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New Possibilities, New Obligations

Ethical Use of the Read/Write Web

For nearly a decade the web was a read-only affair for educators and students. Information moved only one way: from the publishers to the consumers. In recent years, though, things have changed. It is now as easy to create online content as it is to consume it. Anyone can publish, share, and change information as easily as they can view and download it. There is now a read/write web, or a two-way web—what some are calling “Web 2.0.”

Blogs, wikis, and other read/write web services give educators and students a new power to create, but with this comes a new responsibility to use these tools ethically. Some guidance can be found by looking to existing norms, particularly those of academic honesty, ethical journalism, and online etiquette (or netiquette). Norms specifically related to the read/write web are also beginning to emerge, especially with respect to blogs.

Some fundamental ethical principles will be evident to most educators and many students. Intellectual property rights should be respected and copyright law adhered to. Copyrighted material should never be posted online without proper permission. (Even if the material being posted is shared under a creative commons license, consideration must be given to the specific license in use and to issues such as attribution and derivative use.)

Because of the ease of cutting, pasting, and posting, the read/write web can also easily become a medium for plagiarism. Credit must be given where credit is due. Direct quotes should appear in quotation marks (or as block quotes) and sources must be cited – and linked to if at all possible. Of course, the standards of originality and common knowledge still apply; if the writing is completely original or is common knowledge (within the field the author

is writing in), then a citation is not required. Writing online is (almost always) public writing, and as such honesty and integrity are always important.

As for the content of blogs, wikis, and other related sites, inappropriate topics should be avoided, particularly in an educational setting. It is easy for students to post the very content educators are legally bound to protect them from. Educators must make every effort (in good faith) to help stu-

dents see the importance of restraint when they write online, especially for classroom purposes. One side effect of students’ new power to publish is that some are posting threatening content. Teachers should discuss with students the natural (and disciplinary) consequences of this cyber-bullying. Students might also share unsafe information online, putting themselves, their friends, or their families at risk. In general, teachers should let students know not to share

THE TECHNOLOGIES

- **Blogs**, or weblogs, allow the author to easily create and easily update interactive multimedia websites. If you can use email, you can blog. Blogs are generally updated often, even daily, with the newest items typically appearing at the top of the page, and older items moving down before being archived. Most blogs allow visitors to comment on the site. Visit <www.edublogs.org> for a free educational blog.
- **Wikis** are websites that allow any visitor to edit the content. If you can use a word processor, you can use a wiki. CUE members can visit <www.wikispaces.com/t/x/cue/> to join a free educational wiki.
- **Social Bookmarking** is a means of storing, annotating, and sharing bookmarks online. Most services also allow users to classify, rank, and search bookmarks, particularly through the use of keyword-like tags. Visit <www.FURL.net> or <del.icio.us/> to start social bookmarking for free.

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any personal information such as their address or phone number online. (Without parent permission, students also should not be sharing their names or other identifying information online.)

The norms of academic honesty provide additional principles that users of the read/write web should consider. Just as multiple submissions (of one paper in two classes) are unacceptable in school, cross posting the same material to different sites on the web is generally frowned upon. (Consider linking to the original source instead.) As with exams or any other assignment, if students are expected to complete online work independently, they should not violate their teacher's expectations simply because the technologies make it easy to share and duplicate work. Ideally, of course, teachers will give assignments that require collaboration rather than forbid it. Only then will these technologies reach their full potential as educational tools. Along with online publishing for the masses, the read/write web has ushered in an era of citizen journalism (and citizen law enforcement). The two-way nature of the web even makes distributed (or participatory) journalism possible as well. Not surprisingly, the ethics of journalism can offer some guidance in the use of these technologies, particularly blogs. Those who write online should strive for objectivity, or at least be aware of their own bias and make it explicit to their readers. Also, they should always disclose their sources, being sure to identify questionable or biased sources, and should link to their sources if possible. As far as the accuracy and authenticity of what is written, facts should be checked through traditional means such as first-hand observations, interviews, or identifying multiple sources. Educators and students who write online should also give consideration to issues such as slander and libel, and should take to heart the journalists' principle of limiting the harm done by what they write. Here privacy issues come into play; with the exception of public figures who seek power or attention, individuals' privacy should not be violated unless for the greater good. In addition, anyone writing online should not take gifts or money to bias what they write and should always disclose any conflicts of interest. Ultimately, those who write online should strive for the same sort of balance, fairness, and completeness in what they write as do journalists.

