

Excellence in Online Journalism

Exploring Current Practices in an Evolving Environment

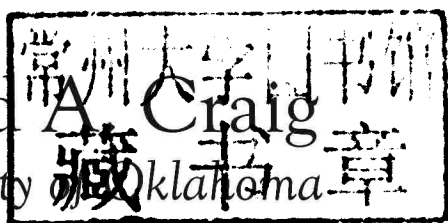


David A. Craig

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Preface

It does not take long to find examples of poorly done online journalism or to find critics eager to point those examples out. But this book is based on the belief that it is more valuable for students preparing for the field to see good examples and to think about what excellent work looks like. Like the technologies that support it, the craft of online journalism is evolving quickly. That makes excellence a moving target. But it is a target rooted in a longer history of high-quality journalism.

This book lets students hear from thoughtful practitioners—more than 30 of them—about what excellence in online journalism looks like and how they are pursuing it despite many challenges such as staffing limits, intense competition, and the complex nature of the medium itself. The book also places the evolution of online journalism in a broader context of how the standards of journalism are changing while maintaining common ground with the best traditions of old media. The work is built on the author's experience past and present interviewing more than 100 online and newspaper journalists about the details of their thinking and their best work.

It is a challenge for instructors in online journalism courses to cover both concepts and technical skills effectively. This book is not a technical manual, and plenty of those are available. It will complement more nuts-and-bolts treatments of online work by showing how professionals think about elements of online journalism and provide specific models of excellence to which students can apply their technical skills. With the maturing of online journalism and instruction in this area, it is likely that courses will continue to become more conceptually sophisticated and that quality expectations for student work will grow. These changes make the book more valuable for the combination of concepts and examples it provides.

Although this book discusses online journalism using an ethical framework, it treats ethics differently from both other online journalism books and most textbooks in media ethics. It does not ignore ethical dilemmas. In fact, boxed features in several chapters look at difficult choices in areas such as use of sensitive archived content, where to draw the line on inflammatory user comments, and how to handle reporting of unconfirmed information. But the book, building on the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and journalism ethicists Sandra Borden and Edmund Lambeth, takes readers beyond individual dilemmas to show how choices to pursue excellence in specific projects help to reshape the understanding of excellence in journalism more broadly. It provides a rich perspective on the development of excellence in the field and what stands in the way. It will help students view powerful tools like social media and interactive graphics for what they can contribute to the development of excellent journalism, not just their value in isolation.

The book also offers a distinctive perspective on how the choices of individual journalists in their daily work can lead to excellent journalism even in a time of stress in the profession. Unlike many discussions of media ethics, it emphasizes personal qualities, or virtues, not codes or rules. These qualities show themselves in on-the-job profiles of four journalists as they face daily challenges and in discussion across several chapters. This emphasis on personal character is important in the current unstable and rapidly changing environment of journalism.

The author developed this book out of a passion for excellence in journalism built on a career first as a newspaper copy editor, then as a teacher of editing helping prepare students for work in print and online media. This project also draws on nearly 20 years studying ethics in journalism and years of teaching students about journalism ethics across media platforms. The author's desire is to help strengthen the future practice of journalism—with respect for both new and old ideas and for the greater purposes of the practice in society.

❖ ANCILLARIES

An author-hosted companion website provides links to examples of online journalism work discussed in each chapter. It will also point readers to new examples of excellence, providing updated material for classroom discussion. Visit the companion site at www.sagepub.com/craigstudy.

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A number of others helped me shape this project to make it more useful to students and instructors. My colleague at Oklahoma, Julie Jones, offered invaluable perspective. I am also grateful for the feedback from a number of reviewers: Timothy E. Bajkiewicz (University of South Florida), Bernhard Debatin (Ohio University), Eileen Gilligan (SUNY Oswego), Steven D. Koski (College of Saint Elizabeth), Mindy McAdams (University of Florida), Kathy Olson (Lehigh University), Al Tompkins (The Poynter Institute), and Michael Williams (University of Kansas).

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Brief Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Excellence Online: A Work in Progress	5
Chapter 2: An Ethical Lens for Looking at Excellence	13
Chapter 3: Speed and Accuracy With Depth in Breaking News	25
Chapter 4: Comprehensiveness in Content	55
Chapter 5: Open-Endedness in Story Development	89
Chapter 6: The Centrality of Conversation	117
Chapter 7: Beyond the Big Guys: Independent and Community Journalism Online	143
Chapter 8: The Future of Excellence in Online Journalism: Living in the World of Both-And	167
Index	175
About the Author	179

