

Hyperlink usage in local news websites in Azerbaijan

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes one of the elements of the digital content-hyperlink issue in digital journalism. Firstly, the main definition of hyperlinks is given. Then hypertext content on several local news websites is analyzed and hyperlink usage in local news websites in Azerbaijan is described through empirical study. A study of the top 5 local news websites shows that hyperlink usage is not so widespread among tested websites. Moreover, the main issue here is data even how wrong can be hyperlinks used. For example, most of the time we can go just to the same page, or to the homepage of the current website by clicking on the hyperlink. This is meaningless, and not an ethical approach to the audience as well. In addition, the article attempts to interpret an online academic survey conducted among local news website journalists to know their hypertext habits, skills, understandings, and so on. Results show that general awareness of hyperlink usage exists among the survey participants, and they mainly use this technique to refer to external sources, or just to give background information.

1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on understanding different approaches to hyperlink issues. In the digital world, international media professionals have been discoursing on the advantages and disadvantages of hyperlink usage in professional journalism. However, in Azerbaijan, there is less discussion on that topic, almost there is not. Because of this lack of knowledge or awareness, it can be observed fewer hypertext samples or misusing hyperlinks in practice. In addition, this research paper tries to understand whether selected news websites mainly use internal or external hyperlinks during reporting. Moreover, an internal hyperlink is a hyperlink that connects to another webpage or resource within the same website or domain. Internal hyperlinks facilitate navigation within a website, allowing users to easily move between different pages or sections of the same site.

On the other hand, an external hyperlink is a hyperlink that directs users to a webpage or resource located on a different website or domain.

External hyperlinks are used to connect content across different websites, enabling users to access additional information or related resources hosted on external sites.

To enhance these hyperlinking skills in local media more research should be implemented and more awareness of this technique should be achieved. The novelty and importance of this research is that it is the only study on this topic in Azerbaijan. No recent local observations, measurements, or theoretical investigations are detected during the preparation of this research.

The findings underscore that there's a partial disconnect between source mentions and linked content. Numerous sources don't get referenced through links, and the majority of links don't direct to primary sources. Moreover, links serve additional purposes like offering services or contextual details to readers. Consequently, these discoveries challenge the concrete definition of "journalistic evidence" and the potential for journalists to establish networks of shared accountability through links.

In a 2008 interview with the Nieman Journalism Lab, Frank Rich, a New York Times columnist, and fervent proponent of linking, emphasizes such logic: The theory was: Why not be as transparent as possible by showing sources when we could? ... Why not give the reader, if he or she wants to, the opportunity to see the sources, or a source, when it's available? It helps bulletproof the column because if they say 'He must be making that up,' they can look and see here's the source, take a look, and judge it for yourself ... If I'm citing a figure, at the most banal level, from the Labor Department or a poll or an economic report, [why not] link to the whole document it comes from? (Frank Rich, quoted in Delaney 2008).

In the New media age now we are facing AI's impact on journalism content as well. "In the news industry, Artificial Intelligence technologies affect many categories such as automated content creation, data mining, news distribution, optimization, selection of news headlines, preparation of interview questions, etc. (Zalova, 2024).

We try to find an answer to the question of whether local website journalists are aware of hyperlinks, and to what extent they use this technique during content production. Answers to these research questions will give us a sample hyperlink usage map for us, and it will contribute to further deep, broad studies on hypertextuality as a main element of new media journalism in Azerbaijan. The goal is to put the importance of hypertextuality and to assess its prominence and its potential elements within the discourses of those who are mainly concerned: professional journalists.

2. Related work

This part provides a concise overview of the literature discussing hypertextuality within the realm of online journalism. The term "hyperlink" was coined in the 1960s by Ted Nelson at the start of Project Xanadu. Nelson had been inspired by "As We May Think," a popular essay by Vannevar Bush. In the essay, Bush described a microfilm-based machine (the Memex) in which one could link any two pages of information into a "trail" of related information, and then scroll back and forth among pages in a trail as if they were on a single microfilm reel. The closest contemporary analogy would be to build a list of bookmarks to topically

related Web pages and then allow the user to scroll forward and backward through the list.¹ Most of the time hyperlink terminology is seen together with hypertext. Hypertext is a text which has hyperlinks. Therefore, in some literature, journalistic content with hyperlinks is called hypertextual news. Numerous academics argue that hypertextual news possesses distinct traits summarized as follows: links enrich news content by fostering greater interactivity, credibility, transparency, and diversity. Moreover, they constitute crucial commercial assets. However, the perceived benefits of linking outlined here don't necessarily align with the practices of news websites; they stem from theoretical debates about the potential role of links in journalism.²

