

TECH 633

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Technical Research Paper  
Websites/Interactive Media

Submitted By:

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The evaluation of Websites/interactive media in this paper involves a lot of practices and theories in a new field, further realized through personal experiences. “Interactivity involves the control that consumers exercise over the selection and presentation of content. Unlike linear mass media, online environment allows users to more fully interact with the content and media by navigating via hyperlinks, participating in online panels and surveys, downloading information, calling up streaming media, searching archives, customizing information delivery and making electronic purchases, all without ever directly communicating with another person (Bucy, Newhagen, 2004).”

The technical side of Websites remains a constant challenge (I’m still trying to figure out how to correctly link pages). I’ve had the advantage of having a wife with three college degrees, two in psychology and one in sociology, to help me synthesize these complex factors. This paper will address more on sociological and psychological effects instead of statistics while considering basic strengths and weaknesses of interactive media. “Nurturing intellectual capital, knowledge management and human behavior focus more on social and psychological not technological (Wallace 2004).”

The creation of Websites, particularly my final project for my “Tall Writer” business can be an intense process, like writing or directing a film. There are so many gaps in user knowledge that have to be constructed. My goal is to make interactive media user proficient through “on-site learning, facilitation of communication, additional resources, integration techniques, collaboration, assessment of learning, freedom to explore the Website and support for people after the learning is finished (Alessi 2001).”

“The World Wide Web has already passed through several stages each of which refashioned some earlier media (Bolter, Boston 2000).” The stages relating to my personal Website will first deal with organization, content and accessibility, then advance to different levels of understanding/motivation before presenting recommendations for the Website and general conclusions about interactive media.

### **Organization, content and accessibility**

There are basically three factors when designing your website - ease of navigation, quality of information, time savings (Wurman 2001).” The ways of organizing data/information are finite and include “location, alphabet, time, category or hierarchy (Wurman 2001).” Interactive media’s main challenge becomes the ways of organizing these categories while meeting the user’s needs.

People can usually describe their displeasure with a Website very quickly. The design of the interactive media has to be the crucial first step, though mistakes can be repaired through user feedback and consequent corrections/additions.

The Tall Writer Website categories were my first concern, then I outlined the receptacles that would hold my data/information, but how full do my receptacles have to be? Is Content really King? How often do I need to change the old content because people don’t like the smell/sight and replace it with new material?

“The content of any medium is always another medium (Bolton, Boston 2000).” The difference in interactive media is the order/methods in which the content is accessed. For example, I can find what the users need by incorporating interactive media like instant messaging, “a communication tool that leans further toward speech, compared to e-mail, and is more immediate and the sense of feedback from the recipient (Alessi 2001).” Instant messaging allows for real time interaction, while e-mail has time gaps.

Interactive media might be the next best thing to face-to-face contact, which people sacrifice mostly for convenience. Ultimately, users decide what content they need, therefore content providers have to anticipate and fulfill their needs according to the specific audience and context.

If you have access to interactive media, it's easy to communicate with others because they also have access ranging from affordable computers/Internet service to public institutions like libraries with free interactive media available to the public. A lot of focus seems to be on that next “killer” app(lication) that will get peoples' attention. “Creating a connection is more than just placing hypermedia advertisements. It's leading their customers from their first phone call to your image brochure to a face-to-face meeting to your website and coming out the other side with a consistent perception of view what you do and how you do it (Wurman 2001).”

“Accessibility is basically a means of getting software and information from one computer to another (media access).” This definition seems to describe a task that sounds so simple, but it really represents just one piece of a complex Web of interactivity that the Website producer must create and simulate communication and/or experiences for users.

Website producers often become so enthralled with the methods of highly accessible distribution methods of interactive media that they often ignore the context/audience of the intended content, even more importantly, envisioning the benefit of the user and anticipating their consequential actions.

