Why linking matters: A metajournalistic discourse analysis

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Abstract

Journalists have incorporated hyperlinks (i.e., linking) into their professional practice since the early stages of digital news expansion. Media scholars and professionals have continually championed their use, yet little is known about the perceptions and uses of links in journalism practice on a broad journalistic scale. Drawing on an analysis of metajournalistic discourses, this study finds that links in news resonate with different aspects of newsmaking: the transparency of news production processes, the user experience, and the economic context. While journalists and other news media experts may indeed see value in linking, that optimism is tempered by levels of caution and worry, suggesting a need for media scholars, journalists, and news organization to re-evaluate the deployment of links within the news process.

Key words: digital journalism, linking, hyperlinks, metajournalistic discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

Journalism as a profession has been in a period of digital evolution for more than a decade, undergoing changes necessitated, if not forced, by rapidly changing technological innovations. Social media alone has required journalists to become closer with audiences that now expect to be included in conversations about the news as well as its construction (Lewis, 2012; Mitchell, 2014). In order to adapt to transforming audience needs, journalists have had to rethink the traditional tenets that have driven their profession for so long, giving more consideration to unique ways of transmitting the news and connecting more contextually and relationally with their audiences (Broersma and Graham, 2013; Author, 2012; Molyneux, 2013).

For most of the last two decades, media scholars have championed the use of hyperlinks (i.e., links) as a means to keep pace with some of those evolutionary expectations. Links are fundamental connective tools that can bring together news stories with other pages and documents on the web providing layers of contextualization to content. Despite their embeddedness within journalism practice, the exact reasons behind their use have been relatively unexplored. Some media studies have probed the ways in which journalists employ links, describing their incorporation into the news process in terms of alignments or breaks with journalistic normalization (Coddington, 2014; Larsson, 2013). Notably fewer have given attention to what has driven their use and how they are perceived on a broader level by those who work them into their practice. That is to say, a wider breadth of journalism professionals and experts has not been included in the analysis of the motivations for, and functions of, linking in journalism.

By analyzing metajournalistic discourses, this study provides extensive insights into how linking has been perceived among professional journalists, media scholars, and other journalism experts since its inception into journalism practice. The findings indicate that while links have been championed as means to add context, transparency, and connectivity to the news, such optimism is tempered with a level of caution within metajournalistic discourses. While links have been increasingly incorporated into journalism practice in a number of ways beneficial to journalists and their audiences, there remains a notable voice of caution surrounding their use.

2. Literature

2.1 Evolving journalistic practices and the hyperlink

Journalism as a profession is in the midst of a paradigmatic transformation, shifting from the notion of journalists as news authorities distributing information to the masses to one where the authority of journalists depends on their ability to convey connectivity and new forms of trust to a public that is increasingly encroaching on the news process (Bogaerts and Carpentier, 2013; McNair, 2013). These and other normative shifts have occurred over a fairly short period of time, beginning with the widespread digital dissemination of the news that began near the turn of the century and speeding up with the arrival of social media platforms shortly thereafter. Media scholars contend that news organizations should develop consequential connections with their audiences within these spaces, not only by adjusting their long-held professional norms, but also by creating reciprocal environments that can encourage enduring communities of news consumers (Lewis et al., 2014).

In many cases, especially those involving communities built around news, content comes in the form of links, which provide individuals with opportunities to share and contextualize their individual interests within spaces public and private (Author, 2012; Hsu and Park, 2011). At

least one study has suggested that social network site (SNS) users seek and share information within single messages, frequently providing links to further explicate their questions or to provide answers (Author, 2014). This suggests that the exchange of links is part of a reciprocal function of SNSs, serving to help build up the kind of communities media scholars have argued provide more layered participation between journalists and news consumers (Lewis et al., 2014).

2.2 Links as matters of concern: an examination of metajournalistic discourses

As Steensen (2011) argued, the ability to include links within news coverage represents one of the most powerful functions of digital journalism. Not only can they improve the context of news narratives and provide relatively new levels of transparency, they can indicate where journalists stand on particular issues by revealing which sources they tend to align with and draw from (Coddington, 2012, 2014). In broader terms, links can serve as indicators of developing journalistic norms and practices or represent a form of normalization wherein journalists graft existing norms and values onto new technologies (Lasorsa et al. 2012). A fuller understanding of what drives linking practices and how they are perceived within the journalistic process can help media scholars and practitioners realize their present functions and future potentials while also revealing how journalistic practices are actualized in digital spaces.