Embracing the notion that web writing should be "shorter, sharper and snappier", links "give journalists a way to tell complex stories concisely" (Stray, 2010). Links are also responsible for enhancing transparency, constituting a third means through which they contribute to online journalism. Links also supposedly increase transparency. They enable readers to trace back the processes involved in "the reader to trace back the reporting and news gathering process" (Deuze, 1999, p. 383). Practices like sourcing and selection of valuable information are no longer entirely concealed. In terms of explicitly identifying sources, "a link stands out as the most straightforward, comprehensive, and transparent form of attribution." (Stray, 2010). Another researcher Bolter argues that hypertext is the remediation of print: "Where printed genres are linear or hierarchical, hypertext is multiple and associative. Where a printed text is static, a hypertext responds to the reader's touch" (Bolter, 2001)

With links, journalists avoid endlessly rewriting news wire stories and have time to focus on what matters. Finally, it is better to mention Jeff Jarvis' formulaic rule epitomizes the principle of curation: "Cover what you do best and link to the rest" (Jarvis, 2010).

Hence, the present paper aims to answer the following research question: What are professional news workers' primary reasons to use hyperlinks? Do hyperlinks used in top local news websites make sense such as making news accurate, relevant, and specific?

¹ New World Encyclopedia. Hyperlink. <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hyperlink>, 23.01.2018

² De Maeyer J. Journalistic hyperlink. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2012.667273>, 27.03.2012

3. Materials and methods

The scope of this research is news websites in Azerbaijan. The novelty of the work is that there is no such research about hyperlink issues in Azerbaijan journalism. Therefore, it is decided to observe and evaluate a local practice regarding this topic. To achieve the goals outlined above, 88 practicing journalists working for distinct local news websites are surveyed in Azerbaijan. The survey is made on Google Forms and shared with website editors, chief editors, and reporters through direct and indirect communication.

On the other hand, an empirical study is implemented to evaluate the top 5 (according to Azerbaijan’s first web analysis tool the Metrix.az portal) local news websites’ news content during a week in the frame of hyperlink usage. These websites are: www.oxu.az, www.axar.az, www.qafqazinfo.az, www.report.az, www.apa.az.

4. Analysis and Findings

A total of 5387 news content from five Azerbaijan news sites are analyzed (Table 1). Out of this data, 687 content is from the “News” category of the www.qafqazinfo.az website which is analyzed from 1-7 May 2023. It is found that only 54 news have a hyperlink, 31 of them are internal hyperlinks (redirecting to the content in the same site), and 22 of them are external ones (Fig.1).

According to this study internal news sources are more than external ones, news coming from social media is just 5.68%. However, mainly in news based on social media has no hyperlinks. It is a very dangerous situation, as fake news is generated mainly on social media outlets.

Table 1. News websites analysis statistics

Websites	Total news	Link (units)	Link (%)
www.oxu.az	1383	190	13.7
www.axar.az	925	106	11.5
www.qafqazinfo.az	687	54	7.9
www.report.az	1400	72	5.1
www.apa.az	992	33	3.3
Total	5387	455	8.4

