

Few Papers Use Online Techniques To Improve Public Communication

by Jack Rosenberry

A content analysis of 47 online newspaper sites finds that few newspapers are using the Internet's interactive technologies to improve the coverage of public affairs.

A poll sponsored by ABC News and the *Washington Post* in late 2003 reported that 49 percent of respondents in a national survey of 1,200 adults were dissatisfied with the U.S. political process. In another poll a month earlier, sponsored by Cable News Network and *USA Today*, half the respondents said the U.S. political system needed either a complete overhaul (17 percent) or major reforms (33 percent). More than half of the respondents in another survey from around the same time rated the media's overall performance as only fair (43 percent) or poor (12 percent).¹ This evidence supports the view that the public at large believes traditional models of political communication, their relation to self-governance and civic engagement and the role of the media in the process have become dysfunctional. The poll findings align with the negative appraisals of the political communication system in general and media performance in particular offered by such commentators as Herbert Gans² and James Fallows,³ who gave his critique the skeptical title *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine Democracy*.

One proposed solution to this dysfunction is offered by theories of "cyber-democracy," which propose that the Internet's ability to close gaps of time and distance with electronic interactivity has the power to make institutional journalism at least anachronistic and perhaps even unnecessary.⁴ But these models in general seem more cyber-utopian than realistic. Solutions proposed by cyber-democracy advocates such as the "electronic town meeting" or the

public-sphere “cyber-salon” have not developed as feasible alternatives to the current liberal-democracy model fed and fostered by a political communication system that includes the media.⁵

Improved political action in the online arena has its greatest potential not when interaction is entirely free-form, as the cyber-utopians propose, but when it is fostered by facilitation.⁶ 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 authority and organization that undermine the cyber-utopian models. Promising parts of cyber-democratic theory can be used as tools in defining a “best-practices” model for how online newspapers can offer themselves as venues for greater citizen engagement. Online sites associated with newspapers are likely candidates for such a role because newspapers are the traditional source of the most in-depth information regarding political communication, especially at the state, regional and local levels.⁷ They also are the focal point for online news consumption. A study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 62 percent of Internet news consumers said they read the Web sites of local or national newspapers.⁸

To help evaluate how well online newspapers are embracing this approach, a content review of online papers’ sites was used to investigate their use of interactive discourse-related devices drawn from cyber-democratic theory, specifically:

- Putting institutional authority behind citizen voices
- Providing places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues
- Providing spaces for citizen interaction with officials
- Combining institutional and citizen voices
- Using interactive devices to present public affairs information serving the surveillance function.

These are the types of practices that proponents of cyber-democracy say the network can fulfill but that critics of the theory say aren’t likely to emerge on their own. Online journalists can provide the facilitation that turns theory into practical reality.

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, for example, Tankard and Ban set out to investigate whether online newspapers were, as they put it in their article’s title, living up to their potential.⁹ 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 the Internet capability at their disposal to enhance presentation of the news. Schultz similarly used the Newslink site to draw a sample of 100 online papers and then applied an index measurement to evaluate whether they engaged in enough interactive communication to effectively promote deliberative discourse, which is similar to the goal of this research project. 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.¹⁰ This study probes more deeply than past efforts to catalog general patterns and uses of interactive devices by seeking out interactive elements that are specifically related to enhancement of political discourse and civic engagement.

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.¹¹ Electronic plebiscites,¹² virtual communities¹³ and online deliberative discourse¹⁴ all were touted as ways that this would come to pass.

Based on these results, the promise of online journalism to create conditions for improved political communication appears to be largely untapped. Only three of the 13 devices used to operationalize online facilitation of cyber-democratic practices were present at more than 50 percent of the papers.

