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Blog etiquette

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In the US, blogs have had some significant influence on national politics. Blogs led the smear campaigns on John Kerry during the last presidential election. Blogs were responsible for the downfall of Dan Rather, CBS anchorman, when they revealed that a news story questioning George Bush's military record was based on forged documents. Over in the UK, bloggers like Guido Fawkes (<http://5thnovember.blogspot.com/>) published stories which proved enormously damaging to John Prescott's career when they eventually forced their way onto the mainstream media's agenda. The BBC's Nick Robinson complained bitterly in his own blog that bloggers have a political agenda —see http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/nickrobinson/2006/07/prescott_for_du.html

Well, so what? The hour of the blogger has cometh, in the US and in the UK, but so far not in Ireland.

However, we can presume that like everything else, Ireland will follow where our eastern and western neighbours have led. In the meantime professional journalists mutter darkly about the danger of millions of amateurs challenging their right to deliver the news.

News organisations, print or broadcast, will thoughtfully work out style guides and ethical guidelines for their staff. But the lone blogger who sits down at their PC with perhaps nothing more than a glass of wine and a strong opinion may not be aware that when they start to blog they are about to enter an ethical minefield. I certainly didn't, and over the course of my years of blogging since 2002 I have encountered many unexpected problems. I will share some of my personal disasters and tell you about some others so that should you choose to start blogging you might avoid some of the mines.

Several years ago, while working in a pleasant if unfulfilling job, I was day dreaming about my future perfect life. I knew I wanted to write. I knew I didn't want to work in an office. The perfect job was to write a column for a Sunday newspaper which I presumed, correctly, I could simply do from home. The only question was how I could go about securing such a position.

Fortunately I happened to share an office with Tom Murphy (<http://tpemurphy.com/blog/>), a well known PR guy in the software world who now works for Microsoft. At the time he was running his extremely successful Natterjack PR

– a blog specifically about the PR industry and which has been so successful he is now part of a group which gives seminars internationally to PR professionals about how their clients can learn to cope with this phenomenally influential and seemingly uncontrollable channel.

Tom suggested to me that I set up a blog. I could then just start writing, about anything I wanted any time. It seemed perfect. If I did get the dreamed of columnist job, I would have a repository of ideas for my columns. So I set one up in five minutes on blogger.com and began entering my daily thoughts. For the first few years they were typical of standard blog fare, which another friend of mine summarised as follows: “That George Bush – he’s so nasty! And Tony Blair – he’s mean too!” I threw in some thoughts on TV programmes I watched and a bit on Irish politics. I had no comments section. I never advertised the site. I never looked for reciprocal links. I was just writing. Then somehow or other people started finding the blog anyway and began sending me emails.

Mostly they were family members or old friends living abroad or that I didn’t get to see too often, that liked to check up on me via the blog. The blog as diary became blog as social network and I began to enjoy that aspect and forgot about dreams of being an important columnist.

In the meantime, I got married and pregnant and began to blog about more personal things, like particularly gory descriptions of the birth of my first and then second babies. I had no agenda as such with the blog, other than using it as a diary and for the entertainment of my friends and family. It was domestic, light-hearted and personal and people seemed to enjoy what is known, derisively, as a “Mommy blog”. I never gave it much thought. I just wrote whatever came into my head.

My attitude to blogging is relevant because it governed the style of my blog. Even though I was sitting there, silly housewife or bored executive, throwing out my random thoughts on life, my actions had consequences, some good and some bad, both completely unexpected.

The good ones were extremely good. Apart from the online socialising, not long after I posted a particular dramatic account of the birth of my second baby, another Tom, Tom McEnaney, now Business Editor of the Irish Independent, then with The Sunday Times, suggested that the then editor, Fiona McHugh, read the piece. She liked it and, when reading back through the blog, she could see that I had maintained a consistent style which she felt would be column potential in The Sunday Times. She offered me a few trial runs and before I knew it I found myself as a columnist in an important Sunday newspaper. So the blog became a portfolio, which was great.

