

 **CASE 9-7****Online Links to Terrorist Home Pages⁷⁹**

As the new media director and online editor of the *San Fernando Star*, Andrea Marcos was on the cutting edge of her paper's technological reformation. She had designed the *Star's* home page and was the gatekeeper of the newspaper's daily online edition, but Marcos had not allowed the technology to overwhelm her sense of journalistic propriety. Technology, in her view, should be the servant and not the master in the journalist's search for truth. The endless possibilities of cyberspace were intoxicating, but Marcos had achieved a respectable comfort level in negotiating the mysteries of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Marcos applauded the state-of-the-art technology that offered instantaneous access to millions of bits of information with only the click of a mouse. But she was also disturbed by the glut of banal, uncouth, and even dangerous material that threatened to turn the Internet into an intellectual wasteland. From a historical perspective, online journalism was still in its infancy, but as its novelty slowly receded, reporters and editors had begun to view cyberspace with a sense of ethical wariness. On the one hand, the new technology allowed newspapers to compete more aggressively with their broadcast brethren in terms of the timely reporting of the day's events and to update stories as needed. For newspapers, it had revitalized the very meaning of news. On the other hand, the seduction of online editions intensified the probability of inaccuracies and the publication of uncorroborated and incomplete information. Marcos questioned whether cyberspace journalism could afford the luxury of ethical reflection.

One of the more promising innovations in the online repertoire, in Marcos's view, was the ability to provide the reader with links to other websites. For the intellectually curious, an online story could serve as a point of departure to an endless array of associated and unfiltered intelligence. However, Marcos did not believe that linking relieved an online editor of her ethical responsibilities as gatekeeper. If a newspaper, for example, were reluctant to include indecent, offensive, or inflammatory material within its regular edition, could it absolve itself of moral responsibility by linking to this information in its cyberspace edition?

During the four years that the *Star* had been online, for Marcos this question had been mostly academic. Where matters of taste were concerned, the newspaper's seasoned cadre of reporters had erred on the side of caution, thus avoiding the editor's moral scalpel. In a few cases Marcos had deleted links to commercial establishments to avoid the appearance of providing gratuitous publicity. But Toni Sanchez's story required more exacting scrutiny.

Sanchez, a seven-year veteran with the *Star*, was the newspaper's education beat reporter. She covered both the local educational establishment and the San Fernando State University campus at the edge of the metroplex. In recent months Sanchez had produced a series of articles describing the university's impressive record in new technologies research and the activities of the newly established Institute for the Study of Cyberspace Ethics, a research institute devoted to the ethical implications of the unregulated World Wide Web. In surveying the institute's daunting mission for story ideas, Sanchez had encountered Professor Benedictine Lasswell, who had received a government grant to study and map the activities of more than fifty terrorist and guerilla groups around the world, including Al Queda, most infamously associated with the 9/11 assault on the United States. Although some of his work was conducted under a cloak of confidentiality, Lasswell shared one interesting finding with the inquisitive journalist: Terrorists had emerged from the shadows and were now on the World Wide Web.

Marcos viewed Sanchez's story with a critical eye. It contained a fascinating account of how

some terrorist groups have entered the mainstream and attempted to gain respectability through the Web. Marcos was impressed with the apparent sophistication of some of these groups, as evidenced by the creative design of their home pages. Once known only for their guns, bombs, and assaults on innocent civilians, the terrorists were attempting to soften their images and to use their home pages to counter what they claimed had been a campaign of disinformation about their causes and their political objectives. Cyberspace had provided a platform for terrorists and other rebel organizations to go directly to the people rather than depend on the mediating influences of the press or risk government censure. Guerilla and rebel groups such as the ELN in Colombia, the Zapatistas in Mexico, and the Hezbollah in Lebanon were now among the featured players on the Internet.

Although the contents varied, the terrorist websites were a virtual smorgasbord of propaganda, featuring everything from doctrinaire and intemperate political commentary to antigovernment invectives to the biographies of "martyrs." Many of the home pages described in Sanchez's well-researched article had links to other sites. The article also had links—to the terrorist home pages. Marcos did not consider the linkage a matter of great moment, but neither was she prepared to dismiss it casually. As the moral agent and the online editor who reported only to the executive editor, she would decide the fate of the home page links in Sanchez's article. In the exchange with her reporter, Marcos was still ambivalent but decided to play devil's advocate.

"I'm a little concerned about the links in your article," Marcos told Sanchez. "Although these home pages appear to be harmless—I accessed three of them earlier today—including them in the online edition of the *Star* may give these groups a legitimacy they don't deserve."

"I question your premise," responded Sanchez. "You're suggesting that by including links in this article that we have somehow helped to mainstream terrorism and these guerilla and rebel movements. But they're already in cyberspace. If someone wants to contact them, their addresses are readily available from other sources."