Detailed Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Excellence Online: A Work in Progress	5
Excellence in Old and New Media	6
Excellence Online: Four Developing Standards	7
<i>Speed and Accuracy With Depth in</i>	
<i>Breaking News: Chapter 3</i>	9
<i>Comprehensiveness in Content: Chapter 4</i>	9
<i>Open-Endedness in Story Development: Chapter 5</i>	10
<i>The Centrality of Conversation: Chapter 6</i>	11
Chapter 2: An Ethical Lens for Looking at Excellence	13
A Practice: The Social Context	15
<i>Telos</i> : The Big-Picture Goal	16
Internal Goods: Distinctive Achievements of the Practice	18
Standards of Excellence: Setting the Bar for the Field	19
Virtues: The Qualities of Good Character	21
External Goods and Institutions: Danger Lurking	21
Chapter 3: Speed and Accuracy With	
Depth in Breaking News	25
The Battle to Be Fast and Right: An Old	
Challenge With New Pressures	26
Insights From Online Journalists:	
Giving Voice to a Standard	31
Breaking News Through an Ethical Lens	33

Online Excellence in Development:	
The Hudson River Jet Landing	35
Challenges to Maintaining and Enhancing Excellence	38
<i>Time Pressures and Competition</i>	38
<i>Staffing Limitations and a "Fire Hose" of Content</i>	45
Overcoming the Challenges: Virtues in Action	48
On-the-Job Profile: Mark Stevenson	
Facing the Daily Challenges	50
Chapter 4: Comprehensiveness in Content	55
Insights From Online Journalists: What	
Comprehensiveness Means	57
<i>Overarching Elements</i>	58
<i>Strengths of Forms</i>	64
<i>Comprehensiveness Through an Ethical Lens</i>	76
Challenges to Comprehensiveness	77
<i>Time and Staffing Pressures</i>	78
<i>Nature of the Medium</i>	79
Overcoming the Challenges: Virtues in Action	80
On-the-Job Profile: Jenni Pinkley Facing	
the Daily Challenges	82
Chapter 5: Open-Endedness in Story Development	89
Excellence in Story Development Online	90
<i>Multiple Stages in Line With Life Span</i>	91
<i>Public Contributions Are Integral</i>	93
<i>Critical Eye, Respect for the Public</i>	97
The Dynamic of Excellence	104
Challenges to Excellence in Story Development:	
External Goods Lurking	107
Attitude Check: Virtues for 21st-Century Journalists	108
On-the-Job Profile: Robert Quigley	
Facing the Daily Challenges	109
Chapter 6: The Centrality of Conversation	117
A Longtime Value Takes Center Stage	118
Standards of Excellence in Online Conversation	121
<i>Blogs</i>	122
<i>Discussion Forums</i>	128
<i>Social Media</i>	131

The Dynamic of Excellence in Conversation	132
Now for the Challenges: Stumbling Blocks in the “Conversational Commons”	134
Virtue and Conversation	137
On-the-Job Profile: Eric Zorn Facing the Daily Challenges	138
Chapter 7: Beyond the Big Guys: Independent and Community Journalism Online	143
Perspectives From Three Smaller Organizations	145
<i>Roanoke.com</i>	145
<i>QuincyNews.org</i>	149
<i>West Seattle Blog</i>	152
<i>The Smaller Organizations in Perspective</i>	159
Citizen Journalism, Social Media, and Journalism as a Practice	160
<i>The Role of Professional Journalists Versus Citizens</i>	160
<i>The Role of Cooperative Activity</i>	162
<i>The Purpose of the Site</i>	163
Chapter 8: The Future of Excellence in Online Journalism: Living in the World of Both-And	167
The World of Both-And	168
<i>A Critical Journalistic Eye and Respect for Citizen Contributions</i>	169
<i>Complex and Simple Communication Forms on Big and Small Devices</i>	170
<i>Big and Small Organizations as Places Where Excellent Work Develops</i>	171
<i>For-Profit and Nonprofit Business Models</i>	172
What It Takes to Work in the World of Both-And	172
Index	175
About the Author	179

Introduction

Thoughtful journalists in both old and new media push hard to surpass the minimum standards of the craft and produce work that is worthy of respect. But maintaining high standards is difficult because of the pressures on individual journalists and organizations in an era of economic change and upheaval. In the online world, what excellent journalism means is evolving as the roles of professional journalists and users become increasingly intertwined and as online journalists keep experimenting to find the best ways to tell stories and engage audiences.

Journalists who produce online content labor amid multiple challenges:

- How to maintain standards of fairness, completeness, and accuracy in the face of competition from other news sites and people's expectations that they will get information online immediately.
- How to make the most of the online medium's capacity for depth and breadth in storytelling with limited time and staff, and the challenge of unifying disparate parts of a story including video, audio, photos, graphics, and text.
- How to develop excellent stories that meld the contributions of journalists—or those traditionally defined as journalists—and users.
- How to foster conversation and community through blogs, forums, and social media.

This book focuses on what excellent online journalism looks like in an era of rapid change in the media industry and in communication technology. The discussion draws on interviews with more than

30 writers, editors, and producers in online news organizations and dozens of examples of strong work. The primary goal is to inspire future online journalists to pursue their craft at a high standard of quality and help them identify the challenges that stand in the way. This book will also help media scholars and critics better understand the connection between ethics and excellence and more critically evaluate the work and practices of online journalism.