Links have been studied by journalism scholars as objects embedded within the product and profession of journalism. Early studies were largely descriptive, viewing online news as a "utopian" environment for journalism (Domingo, 2006) wherein the volume of links within news stories indicated the level of success of news organizations to transition into digital environments. These studies tended to conclude that news websites were not using enough links (Tankard and Ban, 1998; Kenney et al., 2000; O'Sullivan, 2000; Paulussen, 2004) and that when they did, they did not provide nearly enough external links pointing to other content sources

(Kenney et al., 2000; Dimitrova et al., 2003; Pitts, 2003; Tremayne, 2005; Dimitrova and

Neznanski, 2006; Engebretsen, 2006; Himelboim 2010; Sjøvaag et al., 2012). Media scholars

thusly interpreted this lack of links as a failure of news organizations to embrace the innovative

formats of the web, arguing that links, both internal and external, could provide a better news

experience for audiences. Yet, the majority of these studies did not explore why linking mattered

to news creators or consumers, positing in sweeping generalities that as links became part of

web-native formats, they should be part of online news.

More recent scholarship has taken a less descriptive approach, investigating the

production factors that shape the linking practices of news creators, including professional and

non-professional journalists (Coddington 2012, 2014; Larsson, 2013; Weber, 2012). Such

research has shed light on why these individuals and the organizations they serve use links and

what their linking habits might say about the evolving journalistic process. Ryfe et al. (2012), for

instance, have shown that linking practices reflect traditional source hierarchy (with traditional

news sites attracting the most links within the ecosystem they studied) and commercial concerns.

As these studies advance current knowledge about the practice of linking and its effect on an

evolving news process, there is a need to address the intermediary step between the approach that

quantifies how many links news sites produce and the approach that explains what in the

production context explains linking practices. This study aims at addressing that gap by

examining the various functions that links can and do have for journalists.

This study examines interpretations of linking in journalism by analyzing

metajournalistic discourses, which Carlson (2014b: 2) has described as "public utterances *about*

journalism" that engage in discussion "defining appropriate—as well as inappropriate—

journalistic norms and practices." Metajournalistic discourses are vehicles by which journalistic

actors routinely generate shared meaning about journalism, hence fostering an "interpretive community" (Zelizer, 1993). These discourses provide "insight into journalists' ongoing attempts to define their own profession and genre against the backdrop of journalism's ever-changing material context" (Hampton, 2012: 327). An approach focused on metajournalistic discourses suggests that "the ways of doing journalism are inseparable from ways of imagining journalism" and that discourses about journalism impact how it is understood and practiced (Carlson, 2014b: 5). This is not to say that discourse strictly determines practice, but rather that metajournalistic discourses can shape a repertoire of possible performances.

The present study follows the approach suggested by Cooren et al. (2012), who drew from Latour (1996) in their proposal to avoid reducing the world to a dichotomous opposition between materiality and discourse (Cooren et al., 2012: 296) and to instead account for the "plenum of agencies" that constitute the world (Cooren, 2006)[1]. They consequently urge scholars to pay attention to what people are doing, but also to "what leads them to do what they are doing, that is, what animates them." In a Latourian fashion, they emphasize the importance of "matters of concern," i.e. preoccupations, concerns, worries that animate people. We argue that metajournalistic discourses precisely constitute a manifestation of such matters of concern. This study analyzes metajournalistic discourses produced by a wide breadth of journalism professionals and experts in order to describe the motivations for, and functions of, linking in journalism.

3. Method

Metajournalistic discourses can be found in increasingly dispersed venues, including institutionalized publications such as decade-old journalism reviews, news and opinion columns,

news analysis programs, and on various Internet-based outlets ranging from professional news

organizations to individual blogs and Twitter feeds (Haas, 2006; Carlson, 2014b). In order to

take the diverse nature of discourses into account, we gathered metajournalistic documents

according to a "serendipitous" snowball method designed to take advantage of the material

intertextuality embodied by networks of hyperlinks (De Maeyer and Le Cam, 2014). The data

collection consisted of two steps. In order to identify locations where metajournalistic discourses

thrive, a purposive sampling of journalism reviews[2] first served as "windows into the field" of

journalism ((Powers, 2012; Weinhold, 2010). These reviews were systematically explored with

search queries in order to find documents that address the question of linking in the news[3].

