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Regret the error, but who admits it?

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Regret the error, but who admits it?

BY SUE BURZYNSKI BULLARD

Executive Committee member

Correcting errors is simple and quick online.

For Craig Silverman, that ease raises ethical issues. The author of the popular “Regret the Error” book and website believes news sites too often “scrub” away errors without acknowledging the mistakes.

In the 1990s when a Fort Worth reporter confused the name of the school where a meeting would be held, he could only fix the mistake by going to the school he named in the article and handing out maps to folks looking for the meeting. Waiting to publish a correction in the next day’s paper would have been too late for people hoping to attend the meeting.

Now with the ability to update stories 24/7, the reporter easily could have corrected the mistake on the Web.

But what’s the most ethical way to handle those errors? Should the story be updated without explaining that the original error occurred, what Silverman and others call



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ADMIT *Slate* offers RSS feed for corrections

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“scrubbing”? Or should the fix be made with a note appended to the original article explaining that an error had been made?

A 2010 study by Victor Navasky and Evan Lerner for Columbia Journalism Review reported that 45 percent of magazine websites correct factual errors with no indication to readers that an error was made.

Silverman believes the speed and ease of the Internet has lowered standards for news publishing. He’s convinced a study of news sites would show results similar to the magazine study.

“My guess is that the majority of publications are not appending corrections to things that should have corrections on them,” said Silverman, whose “Regret the Error” website reports on media errors. “There are a lot of publications that are doing a very good job of being diligent about this, but it is so tempting and so easy to scrub things away online that I think it happens a lot.

“Even if a publication has a stated policy that online does not scrub errors away, there are certainly times when a reporter will go to the web editor and say, ‘Hey, this is a really small error, can we just quickly fix it?’”

For years, microfilm preserved a historical record of what was published in newspapers. Many, including librarians, argue that an electronic archive should do the same. For Silverman and others, it’s a matter of truthfulness.

“Literally for hundreds of years,” he said, “we have been promising readers when we make an error we correct it. That’s how it works with newspapers. ... Then all of a sudden because it’s easy to scrub something away, we are abandoning what we’ve been doing for hundreds of years. It’s really shameful. It seems to make journalists and editors forget this standard that we’ve had for such a long time.”

Silverman agrees that simple typos or misspellings can be corrected without

calling attention to the fix. In fact, the CJR study showed 87 percent of magazine websites fixed typos or misspellings without notifying readers.

But Silverman believes the standard should be this: “If a mistake introduces a factual error, introduces confusion for the reader, misleads the reader or changes the meaning, then you need to append a correction.”

Some publications do that. The New York Times and The Washington Post both note corrections either at the beginning or the end of the article. They also report corrections on a corrections page. Slate, an online magazine, places an asterisk at the end of a corrected sentence. Clicking on the asterisk takes readers to the correction. Slate also offers an RSS feed for its corrections, which is a way to ensure that regular readers will know about all of its corrections.

Still, it’s no surprise that news organizations have not adopted uniform standards for correcting errors online. Their track record, even in print, is not good. Newspapers correct only a small percentage of factual errors, according to media accuracy studies.

Corrections policies online are haphazard at best, even though it is extremely difficult to erase incorrect information posted on the Internet.

A Google search could lead to the original incorrect article. Online errors aren’t tossed out like yesterday’s newspapers.

Accuracy is even more critical in today’s digital world, where anyone with computer access can post “news.” Today’s journalists — operating with fewer layers of editing and a demand for speed — must be accountable. After all, what sets journalists apart is their credibility.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics says: “Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.” For Silverman, that applies whether a story is published in print or online.