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Online Newspapers as a Venue for Cyber-Democratic Engagement

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Abstract

Ideas drawn from theories of cyberdemocracy, or use of the Internet's interactive abilities to foster political discourse, can be used to define new ways in which online newspapers can become facilitators of that discourse. A content analysis of 47 online newspapers demonstrates that few papers are embracing these approaches. But some limited evidence was found that the idea of using online tools to "cover" public affairs differently is one that's starting to take root in journalism.

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Introduction

Traditional models of political communication and their relation to self-governance and civic engagement have, in the present age, become largely dysfunctional. (Gans, 2003; Kovach and Rosensteil, 2001; Fallows, 1996) The theory and practice of public journalism emerged largely in response to this problem.

On a somewhat parallel but separate track, theories of "cyber-democracy" have developed that say the Internet's ability to close gaps of time and distance with electronic interactivity have the power to make institutional journalism at least anachronistic, and perhaps even unnecessary. (Morris, 1999) But these models seem more cyber-utopian than realistic; neither the "electronic town meeting" nor the public-sphere cyber-salon has developed as a feasible alternative to the current liberal-democracy model fed and fostered by a political communication system that includes the media. (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Barber, 1997; Bimber, 1998)

Online interaction <u>can</u> contribute to democratic discourse. But that contribution has its greatest potential not when interaction is entirely free-form, as the cyber-utopians propose, but when it is fostered by facilitation (Dahlberg 2001a, 2001b). But who should the facilitators be? This is where a new function for journalists could emerge, using the interactive power of online journalism to fill in the "missing links" of credibility and organization that undermine the cyber-utopian models.

Incorporating online journalism into public journalism isn't a novel idea. (Bressers 2003, Giles 2001) But previous work in this area has frequently <u>presumed</u> a connection between interactivity and engagement without a strong theoretical basis. What is novel about the approach embodied here is integration of promising parts of cyber-democratic theory with online

journalism to define specific approaches that indicate how an online newspaper can offer itself as a venue for greater citizen engagement.

The missing link in the traditional model of journalism and democracy is citizen engagement. The missing links in cyber-democratic discourse are structure and facilitation – both of which online papers can provide. A crucial feature that separates this approach from basic cyber-democracy is that involvement of the online newspaper gives the information exchanged and expressed there a certain level of traffic and, more important, institutional credibility.

To help evaluate how well online newspapers are embracing this approach, an empirical content analysis of online newspaper sites was used to investigate online papers' use of interactive devices that foster public discourse, especially:

- Putting institutional credibility behind citizen voices;

- Creating places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues;

- Creating places for citizen interaction with officials;

- Combining institutional and citizen voices; and

- Using interactive devices to present public affairs information serving surveillance function.

Past research into online journalism has sought to catalog general patterns and uses of interactive devices. However, this study probes more deeply by seeking out these interactive elements, which are specifically related to enhancement of political discourse and civic engagement. Work in this area so far has been more case-study-like in nature, such as that by Choi (2004), who examined public journalism in the online and print editions of three newspapers. Choi, in fact, suggested future research should "incorporate a research design using

a larger sample of online newspapers to look for general trends" relative to interactivity and

public-journalism-type activity, which is exactly what the present work seeks to accomplish.

Literature Review

Interactive journalism

When newspapers began establishing online presences in the mid- to late-1990s, a natural

topic of investigation was: to what degree are these online editions using the interactive power of

the Internet in their presentations?

In one such early investigation, Tremayne (1997) used a McLuhan-esque approach of

asking whether the characteristics of the Internet as a medium, specifically non-linearity and

interactivity, meant that messages reaching audiences were different from traditional media that

lacked these features. He defined a non-linear story as "one that goes in a variety of possible

directions, according to the interests and needs of the media consumer" and defined an

interactive site as "one that accepts input from the media consumer, and creates opportunities for

that input" including e-mail to the sponsoring organization or story author, polls, forums and

posting of user comments. An index was created in which each of six potential measures of

interactivity was worth one point. The study found that 12 of the 15 sites used non-linear stories,

although some had a great number of links from those stories while others had just a few; the

interactivity index among them had a mean of 3.0 out of a possible 6 points.

