



# CT SPJ J-Bird



Volume 1, Issue 1

## The Naked Truth

Fall 2009

### Dealing with story comments on the web

By Jodie Mozdzer

INDIANAPOLIS - Whether you think they are the "grand canyon of bad journalism" or a great way to engage readers in lively debate, the comment boards at the end of online news articles have become ingrained in the culture of Internet news.

So how should news organizations handle these comments? That was the topic of a lively discussion at the 2009 national Society of Professional Journalists convention in August. Newspapers handle comments differently: Some, for example, have a completely hands-off approach and allow an outside company to handle story comments. Others monitor all com-



Dennis Ryerson, Robert Steele and Kevin Finch discuss how different news organizations handle online comments on Web sites at the 2009 SPJ Conference in Indianapolis.

ments that are posted on the Web site.

Indianapolis Star editor Dennis Ryerson, one of three panelists at the session "Where to Stand on Standards," said he'd like to see comment boards on

stories treated like a moderated debate among readers. "I'd like to see a moderator do a rolling conversation as issues come up," Ryerson said, describing that job as a sort-of "talk show host." But that (Con't page 4)

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#### Local Calendar

- Oct. 8: Ethan Bronner: Israel & Palestine, What Happens Now. Central CT State University, CSU, Vance Hall, Rm 105, 5 p.m.
- Oct. 17-18: IRE presents "Ethical Media Watchdog Workshop" - Washington D.C.
- Oct. 22: Talk by Anthony Flint, former Boston Globe reporter on his book. Northeastern University, Boston
- Nov. 6: Financial Leadership Forum 2009. Quinnipiac University
- Nov. 13-14: Journalism And The New Media Ecology: Who Will Pay The Messengers? Yale University
- To obtain contact information for these events, please visit the CTSPJ Web site at [www.CTSPJ.org](http://www.CTSPJ.org)

### SPJ chastises Hartford Courant

INDIANAPOLIS - The SPJ Ethics Committee released a statement regarding the Hartford Courant's admission of using other newspapers' stories without attributing credit. The statement issued by the committee: The Hartford Courant has acknowledged using stories from other Connecticut newspapers recently without giving them credit. The director of content has apologized and vowed the mistake won't be repeated. The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists plainly exhorts

newspapers and journalists, "Never plagiarize." When a newspaper invests reporting and editing time to produce a story, that story should not be used by another outlet without permission and without informing readers who actually did the work. Many media outlets aggregate information online, summarizing a story and then linking to the original. The Courant failed to carry the credit from its online version to its print version. "However it happened, the Courant violated funda-

mental standards," said Andy Schotz, the chairman of SPJ's Ethics Committee. "This was theft." Integrity and credibility, two of the most important values in journalism, demand that all media outlets be clear about the source of stories they did not produce. Failure to follow that guideline results in plagiarism, taking credit for someone else's work, as it did in this case. For help in making ethical decisions, consult the Society's Code of Ethics.

## Jerry Dunklee: 'Ethics To Go'

Is that headline a double entendre? Does it mean fast ethics for busy, working journalists? Or does it mean traditional ethics are often eroded when serious economic problems hit the business? Would it be clear if it were hyphenated: "Ethics-To-Go?"

How we tease a story, in broadcast, and how we write headlines in print and online, matters.

The SPJ Ethics Code states the obvious:

"Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context."

All of us have written headlines or teases that did more to confuse than enlighten. In a busy newsroom that can happen. It can happen more easily when we are short-staffed and pressured at deadline. But that's not an excuse. Misleading headlines or teases are poor journalism. When done intentionally, to sensationalize or titillate, they erode the public's faith in what we do. Journalists should be especially careful with teases. We've all seen examples:

"Fiery crash on the interstate," screams the tease over some video of flames. "Update at 5." When the story is aired we discover it's about a



tanker crash in Houston. It has nothing to do with any highway in Connecticut. This kind of tease, which promises, but doesn't deliver, is a classic "bait and switch." It's unethical because it misrepresents the news by implication. It's intentionally designed to play on our fears and legitimate local concerns about safety on our roads. If a thoughtful viewer stays long enough to find out the real story is from Houston, they will be irritated at the obvious manipulation.

There are legal problems that arise from teases and headlines too. It's possible to libel someone in just a few words. But most of our concern is ethical. We need to be cautious about oversimplification and keeping our words in context.