The content provider also must decide how much accessibility to give the user without compromising themselves (e.g. detailed price information that competitors might see) while considering how the user accesses the intended information (e.g. should the user have synchronous (ability to communicate at the same time) capabilities or asynchronous (with time lags) methods like e-mail and discussion boards?

“Content and access concerns the motivation to use information technology and the ability to process meaning once the user is connecting to a communications system (Bucy, Newhagen, 2004).” Website producers have to understand the user's need(s).

### **Levels of understanding/motivation**

Richard Saul Wurman states that “one of the best ways of communicating knowledge is through stories, because good stories are richly textured with details, allowing the

narrative to convey a stable ground on which to build the experience (Wurman 2001).” A story can often be achieved through media with low literacy levels like radio and television, which are easily understood by most people, but high literacy pieces like professional journal articles can drive users away.

Hyperactive media can often alleviate this issue through informational organization. For example, a portfolio Website will actually title a link to an article from Computers and Composition as “Sample Journal Article”, then the user decides which information to pick and the Website producer doesn’t have to anticipate the user’s decision.

Interactive media, like other types of media, has to consider the transmission of useful techniques and skills across generations. Some still exist while others don’t. Others have been adapted or even recreated in other mediums. “Successful navigation and hypermedia environments address the reception of meaning from content whether it is old or new interactivity (Bucy, Newhagen, 2004).” The new technological killer “app” isn’t always the best way to communicate to a user, but it is often considered one of the first choices. “Without context, information cannot exist in the context in question must relate not only to the environment, where it came from, why it’s been communicated how it’s arranged, but also the context and intent of the person interpreting it (Wurman 2001)”, namely the user. Interactive media producers have to consider “why one’s medium might offer a more appropriate representation over the other (Bolter, Boston 2000).”

“Tacit knowledge refers to the far more elusive kinds of knowledge that are difficult to document and share; particularly because no one is sure exactly how to describe what he or she knows (Wallace 2004).” Simulation through interactive media can play an important role here. If we want the user to experience what it is like to work with “Tall Writer”, maybe we provide a testimonial through a video file.

There’s also stress on actual words or context in communications. Many Asian countries rely more on the context, personal relationships and indirect approaches in communication while countries like the United States stress individualism and focus on specific ‘buzz words’ (Wallace 2004).”

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

“Except for rock music, the World Wide Web is perhaps our culture’s most influential expression of hypermedia (Bucy, Newhagen 2004).” High levels of interaction, 24/7 access and quick dissemination have propelled the Internet/Web into the forefront of interactive media while struggles to update systems and wade through seas of information have left some users gasping for air. Frustration occurs when the interactive media elements, both internal and external, prevent the user from meeting his or her goal. “Frustration and other negative effects often involve environmental events combined with specific sociocultural factors (Bucy, Newhagen, 2004).” Negative aspects like frustration and anxiety can transcend any culture. Other media has already emulated this common frustration in television commercials such as the Progressive Auto Insurance commercial where a man sits in an office with a large window behind him. He requests a quote on a

Website which communication someone will contact him in 24 hours. Then it changes to 48, then 96, then “eventually.” Finally the man throws his hands up and screams at the computer.

Let’s say a presenter uses a specific Website to demonstrate an important process. Suddenly, the site crashes on the results page and erases all the previous work, forcing him/her to go back to their office and switch to the documentation medium by getting a paper copy of the results. “Frustration is a significant issue that has consequences and applications in many areas where users are struggling to keep up with the technology (Wallace 2004).” Perhaps the presenter had to learn about Website technology for the presentation and experienced further hardships and negative experiences during that training. “We as a society were already feeling overworked and burned out when along came to Web, yet another breakthrough that makes life feel more like a perpetual run on a treadmill turned up on high why is it that every invention makes our lives more hectic rather than less (Wurman 2001).”

