Mainstream News Outlets Start Linking to Other Sites

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“Thou shalt not link to outside sites” — a long-held commandment of many newsrooms — is eroding.

Embracing the hyperlink ethos of the Web to a degree not seen before, news organizations are becoming more comfortable linking to competitors — acting in effect like aggregators. The Washington Post recently introduced a political Web site that recommends rival sites. This week NBC will begin introducing Web sites for its local TV stations with links to local newspapers, radio stations, online videos and other sources. And The New York Times will soon offer its online readers an alternative home page with links to competitors.

These experiments exemplify “link journalism,” an idea that is gaining traction in other newsrooms across the country. “It is a fundamentally different mindset” for journalists, said Scott Karp, chief of the Web-based newswire Publish2, who coined the term.

For years, newspapers, television station Web sites and magazines have hesitated about linking to outside Web sites because, the logic goes, they want to keep the users on their own site. More internal page views and longer time-spent-viewing can equate to larger advertising revenue for Web sites.

Mr. Karp argues that Google, the leading search engine, is a direct rebuttal to that logic. “It’s all about sending people away, and it does such a good job of it that people keep coming back for more,” he said.

NBC hopes to benefit from the same user behavior. Beginning with its Chicago affiliate, WMAQ, on Monday, the company will turn its TV station Web sites into full-fledged city guides. John P. Wallace, the president of NBC’s local media division, said the partnerships with content providers and the links to third-party sites will “tap into our communities much deeper than we have been able to historically.”

“It’s a change in mindset,” he said. “We’re looking at the fragmented local market and saying, ‘We’re going to provide a destination where you can come and search across different segments.’ ”
Brian Buchwald, the division’s senior vice president for local digital media and multiplatform, said the move amounts to an acknowledgment that local television stations must do more online than merely regurgitate their newscasts online. “We need to be a lot more than just TV stations if we’re going to be relevant,” he said.

NBC’s local media operation has hired about 55 people to create original content and filter the Web. A test version of the Chicago site last week linked to The Chicago Sun-Times, USA Today, TMZ and the local blog Chicagost. The sites do not distinguish between the articles written by their own staff members and the links to outside sites.

“If we can provide them great content, that’s wonderful. If it comes from somebody else, that’s fine, too,” Mr. Buchwald said.

As simple as that sounds, it represents an attitude shift. While linking to other sources is not a new occurrence by any means, it can still seem misguided to journalists who work vigorously to break a story ahead of other news outlets.

Mr. Karp believes the use of blogs by news organizations has helped newsroom managers accept that filtering the Web for visitors is a valuable editorial function. For bloggers, linking to original reporting, primary sources and discussions about stories is a form of etiquette, assigning credit to others who have written about a topic.

Jeff Jarvis, a prominent blogger who directs the Graduate School of Journalism’s new-media program at the City University of New York, has said that the culture of linking was creating a “new architecture of news.”

“Link unto others’ good stuff as you would have them link unto your good stuff,” he proposed in June. His “Golden Rule of Links” for journalists, naturally, earned at least 25 links from other bloggers.

Newsrooms seem more open than ever to that view. The New York Times is developing a version of the home page “that will contain links to other news sites and blogs alongside the articles we publish,” The Times’s chief technology officer, Marc Frons, told Web readers in July. That feature, called Times Extra, will be published using a technology called Blogrunner that the Times acquired in 2005.

Other Web sites are aggregating links manually: ProPublica, the nonprofit newsroom venture led by Paul Steiger, the former managing editor of The Wall Street Journal, has dedicated a section of its site to “Breaking on the Web,” a collection of links to the investigative reporting of others.

Last month The Washington Post added “Political Browser,” a professed source of “what’s good on the Web,” to its site. The page freely links to competitors with features like “Required Reading,” summing up articles in newspapers and magazines, and “Staff Picks,” a list of articles that Post employees are reading. Lest its own newspaper be forgotten, a “Best of the Post” section links to its own articles.
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