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Objecting to Objectivity

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OBJECTING TO OBJECTIVITY

by

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to gauge how hyperlinks are used by four news organizations in order to provide suggestions about using hyperlinks to attain a more transparent style of journalism. The idea for the study grew out of discussion about the shortcomings of the traditional ideal of journalistic objectivity, such as a reliance on "he said/she said" reporting in order to avoid accusations of bias by not giving the sides of an argument equal play in an article. I propose that news organizations can better inform their readers if they eschew the idea of objectivity and, more specifically, the idea of balance in an article. In describing media critics' ideas about transparency, a method of journalism in which the reader is able to see behind the finished article and gain a better understanding of the origin of information, I suggest that online journalism is best suited to developing a working model of transparency, as websites have unlimited space. The study of hyperlinks in particular is designed to support an argument that journalists can work toward transparency in their reporting by linking to source documents, such as the full text of quoted documents or to the full audio of an interview. The study found that online-only news organizations are more likely to use hyperlinks than are organizations still dependent on a print product that provides revenue.

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Introduction

The traditional, objective method of journalism is flawed. Adherence to an out-dated model of presenting news has led critics to advocate a new method of framing news. One aspect of the new method is the idea that hyperlinks, which allow a reader to access a webpage if clicked, can be used in online journalism to increase transparency about the origin of information. The use of hyperlinks provides a process for moving away from a detrimental facet of objective journalism: balance. This study examines the history of objective journalism, the development of transparent journalism and the current use of hyperlinks, in order to suggest how journalists can best use new methods of reporting.

In general, the tenets of journalism insist that reporters record facts and relate them compellingly in order to hook a reader's interest and hold it through the final paragraph. Reporters are taught to vet sources and double-check what they are told. But specifically, traditional, objective journalism demands that reporters then find and cite someone who will say the opposite.

If a journalist were to be completely objective, the only news in the morning paper would be box scores and lottery numbers. Those things can be measured; they can be qualified and quantified without any confusion among observers. Mistakes will still be made, but a hit is either a homerun or it isn't, and the jackpot is always defined. Send a journalist into the wilderness of Washington, D.C., however, and expect him to return with House and Senate "box scores" and "jackpots," and he is unlikely to deliver any information with the same level of precision and clarity. In an attempt to present the news he has gathered as objectively as possible, all quotes will be balanced, and the story will remain in the center of the issue, not straying too far left or right and not offering

information valuable to an argument if it cannot be countered by the other side. You will have not only wasted the journalist's efforts but also the time of the reader who may not receive insightful journalism that places facts in context and explains their importance.

Teaching journalists to approach every situation formulaically and to treat all sources similarly does not prepare them to trust their own instincts; it produces formulaic, "he said/she said" journalism.

In Precision Journalism, Philip Meyer describes the hurdles the objective method can erect for journalists, writing that "[b]eing objective is easy, so long as you are simpleminded about defining it."[1] How well-adapted is a simpleminded definition of objectivity to deal with complex situations? If journalists are not taught to be versatile or shown how to produce quality work that can stray from a perfect balance of source documents, they may well only write ineffective stories. A different approach, one that does not obsessively strive to balance opposing sides of an argument but that is transparent about the origins of information and pulls in contextualizing information, could produce better reporting.

A shift away from objectivity and toward a method of transparency, which would place more emphasis on showing the origin of information to allow readers to decide whether or not they trust it, may produce journalism that readers deem more trustworthy.

In Time, James Poniewozik writes that "[n]ews organizations are still beholden to a concept of objectivity that has little to do with the word's actual meaning,"[2] arguing that removing intuition from a reporter's work damages journalism. "In most fields, drawing informed conclusions is a sign of credibility. Only in journalism does the ideal

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[1]   Philip Meyer, Precision Journalism: A Reporter's Introduction to Social Science Methods. (London: Indiana University Press, 1973) 6.
[2]   James Poniewozik, "The End of 'Objectivity,'" TIME. Nov. 29, 2010: 71.

health care reporter purport to have no opinion as to what makes a good health care system," he writes. "The days of pretending that journalists are dispassionate infobots are ending. And that's good: trust built on openness is stronger than trust built on an agreed-upon fiction."[3]

Beyond the advantages of broader freedom to show the sources of information, the application of transparency to journalism allows journalists to stray from the tenet of balance inherent in objectivity. A news story is not "objective" if readers can discern an imbalance between the number of quotes or column inches devoted to one viewpoint; however, as will be shown later, a transparent method of presenting information can avoid the dilemma of whether to artificially place unequal arguments in balance.

Online journalism is already well-adapted to the transparent method of journalism, with hyperlinks serving as the best tool for achieving transparency due to the inherent interconnectedness of the Internet: Anything a reporter wishes to show a reader is or can be just a click away. Therefore, I conducted a study of four news websites over two weeks' worth of randomly selected days in January and February 2012. With the help of a coder, I looked at the websites of *The Bangor Daily News*, *The New York Times*, *Politico* and *The Voice of San Diego* twice each day and selected the top two news stories in the morning and the evening. I then analyzed the hyperlinks contained in those stories to determine how those sites use hyperlinks in order to make suggestions for how journalists can best use the method of transparency to inform the public.

History of Objectivity

Objectivity as a doctrine of journalism was developed in the early 1900s. Vitriolic partisan dailies, innovation in printing technology and the recognition of a previously

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[3]   Poniewozik 71.

ignored reader demographic in the mid-1800s flooded stands with new mastheads. In order to distinguish a single paper from the throng, editors began claiming objectivity for their papers. They insisted they were more trustworthy than their competitors and that their product was of a higher quality due to "objective" standards, which remained loosely defined until appearing in multiple journalism textbooks of the 1920s. This trend led to "commercial egalitarianism," which "transform[ed] the newspaper into a readily available consumer good, a task accomplished by the penny papers with their emphasis on factual, nonpartisan news."[4] The penny papers appealed to working men both due to their low price and the belief that they were more frank and honest and therefore worth a busy man's time.

Objectivity as it is currently understood was in the journalistic conscience as early as 1902 in an "article that said, without elaboration, yellow journalism lacked 'objective truth.'"[5] Walter Williams, the first dean of the Missouri School of Journalism, founded in 1908, described objectivity as a journalist's responsibility to "marry objectivity with battling injustice" by "reporting the 'facts' [and] showing the meaning of those facts for all concerned."[6] Furthermore, "the first canons of journalism adopted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (1923) used the word impartiality, not objectivity,"[7] which contributed to objectivity's hazy definition. As early as the 1930s, scholars at Bryn Mawr asserted that objectivity in journalism was either impossible or, if possible, only measurable on a relative, subjective scale.[8] In 1996, the Society of Professional

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[4] Ross Allan Eaman, Historical Dictionary of Journalism. (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009) 314.

[5] Steph L. Vaughn, ed., Encyclopedia of American Journalism. (New York: Francis & Taylor Group, 2008) 369.

[6] Eaman 35.

[7] Vaughn 369.

[8] Vaughn 159.

Journalists removed the word "objectivity" from its code of ethics.[9]

That the evolution of objectivity in journalism can only be tracked clearly to the early 20th century and vaguely to the mid-19th century shows that journalism does not have its roots in objectivity. Though the objective method developed long after the craft, it has become so heavily associated with journalism in modern readers' minds that for a reporter to stray from the method's confines is to beg for damning accusations of bias.

That objectivity is not organic to journalism as a practice is obvious in a comparison of American and British news stories. Ideology weighs more heavily on journalism in the United Kingdom than in the United States, where it is viewed as the antithesis of objectivity — though increasingly prevalent in broadcast and online news sources with the emergence of niche talk shows and blogs. Richard Rooney, a professor at Girne American University in Cyprus, argues that ideological bias is both inherent and accepted in British journalism.

