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Does an **Editors Pencil** Ruina Web Log?

BYLINE: By MICHAEL FALCONE

BODY:

Is a blog still a blog if someone else edits it? A recent policy change at The Sacramento Bee has raised questions about whether taking an editor's pen to a Web log before it is published detracts from very nature of Web logs, or "blogs," as the online diaries are called.

Lurking uncertainty about what standards should be applied to Web logs written by journalists bubbled to the surface last week after The Bee's ombudsman made public a recent decision by editors to screen Web log entries of Daniel Weintraub, one of the newspaper's leading columnists, before they are posted on The Bee's Web site.

Other bloggers weighed in, many sharply criticizing the new regulations that the editors imposed on Mr. Weintraub's popular "California Insider" blog, widely considered required reading for recall election news.

For much of the time since he started the online journal in April, Mr. Weintraub had been allowed to update the blog with new comments without editing. Now, before Mr. Weintraub posts an item on his online journal, which includes instant political commentary and news tips, it must be reviewed by an editor.

Some of the most strident protests came from the Slate commentator Mickey Kaus, whose Sept. 21 blog entry, "Free Weintraub!," accused Bee leaders of making "a large, embarrassing mistake."

Many of the initial censorship accusations stemmed from an article published by The Bee's ombudsman, Tony Marcano, that implied that the new policy was a response to objections to Mr. Weintraub's blog raised by the Latino Caucus, a powerful group of Hispanic state legislators. But Mr. Marcano and other Bee editors have since sought to correct the record, saying the policy was not the result of political pressure, but a response to complaints from Bee news staff members who wanted similar editing procedures of the blog and regular print stories.

Mr. Marcano said he supported the decision, and neither he nor Mr. Weintraub said they agreed with critics who see the new rules as a muzzle.

"I think this is more of a logistical issue than a editing issue," Mr. Weintraub said. "I've written nearly 500 columns for The Bee; all of them have been edited, and I can count on one hand the number that have been changed in any substantial way. I expect the same to apply to my blog entries." He said his blog had been edited since about Sept. 10. "It might be slightly

more difficult to be immediate and spontaneous, but the editors are committed to being available whenever I am ready to post."

One venue for sampling this medium is Cyberjournalist.net, a Web site with a list of more than 200 Web logs by journalists, whether linked to official news Web sites or produced on personal Web pages. The site is published by Jonathan Dube, a managing producer at MSNBC.com and one of the first journalists to use an online journal. In 1998, when Mr. Dube was a reporter for The Charlotte Observer, he and reporters used a primitive form of a blog to publish updates and commentary in a hurricane.

While many of the blogs on Mr. Dube's list are written by opinion journalists, who are accustomed to writing commentary without concern about objectivity, others are produced by reporters, who are professionally bound to avoid taking sides. These include the blogs of reporters at The Spokesman-Review in Spokane, Wash.

Ken Sands, the managing editor of online and new media at The Spokesman-Review, said that none of the 10 blogs on the newspaper's Web site were edited before posting and that he could not recall anyone ever asking a reporter to significantly change content after a posting had been made. Part of the reason his bloggers need no editing, he said, is that most have 10 to 25 years of reporting experience and apply the tenets of good journalism to their Web logs.

One of those reporters is Carla K. Johnson who covers health and medical research for The Spokesman-Review and who writes a blog on topics like "How to avoid a C-section" and "Playing politics with Rx drug costs." Having long been a journalist, Ms. Johnson says she has fun with the more personal style the blog affords, but is careful to rein in her opinions.

"It's certainly a balancing act on my part to give the blog a personality," Ms. Johnson said, "and on the other hand, maintain some objectivity so that I'm a credible news sources that people will come back to."

Not all news organizations have been as accepting of employees who blog. Kevin Sites, a CNN correspondent in Iraq who started a blog about his reporting of the war on March 9, stopped posting 12 days later at his bosses' request. Last year Steve Olafson, a Houston Chronicle reporter was fired for keeping a personal Web log, published under a pseudonym, that dealt with some of the issues and people he was covering.

The Dallas Morning News jumped on the blogging bandwagon last month with a 12-member editorial board blog meant to "demystify" the editorial process, said Keven Ann Willey, the newspaper's vice president and editorial page editor. After news of the row at The Bee broke, Ms. Willey posted a message last Monday on the blog, clarifying the editing process, "We have chosen not to edit posts because we believe the best blog entries are fresh, spontaneous and instant and that we are able to be fresh, spontaneous and instant without jeopardizing this newspaper's standards or this department's goals." She said that her staff discussed the purpose and pitfalls of writing a blog before they started it.

Paul Grabowicz, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley graduate school of journalism, taught a class on Web logs last fall and said that while some question whether an edited Web log strays from the true nature of blogging, many of the traditional aspects of journalism and the new publishing medium are not incompatible.

"I think you can do a blog and retain journalistic standards without bleeding the life out of it and without sacrificing what is important about journalism," Professor Grabowicz said.

Mr. Dube is organizing a discussion with journalists about blogging best practices for a conference of the Online News Association in Chicago next month. Professor Grabowicz says discussion is healthy but a rush to impose universal rules is not.

"What's most important to me is this is forcing us into a long overdue discussion about what journalism really is and what we're trying to accomplish with it," he said. "The worst thing is for somebody to come up with a standard that everyone is supposed to adhere to."

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CORRECTION-DATE: October 3, 2003

CORRECTION:

An article in Business Day on Monday about the role of editing in the online diaries known as Web logs, or blogs, referred imprecisely to Tony Marcano, ombudsman at The Sacramento Bee, who made public a recent decision by editors to screen a columnist's blog entries. He is independent of the newsroom, not part of the editing staff.

GRAPHIC: Photo: Carla K. Johnson, a health reporter for The Spokesman-Review in Spokane, Wash., writes a Web log on related topics. (Photo by Christopher Anderson/The Spokesman-Review)

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