Starting from these documents, we next systematically explored their explicit, intertextual

connections via the hyperlinks that they contained in order to progressively gather more relevant

documents until saturation was reached and no new documents could be discovered (De Maeyer

and Le Cam, 2014), As such, this research embraced the principles of the "cartography of

controversies" by choosing a set of "first observation lenses" and then, from node to node,

multiplying the vantage points in order to reveal "how dispersed discourses are woven into

articulated literatures" (Venturini, 2010: 266).

The method may not avoid sampling bias due to the starting points that were chosen

(which remained, to some extent, central), but the final dataset nevertheless successfully

multiplied the points of view and presents substantially diverse discourses. By manually and

systematically navigating through the hypertextual references, we collected and analyzed 256

documents from 1997 to 2013. Journalism reviews that were used as starting points remained

relatively central in the final dataset (about a third of the documents), notably because they were

the most prolific. The overall dataset was diversified: documents came from 81 different

publications and 141 authors. Publications included, but were not limited to, journalism reviews, scholarly works, columns, blogs, and news articles. Authors included professional journalists and editors, former journalists, journalism educators, bloggers, media scholars, and other media experts (with those roles often overlapping or shifting over time). As the chosen starting points were U.S.-based outlets, the resulting set of discourses remained U.S.-centric even though about 40 texts from the U.K. were discovered. The present analysis therefore reflects a limited horizon, that of the discourses and the writers that could be discovered with the serendipitous method described above[4].

After collecting the sample, we conducted a thematic analysis in which we iteratively coded the documents by identifying recurring themes and patterns (Ayres, 2008; Lapadat, 2010). An initial set of themes was derived from previous research in which journalism educators identified possible functions of linking: fostering interactivity, transparency, credibility and diversity (Author 2013). Those broad themes were refined iteratively and new themes emerged inductively, by "constantly comparing data against codes and categories" (Lapadat, 2010). The coding was carried out with TamsAnalyzer, a computer assisted qualitative analysis software.

4. Results

The thematic analysis revealed a variety of interpretations of linking in journalism. Metajournalistic discourses often address issue of practices and norms, discussing what is appropriate or not (Carlson, 2014b), so it is not surprising that a polarization between the "good" link and the "bad" link emerged in our analysis. Positive and negative assessments were equally important in the dataset, with roughly the same number of texts presenting occurrences of "good" and "bad" links. We chose to follow that dichotomy to account for the various ways in which links and linking were characterized. The following sections account for the many *raisons*

d'être of the link and also highlight fundamental contradictions. More importantly, a close inspection of these themes allows for the unpacking of arguments that seem obvious but actually play out at various stages of the newsmaking process.

4.1 The "good" link

The ways in which links are said to enhance the news content and journalism practice are multiple, as metajournalistic discourses highlight several instances of the "good" link. These included links used to increase transparency by showing sources and by displaying usually hidden writing processes, links used to customize the reading experience by providing more context to those who need it, links used to guide readers and offer them more autonomy, and links used as humorous cues targeted at a knowing audience. These different functions not only co-exist—proving that links are more complex than a technological layer that needs to be embraced—they also sometimes veil different lines of reasoning. The following sections explore the variety of arguments that are mobilized in the discourses we analyzed.[5]

4.1.1. Links that show sources (credibility & credit)

One of the prominent discourses associated with the "good" link was that of the ability to show sources. Links are useful for journalists, as our sample pointed out, because they allow them to directly point to the original material that they used to build their story. But there are two underlying purposes to this argument. On the one hand, links to sources produce credibility. Conversely, links to sources ensure credit is given where credit is due. These are two sides of the same coin, but considering them separately allows for an examination of the different journalistic values and practices that are involved when it comes to the relationship between journalists and their sources.

Links help journalists to ensure credibility when they point to original material such as

documents, data, and other primary sources. In this case, links are used as a demonstration of

facticity:

> Why not give the reader, if he or she wants to, the opportunity to see the sources, or a
> source, when it's available? It helps bulletproof the column, because if they say 'He must
> be making that up,' they can look and see — here's the source, take a look and judge it
> for yourself… [Frank Rich, *New York Times* columnist, quoted in Delaney 2008].