The focus of the book is on work from four news organizations: msnbc.com, washingtonpost.com, WSJ.com (*Wall Street Journal Online*), and NYTimes.com. These four are among the largest web news organizations in staffing and audience. Their work has been recognized for excellence through awards from journalism organizations such as the Online News Association. Many of the journalists who work for them are experienced in both new and old media, so they bring a valuable perspective on standards and challenges in online journalism.

But the biggest outlets don't have a monopoly on good work, and they are not immune to problems and mistakes. Excellent work in online journalism comes from all sizes of organizations. Some of the best work has flowed from news organizations in midsize cities, small community sites, and independent operations. Profiles of some talented journalists at organizations of several sizes will showcase their good work and the challenges they face.

The discussion in the book builds on foundational interviews with writers, editors, and producers at the four large news organizations in 2007. Follow-ups with a number of these since then, along with new interviews with several talented journalists at large and small operations in 2009 and 2010, provide additional insight on developments in the practice. Examples come from the work of these journalists and others over the last several years—both well-known examples that shaped future thinking in the field and lesser-known ones that highlight elements of excellence.

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for the rest of the book by looking at the meaning of excellence in journalism and introducing four elements of online excellence: speed and accuracy with depth in breaking news, comprehensiveness in content, open-endedness in story development, and the centrality of conversation. Chapter 2 sets out an ethical model that sheds light on how practices such as journalism evolve or deteriorate. The model is based on the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and journalism ethicists Sandra Borden and Edmund Lambeth. The chapter lays out a central theme: that the practice of journalism is developing in ways that encompass old challenges and possibilities but also redefine them.

The focus turns in Chapters 3 through 6 to an in-depth look at the four elements of online excellence. These four developing standards provide a framework for better understanding what excellence in online journalism means. Comments from the journalists and insights from the ethical model introduced in Chapter 2 help to clarify how standards of excellence in new media are like the standards of old media but build on them in distinctive ways, what challenges make it difficult to do high-quality work, and what personal qualities are needed to achieve excellence despite them. Each of these chapters includes numerous examples to help make the discussion specific. The work is wide ranging, encompassing breaking news stories, multimedia projects, blogs, forums, and social media. An on-the-job profile at the end of each chapter shows how one online journalist faces daily challenges and juggles responsibilities.

Chapter 7 focuses on excellence in smaller mainstream websites and independent ones including citizen journalism initiatives and independent blogs. Chapter 8 looks to challenges that are likely to continue into the future of online journalism in a complex and changing environment.

1

Excellence Online

A Work in Progress



Journalists take a beating every day for their ethics and their competence. Bloggers on the left and right criticize decisions by mainstream media outlets. Critics on radio and television call into question the fairness of news coverage. Much of the public deeply doubts the trustworthiness of reporters and editors (Kohut et al., 2009).

While bad news and opinions about journalists spread rapidly, good journalists at hundreds of large and small news organizations strive for excellence in the face of growing financial pressures and often shrinking resources.

This chapter will:

- Show how excellence is an important but shifting concept in journalism.
- Introduce four elements of excellence in online journalism based on interviews with journalists. These four elements will be the focus of discussion of online journalists' work in the next several chapters.

❖ EXCELLENCE IN OLD AND NEW MEDIA

It has never been easy to do excellent journalism, but news people and news organizations have been thinking about excellence for a long time. From the early 20th century, the professionalization of journalism brought increasing attention to the value of high standards of quality. The founding of journalism schools such as the University of Missouri highlighted an interest in training future journalists to pursue their craft with greater skill and understanding. The creation of journalism professional organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists and Women in Communications in 1909 (Gallagher, 1998) started drawing together journalists with an interest in increasing the quality of work in the field. Numerous journalism organizations articulated standards through codes of ethics—among them, in the 1920s, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the National Association of Broadcasters, and the SPJ (Ferré, 1998). A number of publications critically reviewing journalism appeared in the mid-20th century, including *Nieman Reports* in 1947 and *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1961, and continued in later decades to raise important questions about practices in the field (Bertrand, 1998).

The nature of excellence in journalism is evolving with the development of online journalism. In 2004, looking back at previous research about journalism quality, sociologist and newspaper researcher Leo Bogart wrote:

American editors and journalists share a fairly broad consensus on what constitutes excellence in the press. When experienced news people are asked what makes for quality, a number of words and phrases inevitably surface: integrity, fairness, balance, accuracy, comprehensiveness, diligence in discovery, authority, breadth of coverage, variety of content, reflection of the entire home community, vivid writing, attractive makeup, packaging or appearance, and easy navigability. In the American tradition, but not always accepted elsewhere, is the clear differentiation of reporting and opinion. (2004, p. 40)

At the core of journalistic excellence is strong reporting and storytelling, as recognized in the field through a variety of awards. For example, the Pulitzer Prizes, first awarded in 1917, have honored powerful investigative pieces and other in-depth reporting, heart-rending feature stories, and gripping photography (The Pulitzer Prizes, n.d.). Other awards such as the Edward R. Murrow Awards of the Radio Television Digital News Association recognize news and feature reporting in broadcast journalism (Awards—Edward R. Murrow Awards, n.d.).