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NORMALIZING THE HYPERLINK

How bloggers, professional journalists, and institutions shape linking values

Mark Coddington

This study examines the formation of linking norms among political bloggers and professional journalists. Through in-depth interviews with Web editors, reporters, and bloggers within and outside professional newsrooms, it explores the institutional and cultural forces at work in determining whom blogs and news sites link to, and in what contexts. Drawing on the framework of institutionalism, this study aims to supplement research on journalistic normalization and hyperlink patterns by providing a fuller understanding of the processes by which professional journalism and the political blogosphere mutually adapt toward new norms. It finds a significant role for blogging's cultural values in establishing the importance of linking within professional newsrooms, but also a heavy influence on journalists' linking practices from bureaucratic processes within those newsrooms.

KEYWORDS blogging; hyperlinks; institutionalism; norm formation; norms; professional journalism

Introduction

For much of the news media's modern history, professional journalism could fairly be characterized as a coherent social institution, one that was bound by a common set of organizational and trans-organizational structures, as well as practices that had been routinized and calcified into professional norms. The seminal newsroom sociologists of the 1970s (e.g., Gans 1979; Tuchman 1973) identified and explained the genesis of many of these bureaucratic processes, while new institutionalists such as Cook (1998) and Sparrow (1999) synthesized them into a conception of the news media as an institutional actor interacting with other political institutions within a trans-organizational field. Since then, the news media's institutional coherence and authority have eroded (Robinson 2007), as networked, distributed forms of information production have at times both supplemented and challenged the continued viability of professional journalism's institutional structures and the validity of its values and practices (Bruns 2008; Carlson 2007).

Professional journalism is far from the only institution being fundamentally challenged. The other institutions with which it has historically jockeyed for authority, such as political parties and structured political interest groups, are being disrupted by the same networked forces (Kahn and Kellner 2004). Social upheaval is thus visiting not only professional journalism itself, but the entire field in which it relates to other social institutions. The new cultural forces with which professional journalism increasingly

interacts are not necessarily institutional at all; they are the amorphous and often ambiguous collective values and practices that emerge on the Web, manifesting themselves in decentralized, partially coherent groups such as the political blogosphere, the online activists Anonymous, or the sprawling community at the social news site *Reddit*. Though such forces are exchanging influence with professional journalism, the ways in which they interact with journalistic values to develop norms and values online are much more difficult to observe and evaluate than in the former institutional environment. This study attempts to analyze the relations between institutional journalism and one of those quasi-institutional actors, the political blogosphere, to understand how norms are shaped with regard to a particular contested practice: the use of hyperlinks. Through in-depth interviews, this study examines the ways in which professional journalists, political bloggers, and those who are part of both groups have attempted to shape the meaning and use of links, using them to direct attention online.

Literature Review

The Hyperlink as a Contested Area

The hyperlink has several distinct characteristics that make it an especially fruitful area in which to examine the formation and negotiation of norms between political bloggers and professional journalism. Links have been intimately tied to both the practice of blogging and the structure of the internet itself, and their use has taken on a wide variety of potential meanings and purposes. Within the context of the Web, hyperlinks designate which sources should be given public attention and to what degree (Turow 2008). On a deeper level, they create connections between information, ideas, and actors, helping form the structure of the Web itself (Halavais 2008). Links are also a crucial element in structuring and expressing social relationships online, providing a means by which those relationships can become visible online (Adamic 2008). Within blogging more specifically, linking has been described as a fundamental component of the form, playing an essential role in forming connections among bloggers as well as filtering and organizing information (Efimova and de Moor 2005).

Among links' numerous functions, two aims are most closely tied to the intentions of those who use them: fostering social connections and reinforcing the linker's authority and credibility. The former is particularly central in blogging, in which linking is largely reciprocal (Ali-Hasan and Adamic 2007) and largely absent from professional news organizations, who primarily link to themselves (e.g., Coddington 2012; Dimitrova et al. 2003; Larsson 2012). Efimova and de Moor (2005) described links as the glue that connects and holds together distributed conversations among blogs, and Schmidt (2007) argued that links can express relationships in several ways—such as affirmation, dissent, and formal affiliation—that socially structure blogging spaces.

