Pre-Symposium Lecture Series
Communications Law & Policy Society

WHITE PAPER:

The white papers are a series of one-page reports on the general subjects to be presented in panels or discussion groups at the symposium. They are written by CLPS members. These papers are only meant as guidelines and are not intended to limit the conversation in any manner. Panelists are encouraged to expand the topics to include their interests or practice areas.

Wag the Dog: Tech Reporting & Policy

The objective of this panel is to explore the influence tech-reporting has on the creation, adoption and marketing of new technologies. Discussion will include how both traditional and online journalism affects the timing of product releases, and as a result, how manufacturers address leaks and rumors throughout the product cycle. A focus on how companies can establish and maintain consumer goodwill online will also be explored. Finally, the broader focus of how tech-reporting influences consumer policy will be examined.

Online tech-reporting's audience has become mainstream. A greater number of high-tech devices have entered the marketplace and the home, and the need to stay current is no longer for the mere hobbyist. Today's personal technology is highly complicated, and the choices for what products consumers adopt many. As such, personal technology journalists such as David Pogue of the New York Times, Walt Mossberg from the Wall Street Journal and Leo Laporte of Twit among others are sought after personalities whenever a new consumer electronic device enters the marketplace. Their reviews and opinions can heavily influence the success or failure of a new device or software application.

With their respective followers tech-journalists have a unique opportunity to color the debate on what consumers expectations are in new products and communications. Recently, David Pogue's "Take Back the Beep" campaign, which was launched on his NYT blog criticized wireless carriers for including redundant and lengthy voicemail instructions which ate up consumer minutes, wasting both time and money. His blog campaign found broad consumer support and the wireless carriers quickly modified their policies.

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Meanwhile, Michael Arrington, founder of Techcrunch, was recently in the news because he published from Twitter select content from a library of over 300 internal business documents and screenshots, which were forwarded to him by a hacker. His decision to release this information led to a heated debate over classic themes of journalistic ethics and protection of sources.

Other issues arise in the form of journalistic ethics and conflicts of interest. For example, many of the big name tech-reporters also write books on the products they review. This came into question recently when David Pogue was accused of giving Apple's Snow Leopard OS a warm review in the NYT while his publisher was prepping an instructional book he authored on the same topic. Accusations that he was propping up the new OS to get a large install base that would, in turn buy his book flew throughout the web.

How does tech-reporting influence policy decisions and tactics? How can journalistic ethics reconcile the appearance of conflicts of interest arising from writers reviewing products while simultaneously working on projects related to the devices they review? Does the tech-reporting environment aid or hinder innovation? Are tech-reporters doing an adequate job of informing the public about new technologies? Are companies playing to critics or to the needs of consumers and investors, and if so, how are these interests balanced? How closely do agencies like the FTC and FCC track the debate in the tech-reporting venue? These questions and more will be addressed with both specific and historical examples of how tech-reporting has influenced the communications and technology landscape.