When goofs need more than saying “We’re sorry”

By Eric Freedman, Michigan State University

Abstract

Magazines deal with their mistakes or misjudgments in many ways. They can ignore them, make a notation in their archives, publish a correction, run a letter to the editor with or without an editor’s note, print a follow-up article that acknowledges the mistake or admit error in the editor’s or publisher’s column. However, such traditional measures may be inadequate for a major error that could undermine the magazine’s reputation. Confronted with such problems, National Geographic, Black Issues in Higher Education, and Surgical Laparoscopy, Endoscopy and Percutaneous Techniques took drastic measures to respond to their readers.

Introduction

“Feathers for T. Rex?” National Geographic speculated as its title for an article that drew international attention with the assertion that “new birdlike fossils are missing links in dinosaur evolution.” The November 1999 article by an assistant senior editor told the story in ten well-illustrated pages. [1] Soon afterwards, however, the story fell apart when scientists discovered that a key fossil purportedly proving the existence of that missing link was a fraud and that a farmer in China had used homemade paste to glue the tail of a small terrestrial dinosaur to the body of a primitive bird. That left the ten-million worldwide circulation magazine in a mega-embarrassing situation.

For editor Bill Allen, finding out what went wrong was important—but equally imperative was explaining the mistake to readers. “We owe it to the members of Geographic and to other people because National Geographic is a reference publication and has a long shelf life,” he explained. [2]

At about the same time that discovery was made—and not far from National Geographic headquarters—Frank Matthews, the publisher and editor-in-chief of Black Issues in Higher Education in Fairfax, Virginia, made his own potentially embarrassing discovery: Due to a new but unsuccessful inking technique, the issue just placed in the mail contained a cartoon that appeared racist because of the way it depicted an African-American child. [3] On top of that, the same January 6, 2000, edition inadvertently used the photo of former U.S. Rep. Harold Ford Sr. of Tennessee instead of his son, the incumbent. [4]

“Because our publication deals with issues of race and issues of culture and ethnicity, we have to be acutely sensitive to how we represent the material, especially the images,” Matthews said later. “Had I received that edition in the mail, I would have been offended. We’ve been at this for twenty years, and I can never take it for granted that our readers will be with us just because they have been in the past.” [5]

These and similar situations raise challenges for magazine editors and publishers, who owe an ethical responsibility to their readers and a professional responsibility to their publications. At the same time they face the question of how to respond to errors
and distortions, whether based on inadvertence or on fraud, within the realities of time and space constraints. The handling of major errors by the consumer magazine *National Geographic*, the trade title *Black Issues in Higher Education* and the academic journal *Surgical Laparoscopy, Endoscopy, and Percutaneous Techniques* provide case studies of some options for magazines when their mistakes are drastic.

**Literature review and future research**

There have been several well-publicized incidents in which American magazines with well-established reputations made major goofs that left egg on their faces. There was the *Time* cover of O. J. Simpson’s mug shot, darkened to make him look unrealistically sinister, for example. [6] *Texas Monthly* used electronic manipulation to paste the head of a former governor onto pictures of models, generating reader complaints about the covers and their effect on the magazine’s credibility. [7] There also was the string of phony and phonied-up stories that spilled from Stephen Glass’ keyboard onto the pages of the *New Republic, George* and *Harper’s*. [8] Other incidents receive less attention among the public but the word may spread within the profession among magazine journalists. For instance, in 2002 *Details* published an essay about gossip, ostensibly written by the journalist and novelist Kurt Andersen. Andersen denied authorship, his lawyer complained to *Details* and the magazine both apologized publicly and conducted an internal investigation. A senior editor, who had handled the essay and who quit shortly before the scam unraveled, was suspected of engineering the hoax. [9]

Despite a combination of highly publicized events affecting magazines that reach millions of readers and events known primarily within the magazine industry, ethics in the context of magazine journalism has received far less academic attention than in the contexts of newspaper or broadcast journalism. Among the exceptions: A study that found a significant lack of standard practices and few ethical guidelines among consumer magazines [10]; a comparative study of how often media ethics were discussed in letters to the editor of magazines [11]; and analysis of reader confusion about advertorials [12]; and studies about digital manipulation of photos by magazines. [13]