The second purpose, aiding credibility, has been found to be a fundamental purpose of linking among both bloggers and professional journalists. Matheson (2004a) and Wall (2005) identified linking for attribution of sources as a key element in bloggers' construction of credibility and authority. This function also maps onto journalistic values well (De Maeyer 2012), as links can help reinforce a report's facticity by connecting readers directly with sources and showing readers how journalists know what they know (Tsui 2008). While a previous study has shown that these purposes

manifest themselves in varying linking practices between professional journalists and bloggers (Coddington 2012), this study is particularly concerned with the role that institutional factors play in developing the values and norms that guide those practices. Those institutional influences can play out within a wide range of settings that exist throughout professional journalism and political blogging.

The Institutionalality of Professional Journalism and the Political Blogosphere

Institutional theory is rooted in the idea that the fundamental causes for social behavior cannot be attributed to individuals' psychological and behavioral factors, but to the larger, structural factors that constrain and shape their actions (Schneiberg and Clemens 2006). The primary means through which those structural forces are exerted are institutions, which Cook (1998, 70) describes as "social patterns of behavior identifiable across the organizations that are generally seen within a society to preside over a particular social sphere."

Though institutionalism has taken on various incarnations, institutions have been conceptualized more than anything else as rules—as North (1990, 3) described them, "the rules of the game in a society or, more formally ... the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction." As rules, institutions thus have the power to set normative expectations about legitimate behavior (Ryfe 2006). This conception of institutions as rules that structure behavior helps resolve one of the primary areas of slip-page in the study of institutions—their mistaken conflation with organizations (Lawrence 2006). While organizations are "groups of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives" (North 1990, 4), institutions, by contrast, are the larger normative rules that form and structure those organizations, defining their organizational culture. Since institutions are the rules and structures that undergird organizations rather than the organizations themselves, it is far more useful to think of organizations and fields as *institutional*, rather than conflating them with institutions themselves (Dunaway 2011).

Institutionality, then, is a continuous measure of the degree to which organizations and organizational fields possess formal structures and produce shared cultural practices that exert influence over an area of social life. Institutional structures are designed to guard organizations and fields' knowledge, perpetuate their arrangements of power, and insulate them from the influence of individual members (North 1981). In media organizations, practices often take the form of routines—sets of standard practices that are developed to deal with uncertainty but end up taking on a great deal of social power in themselves (Cook 1998; Sparrow 1999; Tuchman 1973).

Scholars have claimed that professional journalism is institutional on two primary bases—first, its organizations are governed not by individual actors, but routinized processes rooted in an institutional mindset (Cook 1998). Second, professional journalism is institutionally influential in that it forms a framework of social rules within which other political and cultural actors must operate (Sparrow 1999). As Lowrey (2011) argues, one of the main currencies of influence in which professional journalism trades is credibility, conferring it on and withholding it from other actors, while also attempting to monopolize for itself credibility in processing and publicizing information.

The political blogosphere does not possess the same institutional qualities that professional journalism does; it is more often characterized by its heterogeneity than its homogeneity, and it has not accrued enough power to significantly constrain the options of other political actors. Nevertheless, the political blogosphere does exhibit some institutional qualities, functioning as a quasi-institutional field that interacts and exchanges influence with professional journalism in a variety of ways. In this study, “political blogosphere” refers to the subset of filter blogs whose purpose is to select and highlight particular items on political and public affairs issues for readers, as opposed to personal diary-style blogs (Tremayne 2007). Blogs have been broadly defined as frequently updated sites posted in reverse chronological order (Garden 2012), though this study acknowledges, with Garden (2012) and Karpf (2012), that blogging is sufficiently evolving and diversifying to resist a narrowly affordance-based classification. Thus, sites such as *Talking Points Memo* that do not universally abide by traditional blog-posting practices but play similar filtering and commenting roles as other political blogs can be discussed as part of this group. And while Karpf (2012) argues that “blogosphere” is an overbroad term that engenders unhelpful generalizations, modifying the term to include only a particular subset of blogs (“the political blogosphere”) narrows it sufficiently to allow discussion of a definable, though still somewhat amorphous, entity of blogs connected to each other both through common practices and the links between them (Tremayne 2007).

