Interaction

Limiting Possibilities

Why do users flock to "monomedia" websites, like Pinterest? Turns out, constraints are actually a good thing.

by Paul Ford

From its earliest days, the web has been understood as a place for rich, interactive documents. Videos can be embedded inside of paragraphs of text. Songs can play in the middle of a newspaper article. Even "The New York Times" puts video and audio right on its home page and embeds tweets into its blog posts. Facebook and Google+ are mixes of photos, status updates, videos and apps.

But that isn't the whole story. Some successful websites and social apps grew up not around multimedia but around one single type of media. There's YouTube, of course, which is all about video, and its fancier but less popular sibling Vimeo. Flickr and Pinterest focus on images, although each has its own take on what an image really is. SoundCloud lets people share music.

These "monomedia" services are in many ways the opposite of what we expected "new media" to be. Yet their simplicity is compelling to users. If you know what a video is, you understand YouTube. Once you've pinned a single picture, you get Pinterest. You can sign up for these services and instantly upload a video of your barking dog or pin a picture of the sky. Later, you might gain more followers and decide to take pains to make your uploads better or more interesting. It's a pattern that works: YouTube is the No. 3 website in the world, for example, and Pinterest is No. 16. Facebook bought Instagram, which until recently focused only on images with the same aspect ratio, for a billion dollars.

These success stories teach us the importance of constraints. What is a video or a picture in an age of computing? It's just data that follows a standard set of rules and tells a computer what sort of file it is and how to play or display it. Meanwhile, a web page or a digital app can do just about anything we want it to. It can display all kinds of media.

But that's a problem: When you can do anything, where do you even begin? Making a social network focused on one type of media makes it easier for the users to get started.

Constraints also help define the very nature of the community. SoundCloud is a great site for people who are into electronic music, and it's become one of the places where young electronic musicians release their work. They could post their music on YouTube, which has more users and is equipped to host audio files with an unmoving picture, but doing so wouldn't allow them to create the same kind of community. The fact that SoundCloud is all about music and audio files means something to its users. They all share a fundamental understanding of what a song is. It's tribal, almost, and SoundCloud gives the tribe a territory they can share.

Another example worth considering is Tumblr, which Yahoo! recently purchased for $1.1 billion. But wait, you might think, Tumblr is all sorts of media: videos, images and text. That's true, but when you post to Tumblr, you choose what type of post it is: text, photos, quotes, links, chats, audio or video. The way the post will look and behave depends on your choice. Choosing from these post types makes it very easy for users to understand what they are supposed to do when using Tumblr because they already know what a photo or quote is.

Tumblr succeeded in taking constraints that people already understood and mixed them together into a "tumblelog" or "microblog." They didn't invent photos or quotes or even tumblelogs. They just arranged things so that people could work within boundaries and rules that everyone already understood. The end result was something new and valuable that many millions of people now use to communicate and share their experiences.

There's much to learn from these "monomedia" approaches; the most important lesson is that users understand and even appreciate constraints. As Tumblr shows, people can be taught the difference between a "quote," "text" or "audio." As Pinterest shows, training people to organize their world in terms of images can yield huge results. Sometimes we focus on how many possibilities digital media presents. But if we want to build products that appeal to millions of people, it might be better to break our pages and apps down into very small components and focus on the constraints. ∎