

# The erosion of ethics: from citizen journalism to social media

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Jessica Roberts

*Faculdade de Ciencias Humanas, Universidade Catolica Portuguesa,  
Lisbon, Portugal*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to consider the implications of the shift from citizen journalist to social media user by examining how ethics are addressed on social media sites compared to citizen journalism sites.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper applies the framework of a 2012 study of ethics on citizen journalism sites to social media sites' guiding documents to compare how they discuss ethics and what they ask of the users, offering suggestions for how social media sites might imbue users with a sense of their responsibilities and obligations.

**Findings** – The analysis finds that ethics are largely ignored on social media sites, written in legalistic language and framed in negative terms, rather than in terms of responsibilities or obligations.

**Originality/value** – When citizen journalism was subsumed by social media, much of the language – lacking as it may have been – around users' responsibilities to each other was lost. This paper suggests social media sites should seek to raise rather than lower the barriers to entry, and imbue users with a sense of the responsibility they accept when sharing information online.

**Keywords** Ethics, Social media, Journalism ethics, Codes of ethics, Citizen journalism

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

While amateur reporting that gained national attention can be traced back to George Holliday's home video of the beating of Rodney King or even further to Zapruder's film of the Kennedy motorcade, interest in the phenomenon called "citizen journalism" exploded in the US in the early 2000s. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, with the growth of blogging platforms, cheaper and more portable cameras and other tools for recording and sharing information, citizen journalism became the focus of a great deal of attention from professional journalists, media critics, academics and the public. Newsrooms began to grapple with competition from content created for free by citizen journalists, and academics began to examine the practices, ethics and products of amateur internet users sharing information online.

The enthusiasm about participation in the process of information creation spread to social media when the first social-networking sites brought the ability to record and share information to even more users. Social media have grown steadily in reach and become the dominant means by which many people communicate, get news and share information. Facebook now claims more than 2 billion monthly active users (of about 3.5 billion people using the internet worldwide) and in some countries, Facebook is used interchangeably with "internet." Citizen journalism has largely faded in public interest and while it remains an area of interest for academics, it has been overtaken by studies of social media, which now boasts several journals dedicated to the subject.

The connections between citizen journalism and social media are significant, however and provide the basis for this paper. The questions that citizen journalism raised about the



quality of information and the responsibilities of information-creators have only grown as the means to engage in mass self-communication (Castells, 2007) has spread to an even greater portion of the population. Much attention has been paid to the responsibilities of the companies that create, run and profit from social media, in the professional news media, the US Congress and academia, but there has been less focus on the responsibilities of users and how users are situated when they join and participate in social media sites.

This paper looks back to citizen journalism and an analysis of the way different sites addressed (or failed to address) ethics and guidelines, comparing those guiding documents to those now proffered by social media sites. It applies the framework of a 2012 study of ethics on citizen journalism sites to social media sites' guidelines, to examine how ethics is treated on social media sites and how the responsibilities and expectations social media users accept compare to those provided on citizen journalism sites. This analysis focuses on the US context in examining journalism ethics, citizen journalism ethics and social media sites, to provide a single national context for a more effective comparison of the ethics of professionals, the amateurs who came after and finally, the users of the social media giants that originated in the USA. Ultimately, this paper seeks to understand how social media sites approach ethics, the implications for users and their behavior and how users might be treated differently.

### Literature review

#### *Citizens as news consumers*

The term citizen journalism implies contrast to a profession of journalism and is, therefore, grounded in some sense in the definition of journalism that developed over the course of the twentieth century as journalism became professionalized. Citizens were positioned as consumers of information by the professionalization of the news industry, which happened in the USA at the end of the nineteenth century. Carey (1995) has argued that in the mid-1900s, the press, previously an institution engaged in community life and public interests, took over the citizens' role in public life, positioning the citizens as an audience of consumers. In doing so, journalists reimagined First Amendment free press protections to create a special role for their profession as serving a passive group of citizens who became observers and participated in politics through the press, rather than as active participants in the government:

The press no longer facilitated or animated a public conversation, for public conversation had disappeared. It informed a passive and privatized group of citizens who participated in politics through the press (Carey, 1995, p. 245).