Advice: Write it. Read it out loud. Think about what it means. Try to get one or two others to read it. That's usually possible for heads and teases. Then adjust if it's misleading or a double entendre. If we are careful one meaning of the above headline will not be true.

Jerry Dunklee, Professor of Journalism at Southern Connecticut State University and Member of the Board of Directors of CTSPJ.

"How we tease a story, in broadcast, and how we write headlines in print and online, matters."

## Kevin Smith to head up SPJ

INDIANAPOLIS - The Society of Professional Journalists installed its new president, Kevin Z. Smith, assistant professor of journalism at Fairmont



State University. He replaces Dave Aeikens. "We are at the cusp of the next century of this organization," Smith said. "I have tremendous feelings, and very excited feelings to see

young faces in the crowd - they are the leadership for the next years and the next decades."

One of Smith's goals for the year is to make SPJ a leader in discussing the future of the profession. He believes SPJ should drive and be at the center of conversations about new business models, transitioning into other mediums and, most importantly, how to help journalists grow in and keep their careers. But it is not just shop talk. Smith encourages all members to take an active role in the mission. For example, while still serving as president-elect, he instituted a task force that will look into combining resources to assist displaced journalists.

"I know the importance of this office to you and to the thousands of members who are not here tonight, and also to the journalists who know our place in the arena of journalism and of our democracy," Smith said.

## CTSPJ: Join us and support your profession today

By Jamie Deloma

NEW BRITAIN - The Connecticut chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists has made it easier than ever to stay abreast of the latest news and information that affects the journalism industry.

We hope you will join in the conversation on our Facebook, Twitter and WordPress accounts, as well as regularly visit our Web site. The new platforms allow for a regular dialogue among members and officers.

Have you come across an interesting story that affects journalists in our region? Now you could post it on our Facebook or WordPress accounts or tweet it to us at anytime and instantly start a dynamic conversation. Information about our contests, scholarships, hall of fame and annual dinner are posted there before anywhere else. There are also audio slideshows, information about future events and contact information for all of our officers.

You could even begin the process of renewing your membership right from our homepage. I encourage you to visit our Web site at CTSPJ.org.

Jamie Deloma is CTSPJ vice president



## James H. Smith: 'Putting our biases aside in news'



Yet another poll on media bias came out last week with the media once again taking it on the chin. The Sacred Heart University survey showed that only one-quarter

of the respondents believe all or most national reporting and 83.6 percent saw national news media organizations as very or somewhat biased. The poll focused on cable and broadcast media and, quite frankly, I think television news has done nothing but go downhill since David Brinkley and Walter Cronkite, two absolute pros, left their anchor seats to lesser souls a generation ago.

The babble on the cable networks, trying to fill 24 hours a day with "news," all too often exaggerates small events into nationwide traumas and the talking heads and screamers with microphones deadens our sense about what is objective reporting; what is true? News and opinion blend too often on the boob tube.

The sad thing, maybe alarming thing, is that our reaction to national hype on screens in our living rooms can increase our wariness over what we read in the daily newspaper.

I for one have always tried to get the message out that to reporters with pens and typewriters (now keyboards), credibility in pursuing the truth is paramount.

I read with some interest comments on local news site blogs recently that it is hard for "local media" to be politi-

cally biased. Local issues aren't conservative or liberal. There is a good deal of truth in that thought. But then the same commenter said he/she didn't appreciate our "liberal" report on New Britain schools.

I believe the story in question was about how the school system was coping with dozens of different languages spoken in the schools. How anyone can think that is a liberal (or conservative) story is beyond me. It was a story explaining how teachers teach and students learn when the kids don't speak English.

It is a daunting challenge that the school district is tackling with creativity and commitment.

There are those who will never give up their belief in a biased press. Consider that we all read news stories through our own filters, we come at a story from our own point of view. The thing is, it is readers who are biased — and that's OK.

Human beings a subjective, we are who we are because of our upbringing, our environment, our genes. We all have our own biases, political and otherwise.

There are times we must put them aside, when for example, we serve on a jury we are instructed to listen to only the evidence in deciding someone's guilt or innocence. And we have confidence that our judicial system works with an impartial jury.