On the bad side, one day my light-hearted thoughtless domestic banter provoked a reaction that really gave me a kick in the stomach.

On Friday 20th October 2006, Joe O'Reilly, husband of Rachel O'Reilly, the mother of two from Lusk in North County Dublin, was charged with her murder. In October 2004, she had been beaten to death one morning after she left her children to school.

When the investigation began, the police identified a “chief suspect” very early on. The Evening Herald newspaper followed the investigation closely and throughout 2004 and into 2005 put any minor development in the case on their front page. Details were given of the purported chief suspect, although his name was never given. However they made it blatantly obvious that her husband Joe was this chief suspect. I began to mock their style in my blog and would post every time the Herald put the heavily hinted but never-named Chief Suspect on their front page. It became a running joke on my blog. I cheerily pointed out that it was quite obviously the husband who was the suspect and sneered at the paper's strategy of heavy handed hinting.

(<http://sarahcarey.blogspot.com/2004/11/fast-breaking-news.html>)

Then one week I got two emails — both from women, both living abroad. One was a friend, the other a relation of Rachel's. Both were extremely civil but desperately hurt and also shocked. The Evening Herald is not available online and they had been following the investigation through the more sober reports of the Irish Times and Irish Independent which, of course, told them nothing. Through Google searches they had found my blog. My snide little jokes and slagging off of the investigation hurt them deeply. They were also desperate to know what was going on. Could Rachel's own husband really be the suspect in this case? They weren't abusive. They were just hurt.

I felt terrible. It hadn't occurred to me for one second that my little piece of fun for my friends on the internet would be read by people so closely connected to the case and for whom my jeering would only hurt rather than amuse. My heart also sank because I realised the Herald hadn't named Joe as the suspect for the obvious libel it would have entailed. Some months later, when he was arrested they did name him. In the meantime I had been blindly ignoring all sorts of legal conventions.

The incident raised three issues for me as a blogger.

First, what I had considered to be harmless fun, was not harmless fun. The blog exposes you to the world and provides you with power — perhaps not the power to topple governments or ruin careers, but certainly the power to wound perfectly innocent people. I consider it completely legitimate to say negative things about public people, but in this post I had hurt private people. Now, this doesn't necessarily mean that I should restrain myself from saying negative things about anyone for fear of upsetting their nearest and dearest, but it does mean that the blogger needs to keep a measure of responsibility about their remarks. Would you say on your blog what you would say to the person's face?

One blogger has summed up this problem as:

1. Think about who is reading your blog
2. Don't think about who is reading your blog

You see, the best blogs are the honest ones. Opinions are best when unqualified, stories most engaging when truthful. As in conversation, if everyone is nice, everyone is dull. The trick is to be honest and entertaining, but just try not to hurt. It's a tricky one and it's easy to forget. People should also remember that when something goes out on the internet, it never really goes away. Something you might write could come back to haunt you years later. This is something that young bloggers, for example on Bebo or on Myspace, need to be made aware of. In fact, it could well be the time for teachers in schools to introduce an internet etiquette module into their curricula. If a grown adult like me can make such mistakes, teenagers can make bigger ones and may need some adult guidance on how not to hurt themselves and others, however inadvertently, on the internet.

Secondly, I had exposed myself to legal action. This is the very scenario about which professional journalists consistently warn. Generally I have little sympathy with these dire warnings. For starters, newspapers get sued all the time so they are hardly in a position to lecture others about libel. Legal action against a blogger hasn't happened in Ireland, and the worst consequences so far seem to have been in the case of bloggers who ruin their own careers, rather than those of politicians. La Petite Anglaise, the English woman working in Paris who used her blog to mock her boss, amongst others, was fired when her identity was discovered by her employers. Another famous employee who became a cropper was Joe Gordon who on his blog occasionally complained about his employers, the well known booksellers, Bastardstones. He was fired last January.

I think personal consequences like this rather than full scale libel actions are the more likely situation. The full scale libels have been avoided, I believe, for three reasons.