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.¹⁵ But others argued that 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.¹⁶ 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 and links between the governed and the governors.¹⁷

A Framework for Online Coverage

But who should the facilitators be, and where would they be found? With respect to political communication, this is where a new role and function for journalists could emerge, using the interactive power of new forms of online journalism. The traditional media are far from perfect, and certainly not the sole source of information about public life. But they still hold the pivotal place in the political communication system,¹⁸ largely because they perform what Entmann¹⁹ calls the "core function of news" by illuminating and scrutinizing public policy issues, actions of those who hold political power, ideologies of the political and social system, and actions of those in power with regard to their own self interest:

These media put illumination of policy, power, ideology and self-interest at the center of their productions and do so in every issue or edition. This is not to say the traditional news outlets always or even usually augment democracy; an enormous literature documents the gap between journalistic ideals and traditional journalism's actual contributions to democratic life. It is merely to say that the media in this category are generally regarded as having the highest probability of contributing to democratic citizenship.²⁰

The power and promise of online journalism is interactivity, tapping into an audience that is already actively engaged in construction of meaning in the messages and doing some of the gatekeeping for itself.²¹ Their participation in the process already provides a certain structure and common knowledge based on surveillance of the environment through exposure to the news site, along with a pre-existing involvement as participants in the communication rather than as passive recipients of messages through it. If facilitation—provision of forums and tools for engagement and establishment of rules and norms—is what it takes to have effective on-line civic discourse, then doing just that among an already "captive" and interactively engaged audience is one approach online journalists can use to reclaim their eroded Fourth Estate role in ways that are not possible under traditional source-message-channel-receiver models of mass communication.

What that requires, however, is a willingness of journalists to reformulate their approach to political journalism. According to research in the field, it is a step they should be willing to take. As Gurevitch and Blumler put it:

*If journalism-steered-by-news-values converts so readily into news-management-for-politicians, something will have to be done from within to put this right. A need to rethink the journalistic role arises. Too often the alternative to the conventional journalistic role of 'gatekeeper' has been posited as one of 'advocate.' Other possibilities exist and should be explored, including the role of 'democratic midwife.'*²²

Online and off, journalists already can and do fulfill important roles regarding surveillance and social cohesion/construction of common knowledge.²³ Combining these with facilitated discourse and new interactive tools for improving public understanding can add up to a more powerful impact on public opinion and a more powerful process for reconnecting the public with public life.

Two crucial features separate this approach from notions of basic cyberdemocracy. One is the framing and backgrounding of basic news information provided by the news coverage. As Kovach and Rosenstiel describe it:

*As citizens encounter an ever-greater flow of data, they have more need—not less—for identifiable sources dedicated to verifying that information, highlighting what is important to know and filtering out what is not. The role of the press in this new age becomes working to answer the question 'where is the good stuff'? Verification and synthesis become the backbone of the new gatekeeper role of the journalist, that of the 'sensemaker.'*²⁴

The other is that the involvement of the newspaper, a community institution, gives the information exchanged and expressed there a certain traffic level and institutional backing that makes the interaction more meaningful because it is where people are accustomed to turning for accurate, credible information and analysis about those who hold power in society.²⁵ Research by Hsiang and Lasorsa²⁶ and by Sundar²⁷ shows that purposes readers attach to print newspapers will transfer to online coverage.

A key purpose of democratic institutions is to provide "arenas in which citizens can propose issues for the political agenda and participate in debate about those issues. The problem is to figure out how such arenas might be organized."²⁸

One way to answer that question is to say that online papers should be putting institutional authority behind citizen voices and providing ways for citizens to interact with officials in politics and government as a step toward improving the political communication system.

This is just one way that adding the capabilities of the online environment offers previously unavailable approaches that have the potential to transform political communication. So the blueprint ascribing new roles for online journalists should include using that power to provide such information in interactive ways, such as hyper-stories and links, to further information around the Web that augment traditional, linear story-telling approaches.

To summarize, a new role for online journalists that can help reclaim the mantle of the Fourth Estate by improving discourse can be built around practices that make use of interactive devices inspired by cyber-democratic theory, including putting institutional authority behind citizen voices, providing places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues, providing spaces for citizen interaction with officials, combining institutional voices with citizen voices and using interactive tools such as hyper-story presentations to present public affairs information serving the surveillance function.