The fundamental shift was that of commodification – as news became a commodity, it was divorced from its democratic purposes, and thus, “the production of culture, including most importantly the news, becomes disarticulated from existing national societies and policies” (Carey, 1995, p. 253). When news was professionalized, citizens became “acquisitive” individuals rather than engaged citizens and with this change the “notion of citizens of a common polity who participate in a common political tradition [became] increasingly difficult to imagine” (Carey, 1995, p. 254). He concluded, “Ultimately this view creates a passive role for the public in the theater of politics. The public is an observer of the press rather than ‘participants in the government of our affairs’ and the dialogue of democracy” (Carey, 1995, pp. 249-250).

Much, as Carey argued that a professional press might lead to a passive public rather than facilitating their active engagement with each other, Habermas (1981) worried that the growth of commercial mass media turned a critical public into a passive consumer public. He argued that the activist public sphere – where individuals freely discuss social problems and “put the state in touch with the needs of society” (1981) – is necessary for debates on

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matters of public importance and the mechanism for that discussion to affect the decision-making process. He argued that the ideal speech situation occurs in an environment of social equality when participants in the public sphere have the same capacity for discourse. His theories suggest that the modern professional view of journalism is not the most useful for the good of society, and that journalists might be more helpful if they better facilitated public interaction rather than serving a consumer audience.

As journalists further cemented their role as information providers, citizens were positioned squarely as consumers of information and the journalists were assumed to have some responsibility to inform them. Professional journalists were increasingly held to a high standard and understood to have protection under the First Amendment and even a responsibility implicit in that protection. Journalists themselves sought these standards and protections, in part to distinguish themselves from public relations professionals. [Schudson \(2001, pp. 162-163\)](#) argued that journalists, self-conscious about the manipulability of information in the propaganda age:

Felt a need to close ranks and assert their collective integrity in the face of their close encounter with the publicity agents' unembarrassed effort to use information (or misinformation) to promote special interests.

Journalism schools and professional societies adopted codes of ethics, as did individual publications. The social responsibility theory put forth in such documents as the report of [The Commission on Freedom of the Press \(1947\)](#) suggested that journalists had an obligation to provide citizens with the information they need. However, in emphasizing this responsibility for journalists, the theory could be seen as positioning citizens as more passive participants in the relationship, less responsible for their own information and the demands of active citizenship.

The modern ideology of journalism is focused on the five values of public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics ([Deuze, 2005](#)), respectively, often framed in terms of an obligation to the public in a democratic system. Contemporary journalistic ethics codes such as those articulated by *The New York Times*, National Public Radio and the Society of Professional Journalists are based on the premise that journalists have a responsibility to citizens in a democratic society and this assumption is articulated starkly in [Kovach and Rosenstiel's \(2001, p. 12\)](#) authoritative text, *Elements of Journalism*: "The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing." In the context of more participatory media, [Singer \(2006, p. 15\)](#) argued that:

The definition and self conceptualization of the journalist must shift from one rooted in procedure – the professional process of making information available – to one rooted in ethics – the professional norms guiding determinations about which information has true societal value.

### *From citizen journalism to social media*

[Bruns \(2008\)](#) dated the start of modern citizen journalism to proactive and highly networked organizing by Indymedia activists before the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle, although George Holliday's recording of Los Angeles police beating Rodney King in 1991 was one of the first high-profile cases of a citizen using tools at their disposal to record events of public interest that gained national attention. Alternative and radical newspapers and other media had existed alongside professional journalists, even as professionals began to assert their status. In social movements activist media, such as labor press, the abolitionist press and suffrage press, energized citizens who were not

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professionals were crucial to production of texts. It is not surprising, then, that the WTO protests by labor and environmental activists were the first hallmark of the new era of citizen journalism.

The difference, at the turn of the twenty-first century, was the scale of participation that was possible, the ability to reach large national audiences and the removal of the gatekeepers. Citizens who captured newsworthy events could publish their reports directly to the internet, rather than submitting them to professional or even amateur news organizations for dissemination, as Holliday did with his videotape. Easy-to-use, free blogging sites had been growing in popularity and sites for easy sharing of photos, such as Flickr, fed the sense that anyone with a computer connection could easily capture and upload content to the internet, becoming publishers. The civic-minded citizen and the engaged activist could now reach national audiences on the same internet where professional newspapers published their reports. As evident in books such as Gillmor's *We the media* in 2004 and Gant's (2007) *We're all journalists now*, many academics and media observers were enthusiastic about the ability of citizens to take on a greater role in the gathering, analysis and distribution of news and information. Perhaps most important was the idea that journalists' authority to determine what is news and newsworthy would be challenged in ways that would democratize information. Rosen (2006) was an early advocate of journalistic involvement by citizens, whom he called "the people formerly known as the audience." Rosen asserted on his PressThink blog that news media no longer run "one-way," with a few news organizations dominating the discourse while everyone else listens in isolation. Accordingly, he argued, anyone could be a journalist. The "horizontal flow, citizen-to-citizen, is as real and consequential as the vertical one".

