

From the Pixel to the Grid and Back.

Design and Information Architecture in the European and Latin-American Online Newspapers. (10 case studies.)

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In what way has the previous knowledge of graphic design rules and the use of the grid transformed on the web platform? In a canvas composed with pixels would not be logic to follow a set of rules that would naturally fit into those same pixels? How are we using the medium to our own benefit and how can we take advantage of its full potential? Are today's online newspapers embracing the web fully as a new medium or are they anchored to the paper metaphor, disregarding the possibilities of the online platform and leaving the users with a poorer information experience? Should information be presented in the same format no matter the nature of its content? We try to research how the most notorious online newspapers of Europe and South America are addressing this issues and its ways of doing so.

The system, testing and conclusions.

The testing model was based after the ideas proposed by Muller-Brockmann (1996), Devigal (2000), Vinh (2007), Wurman (1997) and Nielsen (2005). We also interviewed over 60 academics and Media professionals from Europe and America in order to gather opinions and insights, that would help us create a set of guidelines that can be simply used to test online newspapers sites.

The research reaches from the structural building of the site, it's use of the grid, the Information Architecture decisions, the navigation process, accessibility standards, use of multimedia resources and their interactivity, size of buttons, color codes to: audience of the online newspaper, event that is being covered, where that piece of news stands in the event's timeline and if the way it is presented is the best. . There is still, in the great majority of online newspapers pages, a paper based concept of where the news pieces should be. This metaphor slows the flux of information and the possibilities of the medium itself. The online platform permits a wider spectrum of approaches to news feeds and a paper based attitude will fail, for obvious reasons, to fully fulfill the new medium's potential.

Online newspapers function has filters to the enormous amount of information that reach us today. It is not only the amount but the variety of it is displayed. The web is a dynamic medium and has to be embraced to work at its highest level. The event of multimedia and its formats conveys the fact that, today, information can be produced and sent out in different forms and shapes. Using efficient and compact modules of images, sound and text, the online journalist, through online narratives, has the possibility to inform his audience in a thorough and accurate manner. Moreover, online narratives set an experience standard for both the user and the journalist that allows room for prediction, planning and explanation. Never like the present time we have been able to dissect and gain access to such an amount of data. As Aron Pilhofer, head of the Interactive News Technologies Group at the nytimes.com, once said "unedited data is information that cannot be accessed" in a simple and diligent way. The role of online newspapers is to make that date visible to the user in the best way

possible, allowing for that same user to make his own decisions, turning him into a role player.

The setting of the grid and its categories was determined after the previously described principles. That same grid was then applied to individual pages of the newspaper. To make the research more accurate we decided to restrain the analysis to 3 sets of examples: Homepage, section page and simple news page. Some additional testing was done on multimedia displays due to their, in some cases, specific nature.

The samples were collected in different days for all the newspapers, to allow us to set an average of each one. Some of the analyzed online newspapers changed both formal and usability aspects of their websites and those changes were taken into consideration, passed through the grid and reanalyzed.

The results displayed some interesting differences between each online newspaper's approach. The main issues that came out of this research were: the uneven and sometimes incomplete use and integration of multimedia resources, the difficulty of setting a robust and flexible information architecture system that could work as the site's structural blueprint, the ambiguous and unbalanced relation with the use of advertising and its placement on the page and the resistance in leaving the paper metaphor and embracing the web as a new and dynamic medium.

The soon to be released full results, will allow a deeper and far more complete vision and analyze of the whole process and where this online newspapers are standing today.

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