Study: Media Plays Fast, Loose with Ethics Online

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AS MORE AND MORE PRINT JOURNALISTS flit through cyberspace, a new study shows that while those numbers are growing dramatically, many journalists remain woefully untrained and sometimes engage in questionable ethical practices when using the Internet.

At the same time, while print media rely more on the web to troll for story ideas and tap sources, newspaper reporters are less likely than their magazine counterparts to trust online sources, instead still preferring to conduct in-person interviews.

Those are some of the findings in what is billed as the most comprehensive survey ever conducted on the print media’s use of online services to help them gather and disseminate news.

In releasing its most recent of six annual surveys, the Middleberg/Ross Media in Cyberspace Studies reports that

- Middleberg/Ross Media in Cyberspace Study
- Middleberg/Ross Print Media in Cyberspace Study executive summary
- Middleberg/Ross news release
- The Freedom Forum Online news release
- Related story on another Newseum/New York panel discussion before the unveiling of the Middleberg/Ross study, in which participants said the most important issue facing the news media and the First Amendment is the need to separate content and commerce on the web.
- E&P Online story on the
Middleberg/Ross study. three-fourths of print media responding to its survey now go online at least once a day. That figure is in sharp contrast to last year’s 48 percent and the 16 percent figure when the study began in 1994.

More than half the newspaper and magazine journalists involved in the survey also say they communicate with readers via e-mail. And almost two-thirds of print journalists surveyed use the Internet to read publications online, a figure that had never before risen above 50 percent.

Don Middleberg, the CEO of Middleberg & Associates, one of the study’s authors, says the findings show that Internet use among print journalists is now part of “the fabric and core of what journalism and communications are all about.”

In summarizing their report, he and co-author Steven Ross, an associate professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, say results of their study are ‘proof positive that the Internet is fully integrated into the journalists’ toolbox.”

To conduct their survey, which was unveiled recently at Newseum/New York, the authors drew from a 10 percent response rate of managing editors and business editors at 1,509 daily newspapers and 2,500 magazines. What they learned was that the print media are flocking to the web for everything from story ideas and pitches to article research and reference needs.

They also found that not only are individual journalists using online services, but their publications have rushed to go online, as well. This year, at least 83 percent of the journalists’ employers have websites, compared with 58 percent last year, according to the study.

"The big news in this year’s survey is that publishers are turning to the web," says Ross, "and in the past year, there was an enormous jump up. There are more sites, more coordination with print. But nevertheless, few publishers in print expect to be web-only some day.”

While Internet use among journalists has increased, the authors say enthusiasm over the web has also been tempered by its limitations. Journalists, in fact, are finding websites to be "sorely lacking in credibility," they conclude. For example, when asked to rank the various types of online sources on a five-point scale ranging from "not credible" to "highly credible," only trade association sites were seen as more credible than not credible, the authors say in their report.
The least credible sites were message boards and chat rooms, according to the survey. But despite those reservations, journalists indicate they would use web forums or Usenet newsgroup postings as sources for an article, although most would do so only after confirming the information elsewhere.

However, in a finding that the authors say raise ethical questions, 17 percent of the respondents say they would report information found on the Internet, even if they could not verify it elsewhere.

"Many of our respondents also admit to publishing Internet rumors, often with little or no substantiation, and to using online sources whose credibility has not been adequately established," Ross writes in the executive summary. "This is the case even though the respondents show they understand such credibility issues."

He goes on to add that while the use of the net by journalists is expanding, the "questionable ethical practices are also expanding" and cites, as one example, the reluctance among many journalists to give credit to other publications’ work when using their material from the net.

Meanwhile, Ross and Middleberg say their survey and follow-up interviews show "a significant lack of training" among print journalists using online services. While article research displaced e-mail last year as journalists’ primary purpose for logging on, the study reveals that journalists are not using specialized single-topic websites to full advantage. Many newspaper journalists, in particular, are scanning the Internet looking for information and sources in a cumbersome, inefficient manner, the authors maintain, when they could be using single topic-specific search engines.

**WHEN CONTRASTING NEWSPAPER AND MAGAZINE JOURNALISTS**, the study also shows a decided difference between newspaper and magazine journalists when dealing with sources. The study finds that even though both groups will seek new sources online, 45 percent of newspaper journalists want to deal with new sources in person -- up from last year’s 31 percent -- while only 16 percent of magazine journalists prefer one-on-one meetings.

Middleberg, whose public relations firm deals routinely with reporters, says that even in a computer age when more and more journalists are roaming through cyberspace, seeking sources and stories online, they will continue to depend most heavily on person-to-person contacts.
“The first and foremost place [to find story ideas] is live sources,” he says. “I don’t think that will ever change.”

Other key findings of Middleberg/Ross Print Media in Cyberspace Study:

- In the past, only a third of respondents said they use the Internet to find sources and experts for stories. This year, the total is 58 percent.
- Two-thirds of newspapers use a common newsroom for web and print operations, which the authors say is a growing trend among regional and local newspapers.
- Forty percent of the respondents say their publications will allow the website to scoop the print edition in certain circumstances.
- Almost three-quarters of all respondents say they have at least two e-mail addresses, and 8 percent of newspaper journalists have as many as six e-mail addresses.
- Yahoo maintains a wide lead among both newspaper and magazine journalists as “favorite general search engine” followed by Alta Vista.

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