

Media Ethicist Cites Power Of Cyberspace

by Keith Darce

The world separating Carl Durrenberger and William Swanson couldn't be wider. Durrenberger, 29, is a chemical engineer and market developer for Hewlett-Packard's ink jet printer division in San Diego. Swanson, 57, is chief executive of Raytheon Co., a defense contractor based in the Boston suburb of Waltham with annual sales of \$22 billion. But their paths collided in a burst of national headlines recently after Durrenberger revealed on his Web log, or blog, that a collection of commonsensical business rules that Swanson had long claimed as his own creation actually was penned by someone else 62 years ago. Raytheon's board punished Swanson for the apparent plagiarism by freezing his salary this year and cutting his stock award, a slap worth about \$1 million. The slip was particularly troubling because it came from the head of one of the country's most powerful corporations, one that is responsible for manufacturing highly secretive defense products for the military. Questions about Swanson's integrity and honesty could damage the credibility of his employer. Swanson, while speaking at a December 2002 graduation ceremony at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., noted the high level of integrity required of senior executives. "Business ethics isn't something you can just put on like a raincoat when the weather gets a bit stormy," he told the graduates. "You need to make a commitment to business integrity from day one, even when the sun isn't shining." Beyond being an expensive embarrassment for the high-profile executive, Durrenberger's revelation offered yet another example of the growing influence of cyberspace and the formidable power that it can wield, even in the hands of an average joe. "Those with power and position are more vulnerable in the Internet era," said Robert Steele, senior instructor on media ethics at the Poynter Institute in Florida. "Their words, thoughts and actions can easily be scrutinized by virtually anyone. "All of us will be held accountable more quickly and easily because of the scope and reach of the Internet." Durrenberger wasn't looking to be a muckraker when he stumbled onto his discovery. In fact, the Austin, Texas, native's blog is mostly filled with personal movie reviews and photographs that he has taken around his San Diego neighborhood. The aspiring art photographer hopes one day to show his pictures professionally. While cleaning out his desk for a move to a new office, Durrenberger came across a copy of "The Unwritten Laws of Engineering," written by California engineering professor W.J. King and published by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 1944. As he thumbed through the book, he chuckled at its corny, outdated language, just as he had several years earlier when he received the tome from one of his bosses at Hewlett-Packard. "A fit of nostalgia hit me," he said. A few days later, Durrenberger stumbled upon some of the same rules again, but this time they were part of a news article about Swanson that had been posted on an Internet blog written by Jason Kottke, whose popular Web site is part of the engineer's weekly Internet-surfing routine. The article, which originally appeared in USA Today, described another publication, "Swanson's Unwritten Rules of Management," a collection of maxims that the Raytheon CEO claimed to have devised and gathered over the years. By the time Swanson's company printed the rules in booklet form several years ago and started giving them away, the CEO's sayings had gained something of a cult following among corporate executive circles. Durrenberger immediately noticed similarities between Swanson's rules and the ones written by King years earlier. "I was like, God, that sounds mighty familiar," he said. "I pulled the (King) book off my shelf and compared it." Here are some of the parallels that he found: Swanson: "Cultivate the habit of boiling matters down to the simplest terms: the proverbial 'elevator speech' is the best way." King: "Cultivate the habit of 'boiling matters down' to their simplest terms." Swanson: "Don't get excited in engineering emergencies: Keep your feet on the ground." King: "Do not get excited in engineering emergencies - keep your feet on the ground." Swanson: "Cultivate the habit of making quick, clean-cut decisions." King: "Cultivate the habit of making brisk, clean-cut decisions." At first Durrenberger imagined that the article had merely failed to credit King, so he dashed off an e-mail to the writer about the apparent problem. "I just thought it was a fact-checking gaffe," he said. But after some more digging on the Internet, it became clear to the engineer that Swanson himself had been claiming credit for the rules for years. "It was something that looked more like a plagiarism case," Durrenberger said. He waited a day to hear back from the USA Today writer, but when no response arrived he decided to publish his e-mail under the heading, "Bill Swanson of Raytheon is a Plagiarist," on his own blog. Durrenberger also forwarded a copy of the e-mail to Kottke, who promptly posted the information on his blog. Soon after a New York Times reporter picked up the story from Kottke's site, Durrenberger's discovery began popping up in media reports

across the country. Swanson and his company initially downplayed the matter, suggesting it was an innocent attribution oversight largely the fault of the CEO's staff. But as heat continued to build, Swanson took responsibility for the gaffe. Swanson addressed the embarrassment during Raytheon's annual meeting May 3, apologizing to the company's board, its shareholders, its employees and "to those whose material I wish I had treated with greater care." Without the Internet, Durrenberger's discovery would have reached far fewer people over a much longer period of time and might never have attracted the attention of reporters at major media outlets, said Steele, the journalism ethics professor. "This would have been much more cumbersome and, in some cases, impossible a decade ago," he said. The story should serve as a foreboding lesson far beyond the ranks of corporate executives, Steele said. "All of us must recognize that there are now hundreds of thousands of watchdogs out there who can gain access to what we write and what we say." The tale also raises serious questions about bloggers such as Durrenberger who operate outside of any formal set of standards for ethics and conduct, Steele said. "When you make an allegation of this nature on the Internet, there is considerable weight to it. Is it fair to shoot a poison dart without (first) going to the person who is on the receiving end to get a response," the professor said. Durrenberger said he did not try to contact Swanson before making the post to his blog because he believed it would have been impossible to break through the corporate barriers that surround the chief executive. Anyway, Durrenberger said, his position as a casual private blogger should not be held to the same standards of professionally trained journalists who write for a vastly larger audience. "My blog isn't a reputable publication or one that gets a lot of visitors," he said. "It's more like me calling someone and tipping them off. And I didn't want this to take up a lot of my time." It's just that sort of detachment that concerns Steele. "My worry is that we are still in the Wild West era of the Internet," the professor said.

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