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Short Research Paper

## **News Design for the Web**

As newspapers strive to keep printing, they also strive to establish credibility with a fresh, innovative audience through Web 2.0. And because of many print media outlets' resistance to learn and adapt to the changing media environment, audiences become disconnected and uninterested—They form factions of social network users who find solace in bits of multiple sites rather than putting sole faith in one. Publications often overlook the most basic reason why users do not come or stay on a Web site: its design. Newspaper sites have consistently adopted a design that resembles its print edition in a more rigid setting, and with no justification. Alternative sites succeed because of their creativity and heavy focus on Web rather than print. The comparison of Web site aspects such as usability, simplicity, trends, and innovativeness between the mainstream news site, [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) (The Washington Post), and the leading alternative news site, [huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com) (The Huffington Post), will work as a case study to reflect the design advantages alternative news sites possess and mainstream newspaper sites should possess.

Usability remains the most important principle of Web development, because without it, Web traffic could not be drawn to a location or even possible. Usability

literally means the ability to use the site—the easier, the better. “Tiny clickable areas” represent a main functional loss on the Washington Post site.

“Why would we want a larger clickable area? Simple. Because our hand movement with the mouse isn’t very precise. A large clickable area makes it easier to hover the mouse cursor over the link. To ensure we get a large clickable area, we could either make the whole link bigger or increase the padding around the link using the CSS ‘padding’ property.” (9 Common Usability Blunders)

Links on the site’s front page are placed close together and in small, indistinguishable fonts. The Huffington Post uses a smart formula of high-contrast colors, larger fonts, and images to separate blocks of text. Users then will not accidentally click on a link he or she did not want to click on. If a page appears text-heavy and not balanced with imagery or at least icons, usability becomes an issue. Newspaper sites also have a tendency to require users to register prior to reading content, and then have the user fill out long forms before reading a story. While this benefits the paper to have demographical information of its users, it also scares off anyone who does not have enough desire to read something in particular. The Huffington Post allows all users to read stories, but only registered users to comment, thus alleviating the stress of spam and obscenity. Any user that posts a comment that violates community policy will be banned from participating in the community. (9 Common Usability Blunders)

Maintaining a successful Web site also means keeping up with Web trends. Web design trends generally change annually. Presenting a revived layout to a user tells him or her that reasons exist to come back, or that the site is not always stagnant. The Web trends of 2009 range from etched typography to introductory paragraphs describing the

purpose of the site—Many of these trends do not even begin to apply to either alternative news sites or mainstream news sites because mainstream sites must appeal to a wider range of users, or in other words, a wider range of browser types. However, the Huffington Post has adopted the large typography trend to hint at its dominant top story, which has a photo and caption that spans three columns (full width) across the top of the front page. The Washington Post uses no typography, or type art, and uses all three columns consistently, which does not break up the top stories from the rest of the stories. The Washington Post only alludes to content hierarchy when an image and text adjacently pair. The Huffington Post succeeds at the trend of designing like a “magazine” with its large headlines, mixture of fonts, generous display of white space, and broken-up display of ad space. The Washington Post, much like its peers, resembles a site with a “newspaper look,” at a time when newspapers are losing popularity. (Web Design Trends of 2009)

When a site needs to cater to a broad demographic, the principles of simplicity and whitespace act as the forerunners of user visual comfort. *Smashing Magazine* puts it nicely in stating, “don’t let users think.” *A List Apart* describes white space in the following passage:

“Designers use whitespace to create a feeling of sophistication and elegance for upscale brands. Coupled with a sensitive use of typography and photography, generous whitespace is seen all over luxury markets.” (Whitespace)

White space allows textual content more legibility and also prevents Web sites from having a “grid” look (Thinking Outside the Grid). The Huffington Post effectively uses white space on either side of its main content container, and separates columns with a

generous 20 pixels. The Washington Post places all of its valuable white space on the right side of the content container while giving different columns and sections various and inconsistent spacing. If one were to look at the front page in retrospect, content would seem to categorize into mismatched, top-heavy blocks. The user's attention would then not have a focus—a necessary amenity to develop trust in business organization and orientation. (30 Usability Issues To Be Aware Of)

One of the most important factors to producing a cutting-edge Web site relies on its technical structure. Computer programming languages and scripting languages fade in and out of the limelight as the most effective in harnessing accessibility. Currently both the Washington Post and the Huffington Post use AJAX, or asynchronous JavaScript and XML, which causes the site to automatically update at a given time period so that the user does not have to hit “refresh” to see current updates on the page. AJAX only requests stylesheets (CSS) once, meaning bandwidth and loading time dramatically reduce and also allow more content to be viewed on the page (Web Design in a Nutshell). To quote *Smashing Magazine*:

“Web users are impatient and insist on instant gratification. Very simple principle: If a web-site isn't able to meet users' expectations, then designer failed to get his job done properly and the company loses money.” (10 Principles of Effective Web Design). The fact that both sites use AJAX puts them both at an advantage over another site that would not need regular updating. AJAX, clearly, although new and still filled with kinks, is the perfect tool for a 24-hour news cycle.

Newspapers can battle to save the print industry by instituting new social networking devices like Twitter feeds and online video, but the overall usability and

structure of news web sites must change for the media to go into “metamorphosis” and to dominate an audience. Newspapers must let go of the tendency to hold on to a rigid, text-heavy design and expand to Web 2.0 potential. They must take cues from alternative sources like [smashingmagazine.com](http://smashingmagazine.com), [alistapart.com](http://alistapart.com), and other sites focusing on Web usability and principle, and drop the sense of professional elitism. Links must be visible, white space must contribute, design must shape a focus, and computing languages must be up-to-date to maximize accessibility. If mainstream media outlets like the Washington Post began to open their digital minds to the technical methodologies of alternative media outlets like the Huffington Post, newspapers won’t die; they will morph into something better.

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