"The press in the UK is stridently political, but they are not party newspapers in the formal sense," he said. "Unlike UK broadcasters, most national newspapers in the UK take an explicit party political position, making it clear in their editorials and sometimes in their reporting of the news as well, which party they support [sic]."[10]

In discussing ideology in American and British journalism in a July 29, 2011, interview for NPR's "On the Media," Ryan Chittum, deputy editor of *Columbia Journalism Review's* "The Audit," described American journalists' need for balanced

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[9] Society of Professional Journalists, "Code of Ethics," <www.spj.org/pdf/ethicscode.pdf>, 10 April 2012.

[10] Richard Rooney, "News Media and Ideology in the UK," -Lecture series, Girne American University, Cyprus, 22 Feb. 2010, 20 Sept. 2011. <www.scribd.com/doc/27250311/UK-News-Media-and-Ideology-Richard-Rooney>.

reporting as "a cultural problem."[11]

"The press has a real aversion to being accused of ideological bias or bias of any sort," he said. "I think the problem is that it's easier to say he said, she said, rather than determining whether one side is telling the truth and one is not. It's much harder to do that. It takes much more time."

What results from this American aversion to bias is a balancing act, and most journalists, rather than risk a misstep, simply give opposing views equal weight in order to stay on the beam. The first stories a student journalist produces are often painstakingly neutral. After the lede, a number of quotes typically follow. After those quotes, which may take the reader to one side, is an equivalence that moves the argument back to the center. "This," the student journalist is certain, "is quality journalism; no one can tell where I stand."

This method easily strays into stenography. A journalist fearful of appearing biased will likely stick to whatever spokespeople say and report that but offer no background research or connection to relevant past events. Such an approach may not reveal the truth of the situation being reported. For example, by attempting to create balance on paper between two or more sides of an argument that are actually imbalanced, whether because one argument has more supporters or another has more evidence, a journalist can create the misconception that a solution to a problem is not as forthcoming as it is in reality.

Some identifiable aspects of objective journalism, such as fairness and the lack of advocacy, are good guidelines for reporters and should remain in the forefront of

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[11]   "The Objectivity Bias: Transcript," On the Media. 29 July 2011. 3 Aug. 2011. <www.onthemedia.org>.

journalistic ethics; however, a strident adherence to the objective method, especially to its mandate that reporting be balanced, can detract from otherwise informative articles.

When a journalist decides to call one source over another or when he settles on an angle for presenting the story to readers, judgments are made. If a journalist makes enough judgments in this way, any attempt to objectify the findings come press time could serve to rob the notes and quotes of significance. Those pieces of information could be stripped of their weight and purpose and become colored chips to be organized, stacked and meted out against each other in order to achieve a "balanced" report.

"[William Safire] felt phony evenhandedness was a disservice to his readers," Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write in The Elements of Journalism. "'Playing it straight does not mean striking a balance of space or time. When one side of a controversy makes news — issues a survey or holds an event — it's not the reporter's job to dig up the people who will shoot it down and give them equal attention. Comment, yes; 'balance' by column inch or stopwatch, no.'"[12]

Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism at New York University, criticizes this adherence to balance as "The View from Nowhere," a term he adapted from philosopher Thomas Nagel.

"If in doing the serious work of journalism–digging, reporting, verification, mastering a beat–you develop a view, expressing that view does not diminish your authority. It may even add to it," Rosen wrote on his blog, PressThink, in November 2010. "The View from Nowhere doesn't know from this. It also encourages journalists to develop bad habits. Like: criticism from both sides is a sign that you're doing something

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[12]   Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007) 118.

right, when you could be doing everything wrong."[13]

For example, because an objective article may call for quotes from both sides of an environmental debate, the reporter might attempt to balance every quote from the concerned public with one from the allegedly polluting company's spokesman. The article would contain the basic information concerning the dispute, but after finishing, the reader might not have an understanding of the actual state of the situation. This example has played out on a larger scale, according to Max Boykoff in *Niemann Reports'* Winter 2005 issue. Controversy over the reality of global warming has been fanned by journalists balancing scientific findings with the other side of the debate: politicians and emotional citizens. By balancing scientists' facts, which admittedly have not always been in total agreement, with dissenters' emotions, journalists suggest to readers that both sides of the debate have equal claim to the truth. This is what Meyer calls "objectivity of result," discussed later in greater detail.

"By adhering to balance […] influential news sources greatly amplified the views of a small group of climate contrarians who contest the notion that humans are contributing to changes in the climate," Boykoff writes in *Niemann Reports*. "Journalists need to acknowledge that their long-cherished norm of balance has become a form of informational bias."[14]

Dropping the objective method after years of training and practice might prove difficult, but the example of Malcolm Browne shows the possibility for success afforded by an understanding of objectivity's limitations. Browne, a former AP Vietnam

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[13]   Jay Rosen, "The View from Nowhere: Questions and Answers," PressThink, 10 November 2010, < http://pressthink.org/2010/11/the-view-from-nowhere-questions-and-answers/>. 15 April 2012.
[14]   Max Boykoff, "The Disconnect of News Reporting from Scientific Evidence," Niemann Reports, Winter 2005, 23 Jan. 2012. <http://nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/100593/The-Disconnect-of-News-Reporting-From-Scientific-Evidence.aspx>.

correspondent, made his first foray into journalism after being drafted during the Korean War. He took a post in the press corps rather than fighting and was so enamored of his limited experience that he did not return to his civilian career as a chemist, taking a job instead at a small New York newspaper.

Perhaps due to his extensive time abroad as a correspondent and away from the daily stream of American reporting, Browne does not believe that objectivity in journalism is possible.

"At root, journalism is subjective — never objective — and the best we practitioners can do is try to be fair,"[15] he writes.

"The results will never come up to the standards of even our most lenient critics, because the role of the journalist is to translate observation into news copy. Unfortunately, the second Law of Thermodynamics — an immutable law of physics — decrees that information is always lost in such a transaction. No news report is any more reliable than the flawed observer who prepares it, and news will always be tainted by perspective and personal judgment, right or wrong."[16]

Browne's view of journalism, however, is not the one widely held by most Americans and is not the method of reporting they demand of their newspapers. In order to satisfy the American taste for balance, reporters have given equal attention to viewpoints that are terrifically unequal in veracity and credibility. Furthermore, the endeavor to keep the taint of "perspective and personal judgment" out of the papers has resulted in many journalists missing the truth.

In the commonly cited case of former U.S. Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin,

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[15] Malcolm W. Browne, Muddy Boots and Red Socks: A War Reporter's Life, (New York: Random House, 1993) p. xii-xiii.
[16] Browne p. xii-xiii.

for example, journalists duly quoted and reported his allegations, but few spent time investigating whether a basis existed for his claims. Reputations were smeared due to low journalistic ambition to discover and convey the truth.

"Pressured by severe competition and leary [sic] of offending pro-McCarthy clients, they rushed McCarthy's charges into print without analysis and without checking their accuracy," writes Michael O'Brien in a review of Edwin R. Bayley's McCarthy and McCarthyism in Wisconsin. "McCarthy sought to intimidate newspapers that criticized him, and when this failed, he tried to discredit them. Because of the atmosphere of fear, some reporters became extremely careful what they wrote about him."[17]

Suggesting Transparency

If the current model of objectivity is insufficient then the model of transparency as objectivity, of showing one's work while avoiding artificial balance, may be more adequate. Using the axiom of "show, don't tell," a reporter would be better able to inform readers by showing how he arrived at the ratio of information from sources used in an article. The need to be a dispassionate, removed reporter is eliminated when he can simply be transparent about the origins of his information and direct the reader to his sources. The reader is better able to decide if the news outlet is one he trusts rather than be left wondering if it is secretly left-leaning or secretly right-leaning.

In 2009, *The Washington Post* introduced social media guidelines for its reporters. The *Post* chose to control its employees' personal lives in order to eschew the possibility that one might ever post something to which a reader could object. Archived in full at paidcontent.org, the guidelines advise employees to remember that their online actions

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[17]   Michael O'Brien, "Review: Joe McCarthy and the Press by Edwin R. Bayley," The Wisconsin Magazine of History, Spring 1982: 218.

