishing an updated/corrected story.

When significant errors occur, the BBC stipulates that corrective notes are to be inserted in the corrected stories to spell out exactly what earlier versions of the story got wrong. Example: “This story has been amended since it was first published to make it clear that the voting site is not endorsed by Mr. Bieber’s record label Universal Music.”

The BBC’s s corrective principles also apply to video and audio content.

### **(3) Placement of corrections**

While there is agreement that online corrections should be communicated to audiences, there is little industry standard about where corrective notes should be placed when content has been corrected within the body of the article.

Some news organizations, such as the Toronto Star, generally place corrective notes at the top of articles. Others insert corrective notes at the bottom of stories and others within the content. Some publishing systems allow for “strike throughs” that strike out the inaccurate copy and insert the correct information.

Among the organizations studied for this report, NPR gives the most prominence to its corrective notes. NPR publishes corrective notes at the top of content in a shaded box so that readers are made aware of amendments to the article before they read.

A recent example may be found here:

<http://www.npr.org/2011/05/27/136712003/report-air-france-pilot-resting-as-plane-plunged>

## **THE LEGAL LANDSCAPE**

Bert Bruser’s detailed note regarding legal considerations to be considered in determining best practices for online corrections is appended. The two important points raised in the note are:

- Sometimes a correction is not enough.
- Sometimes a correction would make matters worse.

These legal considerations indicate the need for full and transparent measures in digital corrections when a serious libel has been published. Bruser’s note also indicates that there may be extenuating legal circumstances – such as violating a court-imposed publication ban – when it will indeed be necessary to delete (unpublish) digital content. In such cases, it may not be advisable to publish a correction.

## **RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES IN DIGITAL ACCURACY AND CORRECTIONS**

Accuracy and transparency are vital aspects of journalistic responsibility in all publishing platforms. Admitting mistakes can be embarrassing, but not admitting them can be more damaging to our credibility. Therefore we recommend the following practices.

### Transparency

- All verified factual errors in digital content should be corrected promptly.
- We should aim for transparency, telling audiences when digital content has been amended or corrected.
- While we should not “scrub” content, minor editing to correct spelling and grammar errors that do not alter the meaning of the content for the reader may be amended without including a corrective note.
- In correcting and amending developing content, particularly in a breaking news story in which sometimes contradictory facts will emerge over time, we should be transparent with audiences throughout the reporting process about what we know and when we know it. When there is a significant verified change in the information first published, subsequent files should

inform audiences about how the new information differs from what was first reported.

### Engaging Readers

- We should make it easy for audiences to report possible errors of fact and errors of omission in digital content by providing a mechanism for audiences to report errors.
- But readers are not always right. Changes to digital content should not be made as a result of readers' errors reports without verification.

### Timeliness

- We have the ability – and responsibility – to correct digital content as soon as we verify something is wrong and no matter how long ago it was published. There is no time limit on making things right.
- We generally do not unpublish content if we discover errors. In some rare circumstances, there may be legal reasons to delete digital content entirely. This is generally done on the advice of legal counsel.

### Placement

- When we verify factual errors in digital content, we should amend the copy to make it correct. In all but the most insignificant errors, we should also append a clearly visible note to the article to tell readers that the material was changed/edited/corrected from a previously published version and provide explicit details about what was corrected. For example: An earlier version of this article misstated the overnight price of a litre of gas as \$2.40.
- Legal circumstances can determine where corrective notes are placed within online content. Generally, retractions and apologies for legal reasons should be published promptly and displayed prominently at the top of content. In some cases, it may be necessary to publish retractions and apologies more conspicuously on a website's homepage to fulfill legal obligations.
- It should be easy for readers to find corrections. For instance, corrections may be captured on a prominent online Corrections page linked from a website's homepage. And, when errors of fact are discovered as a breaking story unfolds through several published versions, corrective notes may be appended to link initial less complete reports to the most complete/correct report.
- If inaccurate information is broadcast through social media such as Twitter and Facebook, audiences should be informed of the inaccuracy – and when possible given correct information – through those same channels as soon as the error is determined.

### Applying the same standards to all platforms

- The principles of accuracy and transparency apply to online, mobile, video and audio content as much as text and the practices recommended here with print in mind should be consistently adapted for other media forms.

- Corrections should be made in every platform in which the error was published.
- News organizations should seek to ensure consistency of information of news and information across all publishing platforms, including archives.

## **APPENDIX: THE LEGAL LANDSCAPE**

The following is lawyer Bert Bruser's note (February 2011) regarding legal considerations to be considered in determining best practices for online corrections.

### **SOMETIMES A CORRECTION IS NOT ENOUGH**

It is well-settled in Canadian law that if a newspaper receives a complaint that it published a libel and recognizes that it made a mistake or understands that it can't defend itself in a libel action, it will publish what is called a retraction, sometimes together with an apology. Publication of such a retraction can greatly reduce and often eliminate any damages that might be awarded.

To accomplish this, the retraction must be:

- Full and fair.
- Published within three days (at least in Ontario) after receiving the libel notice.
- In as conspicuous a place as the original libel.

(The rules vary in different provinces, but the thrust is the same. Similar concepts apply to broadcasts).

Most newspapers have a place in the paper for publishing such retractions, usually Page 2. The theory is that this page is as conspicuous a place as any other page in the paper, with the exception of Page 1. When more prominence is required, retractions are often put in a box or highlighted on the page in some other way. Rarely, if the libel is published on the front page, so too will the retraction.

So how does this apply to a serious libel published on a newspaper's website?

For example, if the story has been up on the website for an hour or so before the complaint is received, the temptation might be to delete the defamatory statement on the website, or correct it, and carry on. This is not sufficient to meet the legal requirement that a full and fair retraction be published.

So what to do? How should retractions and apologies be handled on websites?

Where on websites should they be published? For how long should they be left up?

Neither the courts nor the legislatures in this country have yet attempted to answer these kinds of questions.

Sometimes a correction would make matters worse

Occasionally a publication on a website will:

- a) breach a court-imposed publication ban;
- b) violate a Criminal Code (or other statutory) prohibition against publication; or
- c) be so potentially prejudicial to an accused's fair trial rights as to amount to contempt of court.

Examples of each are:

- a) A court has ordered a ban on publication of what happens at a bail hearing. A newspaper nevertheless publishes an account of the proceedings on its website.
- b) A newspaper publishes the name or other information that identifies a 17-year-old charged with a crime, in violation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act.
- c) During a jury trial, in which a judge has ruled that an accused's confession is inadmissible as evidence, a newspaper nevertheless publishes on its website a statement that the accused has confessed.

In all of these cases, in my view, the story should be deleted (unpublished) from the website immediately. But should any a correction be published? Drawing attention to the mistake in these circumstances will usually just makes things worse.