

Usability 10 Years Later: Are We Listening?

A Research Paper Submitted for the

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON ONLINE JOURNALISM

BY

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Introduction

The usability and design of Web site content has received attention in the human computer interaction literature as well as in Web-specific usability research. Usability has typically been described as a balance between art and engineering (Nielsen, 1999, 11) and has thus often taken an engineering approach to identify a set of principles and common practices that ensure usability as an outcome of system design (Nielsen, 1993; Pearrow, 2000; Shneidermann, 1998).

Usability has been a focus of the software and computing field since the early 1980s (Bernard, et. al., 1981; Eason, 1984; Fried, 1982; Maquire, 1982; Moynihan, 1982; Nickerson, 1981; Paxton and Turner, 1984). As the Web became an increasingly pervasive interface, usability research began to focus more specifically on extending basic usability principles into the Web environment (Nielsen, 1999; Shneidermann, 1998). Nielsen (1999) extended these design principles for Web design to include: (1) navigation, (2) response time, (3) credibility, and (4) content.

Content has received a great deal of attention, producing specific guidelines, such as those that suggest that print content transferred to the Web environment should be reduced because of lower screen resolutions, unfamiliarity with Web conventions and the propensity for user distraction while Web browsing. Nielsen (1999, 101) argues that text originating from print sources should be reduced in length by 50% before posting it to the Web. Krug (2000, 45) goes even further, repeating Nielsen's 50% reduction, but then suggesting that after users "get rid of half the words," that they should attempt to "get rid of half of what's left" (45).

This paper will focus on the implementation of content usability principles in online journalism and mobile phone news dissemination.

Background

Although the majority of media outlets have begun to at least consider embracing convergence practices (Quinn and Filak, 2005), research dating back to the late 1990s shows that online journalism outlets spend more resources repurposing content (“shovelware”) instead of producing original news stories for the Web (Boczkowski, 2002; Neuberger et al., 1998). One of primary reasons given for this practice is that shovelware production requires fewer staff resources while "generating original content and maintaining interactive services can be extremely labor-intensive" (Chyi and Sylvie, 1998, 5).

Cottle (1999) and Ursell (2001) emphasized that the implementation and use of new technologies in the newsroom depend on the commercial and institutional goals of the medium, political expectations, organizational and editorial decisions and the increasing work pressure on journalists. Jankowski and van Selm (2000, 98-99) suggest that traditional media that move onto the Internet often follow a defensive ‘carry over’ strategy, "... designed to maintain current audience and advertising markets as opposed to policies driven by an exploration of new terrains and possible convergence of traditional media fare into multimedia products" (99).

For more than 10 years, scholars from a variety of cultural perspectives have emphasized the importance of developing, measuring and implementing usability principles for the Web environment (Bourges-Waldegg and Scrivener, 1998; Burnett and

Buerkle, 2004; Chau, et. al., 2002; Choong, and Salvendy, 1999; Danet and Herring, 2003; Del Gado and Nielsen, 1996; Eveland and Dunwoody, 2000; Faiola, 2002; Faiola and Matei, 2005; Herring, 1996; Kim and Allen, 2002; Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Nielsen, 1990; Preece, 2001; Sears, Jacko, and Dubach, 2000; Trompenaars, 1997; Wheeler, 1998).

But after 10 years of the general recognition of the importance of Web usability principles, to what extent have journalism Web outlets implemented these principles?

Mobile phones present another set of usability issues for media outlets. While many of the tenets of data presentation on mobile devices are comparable to Web usability guidelines, ease of use is significantly more important in mobile contexts than Web contexts, since the mobile experience is largely based around assumed values of saving time and convenience (Venkatesh, Ramesh and Massey, 2003, 55).

Currently, the global diffusion of cellular phones is almost twice as high as computers (ITU, 2003). At the end of 2004, the number of mobile phone subscriptions in the U.S. had exceeded the number of fixed lines (FCC, 2005). A recent Pew Internet Life report suggests that most Americans reported that it would be harder to give up their cell phone than their Internet connection (and most Americans below the age of 49 reported it would be harder to part with their cellular phone than their television). Mobile data use is becoming increasingly popular, as 62% of all Americans have some experience accessing digital information through mobile devices (Horrigan, 2008). The report also noted that of the 75% of Americans who have mobile technology, 42% engage in digital data activities on a daily basis.

Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent have the major mass media that also maintain a Web presence used content usability principles established in usability literature?

RQ2: To what extent do those major mass media outlets that provide content for cell phone consumers design content that utilizes content usability principles?

Methodology

Twelve media outlet Web sites were identified, including those of two cable news outlets (CNN, FOXNews), three broadcast news outlets (ABCNews, CBSNews, NBC News), and seven newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The USA Today*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Wall Street Journal*). Selections were made by consulting the top-ranked media outlets by industry trade publications (“Most-linked-to local news sites by type”; Teitz, 1999).

From each site, a randomized constructed week from the period of April 2007 until March 2008 was created, resulting in the following sample:

Week 37	Sunday, December 9, 2007
Week 44	Monday, January 28, 2008
Week 18	Tuesday, July 31, 2007
Week 5	Wednesday, May 2, 2007
Week 13	Thursday, June 28, 2007
Week 20	Friday, August 17, 2007
Week 44	Saturday, February 2, 2008

Table 1: Constructed Week

For each date, the three stories featured in the top stories section (for the *Washington Post*, the top three national stories were used) were collected (21 stories per outlet) and examined for evidence of content usability principles implementation. In addition, the stories’ mobile presentations were accessed to determine what kinds and formats of

content were available. Due to constraints in time and space, only the data collected from the *New York Times* data services and the *Washington Post* services are analyzed and discussed here.

Nielsen (1999) argues that users of online media scan rather than read. One of his rules of usability is to “Be succinct. Write no more than 50 percent of the text you would have used to cover the same material in a print publication” (101). In addition, he suggests that long print stories should not be separated by jump links, but rather should be reorganized around sub-topics to keep the length and focus shorter (112).

Identified stories were coded for online length, measured by word and character. Additionally, the number of jump pages per story was recorded.

The character length was important for measuring cell phone display. Each story was accessed using a small consumer cellular phone (a Samsung PM-A740) and a smart phone (a Palm Treo 650) and coded for the number of screens needed to read each story.

Results

The New York Times continues to shovel its print content onto its Web site and allows its Web content to be shoveled through the mobile interface. The collection results appear in Table 2.

Date	Story	Word Count	Char. Count	Computer Screens	Phone Screens	Smart Screens
Dec. 9, 2007	NYT1	1255	7629	2	9	5
Dec. 9, 2007	NYT2	2507	14797	3	17	9
Dec. 9, 2007	NYT3	1636	9701	2	12	6
Jan. 28, 2007	NYT4	1172	6930	1	8	4
Jan. 28, 2007	NYT5	1469	8791	2	11	6
Jan. 28, 2007	NYT6	1061	6182	1	8	4
July 31, 2007	NYT7	1228	7630	2	9	5
July 31, 2007	NYT8	1436	8800	2	11	6
July 31, 2007	NYT9	2574	15521	3	18	9
May 2, 2007	NYT10	1153	6974	1	9	5
May 2, 2007	NYT11	1529	9019	2	11	6
May 2, 2007	NYT12	1026	5772	1	7	4
June 28, 2007	NYT13	1059	6807	1	8	4
June 28, 2007	NYT14	788	5044	1	6	3
June 28, 2007	NYT15	1026	5927	1	7	4
Aug. 17, 2007	NYT16	1273	7766	2	9	5
Aug. 17, 2007	NYT17	954	5647	1	7	4
Aug. 17, 2007	NYT18	1890	10662	2	13	7
Feb. 2, 2007	NYT19	1263	7912	2	10	5
Feb. 2, 2007	NYT20	1768	10912	2	13	7
Feb. 2, 2007	NYT21	1095	6642	1	8	4
Averages		1388.67	8336.43	1.67	10.05	5.33

Table 2: *New York Times* stories, words counts, screens needed to read stories

In contrast to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* issues a separate mobile version of many stories, reducing the length of the paragraphs and stories. The collection results appear below:

Date	Story	Word Count	Mobile Words	Char. Count	Mobile Char.	Computer Screens	Phone Screens	Smart Screens
Dec. 9, 2007	WP1	1892	1475	11889	9273	3	36	11
Dec. 9, 2007	WP2	1101	858	6896	5378	2	21	7
Dec. 9, 2007	WP3	457	356	2780	2168	1	9	3
Jan. 28, 2007	WP4	1392	1085	8616	6720	2	26	8
Jan. 28, 2007	WP5	895	698	5260	4102	2	16	5
Jan. 28, 2007	WP6	2675	2086	16704	13029	5	51	15
July 31, 2007	WP7	1564	1219	9563	7459	2	29	9
July 31, 2007	WP8	970	756	5784	4511	1	18	6
July 31, 2007	WP9	1273	992	7720	6021	2	24	7
May 2, 2007	WP10	683	532	4253	3317	1	13	4
May 2, 2007	WP11	542	442	3231	2520	1	10	3
May 2, 2007	WP12	696	542	4363	3403	2	14	5
June 28, 2007	WP13	1521	1186	9655	7530	3	30	9
June 28, 2007	WP14	1103	860	6658	5193	2	21	7
June 28, 2007	WP15	955	744	5724	4464	2	18	6
Aug. 17, 2007	WP16	1602	1249	9941	7753	1	30	9
Aug. 17, 2007	WP17	494	494	2886	2886	1	12	4
Aug. 17, 2007	WP18	1210	943	7461	5819	3	23	7
Feb. 2, 2007	WP19	1486	1159	9316	7266	3	29	9
Feb. 2, 2007	WP20	690	538	4322	3371	1	14	5
Feb. 2, 2007	WP21	758	591	4776	3725	2	15	5
Avg		1140.90	895.48	7038.00	5519.43	2.00	21.86	6.86

Table 3: *Washington Post* stories, words counts, screens needed to read stories

Analysis

Both sites appear to consider usability principles, though both implement them sparingly and in different ways. Both sites still appear to shovel print content onto their Web site, though the *Washington Post* rewrites its copy for the mobile edition.

The New York Times sample contained many more words per story (1,388.6) than the *Washington Post* (1,140.90), but the difference in words (22% more) does not account for the larger number of words (46%) per screen on the *New York Times* Web pages. The

Times stories contain fewer jump links (1.67) per story than the *Post* (2.0). The *Times* puts more words on a page, allowing readers to consume more content without navigating from the screen.

Times stories are shoveled from the print edition into the Web architecture and little translation occurs for the mobile interface. The average *Times* story takes more than 10 page views to read on a consumer mobile phone, though roughly half as many on a smart phone. The *Times* stories display at an average of 138.20 words per screen on consumer cell phones. Because the smaller screen allows for only 16 characters in width (and nine lines of text in height), users must scroll down an average of 1,356.42 times across 10.05 screens to read a story on a consumer phone (each screen is capable of holding roughly 225 lines of content, excluding the page structure elements and legal statements at the bottom of each screen).

The *Times* smartphone interface is easier on the consumer, cutting the pages needed per story in half (5.33 screens per story), largely because the Treo screen allows more than twice the character display per line (36) than the consumer phone. Because the Treo allows slightly more lines to be displayed (11) and allows the entire screen to advance with a scroll click, the average *Times* story can be consumed in around 100 scroll clicks.

The *Post* stories are also mostly shoveled from the print edition to the Web (although both publications add extra stories and features for the online environment), but fewer words per page (570.45) are displayed and more pages per story (2.0) are used, meaning that users click 46% more jump links to consume a news story.

In the mobile environment, the *Post* rewrites much of its content to make it more appropriate for the smaller screen environment, and varies the number of words displayed to match the screen size in use. Thus, mobile stories are 78.49% of their Web counterparts (895.48 words per story to the Web version's 1140.90 words per story). Because the *Post* controls for screen size, the numbers of screens per story is more than twice the number of *Times* screens needed per story on the smaller phone (21.86 screens per story for the *Post*, 10.05 screens per story for the *Times*). Simply put, the *Post* spreads fewer words (40.97 words per screen, compared to the *Times*' 138.21 words per screen) across more screens in the smaller environment.

In the smartphone environment, the *Post* uses only $\frac{1}{4}$ more screens than the *Times*, though the *Times* displays 55% more text per screen. The average *Post* story can be consumed in slightly less than seven smartphone screens that hold an average of 130.59 words per screen.