"should be presumed to be publicly available to anyone, even if [they] have created a private account."[18] The *Post* laid out clear restrictions on its employees' online interactions, which some decried as censorship. Among other things, The *Post* told its employees that they must:

> " refrain from writing, tweeting or posting anything — including photographs or video — that could be perceived as reflecting political, racial, sexist, religious or other bias or favoritism that could be used to tarnish our journalistic credibility. This same caution should be used when joining, following or friending any person or organization online."[19]

In a 2006 study of New Zealand news outlets in *Journalism Studies*, Verica Rupar claims that transparency in newsgathering leads to a more precise product and suggests that social media forge necessary connections between readers and reporters, which differs from the *Post*'s view of Facebook and Twitter. That the two viewpoints were expressed in a span of three years shows the inconsistency journalists showed in embracing the Internet as a means of communicating with readers. Rupar's view seems to have won out, as the *Post* and invited readers to subscribe to a litany of employees' Facebook profiles in January 2012.[20]

The aversion to bias, long the bulwark of traditional journalism as seen above, is starting to be chipped away with the surge in social media, the very thing the *Post* sought to curtail. For example, the Nieman Journalism Lab covered the guidelines, pulling

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[18]   Staci D. Kramer, "WaPo's Social Media Guidelines Paint Staff Into Virtual Corner; Full Text of Guidelines," 27 Sept. 2009. 12 Oct. 2011. <paidcontent.org/article/419-wapos-social-media-guidelines-paint-staff-into-virtual-corner/>.
[19]   Kramer
[20]   Mark S. Luckie, "Subscribe to Washington Post Staff on Facebook," 3 Jan. 2012, 23 Jan. 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ask-the-post/post/subscribe-to-washington-post-staff-on-facebook/2012/01/03/gIQAXcUWBQ_blog.html>.

together responses by media critics that latched onto the key words "bias" and

"favoritism," the foes of objectivity. Lisa Williams, CEO and founder of Placeblogger, an

online forum that allows a visitor to find blogs based on physical communities, tweeted

the day the guidelines were posted on paidcontent.org that "[t]he fact that biases aren't

revealed just makes fertile ground for conspiracy theories, which erode trust in

journalism."[21]

Proponents of the transparency model suggest that spending less time asserting

that journalists are devoid of opinions or beliefs (less time following the *Post's* approach

to objectivity) and more time being transparent about the building blocks of an article,

whether that be by addressing perceived biases or providing additional information that

happens to tip the balance of sourcing, would produce better journalism.

"[O]ur expectations about how much we should know about a journalist's

sources, evidence, and process are rising,"[22] write Kovach and Rosenstiel in Blur.

If a reader can't determine the source of information in an article and perceives

something amiss, he may be likely to label it as biased, for lack of a better term, which

seems to have become a catchall description for anything a reader disagrees with in news.

"The 'unexplained' newsgathering process produces a hazardous equilibrium of

facts and opinions," Rupar writes. "With visibility of sources comes credibility of claims

and accountability of actions."[23]

The International Center for Media and the Public Agenda at the University of

Maryland conducted a 2006 study of 25 online news outlets to determine how transparent

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[21]   Lisa Williams, Twitter, 27 Sept. 2009. 12 Oct. 2011. <twitter.com/#!/Lisa
Williams/status/4422322740>.
[22]   Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, "Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information
Overload," (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010) 33.
[23]   Verica Rupar, "How did you find that out? Transparency of the newsgathering process and the meaning
of news," Journalism Studies, Spring 2011, 139.

they were about corrections, ownership, staff policies and reporting policies and to determine how open they were to interactivity. Through that study, led by Susan Moeller, a cloistered atmosphere in the companies behind news websites is shown to be surprisingly prevalent, this from news outlets that support sunshine laws and tout transparency in government.

"As [Sydney] Schanberg noted," Moeller reports, "'Journalism's most serious failure, probably, is its reluctance to explain how reporters go about putting together a news story.'"[24]

In 2009, David Weinberger, a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, addressed the problem seen by Moeller of news organizations presenting news as a finished product without allowing readers to see the raw components used to create the articles. He advocated for transparency as an alternative to the traditional objective approach, which is "not an achievable aim,"[25] he wrote, "and the claim that reporting is objective is not just wrong but seriously misleading."

"Transparency — the embedded ability to see though the published draft — often gives us more reason to believe a report than the claim of objectivity did," Weinberger continued. Rupar's study reinforces claims that transparency in newsgathering leads to a more precise product.

"[I]t clarifies the mediating character of communication in the news media," Rupar writes. "It makes apparent that journalism is not just a matter of presenting 'facts as they are,' an objectivity principle flagged by journalism positivists in Anglo-American

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24   Susan D. Moeller et al, "Openness & Accountability: A Study of Transparency in Global Media Outlets," International Center for Media and the Public Agenda, 28 Aug. 2011, <www.icmpa.umd.edu/pages/studies/transparency/z_about_media_transparency.html>.
25   David Weinberger, "Transparency: the new objectivity," KM World, Sept. 2009: 1, 30.

schools of journalism, but also a matter of assembling truth […] beneath and around 'facts as they are told.'"[26]

Rupar says that increased transparency about the origins of information allows readers to approach news articles with a warier eye. If readers can tell whether the information in an article is derived from a press release rather than original research or whether the quotes are pulled from a news conference rather than a one-on-one interview, she asserts they are more likely to make an informed decision about whether to trust the reporter and, by extension, the news organization.

In practicing transparent journalism, a reporter would not feel compelled to backtrack from whatever ground is gained on one side of the argument in order to bring it back to the center. However, using this method on paper is tricky because, as Weinberger points out, "Transparency prospers in a linked medium, for you can literally see the connections between the final draft's claims and the ideas that informed it. Paper, on the other hand, sucks at links. You can look up the footnote, but that's an expensive, time-consuming activity more likely to result in failure than success."[27]

Current print journalism might not be able to incorporate this sort of work, and its inclusion might not achieve its intended purpose. However, the transparent method is well-suited to online journalism. A more involved readership, one that has been prompted by accumulating opportunities for interactivity, is turning a more calculating eye to online journalism. Journalists now have more tools with which to engage and inform readers online.

Some of the challenges of online journalism can be offset through transparency.

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[26]   Rupar 127-143.
[27]   David Weinberger, "Transparency is the New Objectivity," 19 July 2009, 27 Nov. 2011, <hyperorg.com/blogger/2009/07/19/transparency-is-the-new-objectivity/>.

Online, a reporter can provide links to the full text of source documents; full audio of interviews from which quotes are drawn; or video of newsworthy events, such as trials or protests. Hyperlinks can be used to send readers to the sources' websites, such as to government sites for stories on policy or to blogs for a story from someone who was at a newsworthy event that the reporter missed.

By providing hyperlinks, reporters can convey some of the sources' urgency and become animated sources themselves for readers. Transparency allows readers to take a more proactive approach to an article. Rather than reading an article from start to finish and being done with it, readers are given the opportunity to see the source documents from which the reporter mined information. Readers are shown resources to use if they want to be more informed on the subject, but it is not necessary for them to do that research in order to understand the point of the article. This method invites action from the reader by pointing the way to related information, but it should not require it in order for the reader to fully understand the story. Here, however, journalists and their editors could clash on which information to provide through hyperlinks, especially if a story was a scoop that the editor wants to protect. Readers will not know which hyperlinks were inserted by a reporter, who may want to include information even if it is outside the organization's website, or by an editor, who may only approve of hyperlinks that keep a reader within the organization's website.

While online news should not stray into some of the hyperbolic prose found on blogs, the platform does provide opportunities for reporters to present sources' emotionally charged arguments in more detail than does print. One fault found with objectivity is that reporters fall into a pattern of stilted, formulaic writing in order to

avoid the appearance of being biased.

"This creed [of objectivity] transforms reporters into neutral observers or voyeurs. It banishes empathy, passion, and a quest for justice," writes Chris Hedges in the essay "The Disease of Objectivity." "Reporters are permitted to watch but not to feel or to speak in their own voices."[28]

The writing process that robs sources' words and actions of immediacy, the act of translating their ideas into the common language of a news article, can be ameliorated by providing links to source documents. Eliminating anything with the slightest appearance of bias in a news story can render the information complicated to absorb in its formulaic style. Despite the necessity of fairness in reporting, of allowing the accused to defend themselves, balancing quotes can make retaining the ideas difficult because they are immediately countered.