The political blogosphere possesses two primary types of institutional characteristics. The first is its quality as a cultural vehicle by which bloggers “perceive themselves as part of a community that shares values, rituals and language” (Lowrey 2006, 479). Researchers have observed this quality in several ways over the past decade; early in the blogosphere’s development, Kumar et al. (2003) found that community formation happened not randomly, but through shared interests binding bloggers together. As some research deepened our understanding of the structural architecture of the blogosphere’s many subcommunities (Ali-Hasan and Adamic 2007), other studies illuminated the formation of norms within those communities, developing bottom-up, through a collective iteration process (Schmidt 2007; Wei 2004). While the political blogosphere is not internally coherent enough to be considered a subculture in itself, as a culturally connected blogging community, it functions as a site for the development of shared practices, norms, and values that can themselves become institutional.

The political blogosphere’s second institutional characteristic is more specific—since the mid-2000s, political blogs have become increasingly bureaucratized, adopting more formalized structures and routinized practices. Bloggers have pursued many of the marks of institutional structure, holding conferences, developing more complex editorial hierarchies based on division of labor, and pursuing revenue more aggressively (Lowrey 2006; Lowrey, Parrott, and Meade 2011). Scholars have found that bloggers operate by their own routines, which often take the form of “blog etiquette” (Lowrey, Parrott, and Meade 2011; Schmidt 2007); this is especially the case among the top tier of political blogs, whose routines, such as posting very frequently, have been tied to financial and even professional pressures (Lowrey, Parrott, and Meade 2011; Munn 2012). These institutional trappings are far from universal among political blogs, whose structures are too varied to be characterized as strongly institutional in this area (Lowrey and Mackay 2008). But by the measures of routinized behavior and formalized

structures, the political blogosphere is certainly moving closer to an institutional mindset, rather than further away.

Norm Formation Among Journalism and the Political Blogosphere

Professional journalism and the political blogosphere are far from symmetrical groups; the political blogosphere is far larger but has less cohesion and influence over political discourse. Still, they have done much to shape each other's norms and practices. Professional journalism's influence on bloggers manifests itself largely as a tension among political bloggers between adoption and challenge of journalistic norms. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2011) found that those who blog about public affairs are more likely to see their blogs as a form of journalism and follow professional journalistic norms, such as quoting sources and doing fact-checking. Similarly, Singer (2007) saw confluences between the norms and values of political blogging and professional journalism. Bloggers themselves have at times identified themselves as separate from journalism, but have also attempted to gain credibility by engaging in practices marked by the patterns of institutional journalism (Lowrey, Parrott, and Meade 2011; Matheson 2004b; Munn 2012).

Bloggers have exerted their own influence on professional journalistic norms and practices in a variety of well-documented areas. The most direct has been their ability to shape the traditional news media's agenda, as well as their framing of political issues. Researchers have found that professional journalists track blogs in making decisions about what to cover and how (Lowrey and Mackay 2008) and have increasingly cited blogs as sources and quoted bloggers in news stories (Farrell and Drezner 2008; Messner and DiStaso 2008). This has given blogs substantial power to influence the traditional media's agenda, even as political blogs are themselves influenced by that agenda (Lowrey and Mackay 2008; Meraz 2009). More generally, scholars have argued that political bloggers embody an alternative journalistic form that challenges several journalistic norms such as objectivity and exclusivity of participation (Hermida 2009; Wall 2005), and that some norms, such as transparency and accountability, have been redefined as a result (Carlson 2007; Singer 2007).

Professional journalism and political blogging have converged most clearly in the widespread adoption of blogging in newsrooms, an interaction that has particularly revealed the intertwining processes of norm formation between the two forms. Professional journalism's initial interactions with political blogging were marked by animosity and dismissal (Carlson 2007; Robinson 2006), but the industry has since come to see blogs as valuable as a way to break news, allow for personality, and draw more users (Nielsen 2012). Yet studies have repeatedly shown that when institutional news organizations adopt blogging, they do so by incorporating it into existing professional norms, such as objectivity and formality, and subjecting it to bureaucratic structures (Hermida 2009; Singer 2005). This has created an ongoing tension in blogging newsrooms between those institutional norms and what Hermida (2009, 280) called "the occupational culture of bloggers."

