

Popularity Is Not The Same Thing as Influence:

A Study of the Bay Area News System

David Ryfe, Donica Mensing, Hayreddin Ceker, Mehmet Gunes

University of Nevada, Reno

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It is an open question whether the agenda setting or “gatekeeping” role of news organizations will continue in an online environment (McCombs, 2005). The earliest research suggested that traditional news organizations might retain this role (e.g., Cornfield, et. al., 2005; Lee, 2005; Reese, et. al. 2007; Roberts et. al., 2002). Subsequent research, however, indicates that they may not (Carpenter, 2010; Mezar, 2010; 2011). The more recent studies observe that there are simply too many sources of information online, and audience attention to these sources is too fragmented, for the news media to play this “gatekeeping” role any longer (e.g., Bennett, 2004). Even Maier (2010), who generally finds that a majority of online news tracks with the top stories made available by mainstream news organizations, admits that less than one-third of the stories linked to by blogs and social media correspond with the editorial choices of mainstream news organizations (see also Holt & Karlsson, 2011).

Thus far, researchers have explained the waning of the news media’s agenda setting role as a consequence of structure rather than choice. The low cost of cultural production make the web an information-saturated environment, and audiences are fragmenting around this information in such a way that it is difficult, if not impossible, for any subset of organizations to reliably and predictably direct a news agenda (see Benkler, 2006 for the general argument concerning the Internet). Even if, the argument goes, news organizations might wish to retain their influence, the structure of the new medium prevents them from doing so.

In many respects, this argument seems reasonable. However, some structural traits of the web imply that traditional news media are well positioned to play their familiar gatekeeping role. As many scholars have noted, information flows online tend to have

small world characteristics (e.g., Barabasi, 2003; Buchanan, 2003; Watts, 2003). One such characteristic is that hubs, a relatively small subset of nodes, strongly mediate the flow of information in a network. In fact, in a small world, hubs may account for as much as 80-90% of information circulating through a network. Regional daily newspapers seem especially well poised to be hubs in their communities. It is true that online regional news systems have begun to diversify (e.g., Fancher, 2011; Gordon & Johnson, 2011). But unlike the national or international news system, urban dailies stand unrivaled in the level of resources and reach they bring to regional news. In principal, it should not be difficult for them to dominate the production and circulation of regional online news as they have done for decades.

Our research on the linking practices of online news organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area region indicates that, in fact, regional dailies do dominate regional news flows. However, it also shows that they may be intentionally choosing NOT to use this advantage to play their traditional agenda setting role. Strange as it may be to say, the data suggest that these organizations are voluntarily and purposefully relinquishing their role as agenda setters in their communities.

Our argument unfolds in a series of steps. We begin by noting that influence online is established by linking practices. A link is a grant of authority from one site to another (e.g., Kleinberg, 1997). Ordinarily, the more links a site accrues from others, the more influence that site obtains. As in other small world networks, our data show that regional daily newspapers account for the vast majority of linking activity in the region. By most measures of network centrality, they are the primary hubs for news and information in

their communities. But popularity is not the same as influence.<sup>1</sup> Our data also show that these dailies mostly link to themselves, and that most of this internal linking seems to be driven by the template structure of content management systems and efforts to elevate advertising rates for their pages. In other words, their linking strategies are motivated by commercial imperatives rather than an interest in setting news agendas in their communities. Moreover, other media companies account for the majority of links TO urban daily news sites. These companies appear to be pursuing similar commercial strategies, and to be doing so by focusing on “soft” news topics like food, entertainment, and sports. Finally, urban dailies rarely link to other sites, an indication that they have little interest in the information environment beyond their own sites, or that commercial imperatives have restricted their linking practices. As other scholars have noted in similar studies of hyperlinks: “news media use new technology to replicate old practices” (Himmelbolm, 2010, p. 373).