Like the internet, citizen journalism spread globally. Using the slogan "Every citizen is a reporter," the South Korean site OhmyNews launched in 2000; by 2009, some 70,000 citizens from around the world had written stories for the site's volunteer editors (Woyke, 2009). Citizens capturing images of everything from the 2005 tsunami in Southeast Asia to the 2007 bombings of the London tube and the shooting of Oscar Grant by a BART officer in 2009, were celebrated for their ability to act as proxy witnesses, capturing events firsthand (Allan and Thorsen, 2009). In many cases, in a trend that continues on social media today, videos recorded and shared by citizens of police misconduct garnered the most public attention. In some cases, they demonstrated the power of citizen witnesses to aid in holding officers accountable, as in the case of the officer, who shot Oscar Grant. In others, the failure of law enforcement to face consequences for misconduct, despite video evidence, fed public outrage and led to protests.

The publication of Bruns' *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond, from production to produsage* and Shirky's *Here comes everybody* in 2008, signaled a shift in focus from citizen journalism to participatory media and crowdsourcing and the benefits of massive participation in the creation, editing and filtering of information. Studies touted the benefits of participation for the users (Daugherty *et al.*, 2008; Johnson, 2008) and for the quality of information. Crowdsourced information was supposed to be better than information created by the work of an individual expert or gatekeeper because the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki, 2004) led to more diverse viewpoints and ultimately averaged all the knowledge available. There were new terms created to describe the users who both consumed and produced information (prosumers, producers, etc.) and questions about how journalists would incorporate and welcome these contributors. Everything from blogging to accidental or opportunistic witnesses who happened to capture an image of a newsworthy event and share it with professional news organizations was called citizen journalism.

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Participatory journalism, crowdsourcing and other activities and labels were used somewhat interchangeably, sometimes without clear definition.

Of course, not all the reactions to citizen journalism and increased participation were positive, as critics worried about the lack of professional training or oversight of these new contributors (Lemann, 2006; Skube, 2007) and others worried about inclusion – who counts as a citizen? Costanza-Chock (2008, p. 857) expressed concerns about unpaid labor as follows: “participation’ means free user data to mine and sell to advertisers and all user activity is subject to surveillance and censorship.” Other critics noted that, despite the celebration of participation, producers and the like, the vast majority of content on wiki sites and internet communities was created by a small number of the users and that participation was uneven. Sites criticized citizen journalism as mostly the province of:

A rather narrow and very privileged slice of the polity—those who are educated enough to take part in the wired conversation, who have the technical skills and who are affluent enough to have the time and equipment (quoted in Gillmor, 2004, p. 29).

Wikipedia editors were found to be predominantly male (Cohen, 2011). The 89-10-1 rule was used by McConnell and Huba (2006) and Horowitz (2006) to describe the percentage of users who only lurk and consume information, the percentage who like and share content and the percentage who create content. The rule was not assumed to apply on social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter but questions about the real representativeness of the crowd whose wisdom was presumed to come out of these participatory creative processes are likely relevant on social media as well. Many journalists were either openly hostile to the bloggers and citizens who offered competition (Skube, 2007; Dowd, 2009). This was all happening at the same time as huge economic challenges in the news industry, which led to staff cutbacks at virtually every major newspaper and the closure of some of the country’s longest-running dailies.

The growth of social-networking sites and later the broadly conceived term “social media,” further confused the issue. Facebook launched in 2004, eventually becoming the most widely-used social media site in the world and Twitter launched two years later. Over the course of the following decade, the use of social media sites grew from 5 per cent of US adults in 2005 to 69 per cent in 2018, according to the Pew Research Center (Smith and Anderson, 2018). Facebook reached 1 million users in less than a year, 50 million in three and a half years and 500 million in six years. Twitter reached 50 million in just two years. In 2018, Facebook claimed 2.23 billion monthly active users (Castillo, 2018). While the speed, low cost and low barriers of entry on easy-to-use blogging tools, photo-sharing and video-sharing sites and the integration of cameras in phones, had brought more creators to the process in citizen journalism, social media made production and sharing of information accessible to even more users.

