CBS News Draws Ire of Bloggers

By TOM ZELLER JR.
Published: January 17, 2005

The handling of documents appears to have tripped up CBS News again, and once more bloggers have provided instant - and biting - critiques of the incident.

After an independent panel published its findings on the use of unverified documents relating to President Bush's National Guard duty on "60 Minutes Wednesday," the entire 234-page report was made available on the CBS News Web site and that of the law firm hired to handle the inquiry, Kirkpatrick & Lockhart Nicholson Graham. But several Web sites noted that the posting of the report had been altered two days after it was placed on the Web page.

"I'd written a couple of pieces on the document earlier in the week," said Ernest Miller, a fellow of the Information Society Project at Yale Law School who writes a popular blog on Internet law (www.corante.com/importance). "Then I noticed that I couldn't copy and paste from the report as I did in days past."

With the help of Seth Finkelstein, a programmer and fellow blogger (sethf.com/infothought/blog/), Mr. Miller found that the document's encryption settings had been changed and, as a result, the text could not be copied. Anyone who downloaded the panel's report from either the CBS News servers or those of the law firm would have to retype any passages they wished to include in, say, an e-mail message or a blog post.

In the lightning-fast realm of online commentary, the change was akin to dumping molasses on a blogger's keyboard. "Now why would CBS News do that?" Mr. Miller asked on his Web site. "What happened to the transparency?"
According to Linda Mason, a CBS News executive who served as a liaison between the network and the independent panel, an attorney from the law firm called her on Wednesday and asked that the digital restrictions be made - including the prevention of copying and pasting. The fear, it seems, was that an enterprising ne'er-do-well could copy the text into a new document and begin circulating a faked version of the report.

"The bloggers and anybody else can do what they want with it," Ms. Mason said. "It's out there for the public to see. We're not trying to hide anything."

But few bloggers were buying that. Many sites were suggesting ways to beat the encryption settings, and others, like rathergate.com, were more than happy to make available the earlier, unrestricted version of the report.

"They're just putting up speed bumps," Mr. Miller said. "It makes CBS look bad."

**Special Offer: Home Delivery of The Times from $2.90/week.**