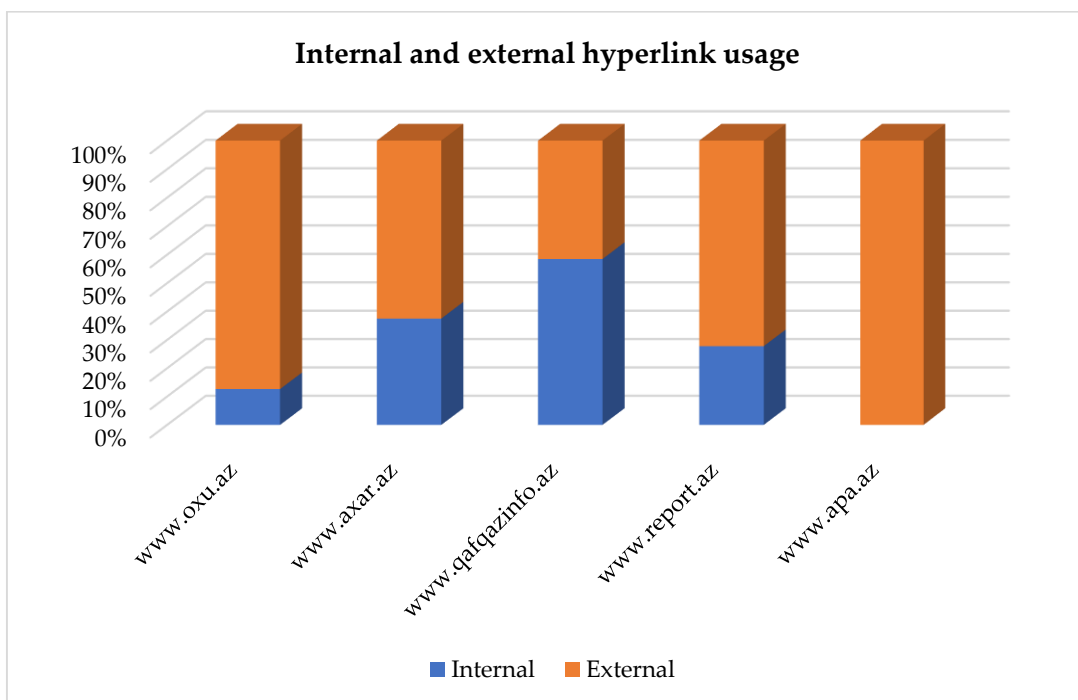


Fig.1. Hyperlink types usage percentages

So, professional journalists have to be sensitive citing social media as a source and even not giving any link as proof.

Out of the total news content, 1400 news belong to the www.report.az news agency website. The content was analyzed from the "Main News" category, during 1-7 May 2023. Totally 72 news has a hyperlink, 20 of them are internal hyperlinks, and 52 of them are external (Fig.1.).

In Report.az a very bad experience of using hyperlinks in the wrong way is detected. In 1146 news content it is observed that Report.az is mentioned with the hyperlink. When users click on those links the same news content page opens in a new tab. This is a very meaningless way of using links, and also, ethically speaking, it's a deceptive move towards the viewers.

Out of the total news content, 1383 news belong to the www.oxu.az news website. The content is analyzed, from May 1, August 15-20, 2023. Totally 190 news has a hyperlink, 24 of them are internal hyperlinks, and 166 of them are external (Fig.1.).

Out of the total news content, 925 news belong to the www.axar.az news website. The content was analyzed, during August 21-27, 2023. Totally 106 news has a hyperlink.

In Axar.az in 768 news content, it is observed that Axar.az is mentioned with the hyperlink. When users click on those links the home page opens in a new tab. 44 hyperlinks with external source links redirected people to those external news websites' homepages, however, by clicking on those links where there have to be on the linked news pages of those websites.

Finally, out of the total news content, 992 news belong to the www.apa.az news website. The content was analyzed from June 1, 20-25 August, 2023. Totally 33 news has a hyperlink. All of them are external links (Fig.1.).

In Apa.az in 888 news content, it is observed that Apa.az is mentioned with the hyperlink. When users click on those links the home page opens in a new tab. 42 hyperlinks with external source links redirect people to those external news websites' homepages, however, by clicking on those links where there have to be on the linked news pages of those websites.

Analyzing link usage reason, it can be summarized that these news websites use hyperlinks mainly:

- ✓ To cite external sources – www.oxu.az and www.report.az
- ✓ To link related news content – www.axar.az
- ✓ To give background information – www.qafqazinfo.az
- ✓ To give additional information – www.apa.az

Besides the empirical study, this study surveys journalists working for local websites in Azerbaijan. Totally 88 journalists participate in this online survey, and their main ideas on the importance of using hyperlinks in news are that it makes content more understandable, and is very useful for giving background information. Also, it is crucial to cite previous news, which may also expand reading traffic. Some of the survey participants mentioned that there is no need to use hyperlinks as she/he mainly writes interviews or produces video materials. While analyzing kind of open-question answers it is possible to realize that such kind of opinion is because of a lack of knowledge about hyperlinks, as it is possible to use hyperlinks for visual materials and in interviews as well.

