How to Blog Safely (About Work or Anything Else)

Blogs are like personal telephone calls crossed with newspapers. They're the perfect tool for sharing your favorite chocolate mousse recipe with friends--or for upholding the basic tenets of democracy by letting the public know that a corrupt government official has been paying off your boss.

If you blog, there are no guarantees you'll attract a readership of thousands. But at least a few readers will find your blog, and they may be the people you'd least want or expect. These include potential or current employers, coworkers, and professional colleagues; your neighbors; your spouse or partner; your family; and anyone else curious enough to type your name, email address or screen name into Google or Feedster and click a few links.

The point is that anyone can eventually find your blog if your real identity is tied to it in some way. And there may be consequences. Family members may be shocked or upset when they read your uncensored thoughts. A potential boss may think twice about hiring you. But these concerns shouldn't stop you from writing. Instead, they should inspire you to keep your blog private, or accessible only to certain trusted people.

Here we offer a few simple precautions to help you maintain control of your personal privacy so that you can express yourself without facing unjust retaliation. If followed correctly, these protections can save you from embarrassment or just plain weirdness in front of your friends and coworkers.

Blog Anonymously

The best way to blog and still preserve some privacy is to do it anonymously. But being anonymous isn't as easy as you might think.

Let's say you want to start a blog about your terrible work environment but you don't want to risk your boss or colleagues discovering that you're writing about them. You'll want to consider how to anonymize every possible detail about your situation. And you may also want to use one of several technologies that make it hard for anyone to trace the blog back to you.

1. Use a Pseudonym and Don't Give Away Any Identifying Details
When you write about your workplace, be sure not to give away telling details. These include things like where you're located, how many employees there are, and the specific sort of business you do. Even general details can give away a lot. If, for example, you write, "I work at an unnamed weekly newspaper in Seattle," it's clear that you work in one of two places. So be smart. Instead, you might say that you work at a media outlet in a mid-sized city. Obviously,

don't use real names or post pictures of yourself. And don't use pseudonyms that sound like the real names they're based on--so, for instance, don't anonymize the name "Annalee" by using the name "Leanne." And remember that almost any kind of personal information can give your identity away--you may be the only one at your workplace with a particular birthday, or with an orange tabby.

Also, if you are concerned about your colleagues finding out about your blog, do not blog while you are at work. Period. You could get in trouble for using company resources like an Internet connection to maintain your blog, and it will be very hard for you to argue that the blog is a work-related activity. It will also be much more difficult for you to hide your blogging from officemates and IT operators who observe traffic over the office network.

2. Use Anonymizing Technologies
There are a number of technical solutions for the blogger who wishes to remain anonymous.

If you are worried that your blog-hosting service may be logging your unique IP address and thus tracking what computer you're blogging from, you can use the anonymous network Tor to edit your blog. Tor routes your Internet traffic through what's called an "overlay network" that hides your IP address. More importantly, Tor makes it difficult for snoops on the Internet to follow the path your data takes and trace it back to you.

3. Use Ping Servers
If you want to protect your privacy while getting news out quickly, try using ping servers to broadcast your blog entry for you. Pingomatic http://www.pingomatic.com is a tool that allows you to do this by broadcasting to a lot of news venues at once, while making you untraceable. The program will send out notice (a "ping") about your blog entry to several blog search engines like Feedster and Technorati. Once those sites list your entry ñ which is usually within a few minutes ñ you can take the entry down. Thus the news gets out rapidly and its source can evaporate within half an hour. This protects the speaker while also helping the blog entry reach people fast.

4. Limit Your Audience
Many blogging services, including LiveJournal, allow you to designate individual posts or your entire blog as available only to those who have the password, or to people whom you've designated as friends. If your blog's main goal is to communicate to friends and family, and you want to avoid any collateral damage to your privacy, consider using such a feature. If you host your own blog, you can also set it up to be password-protected, or to be visible only to people looking at it from certain computers.