This journalistic normalization of new technologies has been found elsewhere in digital media (e.g., Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). Scholars have found that journalists impose their professional norms and values on their use of those new technologies,

but also that those technologies are altering professional norms as they are incorporated into journalists' work. This study aims to deepen that work by examining not only the norms and values surrounding a technological affordance—hyperlinks—but also the process by which they are developed among professional journalists and another group deeply invested in their use, the political blogosphere. It is particularly focused on the role of institutional forces in shaping and constraining those norms in settings with varying degrees of institutionality. With those considerations in mind, this study poses the following research questions:

- RQ1:** What values and norms have developed to guide the political blogosphere's linking practices?
- RQ2:** What values and norms have developed to guide professional journalists' linking practices?
- RQ2b:** How do the institutional values and norms of professional journalism influence journalists' linking norms?

Method

To answer these questions, this study drew on 21 in-depth interviews with political bloggers, both within and outside traditional news organizations, and Web editors at those news organizations. This method allowed for the researcher to examine bloggers' and editors' self-conception of their own values and practices regarding linking, as well as the bureaucratic settings in which those practices are situated. Interview participants were selected purposively, to produce a sample that included a wide range of journalistic and political blogging practices. The sample was also constructed to include the most influential across online professional journalism and political blogging in order to examine those who are especially instrumental in shaping linking practices. Blogs that covered general political issues were selected based on influence through inbound links via their presence among the top 100 US political blogs on the influence-tracking site Technorati, as well as Web traffic, as measured by the analytics sites Quantcast and Compete. News sites were chosen based on their organization's influence and prominence measured via circulation size, traffic, and cultural standing. All of the news organizations chosen were national in scope within the United States, with the exception of a few prominent regional organizations, such as the *Chicago Tribune* and *Dallas Morning News*. The sample was limited to American news sites and blogs in order to examine a group of actors that operated within a relatively bounded cultural and political environment, making it easier to evaluate differences among them and the forces that account for those differences. In this case, the US political media environment has been particularly marked by significant overlap between the fields of blogging and professional journalism and multiaxial flows of influence between the two (Meraz 2009; Munn 2012; Tremayne 2007).

In total, interviews were requested with 58 people, 21 of whom agreed to participate in the study. Fourteen of the participants worked in traditional news organizations, with six coming from blogs outside news organizations¹ and one from the Web-based news organization *Politico*. Of those within news organizations, seven were bloggers,² and the remaining eight were Web or blog editors.³ All agreed to speak on the record,

with the exception of two participants who asked to be identified only as a reporter and blogger for a major news organization.

The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted via telephone between February and October 2011. Each interview covered perceptions of links, linking practices and processes, and influences on linking. Interviewees were asked questions about the purposes served by links, the process by which links were typically added to their content, the situations in which they link and sites they prefer to link to, and the influences on their linking values. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour in length. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006), with content tagged and examined based on characterization of particular values and practices, then compared across interviews with other similarly themed discourse, according to the research questions posed in the study. Unlike previous, large-scale quantitative studies of linking practices, this method does not allow us to generalize the results to the larger populations of political bloggers and professional journalists. However, it builds on such research by offering thicker, more textured information about the institutional setting in which those linking practices are rooted, answering the call for such research by scholars such as Larsson (2012).

Results

Formation of Bloggers' and Journalists' Linking Norms and Values

At the most basic level, the political bloggers interviewed in this study, especially those outside traditional news organizations, linked to other sites because they felt compelled to do so by the norms of Web-based writing. They referred to linking as something they were obliged to do because it was "polite," "ethical," or "just good manners." One blogger tellingly referred to an "unwritten understanding" between bloggers that writers should link to and attribute any work they referred to by other bloggers or online sources.

Bloggers articulated two primary bases for this culturally embedded obligation to link to the sources of their information. The first was economic: because links were an important source of traffic and bloggers and other sites relied on that traffic to bring in revenue (and cultural capital in the form of attention), to neglect to link to sources was to deprive them of the capital they had earned by creating useful content. Dave Blount of the conservative blog *Moonbattery* described this rationale aptly: "It's almost like that's the fee you pay them for the service they give you by providing you with material; you provide them with traffic by giving them that link. So you're cheating people if you don't link to them."⁴

The second basis was similar, but social in nature. Bloggers saw links as a way to express social ties and as a gesture through which to strengthen them, describing them as a sort of social currency through which they could repay favors to friends, establish relationships with new bloggers, and "pay it forward" to less established bloggers. Despite previous research that has indicated that linking among bloggers follows partisan patterns (e.g., Adamic and Glance 2005), these economic and social duties trumped even political loyalties for the bloggers interviewed. Several bloggers said that even when they criticized posts by bloggers from the opposite political

perspective, they linked to them in part because they felt a social obligation to those fellow bloggers.

