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## Teaching Linking—Ways to Develop Respected Curators

‘The key lesson [Professor Jim] Stovall wants journalism students to absorb is this: Provide links that satisfy the reader’s need for information, and they’ll come back for more.’

By Sue Burzynski Bullard  
*Digital Media*

As part of the growing Internet culture of sharing, teaching the value of linking has found a home in journalism schools. These bits of embedded computer code provide readers with the capacity to unearth more information with a simple click. Links can provide context and attribution, the linchpins of journalism. Yet some newspaper editors have been wary, in part, because linking is counterintuitive. Inviting readers to move away from the story before finishing it can feel akin to the Chicago Tribune inviting readers to sample the Chicago Sun-Times.

The aversion to linking is changing, though, partly because the Internet has conditioned millions to find out more by clicking. Links in news stories are part of a culture of sharing in a world that includes Twitter and Facebook, a top driver of traffic to news websites with its 500 million users sharing news stories.

The power of linking makes it vital to teach the skill to journalism students, according to Jim Stovall, journalism professor at the University of Tennessee. “You have to do this if you’re going to be a good online journalist. It’s got to be part of your makeup,” he says, as he explains to his students that learning to link enhances their journalism. “We’re trying to give people information that they want and are expecting.”

In the move toward a digital-first mindset, newsrooms are recognizing links as essential to creating a satisfying reader experience. “It’s a linked economy, said Henry Fuhrmann, an assistant managing editor at the Los Angeles Times. “If you’re not linking you’re saying you’re oblivious to what’s happening with real people or you’re saying you don’t care.” That’s why creating effective links is a real world skill that journalism students need, Fuhrmann said.

The Times is working on getting better at linking, Fuhrmann said. In the pipeline is a draft of principles designed to encourage the smart use of links by reporters and editors. “Effective hyperlinking helps build our website’s authority as a go-to destination for information,” the draft says. “Links can enrich individual Times stories, blog posts and photo elements by directing users to additional relevant material, helping them navigate across latimes.com and to other sites in their search for information.”

Serena Carpenter, an assistant professor who teaches multimedia classes at Arizona State University, said creating useful links is hard work. “What you’re doing is combing the Web for the most credible sources of information,” Carpenter said. “That takes time. That takes a lot of research.” Online audiences expect that kind of research to be done and want shared information, say those who tout links.

At Arizona State, teaching students to provide meaningful links is a way to teach them about research, particularly the differences between primary and secondary sources. Typically, when students find a story about a research study, they want to link to the story instead of going to the next step of looking for the original study. “They do it because that’s what comes up on a Google search first,” Carpenter said. “That’s what they’re used to doing. I tell my students you need to link to the original source. You need to find the actual study instead of relying on the interpretation of others.” Doing this helps them to evaluate the credibility of sources. “Talking about research totally changes my students’ stories by the end of the semester,” Carpenter said. “They see the world differently.”

Linking skills can be incorporated into almost any reporting, editing or multimedia class. Showing students how to use links effectively teaches them how to:

- Provide meaningful information for their audiences.
- Connect with their communities and audiences.
- Deliver context and background in stories.
- Increase transparency by linking to documentation.
- Evaluate sources of information.
- Distinguish between primary and secondary sources.
- Think critically.
- Write effective links.

The bottom line: A journalist’s job is providing information. Links—even when they deliver readers to other sources—help do that, said Mark Johnson, a senior lecturer in journalism at the University of Georgia. “My belief is you become the source that folks go to for information even if it’s not information that you’ve sourced yourself. It’s going to help improve site traffic and site loyalty,” he said.

That’s why Johnson has students create links for [gradyjournal.com](http://gradyjournal.com), an experimental learning lab in his college’s journalism program. The website features original content created by University of Georgia journalism students, but students also link to news roundups from other sources.

“We can say, ‘Hey, we don’t have the resources to cover this story, but The Atlanta Journal-Constitution did a really great job and you should go read their story,” Johnson said. It also forces students to evaluate sources. “If I have one person ranting about something in the middle of Oklahoma, I’m not so sure I’m going to link to that because I don’t trust the news source.”

In pre-Web days, newspapers or broadcast outlets were often the only news organizations in a town. They branded themselves as the “trusted source” of news. But that situation has changed. “We’re now in an era where the audiences know they have multiple places to go for information,” Johnson said. “The problem is the audience at times can’t discriminate between what is good information and bad information. That’s where we’re still the experts.”

In this way, Stovall observed, editors and reporters now function as curators. “I’m going to go to 10 different sites but only three of them are any good,” he said. “That’s what I’m going to tell my readers about. That’s what we should be doing as reporters.”

Linking, he said, requires editing, reporting and writing skills. Students have to consider whether to include inline (within the body of the story) links or related links at an end of the story. They have to determine how many links are too many so they are not annoying or distracting to readers. They need to learn to write links that provide information, rather than simply saying “click here” without warning readers what they will find. “It’s a mental exercise,” Stovall said. “You don’t want to deceive the reader or waste the reader’s time.”

For Fuhrmann, linking is all about focusing on what’s good for readers. “It enables you to enhance your storytelling because you’re saying, ‘here’s how I did this story’ or ‘here’s something I used to get this story.’ ” One goal is increased transparency. Among the Times’s draft principles on links is this one: “Writers and their editors should link to publicly available source documents to enable readers to dig deeper or understand better how we reported the story.”

Johnson said he learned the value of linking to original documents when he was photo editor of a newspaper in central New York. When the newspaper posted a PDF of a 40-page court decision involving a lawsuit between the newspaper and the city, the 50,000-circulation newspaper had 25,000 downloads of the report within 24 hours. And that was back in the day when newspaper websites simply shoveled the day’s paper onto the Web. His reaction: “Holy cow.”

“Audiences now expect a wide range of information,” Johnson said. “They expect to know where you got your information.”

Adopting that concept requires teaching links in journalism classes—a 21st-century supplement to writing, editing and other traditional skills. At the University of Tennessee, Stovall puts it to his students this way:

What’s the most visited website in the universe? It’s Google. What content is there on Google that Google has created? Nothing. Google, when you come to their site, Google sends you away immediately. So do you go back? You’re damn right you go back because you’ve been sent away and you’ve gotten some information you need. So you

think I'm going to go back to Google the next time I want information. We have to think in terms of Google.

The key lesson Stovall wants journalism students to absorb is this: Provide links that satisfy the reader's need for information, and they'll come back for more. "If you don't teach your students to do it," he said, "you're not giving them a fair shake."

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