In this academic survey, mainly reporters participate with 64.77% with mostly 1-5 years of experience. Awareness of hyperlinks is high (see Fig.2.) among the participants.

Answers mentioned that his/her editor does not allow to use of external hyperlinks because they don't want to cite directly the other websites. This notion also is not acceptable, as journalists are keen on using other external sources, so there should be links to those sources as it is ethical and transparent in front of the audience. Survey participants who prefer to use both internal and external hyperlinks slightly more than those who prefer only to link to their own, internal content (Fig.3.).

However, according to the results of the empirical study of local website news content, journalists still need to enhance their knowledge and skills on usage of hyperlinks.

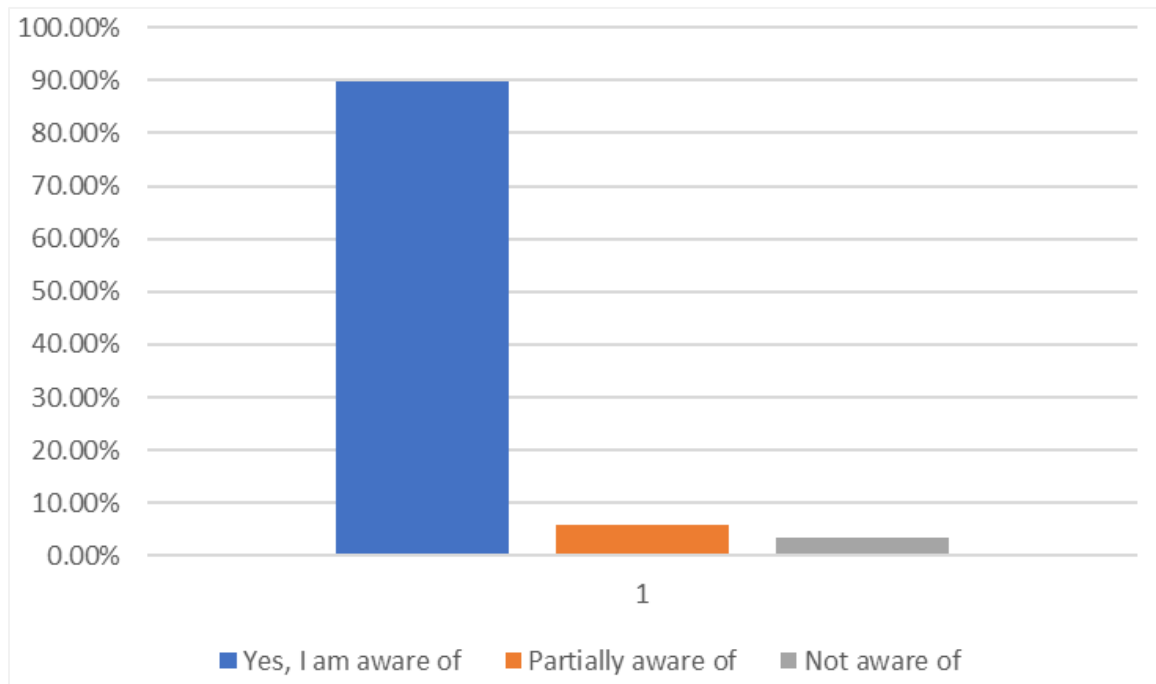


Fig.2. Survey participants' awareness of hyperlinks

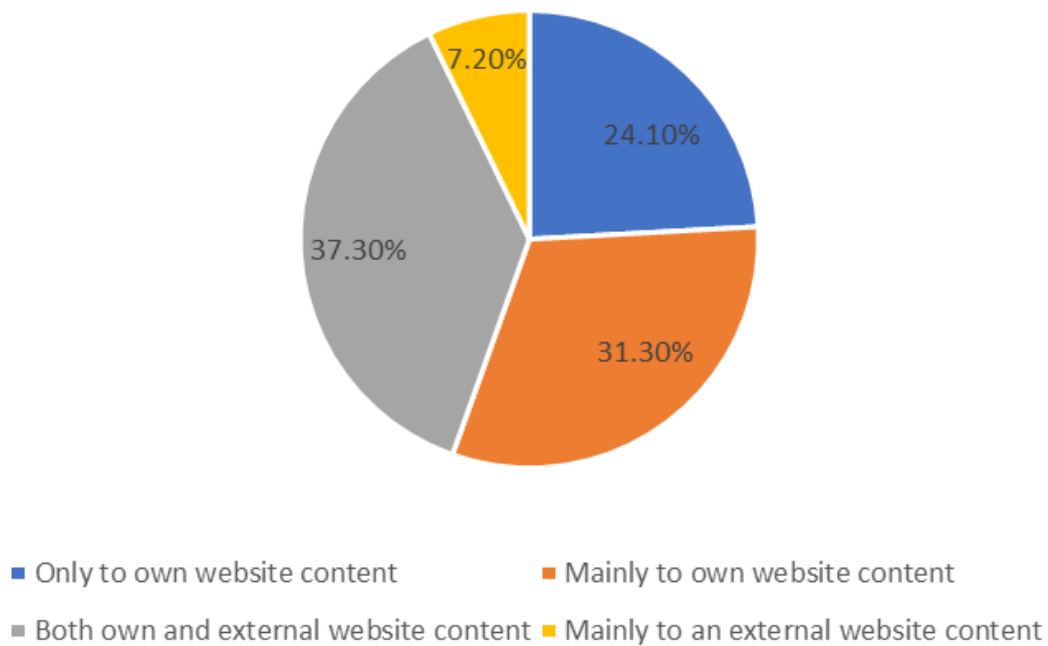


Fig.3. Survey participants' internal and external hyperlink usage

5. Discussion

Journalism as a part of the communication field has been facing several changes due to technological development. Before the Internet, there was traditional communication where messages are delivered through one-to-one or public channels. That was physical/analog, synchronous, and no interacted content. As technology developed communication

transformed from classical to new, moreover, the content as a message became virtual/digital, one-to-one and public, asynchronous, with unlimited interaction. These advantages bring to journalistic content digitality, time and space independence, and endless interaction with its audience. In new media journalism, the most affected element is content. In general, hyperlinks in news texts are supposed to enhance the perception of control in online readers.

Hyperlinks are objects of truth for journalists. Therefore, it is important to have hyperlink literacy among journalists and audiences. Hypertext can facilitate greater depth in reporting and allow stories to be told from multiple perspectives. Moreover, it can deepen the relationship with the audience, so has the potential to attract new readers or keep existing ones engaged for longer.³