The first is the primary one: blogs are easily corrected. A factual error will be pointed out by a reader within minutes, if not hours, and so possibly libellous material just doesn't have the chance to stay around too long. And of course, once the page is corrected, unless someone has had the foresight to capture a cache of the original page, then the evidence is gone. The blogger who ignores a correction is being both foolish and unfair. They are also being malicious and therefore deserve to be sued. Secondly, of course, unless you are Andrew Sullivan, there isn't much point suing a blogger because they are likely to be a beardy nerd in his early 20s with no money.

However, the other factor which makes suing irresponsible bloggers difficult is the common practice of blogs being written pseudonymously, and I want to address the whole issue of identity and the internet, which I believe is the fundamental issue to be addressed when it comes to blog etiquette.

When I made my careless remarks about Joe O'Reilly being a suspect in his wife's murder, I did so under my own name and with an email address attached. The two women whose feelings I hurt were both able to identify who I was and contact me. In both cases, I wrote back to them, apologised for my remarks and explained what the Evening Herald had been saying. In fact, in both cases I maintained a correspondence with them and they began to read my "Mommy blog" style entries and we remain in

touch to this day. When there are further developments in the Rachel case, I still post them on the blog, but now for their information, and not for my own entertainment.

It was a lot easier on them because I had a name. If I was blogging pseudonymously, I would have felt equally guilty about inflicting pain on these perfectly nice women, but I would also know that they wouldn't know who I was. If they couldn't track me down, I wonder would this have changed how I acted in response to their emails? Or if not in my case, how does pseudonymity affect the behaviour of the unidentifiable blogger? Does it make them more likely to make irresponsible or hurtful or libellous posts?

As I said at the outset, you can only judge this when you understand the intent behind pseudonymity. Some people will hide their identities because they don't want their employers to know their views on something as apparently innocent as politics. In the US, you might be justifiably fearful of the consequences of your political views being known to the government. If you are blogging about your work, without the knowledge of your employers and, for example, playing some kind of whistle blowing role, then you certainly don't want your employers knowing you are the author. In all these cases, I think anonymity is perfectly justifiable.

However, for the personal blogger, things get a little murkier. For someone who writes a blog about their personal life, anonymity confers great freedom. They can say what they want about the people in their lives. It will make the blog far more entertaining and interesting for readers. But this freedom can be extremely dangerous. The day of reckoning will come, as it always does. Picture the husband or wife or friend who sits down one day to read an amusing anonymous blog and begins to recognise themselves being mocked, or truths laid bare, or harsh but honest opinions thrown out to the world. A pretty painful experience, and when the discovery is revealed, we can guarantee some pretty nasty consequences for the blogger. Anonymity may appear like a gift, but it's also a time bomb.

My advice to the personal bloggers: put your name to it. Having to stand over what you say will temper your remarks and preserve your relationships. This applies to commenters on blogs too.

The debates which take place in the comments section of blogs are one of the huge attractions for readers. I love people disagreeing with me and making me dig deep to justify my belief in a particular view. However, one of the disturbing aspects is that occasionally nasty and personal little comments will be made. When the writer is unknown, the shock of the insult is heightened by the rather sinister aspect of not knowing the insulter. Commenters should not use anonymity to hurl personal abuse. However, if you are setting up a blog, you will have to accept the fact that these comments will come. The question is what to do about them.

On the one hand, I would feel responsibility towards the public nature of the debate to leave the comment on the blog. However, my friend Justin Mason (www.taint.org) corrected my view on this. He said that your blog is like a room in your house. If people

don't behave well in your house, you are perfectly entitled to ask them to leave. So now I delete abusive ones, and take great pleasure in it.

That's the personal side though. Some blog critics complain that political bloggers have an agenda. This is true, but many mainstream media outlets have agendas too. I say there is nothing wrong with any agenda unless it's a hidden agenda.

Whenever I read an article in the newspaper, especially when it's covering some breaking news about some scandal, I need to know two things before I can make a judgement on the story. I want to know: who's writing it, and who leaked the information. Because, since I subscribe to the theory of all truths being relative, I want to know whose agenda is being served by the story in question. When I know the source of a story, I know what they want me to believe and how they might present the facts in a way which persuades me to their point of view, rather than simply presenting the facts in an apparently neutral manner.