In a similar vein, Tankard and Ban (1998) set out to investigate whether online

newspapers were, as they put it in their article's title, living up to their potential. To do this, they

conducted a content analysis of online news sites selected from a list maintained by American

Journalism Review at its site, newslink.org, and created indices for use of interactivity,

multimedia and hypertext links in the storytelling by assigning points for presence of defined

features such as e-mail addresses and forums or bulletin boards for posting of user messages. Overall, they concluded that few papers were using all of the Internet capability at their disposal to enhance presentation of the news.

Schultz (1999) similarly used the Newslink site to draw a sample of 100 online papers to evaluate whether they engaged in enough interactive communication to effectively promote deliberative discourse, which is similar to the goal of this research project. Specifically, Schultz looked at the presence or absence of what he called "feedback options" to create a 15-point index. Some devices were weighted more heavily than others, with the weights based on "sophistication and significance for interactive communication." For example, having e-mail links to just some articles was worth
1 point, but a general policy of putting e-mail links on every article was worth 2 points. Among the 100 papers, the mean score on the index was 4.1 out of a possible 15 and the median 3.5, indicating a generally low degree of interactivity. This led him to a general conclusion that despite the potential for interactive online journalism, "Many news organizations infrequently exploit this advantage of the new medium. Journalistic Web sites are not necessarily interactive at all."

Schultz's research was the first – which is to say the oldest, dating to 1999 – study found in the literature that addressed the idea of using online journalism's interactive potential to enhance public sphere discourse. It was an exploratory study designed, in the author's words, to "provide only a starting point to study and question the reality and possibilities of online journalism." Researchers who later followed this trail included Singer, who wrote that the opportunities offered by online journalism mean that "newspaper journalists' self-perception as a cornerstone of democracy is now open to fresh interpretation. The Web offers both citizens and

journalists new options related to information, discourse and decision making." (Singer 2003 p. 40) In what she also called an exploratory study, Singer surveyed editors of large newspapers in all 50 states about their use of online editions in coverage of the 2000 presidential election and concluded that immediacy and depth were the two main benefits that the journalists attached to online election coverage. Interactivity and the ability to use multimedia presentations were also mentioned, but not as frequently, as devices that editors were notably proud of using or saw as an important part of their newspaper's coverage.

Another, more recent, study looked at the potential for online tools to help in meeting the goals of public journalism. Choi (2004) selected three newspapers that in their print editions are often cited as practitioners of public journalism and matched them with opposite-companion papers, that is, ones in nearby cities with similar circulation and demographics that are not perceived as engaging in public journalism. He then used a content analysis of online coverage for each paired set, examining whether online stories incorporated characteristics of public journalism coverage, such as inclusion of "ordinary citizen" voices and suggestions of solutions to public-affairs problems. When little difference was found between the online content of the public-journalism papers and the non-public-journalism ones, he concluded that public journalism wasn't being practiced consistently in the online environment. However, one serious limitation of this study, which the author acknowledged, was the small sample of just three paired sets of newspapers. "Future research might incorporate a research design using a larger sample of online newspapers to look for general trends, while using small case studies to analyze the contents" of interactive communications on a site, he suggested.

Cyber-democracy

Another area where the interactive potential of the Internet was applied in the late 1990s was for changing politics and governance. Most of these ideas were based in the notion that the Internet can break down the barriers of physical distance and message "reach" that limit access to information dissemination, retrieval and exchange. Mediated communication could be much more fluid and interactive in cyberspace, regardless of whether two individuals were in the same room, the same town or even the same country. Similarly, issues of individual status, social rank and even race were meaningless in the realm of virtual communication. At the same time, everyone could have access to a virtually unlimited information bank, literally at their fingertips, indexed and organized with hypertext links. These conditions, the thinking went, would offer a new paradigm for self-governance that would address the breakdown of the traditional U.S. political communication system. (London 1995). Electronic plebiscites (Morris 1999), virtual communities (Rheingold 1994), and online deliberative discourse (Gaynor 1996) all were touted as ways that this would come to pass.