The conclusion we draw from these data is that, in pursuit of popularity, urban dailies are relinquishing their influence. Theirs is a version of the “commercialization” strategy that has motivated news decisions within urban dailies for three decades (e.g., McManus, 1993; Squires, 1993; Underwood, 1993). According to this strategy, news organizations use marketing tools to discover audience interests, and devote most of their resources to delivering content that aligns with these interests. The result has been less investment in “hard” news and more investment in “soft news.” As this strategy unfolds online, these organizations are becoming less news-oriented and more media-oriented, less

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<sup>1</sup> This observation has also been made by writer Brian Solis in his work on the effects of emerging media, most recently in his report “The Rise of Digital Influence.”

interested in shaping the public agenda than in driving audience traffic via the production of soft news content. This outcome is not inevitable. It is not caused by structural characteristics of the web. Rather, it is a choice being made by these companies to chase “digital dimes” to replace the “print dollars” they have lost in advertising revenue from their core products (i.e., the newspaper).<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, our analysis shows that non-profit news sites, like California Watch and public media, such as KQED in San Francisco, seem to be stepping into the gatekeeping role vacated by urban dailies. The linking strategies of these organizations demonstrate that the web is not inevitably hostile to the formation of coherent news agendas, at least in regional news systems.

### **Methodological Issues**

The extant literature on news agenda formation online is scant. Thus far, much of this research has combined content analysis of a sample of coverage of particular issues with counts of hyperlinks between a defined set of news sites. So, for instance, Dmitrova et. al. (2003) trace hyperlinks between 15 American newspapers in their coverage of Timothy McVeigh’s execution. Lim (2006) tracks hyperlinks between stories in three South Korean daily newspaper websites and a news agency. And, Reese et. al. (2007) examine linking patterns between political blogs and mainstream news sites on posts generated during one week.

In some ways, the reasoning that underlies this method is easy to understand. The focus on stories and/or issues stems directly from the prevailing agenda setting theory.

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<sup>2</sup> Solis (2012) notes this strategy is common to many types of businesses that pursue traffic, page counts, likes and followers at the expense of core relationships.

According to this theory, issues that remain in the news agenda for some period of time (from weeks to months), tend to structure the range of issues raised in the public agenda. In the age of mass media, tracking issues in the news agenda required little more than analyzing the content of the most elite news outlets in a community. This is because less elite outlets tended to follow the direction of more elite outlets (e.g., Reese and Danielian, 1989). In effect, this meant that every other news outlet tended to take its cue from major urban daily newspapers—the most elite news outlets in most communities (e.g., Lopez-Escobar et. al., 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). Thus, to identify the news agenda, researchers conducted content analyses of elite news outlets in a given community. Because their reach was limited, and they mostly followed the cues of elite news outlets anyway, less elite outlets were ignored by researchers.

Online, however, it is not necessarily the case that elite news outlets will remain dominant. Given the greater diversity of information online, and the fact that online audiences are much more fragmented, it may be the case that no outlet follows the cue of any other outlet.<sup>3</sup>

To study this question, researchers have added counts of hyperlinks between sites to their traditional analyses of content. Hyperlinks from one site to another represent a grant of authority (Kleinberg, 1997). In linking to site *q*, site *p* says, in effect, “what *q* has written about topic *X* is of such interest that I wish my audience to read it as well.” The

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<sup>3</sup> It may also be the case that sophisticated use of social media will drive the news agenda under certain conditions, and that increasing use of mobile technology and other devices will complicate methodologies for studying agenda setting.

more such links site  $q$  accumulates from other sites, the more one may say that site  $q$  influences discussion of the topic within that particular network.

The strategy of counting hyperlinks naturally raises a sampling issue: how many and which sites should a researcher include in her count of links? Interestingly, most researchers have followed the traditional “most elite outlet” strategy of sampling. Dmitrova et. al. (2003) for instance, chose 15 news sites cited by the professional journal, *Columbia Journalism Review*, as “best newspapers.” Mezar (2010) chose to include the “most popular” political blogs as identified by three major blog aggregators. Reese et. al. (2007) adopt the same strategy, choosing the six “most popular” political blogs according to the aggregator Technorati’s rankings. Similarly, in his analysis of global news flows Himelboim (2010) chose to include the top media organizations in each country as identified by the BBC “Country Profiles,” and Karlsson and Stromback (2009) used the Guardian.co.uk and Aftonbladet.se to study various methodologies for online content analysis.

To our mind, this strategy makes an assumption that should, instead, remain a question: is “most popular” the same as “most influential?” Are sites that attract the most links necessarily the most influential, or, might it be the case that, in an online environment, influence depends on something more (or other) than popularity?

To address this question, we conducted a network analysis of an entire regional news system. We chose the San Francisco Bay Area because it is a fertile field for online news. A region that includes nine counties and roughly 7 million people, the Bay Area is a recognized leader in online innovation. Given its high broadband penetration,

sophisticated user base, and high concentration of online publishing experiments, it represents as good an example as any of a rapidly changing regional news system.