The interactive media fails when it doesn’t give users significant control over usage and opportunities, which lead to “aggression, regression (leading to dissolution with interactive media), resignation, blame, guilt, remorse and/or fixation-repetition of courses of action that were once effective (Bucy, Newhagen, 2004).” There are also technical points to consider “From the user’s point of view the issue of connection quality boils down to download times which can range from annoyingly long to completely disabling (Bucy, Newhagen, 2004).”

My piece of interactive media must have the user’s best interests in mind while immersing them in a simulated, interactive environment that accurately communicates Tall Writer’s “real” elements and knowledge. I can paraphrase for easier understanding and chunk information together much better than other mediums, while priming the communication “to make it safe for the user to open up (Alessi 2001).” The story/narrative method mentioned by Surman can overcome a potential communication weakness of the interactive media. Users will see the communication become more important as they progress prompting them to become proficient users at Tall Writer.com. As they progress, they’ll have ways to communicate back. It’s my responsibility to reciprocate their communication in a timely and functional manner. Lack of elementary and digital experience in interactive media is often caused by a lack of interest, computer anxiety and unattractiveness of the new technology-media access, which are important social and psychological factors to consider in interactive media.

The growing complexity of the Internet presents some formidable challenges and the future is uncertain. Richard Saul Wurman offers the following opinion: “The division of the Internet as a medium for the open sharing of information will fade as it becomes more difficult and more time-consuming to distinguish between meaningful and the relevant facts (Wurman 2001).” Yes, content is king, but so are the other components of interactive media. Combined with careful social and psychological considerations, interactive media can be a successful venture. I’ve formulated three major objectives that combat current negative trends and challenges in the field of interactive media.

### *How to make information less threatening*

“If you make cars and a customer calls to find out why he is having problems with his transmission, let him talk to a mechanic not the company spokesperson. The spokesperson may not be the best person to help your customer figure out his transmission problem. When we communicate we usually have some idea we're trying to share, but don't always know if that corresponds with the picture we have planted in someone else's mind. When we give instructions, we test our ability to communicate information and gauge how much we really know about a process or place (Wurman 2001).”

### *Use interactive media to give people easy access to the information they need to make the right choices*

An interactive website can often exceed any in-house newsletter or employee handbook...according to research reports, the majority of attempts to contact the business person by telephone meet with failure. Given the common failure to reach people by phone is not surprising that many have flocked to the asynchronous environment of e-mail in which conversations can be spread over time and interactions can take place within whatever time slots each participant had available. Though choppy and fragmented, the medium presents fewer frustrations compared to voicemail tech (Wallace 2004).”

### *Realize that most people don't like to admit they don't know something and many are reluctant to ask for help or search out expertise when they need it*

This statement can be a problem for people who are trying to offer their expertise as a knowledge base or knowledge management project. In interactive media, I can only listen to the user through the medium after they learn about my Website. My biggest external challenge is to accurately display my skills and talents as a technical writer/communicator as usable communication for the user. Ultimately, I have to concentrate on “giving people the information they need to do their job (Wurman 2001)”, which includes public relations workers, human resource managers and other people who might not even know what a technical writer does. It's almost better to run guided tours and field trips of your company as a primer for first time users/learners. “As more businesses and individuals use more of the Internet's capability - each will make individually rewarding rational decisions (Alessi 2001).” There's still a long way to go.

“You must consider all variables and look for ways to remove every company made barrier (Alessi 2001).” Internal factors can often be addressed but other external factors such as a chance to get more work and/or competitors luring clients away are much more challenging. I believe most users don't want to know or shouldn't know how we're doing against our competitors or the details of the lucrative job we just got. That communication should occur through more direct media involving face-to-face contact. “The Internet can promote lowered self-awareness and disinhibition-physical distance, so many people are

unaware of how powerful the environment can be and its effects on behavior and how easy it is to misinterpret communication with low media richness...it's difficult to secure protect and maintain trust (Wallace 2004).” Hopefully these three objectives and other considerations will help me succeed in interactive media.

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