Many of these approaches came to be known as cyber-utopian because of a technological determinism built into their assumptions. They ignored the point that just because the network makes certain actions and interactions possible doesn't make them inevitable. (Wilhelm 2000, Barber 1997). But others argued the basic ideas behind cyber-democracy could be made to work by applying structure and facilitation to the system; the flaw was assuming it would evolve on its own in a free-form environment.   (Dahlberg 2001a). This could be accomplished by providing mechanisms and resources such as: virtual public spaces under the sponsorship or auspices of neutral organizations; reliable on-line information upon which discussions could be based; educational materials; and a link between the governed and the governors. (Coleman 1999)

The discourse model

Creating these mechanisms and providing these resources is a natural role for online journalists to step up and take. Online and off, journalists already can and do fulfill important roles regarding surveillance and social cohesion/construction of common knowledge. Combining these with facilitated discourse can add up to a more powerful impact on public opinion and a more powerful process for reconnecting the public with public life (a stated goal of public journalism) than any of the traditional techniques alone.

Two crucial features separate this model from notions of basic cyber-democracy. One is the framing and backgrounding of basic news information provided by the news coverage. The other is that the involvement of the paper, a community institution, gives the information exchanged and expressed there a certain traffic level and institutional credibility that makes the interaction more meaningful in a deliberative sense than would be accorded to bloggers who are doing the same thing -- but who may or may not be working with accurate, credible information and whose work may or may not even be noticed by any sort of larger public, much less institutional decision makers. This is not meant to be disparaging of those who work outside the institutional media settings, many of whom do extensive and high quality work, as documented by Gillmor (2004). But by bringing public discourse under the tent of the newspaper's institutional credibility, journalists can reclaim their Fourth Estate role that has been eroded away by public cynicism about politics, "the process" and the media's place within it.

This project is a broadly based investigation seeking specific, public-discourse-oriented characteristics employed by online newspaper sites, as defined by and drawn from theories of cyber-democracy. These are, as outlined above, putting institutional credibility behind citizen voices, creating places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues, creating places for citizen

interaction with officials, combining institutional and citizen voices and using interactive devices to present public affairs information serving the surveillance function.

Research methods

A research methodology similar to the ones used by Tremayne, Schultz, and Tankard and Ban was developed; specifically, a content analysis was conducted to evaluate the presence of certain devices as defined in the online newspapers discourse model. But one important way that this study differs from those earlier ones is that rather than looking for general aspects of interactivity, such as general use of hyperlinks or

e-mail links, the investigation was made into whether the online papers include those devices (as outlined above) that are specifically related to online journalism's efforts to enhance conditions under which more effective discourse can take place. Nearly all of the sites examined offered general interactive ability of some sort, either e-mail links with stories or a "contact us" link that opened an e-mail window. Some put extensive staff lists on line with an e-mail link next to all the names. This is the type of interactivity sought, but not always found, by early investigators of the subject, indicating advances in this area of general interactivity of online news sites the past several years.

The U.S. daily newspapers section of <u>American Journalism Review</u>'s Newslink site (www.newslink.org/daynews.html) was used as a sampling frame. In October 2004, Newslink contained links to sites of approximately 1,200 U.S. dailies, up from about 500 when Schultz did his investigation a few years earlier. Since there are only about 1,470 U.S. dailies, the 1,200 listed at Newslink can be inferred to be a good representation of the population of U.S. papers with an online presence.

A random starting point and nth-entry selection process was used to draw a systematic random sample of 50 papers from within the Newslink list. Of these, 47 were examined. Two of the papers, although they were in the Newslink list, were "dead" URLs. Another link, although it was on the dailies page, actually led to a site operated by a weekly newspaper group, so it was removed from the data set.

The goal was to draw a sample that broadly represented the U.S. newspaper industry at large in a way such that valid statistical inferences to the larger population could be made. U.S. newspaper circulation is distributed according to a power curve, with a few very large newspapers, a smaller number of mid-sized papers, and a large number of smaller-circulation community dailies. Comparing the distribution of circulation numbers for the print versions of the online papers in the sample with the general population of papers shows this goal was met. (See Table 1) The correlation (Pearson's r) of the percentages in each circulation stratum for the total U.S. newspaper industry vs. the sample was .79. Mid-size papers (25,000 to 100,000) were slightly over-represented in the sample while the smallest papers (less than 10,000) were under-represented.