Those within the traditional media used similar language to describe their adherence to the cultural norm of linking externally, referring to it as “etiquette,” “courtesy,” “an ethical issue,” and something they were “absolutely obligated” to do when referring to outside sources. Their rationale behind the obligation took on a less social quality, though two bloggers within traditional news organizations said they occasionally linked out of a collegial desire to draw attention to others on the Web. While it should not be assumed that the establishment of that norm flowed from bloggers to those in the professional news media, when professional journalists were asked how they came to understand these norms, they overwhelmingly named the blogosphere (and the Web in general) as the source. Wright Bryan, a producer for blogs and social media at *NPR*, said the linking norms at *NPR*’s blogs had “just evolved out of standard blogging practice” and a desire to “follow the best practices of the Web.” Others explained in more detail that they had absorbed their linking norms through years of being a reader of blogs themselves. Chet Czarniak, the executive editor for distribution and programming at *USA Today*, gave a typical description of the process by which his paper began to adopt the linking practices of the Web:

It came about gradually over time. As we saw more linking, as we realized that, I think, our readers, our users respected that and were looking for that additional information. So it wasn’t a sudden, “OK, let’s go out and do it.” It was incremental, it was over time, and it was certainly the blogosphere.

The practice of linking out of economic and social obligation was a norm that had originated online and been adopted and propagated by bloggers. Those norms began to normalize professional journalistic practices as well when journalists first encountered them as readers and saw their importance to other readers and bloggers. The journalists then gradually incorporated them into their own practices as they moved into bloggers’ cultural space.

The other central value driving linking practices among bloggers was expressed not as an obligation to other bloggers, but as a mechanism by which to build one’s own credibility—and, in that way, a form of obligation to readers. Bloggers repeatedly described linking as a way to establish the truthfulness of their assertions and the rationality of their arguments by allowing readers to see for themselves the basis on which those statements were made and even to retrace the writer’s information-gathering steps. Liberal blogger Marcy Wheeler of *Emptywheel* described “showing your work” through links as “the ethic of credibility” in the blogosphere. Among blogs, she said, credibility “comes from people being able to check your work and come to the same conclusions—or at least ensure that you’re not making stuff up, you’re fairly stating what the underlying issue is.” Links were thus characterized as a necessary tool to enable readers’ own verification inquiries, an obligation whose violation would result in a deserved loss of credibility and authority.

With this value, too, professional journalists employed similar descriptions of the function of links as vehicles for establishing their credibility. But unlike with the socially oriented norm for linking, journalists did not attribute to blogging culture their idea of the link as a credibility mechanism. Rather, they said their conception of the credibility-building function of links had arisen from their professional journalistic values,

especially transparency and proper attribution of quoted material. Said one blogging reporter from a major news organization: "It's just part of my journalistic outlook. It's part of what I've been taught all along as a journalist: you should tell readers what you know, and how you know it." This practice of linking to build credibility illustrates a process in which both bloggers and professional journalists are mutually gravitating toward a new norm, though from different cultural directions. The idea of creating credibility through the information transparency provided by links maps well onto the values of both institutional journalism and blogging culture, and that conception may well have originated relatively independently from both sources.

As the evolution of these linking values show, very similar cultural norms can be formed and justified in significantly different ways based on how they are shaped within institutional (and quasi-institutional) contexts. In this case in which linking norms originated outside their professional culture, journalists either imported blogging norms wholesale into their institutionalized frameworks or developed independent rationalizations for those norms, depending on how well linking practices could be synthesized with journalists' institutional values. The following section will illustrate the role institutional forces have played in directing this mutual creation of linking norms within both professional journalism and the political blogosphere.