Conclusions and Discussion

On the Web, both the *Times* and the *Post* continue to shovel a significant amount of content in their top news stories. Both appear to consider usability principles, but struggle to implement content principles. The question of whether it is important to reduce the number of screens versus the number of words per screen is a trade-off that designers do not uniformly agree upon. On the one hand, knowing that some users will be lost with every jump link is a concern, but the drive to reduce the large blocks of text on each page is also a concern. No doubt some usability designers would champion each

news outlet as the better-designed site for users, though most would likely point out that news outlets are not generally known for their high usability scores.

Once again, it is understandable why a commercial news organization would repurpose content between media. However, content created for display in one medium does not always fit the needs of consumers in another medium. The transfer of media display language in this case can be related back to the emergence of previous media, such as when radio producers read newspaper content into radio microphones for broadcast purposes (Fidler, 1997, 90-91) or when television stations began by broadcasting images of live radio segments. Both of those media eventually developed their own language and formats. To think about how inappropriate newspaper writing is for radio or radio presentation for television is to consider how we will likely look back upon how print and broadcast media shovelware will be perceived by future generations once a format language emerges.

In the mobile environment, however, the *Washington Post* is clearly investing more effort into the ease of use demands that come with smaller screens and less bandwidth. Rewriting many of the stories to more efficiently communicate in a given medium is a core principle of convergence theory (Quinn and Filak, 2005), though most journalism outlets appear unwilling to go to this extreme to best utilize a given media environment.

Because users tend to glance at mobile devices instead of gaze, reducing the amount of content per screen is important. Also, completing a paragraph before a page jump is vital, since slower load speeds on the second generation American cellular

network make it difficult for readers to hold an abstract thought in mind between page loads. Both outlets do an adequate job of protecting against textual widows and orphans.

As with many other news outlets, the *Times* does streamline certain data service offerings (stocks, weather, etc.) to combat the design pressures of the medium, but its news offerings do not fit well into these services.

The analysis of usability data is important because of the reported rising interest in mobile data consumption. Although news access is a relatively small component of these activities (only 7% of Americans access news through mobile devices on a daily basis according to Horrigan, 2008), understanding the barriers to data access in the U.S. is essential to understanding how news will be consumed in the future.

The current low usage statistics could discourage media outlets from investing in new mobile infrastructure. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether the lag in American usage of mobile news services relative to European and Asian nations is rooted in differences in culture (many countries are mobile-centric in their Internet consumption, whereas the U.S. is computer-centric) or a function of the poor information design experiences resulting from mobile access of HTML-based Web content.

Usability design and consumer perspectives are vital data points for information producers that involve the future of information consumption in our culture. The current assumptions (suggesting that users don't want mobile access because they are not engaging in it) are reminiscent of the debates surrounding the early adopters of high-definition television (was the technology worth increased expenditures, or was consumer lag based upon a lack of available content).

Fidler (1997) argues that users must have a compelling reason to adopt new technologies and new technology platforms. Certainly, mobility and ease of access are considered competitive advantages in their own right. But if news organizations do not leverage this competitive advantage, users would appear to have little initiative to change their behavior and adopt a more mobile-centric use of news and information products.

Limitations

Because the larger project entails so many outlets, this analysis was reduced to the top news stories offered by each outlet. This reduction hardly does justice to the advantages the Web medium brings to the information presentation process. There exists much content on both the *Times* and the *Post* sites that is not accessible in the print editions or in the mobile phone environments. The usability analysis of content created specifically for the Web would no doubt affect the results.

Also, most of the stories in the current sample either had one photograph or none at all. This analysis does not address how content providers should address user concerns for stories that contain multiple photos, or even other multimedia elements. Such elements do affect the screen real estate question, but this study was focused more on textual content.

Finally, this study utilized particular browser platforms (specifically Mozilla Firefox) and most pages were coded using Macintosh computers. The author did compare the screen layout between multiple operating system platforms and browsers and found small variations in some *Times* stories, though the differences in layout were usually less

than five words per screen, which did not affect the number of screens nor significantly the number of words per screen.

Finally, Apple's iPhone has enjoyed increased exposure in the marketplace, but was not considered for this project. The rationale for the exclusion of the iPhone and the iPod Touch is that the interfaces of their architecture allows for true Web-enabled browsing (rather than a reinterpretation of HTML code into a separate mobile language).

Some Web sites are beginning to streamline their content to take advantage of Apple's proprietary format changes, but no reliable user data exists for the market penetration or the access of news information by consumers via Apple's technology.

