

# ***Media Credentials for Web Sites***

*(and the case for HokieCentral.com)*

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## **Overview**

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### ***Situation***

Independent web sites such as HokieCentral.com, which are not affiliated with the university or a traditional news/sports organization such as TV or radio, are requesting media credentials from the Virginia Tech Athletic Department.

### ***Problem***

The Athletic Department does not know how to differentiate the legitimacy of one site when compared to another, and does not know how to decide when to grant credentials to web sites, and when to refuse them.

### ***Solution***

Establish criteria for the decision of whether to grant credentials for a web site, and apply those criteria consistently across the board. The most likely candidates for criteria are the history and longevity of the web site and its traffic.

A detailed presentation follows that clarifies how to consider these factors when deciding to grant credentials to a web site. The presentation is structured to suggest possible criteria, and how HokieCentral.com meets the suggested criteria.

## ***Factor #1: The History and Longevity of the Web Site***

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A concern of the Athletic Department is that "anyone could start a web site and request media credentials." Yes, this is true, but the Athletic Department can easily differentiate "fly by night" web sites from long-term productions simply by requiring that a web site be in existence, under its own domain name, for a certain period of time before the site can request media credentials.

HokieCentral.com has been in existence since March of 1997 under the www.HokieCentral.com domain name, meaning that the HokieCentral.com domain name has been in existence for two and a half years. Prior to that, the site existed from March, 1996 to March, 1997 as a user home page on the NRVNet and later the U.S. Internet web servers.

### ***Suggestion***

Require that a web site be in existence for a full year, under a unique domain name, before it can request media credentials from Virginia Tech.

A time period of longer than a year is not necessary. One year will easily separate a serious, long-term web site producer from a temporary, fly-by-night operation.

A period longer than a year would be unfair and inconsistent when considering other forms of media. For example, when the Fox TV Network was started, it was no doubt granted news and sports media credentials without having to be in existence for an arbitrarily long period of time.

### ***How HokieCentral.com Meets The Criteria***

HokieCentral.com has been in existence under the HokieCentral.com domain name since March of 1997, which equates to a period of two and a half years.

### ***Further Details/Explanations***

A unique domain name is www.domainname.com, where "domainname" is a unique name, and the server is used exclusively by the web site producer and those that he authorizes to use it on his behalf.

For example, <http://www.HokieCentral.com> is a unique domain name. <http://www.nrvnet.com/~wstewart>, where the HokieCentral.com web site existed from March, 1996 to March, 1997, was not a unique domain name. It was simply a directory on NRVNet's server. The server was used by every NRVNet subscriber with an account.

## ***Factor #2: Web Site Traffic***

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One way to judge the "legitimacy" of a web site is its traffic, or "user sessions."

A "user session" is roughly defined as the time period that an Internet user accesses a web site, "surfs" through its pages, and then leaves the site for another destination. Each time an Internet user does this, it is registered on the web site's statistics reports as a "user session."

HokieCentral.com has a long history of traffic. The web site began registering over 10,000 user sessions per week in the Fall of 1998, and currently, as of 8/24/99, registered 35,238 user sessions *in one week*.

The figure given *does not* include the message board traffic. The 35,238 user sessions represent the number of times in one week that users logged on to HokieCentral.com to read its original, news-oriented material (news articles, photos, commentary, and opinions), *not* just to chat with each other on the message board.

HokieCentral.com's message board receives approximately twice as many user sessions as the main part of the web site, which means that all told, HokieCentral.com received approximately *100,000 user sessions* in its most recent week of existence.

### ***Suggestion***

Require that a web site register a history of 10,000 user sessions per week for a period of six months before it will be granted media credentials by Virginia Tech. This requirement should exclude chat room and message board user sessions, so the statistic will measure how many user sessions are being registered in order to view original content created by the web site.

A requirement of 10,000 user sessions per week is reasonable. A requirement of more than 10,000 user sessions per week would be unfair and inconsistent when the concept is applied to other forms of media.

For example, the Athletic Department grants media credentials to David Bissett of New River Newspapers, and yet does not require that the newspapers that Mister Bissett writes for meet certain subscription numbers criteria (see "Further Details/Explanations" below for how a web site user session equates to newspaper traffic).