However, with a newspaper or a particular journalist, the agenda is not always so clear. For example, when the Irish Independent put an editorial on their front page the day before the 1997 election urging people to vote against the Rainbow government and for Fianna Fáil, we didn't know at that stage that Tony O'Reilly had threatened the then Taoiseach, John Bruton, that the government would "lose Independent Newspapers as friends" if the government didn't address some areas of concern to O'Reilly's businesses. Will we ever know the real reason why that influential editorial was published? We'll have to ask the editor at the end of his career.

However, with a political blogger, it is most often the case that even if we don't know who they are, their agenda is perfectly obvious. We can therefore judge their posts in the light of this clear agenda. Bloggers will have a consistent view point, so if they rail against Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, we know where they are coming from, even if I don't know who they are. In fact, as Guido often observes, and as certainly applies in Ireland, the political and media establishments have their own cosy little agreements to which the public are not privy. Journalists will know that publishing a story against an influential politician or spin doctor will result in their being cut off. Anonymous bloggers don't have these constraints and can publish anything they want. That's why we like them. However, despite this advantage of anonymity, I have to say that I still prefer to know someone's name. If what they say is true or fair, even if biased, then I don't see why they have to hide.

Hiding, except for those whistleblowing cases, just leads to trouble. For example, hiding one's identity in the comments section can have other ulterior motives and the story of Lee Siegel illustrates this neatly.

The New Republic, the US magazine, hosts several blogs on their website. One is, or was, called Culture, by Lee Siegel. The New Republic is a favourite target of liberal bloggers, because it spent a substantial period of time since the late 1980s as a de facto conservative magazine. It styles itself "contrarian" but with Bill Clinton being so popular,

“contrarian” often meant anti-Clinton. Then they compounded that by being for the Iraq war and more recently for Joe Lieberman in the Connecticut Democratic Primary. Siegel got embroiled in some iteration of this row, and coined the term “blogofascism” to complain about the hordes who, in his view, descend to complain about anyone who deviates from the supposed party line. At this stage most viewed his antics as merely amusing fodder. But then he did a post about child abuse around the time that Jon Benet Ramsay was back in the news. There’s a professor somewhere who has long argued that child abuse gets way over-covered in the media relative to its actual incidence, and has theories that the obsessive interest in the stories has to do with people’s anxiety about sexual development. Siegel attacked this thesis in a post, and from there decided to make the claim that the professor’s theories reflected his own possible perverted interest in child sex — a case he supported by butchering quotes from the professor to make it sound like he was disturbingly interested in this stuff.

All hell broke loose in the comment section of his blog, whereupon a commenter “Spezzatura” suddenly appeared to launch personal attacks on the critical commenters — especially on Ezra Klein, who had critiqued Siegel on his own blog. For example one comment said:

“I’m a huge fan of Siegel, been reading him since he started writing for TNR almost ten years ago. (Full disclosure: I’m an editor at a magazine in NYC and he’s written for me too.) I watch the goings-on and have to scratch my head. The people who hate him the most are all in their twenties and early thirties. There’s this awful suck-up named Ezra Klein — his “writing” is sweaty with panting obsequious ambition — who keeps distorting everything Siegel writes — the only way this no-talent can get him.....”

In a bizarre coincidence, Klein’s mother had written to Siegel something complimentary about another thing he had written, and “Spezzatura” made oblique reference to this.

One of the commenters collected the trail of “Spezzatura” comments on the blog and deduced from usage and tone that it was Siegel himself. The evidence was put to Frank Foer, the editor of *The New Republic*, who then closed down the blog and “suspended” Siegel as writer. The case clouds several different issues. Siegel first tried to claim that he was being attacked for using a pseudonym, which of course many bloggers do. But the issue was the dishonesty of using a pseudonym to attack critics and defend himself, with the attacks getting personal and using information that the “real” person had on other people.