In Azerbaijan, hyperlink usage ability needs to be investigated more deeply, as there is no research on this topic. The present paper puts the particular importance of hyperlinks to the test. Linking also seems to be at the core of a paradox: inquiries into the values and opinions of journalists indicate that they think hypertext is an important and valuable feature and that journalists have adopted linking as a cultural norm, but content analyses of news sites shows that hypertext is “not utilized to its potential”.

6. Conclusion

Not all links are created equal. Good links make stories more transparent and add depth. Bad links are distracting, misleading, and even unethical. To be a good journalist, he/she has to learn how to select and present the right links.⁴ Good links mean they redirect the audience to accurate, relevant, and specific content. There are a handful of studies that consider journalistic hyperlinks beyond the internal and external perspective of some of this earlier work. Coddington (2012) examined how links contribute to news frames, Larsson (2012) explored the motivations for journalistic hyperlinks, and Larrondo Ureta studied Web special features in her view as “one of the maximum expressions of hypertextuality” (2011, 199). She argued that although story packages sometimes masked “a lack of content”, such packaging was a way of exploiting the “hypertextual, multimedia and interactive dimensions of the online medium” and that although it was not yet a characteristic format, it indicated the potential for online journalism.

In the conclusion, especially focusing on external links (referring to links leading to other websites), this study revealed variations in findings based on countries, selected news platforms, and research methodologies. However, numerous content analyses indicated that while news websites might include a considerable number of internal links, their utilization of external links

remained inadequate. Nevertheless, it was precisely through external linking that the potential to display sources was believed to exist. So far, empirical studies of links contained in news stories only measured the mere presence of links while trying to assess if a link was used correctly or to fulfill another function.

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