5. Don't Be Googleable

If you want to exclude most major search engines like Google from including your blog in search results, you can create a special file that tells these search services to ignore your domain. The file is called robots.txt, or a Robots Text File. You can also use it to exclude search engines from gaining access to certain parts of your blog. If you don't know how to do this yourself, you can use the "Robots Text File Generator" tool for free at Web Tool Central . However, it's important to remember that search engines like Google may choose to ignore a robots.txt file, thus making your blog easily searchable. There are many tools and tricks for making your blog less searchable, without relying on robots.txt.

6. Register Your Domain Name Anonymously

Even if you don't give your real name or personal information in your blog, people can look up the WHOIS records for your domain name and find out who you are. If you don't want anyone to do this, consider registering your domain name anonymously.

Blog Without Getting Fired

A handful of bloggers have recently discovered that their labors of love may lead to unemployment. By some estimates, dozens of people have been fired for blogging, and the numbers are growing every day.

The bad news is that in many cases, there is no legal means of redress if you've been fired for blogging. While your right to free speech is protected by the First Amendment, this protection does not shield you from the consequences of what you say. The First Amendment protects speech from being censored by the government; it does not regulate what private parties (such as most employers) do. In states with "at will" employment laws like California, employers can fire you at any time, for any reason. And no state has laws that specifically protect bloggers from discrimination, on the job or otherwise.

One way to make sure your blog doesn't earn you a pink slip is to make sure that you write about certain protected topics. Most states have laws designed to prevent employers from firing people who talk openly about their politics outside of work, for example. Be warned that laws like this do vary widely from state to state, and many are untested when it comes to blogging.

1. Political Opinions

Many states, including California, include sections in their Labor Code that prohibit employers from regulating their employees' political activities and affiliations, or influencing employees' political activities by threatening to fire them. If you blog about membership in the Libertarian Party and your boss fires you for it, you might very well have a case against him or her.

2. Unionizing

In many states, talking or writing about unionizing your workforce is strongly protected by the law, so in many cases blogging about your efforts to unionize will be safe. Also, if you are in a union, it's possible that your contract may have been negotiated in a way that permits blogging. Some states protect "concerted" speech about the workplace, which means that if two or more people start a blog discussing the conditions in their workplace, this activity could be protected under local labor laws.

3. Whistleblowing

Often there are legal shields to protect whistleblowers--people who expose the harmful activities of their employers for the public good. However, many people have the misconception that if you report the regulatory violations (of, say, toxic emissions limits) or illegal activities of your employer in a blog, you're protected. But that isn't the case. You need to report the problems to the appropriate regulatory or law enforcement bodies first. You can also complain to a manager at your company. But notify somebody in authority about the sludge your company is dumping in the wetlands first, then blog about it.

4. Reporting on Your Work for the Government

If you work for the government, blogging about what's happening at the office is protected speech under the First Amendment. It's also in the public interest to know what's happening in your workplace, because citizens are paying you with their tax dollars. Obviously, do not post classified or confidential information.

5. Legal Off-Duty Activities

Some states have laws that may protect an employee or applicant's legal off-duty blogging, especially if the employer has no policy or an unreasonably restrictive policy with regard to off-duty speech activities. For example, California has a law protecting employees from "demotion, suspension, or discharge from employment for lawful conduct occurring during nonworking hours away from the employer's premises." These laws have not been tested in a blogging context. If you are terminated for blogging while off-duty, you should contact an employment attorney to see what rights you may have.

Blog without Fear

Blogs are getting a lot of attention these days. You can no longer safely assume that people in your offline life won't find out about your blog, if you ever could. New RSS tools and services mean that it's even easier than ever search and aggregate blog entries. As long as you blog anonymously and in a work-safe way, what you say online is far less likely to come back to hurt you.

Resources

C|Net's guide to workplace blogging:
http://news.com.com/FAQ+Blogging+on+the+job/2100-1030_3-5597010.html?tag...

How Tor works:
http://tor.eff.org/overview.html

The Bloggers' Rights Blog:
http://rights.journalspace.com/

A Technical Guide to Anonymous Blogging (An Early Draft), by Ethan Zuckerman:
http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/?p=125

EFF's Legal Guide for Bloggers, a larger, more comprehensive look at the legal issues facing bloggers:
http://www.eff.org/bloggers/lg/