Chapter XXXII
Web Site Experience Analysis

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BACKGROUND

The Web site experience analysis (WEA) (Vorvoreanu, 2004) is a research protocol used to evaluate the experience of visiting a Web site. Currently, the dominant approach to Web site evaluation is usability, which is primarily concerned with ease of use (Brinck, Gergle, & Wood, 2002; Nielsen, 1993, 2000a; Nielsen & Norman, 2000; Nielsen & Tahir, 2002; Spool, 1999). While ease of use is an essential part of the experience of visiting a Web site, the Web site experience cannot be reduced to usability alone. Meanings, perceptions, and attitudes are also significant aspects of the Web site experience. Take the example of an emergency preparedness Web site such as Ready America (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). A usability evaluation of this Web site would assess whether information is easy to find, the site is easy to navigate, and so forth. WEA would take usability into consideration, but would also address other aspects of the Web site experience, asking questions such as: Did the Web site visitors understand the information? Were they persuaded? Were they scared? How likely are they to take the actions recommended? Did they perceive the Web site as credible? What are their understandings of the Web site authors' intentions?

In short, WEA taps into the communication aspect of visiting a Web site. Its purpose is to create a map of the user's Web site experience, complete with meanings, perceptions, and interpretations.

The WEA research protocol is directly derived from a framework of the Web site experience (Vorvoreanu, 2004) that incorporates results of several user behavior studies (Berkun, 1999; Brinck et al., 2002; Cockburn & McKenzie, 2001; Koyani & Bailey, 2002; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2002; Nielsen, 1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2003a, 2003b; Paul, 2000; Shedroff, 2001; Spool, 1999). The framework conceptualizes two interrelated dimensions of the Web site experience: the spatial one—the Web site virtual space; and the temporal one—the sequence of user perceptions, cognitions, and behaviors a Web site visitor experiences during a Web site visit. The spatial dimension of the Web site experience includes a classification of Web site elements and components. The temporal dimension is broken down into three main phases of the experience: first impression, exploration, and exit. The exploration phase is further broken down into two steps: orientation and engagement. The two dimensions of the Web site experience are explained in more detail elsewhere (Vorvoreanu, 2004, 2005).

The purpose of the WEA research protocol is to produce a map of a user's Web site experience by observing how the connections between the spatial and the temporal dimensions are activated. For each phase of the temporal dimension, WEA contains one or more questions exploring the connections with the spatial dimension. For example, user behavior research shows that in the first few seconds of looking at a Web page, users form a quick assessment of the quality and usefulness of the Web site. Therefore, the questions corresponding to the first impression phase ask users to rate their perceptions of the Web site's quality, and to provide an account of the specific Web site elements their perceptions are based upon.

WEA contains items for all phases and steps of the Web site experience, except for the engagement step. During the engagement step, users engage in information learning and evaluation, while at the same time trying to maintain their orientation on the website (Eveland & Dunwoody, 1998, 2000). Different batteries of items can be used with the engagement step to assess different communication goals. For example, in an analysis of corporate Web sites, Vorvoreanu (2004) used a battery of items assessing aspects of organization-public relationship building. This battery of items can be replaced with items assessing learning, persuasion, or other user perceptions. WEA's built-in modularity was intended to provide the flexibility needed to assess the experience of visiting various types of Web sites.

RESULTS

WEA is available as a computer-based questionnaire that Web site users fill out as they visit the Web site to be evaluated. WEA requires switching between two computers, one used to visit a Web site, the other to complete the questionnaire. The questions for each phase of the Web site experience are presented on a separate page. WEA also includes a preliminary background questionnaire.

The data collected through the computer-based questionnaire is sent to a database. The data is a combination of quantitative ratings and open-ended answers that research participants type in. Overall, the data provides a map of the Web site experience. WEA makes it possible to identify how users perceive a Web site, what they understand, what conclusions they draw.

COMMENTARY

To date, the instruments available for studying and evaluating Web sites are mostly concerned with Web site usability. WEA is the only systematic, theory-derived research protocol available for assessing the overall experience of visiting a Web site. WEA is ideal for assessing user perceptions before launching a Web site. WEA points to the specific Web site elements that users base their interpretations upon, and makes it easy to alter the Web site in order to achieve different perceptions. For example, certain Web site elements might be intended to be perceived as playful and family-oriented. WEA can assess whether the Web site's public actually perceives them positively or negatively, and provides detailed accounts of these perceptions.

The caveat, of course, is that individual perceptions vary, and so it is theoretically problematic to generalize from a sample of users who completed WEA to a larger population. Theory argues that groups of people who share experiences, interests, and backgrounds, known as interpretive communities, tend to also share interpretations and perceptions (Fish, 1980, 2001). Therefore, in order to use WEA effectively, it is important to start with a well-defined interpretive community, or Web site public. A public is defined here as an interpretive community (Fish, 1980, 2001) who shares a set of assumptions, interpretations, and values (Botan & Soto, 1998), interests (Dewey, 1927), and cognitions and behaviors (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It is important to keep in mind that