

LA Times Blogger Involved in Controversy Over Anonymous Postings

On April 20, 2006, *Los Angeles Times* business columnist Michael Hiltzik admitted to using a pseudonym to post controversial comments on a number of Web sites, including his own company-sponsored Weblog. After a week-long investigation, the newspaper announced that it would no longer publish Hiltzik's column and discontinue his latimes.com blog, "The Golden State." Hiltzik, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, was suspended and will be reassigned when his suspension ends.

The controversy, which provoked mixed reactions from journalists, media ethicists, and commentators, began when Patrick Frey, an assistant Los Angeles prosecutor, unmasked the *Times* columnist in an online posting to a weblog named "Patterico's Pontifications." The Weblog, or blog, was authored anonymously by Frey. Frey is one of a number of politically-oriented bloggers in southern California who feuded frequently with Hiltzik online. "As a blogger, Mr. Hiltzik is often strident in his liberal views, and has engaged in public political scrapes with a number of conservative bloggers," *The New York Times* reported on April 24, 2006. According to a column written that same day by Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post*, the conflicts were often "far more personal and inflammatory than his newspaper column on financial issues."

On April 20, 2006, Frey offered evidence that Hiltzik "left comments on the Internet under an invented pseudonym, at times explicitly pretending to be someone other than Michael Hiltzik." After noticing that Hiltzik's online comments were frequently admired by a blogger using the name "Mikekoshi," Frey used an online search engine to retrieve a number of Internet mailings lists that identified Hiltzik as "Mikekoshi." The search results, he said, also included online messages signed using the invented identity but bearing the columnist's full name and news affiliation. A second pseudonym used by Hiltzik, "Nofanofcablecos," was discovered by matching the IP addresses used to post comments under all three names, at times on his latimes.com blog. According to Frey, "Hiltzik and his pseudonymous selves have echoed each other's arguments, praised one another, and mocked each other's enemies."

Hiltzik admitted to the use of the pseudonyms in his final authorized posting on "The Golden State," but chided Frey's attack as a reaction to his earlier comments ridiculing Hugh Hewitt, a conservative talk show host and blogger.

According to Michael Weiss of *Slate.com*, Hiltzik remained “defiant and unapologetic to the end,” even when confessing to his indiscretion.

An Editor’s Note, written by *Times* editor Dean Baquet on April 29, 2006, acknowledged the columnist’s use of assumed names. According to Baquet, “employing pseudonyms constitutes deception and violates a central tenet of *The Times*’ ethics guidelines: Staff members must not misrepresent themselves and must not conceal their affiliation with *The Times*.” The editor mentioned no other ethical indiscretions that the columnist may have committed while working as the newspaper’s first staff member to maintain a blog on *latimes.com*. “Hiltzik did not commit any ethical violations in his newspaper column, and an internal inquiry found no inaccurate reporting in his postings or on the Web,” he wrote.

For some, Hiltzik’s use of assumed identities was representative of a nettlesome but unavoidable problem for publications sponsoring staff-written weblogs. Many commentators who make online postings do so anonymously. But one perceived problem in posting anonymous commentary as a journalist is that, while it may pose no direct harm to the reader, it may raise issues for the companies sponsoring the blogs.

“In posting to his own blog under a fake name, Hiltzik was clearly abusing the trust the paper had placed in him, and the *Times* has a right to protect the reputation that its brand depends on. But writing praise about yourself in pseudonym-ed comments is like a sitcom using a laugh-track; pretty lame, but not ultimately harmful,” *Editor & Publisher’s* David Hirschman wrote.

“What exactly are the rules for print or television journalists blogging on company sites?” Howard Kurtz, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, asked in a column on April 23, 2006. “Reporters are usually told not to take political stands or say anything they wouldn’t say in print or on the air. But their blogs by their nature are more personal, attitude-filled, sharp-edged or sarcastic.” The posting of blogs by reporters requires that publications come to terms with the fact that the “freewheeling, name-calling, grudge-settling blogosphere” that Kurtz described in an April 24, 2006 article may be at odds with many of the ethical guidelines adopted by publications across the nation.

The *Los Angeles Times* Ethics Guidelines forbid reporters from using their affiliation with the newspaper to settle personal disputes, and warns staff members to refrain from making public comments that “stray beyond what they would write in the newspaper.” The newspaper’s guidelines are available at <http://www.asne.org/ideas/codes/losangelestimes.htm>. Yet Hiltzik was widely

known for posting incendiary and unrestrained commentary on “The Golden State” and on other Web sites. Kurtz characterized Hiltzik’s posts as being frequently inflammatory and often motivated by personal grudges in his April 24 column.

According to Hiltzik, the *Times* never assigned an editor to guide the commentary on his blog. “I think essentially, they trusted me to know where the limits were. And to know that the limits were going to be a little different from what they are in the column,” Hiltzik told Robert Niles in an interview published by the *Online Journalism Review* on April 17, 2006, only days before his assumed identities were exposed.

The key is “to use the technology our way,” *The New York Times* deputy managing editor Jonathan Landman wrote in a memo sent to reports and editors at the paper after the launch of columnist David Carr’s blog, “Carpetbagger.” So long as editors and writers, working together, vigilantly observe the typical standards of fairness and care while blogging and editing online commentary, he wrote, “[o]ur notions of journalistic responsibility are perfectly compatible with spirited fun.” The memo is available at <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/003082.php>.

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