

2D: Contextual Inquiry Review

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Political Group

Summary of key findings or takeaways

We performed a total of six contextual inquiries through the form of interviews with embedded simulations. Although our participants ranged in level of political awareness and involvement, we were able to find common themes between each individual. We learned that our participants want a product that aggregates different news sources to a single location, while also taking into consideration their own personal interests. These individuals communicated the importance of being able to interact with and follow their friends' activity with political news. We also found that people are not interested in accessing unbiased news. The humanistic aspect of conflicting perspectives provides a more insightful understanding behind political issues. All participants currently use some form of a social media platform to find and share political news with friends and family. Participants would be open to using another product to follow political news, as long as it does not require a big learning curve or a large amount of investment.

Contextual inquiry participants

- For our first contextual inquiry, we interviewed an international graduate student in the Paul Allen Research Commons. She frequently uses her laptop and phone to access social media sites in order to view political news. She is also an avid listener of podcasts on her phone, which she uses to get information regarding current news events. She uses Facebook and Twitter accounts to subscribe to news outlets such as Vox, NPR, and The New York Times. Despite being ineligible to vote in U.S. elections, she remains highly interested in following political news that relates to her own life, as well as her friends' lives.
- For our second interview we interviewed an undergraduate student at his apartment in order to make things as convenient for him as possible. His major is not related to the political sciences, but he still views himself as politically aware and consumes political news via social media (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) from a variety of sources (e.g., CNN, The Daily Show, The Colbert Report) whenever he has downtime and the use of his smartphone. Although he makes a concerted effort to follow the news, he does not vote in elections. He identifies as a liberal because his views tend to be left-leaning.
- Our third interview was conducted with a high ranking member of a campus student political group and a self described "Poli Sci nerd." The interview took place in a meeting room in Paccar Hall. This person frequently uses her tablet to research political news issues. She supplements this research with podcasts, which she has integrated into her morning ritual. She also subscribes to Google Alerts in order to keep herself informed on issues of importance to her, especially at the state level. She describes herself as a moderate Democrat.
- Our fourth interview took place with an elected member of UW's student government at their office. She is a senior majoring in Law, Societies, & Justice. Despite being a member of the student government, her practices of acquiring political news was not very different from our other participants. She shared information among her friends at work (specifically because she knew they were interested in talking about politics), and her acquisition of political news was by use of her phone if she was on the go, or on a computer if she was at home because it was easier to use Google search on a computer.

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- Our fifth interview was with an undergraduate international student at a casual setting in her apartment. Like our other undergraduate participant, she has not studied politics in an academic setting. She described herself as being open to political news but doesn't actively participate in any political news-gathering activities, because as an international student she is ineligible to vote in U.S. elections. She is only interested in reading news articles if they're related to conversation topics she has been exposed to. She receives news articles via her Facebook feed, but will not actively search for political news.
- Our sixth interview was with an undergraduate student in a major unrelated to politics. He does not find any interest in politics and does not concern himself with subjects of debate either (e.g., abortion) because he does not like the emotional conflict it can entail. He sees comments from friends about political subjects on social media such as Facebook, but doesn't read them in detail. He does not wish to access any political information because he finds all such information boring to read. He believes that there is an overwhelming amount of information provided by the media, which would make it difficult for him to find a place to start even if he wanted to.

Contextual inquiry themes

We used our contextual inquiries as an opportunity to gather information about how our participants currently follow the news, use the news, and feel about the news. Although our participants come from diverse backgrounds, we began to notice commonalities between their personal experiences.

The use of social media as a news outlet was common amongst our participants for multiple reasons. Our participants felt as if there are too many news outlets available, and that it wouldn't be feasible to track each one individually. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter act as content aggregators because website referrals for a wide variety of news outlets and online sources are gathered into a single place. Our participants view this consolidation of information as a helpful tool in navigating what they perceive to be a deluge of information. Facebook's trending topics was a popular feature amongst our participants for this very reason because it allows them to see popular stories from five categories: All News, Politics, Science and Technology, and Sports and Entertainment. These trending topics also allow individuals to view what relevant articles, images, or videos their friends may have shared. This interest in being able to view friends' activity or have a discussion with friends regarding a news story or issue was common across our participants as well.