Institutionalization of Linking Processes

Alongside cultural norms from the political blogosphere discussed above, the institutional setting of news organizations also played a significant role in shaping journalists' linking practices. This setting manifested itself primarily through the institutional forces shaping the bureaucratized process by which those links are added. One of the fundamental elements of that process—and one of the sharpest differences between linking in more and less institutional contexts—is who performs the task of adding the links. In less institutional settings such as a single or dual-authored blog, writers of a post almost always added links themselves. A variety of arrangements existed in more institutional news organizations, but links were most commonly added by the author, with editors checking, suggesting, and adding links. At two news organizations, online producers added all links. Four news organizations—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *Dallas Morning News*—had used automated processes to link to reference-oriented topic pages, though the *Post* and *Times* had made efforts to scale back on automated linking, preferring instead to use less mechanized processes to ensure relevance to readers. In general, however, the more institutional the setting, the more likely links were to be subject to extra layers of organizational oversight, and the less likely they were to be tied to a single individual's judgment, values, and practices.

In some instances, linking in professional journalism was limited by institutionalized forms of technology. This was the case with automated linking processes (Larsson 2012), which used technology to supersede individual judgment on behalf of the organization's collective objectives. Additionally, several journalists cited organization-wide content management systems (CMS) as a major obstacle to linking at their news organizations. Those journalists said their newsrooms had used CMSes that were built around the production of the print newspaper, making it cumbersome to incorporate links through them. They described difficult, drawn-out processes to replace those CMSes

with ones more oriented toward online publishing, and time-intensive procedures required to transfer linked online content to print and vice versa. For example, Bill Adee, vice president for digital content at the *Chicago Tribune*, described the process of slowly moving from a print-based CMS to a blogging CMS that allowed linking, then gradually moving back to the original CMS as it was improved to enable easier linking. "The tradition of our content management system is as a print-first vehicle that doesn't have the ability to [insert links]. And so that's probably where the *Tribune* and most other media publications got off to a less-than-stellar start on linking," Adee said.

In addition to their deeply embedded routinized constraints on linking practices, news organizations also put more obtrusive institutional structures in place to circumscribe the way links were employed. Formal guidelines were used by several news organizations (but no blogs outside institutional news organizations) to codify preferred linking practices. As of 2011, *The New York Times'* linking style guide included instructions about who should add links and how, along with suggestions of types of links to include (e.g., official reports and archived articles). Other news organizations had no written guidelines, but had impressed onto their journalists informal rules regarding linking, such as always linking to any online source named in a story. Such guidelines, whether encoded formally as written policies or passed down informally from editor to reporter, functioned as one of the most direct institutional means of dictating linking practices.

Still, such assertive practices were quite limited in their reach. Five of the journalists interviewed were not certain whether or not their organizations had formal guidelines, including one who later determined that his organization had indeed issued them. Within even highly institutional news organizations, bloggers tended to have a relatively high level of autonomy in determining what they linked to; both bloggers and their editors described their linking practices as being largely free from editorial oversight. For example, Hemal Jhaveri, *Politico's* executive director of digital innovation, made a sharp distinction between the linking guidance given to bloggers and to the rest of the staff, saying that "for bloggers, it's really up to them how they decide to do it." Similarly, *Los Angeles Times* blogger Andrew Malcolm spoke of the freedom he felt in blogging as opposed to writing for the print edition, remarking that he had never received any directions from his superiors about how much to link. Even within news organizations, bloggers' linking practices were rooted more deeply in personal routines and cultural values from journalism and the Web than in formal organizational procedures and guidelines.

The primary force affecting journalists' linking practices, then, was at one of the deeper structural levels of the news organization, embedded in the routines and values that make up newsroom culture, rather than through organizational fiat. Jim Frederick, managing editor of *Time.com*, described this embeddedness well:

[Linking guidelines] are very informal, and it's almost a body of received wisdom that's passed down from producer to producer and from editor to editor. There's nothing written down, but there's generally a workflow, and ... I don't think it's ever been formalized into an actual codified workflow, like a checklist, like, "You do this, and then you do this, and then you do this." But a step in the process, like I just said, is generally understood to be, "Are you linking to all the places that make sense and have you removed all the links that don't make sense?"

Because the processes of linking are so routinized and the values that constrain it so culturally bound, changes in linking practices within news organizations have had to take place at the routine and cultural levels as well. Several journalists described a cultural resistance to linking in newsrooms in past years built around a desire to keep readers within the organization's website. But all of them also said that deep-seated resistance to linking had begun to fall away, largely because of two factors: the infusion of the Web's cultural values discussed earlier, and a concerted effort by particular editors to institutionalize linking by incorporating it into the workflow of writing for the Web. Frederick, for example, said the process he described above was a "very conscious sort of link strategy in place that's deeply baked into the workflow," and former *Washington Post* head of digital news products Katharine Zaleski⁵ said most of her efforts to encourage better linking in the newsroom are spent working on altering writers' and editors' publishing routines. To the extent that journalists' linking practices are changing over time, they are being changed not so much by shifting policies as shifting habits and technologies.

