

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The Ethical Dilemma of Blogging ^[1]

An estimated 28.8 million bloggers publish on the Internet, while by comparison there are only a paltry 2,500 U.S. daily and Sunday newspapers published. As blogging grows and matures, it needs to confront an ethical issue, as its senior ink-to-paper colleagues have, where free trips and other gratuities are offered by those who would likely expect a return on their investment.

Print journalists have strict policy guidelines to help keep their objectivity and integrity intact and to control potential conflicts of interest. Nevertheless, many still take their junkets, especially plentiful in the entertainment and tourism fields. But individual bloggers who don't have publishing or broadcast organizations to foot the bills are often on their own.

One of the most controversial recent events in the blogosphere was the 2nd Annual Al Jazeera Forum in Qatar in February, where at least 100 blogger-delegates had all travel and accommodation costs covered, courtesy of their host sponsor. Another instance involved 25 bloggers who were hired by Holland's tourist bureau to fly to Amsterdam, stay in a five-star hotel and tour the city with an unlimited credit card. And, oh yes, the bloggers might decide also to write about the great tourist destination, but were not obligated to do so.

Daniel Glover in his Beltway Blogroll was highly critical. "No one who makes the trip is compelled to write one word, good or bad, about Amsterdam and maybe some bloggers will return home and say nasty things about the place. But somehow I doubt they will." He also felt bloggers who took expense-paid trips to the Al Jazeera conference ought to have been more transparent with their readers on disclosing gratuities they received.

The online news association Cyber Journalist suggested adopting ethical guidelines, but acknowledged that "since not all bloggers are journalists and the Weblog form is more casual, they [bloggers] argue they shouldn't be expected to follow the same ethics codes journalists are. But responsible bloggers should recognize that they are publishing words publicly, and therefore have certain ethical obligations to their readers, the people they write about, and society in general."

Policies of the larger news organizations are strict on acceptance of gifts from news sources.

The San Francisco Chronicle advises its journalists: "No freebies....reduced-rate transportation, gifts, or junkets from current or potential news sources, including...agents of another country."

The CBS policy states that "employees shall not accept free transportation, accommodations, services or gifts...to avoid compromising their journalistic independence, but also so as to avoid the appearance of such compromise."

But one mainstream journalist, who wished to remain anonymous, cut bloggers some slack.

"For journalists from less well-funded organizations...free travel and accommodation may make all the difference between being able to attend events or not." But, he added, "journalists who benefit from paid travel or accommodations should reveal this in their writing."

Former New York Times and CBS News correspondent Bernard Kalb agreed that "if you do go the paid-for route, then obviously you add the alert that in fact the sponsor took care of the bill."

But few disclosed to their readers that the sponsor of the 2nd Annual Al Jazeera Forum funded the trips. The theme for the event was "Defending Freedom, Defining Responsibility," but Guardian reporter Julia Day wrote that the forum "has been used to help launch the channel's [English-language] international channel."

At least one blog obliquely informed readers that he was "flown out" to Al Jazeera's forum along with about 100 others, who traveled business class. Al Jazeera's press and public relations office did not return numerous telephone and e-mail inquiries to elaborate on the trip arrangements such as exactly how many were provided free transportation and lodging in the Sheraton Hotel.

The BBC and most other mainstream media chose not to attend the session. A source who wished to remain anonymous said, "The BBC's official policy – which I personally agree with – is that it would not accept the payment of airfares or hotel accommodation associated with attending or covering a conference like the recent Al Jazeera event. Even if a BBC person was speaking at the event, the BBC would still insist on paying its employee's expenses at the event." Otherwise, he said, the recipient would be placed under a perceived obligation.

Of course, there were those who funded their own trips, or whose organizations picked up the tab. It must also be pointed out that panelists engaged in sharp discussions, especially on the issue of whether the U.S. media have lost their direction.

Kelly McBride, ethics group leader at the Poynter Institute told Worldcasting that it would be acceptable to receive transportation and housing if one were asked to appear on a panel discussion at a conference, and to later report about that panel. However, it would be unethical to "double dip" and report on other activities at the event without disclosing that the sponsor paid for the reporter's trip.

Two bloggers who are also academics said they do a combined total of at least three dozen expenses-paid appearances per year.

Professor Marc Lynch, who wrote about the Al Jazeera conference in his blog Abu Aardvark, believes his ethics are in tact because "travel and accommodations plus a small honorarium is the absolute norm for academics giving talks. It isn't the least bit controversial, and 'ethics' doesn't arise at all....I give a dozen talks a year, and every one offers the same – the only variation is the size of the honorarium."

Lynch spoke on panels at the event and his travel and accommodations were also picked up by Al Jazeera. He said he blogged about the forum without informing his readers about the arrangement "because I was there, and it was interesting. I can't for my life imagine any reason why I wouldn't have. That's kind of the point of blogging – you do interesting things,

and you write about it."

Ethan Zuckerman, another forum panelist and research fellow at Harvard Law School 's Berkman Center for Internet and Security, received free transportation and lodging. "I speak several dozen times a year. I generally try to minimize the amount of travel I pay out of my own pocket, which means I usually ask conference organizers to pay my travel and hotel rooms," he said.

McBride agreed that "academics have very different standards than journalists. So you end up with two sets of standards, one for the 'professionals' and one for everyone else. That's why I think transparency is so important. If the audience can at least discern which writers are financially independent in their pursuit of topics and who might have a conflict of loyalties."

Blogger-critic Daniel Glover countered that "Too many public affairs bloggers are interested only in condemning the ethical lapses of others, especially journalists and politicians.

"Those bloggers won't even consider the possibility that as they gain access and influence, their own ethics could be compromised. Even worse, they ridicule and attempt to ostracize anyone who dares suggest that bloggers may be susceptible to manipulation, whether knowingly or unknowingly. That's exactly the kind of hubris that ultimately leads to ethical breaches and outright corruption."

Daniel Glover believes bloggers "should be talking amongst themselves to try to establish some norms, and I don't get the sense that many of them are or want to."

As more bloggers begin to publish on the Internet, and as some become better established with large readership, an organization such as the Poynter Institute might be enlisted for guidance. It has an ethics adviser on call at an 800 number, and its advice on blogger transparency should be heeded.