As mentioned previously, our participants felt as if there is far too much information available online and there isn't enough time to parse through it all. For this reason, a commonly held view amongst our participants was that in order to have the motivation to closely follow a news story, it has to have some degree of personal relevance. For example, one of our participants was an international student and she stated that she tracked news stories regarding immigration because this is an issue that is relevant to her own life. When asked if they would like to have access to unbiased articles, that is, articles that merely present a summarized list of facts regarding a news story, our participants overwhelmingly agreed that this was not something they would be interested in as their sole influx of political information. Most of our participants claimed that they were interested in gaining perspective on an issue from reading news stories from both left-leaning and right-leaning news organizations.

We believe that there is an opportunity to design a product that would provide individuals with a one stop source of news aggregated from multiple news outlets. We also believe that this news aggregator could be tailored to the individual so that he or she is only receiving information about the issues they find pertinent. Finally, this one stop news source could also

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provide individuals with a way to see what stories their friends and family are particularly interested in and to share relevant content with them.

Task analysis questions

1. Who is going to use the design?

We believe that individuals who are interested in expanding their current knowledge of political issues in the most efficient way possible - that is, without having to visit multiple sources - will benefit the most from our design.

2. What tasks do they now perform?

At present, people use social media as a way to receive their news in a single location. These individuals supplement social media sites like Facebook and Twitter with subscriptions to news outlets through services like Google alerts. Because individuals are consulting content aggregators, their news is not coming from a single source like The New York Times, for example. Individuals are also passively acquiring information; for example, they will listen to podcasts so that they can simultaneously multitask.

3. What tasks are desired?

Individuals from our contextual inquiries have indicated the desire to view political news from a single source that aggregates stories, rather than having to visit multiple news outlets. This single source should be easy to navigate and keep up with, because current platforms do not provide a well organized collection of stories. This means that a person should be able to follow the development of an on-going political issue. There should also be a way to personalize the experience by allowing people to choose stories they find interesting or relevant to their own lives. Political news found on our product should also include multiple perspectives of a topic, because our participants were not interested in unbiased articles. Additionally, the ability to interact with friends through the process of sharing stories or following friends' activities is an important feature. The final product should be accessible on-the-go.

4. How are the tasks learned?

Individuals learn how to perform tasks from observing their friends' behaviors, as well as strangers present in their environment. For instance, a person may begin to follow a news source after seeing a friend post a link to an article on Facebook. Additionally, the platforms people are using can offer intuitive interfaces, allowing users to be able to self-teach themselves how to find current political news. These people must already have a general knowledge about how to operate computer devices.

5. Where are the tasks performed?

Tasks can be performed in the privacy of an individual's home. In this environment, individuals can either be multitasking while reading, watching, or listening to political news, or they can be focused on the news source (that is, actively attending to the news source). Tasks can also be performed during passing periods or free time during the day, such as when taking the bus or waiting in between classes, meetings, etc.

6. What is the relationship between the person and data?

The data is political news or information that each user deems as important because of its personal relevance or interest. Political news is accessible from any device that has

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internet access, and we found that our CI participants accessed political news using all three devices of smartphones, laptops, and tablets. In some cases, people can download political news stories to their device, so internet access is not necessary after importing the data. Over time, a person's relationship with the data may change because the stories themselves could change, or what a person believes is relevant to themselves could change.

7. What other tools does the person have?

The tools that we saw our participants use included smartphones, tablets, and laptops. Participants who chose to use these devices to obtain news needed internet access in order to listen to podcasts and access social media sites including Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter.

8. How do people communicate with each other?

People are communicating with friends through social media outlets, as well as in person. During these interactions, they may be having a casual conversation or more debate-like conversations on current political issues. During these interactions, political knowledge can be transferred between individuals.

9. How often are the tasks performed?

The tasks are performed whenever it's convenient. Through our participants' reports we learned that tasks were done in times of leisure or waiting (e.g., between classes) when they were alone (i.e., without friends, but they could be in a public setting).

10. What are the time constraints on the tasks?

There are no time constraints on when people will perform tasks to access political information in general, but there may be a time constraint on the relevance of the news subjects in which they may be interested. For example, information about political policies may be time-sensitive to an election schedule.

11. What happens when things go wrong?

The intent of our final product is to provide users with news and information that is relevant to them in a single endpoint that is easy to navigate. When this intent is not achieved, then something has gone wrong. This could manifest itself through users failing to use the product at all, or users being unsatisfied with the information they are receiving. Users may receive information that they do not want to see (that is, about topics they are not interested in), or, they may receive so much information and experience trouble filtering through it (thus defeating the purpose of simplifying the task of getting pertinent news). If the user feels unsatisfied, there should be a way for them to alter their preferences so that they get the right kind and right amount of news (where "right" is a subjective measurement that will differ between individuals).