

Keep archives correct to prevent repeat errors



Be sure indexing software follows updates

By JEAN MANEKE
MPA Legal Consultant



(Jean Maneke, MPA's Legal Hotline attorney, can be reached at (816) 753-9000; jmaneke@manekelaw.com.)

Inevitably, it is on a Monday morning when the phone rings and the caller on the other end launches into a diatribe to tell you how inept your newspaper is and how you have made a terrible mistake in a recent issue and how their life will never be the same.

Most of you know that the steps you take after answering that call will determine whether this is a small problem or a large problem. But the new technology we use today raises interesting questions about what you do in your archives. Let's say you either misspelled a name or used the wrong person's name in the story. Or maybe you even got a fact wrong in the story. Of course you do a clarification for your next issue that resolves the error.

What do you do about the story that is posted to the web? Do you change it? Or what about the story in your electronic archives that is there for your staff's future reference?

The general recommendation you will receive from media lawyers is that you should indeed correct the electronic records and your on-line archive. Making a minor change in material does not affect your copyright.

If you fail to correct your internal library material, I guarantee you (from a story that dates back to my journalist days and probably is just like a story you can tell me), that the mistake will be repeated ad infinitum as future journalists pick up your error and compound it over and over again.

Correcting the on-line archives for your readers arguably enhances your credibility as a reliable source for information. You may even want to consider adding a short note at the beginning of the story to indicate a sentence or two has been changed since the original published version to clarify a matter in the story or to ensure accuracy of a person's name.

I suggest you go a step further. You should check to make sure that whatever software you use to index these materials is also corrected. Otherwise, a search for the erroneous name will not bring up the corrected story. Or, depending on how your software functions, it could be that a search for the correct name will not bring up the corrected story.

Certainly, you want your indexing mechanism to be as current as the correction on your original story.

A recent article on this subject pondered the issue of whether you should also correct errors your reporters find in archived materials they are using for current stories that didn't generate a correction at the time the original story was published. "We're not going to publish a correction about an error that we made a year ago, but it's still wrong so we will fix it," said Michael Jesse, library director of the Indianapolis Star.

He's right, I would argue, not only from the standpoint of the earlier issue about errors compounding themselves, but also from the standpoint of trying to be correct in all things. This is the type of issue that is important to create a policy on for your paper to ensure that staffers know when such matters should be "fixed."

If you are large enough to have a librarian, these duties can be delegated by the reporting staff to the librarian for handling to ensure consistency in the application of the policy. If you are the librarian, reporter and janitor, then having a policy will help you know what needs to be done and ensure that all steps are taken when the situation arises.

Correcting your on-line archives ... enhances your credibility.

###