Reporters remember stories, even the boring ones, based on how they are told the information. An energetic or emphatic speaker's salient points are more likely to be retained than those of a boring, droning speaker. In order to use those energetic quotes in an article, however, the reporter must balance them with an opposing view, which can detract from a statement's impact on readers and weaken the chances of educating them.

None of this is to say that the method of transparency can slip seamlessly into online news outlets, as it can sometimes be unclear how the standards of print journalism apply on the Internet. For example, in the haste to post accompanying information with an online story, a journalist may overlook sourcing the data included in a timeline or graph. In the interest of limiting word count in an infographic, a journalist may make

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28   Chris Hedges, "The Disease of Objectivity," in Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It, eds. Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard. (New York: The New Press, 2011) 209.

assertions without supporting them with evidence. Corrections can be timeless online, with reporters simply fixing the mistake and updating the story, so that a reader does not know where or when something was altered.

"In some cases, the people producing the material are not even aware of what model they are operating under, as they adapt to new technology, grope to maintain an audience, endeavor to innovate, and bow to financial pressure."[29]

Another difficulty associated with transparency is that it should not become a means through which journalists can return to the penny press era of journalism, when readers could gauge the tone of the news contained in a paper by whether the masthead read "Daily Republican" or "Daily Democrat." The transparent method does not suggest that reporters begin inserting opinion into stories just because they can provide a link to someone with the same ideas. Journalism should not become well-sourced op-eds. The ideas of fairness and honesty espoused in the objective method still apply to transparent journalism; it is the idea of balance that must change.

Hyperlinks that direct readers to primary sources, such as the text of a new law or a campaign finance report, can also be beneficial, since they enable readers to review sources reporters quote and see for themselves if the portrayal of that information is fair. Here, however, we encounter another difficulty in transitioning to transparency in that, when considering linking to other journalists' work on competing news sites, reporters encounter the gray area of directing a reader away from the news outlet's homepage. While doing so is a possible point of contention for editors striving to keep readers moving through their organization's website, Weinberger suggests that news organizations' reluctance to direct readers to other websites is foolish.

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[29]   Kovach and Rosensteil, <u>Blur</u> 35.

"Why should we trust what one person — with the best of intentions — insists is true when instead we could have a web of evidence, ideas and argument?"[30] he asks.

Weinberger's words suggest that sending readers away now and then will help cultivate credibility that will encourage them to return later. If readers know a certain website will either have the information or has found it elsewhere and linked to it, they might make that website their first stop when searching for news. Reporters must also deal with the non-delineated boundary between an appropriate number of hyperlinks in a story and an unmanageable or intrusive number, though this study does not seek to define that boundary.

Kovach and Rosenstiel argue in Blur that the press, in adapting to online journalism, must take its role as a news aggregator more seriously, which would discount the issue of whether to direct a reader to another news site.

"Smart aggregators should share sources they rely on, the stories they find illuminating, the information that informed them,"[31] they write. By aggregating source documents for articles, even if it makes only a brief, easily overlooked appearance in the final product as a hyperlink, reporters can put that information online in full and direct interested readers toward it.

One of the dangers of online journalism in general is the ease with which a reporter can slip into a narcissistic cycle. Termed "media narcissism,"[32] journalists' infatuation with their bylines and desire to redirect readers to their own prior stories may do less to educate readers than to overwhelm them with information. Linking to articles

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[30]   Weinberger, KM World,1.
[31]   Kovach and Rosenstiel, Blur,179-180.
[32]   Andrew Paul Williams, Media Narcissism and Self-reflexive Reporting: Metacommunication in Televised News Broadcasts and Web Coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom, diss., University of Florida, 2004. 19.

the author has already written on a subject may sometimes be a tempting alternative to offering background information in a story. For example, by a reporter's fifth article on a given topic, it's easy to assume readers are as well-informed as the reporter because they have had the opportunity to read the first four, and the reporter may start glossing over details an uninformed reader would need to understand the information, providing hyperlinks to the past stories instead.

Also, a reporter covering a complicated story may wish to insert hyperlinks directing readers further and further back in time to read earlier articles. Such a case, no matter the author of the stories, might provide a disservice to readers, who could take out-of-date information as current fact based upon following a hyperlink.

A danger inherent in media narcissism is the potential for misinformation. In reading a story with multiple links directed solely or predominantly back to other stories the author wrote, readers gather an understanding of a topic through a single lens. If the reporter is responsible and comprehensive, that may not be a problem. If the reporter does shoddy work, the reader is in trouble. Acknowledging that others are covering the same stories and linking to stories by other news sources when the information warrants it lends credibility to an article and the news organization by showing that the author evaluates others' viewpoints with some degree of regularity and has service to readers as a main goal.

My study sought to determine whether online news organizations were using hyperlinks to extend the web of information, as Weinberger, Kovach, Rosenstiel and others advocate, or to slip into a self-reflexive cycle of media narcissism. By gauging where four organizations currently stand, informed suggestions can be made for future

use of hyperlinks in order to provide the most comprehensive, transparent news coverage possible to readers.

Research Questions

Current understanding of the value of transparency in journalism would be informed by an evaluation of the hyperlinking practices of news websites. This paper seeks to answer the following research questions through an exploratory survey in order to develop such an evaluation:

1. On *The Bangor Daily News*, *The New York Times*, *The Voice of San Diego* and *Politico* websites, what are the predominant characteristics of pages hyperlinks lead to?

a) What is the average number of hyperlinks in a story?

b) With what frequency do they lead to what types of sources?

2. Are journalists more likely to link to their own work or the work of their own publication than to the work of other publications?

3. Are there differences in the predominant characteristics between websites of news outlets that are online-only and websites of new outlets that also have a print product?

Method

This study is a quantitative content analysis that sought to gather information about the hyperlinking practices of four news websites by viewing representative samples of hyperlinks collected in January and February 2012. The unit of analysis was one hyperlink. Qualtrics survey software was used to collect and store information about each hyperlink. HTTrack Website Copier software was used to download caches of websites if the author or assistant could not code hyperlinks at 8 a.m. or at 8 p.m. on a day selected

for data collection.

The websites examined in this study were those of *The Bangor Daily News*, *The New York Times*, *Politico* and *The Voice of San Diego*.

The Bangor Daily News was selected because it is a dominant print product in a relatively small market. According to Compete's[33] site analytics, *The Bangor Daily News*'s website had 341,519 unique visitors in September 2011. *The New York Times*, which had 16,370,473 unique visitors to its website in the same month, was selected for its national scope and traditional dominance in the news media. *Politico* was chosen for its national scope and for its online-only format. It is true that a print version of *Politico* exists in Washington, D.C., but for the purposes of this study, it was viewed as an online-only news organization. *Politico* had 2,557,082 unique visitors in September 2011. *The Voice of San Diego* is truly online-only, though it does occasionally work in conjunction with other news outlets that focus on different media. It is also a nonprofit organization, which is interesting to contrast with the three for-profit news organizations. *The Voice of San Diego*'s website had 62,828 unique visitors in that same month. Compete calculates unique visitors using data from only within the United States.

Data collected will be used to answer the three research questions quantitatively.

Research Question 1 seeks to provide a quantitative measure of aspects of online journalism that contribute to transparency. Transparency in online media is discussed in terms of unlimited space encouraging more in-depth disclosure about sources and methods, but the idea of online journalism encouraging reporters to write differently has also been raised with the suggestion of having reporters shift some of their focus to maintaining blogs, both related and unrelated to their news coverage. Tom Price, writing

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[33] Compete. <http://www.compete.com/us/>.

for *CQ Researcher* in October 2010, suggested that "the informal, chatty nature of much online communication pushes reporters to throw off the time-honored cloak of objectivity and reveal more about their personal values and opinions than they traditionally have been allowed to do."[34] This study will measure where hyperlinks lead a reader and how often a reader is led to a certain type of information.

