

Effective Linking



Doug Fisher

By Doug Fisher

Blogger, professor and former editor Jeff Jarvis has formulated a widely quoted phrase for the new era of news: “Do what you do best and link to the rest.”

Links are the “currency” of the Web. They let readers broaden perspectives and discover new information and resources without needing to cram a story full of detail and background.

They boost credibility and transparency by showing you are not afraid to let readers check sources and make their own judgments. Links encourage others to link back to you, increasing your exposure and potentially your search rankings,

So why do so many news organizations still struggle with getting linking right?

Partly, it's the fear of sending people away from your site. But online isn't the same as newspapering. Links encourage people to come to yours, knowing they can get to other relevant sites.

Partly it's workflow – we're so used to cramming in those background grafs in the printed stories that the idea of not always needing them online and using a link instead seems kind of alien. And partly it's a workflow issue that favors “turnkey” systems that send people to general links, not relevant ones.

Problem is, those other online sites you are competing with don't have all that psychological and operational baggage. If you want to be in the game, your newsroom needs to consider how to do effective linking.

An effective link makes clear where I am going and what I will find there. It also warns me if I am going to be opening a file type (jpg or PDF, for instance) that might start another program on my computer.

It also takes me past the home page to the information I need (also known as “deep linking”). For instance, if you are discussing education tax credits, don't point me to [irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov), point me to <http://www.irs.gov/faqs/content/0,,id=200041,00.html>.

And take me to information that really matters. The New York Times, for instance, is spotty about linking outside. Many of its links are automatically generated from its archives while missing what could truly broaden and deepen a story.

In a recent story (<http://bit.ly/10r74q>) about the alleged terrorism plot against Bronx synagogues, for instance, the Times linked to its stories on the FBI, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the New York Police – all marginal. But where was the link to the mosque where an informant allegedly met the men (<http://www.masjidalikhlas.org/>)? Or to the Web sites of the synagogues (<http://www.riverdaletemple.org> and <http://www.rjconline.org>)?

This needs to be part of your newsroom culture: *Effective, relevant links are the reporter's job, but the editor's (or producer's) responsibility.*

Who better than the reporter knows the story and the sources, online and otherwise? Reporters should be suggesting links, but editors need to make sure they are there and relevant.

My students, for instance, must submit three relevant links with every story. It's not har, but just doing a Google search and cutting and pasting the first few you find won't work.

You must know who is behind the page or item. If you can't find identifying information, it should give you pause. That goes for all sites, even those ending in “gov,” “mil” and “org.” Beware of sites not updated in several years. And, of course, all links should be checked to make sure you aren't sending someone to a porn site because of a mistype.

Some other quick thoughts:

- If you are using in-text links, make them from relevant words. Avoid “click here,” or something similar. Most people now know that colored text with an underline means click here.

- If you embed links in text by just highlighting relevant words, provide a link list at the end of the article. It's annoying to be handed a printout and have no idea what the links are. For long links, use a link-shortening service like tinyurl.com, bit.ly, is.gd or notlong.com.
- Use links more in your paper, perhaps in a box accompanying the story. Chances are someone's going to cut that out and hand it to a friend who might want to look them up. Even better, maybe that person will go to your site, knowing he or she can find a reliable doorway to the Net.

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