Table 1

Circulation Category	Percentage in population n = 1468	Percentage in data set n = 47
250,001+	2.7% (39 papers)	2.1% (1 paper)
100,001 - 250,000	4.3% (64 papers)	6.4% (3 papers)
50,001 - 100,000	8.6% (128 papers)	14.9% (7 papers)
25,001 - 50,000	13.6% (203 papers)	21.3% (10 papers)
10,001 - 25,000	29.3% (437 papers)	29.8% (14 papers)
5,001 - 10,000	24.4% (364 papers)	19.1% (9 papers)
5,000 or less	17.1% (254 papers)	6.4% (3 papers)
		Correlation (Pearson's r) = .79

The investigation was done during October 2004, a time frame selected specifically because it was the height of the quadrennial election campaign. The rationale for this time frame is that, out of all the times online papers might use the designated tools to promote better discourse and engagement, shouldn't it be during a significant election season? Once the papers were selected, each site was reviewed for whether or not it had the following characteristics, as drawn from cyberdemocratic theory:

- Putting institutional credibility behind citizen voices, as operationalized by:
    - Citizen blogs
    - E-mail posting and submission of letters to the editor
    - Online polls
- Creating places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues, operationalized by:
    - Threaded and non-threaded message boards about public affairs
    - Links to other sites designed to promote discussion, such as e-the-People (www.e-thepeople.org)
    - Chats
- Creating places for citizen interaction with officials, operationalized by:
    - E-mail links to candidates, officials, and institutions
- Combining institutional and citizen voices, operationalized by:
    - Citizen input (e.g. from message boards and blogs) used in stories, and/or editorials.
    - Opportunity to "talk back" on a story, editorial or letter to the editor.
- Using interactive devices to present public affairs information serving surveillance function, operationalized by:

- o Interactive storytelling, e.g. candidate quizzes, budget games.

- o Layering/hyperstory formulation of stories on civic issues or elections.

- o Links to sites such as government sites with general information or voting

  information as well as election-related material, including candidates'

  personal/campaign sites and third-party information/advocacy sites, e.g.

  Factcheck.org, Vote-Smart.org, Move-On.org.

The proportion of total papers in the investigation containing each of these devices is

shown in Table 2.

Findings

Based on these results, the promise of online journalism to create conditions for enhanced

civic discourse appears to be largely untapped, a finding that echoes the work of previous

researchers. Only three of the 12 devices used to operationalize online facilitation of cyber-

democratic practices were present at more than 50 percent of the papers while more than half of

them – seven out of the 12 – were used by fewer than a third of the papers.

Table 2

Institutional credibility behind citizen voices
Citizen blogs	6 % (3 papers out of 47)
Online letters	89 % (42 papers)
Online polls	51 % (24 papers)

Public affairs interaction
Forums	45 % (21 papers)
e-the-people	21 % (10 papers)
Chats	2 % (1 paper)

Connecting citizens with officials
E-mail officials	19 % (9 papers)

Citizen involvement in institutional views
Story input	6 % (3 papers)
Talk back	30 % (14 papers)

Interactive devices to present surveillance information

Interactive storytelling	36 %	(17 papers)
Hyperstory presentation	30 %	(14 papers)
Offsite Links	62 %	(29 papers)

The most common device was online presentation of letters to the editor. A heavy majority of online papers -- 89 percent of them -- either accept e-mail submissions of letters, post them on the site or do both. Letters are the most traditional forum for citizen voices, so this finding is consistent with Singer's work (2003), in which she reported that editors mostly saw the Internet as a delivery platform with certain advantages regarding speed of publication and depth of information presented, but basically used that platform for news defined in traditional ways rather than seeing it as a new and different way of doing journalism. With citizen engagement the online editors appear to be falling back on the traditional ways as well, offering a space for letters but not a lot more.

The one area of the five broad ones in the discourse model in which online papers were generally more active in using the power of the Internet to engage citizens with public affairs was use of interactive or hyperstory coverage and off-site links for citizens to find more information for themselves from government agencies, candidates' campaign sites, and third-party groups such as Move-On.org and Vote-Smart.org.