In a deeply ironic twist, by the way, Siegel remains as a senior editor at *New Republic* and sent an email around just a few weeks ago looking for a research assistant to help him with a book about internet culture that he is writing for Doubleday

As the influential Atrios asked: “What’s next? A textbook on theoretical physics by George W. Bush? A Guide to Civility and Manners from Michael Savage?” As bizarre as this twist in the story is, it does show that public errors only end in temporary public disgrace and the book deal isn’t far away.

Still, Siegel only embarrassed himself by his messy efforts to defend himself and attack others under a fake name. When corporates start at this game, then you really have to watch out.

Richard Edelman is the president and CEO of the world's largest independent public relations firm with 1800 employees in 40 offices worldwide. He is leader in what they call the field of "social media" and uses blogs to debate with his clients audiences. However, he got into big trouble in the past few weeks. One of his clients is Wal-Mart who I am sure you know are one of the most despised companies in America.

See http://www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog/archives/2006/10/a_commitment.html.

They set up an organization called Working Families for Wal-Mart which is supposed to push good PR for Wal-Mart. He designed a pro-Wal-Mart blog called "Wal-Marting Across America," ostensibly launched by a pair of average Americans chronicling their cross-country travels in an RV and lodging in Wal-Mart parking lots. Of course it was eventually discovered that the writers were not average Americans — they were being paid by Wal-Mart. Edelman was forced to apologise on his blog.

But with Siegel, Edelman and all these guys, the great thing is that they were caught. And this is a truly wonderful thing about blogs: there is no hiding place. You are exposed and if you breach the etiquette, if you lie or make a mistake, you will be caught out.

These cases also highlight a major split in blogging ethics. You see, bloggers are popular because they are the uncensored voice of the individual. Although mainstream media hates the blogger and warns of the mistakes, the fact is that the biggest breaches of blog etiquette have been carried out when the corporates — not the individuals — try to get in on the act. Even the whole practice of mainstream media journalists setting up blogs is dodgy. They have a platform already. Why do they need another one? The truth is that they have blogs because their corporate bosses are terrified of losing market share — not because their famous journalists have anything new or interesting to say. In fact, I heard of one story last week where Fox had hired a writer to start a blog — allegedly about the breakdown of her marriage. It has drawn a huge audience because people believe it. Soon it will be exposed and the writer has the book deal already secured. The rise of this sort of commercially focused fake blogging is disastrous for blogs and is an enormous breach of trust. It means every time someone reads a heart-wrenching story on line now, they'll be wondering if it's true. A great shame.

Finally, I want to address the issue of how to respond to comments, either emailed or posted, in the public comments section. Siegel chose to respond to comments pretending to be someone else. Generally I will always respond to someone who has left a comment within the blog's own comment section. If someone writes to me personally, I will assume that they wanted to keep their comments private and I wouldn't publish their remarks, or certainly not attribute them publicly without permission.

If someone makes a public comment, then I will respond to them publicly. There was just one exception to this in my blog.

I had posted twice about a woman called Sheila Hodggers who had died in tragic circumstances in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in 1983. She was pregnant and suffering from cancer. However the hospital management stopped her medication as she was pregnant. My post included descriptions by her husband, Brendan, of how he would arrive at the hospital door and hear her screams. She and her baby eventually died.

One day a comment was left on the blog from a daughter of Sheila Hodggers. When I first saw the comment I was sure she was going to complain about the dramatic way I had described her mother's death. Instead, it was a sad but gentle message explaining who she was and how she was trying to find out about her mother's death since when she was small; her father never spoke about it.

She was willing to discuss her personal life publicly but I felt this wasn't in her best interests and, rather than responding on the blog, I asked her to send me her email address and we exchanged several emails privately. She had had many tragedies in her life and I was incredibly conscious that what I might do or say could affect her disproportionately.

Anyway, I think I handled it in a conscientious way, but it underscored for me the point that the Rachel O'Reilly incident had made: a public forum can hurt private people.

The blogger needs to speak with their own voice and write honestly about how they feel. This will draw in people. But, remember: if you invite people into your home, you have to treat them well.

Ends.