With two exceptions—the thinktank-operated *ThinkProgress* and *The Foundry*—the bloggers interviewed, however, exhibited almost no institutionalization in their linking practices. Instead, for bloggers outside of institutional settings, link sources were driven in part by readers, who send bloggers a steady stream of tips and then use links to verify or challenge bloggers' work. This formed a cyclical process of networked information production that began with reader suggestions that then helped dictate bloggers' links, which in turn directed readers to further information to suggest additions or correction to the bloggers' work. *Moonbattery's* Dave Blount said he gets nearly all of his sources via reader tips, while Marcy Wheeler of *Emptywheel* said links allow her readers to draw her attention to noteworthy information in her sources that she may have missed, prompting her to highlight that information in future posts as part of what she called "open-source research." Thus, those bloggers' links are the product of a flatter, more networked collaborative model than the hierarchically dictated institutional model of professional news organizations.

Institutionalization of Link Sources

The most direct result of these institutionalized linking processes in professional news organizations is the direction of links primarily to other institutional sources, such as governmental bodies and other professional news organizations. That news organizations link to a limited range of established sources has been shown in several content analyses (e.g., Coddington 2012; Larsson 2012). But the interviews in this study reveal the degree to which those links are explicitly driven by news organizations' institutional context. In keeping with the findings of those content analyses, several professional journalists said they preferred to link to official or established sources, but they also tied that preference to their own institutional standing. Bill Adee of the *Chicago Tribune* said that because of his paper's reputation for original reporting, he feels that his readers perceive links to other reported material as a sanction of that source, which in turn leads him to be especially careful when linking to other news sources. The importance of institutional factors on determining link sources was most explicitly stated by Bruce Tomaso of the *Dallas Morning News*, who said he continually reminds himself that his

blog is not his, but the newspaper's, and as such, its readers expect a higher level of credibility and accuracy from it than they would a personal blog. The result is a limited range of link sources that comes largely from established sources. "It probably restricts us a little bit in what we can link to, where we can link, where we do link. Again, more so than if I'm just publishing on my own," he said.

Another primary result of the institutional influence on journalistic linking is in professional journalists' reluctance to link to opinionated sources. Several journalists said they prefer to link to fact-based sources, and the *Los Angeles Times*' Andrew Malcolm, an opinion blogger himself, said he links to a variety of opinions, but not to those who are "banging their shoe on the table." Instead, he said, "unless I'm writing an item about 'Holy smokes, look at the crazy stuff that's out there,' I would probably prefer to link to more established sites." In one news organization, *PBS*, arranging a careful balance of opinion through links was a fundamental part of its linking practices, stemming from its identity as an objective, neutral news organization. Dave Gustafson, the online news and planning editor for *PBS NewsHour*, said the program requires a balance of links in its stories—if a conservative group is linked to, a liberal group must also be linked to in order to balance it out. Editors there even occasionally reject reporters' links to groups that are perceived as especially partisan: "There are times where we'll come across a reporter's link that may go out to a particularly biased organization's report on a given topic, and I'll go back to them and say, 'Could you find a more neutral organization to link to about that same topic?'" This objectivity-based aversion to opinion-based sources is a significant part of an impulse toward institutional protection that limits news organizations' links to bloggers. While several journalists said they have no preference between linking to mainstream news organizations and bloggers, their affinity for institutional sources and wariness toward partisanship may lead them to limit their links to blogs, even among those who are bloggers themselves.