Research Question 2 draws on the idea of media narcissism, the idea of focusing more on the author of an article than on the information it contains, and seeks to determine whether hyperlinks are used more often to increase the breadth of information available to readers or to narrow its focus to show only the author's viewpoint. This study will measure whether authors link more to their own past work or their organization or to work by other organizations.

Research Question 3 seeks to determine whether having a solely digital structure changes how hyperlinks are used. Speculation about print products' migrations to the computer screen is common, and it has been suggested that traditional newspapers will fail online. *The Bangor Daily News* and *The New York Times* have both a print and online product, but *The Voice of San Diego* is only online and *Politico*'s print product is largely limited to Washington, D.C., although it has a large online readership. Speculation about internet sources exists as well, though, with the connotation of blogs as not worth reading since some authors use them to vent personal frustrations. This question will be answered by analyzing the results of the first two questions and placing them in context alongside past research.

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34   Tom Price, "Journalism Standards in the Internet Age: Are the news media sacrificing ethics online?" <u>CQ Researcher</u>, Oct. 8, 2011.

Sample

January and February 2012 were selected as sampling periods for the study, and a week was reconstructed randomly from each month. On selected days, the top two news stories from each of the four sites were selected at 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., and the hyperlinks were archived. The days were chosen randomly by selecting a card for each day of the week. The days in the constructed weeks were Jan. 11, 16, 20, 22, 26, 28 and 31 and Feb. 1, 2, 5, 20, 24, 25 and 28.

For *The Bangor Daily News*, the top two stories were determined to be the featured items on the left side of the screen that were accompanied by a photo. If there was only one featured story then a news story was selected from the top of the column next to the featured stories.

For *The New York Times*, the top two stories were the first two stories in the strip directly to the right of the left-most column. The left-most column contains links to stories sorted by categories, and the column to the right of that contains links to single stories.

For *The Voice of San Diego*, the top story was in the featured position at the top of the home page, which is generally accompanied by a photo. The other story was selected by clicking "Today" at the top of the screen and choosing the first story in the list.

For *Politico*, the top two stories were the featured story at the top of the screen and the first story in the column underneath the featured position and at the far-left of the screen.

When there was overlap on any site for any reason, the duplicated story was only used once, and the next in the same column of stories was selected.

Coding and Intercoder Reliability

Hyperlinks were analyzed by the author and an assistant coder according to the coding protocol. Intercoder reliability using Holsti's formula[35] was .91. The assistant coder was given about an hour of instruction in order to understand the coding protocol and use it correctly.

The coding protocol included:

1. The name of the news organization

2. The page's URL

3. The number of hyperlinks in the story

4. Whether a hyperlink leads to either an internal or external page

5. Whether a hyperlink leads to a dead-end or orphaned page, which open in a new window so a reader either cannot navigate back to the original document or navigate away from the information it contains

6. Whether an internal page linked to in the original article is written by the same author

7. The hyperlink's destination (a government source, excluding the Department of Education; a nonprofit source; a competing news organization; a blog; a commercial site; an education website either using the .edu domain or the Department of Education website; a broken link; or an unclassifiable link)

8. Whether a hyperlink that leads to a dead-end page contains source documents.

Results

This study was a quantitative content analysis of the use of hyperlinks on the websites of *The Voice of San Diego*, *The Bangor Daily News*, *The New York Times* and

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[35]   O.R. Holsti, "Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities," (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969).

Politico over a two-month period (N= 1,548). The author coded 70 percent of the sample

(N= 1,082), and an assistant coded 30 percent (N= 466).

Research Question 1A asked what the average number of hyperlinks in a story

was. First the number of links per website was found.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Links Found at Each Website**
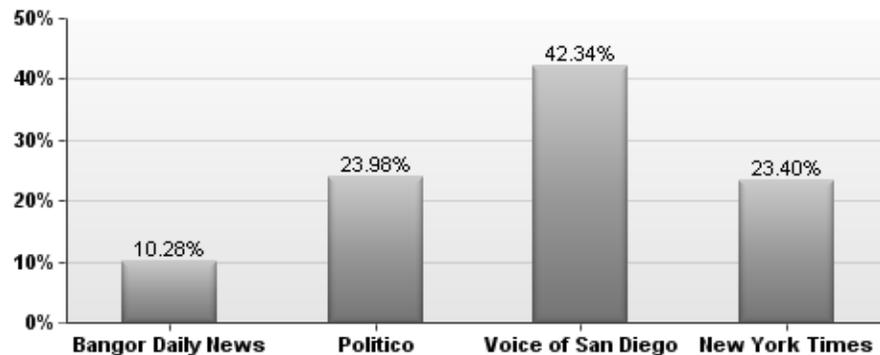
Once the number of links per website was found, that number could be divided by

the number of stories collected from the site, which yielded an average of 6.9 hyperlinks

per story for the aggregate.

The Voice of San Diego had the most links, and the average number of links per

article was 11.69. *Politico* had the second most links, and the average was 6.63. *The New

York Times* was third for the number of links, though it nearly tied *Politico*, and the

average number of links was 6.46. *The Bangor Daily* News had the fewest links, and the

average per story was 2.84.

Research Question 1B asked what type of source was linked to most frequently.

Hyperlinks led to internal links (N= 1,129) nearly three times as often as external links.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Internal Links**[36]
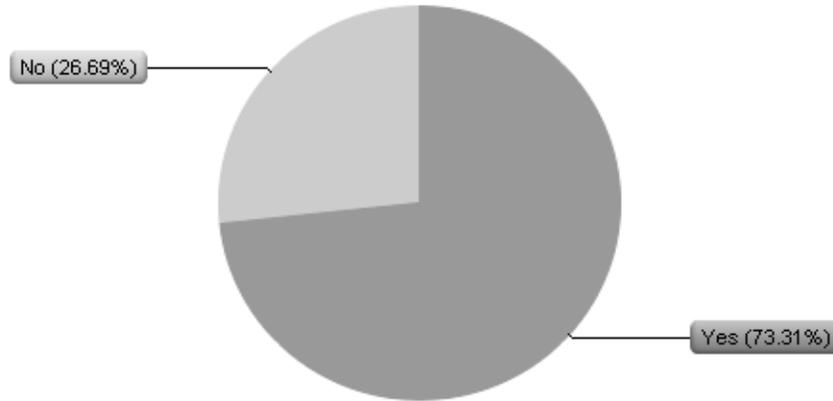
The Voice of San Diego had the highest prevalence of external links at 44 percent, and *Politico* had the lowest at 11 percent. *New York Times* links lead to external sources 15 percent of the time, and *Bangor Daily News* links lead to external sources 20 percent of the time.

External links were coded as "competing news organization," "commercial site," "government," "nonprofit organization," "education source," "blog," "broken or removed," "unclassifiable," or "other."

[36] An answer of "yes" indicates that a link led to an internal page.

Figure 3: Destination of External Links
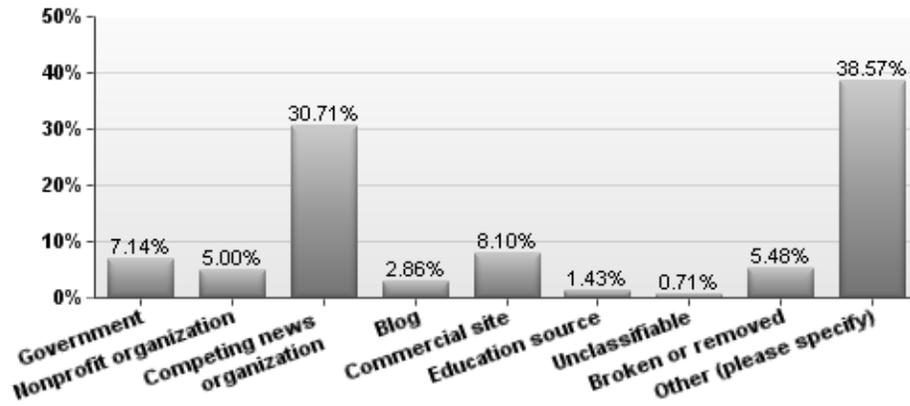
Of 420 incidences of external links, 39 percent were classified as "other." An option to connect to the author through email, Facebook or Twitter was the predominant use for "other." "Competing news organization" accounted for more than a third of responses.