Among these three devices, offsite links were the most common, with 60 percent of the papers in the sample (29 out of 47) offering them. At the Denver (Colo.) Post, for example, stories about the state legislature were accompanied by links to state agencies related to the story topic. The Abilene (Texas) Reporter-News linked to the Texas Legislative Council for information about the state's controversial congressional redistricting while the Athens (Tenn.) Post-Athenian had links to Census data about its community as well as to congressional representatives' Web sites, the city of Athens, McMinn County voter registration, and municipal

services such as police, fire departments and hospitals. Links to non-governmental community resources, such as chambers of commerce, were found on some papers' sites also.

Around a third of papers offered either hyperstory presentations or interactive presentations, in which a user's information input, e.g. selection of one option over another with a mouse click, would help to determine the later presentation. The Pasadena (Calif.) Star-News, for example, offered an election news portal with links to election information offered by the county, links to other government Web sites including an interactive polling-place finder, and links to third-party sites such as Vote-Smart.org, which has biographical and other information about state and federal officials. The Denver Post offered an extensive and interactive Voters Guide, with features such as the ability for users to type in their names and see whether they were registered to vote.

The next most-represented area was giving space for citizens to interact with each other on topics of public-affairs interest, especially through paper-sponsored forums. Twenty-one of the papers, or 45 percent, offered active forums. Some papers, mostly larger ones such as the Denver Post and the Syracuse (N.Y.) Post-Standard had extensive sets of forums, not all of them related to news or public affairs. Both of those newspapers' sites, in fact, had more postings in forums related to sports teams than in political areas. Some papers offered forums that were sparsely attended, or were filled mostly with comments about the quality of the site and personal messages, such as requests for genealogical information. Three sites had links that appeared to go to a forum page, but the link led to a message to the effect that the forum had been temporarily or permanently discontinued.

Another device that offered an outlet in a slightly different way, providing a direct link between the paper's "voice" in the form of a story or editorial and a reader or citizen's

perspective on it, was employed by 29 percent of the papers (14 of the 47). This was a "talk back" opportunity through which a response or reaction to something published on the site could be registered. The Fort Wayne (Ind.) Journal-Gazette, for example, had links at the ends of stories taking readers to the forum section to post comments. In another example, the Alton (Ill.) Telegraph's online stories had links that allowed for posting of messages, which were queued at the end of the story. Anyone reading the story would automatically find a few of the messages, plus a link to display the full set and another link to open a frame to add a comment to the list. At Alton and at the St. Cloud (Minn.) Times, these story-linked chats functioned almost as the threaded message boards at other papers did, with reactions to earlier comments mixed with entries about the original stories.

Online polls on public affairs issues were another fairly widely used device, appearing at 24 papers, or 51 percent of the total. But application varied widely. Some offered a disclaimer about the poll's lack of scientific validity but many did not. Some offered just a button-click voting option; when the vote was submitted the frame changed to display voting results. Others offered more extensive results pages, including charts and graphs of results and opportunities to comment on the poll and its results.

The remainder of the devices from the model were not as common as any of these discussed so far. E-mail links to individual officials and agencies in politics and government were found at 19 percent of the sites (9 papers out of the 47). Citizen blogs and clear-cut instances of reader contributions to staff-written stories about public affairs were in evidence at just three locations, and the opportunity to engage in chat about politics was found at only one. But since these are some of the most effective devices within the model for combining citizen

and institutional voices in effective public affairs discourse, their application is worth examining despite their limited usage.

The Abilene (Texas) Reporter-News was the lone paper to offer chats, with options to participate in eight different topics, including one devoted to the presidential election. Others chat areas were devoted to sports, religion and the war in Iraq.