To identify the broadest range of news-related sites as we could, we adopted a two-pronged sampling method. First, we used a snowball method in which we identified the sites of every major news outlet in the region, and followed links to other sites linked to on their home page. We then followed links from these sites to other sites, and so on until our results began to repeat. Second, we also conducted Google searches of key terms to discover additional sites. Upon visiting these sites, we applied our snowball method as described above. In total, this strategy produced a sample of 170 sites. Of the 170 sites with which we began, 56 did not allow our software to crawl their pages. This was mostly due to technical reasons with how the site was built in HTML. After examining these sites, we determined that most were very small and contained relatively few pages. Therefore, their absence from the sample was unlikely to affect our overall results. Our final sample, then, was composed of 114 sites (see Appendix A for a complete list). They include everything from traditional news outlets to one-person neighborhood blogs. For purposes of this study, we labeled these sites as “seed sites.” Sites were considered “news” sites if they were updated at least weekly and focused primarily on issues of public interest.

To record hyperlinks, we used a modified version of the WebSPHINX crawler software program. A crawler catalogs each hyperlink it finds on every page of a site. At the end of this process, we were left with a picture of the number and direction of links from every site in the sample to every other site. These data compose the corpus for our study. We put the data into a table, and analyzed patterns in the linking practices across sites.



Importantly, this method of taking a global snapshot of an entire regional news system allows us to refrain from making assumptions about which sites are most likely to be popular or influential. It may be that the most popular sites achieve this status by relinquishing certain kinds of influence. In fact, that is precisely what our data suggest.

### **The Popularity of Traditional Media**

As a whole, the extant research finds that traditional media exercise a strong influence on online news. Traditional news media tend to link to one another much more than to any other kind of site (Deuze, 2003; Dmitrova et. al., 2003). Independent bloggers tend to rely on traditional news sites for stories and information (Cornfield et al., 2005; Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Herring, et. al., 2004; Meraz, 2008; Reese and Danielson, 2007). News aggregators like Google and Yahoo! follow the news agenda of major news organizations (Yu & Aikat, 2006). Even news media in peripheral countries tend to link to news and information produced by news media in core countries (Himmelboim, 2010).

**Table 1. Sites Attracting the Most Links From Other Sites**

Site	# of In-Bound Links
Mercurynews.com (MediaNews Group)	57,944
Siliconvalley.com (MediaNews Group)	32,765
Insidebayarea.com (MediaNews Group)	28,299
Sfcurbed.com (Curbed.com)	25,699
Sf.eater.com (Curbed.com)	22,480
Sfgate.com (Hearst)	16,600
Alamanacnews.com (Embarcadero Media Publishing)	14,316
Contracostatimes.com (MediaNews Group)	12,970
<b>Total:</b>	211,073

Our study of the Bay Area news system confirms this finding. The 114 sites in our study produced 246,737 total in-bound links. In-bound links are “links to” one site from another site. Just nine of the 114 sites in our sample attracted 85% of these links, or 211,073 of the total, (see Table 1). The *San Jose Mercury News* is the number one site “linked to” in this news system. This newspaper is owned by MediaNews Group, which also owns *Siliconvalley.com*, *The Oakland Tribune* (*insidebayarea.com*), and the *Contra Costa Times*, all of which also appear on this list of most “linked to” sites. *Sf.curbed.com* and *Sf.eater.com* are owned by *curbed.com*, a New York-based media company specializing in real estate and food websites. Rounding out our list, *Sfgate.com* is the online portal of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *alamanacnews.com* is the online site of a group of community newspapers owned by the Embarcadero Media Publishing Company. In other words, except for *sf.eater* and *sf.curbed*, traditional media companies own the most “linked to” sites in the region, and the largest of these companies dominate the list.

**Table 2. Sites Linking the Most to Other Sites**

Site	# of In-Bound Links
Sf.eater.com (Curbed.com)	39,180
Contracostatimes.com (MediaNews Group)	37,178
Mercurynews.com (MediaNews Group)	34,270
Sf.curbed.com (Curbed.com)	31,840
Insidebayarea.com (MediaNews Group)	30,140
Ibabuzz.com (MediaNews Group)	27,806
Paloaltoonline.com (Embarcadero Media Publishing)	14,319
<b>Total:</b>	214,733

The pattern of “linking from” one site to another, or out-bound links, is slightly more concentrated. The top seven sites account for 87%, or 214,733, of the total number of out-bound links. And the list of sites doing the most linking out to other sites is very similar to the list of sites attracting the most links: 3 news sites of the Bay Area News Group, Sf.eater.com and Sf.curbed.com, and Palo Alto Online (a website of the Embarcadero Media Publishing Company), all appear on this list. The only new site, Ibabuzz.com, is a sports website focused on the Oakland Raiders that is (of course) also owned by the Bay Area News Group.