### ***How HokieCentral.com Meets The Criteria***

Traffic reports for HokieCentral.com are attached to show that HokieCentral.com significantly exceeds the requirement of 10,000 user sessions per week for the last six months. HokieCentral.com traffic has not registered below 19,000 user sessions per week in that time period.

### ***Further Details/Explanations***

Be careful that "user sessions" are evaluated, and *not* "hits." Hits is a term used to measure how many pages and images on a web site are accessed, not how many times people "used" the web site.

In newspaper terms, a web site user session equates to a person picking up the paper and reading at least part of it. A "hit" is registered on a newspaper each time a person reads an article, looks at an ad, or looks at a picture. So during a typical newspaper "user session," a person will register many "hits" as they read articles, and look at ads and pictures.

As an example, during HokieCentral.com's most recent week ending 8/24/99, when over 35,000 user sessions occurred, over 531,000 hits were registered. And remember, that's independent of the message board.

## ***Other Factors to Weigh When Considering HokieCentral.com for Media Credentials***

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- HokieCentral.com is a full-time, incorporated business. The web site is infused with equity capital and has a full-time staff whose primary (and only) employment is on the web site. In short, HokieCentral.com is not a "hobby" web site. It is a legitimate business and a legitimate news outlet.
- HokieCentral.com is hands down the most popular independent web site covering Virginia Tech athletics. The web site creates immeasurable amounts of enthusiasm for Virginia Tech sports, resulting in extra ticket sales, increased attendance, increased donations to the Virginia Tech Athletic Fund, and other benefits that are too extensive to recap here.
- HokieCentral.com does not use Virginia Tech trademarked marks and logos without authorization, and does not use copyrighted material from other outlets without permission.
- HokieCentral.com is ready and willing to comply with all Athletic Department rules and regulations concerning media.
- HokieCentral.com has always conducted its affairs in a business-like, professional, and legal manner. HokieCentral.com's founder, Will Stewart, has always sought to cultivate a relationship of cooperation and good will with Virginia Tech and the Virginia Tech Athletic Department.

Over the years, Will Stewart and the HokieCentral.com web site have benefited Virginia Tech directly in the following ways:

- Will Stewart functioned as an advisor to Matt Phillips and Diana Fain in the creation of the Hokie Club's web site, going so far as to visit the campus, meet with them, and counsel them on web site design and hosting.
- Will Stewart organized a Gator Bowl ticket drive in December of 1997 that resulted in the purchase of hundreds of Gator Bowl tickets and the subsequent donation of those tickets to needy organizations that used them to attend the game. This effort resulted in the sale of hundreds of Gator Bowl tickets that Virginia Tech otherwise would have paid for out of Athletic Department funds.
- The HokieCentral.com web site has sold licensed Virginia Tech apparel over the last few years that has resulted in thousands of dollars of licensing revenue for the university.
- HokieCentral.com also benefits the local community. Recently, Will Stewart organized a ticket drive that will collect unused football tickets from HokieCentral.com readers and will donate them to the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization of the New River Valley (see <http://www.hokiecentral.com/football99/bbbstix.htm> for more details).

## ***Possible Objections to Granting Media Credentials to HokieCentral.com and Rebuttals***

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### ***The Internet is not "real" media.***

Random House dictionary defines "media" as "The means of communication that reach very large numbers of people." It is obviously true that the Internet fulfills this requirement.

The Internet is indeed media, and it is used as such by major news organizations and broadcasters around the globe. Organizations such as CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox, USA Today, CNN, MSNBC, and other agencies too numerous to mention use the Internet as media.

The Internet is not "print media" or "broadcast media," but rather, "electronic media."

### ***If Virginia Tech gave credentials to HokieCentral.com, they would have to give them to every web site that requested them.***

This is not true. Some web sites are legitimate news outlets that are worthy of press credentials, and some web sites are simply hobbies that are not serious about covering sports and should not be granted media credentials.

As described elsewhere in this document, HokieCentral.com is a full-time, well-staffed business that is serving as a legitimate news outlet for reporting on Virginia Tech sports. The web site is not a "hobby" or a part-time endeavor.