Yet, despite the fact that these institutional influences limit their own inbound links, political bloggers substantially pattern their rationale for link sources after that of professional journalism. Even within non-institutional settings, bloggers' conception of what constitutes reputable sources that are preferable as link sources is dictated largely by the trappings of professional journalism. Most bloggers cited institutional sources—and especially traditional news organizations—as those they preferred to link to, trumping even those of the same political viewpoint. Said Dave Blount of the conservative blog *Moonbattery*, "You want to link to people who are more or less taken seriously, even if you don't agree with their point of view. If you can link to *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, whatever, just because they're established, it lends more credibility." This, it turns out, is the most significant area of institutional journalism's influence on linking practices: it sets the parameters by which the universe of acceptable link sources is defined. Across the political Web, the worthiness of a source to be linked to is judged based on the amount of "original reporting," longevity, size, and status, even among bloggers who have little of any of those qualities. Bloggers may have impressed on professional journalists the importance of linking externally, but the criteria by which the sources of those links are determined remain based on the traditional strengths of professional journalism, rather than the emerging characteristics of political blogging.

Conclusion

Linked networks such as the online political media environment have long fallen into a power-law distribution, in which connections preferentially attach to the longest-standing, most popular nodes (Tremayne 2007). A companion study to this one found similar patterns at work (Coddington 2012), but rather than attributing them simply to network structure, this study sought to explain them through the social institutional forces that operate within that structure. Specifically, in the space for political information online, the representation of linking is shaped in significant ways by both the institutional qualities of professional journalism and the quasi-institutional qualities of the political blogosphere. Despite their relative lack of institutional coherence, bloggers help establish the cultural norms of online writing, including the standard of attributing information from elsewhere on the Web through links. Those norms are also deeply molded through more institutional means, as the social cachet built up by professional journalism through years of institutional structures and influence to dictate the standards of online credibility. Internally, news organizations' own linking practices are also subjected to institutional structures and routines.

This study captured only a small part of the complex interaction between journalists and the world of the Web, and it is limited in its ability to fully portray that interaction. Specifically, it addresses linking only within news sites and blogs and does not include an examination of links on social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook, which are becoming a significant space in the continued development of linking norms and practices. Additionally, these findings are rooted in an American context and reflect many of the particularities of that context, including the relative prominence of political blogging and the central role of objectivity and neutrality in professional journalistic ideology. And while interviews are an effective method in revealing latent attitudes and processes behind linking, a more systematic survey of linking policies and practices could give a broader sense of the variance within professional news and political blogs. Future work could also further connect measurement of actual linking practices with interpretive methods such as these, as this study has attempted to do in relation to a companion study (Coddington 2012).

Despite these limitations, this study sheds light on several levels of interaction between institutional journalism and the emerging forms of the Web. Most specifically, it shows us how the practice of linking exists in continual negotiation between the institutional mindset and routines of professional journalism and the cultural norms of political blogging. More generally, it gives us a picture of how the spheres of professional journalism and the more networked journalistic form of political blogging mutually develop and adapt to new norms. In the case of linking, professional journalism has shown a real willingness to adopt and absorb Web-based cultural values, using links as tools for transparency and networked connection. These values mesh well with laudable journalistic aims, but they are also transformed as they are filtered through the structures and processes of the institutional newsroom. What emerges is a bureaucratized manifestation of those values—one that shears off many of the open, networked qualities of their original expression but which nonetheless helps feed and guide the development of linking practices online. In this way, the institutionality of professional journalism simultaneously inhibits and aids professional journalism's adoption of the values and practices of the Web.

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NOTES

1. The bloggers from outside news organizations were Dave Blount, *Moonbattery*; Mike Brownfield, *The Foundry*; Ed Morrissey, *Hot Air*; Doug Ross, *Doug Ross @ Journal*; Faiz Shakir, *ThinkProgress*; and Marcy Wheeler, *Emptywheel*.
2. The bloggers from within news organizations were Michael Crowley, *Time*; Andrew Malcolm, *Los Angeles Times*; Lynn Sweet, *Chicago Sun-Times*; Bruce Tomaso, *Dallas Morning News*; Jim Webb, *Chicago Tribune*; and two who remained anonymous.
3. The Web and blog editors within news organizations were Bill Adey, *Chicago Tribune*; Wright Bryan, *NPR*; Chet Czarniak, *USA Today*; Jim Frederick, *Time*; Dave Gustafson, *PBS NewsHour*; Hemal Jhaveri, *Politico*; Jim Schachter, *The New York Times*; and Katharine Zaleski, *The Washington Post*.
4. Each of the quotations in this section is from an interview with the author.
5. Zaleski held that title at the *Post* at the time of the interview; she has since left the paper.

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