If we use these data to generate basic measures of network “centrality,” we find that traditional media sites are by far the most popular sites in the Bay Area news system. For instance, in a calculation of Eigenvector centrality, which measures the degree to which a node is connected to other nodes that are central to a network, the top five sites are, in order: sfgate.com = 1.0; mercurynews.com = .76; abclocal.go.com = .63; insidebayarea.com = 6.2; contracostatimes.com = .58. Similarly, the five sites that are most “between” other sites, that is, that other sites are most likely to use as go-betweens to get to other sites, are: ibabuzz.com (1681.63); sfgate.com (1581.07); Sf.curbed.com (1175.88); and, kqed.org (946.94). Kqed.org is the online platform for the KQED public radio station. Aside from this site (more on it and other similar sites in a moment), the numbers tell the same tale: traditional media organizations own the most popular sites, by far, in this news system.

There are various ways one might explain this level of concentration. Traditionally, the ability to dominate a news agenda has been principally determined by a combination of access (to sources and resources) and reach (to audiences). More elite news outlets tend to reach larger audiences. The advertising revenue generated by these large audiences allows

them to hire more reporters, and to place these reporters closer to the institutions that drive the public agenda. Greater access and reach give elite news outlets more ability to determine the stories and issues that will circulate through a news system. This was true in the age of mass media, and it may be important in the age of online media as well. Though there are now 100+ news-oriented sites operating in the Bay Area, most are very small, with limited resources and reach, and they may necessarily have to depend on traditional news media for most of the information flow in the network.

Preferential-attachment theory may also explain the relative concentration of information flows in this network. First proposed by Barabási and Albert (1999), this theory explains the self-organizing character of certain kinds of complex networks. When a network is “scale-free,” meaning that the costs to one node of connecting to another are low, a certain dynamic takes root. First, the earliest nodes in a network tend naturally to have more connections, and their connections to others grow faster as the network enlarges. Thus, for instance, [mercurynews.com](http://mercurynews.com), which began in the early 1990s, is one of the earliest online news sites in the Bay Area. It has simply had more time to make and attract even more links, giving it a natural advantage in the network. If this were the only principle at work, however, then the earliest sites would always have an advantage, and so always make and attract the most connections. The presence on our list of a site like [Sf.eater](http://Sf.eater), which only appeared in the last few years, indicates that this is not the only dynamic at work. Barabási and Albert add to their first principle a second: a new node in a network is more likely to link to the most popular nodes, if only to efficiently gain access to other nodes. In this way, nodes will “preferentially attach” to the most popular nodes in a network, which means that the more popular a node is at  $T_1$ , the more likely it is to be even

more popular at  $T_2$ ,  $T_3$ , and so on. Overall, Barábasi and Albert conclude, scale free networks are likely to exhibit “power law traits” in which 20% or fewer of nodes are likely to account for 80% or more of information flows (e.g., Barábasi, 2002; Watts, 2003). As one such scale-free network, the web has been shown to contain these traits (e.g., Fragoso, 2011; Meiss, et. al., 2008). The Bay Area news system may simply be another example of these principles at work.

