Information architecture meets the user experience

Creating more usable information architectures

Presentation by Alison J. Head

Alison J. Head & Associates
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Who am I? What is today's topic?

Brief Bio:

~ Approach: Combining HCI and information science.

~ Principal of Alison J. Head & Associates, providing Web design evaluation and usability testing for information resources.

~ Clients include Hewlett-Packard, Sun Microsystems, New York Times Newspaper Regional Group.


How can more usable information architectures be created?
First off, what is information architecture?

![Diagram showing the components of information architecture: Organization, Content, Labeling, Navigation, Search.]}
Straight from the horse's mouth

Information architecture involves the design of organization and navigation systems to help people manage information more successfully.

~ Lou Rosenfeld (WebWord.com interview, 5 | 99)
How does IA tie in with usability?

Discipline View: Separate fields

- Organization
- Content
- Labeling
- Navigation
- Search

IA

Usability

- Easy to use
- Efficient to use
- Easy to remember
- Causes few errors
- Pleasant to use

for information management

for any key task
Another view, both parts of a whole

Holistic View: The user experience approach

- strategy
- marketing
- technology
- IA
- usability
No matter which view, there is an important overlap which leads to creating more user-centered designs.
A newspaper case study

**The Facts:**

- ¥ 100,000+ regional newspaper
- ¥ Web site since 1996
- ¥ Whole new staff
- ¥ Face-lift redesign
- ¥ 5 major fixes
- ¥ Methods: traffic stats, online survey, and usability testing
- ¥ 2.5 month project during the summer (2000)

Used with permission, The Press Democrat Newspaper, a New York Times Regional Newspaper
What did usability testing tell us about where the site's IA went wrong?
The scope of the site was unclear

- Every participant we tested couldn't tell the difference between commercial vs. editorial content.
- As a result, they only used the left and middle column of the site.
- Some content in the right column was outdated and trivial.
- Overall, heterogeneous content and its functionality were poorly communicated.
Labels with little navigational guidance

- Many labels were grounded in journalism jargon (e.g., Features, Wire).
- Even frequent users reported since they didn’t understand the labels they didn’t use them ever.
- Essential navigational links did not appear on every page (e.g., search, home, local news).
- Overall, plotting a course was very difficult for users.
Information retrieval wasn't well-supported

- There was a recent (free) search and an archive (pay) search all participants didn't make the distinction.
- A search link did not appear on every page and the home page didn't have an input box.
- Results didn't show date or allow users to sort by date or relevance.
3 out of 5 of our design recommendations were related to the site's IA problems
Some time later, a redesigned site

- Site is redesigned so that organizational schemes (heterogeneous content) are more visually apparent.
- Superfluous, outdated content is eliminated from right column.
- Standardized navigational bar appears on every page with appropriate labels.
- Search box added to home and user search capabilities are boosted.
Separate tools and deliverables

Usability:

￥ Focus groups, survey analysis, and task-based testing
￥ Findings and recommendations

Information architecture:

￥ User observation, interviewing, and ethnographic methods
￥ Blueprints for layout, navigational structures, vocabulary

Diagnostic  Prescriptive
Still there are some mutual concerns!

**Usability:**
- Focus on users and focus on conceptual models
- Learnability, digestibility, and ease of use of the site’s structure and content
- Effectiveness and potential reuse of content, time savings

**Information architecture:**
- Focus on users interpretations of information schemas
- Organizational and navigational structures that support users information needs
- Appropriate content that is easy to find when users need it
The Point:

To create more usable IAs, recognize the overlap between usability and IA concerns

... and lastly, beware of the iceberg problem
Many Web site owners still focus on the glamour of fully-designed Web pages, without understanding the underlying components.  

Know enough to look just beneath the water line.

-Peter Morville
Information Architecture and Business Strategy
Strange Connections column
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Contact Information:
Alison J. Head, Principal
Alison J. Head & Associates
PO Box 208
414 First St. East, #9
Sonoma, Ca. USA  95476
www.ajhead.com | alison@sonic.net | +1.707.939.6941