Given the vast array of consumer, association and business-to-business magazines, this suggests a fertile arena for study into such topics as formal magazine ethics codes, informal magazine ethics policies and ethics training for magazine journalists. The growing reliance of editors, writers and photographers on electronic communications among themselves also points to an area for exploration. In the *Details* hoax incident, the magazine’s only pre-publication contact with “Kurt Andersen” throughout the assignment and editing processes was by e-mail. There was no fact-checking, no telephone conversation, no written contract, and no payment sent to the real Andersen or to anybody else. [14] The proliferation of both online-only magazines and Web versions of printed magazines opens additional research doors. One of those would be a study of how magazines use their Internet and e-mail capabilities to promptly post corrections and notify subscribers of mistakes or clarifications. In February 2003, for example, *Computerworld* published a Web article that blamed a radical Islamic group for a virus-type attack on the Internet. The magazine’s staff writer based his report on an e-mail interview with a supposed member of a Pakistan-based group responsible for the cyber-assault, but quickly learned that an American freelancer had duped him. Three hours after the article was posted, *Computerworld* removed it from the Web site and
posted a retraction. The next day, it posted an explanatory article by the same writer. [15]

Prompt Responses

For magazines, dealing with errors involves different temporal considerations than for newspapers and broadcasting. Corrections can’t be made for essentially the same readership or audience the same day, as with television or radio, or the next day as with daily newspapers or the next week as with weeklies—although they can be posted immediately on a magazine’s Web site. Given the practical realities and logistics of editorial lead time, production and printing, there may be a gap of several issues between publication of a mistake and its acknowledgement and fix.

At the same time, media ethics codes strongly urge publications to correct errors in print, and as soon as possible. For example, the accountability section of the Society of Professional Journalists code says, “Journalists should … admit mistakes and correct them promptly.” [16] The code of the American Society of Magazine Editors advises: “When mistakes are published—whether created by reporters, writers, editors or sources—acknowledge them promptly and prominently in your magazine with straightforward, thorough corrections. Complete candor about errors enhances the magazine’s credibility.” [17]

Individual magazines may adopt their own ethics policies, which are most often distributed in-house. Formerly, Folio, the magazine of the magazine industry, provided a model that simultaneously told readers of its commitment to correct errors but emphasized that the magazine would maintain control of its own editorial content. A box in each issue explained its corrections policy:

1. We always publish corrections at least as prominently as the original mistake was published.

2. We are eager to make corrections quickly and candidly.

3. Although we welcome letters that are critical of our work, an aggrieved party need not have a letter published for us to correct a mistake. We will publish corrections on our own and in our own voice as soon as we are told about a mistake by anyone—our staff, an uninvolved reader or an aggrieved reader—and can confirm the correct information.

4. Our corrections policy should not be mistaken for a policy of accommodating readers who are simply unhappy about a story.

The notice also included contact information for Folio’s then-editorial director and for Steven Brill, who was at the time the chief executive officer of the magazine’s parent company, Media Central. [18]

With or without a formalized written policy, magazines can follow a variety of avenues for dealing with their mistakes or misjudgments. They can ignore them, make a notation in their morgue or archives, run a correction, [19] publish a letter to the editor—with or without an editor’s note, [20] print a follow-up article that acknowledges the prior mistake someplace in the text, or admit the error in the editor’s or publisher’s column.
Candor and clarity are important, including an explanation of why the mistake was made. A reader wrote to *Natural History* explaining that the photograph of a marine animal identified as a pilot whale actually was a shale shark. Immediately below the letter came the editor’s reply: “The photography is indeed of a whale shark. The slide we worked from was captioned correctly by the photographer, but we mislabeled the photograph. We thank you and the other sharp-eyed readers who pointed out the error.”

