



## **The Hyperlinked Society: Thoughts on Linking, Knowledge, Marketing and Media**

June 9th Annenberg Public Policy Center conference explores new world of web links – brave and otherwise

“Every day millions and millions of individuals around the globe click highlighted text and get transported to new domains. Links connect people, companies and ideas in ways that make time and distance irrelevant.”

With those words, Joseph Turow opened a June 9, 2006 conference entitled “The Hyperlinked Society.” The event, sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, attracted more than 175 digital media experts and consumers from the fields of technology, entertainment, journalism, cartography and sociology.

The conference was organized by Turow, a professor of communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at Penn. Financial support for the day-long meeting was also provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Read on for highlights of the first two panels of the day, Mainstream Linking and Linking in Web 2.0. For an audio and video stream of these panels, [click here](#). (Streaming coming soon.) For a list of panelists and other information about the conference, [click here](#).

A link is “an amazingly simple thing. It’s even humble in some ways,” noted New York University journalism professor and blogger Jay Rosen, moderator of the first panel. “But it’s created a new kind of world, and we’re trying to discern the shape of that world.”

From the outset, the discussion of links focused as much on economics as communication. Google is largely the reason, the panelists agreed.

Google has revolutionized web searching, noted Tom Hespos, a blogger and president of Underscore Marketing, a New York City multimedia ad agency. “I think Google has brought relevance back to search,” he

explained. “That was the first thing that they did. The second thing...is they gave links an intrinsic value that they really never had before. And that’s an important thing because, while Google’s mantra is Do No Evil, I think...they may have done a bit of evil in giving that value to links.”

Marketers are now racing to identify and capitalize on that value. That, in turn, has created a variety of problems, including the rise of spam blogging.

“That’s starting to erode a lot of the value that we see in hyperlinking, and we need to do something about that,” warned Hespos. “And do something about it quick.”

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Thanks to hyperlinks, the flow of information – formerly a top-down phenomenon – now resembles a two-way street. People have become “knowledge producers in addition to being [knowledge] consumers,” said Rosen.

“All of the professions of people who specialized in seeing people as masses or as a target audience...are having to contend with a world where horizontal communication is so much more effective.”

This free exchange of information obviates the need for filters or “gatekeepers.” But what of current efforts to curtail or eliminate “net neutrality?”

Tony Gentile, vice president of Healthline.com, reassured the audience that any restrictions would be short-lived. “[T]his is just something we’ll find a way to route around...It’s not something that people will stand for.”

Rosen said he’s not surprised by the effort to impose controls on linking and the web. “It’s too democratic, it’s too open...it’s too much fun.”

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How are old media grappling with new media? That was a topic of discussion by the second panel, chaired by Saul Hansel, a technology reporter at The New York Times.

“Think of the internet as a cyclotron,” Hansel told the audience, a machine that takes bulk information – an issue of his own newspaper, for example – and spins it apart into tiny particles. While this unbundling of traditional media products to create entirely new ones is technologically quite simple, the economics are not.

To remain viable on the web, “all these individual fragments, all these individual units, have to stand naked in the marketplace,” explained Nicholas Carr, former editor of the Harvard Business Review and author. “They have to justify economically their own existence – in a way that they didn’t have to before” when they were part of a larger product. And while some might argue let them live or die with the market – “like toasters and toothpaste” – that won’t work necessarily work with news or information. And Carr is worried about what that means for journalism in the long-run.

“Unbundling of content means also a loss of cross-subsidies,” explained Carr. “[T]he classified ads might provide a subsidy to send a photojournalist to Africa to do a report on malaria. Brad and Angelina’s baby might draw enough readers in to help subsidize long-term investigative report[ing] on graft.” Would readers pay as much for a corruption exposé as a celebrity baby? Carr has serious doubts.

The economics of “unbundling” and transforming old media for a new audience are issues panelist Martin Nissenholtz grapples with daily. Nissenholtz is senior vice president for digital initiatives at The New York Times.

