

Look before you link

Editor's Note: This is an opinion column by Ben Lyons.

On July 19, the New York Times' Nicholas Kristof wrote that " Hamas sometimes seems to have more support [on certain college campuses in America or Europe than within Gaza](#)," (links original) in a column titled "[Who's right and wrong in the Middle East](#)." If you read the online version of his column, the first link (under the text "on certain college campuses...") would send you to a Washington Post article on the American Studies Association's backing an academic boycott of Israeli universities in December 2013.

On Twitter, a few readers asked Kristof about the link. Said Chase Madar (a lawyer and journalist, according to his bio): "The article that you link to about the ASA #BDS resolution does not even mention Hamas, by the way."

Kristof's reply was a stunner. He said "[I] write the column, and someone else chooses links later, so don't read too much into the links except as further resources."

For those following the exchange, this became the bigger story. For Jay Rosen, media critic and NYU professor of journalism, this news was "Not good. Not good at all." Other readers offered more instructive critique.

The role of links has changed

Ward Harkavy, formerly of the Village Voice, said to Kristof, "This is 2014. Links are part of your copy in close ways that they weren't last century. Should be chosen by you."

Ahmed Al Omran, a Wall Street Journal correspondent, said "linking is an editorial choice, very much part of writing now."

All links not created equal

Seline Jung, a journalist based in Boston, pointed out the obvious: While some links are simply tangential information, this one was vital to Kristof's argument. "But that link is CRUCIAL in that it suggests further reference for the statement you made," she said. "What DID you mean by 'support for Hamas on college campuses in the US'? A new link or clarification for your statement is needed."

At least be transparent

Matthew Richards, a photojournalist published in the Economist, the Wall Street Journal and the Guardian, suggested "perhaps you want to think about stating that at the end of the article?"

The readers are right. Kristof should be aware of the links in his articles, when so much news is consumed online – and should speak up if he disagrees with those employed. This is especially true in articles on highly charged topics, such as this one.

Journalists (especially those of Kristof's stature) cannot abdicate responsibility here – conscientious use of hyperlinks has become an important, and undervalued, part of the job description.

A link is not (always) an "extra." Often, links are like footnotes to support one's argument, as one reader pointed out. Bad ones undermine it.