It’s possible to publish such letters with a touch of humor. A number of readers caught a mathematical error in a December 2001–January 2002 *Natural History* article called, ironically, “Fear of Numbers” and dealing with Americans’ math-phobia. Five letters to the editor appeared in print, followed by a reply by the author, Hayden Planetarium Director Neil de Grasse Tyson, who embarrassingly acknowledged that he had made “a mistake of two orders of magnitude” when he referred to 25 billion Americans. “While I regret the error,” he continued, “I remain happily surprised by how many people were paying attention.” In addition, one of those readers asked how many letters the magazine received about the goof. The editors’ complete reply: “A zillion.”

*How National Geographic and Black Issues in Higher Education Responded*

When there is a dramatic error, one that could undermine the magazine’s reputation and standards, such traditional measures may be inadequate. In such circumstances, a correction or clarification box, or even a mea culpa in the editor’s column may fall short of what’s ethically required.

How did Allen and Matthews respond? At *National Geographic*, Allen and his associate editor discussed the best way to get out the facts, fully and as soon as feasible. One step was publication of a letter to the editor from the Beijing paleontologist who had concluded that the fossil was a composite rather than genuine. An editor’s note after the letter said CT scans of the fossil “seem to confirm the observations” in the paleontologist’s letter and promised that details about “anomalies in the fossils reconstruction” would be published once studies were complete.

Most dramatically, Allen hired a former *Washington Post* reporter, Pulitzer Prize-winner Lewis Simons, to investigate what went wrong and to tell *National Geographic* readers all about it. Writing about his assignment, Simons said, “Allen asked me to try to find out what happened. ’Learn everything you can about it. How did we get into this mess? Who put this thing (the fraudulent fossil) together? How did it make its way from a hole in the ground to our pages? Who’s at fault? Let the chips fall where they may.’” Allen told Simons to take as long as necessary and promised access to everyone and every document he could find, with the magazine underwriting all expenses. “He could talk to anyone, anywhere in the world, and we would make no suggestions as to whom he should or shouldn’t talk to,” Allen said. Equally important, the magazine promised to publish the report as written—“we would not cut anything out of it”—and Simons would have the power to approve any suggested changes in sentence construction, style, or even grammar.

What resulted was an extraordinary “Report to Members” in the October 2000 issue. Simons detailed “a tale of misguided secrecy and misplaced confidence, of rampant egos clashing, self-aggrandizement, wishful thinking, naïve assumptions, human error,
stubbornness, manipulation, backbiting, lying, corruption, and, most of all, abysmal communication. It’s a story in which none of the characters looks good.” The article traced the fossil—and the quagmire—from the Chinese farmer who sold the composite fossil to the dealer who first acquired it, to the owners of a Utah dinosaur museum that bought it, to the paleontologists and academic experts who examined it and, finally, to National Geographic’s own editorial staff. To give the article the full five pages that Simons wrote, National Geographic cut two pages of other editorial content from that issue.

At Black Issues in Higher Education, Matthews sent a letter to all 12,000 subscribers expressing his “humble apology for the problems and errors that appear” in the issue that would be delivered within a few days. “Because you are a faithful subscriber, I know that you expect and deserve the highest level of editorial professionalism and printing quality.” His “Dear Subscriber” letter went on to describe what went wrong, both with the “disastrous results” of the new inking technique and with the photo mix-up, which he characterized as “indefensible.” [27]

Regardless of the causes of the problems, including his own concerns when examining the galleys and a holiday-season botch-up at the magazine’s Canadian printer, Matthews felt he needed to take the initiative. That’s why the letter went out immediately. Readers responded with appreciative letters and e-mails, he said. “They sensed my sincerity and my displeasure and my embarrassment. I heard from congressmen, from presidents of universities, from people all over the country. They affirmed that I’d done the right thing.” [28]

**The retraction solution:** Surgical Laparoscopy, Endoscopy and Percutaneous Techniques

A retraction is another dramatic alternative. The research journal Surgical Laparoscopy, Endoscopy and Percutaneous Techniques took that drastic step when it learned of problems with the validity of a 1992 article. Those problems included malpractice suits and accusations of faked research, unauthorized experimental surgeries, overbilling of patients, threatening witnesses and other misconduct by the authors, who were internationally renowned surgeons and Stanford University Medical School faculty members. [29] First, in August 2000, the journal published a “Notice to Readers,” followed by a formal retraction in February 2001 that cited “recent public controversy” surrounding the article.