Just as with citizen journalism, the growth and spread of social media was often celebrated for its potential to empower citizens and others to organize and build social movements. Twitter received perhaps too much attention for the power attributed to the site in galvanizing political revolutions in different parts of the world (Morozov, 2009) but it was doubtless significant in exposing many US observers to the issues. Hashtag campaigns to raise awareness for issues or the spreading of videos, such as the later-debunked Kony 2012 video, demonstrated the power of social media to spread information to huge numbers of users.

The growth of social media raised some of the same concerns and some new ones, including the vulnerability of personal data, privacy and the unintentional disclosure of

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information through social media, users' rights to their content and the exploitation of users' data for purposes they did not know or had not agreed to and concerns about young users sharing inappropriate content, getting bullied or falling prey to schemes such as cat-fishing. The spread of misinformation and especially the fabricated stories made to look like real news content known as "fake news" became an issue of national concern following the 2016 US presidential election. Meanwhile, the term citizen journalism, already used to describe a wide range of participatory activities, has been subsumed or further diluted by sharing on social media. Social media took user-generated content and expanded its reach, while distancing it from journalism even further. However, social media users have the same power to share information that citizen journalists possessed.

#### *Ethics and citizen journalism sites*

In 2012, Roberts and Steiner examined 34 citizen journalism sites:

To inventory ways in which these sites introduce education, standards and resources about ethics so that citizen journalists could develop a serious ethical awareness appropriate to the serious aims claimed on their behalf (p. 88).

Those sites represented a sample across a broad spectrum, including news aggregators, sites that published independent reports by citizens, professional legacy media sites that accepted citizen contributions and projects led by universities or other institutions. [Roberts and Steiner \(2012, p. 92\)](#) found that "few citizen journalism sites took ethics seriously, regardless of whether they are organized by mainstream news organizations, individuals with professional journalism, citizen groups or individual citizens." The approach to ethics ranged from news-sharing or news aggregator sites, which they said relied on users "to moderate each other and build reputation through peer evaluation of comments or posts" to traditional news organizations and content-sharing sites, which offered "only a legalistic Terms of Use or User Agreement prohibiting activities," including "the kinds of 'obvious' behaviors that are widely condemned and, in any case, are generally limited to behaviors that would result in legal actions against a user or the hosting site":

For example, users of NPR.org's social networking tools are told to respect people's privacy and avoid personal attacks; hate speech and threatening, bullying, pornographic, sexist and racist comments are prohibited. The Washington Post, for example, said that submitted content may not violate privacy or intellectual property rights; be libelous, defamatory, predatory or sexually explicit; advocate illegality or violence; degrade others on the basis of protected categories such as race; or attempt to intimidate or harass." ([Roberts and Steiner, 2012, p. 92](#)).

Where they did find examples of taking ethics seriously, generally on community-run sites, still the emphasis was on "prohibited behaviors – which are almost entirely behaviors broad enough that they should be applied to anyone online – rather than affirmative obligations or responsibilities specific to citizen journalists" and these "legalistic definitions of prohibited behaviors are not elaborated or explained" ([Roberts and Steiner, 2012, p. 94](#)). [Roberts and Steiner \(2012, p. 94\)](#) concluded:

Citizen journalism deserves and requires much more robust and philosophically complex discussions of ethics – for the benefit of the sites and the communities they serve, as well as the citizens engaged in journalistic activities.

In the enthusiastic push to encourage as many voices as possible, as [Roberts and Steiner \(2012\)](#) noted, the suggestion of many citizen journalism sites seemed to be that journalism is easy and anyone can do it, rather than the assertion that users have a responsibility when sharing information with the public. Compared with the social responsibility theory of the

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press, the approach to citizen journalism seemed to suggest that sharing information is easy and accessible and that power comes with no responsibility.