Links to sources not only concern primary sources and raw documents, they also involve an

acknowledgment of who published news or information first. In this case, the motive behind

linking is the reinforcement of the attribution of original sources. For instance, in the 2011

adjustment of the Associated Press's attribution policy, it is noted "News organizations that break

big stories will soon get a little more credit (…) from The Associated Press. Beginning Aug. 1,

whenever the AP picks up a local story from a member for rewriting and distribution, the text of

AP's story will include a link back to the original report" [Phelps 2011]. In this case, there is no

original document or data in the target of the link; the sole purpose of the link is to highlight who

is the original producer of the news. Journalism professor and entrepreneur Jeff Jarvis puts it as

follows: "The link ethic demands provenance" [Jarvis 2010]. Provenance and primary sources

might require different links, but both ideas exist—and are sometimes conflated—in the

injunction to use links to show sources.

Both imply their own obstacles. In the case of links that point to primary sources, some

sources are simply impossible to link to. "Sometimes it's unlinkable material" [Delaney 2008]

such as documents that do not exist online or exist behind security or paywalls and facts that

have been witnessed yet do not have a digital existence. In the case of attribution links, there is a

reluctance to openly acknowledge direct borrowing (that some defendants of digital culture deem

an old-fashioned stance [Ingram 2012, Jarvis 2008]) and the difficulty to identify the true

original source in the abundance of aggregation pieces. Some journalists and media professionals

argue that links should be used to avoid that kind of situation, i.e. rewriting what has already

been published elsewhere. Embracing Jeff Jarvis's motto—"Cover what you do best and link to

the rest" [Jarvis 2007]—they argue that replicating news items is a loss of time and that

journalists should focus on adding value [Salmon 2010].

4.1.2. Links that show the writer's ethos

Links to sources are also presented as a way to provide a peek behind the scenes. As

such, they say something about journalists and the news processes they work within. By showing

what journalists are reading, for example, links are a direct gateway "inside the heads" of

journalists [Karp 2008c]. They illustrate the "implicit context" of an article by unveiling a

writer's ethos: "The links you put into a piece of writing tell a story (or, if you will, a meta-story)

about you and what you've written. They say things like: What sort of company does this writer

keep? Who does she read? What kind of stuff do her links point to (...) Links, in other words,

transmit meaning, but they also communicate mindset and style" [Rosenberg 2011a].

Metajournalistic discourses hence argue that links reflect a writer's voice and personal

style [Garber 2011a] as well as personal news judgment [Karp 2008c]. Mathew Ingram explicitly

relates this function of linking to transparency, in line with the argument that transparency is the

new objectivity: "Links also make it easier for readers to understand a writer's perspective, and

thus are an important tool in disclosing bias (in an eloquent discussion of how transparency is the

new objectivity, author David Weinberger said that objectivity was something 'you rely on when

your medium can't do links')" [Ingram 2010]. The ways in which links might provide more

transparency hence operate a distinct levels: linking divulges the relation between a journalist

and source material, the relation between different news organizations that potentially lead to

replication and aggregation, and the identity of writers themselves.

4.1.3. Paradoxical virtue: Concision and depth, autonomy and guidance

The "good" link also fulfills another, seemingly paradoxical function: it allows news items to be both more concise and broader. By placing links to relevant background information, journalists do not need to restate the full context of a news story. Instead, they are able to focus on new pieces of information. This newly gained focus is not at the expense of rich, in-depth reporting as all the relevant elements are still available to the reader behind the links. This virtue is also presented as a way of empowering readers, who can judge if they need additional information or not. Those who want to explore a story more deeply can choose to click on links [McLellan 2009], but "if they already know the background on the information, they can simply skip over that link and keep reading the story" [Lyon 2012].

With links to contextual information, the news becomes more customized, allowing readers to choose what fits their informational needs. As such, another virtue of the "good" link highlighted by the metajournalistic discourses is that they provide more autonomy to readers. By fully controlling how they browse news and navigate through links, readers may have more freedom to enjoy the benefits of interactive media—in representations that overstate the linearity of offline media and underestimate news reader's autonomy in general: "[Links help] to change the way we experience the news from an act determined by the newsroom (reading the *New York Post* from cover to cover every morning) to an act that I can basically control on my own" [Luzer 2008].