One of the authors has now admitted to significant discrepancies between the publication and the original medical records. Review of this and other court documents in the public record has led the Editors to conclude that this paper inaccurately represents the data on which it is based. Further, the Editors cannot be assured of the accuracy of an earlier publication that was part of the same clinical experience. As a result, Surgical Laparoscopy, Endoscopy and Percutaneous Techniques regrets to inform its readers

that it was retracting the two articles, one published in 1991 and the other in 1992. [30] Both articles described a new bowel surgery procedure that the authors claimed to have performed on sixteen women in Atlanta. One of the authors had admitted to a number of
errors, and his affidavit confessed that the procedure had not even been performed on two of the women. [31]

Retractions by medical journals are rare. A University of Pennsylvania medical ethicist was quoted as saying, “It takes a pretty obvious and outrageous case to get a retraction. [32] And the chief medical officer for Stanford Hospitals and Clinics labeled such an action by a medical journal as “unusual.” [33]

As uncommon as a magazine’s retraction of an entire article may be, so is press attention to a retraction. However, The Surgical Laparoscopy, Endoscopy and Percutaneous Techniques announcement drew front-page newspaper attention, with lengthy articles in the San Francisco Chronicle—due to the proximity of Stanford—and the Atlanta Journal and Constitution—because the discredited articles related to surgical procedures the authors had pioneered at an Atlanta hospital. Lessons from the heart

Ron Smith, a journalism professor at the University of Central Florida and author of Groping for Ethics in Journalism, argues that editors and publishers are obligated to be honest when their magazines mess up. “When your error is really misleading, you have to do more than run a little correction box. Readers do see those things and do appreciate them.” Smith added: “In some ways, it’s a sad thing to have to go outside, but ombudsmen are “next to nonexistent” at U.S. magazines. [34]

In situations where a publication’s very heart is at stake, Allen calls it critical to find somebody outside the organization to investigate and report. “Make sure you have someone who is absolutely trustworthy and has a sterling reputation, and be willing to live with whatever that person comes up with, wherever the trail leads.” [35]

Matthews says editors and publishers must evaluate the severity of the errors in relationship to their magazines’ subject matter and their perception of who their readers are.

That’s absolutely critical. As with the National Geographic retraction, they stake their reputation on bringing verified scientific information to their readers, and we stake our reputation on bringing to our readers extremely sensitive, extremely important information about the historical treatment of African-Americans and other minorities in the press. [36]

Conclusion

Situational responses, no matter how ethically admirable, don’t happen in a vacuum. Magazines—business-to-business, consumer or association—should be encouraged to adopt and follow a set of ethical standards, whether self-designed or adopted from a professional organization such as the American Society of Magazine Editors. Obviously, no code can answer all questions but codes can provide guidance to employees, from the publisher and editor on down. [37] Those standards should acknowledge an obligation to correct mistakes, and the magazine should have procedures in place to implement that obligation, whether the mistakes are routine or so serious that they require the type of extraordinary, self-motivated responses that National Geographic and Black Issues in Higher Education undertook.
Endnotes


7 Smith, 107.


[19] Business Week, for instance, runs a “corrections & clarifications” box in its weekly letters-to-the-editor section.


[22] Allen interview.

[23] Allen interview.


[26] Allen interview.


[29] See, for example, Alison Frankel, “Obsession,” The American Lawyer, June 2001, 80-109. Also, court documents in a Georgia malpractice suit indicated that the authors had failed to disclose that some of the patients who underwent surgery for a uterine disorder suffered serious health problems although their journal articles claimed that the women suffered no major complications.


[34] Ron Smith, telephone interview with author.


[37] Eric Freedman, “Build a code of ethics to keep trouble at bay,” Folio: 1 November
1998, 139-141.