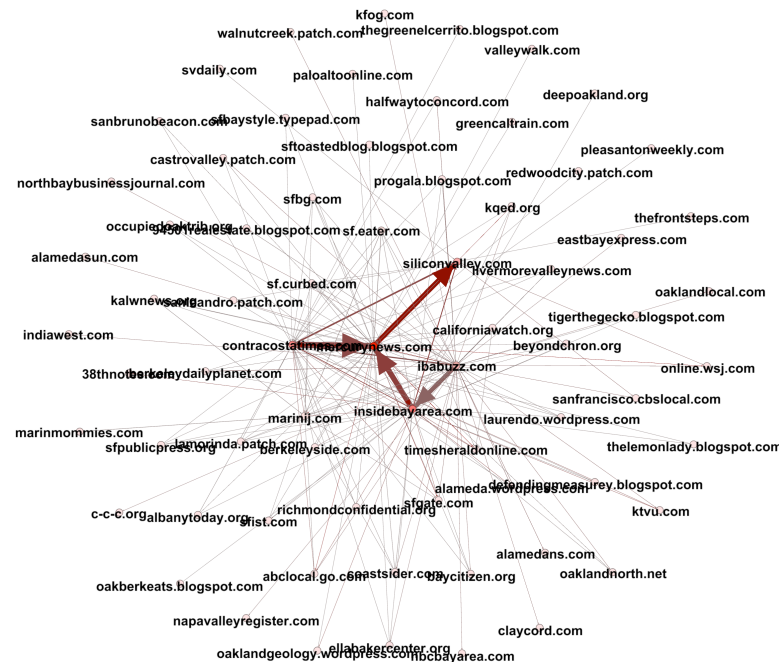
No doubt these theories explain some of the dynamics at work, and we might have relied on them to explain the networking patterns in this news system. Then we calculated a measure of “closeness centrality” for the network. “Closeness centrality” tells us how near a site is to other sites in a network. Table 3 lists the ten “closest” sites in the Bay Area news system. As the reader can see, this list looks almost nothing like the others. It is led by Almanacnews.com and Danvilleexpress.com, sites owned by the Embarcadero Media Company, and includes siliconvalley.com, which is owned by the Bay Area News Group. But it also includes two patch sites, a black newspaper site (sfbayview.com), two community newspapers (pacificsun.com and claycord.com), and the blog site of a non-profit community development organization (communityrejuvenation.blogspot.com). The major media site closest to other sites is the *Mercury News* site, which comes in at #54 on our list. This raised a question for us: how can it be that major media outlets are the most popular sites in a news system (as defined by most measures of network centrality), but are not very near other sites?

**Table 3. Closest Sites in the Bay Area News System**

Site	Measure
Alamanacnews.com	4.009
Danvilleexpress.com	4.00
Halfmoonbay.patch.com	3.91
Belmont-ca.patch.com	3.91
Sfbayview.com	3.78
Pacificsun.com	3.76
Communityrejuvenation.blogspot.com	3.6
Claycord.com	3.51
Siliconvalley.com	3.4
Pleasantonweekly.com	3.32

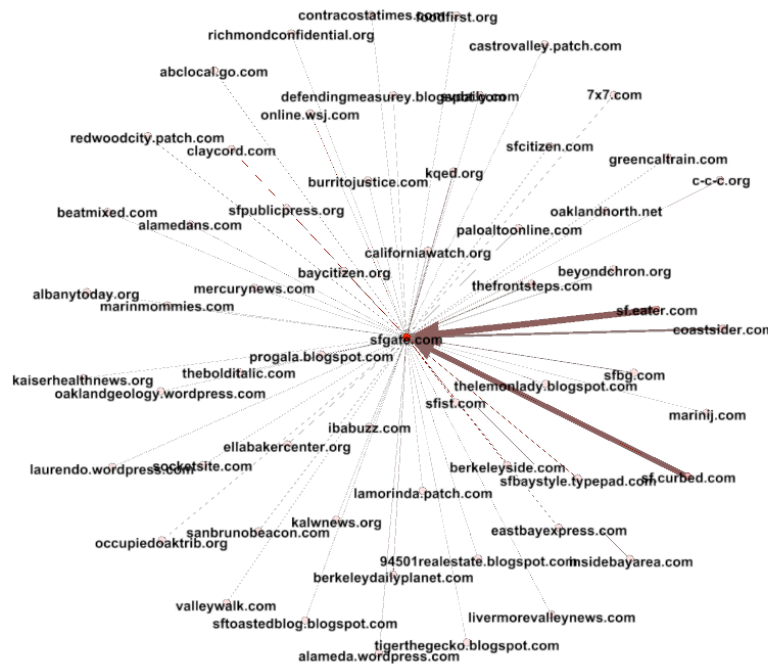
This question led us to examine more closely the linking practices of the major media sites. When we did so, we found that the linking patterns in this network are artificially skewed by strategies adopted by these companies. When we pull out the Bay Area News Group, for instance, we find that these sites mostly link to and from one another. Mercurynews.com links to siliconvalley.com; siliconvalley.com links to insidebayarea.com; insidebayarea.com links to contracostatimes.com, and so on. In fact, over 95% of the links “to” and “from” these sites come from one another. Because the sites are very large, containing thousands of pages, they generate an enormous number of links, and so strongly skew the numbers of the overall network. In reality, however, they are strongly insulated from the rest of the network. Figure 1 visualizes this clustering effect. Every line represents a link from one site to another. The bold, arrowed lines represent especially strong relationships between the Bay Area News Group sites.