Government links could be further classified as "other, unspecified," "state government resource," "municipal government resource," "politician's website," "census data," "Bureau of Labor Statistics" or "Environmental Protection Agency."

Figure 4: Destinations of External Government Links
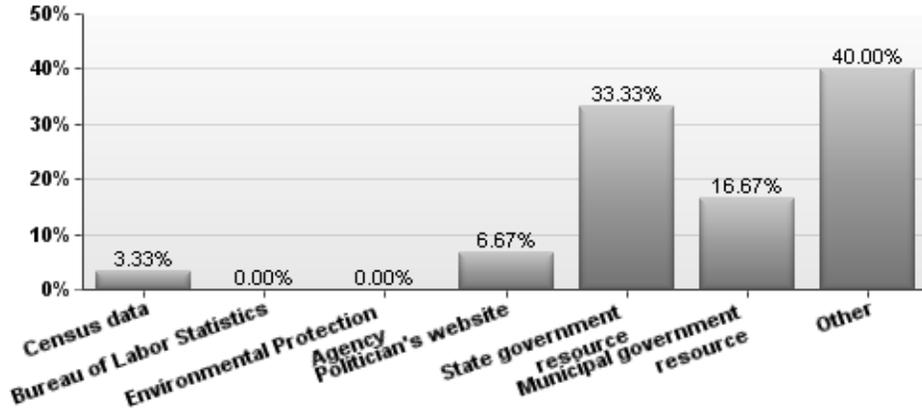
Of 30 responses identifying a link as leading to a government source, "other, unspecified" accounted for 40 percent of links. "State government resource" accounted for 33 percent. More than half of all links lead to dead-end or orphaned pages.
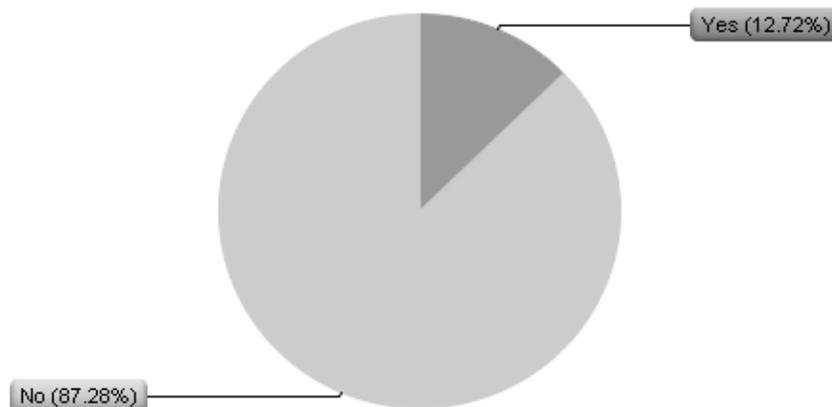
Figure 5: Percentage of Dead-end or Orphaned Pages[37]
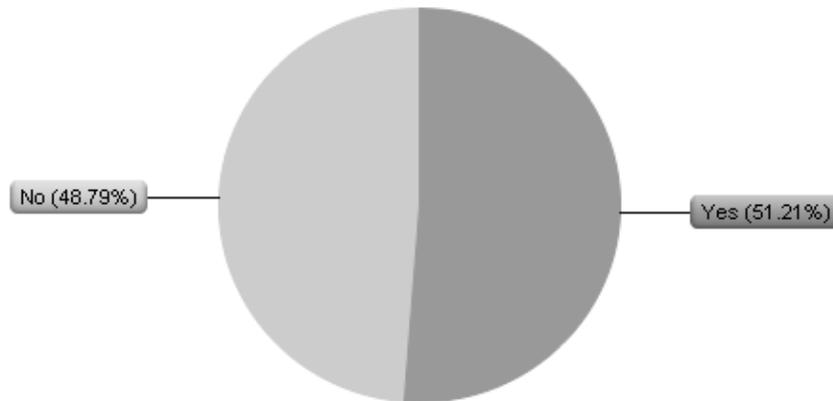
Also overall, of the links leading to dead-end or orphaned pages, 87 percent did not contain source documents.

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[37] An answer of "yes" indicates the link leads to a dead-end or orphaned page.

Figure 6: Percentage of Dead-end or Orphaned Pages

Containing Source Documents[38]


Yes (12.72%)

No (87.28%)

The majority of *Voice of San Diego* links lead to dead-end or orphaned pages (at 80 percent). Of the dead-end or orphaned pages, 84 percent did not contain source documents. More than three-fifths of *Politico* links lead to dead-end or orphaned pages. Of the dead-end or orphaned pages, 94 percent did not contain source documents. Nearly none of the *New York Times* links lead to dead-end or orphaned pages (at 1 percent), and none contained source documents. Only three percent of *Bangor Daily News* links lead to dead-end or orphaned pages, and none contained source documents.

Research Question 2 asked whether journalists linked to their own work or to that of another reporter more often, and it was learned that authors linked to work by others more than their own at an approximately 2:1 ratio.

Overall, 69 percent of links (N= 1,051) did not lead to content produced by the same author.

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[38] An answer of "yes" indicates the dead-end or orphaned page contained source documents.

Figure 7: Percentage of Links Leading to Content Produced by the Same Author[39]
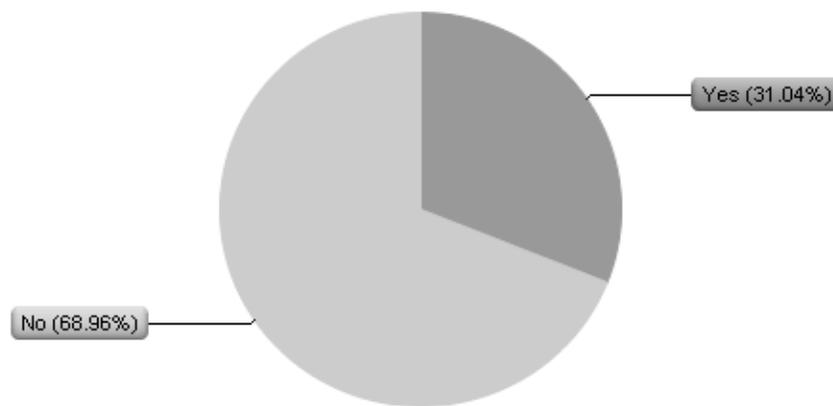
Almost a third of *Voice of San Diego* and *Politico* links and a fifth of *New York Times* links led to content produced by the same author. More than half of *Bangor Daily News* links led to content produced by the same author.

Research Question 3 asked if there are differences in the predominant characteristics between websites of news outlets that are online-only and websites of those with a print product. Looking at the type of external source each site linked to shows a difference in characteristics of hyperlinks.

Of *Voice of San Diego*'s external links, more than half lead to "other" sources. Of *The New York Times'* 52 external links, three categories are nearly tied for prevalence: "Competing news organization," "nonprofit organization" and "commercial site" saw approximately a quarter of results each. Of *Politico*'s external links, 60 percent lead to "competing news organization." Of *The Bangor Daily* News' external links, 38 percent lead to a "competing news organization," and 28 percent lead to an external "government" source.

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[39] An answer of "yes" indicates that the link led to content produced by the same author.

Discussion

The average number of hyperlinks per story on each of the four news sites clearly correlates to how the organizations approach the dissemination of information, as the two sites with the higher number of links per story are online-only.