Research Method

A research methodology similar to the ones used by Schultz and by Tankard and Ban was developed for this project. Specifically, a review of online news sites was conducted to evaluate the presence of certain devices as defined in the online newspapers coverage framework. The U.S. daily newspapers section of *American Journalism Review's* Newslink site (www.newslink.org/daynews.html) was used as a sampling frame. Greer and Mensing²⁹ put the number of online U.S. dailies at 1,279 as of 2003. In October 2004, Newslink listed sites of approximately 1,200 U.S. dailies, so it can be inferred to be a good representation of the population of U.S. papers online. 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, which is organized first by state then alphabetically by city of publication. Of these, 47 were examined. Two papers, although they were in the Newslink list, were "dead" URLs. Another link, although it was on the dailies page, led to the site of a weekly 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. 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. The correlation (Pearson's r) of the percentages in each circulation stratum for the total U.S. newspaper industry and 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. This follows the findings of Greer and Mensing, who said smaller papers lagged in creating online presences.

The investigation was done during October 2004, a time frame selected specifically because it was the height of the quadrennial election campaign. Once the papers were selected, each site was reviewed for whether or not it had the following characteristics, as drawn from cyber-democratic theory:

- Putting institutional authority behind citizen voices, as operationalized by reader blogs, e-mail posting and submission of letters to the editor and online polls
- Creating places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues, operationalized by threaded and non-threaded message boards about public affairs, links to discussion sites, such as e-the-People (www.e-thepeople.org) and chats with other community members
- Creating places for citizen interaction with officials, operationalized by e-mail links to candidates, officials and institutions and chats with officials
- Combining institutional and citizen voices, operationalized by citizen input (e.g. from message boards and blogs) used in stories, and/or editorials and the opportunity to “talk back” on a story, editorial or letter to the editor
- Using interactive devices to present public affairs information serving the surveillance function, operationalized by interactive storytelling, e.g. candidate quizzes, budget games, layering/hyperstory formulation of stories on civic issues or elections and links (other than e-mail) 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 unit of analysis in seeking out these devices was the entire online site. All coding was done by the author. The absence of a multi-coder design was not seen as a serious threat to validity since the investigation was designed merely to catalog the presence or absence of site features that are discrete and obvious. The types of content-categorization judgments that demand a multiple-coder design and high inter-coder reliability were not features of this site review. The proportion of total papers in the investigation containing each of these devices is shown in Table 1.

Findings

Based on these results, the promise of online journalism to create conditions for improved political communication appears to be largely untapped. Only three of the 13 devices used to operationalize online facilitation of cyber-democratic practices were present at more than 50 percent of the papers. Less than half of these devices—six of the 13—were used by fewer than a third of the 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’s³⁰

work, in which she reported that editors saw the Internet as primarily 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 out of the five broad ones in the coverage framework in which online papers were most active in using the power of the Internet to engage citizens with public affairs was use of interactive

or hyper-story coverage and off-site links for citizens to find more information for themselves. These included links to government agencies, to candidates' campaign sites, and to 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 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.

About a third of the papers offered either hyper-story 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.

Table 1
Percentages of Coverage Devices by Paper

<i>Institutional Authority Behind Citizen Voices</i>	
Citizen blogs	6 % (3 of 47)
Online letters	89 % (42)
Online polls	51 % (24)
<i>Providing Spaces for Citizen Interaction on Public Issues</i>	
Forums/Message boards	45 % (21)
Discussion site links	21 % (10)
Community chats	2 % (1)
<i>Providing Spaces for Citizens to Interact with Officials</i>	
E-mail links to officials	19 % (9)
Chats with officials	0 %
<i>Combining Citizen and Institutional Voices</i>	
Story input	6 % (3)
Talk back	30 % (14)
<i>Interactive Devices to Present Surveillance Information</i>	
Interactive storytelling	36 % (17)
Hyperstory presentation	30 % (14)
Offsite Links	62 % (29)

The next most represented area was 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 the Denver and Syracuse sites, in fact, had more postings in forums related to sports teams than in political areas. 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 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 used 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 device that was used fairly widely, 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.