**Figure 1. Bay Area News Group Cluster**



The same pattern holds for Sfgate.com, the site of *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Our data show that Sfgate.com linked out to other sites 436,407 times. But 70% of these links are to sites owned by the *Chronicle*: [imgs.sfgate.com](http://imgs.sfgate.com), [local.sfgate.com](http://local.sfgate.com), [subscriber-services.com](http://subscriber-services.com), [marketplace.sfgate.com](http://marketplace.sfgate.com), [blog.sfgate.com](http://blog.sfgate.com), [localcrimenews.com](http://localcrimenews.com), and [sfgate.kaango.com](http://sfgate.kaango.com). Indeed, Sfgate.com links out only to ten seed sites that are not owned by its parent company. A larger number of seed sites—55 in all—link to sfgate.com. In total, SFGate only attracted 16,600 links from other sites or 6% of the overall number of links made in the network. As Figure 2 shows, the only sites external to Sfgate.com with which it has a strong relationship are Sf.eater.com and Sf.curbeded.com—sites owned by an online media company specializing in the topics of food and real estate.

### Figure 2. Sfgate.com Cluster



In sum, major media companies generate most of the links “to” and “from” their own sites. Why do they do this? We have found very little in the popular literature on the digital strategies of these companies, and we have yet to speak to the people responsible for developing them (but plan to do so for a future version of this paper). It seems clear, however, that these linking practices are motivated by commercial imperatives. The architects of sfgate.com want to keep users on the site, clicking from internal page to internal page to internal page, in the hope of elevating user traffic numbers, because higher traffic numbers translate into higher rates that can be charged to advertisers. The same is true for sites owned by the Bay Area News Group. The more the company can keep a user inside the News Group, the higher the traffic numbers generated, and so the higher the ad rates that can be charged.



As a consequence of such practices, sfgate.com is far less consequential for the network than its footprint would imply. For instance, berkeleyside.com is an independent news site created by three veteran journalists. With a staff of seven, it is very small, and so cannot hope to cover a city the size of Berkeley in any depth. Therefore, it relies on its partners for help, which include KQED, the Bay Citizen, and the *Chronicle*. In fact, according to our data, berkeleyside.com linked to *Chronicle* content on 73 different occasions. However, a review of berkeleyside's site indicates that *Chronicle* stories mostly appear under the heading, "Berkeley Wire," an aggregation of the day's news from many regional news outlets. Moreover, most of these are daily, event-driven stories, like one about the Chancellor of the University of California's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, or another about a local murder. In other words, berkeleyside.com reporters followed up on no *Chronicle* stories, and no *Chronicle* stories influenced berkeleyside.com's reporting on any issue. At most, the *Chronicle* appears to be an alternative source for readily available content.

The *Chronicle's* strategy of intentionally NOT serving as a regional hub for public affairs journalism is consistent with the commercialization approach urban dailies have pursued for the past several decades. When urban dailies were bought up in large numbers by corporate chains in the 1980s and 1990s, they began to do several things at once: use market research to pinpoint more precisely consumer interests and needs; use computer technology to squeeze efficiencies out of reporters and editors; and, reorganize newspapers to make them more graphically-oriented, and more user-friendly (e.g., Downie & Kaiser, 2002; Fallows, 1996; Roberts & Kunkel, 2002; Squires, 1993; Underwood, 1993). This strategy led to newspapers with fewer reporters producing hard news about government and public policy, and more producing soft news about consumer practices,

entertainment, and sports. The same dynamic appears to be at work for the online portals of these companies: fewer reporters producing public affairs journalism, and correspondingly more attention to driving user traffic.

## **Influence**

As we mentioned above, in a mass mediated environment, elite news outlets generally set news agendas because they have greater access to sources of information and journalistic resources, and broader reach with audiences. They have, in other words, the best stories from the best sources and the greatest ability to push these stories through the news system. Online, the ingredients for the same sort of influence are different. In the first instance, access to sources of information is more diffuse. Many more people—and not all of them journalists—have access to information that might drive a news agenda. Journalistic resources are also more widely diffused. A solitary journalist working with relatively inexpensive tools can produce the same sorts of stories as were once the sole province of reporters working in traditional newsrooms. Reaching large audiences also happens differently online. Due to the networked structure of the medium, it is not possible to broadcast content to an undifferentiated mass audience. Instead, content online flows in a viral manner, from hub to hub and thence to broader communities of people. It is important, therefore, for producers to establish relationships with these hubs if they wish to broaden the reach of their content (Solis, 2012).

