IA Column

Using IA to Increase User Awareness

by Laura Creekmore

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Skewed information content delivered in search results, unwelcome emails, "news" stories or as advertising are telltale signs of an invisible filter bubble that distills the information we receive. Users are often unaware of how information is screened and beyond our control. Yet information architects have considerable influence in shaping content delivery as they design information environments. IAs can enhance user satisfaction by removing imposed limits, creating a setting that empowers users to understand and control the information environment and enabling them to exert their own perspective and agency. Design efforts in information architecture should liberate content for the user, leading to delight in mind-broadening discoveries.

KEYWORDS

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My sister calls me every few months to complain that an organization we belong to must have sold or given her email address to another group, because she can't think of any other way she would have received an email from an unfamiliar charitable organization. The organization has a strict policy not to share or sell its members' contact information, of course. But she's angry that someone has obviously broken the rules.

I have a few friends who reliably post satirical articles on Facebook, thinking the articles are actual news stories. The stories are inevitably good satire, and they're usually from a website that's not familiar to the general population, unlike a well-known satire site like The Onion. The results are also predictable: Several people get up in arms about whatever the supposed "news" story says, someone else finally runs it through Snopes and they return to berate the original poster and all the previous commenters, who are then embarrassed or angry in return.

A few years ago, I was a student in a grad school class held online, with students meeting virtually but residing physically in multiple cities around the United States. We compared the first page of our search results for several inquiries, and some classmates were surprised to see how much results differed, even on topics that seemed as if they should have no local variation.

In the past few months, we've all seen the outcry about whether terrorist attacks in one city and country were covered by the international news media in the same quantity and quality that attacks in another city were. This discussion follows a similar pattern – after the initial upset, someone points out that those angry media critics are actually missing large segments of news available to anyone, usually due to the critics' filter bubble.

The filter bubble really gets at it for me. If you didn't read Eli Pariser's 2012 book by that title, it's worth your time. One of the important points is that your users don't always see or understand the invisible bubble around them that filters the information they can easily receive.

My sister got an email she didn't expect, and it didn't say, "Your friend Susan shared your email address with our organization." Many satire sites design themselves to look as much like real news sites as possible on purpose. Your search results and your news media don't always give you an easy way to see what you aren't seeing, or what they chose not to cover or how what you see is different from what someone else sees.

All of these situations are ones that information architecture can change in a positive way. When you are designing an information environment, are you giving your users the clues they need to fully understand the context that your information design decisions imply?

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I remember when breadcrumbs became popular on websites many years ago. They were a digital enhancement of chapter or topic titles printed in the upper and lower margins of book pages – a subtle reminder of where you are and a way to navigate somewhere else if need be. Today's digital experiences are far more complex than the websites of 15 or 16 years ago, however. The best designers *do* spend a lot of time trying to understand the users' contexts – what are the assumptions, experiences and needs that users bring to the information encounter? But we don't always spend as much time thinking about how to show our users the assumptions, ideas and goals that *we* bring to the information encounter and deliver through the design we craft for them.

There are so many different factors that impact a user's experience that a user has no way to see or evaluate or even to be aware of their existence. As designers, we create or take advantage of many of these factors, but we don't always demonstrate to our users what we're doing.

I love the idea of delight in the user experience. Abby Covert made this concept an explicit criterion for IA critique in her 2012 IA heuristics document (http://abbytheia.com/2012/04/12/ia-heuristics-journey/). There are many wonderful digital experiences that truly create delight for their users, with the unexpected but welcome understanding of your needs or a fun interface or even a shopping cart that made checkout fast and seamless.

I'd argue that we cross the line from delight to unhappy surprise when we remove (or never support in the first place) the user's ability to fully understand and control the information environment that we have designed.

Last year, I wanted to buy a pair of sandals. I wanted a particular pair that I'd owned in the past, made by a certain brand, which I'd literally worn until they fell apart. I easily found the sandals online, but every store I checked was out of my size. Every single store.

Imagine my unhappy surprise when the online advertising algorithms figured out how much I wanted that pair of shoes and therefore built a banner ad with that exact sandal, in the color I wanted, but the size unavailable anywhere for actual purchase – and had the ad featuring *my unavailable sandals* following me all over the internet for weeks afterward. I wasn't delighted. I was angry. As a digital professional, I at least understood what had happened. As a user, there was no way for me to contact the algorithm gods to say, "Enough already!"

Our users aren't usually practicing IAs, of course. When we design opaque systems for our own purposes or because we haven't considered their perspective, we remove their agency and increase their frustration.

On your next project, think about how you can design the information environment to give control and understanding back to your user. *That* is delightful! ■

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