Again, the advantage of linking (increased autonomy, freedom of choice) goes hand in hand with a seemingly paradoxical quality: the idea that links exist to guide readers, to show them the way, and to lead them down more productive paths. The representations of readers conveyed by the discourses we analyzed are two-sided: readers that want more autonomy and

readers that need to be guided. The latter representation is grounded in the well-known argument

of "information overload" : there is too much information [Luzer 2008] flowing from too many

channels and journalists' roles—in line with the notion of gatekeeping—are to point news

consumers to relevant pieces of information by using links to "guid[e] audiences to the best of

the internet" [BBC editor Steve Herrmann, quoted in Stray 2010a].

The will to guide readers in the vastness of the web was particularly strong in a genre that

now seems somewhat old-fashioned: that of the directory, i.e. lists of links that point to resources

deemed interesting by a news organization. The BBC had a "Webguide", the *New York Times*

the "Cyber Times Navigator." When they were created in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these

pages were framed as exhaustive channels that could help readers find their bearings in the

whole world wide web (the Navigator's headline reads: "Searching the net? Here is a place to

start" [Meslin 2002]). Both still exist, if discreetly, but they have been divided in thematic

sections and no longer play the exhaustive role of stronger, more popular search engines such as

Google.

4.1.4. Links that aid the "link economy"

So far, the benefits of the "good link" have mostly concerned readers, with links

enhancing the news consuming experience. But there is an additional way in which linking is

said to be positive within metajournalistic discourses: it could produces economic value for the

news organization. This is at the core of what has been labeled the "link economy theory"

[Hemery 2011], which posits that links can be monetized. In a world of information abundance,

the argument goes, the key issue for news organizations is the diffusion of content as much as (or

even more than) content production. Links to news sites could drive audiences, consequently

allowing news organizations to collect page views that can be sold to advertisers. The idea of the

"link economy" is notably defended by Jeff Jarvis who discursively disconnects the value of the link from the value of the content that is linked to: "Let's say that the real value in this equation is not content and information—both of which are now quickly commodified—but links, which are the new currency of media. Links can be exploited and monetized; get links and you can grab audience and show ads and make money. Content is becoming a cost burden, what you have to have to get the links, but in and of itself, content can't draw value without an audience, without links" [Jarvis 2008].

For news organizations, there is an obvious economic interest in gathering as many inbound links as possible. But the argument of the "link economy" also applies to outbound links, in a seemingly counterintuitive reasoning: the more external links a site produce, the more value it creates. Such rhetoric mostly relies on analogies with highly successful websites that produce many links and attract high amount of traffic. If sites such as the Drudge Report [Karp 2008b] or even Google [Buttry 2008] attract so many users simply by offering links, the same logic must be valid for news organizations: "Google has become synonymous with innovation and lucrative business success in the web age. And it just drives newspaper executives nuts because Google doesn't provide actual content. It just provides links. Are you starting to understand? Links have value – value of Googlenormous proportions" [Buttry 2008].

Those who propose that rationale highlight two underlying principles. On one hand, links are a valuable service to readers who tend to come back to the site that proposes relevant links [Glaser 2003]. On the other, external links foster reciprocity and hence have positive indirect repercussions: this argument is meant to encourage links between news sites, arguing that if journalists collectively seek to highlight news content by linking to it, it would enhance the visibility and diffusion of news overall [Karp 2008a]. In other words, "you give what you get in

online media" [Gahran 2006].

Besides constituting a source of traffic—be it direct or indirect through the hope of reciprocal linking—there is another way in which links allow news organizations to thrive on the "link economy" : the role they play in Search Engine Optimization (SEO). If search engines use links to rank results, then news organization should take advantage of that to promote their own content. This principle results in calls to emphasize internal links, as highlighted by this excerpt from a 2011 *Washington Post* memo: "from a strategic perspective, links are key to expanding our audience. Google was built around academic citation: The content that gets the most links from trusted sources gets the highest spot in search results. The *Washington Post* is a very trusted source with a very high Google ranking. By not linking other *Washington Post* stories to your own, you're denying yourself a lot of Google-driven audience" [*Washington Post* memo, quoted in Rothstein 2011].