LINKS

Creative Commons Licensing:

<www.creativecommons.org>

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism:

<depts.washington.edu/grading/issue1/honesty.htm>

Ethics of Online Journalism:

<www.ojr.org/ojr/wiki/ethics/>, <www.journalism.org/resources/tools/ethics/codes/newfrontier.asp>, and <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journalistic_ethics>

Netiquette:

<www.albionl.com/netiquette/corerules.html>

Blogging Ethics:

<www.cyberjournalist.net/news/000215.php>, <rebeccablood.net/handbook/excerpts/weblog_ethics.html>, and <blogethics2004.blogspot.com/2005/03/cobe-revised-form-based-duties-in-blog.html>

The Web 1.0 has given rise to a variety of ethical principles that are no less relevant in the Web 2.0 era. Users of blogs, wikis, and other read/write web services should avoid generating spam, or unsolicited bulk messages. Spam is no longer confined to email, but can appear in the comments of a blog, or in the main body of a blog post or wiki page. Also, educators and students should strive for ad free pages as much as possible, but if there must be advertisements, they should be tastefully placed in a side column or at the bottom of the site. Ads should not appear in the body of a blog post or in an RSS feed. In

addition, the established rules of netiquette apply to the read/write web. In general, users should be as polite online as they would be in real life (or more so), and should always respect others' time, privacy, and bandwidth.


A number of ethical norms have emerged around the practice of blogging in particular. For example, if the information being written about exists online, link to it. If a blogger is going to re-present content from another site, then that content should appear in a block quote. Bloggers should also promote interactivity as much as possible. To this end, they should post regularly (but not so often as to be annoying to the

readers), they should comment on others' blogs frequently, and they should always attempt to be entertaining, interesting, or relevant when doing so. Bloggers should also promote free expression by not restricting access to their blog, by not censoring (or deleting) their own posts or others' comments, and by always allowing and encouraging comments on their own blogs. (A corollary to this principle is the suggestion that bloggers should always post deliberately, and only add to, but not change or delete, a finished post.) Perhaps most importantly, a blogger should always admit mistakes and correct them publicly. The practice of revealing unethical behavior in other bloggers is also generally accepted as an important part of blogging. As in the netiquette of the past decade, it is beneficial to remember the human behind the blogs. Bloggers can promote community by linking to others often and by maintaining a blogroll, or list of other related blogs, on their own sites. They can also build their relationships with other bloggers by responding to comments (and emails) left on their own blogs. Naturally, these principles of blogging can be applied to wikis, social bookmarking, and other read/write web services as well. **Continued on pg 15**




Subscription databases are another safe and reliable source of information. Both school and public libraries subscribe to a variety of databases. Public libraries make these resources available through any computer with Internet access. The user simply logs in using the number on their library card. Specific resources vary among different library systems, but all have resources appropriate for younger readers, as well as teen and adult researchers. Visit your local public library branch and speak to a reference librarian to learn more about how to use these free resources.

If students need additional resources, indexes and directories provide a selection of resources chosen by librarians or by volunteers with expertise in specific areas. Although there are a limited number of topics and limited resources within each topic, indexes and directories have the advantage that all of the articles have been pre-screened by someone with more expertise than most teachers and students. The websites of extremist organizations and other dangerous sites are excluded from indexes and directories. Great places to start for middle and high school are the Librarian's Index <lii.org>, and for elementary students, Yahoo!igans <www.yahooligans.com>, Kidsclick <www.kidsclick.org>, and Ask for Kids, formerly known as Ask Jeeves, <www.askforkids.com>.

Visit the CTAP IV website to find additional resources and classroom ready handouts for students on how to write and research a topic. 

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Ultimately, ethical use of these powerful tools will be easiest if writers know their audience and their purpose for writing. Arguably, the moral imperative to contribute ethically is greater the larger the audience, and while many educators and students may be writing for a relatively small audience, any site online has the potential for a global audience. Many of these technologies, especially wikis, rely on the fact that the "white-hats" outnumber the "black-hats" by orders of magnitude. Educators must work with their students to ensure that this remains true. Finally, the best advice for ensuring ethical use of the read/write web may be to reflect on what is being written, and to edit it critically, before posting it. 

Mark Wagner, a former high school English teacher, has served as an educational technology coordinator at the site, district, and county levels. He is the president of the Educational Technology and Life Corporation, which provides training and consulting services to schools and districts. He also serves on CUE's Communication and Conference Planning Committees.

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