### *Ethics and social media*

In the years since that analysis of ethics on citizen journalism sites, social media use has grown massively and the number of social media sites with more than one billion active users is now at least five. When it comes to ethics, however, debates around social media users and online concerns seem to focus on users knowing their rights and privacy and on the behaviors that would get users removed from sites. A 2014 Pew Research study found that most Americans do not know what a privacy policy is (Smith, 2014) but again the emphasis seemed to be on what social media users—and internet users, generally – know about their rights, rather than what responsibilities they have when connecting with other users online. Other Pew research (Smith, 2017) has found that Americans do not understand privacy or security concerns. Where there is awareness of issues or concerns, again, it seems to be on what the effect on the individual user might be and how they might expose themselves to risk, through sharing content they did not intend to make public, for example.

Much of the research around social media and ethics has examined the obligations of journalists and other professionals or even researchers using social media to gather data, rather than the users themselves. The users are largely positioned as customers, irresponsible – or at least un-responsible, being served by the site, rather than as participants with an obligation to engage in a way that promotes the social good or the needs of a democratic society. Executives from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have faced questioning in Congress about the role their sites played in the spread of fake news and what responsibilities they have to filter misinformation, to protect the privacy of users or to inform users about what rights they have over the use of their information and content. This questioning, however, also seems to place responsibility in the hands of the companies rather than the users.

While the object of this study is the documents such as Terms of Use/Agreement and Community Guidelines, it is worth noting that most users do not read these agreements, terms or guidelines. In Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch's (2018) experiment to test behavior relating to privacy policies and terms of service agreements, 74 per cent of participants joining a fictional social network skipped the privacy policy and users spent an average of 51 s reading the terms of service, which was shown to all users and was estimated to take 15–17 min to read at average adult reading speed. Other consumer studies have found anywhere from 7 to 17 per cent of users read terms of service and other agreements. This paper, therefore, seeks to provide a better understanding of what the creators and owners of social media sites present as information that users ought to agree to or might consider useful to know, rather than insight into what users consider their responsibilities.

### **Methods**

This study examined the Terms of Use, User Agreements, Community Guidelines, Privacy Policies and any other documents provided to users of six of the most popular social media sites in the US, namely: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter and Snapchat, to inventory how those sites address ethics by analyzing the standards, education and resources provided to users. The social media sites selected are among the seven most popular social media sites in terms of percentage of population who use them (Smith and Anderson, 2018); the seventh on that list, LinkedIn, was excluded because it is not used to create and share the same type of information. Instagram is owned by Facebook, so ultimately only five companies were responsible for the user documents analyzed here.

The analysis adopted the framework of the 2012 study by Roberts and Steiner. Each site was searched for Terms of Use, User Agreements, Privacy Policies, Community Guidelines and any other documents appearing on those pages were examined. All materials or resources provided by a site were read and each link explored to understand the full extent of rights, responsibilities, and rules given to users of a particular site. Each site's documents were analyzed using the same questions that guided Roberts and Steiner's (2012) analysis of citizen journalism sites' ethics codes. This analysis was conducted in January 2019, so it may not reflect any additions or modifications made to the user resources provided by social media sites.

The areas of analysis from that study, adopted here, were as follows:

- *Training*: What kinds of ethical training or ethical education potential citizen journalists receive at sites and how they got it;
- *Content*: Whether the site provided a code of ethics that was either elaborate or bare bones;
- *Ethical standards*: Were citizen journalists held to ethical standards, such as minimizing harm or serving democracy? On whose behalf were they directed to be accountable – only each other or also sources or audiences? What provisions were made for cases where ethical standards were violated? What kinds of enforcement mechanisms had been established? Were citizen journalists encouraged to explain how their own stories came to be and to admit their own ethical violations – and were they encouraged to expose the ethical problems of others? Were the ethics merely technical and procedural or did they speak to a larger mission and responsibility of journalism?
- *Resources*: Did the site provide resources, citations or literature for further thinking about ethics? Did the site link to codes of ethics? Was ethics contextualized in terms of general theories?

## Analysis

### *Training*

This section considered training offered to users. On all the sites analyzed here, creating an account can take only seconds. Each site provides a Terms of Use or Terms of Service and a Privacy Policy but none of these policies address ethics. A few provide other documents, such as Community Guidelines – Facebook provides such a document. It is worth noting that users are generally required to indicate acceptance of the terms of service, but there is little in the way of barriers to ensure they do so before beginning to use the site to post content. The emphasis is often on the “ease” of sharing and participating in other activities (liking, following, etc.). Most social media apps or sites offer a brief series of instructional slides explaining features when the app is first opened after installation but these can be skipped, and none address ethics anyway.