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Appendix 1: Collected Stories

Sunday, December 9, 2007 – NYT1

Kraus, Clifford. Oil-Rich Nations Use More Energy, Cutting Exports. *The New York Times* (December 9, 2007).
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/business/worldbusiness/09oil.html>>

Sunday, December 9, 2007 – NYT2

Leibovich, Mark. Clinton Proudly Talks of Scars While Keeping Her Guard Up. *The New York Times* (December 9, 2007).
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/us/politics/09clinton.html>>

Sunday, December 9, 2007 – NYT3

Farrell, Stephen. As Iraqis Vie for Kirkuk's Oil, Kurds Become Pawns. *The New York Times* (December 9, 2007).
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/world/middleeast/09kirkuk.html>>

Sunday, December 9, 2007 – WP1

Warrick, Joby, and Dan Eggen. Hill Briefed on Waterboarding in 2002 *The Washington Post* (December 9, 2007).
<<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/WBRH016A04503AF339875379776590>>

Sunday, December 9, 2007 – WP2

Eilperin, Juliet. High Weedkiller Levels Found in River Checks. *The Washington Post* (December 9, 2007).
<<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/WBRH016A04602AF339875379776590>>

Sunday, December 9, 2007 – WP3

Kane, Paul. Bush Threatens Veto Of New Spending Bill. *The Washington Post* (December 9, 2007).
<<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/WBRH016A0440DAF339875379776590>>

Monday, January 28, 2008 – NYT4

Zeleny, Jeff, and Carl Hulse. Kennedy Chooses Obama, Spurning Bill Clinton Plea. *The New York Times* (January 28, 2008).
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/28/us/politics/28kennedy.html>>

Monday, January 28, 2008 – NYT5

Nagourney, Adam. Races Entering Complex Phase Over Delegates. *The New York Times* (January 28, 2008).
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/28/us/politics/28delegates.html>>

Monday, January 28, 2008 – NYT6

Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. In Bush's Legacy, Weak Economy Moves Up Front. *The New York Times* (January 28, 2008).
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/28/washington/28bush.html>>

Monday, January 28, 2008 – WP4

Wright, Robin, and Glenn Kessler. U.S. Brokered Bhutto's Return to Pakistan. *The Washington Post* (January 28, 2008).

<<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/WBRH01623B255AF339875376C88430>>

Monday, January 28, 2008 – WP5

Schelzig, Erik. Historically Black College Struggles Financially. *The Washington Post* (January 28, 2008).

<<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/WBRH01623B354AF339875376C88430>>

Monday, January 28, 2008 – WP6

Grimaldi, James V. and Jacqueline Trescott. Indian Museum Director Spent Lavishly on Travel. *The Washington Post* (January 28, 2008).

<<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/WBRH01623B057AF339875376C88430>>

Tuesday, July 31, 2007 – NYT7

Andrews, Edmund L. and Matthew L. Wald. Energy Bill Aids the Expansion Plans of Atomic Power Plants. *The New York Times* (July 31, 2007).

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/31/washington/31nuclear.html>>

Tuesday, July 31, 2007 – NYT8

Moore, Solomon. States Export Their Inmates as Prisons Fill. *The New York Times* (July 31, 2007). <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/31/us/31prisons.html>>

Tuesday, July 31, 2007 – NYT9

Kantor, Jodi. Primed for a Second Stint as First Daughter. *The New York Times* (July 31, 2007). <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/31/us/politics/31chelsea.html>>

Tuesday, July 31, 2007 – WP7

White, Josh. Conflicting Portraits of Officer Charged Over Abu Ghraib. *The Washington Post* (July 31, 2007).

<<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/W6RH0280813D6AF339875310E3ED80>>

Tuesday, July 31, 2007 – WP8

Barnes, Robert, and Michael D. Shear. Chief Justice Suffers Seizure. *The Washington Post* (July 31, 2007).

<<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/W6RH0280818D1AF339875310E3ED80>>

Tuesday, July 31, 2007 – WP9

Vogel, Steve. At Walter Reed, a New Approach. *The Washington Post* (July 31, 2007). <<http://letters.washingtonpost.com/W6RH0280819D0AF339875310E3ED80>>

Wednesday, May 2, 2007 – NYT10

Stolberg, Sheryl Gay, and Jeff Zeleny. Bush Vetoes Bill Tying Iraq Funds to Exit. *The New York Times* (May 2, 2007).

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