Between 24 and 25 million people each month visit the Times’ newly designed website. About 10 percent link directly. The others, according to Nissenholtz, are “coming in through side doors” – search engines, email, blogs or other links. His goal is to devise ways to expose these readers to the rest of the Times’ content. To, in essence, rebundle the unbundled content, and bring in new readers. At the moment, said Nissenholtz, the Times website is not yet capable of “driving the train” at the newspaper, “but given the growth rates that we’re experiencing... we’re pretty optimistic about our future.”

The Times is linking print and web content

in another way, Nissenholtz explained, by offering links to websites relied upon by Times reporters and editors. “We have 1,200 smart people who are looking at the Internet all the time.” MyTimes will offer RSS feeds from the newspaper plus selected websites. “We’ll see how it works,” said Nissenholtz.

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“What is the best way to win a coveted link in a popular blog?” asked an audience member. Short answer from the panel: Earn your stripes.

“In my opinion, the best way... is to create something of value that adds to [the ongoing] discussion,” responded Hespos.

As for irrelevant stuff: “It’s killin’ the blogosphere right now.” Move this section after the next one?

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News from large areas of the developing world often is overlooked by traditional media. Global Voices is a project that “aggregates content” from bloggers, bulletin boards, flicker photos and podcasts to create “a virtual newswire of information from around the world,” according to co-founder Ethan Zuckerman.

The idea has gained traction in countries with repressive regimes. But the reach has grown beyond domestic audiences to international ones.

Is the rise of “citizen media” a good thing or bad? While some in the traditional media fret about a loss of “professional culture,” that “horse is out of the barn . . . we are in a new world, and so we have to breed new horses,” observed blogger Jeff Jarvis, who was a member of the audience.

“Professional content is going to be less of the total pie than it has been in the past,” agreed Hansel, the panel’s moderator.

Zuckerman’s Global Voices relies on 120 contributors from around the world, reporting on events in their own communities – many of them places reporters cannot or do not visit. “I’m in no way saying they have a superior take [on the news],” said Zuckerman of his contributors. “But certainly a different take on it. And a complementary take on it.”

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Accuracy and authenticity have been the cornerstones of traditional media. Will they be sacrificed as information gathering and dissemination shifts to citizen journalists? “Under this structure of free volunteer labor, how good will it actually get?” asked Nicholas Carr.

Earlier this year, Carr declared Wikipedia – the encyclopedia “anyone can edit” – dead. It was “a nice experiment in the democratization of publishing, but it didn’t quite work out,” wrote Carr.

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales, sitting two chairs away from Carr on the panel, wasn’t quite willing to accept that obituary. He conceded, however, that his brainchild of contributed content salted with links sometimes is overrated.

“This question of students relying on Wikipedia as a reliable source of information is always kind of funny to me,” said Wales. “I get at least one e-mail a week from some college student who says ‘Please help me. I got an F on my paper because I quoted Wikipedia.’ And I always write back and I say, ‘For God’s sake, you’re in college, why are you quoting an encyclopedia?’ I got in trouble in the ninth grade for quoting Britannica, you know?”

Wikipedia delivers “good enough knowledge,” said Wales. “This is your starting point, not your ending point.”

Yet, like gullible college students, do web users recognize differences in the sources of what they’re reading? That worries the Times’ Nissenholtz, especially as Google grows as a web powerhouse.

“[S]ources are becoming less important than Google ranks,” said Nissenholtz. “[A]nd the assumption is that if something appears on the first page of Google, it’s true.”

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“What kind of society are we creating?” asked a member of the audience.

According to Zuckerman, a society that “involves a whole lot more interaction between people who rarely get the chance to talk to each other in real life....[T]he idea that this really does become a space where anyone can talk to anyone is slowly but surely coming true. And I think that’s very exciting.”

Nicholas Carr was not as optimistic.

“[W]hat we may be creating, and this is going to take many years until it plays out, is a very shallow society, where people’s idea of understanding means

hydroplaning across information from link to link.”

Saul Hansel suggested something in between. “[B]y creating a participant culture of media, we’re going to create a level of understanding of media that is going to be far deeper than any we’ve had so far, even in the media-saturated world we live in....” In the end, he said, this may alter “how people perceive other media because they’re making their own.”