A number of papers offered staff blogs, particularly election-oriented ones, on their sites. But only three – the Syracuse Post-Standard, the Denver Post and the Tampa (Fla.) Tribune -- offered citizen blogs either hosted or linked to from within the site. Perhaps not surprisingly, Syracuse and Denver were the two largest hosts of community forums as well. Both Syracuse and Tampa had designated citizen political bloggers – in Syracuse it was a free-lance writer from the paper's area who identified herself as The Rational Liberal and in Tampa's case a University of South Florida political science professor. Denver had a page called the Bloghouse, with featured links to eight staff blogs (including one by editor Gil Asakawa) and links to more than 60 other bloggers. It also included the disclaimer from Asakawa that "The Denver Post is not responsible for the content on any of these Web sites. Some will have language that you may find offensive. You may not agree with the content of others. I think it's important to allow as much discourse as possible." (www.denverpost.com/bloghouse)

Tampa and Syracuse were also two of the three places where online citizen input into a staff story or story idea was evident. The Syracuse case was a story about how bloggers across New York state were contributing to the movement to reform the dysfunctional Albany power structure. "Web loggers are rounding up newspaper stories, academic reports and other blog commentary, adding their two cents and inviting debate," reporter Michelle Breidenbach wrote in the story, which went on to quote from several such blogs. (Breidenbach 2004) In Tampa, the

Tribune called for site users to contribute questions that the editorial board could ask candidates during endorsement interviews. The third example came from the Annapolis (Md.) Capital, which did something similar to the Tribune but for news stories, seeking contributors for a "Reader Response Team," or e-mail listing of citizens offering to be contacted for comment on future stories.

Discussion

Investigation of a sample of papers drawn to be representative of the online newspaper industry as a whole found that many of the devices from the online discourse model did not have evidence of widespread adoption. However, some interesting and valuable "nuggets" were found that suggest at least some editors recognize opportunities for their online papers to step forward and engage in journalism that uses the unique characteristics of the Internet for something more than business-as-usual journalism.

The results may be interpreted as limited evidence that the idea of using online tools to "cover" public affairs differently is one that's starting to take root in journalism but has a ways to go before becoming widespread enough to have an impact. As one editor put it, "Newspapers have always been the bridge between newsmakers and readers. With interactive Internet applications, we have a way to enhance that role and make that bridge a two-way thoroughfare. This is good for the newspaper, good for the online service and good for the users." (Anonymous survey respondent quoted in Singer 2003)

The model used in this content analysis was drawn from theories of cyber-democracy, which addresses the potential for online interaction to promote discourse by providing participants access to a vast pool of information that anyone can draw on and share with others for purposes of discussion, and by breaking down barriers of time and space for information

exchange. But "raw" cyber-democratic theory is flawed by its technological determinism --
which assumes that because effective discourse <u>can</u> emerge it <u>will</u> emerge – and by its lack of
any connection with, indeed its disdain for, the institutional basis of the political communication
system. Cyber-democracy is most successful not in its most free-form state but rather when
leavened with some degree of structure and facilitation, which can be provided by online
journalists using the devices identified in the model.

These practices are fairly close to the roles and goals of public journalism. In a way, the
model also can be viewed as an argument that taking the practices of public journalism online
can help to overcome conditions that have limited its effectiveness in traditional media
formulations. Public journalism seeks to frame and structure news coverage in ways that create
an active, engaged audience and leverage that interest into community action. One of its
limitations is the inertia created by the one-way nature of traditional media, which makes
building that public engagement more difficult; the interactive nature of the online arena
provides more fertile ground for this to develop.

Using interactive tools also helps to address the criticism within the industry that public
journalism takes reporters and editors too far from their traditional role as observers and
chroniclers to turn them into promoters and advocates. In the online environment, audiences can
take more responsibility for organizing themselves using the tools of interactivity. Journalists
still must have an active sort of involvement; merely providing "shovelware" news coverage
isn't enough. The nature of the medium means online journalists are better positioned logistically
to help this happen than their print counterparts, and the online discourse model proposed here
provides a kind of roadmap for them to get there.

Early investigations of general interactivity found that online papers weren't living up to their potential, as one article title on the topic stated it. (Tankard & Ban 1998) But the types of interactive devices those investigations found to be in short supply – such as e-mail links to story authors -- have since become fairly ubiquitous. Over time, the same may happen with the devices that create conditions for civic discourse that appear to be just getting a toehold in the industry. The current study provides a baseline for investigating this concept in the future.

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