"But that's an ethical cop-out," replied Marcos. "We can justify just about anything by claiming that readers who want this information will find it anyway so why worry about it. Would you approve of the *Star's* online edition linking to a site that provides instructions on how to manufacture a bomb from household products?"

Sanchez pondered her colleague's challenging inquiry but wasn't dissuaded from her opinion. "But this is different. We certainly don't want to link to a site that promotes violence. The home pages linked to my article may belong to terrorists, but they're not using the Web to launch an attack on the international computer network. I certainly don't condone their acts of violence, but they view themselves as politically oppressed minorities. The Web affords safe passage for their ideas past government censors. It provides an outlet for their frustrations and may even help to defuse their violent inclinations."

"But your argument misses the point," replied Marcos. "These home pages are still instruments of propaganda. Some of our curious readers will undoubtedly visit them. But we wouldn't include this kind of unfiltered information in the body of the story. Links should offer readers an opportunity to go beyond the coverage offered by our online edition, such as the full text of a Supreme Court opinion, but we should not abandon our editorial judgment just because we have the technical capacity to link our readers with the sources referred to in our articles. We're still gatekeepers. If we're doing a story about General Motors, would we link to their home page and provide them with free publicity?"

"Only if there is something there that we believe will supplement our own story in a meaningful way," said Sanchez. "When we link to an organization's home page, we aren't providing them with free publicity. Our readers are autonomous individuals. They can click to the sites if they wish, but the fact that we include them in the body of our texts doesn't imply our endorsement."

"Not directly," acknowledged Marcos. "But many of these groups are on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations. One strategy in the war against terrorism is to isolate them. In some respects their move onto the Web has circumvented that strategy. But the issue is whether

a newspaper should help to facilitate this facade of respectability—an attempt to legitimize their antisocial behavior through the unregulated forum of the Internet."

Sanchez persisted in countering her editor's objections. "I disagree that we're helping to enhance their credibility by linking to their home pages. Our readers can accept or reject what's there. The information there is harmless, and linking adds a dramatic dimension to the story."

"You may be right," admitted Marcos. "But keep in mind that home pages can change daily. Today they may be harmless; tomorrow they may contain a call for the violent overthrow of the regimes against whom they are revolting or a holy war against their enemies."

THE CASE STUDY

The pages of the World Wide Web are connected by a series of hyperlinks consisting of words, pictures, and phrases. A simple click of the mouse will instantaneously move you from one page to another. Linking the contents of an online publication to other sites allows journalists to share their documentary evidence and primary source materials with their readers. If done properly, over time linking may help to enhance journalistic credibility because it allows readers to review for themselves the points of interest referenced in the online article.

Does linking diminish an editor's moral responsibility as gatekeeper? As editor, would you be inclined to link to a site containing content that you would not include as part of the substance of the original article? If the case concerned child pornography, the decision would be more clear-cut. But the Web pages described in Toni Sanchez's article are essentially propaganda vehicles, an attempt by some terrorist organizations to soften their images and perhaps to gain sympathy within the global community.

Although she is keeping an open mind on the matter and is playing devil's advocate, online editor Andrea Marcos is concerned that by linking to these sites, her paper then becomes a political pawn for these organizations. Although the *Star's* linkage to these web pages will not alone significantly enhance their influence, she believes that

each news organization should assume its share of the responsibility for helping to spread the propaganda of these disaffected groups.

Marcos is also concerned about the transient nature of these terrorist home pages and the potential for quickly evolving from harmless propaganda vehicles to rhetorical devices for violent revolution. This reality of the cyberspace phenomenon is captured in this observation from Edward Mendelson in which he describes the use of the Web by a twentieth-century monk:

The system of hyperlinks connecting the pages of the World Wide Web suggests a world where connections are everywhere but are mostly meaningless, transient, fragile and unstable. A would-be monk in the twentieth century who visits the Web page of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert will find the exhortation "Don't miss our Thanks Page." A few clicks, and he arrives at an image by a local artist, which will be replaced on screen automatically and randomly in a few seconds by another, and then another. You can create a link between your own Web page—the "homepage" that acts as a table of contents for all the pages linked to it—and someone else's homepage, but you have no assurance that the other person's page will display the same content from one day to the next.⁸⁰

Sanchez obviously doesn't share her editor's apprehension and believes that linking to these web pages provides a more dramatic dimension to the story. Even if the content of the websites does shift, she still feels that the *Star's* readers are sufficiently mature to evaluate this information for themselves.

Assume the role of online editor Andrea Marcos. Are you convinced by reporter Sanchez's plaintive plea, or are your reservations still sufficiently disturbing that you will delete the web page links from the article? In examining this issue and reaching a decision, you should apply the SAD formula, as described in Chapter 3.