None of the six social media sites provided any training in terms of ethics. YouTube has an extensive resources area with instructional videos, but it is largely focused on safety (topics: teen, parents, privacy, suicide and self-injury, educator resources). Several clicks through the resources bring a user to the “YouTube Digital Citizenship Curriculum,” described as providing:

A few short lessons, teachers in secondary level education can educate students (age 13+) on topics such as: YouTube's policies; How to report content on YouTube; How to protect privacy online; How to be responsible YouTube community members; How to be engaged digital citizens.



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The link directs users to Google's teacher center: (<https://teachercenter.withgoogle.com>). Despite the language in the lesson titles about being responsible community members and engaged digital citizens, the training in these categories is related to internet safety and privacy, "savvy searching," maintaining an online reputation and avoiding scams.

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest and Snapchat provided no training of any kind.

### *Content*

The analysis sheet asks whether a site's materials "go beyond forbidding clearly taboo behaviors that would be off limits for all citizens?" The terms of use of every social media site analyzed here focused almost exclusively on what behaviors were prohibited, and they generally included activities that are already illegal. For example, Pinterest's "Community Guidelines," state:

At Pinterest, our mission is to help you discover and do what you love. That means showing you ideas that are relevant, interesting and personal to you, and making sure you do n't see anything that's inappropriate or spammy. These guidelines are our acceptable use policy and clarify what we do and don't allow on Pinterest. If you come across a Pin, comment or message that seems to break these rules, you can report it to us.

The guidelines cover five areas, namely: safety, intellectual property and other rights, site security, spam and quality and contests and paid content (to prevent inauthentic behavior).

Other sites similarly focus on what is prohibited on the site, including the behaviors that will result in the removal of content and the behaviors that will result in a user being banned from the site. The same categories are covered on each site: privacy, safety, harassment, inappropriate content and intellectual property, respectively. There are differences among the sites. While Pinterest, for example, has a very broad range of content that can be banned, Twitter has a minimal policy: "We reserve the right to remove Content that violates the User Agreement, including, for example, copyright or trademark violations, impersonation, unlawful conduct or harassment."

### *Ethical standards*

The standards on these sites were articulated in terms of behaviors to be avoided if a user does not want to be banned from the site or have content removed from the site. Most of these behaviors were illegal, such as copyright infringement or defamation. The remaining behaviors were mostly related to protecting other users from harm or harassment or keeping out content that the sites presumably find disturbing or distasteful for other users.

Facebook has a "Community Standards" section, which begins:

The goal of our Community Standards is to encourage expression and create a safe environment. We base our policies on input from our community and from experts in fields such as technology and public safety. Our policies are also rooted in the following principles: Safety, Voice, Equity.

The community standards area has the following sections: violence and criminal behavior, safety, objectionable content, integrity and authenticity, respecting intellectual property, content-related requests. However, none of these sections addresses ethical standards.

Pinterest provides a detailed list of all the types of content they remove:

[. . .] porn, content that physically or sexually exploits people, images that show gratuitous violence or glorify violence, anything that promotes self-harm, like self mutilation, eating disorders or drug abuse, hate speech and discrimination or groups and people that advocate either, content used to threaten or organize violence or support violent organizations, attacks on private people or sharing of personally identifiable information, content used to sell or buy

regulated goods, like drugs, alcohol, tobacco, firearms and other hazardous materials, accounts that impersonate any person or organization, harmful advice, content that targets individuals or protected groups and content created as part of disinformation campaigns.

Where Pinterest does ask the user for something, it is framed in negative terms, as follows: do not infringe anyone's intellectual property, privacy or other rights; do not do anything or post any content that violates laws or regulations; and do not use Pinterest's name, logo or trademark in a way that confuses people (check out our brand guidelines for more details).

### *Resources*

No site examined here included any resources of the kind suggested in the analysis sheet. The training resources discussed above are the only educational resources provided for users. Ethics is never addressed in any of the resources on the sites examined here.