Other 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 (nine 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.

Discussion

The five-part online public-affairs coverage framework used to frame this analysis is drawn from theories of cyber-democracy, which address the potential for online interaction to promote engagement by providing participants with greater access to information and by breaking down barriers of time and space for information exchange. The framework suggests online journalists are

well situated to facilitate this process through use of certain devices or techniques in the online news site. In doing so the framework mitigates the weaknesses of “raw” cyber-democratic theory, which is flawed by its lack of any connection with – indeed its disdain for – the institutional basis of the political communication system and also by its technological determinism, an assumption that because effective discourse *can* emerge, it *will* emerge. Cyber-democracy is most successful not in its free-form state but rather when leavened with structure and facilitation, which can be provided by journalists using the devices from the framework.

Online papers have a part to play by virtue of the traditional role of journalists in the political communication process. Together, this makes the online news sites a more suitable venue than “free-form” online discourse and information access, as represented by bloggers and some other types of political information/political discussion sites.

But investigation of a sample of papers drawn to be representative of the U.S. online newspaper industry as a whole found that many of the devices from the online public affairs coverage framework have not been widely adopted. The results may be interpreted as limited evidence that using online tools to “cover” public affairs differently is one that’s starting to emerge in journalism but has a ways to go before it becomes 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.”³¹ To extend the metaphor, this bridge is still under construction.

More widespread adoption of the devices in the framework would not be a panacea, but could still contribute to improving the climate for political communication that much of the public and many commentators see as dysfunctional. This is because the news media, especially newspapers, still are seen as the leading source for accurate, verified information about politics, as discussed by Entmann. Online tools, and the revised tasks ascribed to journalists in the framework, help this to happen in new, more efficient ways. But at the same time, journalistic purpose and tradition in offering general information offers some protection against the dangers of overly selective information selection that is so prevalent online, and also offers an opportunity for creating shared understandings. Further, online papers can provide a sense of authority and direction for information such as links to online sources, an example of what Kovach and Rosenstiel call helping readers find the “good stuff,” and also an example of how journalists can add authority, structure and facilitation that makes cyber-democracy work better.

Technology allows papers to do things that are not possible in print editions. When journalists provide links to other sources beyond their own presentations, readers can “build” a story to the level or depth that they want; this is the practical value of a shift in gatekeeping. The value-added part that

journalists provide is verification and vetting of these sources—helping people find the good stuff. Hyper-story presentations not only shift some of the gatekeeping to readers, but allow for depth and persistence of presentation that are impossible to achieve in print. The links can stay in place on the paper's Web site long after the print edition has reached the recycling bin.

Arguably, motivated and interested citizens would find these links on their own. But motivated, interested citizens can attend city council meetings, too. Nevertheless, newspapers cover city council because not everybody can or will attend the meetings, and the journalists see it as their job to improve the public's access to what happens there by reporting on it. This is the essence of public affairs coverage, and such coverage is the media's primary contribution to an effective political communication system. The online paper provides the same sort of public service, based in technology, when it collects and presents valuable links to the public and offers forums for citizens to engage with each other and with officials.

The online public affairs coverage framework suggests specific tactics for creating the conditions that can improve political communication, to which the technological determinist (or cyber-utopian) might reply: "so does the network." The key difference is that the framework starts with the network's capabilities but then employs human artifacts—notably rules of engagement and institutional authority and connections—to channel the power of the technology for human ends, i.e., more effective self-governance. The framework corresponds directly with the information-interaction-institutional impact model of public opinion effectiveness traditionally seen as the root of the political communication system. It incorporates some of the traditional normative theories of how the news media should contribute to democratic discourse. But at the same time it does not ignore the ideas that underlie theories of cyber-democracy. Rather, it integrates promising aspects of the cyber-democratic approach but at the same time places them in a realistic and practical framework that can provide a new set of normative practices for journalists.

Notes

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