

Public Abstract

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Title>Data Privacy in the Newsroom: The Ethical Justifications of Using User Data in the Reporting Process

Most websites have a privacy policy which tells users what information the website collects about them and how they will use that information. For news websites this information not only helps them provide advertising to the readers, but can also allow news organizations to identify the anonymous users of their site for news purposes.

This study looked at the ethical dilemma of journalists looking up the personal information of website users with the intent of unmasking their identity to the public.

The researcher started by reading the privacy policies of 13 of the largest newspaper corporations in the country, which represented 336 daily newspapers in 46 states. This helped the researcher to understand what types of information news websites typically collect and what is the standard procedure for distributing that information.

Next, the researcher spoke with attorneys to better understand how the policies are drafted and implemented by organizations. This also gave the researcher more information about how these policies are perceived by courts and privacy experts.

Finally, the research spoke with journalists who work for these corporations about their understanding of their privacy policy and also how any newsroom ethics policy might conflict with that policy.

The researcher found that journalists often are unaware of the importance of the privacy policy and make decisions based solely on ethics - which can cause a conflict when journalism ethics allow the journalist to disclose the anonymous person's identity, but the legal privacy policy might state otherwise.

In order to prevent this conflict, news organizations should change their privacy policy to allow for the disclosure of information about public individuals who attempt to use the site to speak about public issues from behind a veil of secrecy. Also, newsroom ethics policies should state a clear policy on how journalists should make a decision as to whether to identify an anonymous person on their website.