The Voice of San Diego is far and away the leader in the number of links per story, which aligns with its heavy online presence.[40] Social media also play a large role in connecting with *Voice of San Diego* readers. With over half of its external links leading to Facebook, Twitter or a pop-up window to email the reporter, *The Voice of San Diego* is entrenched in the Internet.[41] A section of *The Voice of San Diego*'s autobiography on its "About Us" page succinctly sums up what makes this site stand out in terms of its online presence:

> We don't try to be everything to everybody. We don't think we're the only place you're going to get news today. We know that in today's world you've got plenty of places to turn for national and international coverage, and there are other publications in San Diego doing work that we don't need to chase after or replicate. Those are all just a mouse click away.[42]

That *The Voice of San Diego* is cognizant of the possibility for interconnected news online is evident in its efforts to include social media in the news experience for readers, which supports Weinberger's assertion that readers deserve a "web of

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[40] The author contacted each of the four news organizations by email to ask whether a hyperlinking policy was in place. Only The New York Times responded; the response was a form letter saying the paper does not assist research projects.

[41] That is not to say that *The Voice of San Diego* is ignorant of using other media to interact with readers, however. The organization often works in conjunction with a local television news program to convey the results of investigations.

[42] "About Us," The Voice of San Diego, 27 March 2012, <http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/support_us/about_us/>.

evidence"[43] and Kovach and Rosensteil's assertion that online journalists must act as "smart aggregators."[44]

The Bangor Daily News has the fewest links per story. Though the paper has a strong online presence for its area of the country,[45] the company still places great importance on the print product, which is integral to readers in rural areas of the state that lack reliable Internet access and to older readers who prefer to read words on paper rather than a screen. As with other newspapers, the print product's advertising revenue is likely funding its online presence. *The Bangor Daily News* uses Twitter and Facebook, like *The Voice of San Diego*, but individual stories generally do not contain links encouraging readers to follow reporters.[46] From a community member's perspective, individual reporters are only sporadically using personal, professional Twitter accounts to connect with readers, but @bangordailynews is an avid tweeter.

The Voice of San Diego's broad approach to social media among members of its staff contrasts sharply to *The Bangor Daily News*' more funneled approach. The nine *Voice of San Diego* employees listed on its "About Us" page who are not on the organization's development committee or board of directors each have a Twitter account. *The Bangor Daily News*' low number of links per story might be explained by this reliance on a print product not seen at *The Voice of San Diego*, which results in a different mindset when writing a news report whether or not a publication is web-first in posting skeletons of stories online even as reporters flesh them out for print. The idea of a

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[43] Weinberger, KM World
[44] Kovach and Rosenstiel, Blur, 179-180
[45] According to Compete's site analytics, web traffic for *The Portland Press Herald*, the other major Maine daily, reached 233,203 unique visitors in September 2011. In that same month, *The Bangor Daily News* had 341, 519 unique visitors.
[46] Toward the end of this study, some *Bangor Daily News* stories were beginning to have shirttails encouraging readers to follow the author on Twitter, but no hyperlink was provided to direct the reader to the author's account.

limited circulation due to the state's small population initially seemed as though it could also explain the low number of links, perhaps with the thought that a constricted readership might produce a constricted method of conveying information; however, *The Bangor Daily News* had more than five times as many unique visitors to its website in September 2011 than did *The Voice of San Diego*, according to Compete's site analytics, which counters that theory.

Politico and *The New York Times* have nearly the same number of links per story, providing a bridge of an online-only news organization and of a news organization with its roots still firmly in its print product to close the gap between *The Voice of San Diego* and *The Bangor Daily News*. Each of these sites has a national presence, which neither *The Voice of San Diego* nor *The Bangor Daily News* has. Both sites have a much higher number of unique visitors per month than the two local papers: *Politico* saw more than 2.5 million unique visitors and *The New York Times* more than 16.3 million during September 2011. Due to the similarities in both the scope of *The New York Times'* and *Politico*'s online presences and to their similar number of links per story, perhaps their similarities can be extrapolated to serve as a benchmark for hyperlink use on websites of national news organizations.

Regardless of the number of links in a story, a news organization is more likely to link to an internal page than an external one, which reinforces earlier discussion of media narcissism though taking the definition of the term in a different direction than previously established. While *The New York Times* and *Politico* both made frequent (though unmeasured) use of "topics pages," which do not carry a byline and could be either lists of related stories or encyclopedic repositories of information on a specific topic, the

prevalence of internal links shows the sites' chariness to encourage readers to exit their sites. Are these links necessary? If a web algorithm inserts a hyperlink for every first mention of President Barack Obama,[47] at what point does that cease to further readers' understanding of an issue and simply become white noise?

The frequency with which internal links are used suggests that media narcissism may be expressed here as a "look at me" gesture designed to make a reader's experience on a news organization's website more about the organization than about the news. All four sites had writer profiles in hyperlinked bylines, and more than half of *Voice of San Diego*'s external links led to the Facebook or Twitter profiles of either the reporter or the organization itself or to a way to email the reporter directly. These options emphasize the identity of the reporter and invite readers to interact with them regardless of the subject of a story. In contrast to *Voice of San Diego*'s "other" external links, the other three sites shared "competing news organization" as at least one of their top categories of external links. While *Voice of San Diego* seeks to keep readers connected to the site after they have left, the other sites seem more resigned to relinquishing their hold on readers if they must navigate away from the organizations' sites.

Williams' definition of media narcissism, though it considers the broader process of gathering information rather than just reporting it that this study explores, alleges that media infatuated with themselves are less likely to be successful in educating the public:

What is particularly problematic about this practice of the media covering themselves instead of focusing on their traditional, established role is that the discourse is generally that of running subjective commentary and pontification,

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[47] Or even the second mention as well, as was sometimes the case in New York Times stories that referred to President Obama and Barack Obama, both of which seemed to have been interpreted as a first reference and both of which led to the Times Topics page about Barack Obama.

instead of objective reporting of information that could be provided if the media would offer it from readily available sources other than the media participants themselves.[48] [49]

"It appears that the answer is that the media tend to readily give up their vital function of serving as a watchdog for the public, because they are largely too busy watching themselves -- enamored by the spectacle of the unfolding news process and their own involvement in it," Williams continued.[50]

The results of this study highlight the practice of providing a reporter biography linked to each byline, and *The Voice of San Diego*'s emphatic push for readers to connect to reporters through Facebook, Twitter and email suggest reporters have become no less "enamored by the spectacle" since Williams' study was published in 2004.

This study shows the existence of a different style of media narcissism than described by Williams. Here the press is not devoting time reporting on itself -- unless it can be argued that the prevalence of internal links amounts to self-reflexive reporting -- but rather is devoting time to promoting specific news organizations and reporters as things worthy of attention beyond the news of the day. By encouraging readers to learn more about reporters and to follow them on Twitter or subscribe to their posts on Facebook, readers are invited to interact with the organizations on a level that disregards the organization's purpose: the news. A type of branding is evident in this that serves a purpose of retaining readers but does little to inform them. The reporter's personality is

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[48] Williams, 8.

[49] Williams approaches the problem of media narcissism largely from the point of view that it allows the news cycle to stray into subjectivity when objectivity is the only appropriate mindset for reporters to work in, which runs contrary to the purpose of this study. On page 6, he lays out the degree to which he ascribes to the practice of objectivity: "It is perhaps the notion of objectivity, in terms of evaluating true news value, that is at the center of this dissertation's evaluation of self-reflexivity, narcissism, and metacommunication in news coverage." This study includes the idea of self-reflexivity in its definition of narcissism.

[50] Williams, 9.

presented as exacting an equal demand on a reader's attention as does a link leading to supplementary information, blurring the lines between social media and news media.

The description of transparency that can be achieved through hyperlinks delineated above, the main crux of which was that source documents could be housed in dead-end pages, is not found by the study's findings to be practiced by any of the news organizations.

The survey did not distinguish between dead-end pages, which prohibit a reader from navigating beyond them, or orphaned pages, which prohibit a reader from navigating back from them. *The New York Times* and *Politico* made frequent use of these types of pages, but overall, the sites achieved a roughly even split between linking to these types of pages or not. This suggests that the industry is unsure of how to best retain readers but has a sense that restricting their movement would help them do so. From there, dead-end and orphaned pages serve the purpose of holding a reader's place in the original article, making it easy to return after following a hyperlink. However, since news organizations use these types of pages as often as not, the data suggest they have yet to determine exactly how they should be used in order to achieve their goals.