If we grow up to be a research scientist we know we have to put our as-

sumptions and beliefs aside and discover new knowledge based on real information developed through painstaking inquiry.

That's what journalists do. We put our own biases aside trying to get to the truth of what we are covering. And I think we do it well.

The reporters, photographers and editors in our local newsrooms are professionals working under a code of ethics that forbids bias in covering the news.

In four decades I have worked in newsrooms all over Connecticut peopled with Christians, Jews, Muslims, whites, blacks, Latinos, Asians, conservatives, libertarians, liberals and none of them took their reporters notebooks with them on a story with anything on their minds beyond trying to get it accurately, fairly and write it was well as they can.

We never tell someone to go out and

write a liberal story or a conservative story. It simply is not in our lexicon. I think readers confuse the opinion pages with the news pages and then label the paper that way. Editorial pages are indeed opinion writing as

are the opposite pages (op-ed) with columnists.

We try to balance the opinion columnists in my paper — for instance, Bill Collins, unabashedly liberal on state issues, and Chris Powell, hard to pigeon hole, but not (Con't page 4)

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## Online journalism course offered in December

How to be an Entrepreneur as a Business Journalist — Free week-long event

The free, weeklong "How to be an Entrepreneur as a Business Journalist" Webinar will teach you how to use your skills to make a living outside mainstream media. Freelancer Maya Smart and "Ask-the Recruiter" blogger Joe Grimm will teach the five-hour course.

Taught one hour a day from Dec. 7-11, the interactive course covers the nuts and bolts of setting up a business from legal and accounting questions to branding and marketing yourself. A highlight of the week will be a live chat held by Joe Grimm and five successful business journalists turned entrepreneurs. Even if you have no plans to go into business for yourself, you will benefit from learning about

your options and how to brand yourself in your current job.

Start Date: 12/7/2009

End Date: 12/11/2009

Event URL: <http://www.businessjournalism.org/seminars/2009/entrepreneur1207/>

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Smith—from page 3

but not unafraid to wax conservative on state issues.

But the news pages are for fair and accurate reporting and I think readers can tell the difference. The good news in the Sacred Heart survey is that two-thirds, 64.1 percent, agreed that the health of our democracy is directly tied to the health of journalism.

Newspapers are still here, necessarily developing our own Web sites in the digital age, but journalism — the writing craft devoted to pursuing the truth and keeping public officialdom

honest — cannot go away, otherwise democracy will go away.

James H. Smith is executive editor of The New Britain Herald and The Bristol Press

We're On The Web  
[WWW.CTSPJ.ORG](http://WWW.CTSPJ.ORG)

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Questions about your membership?  
Call the SPJ office at (317) 927-8000, ext. 200 or send an e-mail to [membership@spj.org](mailto:membership@spj.org).



## Connecticut Chapter, Society of Professional Journalists

Mozdzer—from page 1

solution most often can't happen because of diminishing manpower at newspapers. With the thousands of comments posted at most daily newspaper sites, it could take a full time employee just to handle the single task of sorting through them all.

At the Star, for example, there are about 100,000 comments are posted each month, Ryerson said.

### Legal Issues

Some papers have taken the hands-off approach to comments for several years to avoid legal actions taken against the paper.

Many papers interpreted the Communications Decency Act of 1996 as allowing internet chats and comment

boards to be considered public forums. Once newspapers start editing comments, they take liability for the content. Those papers feared the consequences of that liability but leaving the comment boards to fester on their own has created a much bigger problem, panelists said.

"The reality is it's turned into much more diatribe than dialogue," said panelist Bob Steele, a former ethics faculty member at the Poynter Institute, now a visiting journalism professor at DePauw University.

"I think it's one of the worst problems in American journalism," Steele said. Should newspapers step in?

Newspapers have allowed comment boards to run rampant for reasons beyond legal concerns, Steele said.

First, newspaper leaders have been urged by Internet experts that allowing a "marketplace of ideas" to exist online is in the true journalist spirit, he said. And comments often bring page views, which news sites want. But newspapers have started to realize the unmonitored comment boards aren't always the best answer.

Panelist Kevin Finch, former news director for WISH-TV in Indianapolis and now a Web producer and writer for Calamari.com, said newspapers have to view their Internet comment boards as a "brand extension."

The panelists didn't have conclusive answers on the best practice.

Jodie Mozdzer is CTSPJ treasurer