### **Discussion**

The social media sites examined here – the most widely used in the USA – frame the rights of users in terms of negative rights rather than obligations, only warning users about what behaviors will be punished or result in the removal of content or an account. None of the sites communicate to users that they have an obligation to other users or society in general. In fact, they communicate to users that they are free to engage in whatever behaviors they want, as long as they do not explicitly violate the rights of others, generally in ways that are already subject to legal prosecution offline. The majority seemed focused on avoiding culpability for the sites in the case of any bad behavior on the part of users. When platforms discussed obligations of users or framed terms in positive responsibilities, it was vague and limited, making a brief reference to making the site a place users enjoy or feel comfortable but not explicitly describing any obligations the users have to each other.

Many of these documents are written in legalistic language that may not be easily understood by many users but more importantly, in general, they do not ask the user for much. The terms do not imply that the user owes anything to other users of the site, or that they have any responsibility to do anything other than avoid explicitly illegal or harmful behaviors. Instead, the implication is that they are consumers being served by the platform, free to do as they please as long as they do not break the law.

While the goal of this study was to analyze the terms of service, community guidelines or other policies of these social media sites, it is important to note the ease with which these documents are skipped over or dismissed by users. Users do not have to read them before beginning to engage with and create content on social media and as referenced above, the vast majority do not read them. In this sense, the platforms are very user-friendly, in that they facilitate easy use by imposing almost no barriers to entry. This is an effective way to get as many users on the site as quickly as possible and likely serves the business goals of the social media companies. However, it also allows for participation without education, training or any reflection on the purposes or responsibilities of sharing content with others and it demonstrates to the users that the sites do not value these responsibilities.

Of course, this was largely the case with the citizen journalism sites examined in the 2012 study and it appears that social media sites have simply carried on the worst practices of some of those citizen journalism sites. Participation in sharing information is made to seem easy and free of responsibilities, likely so that users will sign up in huge numbers and start creating and interacting with content, which will generate more advertising income and user data the social media platforms can sell. However, in doing so, these sites indicate to users that they do not have much responsibility to check the quality of the information they share

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or think about the impact of content they share. It appears that most citizen journalism sites set low bars and social media sites lowered the bar further, eroding what little commitment to ethics was evident on those sites.

Perhaps, it would be more instructive to look back to journalistic ethics, to apply social responsibility theory of the press to all those who create, analyze and spread information online. The social responsibility theory of the press was predicated on the idea that the press have great power and a role to play in shaping the ability of the citizens in a democratic form of government to make decisions. Social media sites undoubtedly play a similarly significant role, as a growing number of Americans get news through them. It would reasonably follow, then, that the users of those sites have a similar responsibility to the one the Commission's members concluded journalists had. Social media sites could put those responsibilities and an understanding of the impact of their participation at the forefront of users' minds when they join a site, and perhaps, throughout their time on a site. Social media sites would need to imbue users with a sense that they have a responsibility to inform each other. User agreements, rather than lengthy, legalistic documents that most users skip past without reading, could instead be contracts detailing the obligations that users have to each other and the broader system within which they live, whether framed nationally, globally or in some other sense. Users could be asked to review some principles of ethics, and to make a pledge to behave in a way that benefits the greater good.

Much as journalists are not subject to any licensing or certification, social media users are not required to pass any test before participating in the creation and spreading of information. However, journalists learn about ethics and are expected by their peers, editors and employers to adhere to ethics codes. Much of boundary work or paradigm repair is dedicated to policing perceived violators of those ethics codes. It would benefit social media users to be exposed to ideas about ethics and their own responsibilities when creating, spreading and otherwise interacting with information that may inform other users. Adopting this change would not provide the same ease of use and participation, which could be a good thing. While it might hurt the bottom line of the social media companies, it might benefit the quality of information shared and promoted on them, and ultimately, the greater society.

The creation of ethics codes, providing resources or training about ethics would not guarantee good behavior. Professional journalists are guilty of lapses in judgment and violations of ethics codes. However, the fact that the social media sites ignore ethics and ethical training completely means that they are not communicating to users anything about the responsibilities they have or that ethics should play a role in the choices they make on social media. Social media users are still effectively citizen journalists – even if they are not identified that way – empowered to publish information to an audience; the sites that give them that power should provide them with some ethical guidance.

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**Corresponding author**

Jessica Roberts can be contacted at: [jessyrob@gmail.com](mailto:jessyrob@gmail.com)