4.1.5. The humorous link: Easter eggs and knowing readers

Finally, links sometimes do not have any function other than sheer enjoyment—as reported by Frank Rich, a *New York Times* columnist, who said, "Sometimes we have fun with the links" [quoted in Delaney 2008]. These links are winks from the authors, directed to the knowing reader. They are, according to one article, "like the Easter eggs hidden in DVDs and video games, are there just for the amusement of writer and audience alike. They defy too much explanation and analysis, as their purpose is simply to provide a little humor" [Niles 2008].

The playfulness of hypertext sometimes borders on textual experimentation, especially in the early days of online news. This is, for instance, how blogger Scott Rosenberg describes the peculiar linking style of Suck.com, a late-1990s online-only news outlet: "Suck's best hook all along—its most original contribution to Web culture—has been the style of hypertext link it

pioneered. Suck's writers use links not as informational resources or aids to site navigation but as a rhetorical device, a kind of sub textual shorthand. A link from a Suck.com article, far from illustrating a point, more often than not undercuts it. A Suck link's highlight is often a warning: Irony Ahead—do not take these words at face value" [Rosenberg 1997].

4.2. The "bad" link

All of these virtues and their various implications should not obscure the fact that metajournalistic discourses do not unanimously embrace the link as a positive tool. Several instances of the "bad" link were also present in the documents we analyzed, including circumstances in which linking was presented as harmful or as promoting interests that provoke tension with the positive values presented above.

4.2.1. Links that distract readers

There are two ways in which links are framed as a potential nuisance that distract readers: they create a risk for readers to get lost in hyper textual mazes [Garber 2011b, Luzer 2008], and their visual presence also causes cognitive overload, affecting readers' concentration [Carr 2010, Herrmann 2010, Chittum 2010].

The first claim concurs with an argument well discussed by hypertext theorist, the "lost in hyperspace problem" (Theng and Thimbleby, 1998). When endlessly clicking on links, readers may feel disoriented and lose their sense of purpose. Potentially endless navigation paths equate to black holes: "The flip side of the web's status as the greatest repository of information the world has ever known is that its information can easily form a kind of black hole when it comes to user attention. Hyperlinks allow us—hey, encourage us—hey, almost force us—to flit about from site to site across the vast expanse of the web, indulging our curiosity at the cost of nothing more than a click and a bit of time" [Garber 2011b].

The negative impact of links does not even require readers to click on them, as simply looking at links could already create harmful distraction. Essayist Nicholas Carr has notably made this argument. In his 2011 book, *The Shallows*: *What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,* and in follow-up blog posts, Carr sparks the debate: what if in-text links had negative consequences on our ability to concentrate on a text? "[Links are] tiny distractions, little textual gnats buzzing around your head. Even if you don't click on a link, your eyes notice it, and your frontal cortex has to fire up a bunch of neurons to decide whether to click or not. You may not notice the little extra cognitive load placed on your brain, but it's there and it matters" [Carr 2010].

4.2.2. Links that cause traffic loss

The idea that links create a risk of sending readers away, and consequently represent a direct traffic loss for a news organization, is also among the negative connotations found in the discourses we analyzed. "The reasons I've usually heard for not linking, or for only linking to internal pages, is that the journal's site "needs" to be "sticky," to "drive traffic" past ads, and to maximize the time spent by readers on the site" [Searls 2011]. But this argument is allusive. Those who mention it immediately distance themselves from it, by saying that it is an old-fashioned point of view, or something that news organizations used to do. Not wanting to send readers away is an "old bromide" [Delaney 2008], "a very old-fashioned view" [Smith 2010].

4.2.3. Links that are produced by robots

Who or what, then, should create the links in news reports? This question is centered around the opposition between humans and robots, as another embodiment of the "bad" link is pointed out: the automatic link, created by an algorithm. These links are seen as a nuisance: "When I read *Times* stories I tend to ignore the links because I've learned that most of them will

be generic –machine-generated rather than hand-crafted" [Rosenberg 2011b]. The fact links are

produced by "faceless algorithms" [Karp 2010] is not necessarily presented as bad per se, and

sometimes better than no links at all [Belam 2010]. But human intervention is said to outperform

machines and produce more relevant, valuable links [Stray 2010b]: "Fully automated sites like

Google News and, until recently, Techmeme, have shown that algorithms can do much of the

work — and you don't need to pay health insurance for computers. But at least for now, edited

aggregators still seem more valuable" [Seward 2008]. The word "curation" appears to refer to

the artful selection of relevant links, as opposed to large-scale, soulless "aggregation." Even

when machines can help to perform some tasks, the journalist should maintain editorial control

[Salmon 2011, Hemery 2011]: "The people best positioned to provide links are those who create

content in our newsroom" [Rothstein 2011].