In order to utilize hyperlinks as a tool to improve transparency in journalism, news organizations might make greater use of these types of pages in order to present source documents to their readers. Using these types of pages skillfully, and according to the as-yet undeveloped organizational structure, would exemplify Weinberger's idea of a "web of evidence" by drawing in extra information without forcing a reader to navigate away from the article he was trying to read before becoming intrigued by the hyperlink.

Weinberger's assertion that "transparency prospers in a linked medium"[51] still rings true; however, this study shows that simply using a "linked medium" does not equate to transparent journalism. Journalists must be shown how to use hyperlinks to avoid the pitfalls of the "'unexplained' newsgathering process" Rupar warns against. "With visibility of sources comes credibility of claims and accountability of actions," she writes, but simply saying that hyperlinks allow sources to be more visible to readers and therefore are equitable to transparent journalism is discredited here.

The Washington Post's about-face on the use of Facebook and Twitter suggests that the paper grew more comfortable with social media both as it learned how to use and navigate it and as it grew in popularity. Seeing other papers benefiting from the increased traffic social media directed toward their websites may have been the impetus to the alleviation of concerns about social media. The same could prove true for hyperlinks. If a set method of using hyperlinks were to be developed, news organizations might be more comfortable with using them to promote transparency; a consensus on how and when hyperlinks should be used could promote more streamlined use. The use of hyperlinks is much less structured than the use of Twitter, for example. Tweets can only be 140 characters long. Tweets contain hashtags to direct readers' attention to a specific topic or contain a short URL to direct them to a webpage. A user can tweet to just one follower or to hundreds. No such structure is applied to hyperlinks as there is no cohesive larger entity, such as Twitter for tweets. Therefore, if such a structure could be agreed upon for the use of hyperlinks, it is possible that we could see more consistency in how hyperlinks are organized or selected for inclusion in an online article.

To revive and adapt Philip Meyer's quote from the beginning of this study, being

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[51] Weinberger, "Transparency is the new objectivity"

transparent is easy, so long as you are simple-minded about defining it. This study sought to provide a basic understanding of the use of hyperlinks on news organizations' websites in order to suggest how the inherent interconnectedness of the Internet can improve the quality of journalism. Although the idea that hyperlinks to source material foster transparency, the data collected shows that news organizations are still trying to figure out the most conducive way to use hyperlinks. Work must be done off-screen to educate journalists about using hyperlinks to convey data to readers, because simply throwing the tools for transparency at them without giving any instruction appears to result in clumsy usage.

Limitations of the Study

This study originally also sought to determine whether the wording of hyperlinks suggested what could be learned by following them, but that question lead the study from the realm of quantitative analysis toward qualitative analysis and so was determined to not be germane to the study.

A question that could have been included was whether a link led to an internal topics page, which would have showed how often a news organization purported to be a reference source as well as a news outlet. The external source question would also have benefited from including the category of social media, as Facebook and Twitter do not fit into the idea of a blog as described for this study and as *Voice of San Diego* in particular linked to social media extensively.

Several hiccups were encountered in collecting data. On Jan. 17, the second page of a cached *New York Times* site would cause the story to refresh to its updated version, so not all links could be verified as being part of the story at 8 p.m. on the evening

collected. On Jan. 20, the same issue occurred for evening links from *The New York Times* and *The Voice of San Diego*. On Feb. 5, night links were collected at 11:40 p.m. instead of 8 p.m. because the author was at work and lost track of time. On Feb. 26, a typo in *Voice of San Diego*'s URL precluded the software from downloading the site, so those links were collected on Feb. 29, and the problem with *New York Times* links experienced on Jan. 17 occurred again. On Feb. 28, the author downloaded the night links for the assistant, but the links were corrupted in transferring them from one computer to the other, so the assistant collected night links on March 13.

Future Research

Questions about the feasibility of transparency remain. While the use of dead-end or orphaned pages, if used to deliver source documents, would increase transparency about the origins of information, many hurdles stand between advocacy of an untested method and public acceptance and interaction with it. How do we wean readers from flawed but familiar objectivity without an uproarious backlash about the return of the partisan press? How do we do more with less in terms of providing more raw data to readers in a time of shrinking newsrooms? More information about how readers approach the news is necessary before the suggestions in this study could be implemented with any hope for a warm welcome.

Other possibilities for future research beyond this study exist. This study would have been better informed if information about hyperlinking policies at the news organizations could have been included. As indicated in a footnote earlier, that information was not forthcoming. Future research can incorporate company policies and whether a specific mentality about the use of hyperlinks better enables a news

organization to make good use of them. Future research could also build off this study in examining whether it is possible to "over-link." Is there a threshold at which readers become too distracted by the number of hyperlinks and cease to learn anything from the story itself?

Reader submissions about their views of hyperlinks would have added another dimension to this study in determining whether readers actually follow hyperlinks. If not, any suggestions about how to better use hyperlinks in the interest of transparency are moot.

In writing the discussion section, I realized I should have tracked the frequency with which hyperlinks led to "topics pages" rather than pages with bylined content, which could be used to show the extent to which news organizations attempt to be a definitive, encyclopedic source of information. I suspect news organizations' use of topics pages would outweigh their use of external links.

Appendix A: Coding protocol

1. What news organization is the article from?

2. What is the article's URL?

3. How many words are in the story?

      Include byline and shirttails in word count but not the headline.

4. How many hyperlinks are in the story?

5. What is the destination of the link?

      A. Internal page

      B. External page

           A link that opens an email client is external and a dead-end page.

6. Does the link lead to a dead-end page?

      If the link opens in a new window and you cannot click the back arrow to return to the story, answer this as yes.

7. If the hyperlink leads to an internal page, does it link to content produced by the original article's author?

8. If the hyperlink leads to an external page, what type of page is it?

      A. Government source

           I. Census data

           II. Bureau of Labor Statistics Data

           III. Environmental Protection Agency

           IV. State government resource

           V. Municipality government resource

           VI. Other

B. Nonprofit organization

C. Competing news organization

D. Blog

E. Commercial site (such as a private company or online marketplace site)

F. Education source (such as the Department of Education or any website using the .edu domain)

G. An unclassifiable destination

H. A broken or removed hyperlink

I. Other

9. For hyperlinks leading to dead-end or orphaned pages, does the page contain source documents?

10. Does the hyperlink represent a full-line disruption?

11. Please include any difficulties you encountered coding this item or any information important to understanding the data you have coded.

Appendix B: Code book

Internal page: An internal page is one contained in the same news outlet's website as the story.

External page: An external page is one contained in a different news outlet's website than the story.

Dead-end page: A dead-end page is one that a reader cannot navigate back from. It opens when a hyperlink is followed, but information is displayed in a window, and the reader does not navigate back to the original story.

Topics page: A topics page is one contained in the same news outlet's website as the story that focuses on a specific topic, such as a politician or a world region. It offers history on the topic and hyperlinks leading to more information. Topics pages are not traditional news stories.

Source documents: source documents are anything cited in a story such as a proposed bill, a contract, a photo, an audio file or a video. They contain raw information that a journalist has integrated into the story.

To determine if the hyperlink's wording suggests the information that can be learned by following it, look only at the words contained in the hyperlink. If the hyperlink contains only a person's name, it is not likely to suggest what may be learned. If the hyperlink is a partial clause, the reader may be able to glean a better idea of what can be learned by following the hyperlink.

Full-line disruption: A full-line disruption is a hyperlink that stretches across all or part of the width of the text of an article and that is not a part of the article's logical syntax. It is often a link to a "related article" but does not need to be labeled as such.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth R. Kevit was born in Bangor, Maine, on May 6, 1990. She was raised in Eddington, Maine, and graduated from John Bapst Memorial High School in 2008. Majoring in journalism, Elizabeth has minored in French. She is a member of Lambda Pi Eta, Phi Kappa Phi and Phi Beta Kappa. Upon graduation, Elizabeth plans to work as a reporter.