Virginia Tech grants media credentials to radio stations, but does not grant them to someone transmitting from their basement via short wave radio. Virginia Tech grants media credentials to newspapers, but does not grant them to someone who is printing a two-page newsletter on a laser printer in his basement office.

In much the same way, there are criteria that can be applied to web sites to differentiate between serious web sites that serve as news outlets versus fan web sites that are run as hobbies. The bulk of this document is dedicated to describing what criteria can be used to separate the wheat from the chaff when considering the issue of whether to grant media credentials to a web site.

### ***HokieCentral.com's staff are not trained journalists.***

Some of HokieCentral.com's writers are trained journalists, some aren't. HokieCentral.com is currently negotiating freelance work for a number of columnists, some of whom are "trained journalists," some of whom aren't.

In any case, this isn't a valid objection, because many other forms of media use broadcasters and writers who are not trained in their fields. As one of many examples, Mike Gottfried, a color analyst for ESPN, is not a trained journalist. He is a former football coach. Yet he receives media credentials and is allowed to broadcast games for ESPN from the Lane Stadium press box.

***Virginia Tech doesn't wish to endorse the web site by granting it media credentials.***

By granting HokieCentral.com media credentials, Virginia Tech is not "endorsing" the web site any more than it endorses other media outlets by granting credentials.

Virginia Tech grants media credentials to dozens, perhaps hundreds of other media organizations and in so doing, does not endorse any one of them.

## **Summary**

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HokieCentral.com's request for media credentials is submitted with this document. The request should be granted because HokieCentral.com is a legitimate form of media and a legitimate, full time news outlet.

The Virginia Tech Athletic Department stands much to gain and nothing to lose by granting media credentials to the HokieCentral.com web site and its staff. By granting media credentials to HokieCentral.com and continuing to build a mutually beneficial relationship, the Virginia Tech Athletic Department can take advantage of a situation in which HokieCentral.com's parent corporation, Maroon Pride, LLC, is willing to invest thousands of dollars into what translates into exclusive but journalistically independent coverage of Virginia Tech sports.

Working with independent web sites such as HokieCentral.com is the kind of action that is a sign of a forward-thinking, up and coming athletic program. To deny HokieCentral.com media access is short sighted and not in the best interest of Virginia Tech athletics, not to mention being completely inconsistent with the way that Virginia Tech treats other forms of media.

Any public relations person will tell you that more coverage is good, and a lack of coverage is bad. HokieCentral.com offers round-the-clock coverage of Virginia Tech sports, and through that coverage, promotion of its athletic programs.

Virginia Tech and its Athletic Department have benefited tremendously from the existence of HokieCentral.com over the years. It is HokieCentral.com's intention to continue to benefit Virginia Tech.

The university stands to gain greatly by cultivating a relationship of continued cooperation with HokieCentral.com. Granting media credentials to HokieCentral.com would be a major step in continuing the cooperative relationship between Virginia Tech and HokieCentral.com, which would perpetuate the cycle of growth and benefits that have characterized the relationship thus far.

## **Appendix: HokieCentral.com Web Site Statistics for the Last Six Months**

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The following pages reprint the first pages of web site hit reports for HokieCentral.com for the last six months, from early March, 1999 to late August, 1999.

The key statistic is "Number of User Sessions." Examining the attached reports reveals that HokieCentral.com has received over 20,000 user sessions per week for almost every week of the six month period shown, and has never received less than 19,000 user sessions per week during the time period shown.

A "user session" is roughly defined as the time period that an Internet user accesses a web site, "surfs" through its pages, and then leaves the site for another destination. Each time an Internet user does this, it is registered on the web sites statistics reports as a "user session."

HokieCentral.com has a long history of significant web site traffic, measured in user sessions. The web site began registering over 10,000 user sessions per week in the Fall of 1998, and currently, as of 8/24/99, registered 35,238 user sessions *in one week*.

And this figure *does not* include the message board traffic. The 35,238 user sessions represent the number of times in one week that users logged on to HokieCentral.com to read its original, news-oriented material (news articles, photos, commentary, and opinions), *not* just to chat with each other on the message board.

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