4.2.4. Links that are paid for

Ultimately, the link that is unanimously condemned is the link that has been paid for—

and even more so if the transaction is hidden. The attempt at "bribing" bloggers to clandestinely

place links are vigorously denounced as "shady marketing schemes" [Nolan 2011] and presented

as obviously wrong, as exemplified by this statement by Henry Blodget (CEO of Business

Insider, a news site that where such practices allegedly took place): "We don't have an explicit

policy against it [writers accepting bribes in exchange of links], but we also don't have explicit

policies against throwing chairs through windows, spray-painting walls, or any of a thousand

other things that common sense would tell you not to do. Obviously, we do link to advertiser

sites occasionally, but the money goes to the company, not specific editors. And the relationship

is disclosed" [Henry Blodget, quoted in Nolan 2011].

Even when the transaction happens to be controlled by the news organization and

transparently disclosed, ads "disguised as links" seem to be negatively received [Roderick 2010].

Corrupted links do not necessarily need to be the subject of a monetary transaction, and the

blame is extended to links that suggests conflict of interests [Brisbane 2011] or an understanding

between two sites that does not purely reflects journalistic interest [Beato 2009]. Moreover,

embracing the "link economy" is sometimes seen as unethical: those who solely produce links to

reinforce their position in search engine rankings or deprive others from "Googlejuice" are

harshly criticized [Belam 2008, O'Donovan 2008, Altoft 2008, Bradshaw 2008, Ingram 2012].

There seems to be a balance to strike between journalistic and commercial interests, but how

exactly to achieve the perfect equilibrium is unclear.

5. Discussion

Collectively, these issues shape how links come to exist as matters of concern in

metajournalistic discourses. We saw three overarching themes in the metajournalistic discourses

that relate linking to different aspects of newsmaking. These included (1) the news production

processes, (2) the user experience, and (3) the economic circumstances in which the news is

produced. First, the concern for credibility, credit, and the writer's ethos indicate that links can

function as transparency devices. In this respect, links are traces of the news production

processes that can become visible in the news text. Secondly, the tensions between concision and

depth, autonomy and guidance, as well as the humorous or distractive potential of links reveal a

function of links that is more related to reception. When elaborating on these themes, the

metajournalistic discourses are preoccupied with what the readers experience (with potentially

positive or negative impacts). A third overarching theme also binds positive and negative

expectations with the considerations on the link economy and the cautiousness related to traffic

loss, automated links and bribery. Here, metajournalistic discourse highlight pragmatic concerns,

and focus on the concrete economic context of newsmaking.

It should be noted that the themes delineated above emerged repeatedly over time. Even if the examples and concrete situations on which they drew varied with the evolution of online news, the various virtues and pitfalls of linking were mobilized throughout the discourses. Contrary to the "digital utopian" (Domingo, 2006) view that casts linking as yet another tool that news sites need to use simply because they are part of the technological arsenal, the results indicate a certain level of complexity about the functionality of links in the news process. Adding a links potentially reveals the news production process, affects the way readers experience the news, and implies broader economic issues. This suggests a reconsideration not only of the frequency in which links are used in the news process, but also *how* they are used.

This is especially critical given the current evolution of news consumption, which increasingly happens in digital and social media spaces and through mobile technology (Caumont, 2013; Kohut, 2013). The results here indicate themes that have occurred since the popularization of links in the news process. With the evolution of Twitter, Facebook, and other SNSs into "ambient" sources of news that frequently rely on the rapid exchange of information, including links, journalists have had to rethink the functional and critical role links now play (Hermida, 2014). Media scholars have illustrated the pivotal role of links employed through social media, noting they aid in source transparency and verification, open opportunities for deeper connections with news consumers, and allow for individual and organizational branding (Broersma and Graham, 2013; Bruns, 2012; Author, 2014; Molyneux, 2013). Yet, as this study showed, such changes may not always be perceived as positive.

