

Case 9-E

Born Just Right

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Missouri School of Journalism broadcast news professors Jennifer and Randy Reeves could not have been more excited about the birth of their second child—all the prenatal checks were great, brother “Cam” was excited, and the birth process itself went as expected. Baby girl Jordan was born happy, healthy, and almost without flaw. But sometime during Jen’s pregnancy, the baby’s umbilical cord had become wrapped around her right arm, choking off the blood supply to the developing limb. When she was born, Jordan’s right arm did not extend as far as her elbow. The problem was an unexpected one; ultrasound had not picked it up prior to her birth. Jordan’s “defect” was an unusual one. Very few infants are born needing a prosthetic limb.

Jenn Reeves is a talented and caring teacher who embraced new technology and did her best to incorporate it into her classes. But with the new baby less than three months old, Jenn applied her journalistic and new media skills to the newest problem in her life. She started the blog “Born Just Right” (<http://www.bornjustright.com/>), an effort that required learning some programming and a bit of technology to try to provide parents of kids with similar challenges to share experiences, learn from each other, and build a community.

As Jenn learned, blogging is a complicated and time-consuming process, something she had to work around her already demanding teaching job and her equally demanding life as a wife and parent. Among the most popular kinds of blogs are “mom blogs” where mothers share their insights about parenting, children and family life. Originating and maintaining such a blog required daily effort. Frequent updates are mandatory—multiple times a day is best—if a blog is to appear high on a search engine list. Some “mom blogs” have become profitable; those blogs usually contain endorsements for particular products aimed at kids or their parents. Finding a computer program that would allow for the sort of interaction Jenn required also was work; during the blog’s life, she’s changed its data architecture at least twice, always with the goal of making it easier for her to post and for others to comment.

What Jenn had in mind was not the typical “mom blog”. She was seeking other parents who faced the sort of challenges she did—everything from getting some state help with the expenses of paying and continuing Jordan’s therapy—to finding people willing to construct prosthetic limbs for children who were going to outgrow them, an expensive proposition and, as the Reeves learned, one that was not well covered by insurance.

But, slowly, the blog and its audience grew. Jenn says her “blog” voice is distinct from her journalistic one—it’s more personal, more emotional and very much more focused on the single issue of helping Jordan. It also chronicles the daily events in Jordan’s life as well as the milestones, including photos. The first ballet lesson, the first dance recital, getting the first prosthesis, finding those who could and would help, all became blog entries. But, it’s also journalistic; there’s a wealth of information presented impartially from the point of view of someone who both needs and values the facts about government programs, private support, and facing the problems that every child who is born just right encounters.

As of this writing, the blog itself has about 3,200 unique visitors. In the blog world, this is more than enough to interest sponsors—in other words, Jenn could monetize her blog should

she chose. The blog has also resulted in some professional rewards for Jenn—she is invited to present at blogging conferences to talk about creating and sustaining a blog. She also uses the blog in her classes; in fact, in many of her classes, Professor Reeves requires her students to blog multiple times a week. She notes that blogging is really writing practice and that it can, in rare instances, boost a student to the head of the applicant line for jobs after graduation. And, the blog also has given the entire Reeves family some terrific opportunities. Disney, after it became aware of the blog, invited the entire family to visit Winter, the dolphin star of the film *Dolphin Tale* who was born without a fully developed tail and needed her own dolphin prosthesis. Jordan was not part of the film itself or the publicity effort surrounding it, but she and Winter did get to compare their “artificial” limbs. You can find photos of all of this on the blog itself.

Jenn herself says the blog has taught her a lot that she’s been able to pass along in the classroom. But, it’s also given her and her daughter a community. Jenn is not sure whether what she has created is point-of-view journalism, a non-money seeking non-profit, or a multi-year long set of persuasive messages. But, as long as Jordan continues to approve, she will continue the effort.

Micro Issues

1. Take a look at the blog. Do you think it invades the privacy of the Reeves family?
2. How do you think Kant and Aristotle would evaluate this blog?
3. Do you think a blog such as this could have succeeded as well if its creator had not had some journalistic training and experience? Why or why not?

Mid-range Issues

1. Do you think monetizing the blog would change its character? Evaluate your response in terms of loyalty and truth-telling.
2. Before this case study was written, Jenn Reeves reviewed it. Was this an appropriate approach? Evaluate your answer in light of the recent controversies about reporters clearing quotes with sources as outlined in the case in chapter 2. If your answer in these instances is different, explain why, using ethical theory.
3. From the point of view of a strategic communications professional, how could/ or should Jenn ethically market her blog to, for example, help pay for Jordan’s college expenses. Justify your response using ethical theory.
4. Should this blog become the subject of news stories?

Macro Issues

1. Is this blog journalism? Strategic communication? Link your answer to craft standards.
2. Evaluate the idea behind “Born Just Right” and its content according to ethical principles.