The documentary “Kony2012” is an example of how this process works. The group that produced the documentary, Invisible Children, had been making films about the use of children as soldiers in Uganda since 2003. But in just a four-day period in March 2012, 40 million people viewed this particular documentary on Youtube. In so doing, the issue

became a significant part of the news agenda. How did Invisible Children achieve this feat? The first thing to say is that its success would have been impossible in a mass mediated context in which mainstream professional news organizations exercise a strong gatekeeping function on the information flowing through their communities. But in a networked age, Invisible Children could combine its access to unique sources of information with inexpensive production tools to perform a feat of journalism that rivals that of any newsroom. However, even this was not enough. Invisible Children had been producing such movies since 2003. What changed in 2012? In the ensuing years, Invisible Children systematically built relationships online. It created a twitter feed that attracted over 300,000 followers, and a Facebook page that added another 2 million fans. It also built relationships with media celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, Ryan Seacrest, and Justin Bieber, who served as hubs to reach millions more people (e.g., Goodman & Preston, 2012; Steel, 2012). Content + Access + Relationships made it possible for Invisible Children to set a news agenda so powerful that it prodded reporters to ask press secretary Jay Carney about the issue during a White House press briefing (March 8, 2012).

If regional news outlets like the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* retain access and resources, their linking practices suggest that they are less than motivated to build the sort of relationships that might make them powerful agenda setters. Their unwillingness to play this role may mean that regional news agendas will never be so cohesive as when McCombs and Shaw conducted their original agenda setting study in 1960s Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Then again, it may mean that an opportunity now exists for other organizations to step into the breach. Many organizations might do so, but which seem especially well suited to do so?

Our data suggest that a non-profit news network like one that has formed between the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR), California Watch and the Bay Citizen is best positioned to fill this void. A non-profit investigative journalism enterprise, CIR has been in business for 35 years. In that time, it has published a magazine and collaborated with major news outlets (such as “60 Minutes” and the *Los Angeles Times*) to produce award-winning investigative journalism. In 2009, CIR created California Watch, an online news site that is self-described as the “largest group of journalists dedicated to investigative reporting in the state.” California Watch employs 20 reporters, 5 editors, and 8 development/engagement staff. Most of these journalists have had long careers working for such publications as the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and the *Sacramento Bee*. In recent weeks, CIR has incorporated the Bay Citizen, an independent online news site that began operation in 2010. In an announcement on the Bay Citizen website, Robert Rosenthal, CIR’s executive director, imagined the three sites working in tandem with one another: CIR will cover national issues; California Watch will report on state issues; and the Bay Citizen will investigate regional issues.

This network certainly has access to sources and resources that rival any daily newspaper in the region. In fact, the combined investigative journalism experience of the three organizations is as great as any newsroom in the state, save perhaps the *Los Angeles Times*. Moreover, if their linking practices are any indication, they have established deep relationships across the news system. Together, California Watch and Bay Citizen link out

to 33 of the 114 “seed sites” in our sample, or 3 times more sites than sfgate.com. Despite containing 1/3 the number of pages, California Watch alone links to twice as many sites as sfgate.com. In fact, if we take inbound/outbound links together, and we exempt the traditional sites (which are mostly linking to one another) California Watch has more reciprocal relationships with other sites in the news system than any other site. Such linking practices are an indication that this network is intent on exercising influence in the news system. It partners with other organizations, links to their content, and, by producing relevant content of its own, attracts a good number of links itself. Moreover, with its strict focus on “hard news” investigations, the network has a greater chance of pushing issues onto the news agenda than sites like sfgate.com, which focus mostly on daily and “soft” news. In subsequent research, we will test whether, and the extent to which, this network, and a similar one that is organizing around the public media station, KQED, is able to drive issues onto the news agenda of the broader system.

Whether or not these networks become more influential, one thing seems clear:. The weakened agenda-setting role of media in regional news systems is not due to anything intrinsic to networked environments. Rather, our data indicate that the choices of the major media organizations in the system bear some responsibility for this consequence.

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