While the value of content embedded with links has been demonstrated by a number of studies that have indicated links help enhance audience knowledge, increase social capital, and

enhance online network connectivity (Author 2014; Hsu and Park, 2011; Hughes and Palen, 2009), their value is not considered without peril in metajournalistic discourses. These discourses recognize the potential for "good" links to enhance journalistic practices in ways that meet current audience expectations of richer context and fuller transparency, but they alternatively remain guarded about the current and potential negative impacts "bad" links may have on journalism as a profession, on news consumers, and on the relationship between the two. This suggests that links may not be so much a technological layer atop of news content, but rather that links are objects that journalists may use at their own discretion based on their intentions, their imagined audience and the editorial policy of a news organization. The diversity of issues at stake might therefore suggest why examinations of news sites (Tankard and Ban 1998; Kenney et al. 2000; O'Sullivan 2000; Paulussen 2004) found that they produce so few links. Adding a link is not a mere technical gesture, it is a complex journalistic practice that may require pondering and self-reflexivity from news creators that do not necessarily fit with the highly routinized context in which many journalists work. A related study (Author 2013) that investigated actual newsroom practices in relation with these matters of concern has shown that journalists only spend a minute fraction of their time on linking.

Clearly the function of links is a question that should be put more pointedly to today's news creators and news organizations. They are, after all, the ones who determine the appropriateness of linking within the news process. This study does not serve as an indicator of their perspectives alone, but rather has cast a wide net as a means to begin reflecting on how links and linking are considered by professional journalists, scholars and media experts. Our unpacking of metajournalistic discourses can aid in the exploration of relatively unexplored areas of journalistic practice, providing indicators of how evolving practices are viewed within the

holistic process of journalism (Carlson, 2014a).

This paper drew on a vision of action and discourse that is not dichotomic and argued that metajournalistic discourses constitute a manifestation of the various "matters of concern" of journalism. By studying how metajournalistic discourses discussed the notion of linking, we have described specific ways of imagining journalism which are inseparable of the ways of doing journalism. In this also resides the most prominent limitation of this paper: it does not say much about actual journalistic practices; describing instead a possible repertoire of action that can animate journalists when they link. Further research can therefore show how the different themes that we have highlighted play out in specific journalistic practices (see for example Author 2013). Another fruitful avenue to be explored by further research could focus on the origins of the metajournalistic discourses and their circulation. The present research has considered those discourses globally by adopting a methodological standpoint that consists in exhausting the diversity of discourses about links. Future research can deepen our understanding of metajournalistic discourses and their role in journalism as a whole by investigating the identity of the authors of the metajournalistic discourses, their distinct social location as well as the centrality of some of these actors and the circulation of discourses (among actors, across cultures or national contexts).

At a time when the profitability and growth of news organizations across the world is beginning to experience a positive turn in terms of digital production (see Mitchell, 2014), journalists and other news creators may benefit from re-examining their current approaches to linking. If there are indeed benefits to linking as studies have shown, and if audiences are more frequently looking for ways to engage more deeply with news and those who deliver it, then linking should not be dismissed simply as a means to drive traffic or point to internal and

external resources with high frequency. It should instead be more critically examined as an

evolving tool that, when appropriately incorporated, could continue to play a pivotal and positive

role in the evolution of journalism.

Notes

1. We therefore argue that discourse can have agency. For a full discussion of the agency of

texts, see Cooren (2010).

2. The publications included: Online Journalism Review, Columbia Journalism Review, Nieman

Journalism Lab, and Poynter, all well established outlets of journalism scholarship and news

coverage.

3. Each site's own search option—as well as Google (which did not produce new results)—was

used to perform search queries with the following keywords: link, links, hyperlink, linking,

hypertext. A manual analysis of the results (examining the title and the first paragraph) allowed

to select relevant documents, i.e. those that primarily addressed the issue of linking. The initial

search resulted in between 10 and 20 documents for each starting point.

4. A discussion of the circulation of metajournalistic discourses across national and linguistic

borders can be found in Author (2013), where we show that there is evidence that the Anglo-

American metajournalistic discourses strongly pervades the French-speaking discourses.

5. Sourced articles from the sample are bracketed, with abbreviated citations presented in the

appendix. The full list of analyzed text is available from the authors upon request.

Appendix

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