LOGIN

MIT CENTER FOR CIVIC MEDIA

NEWS AS EXPLORATION, DISCOVERY AND SERENDIPITY

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Catherine D'Ignazio is the person behind that really cute baby. She is an artist, software developer and educator and occasionally goes by the name of kanarinka. She is the Director of the Institute for Infinitely Small Things, an interventionist performance troupe, and former Director of the Experimental Geography Research Cluster at RISD's Digital+Media MFA program. She taught in the Comparative Media Studies program at MIT in 2009 & 2012. Her artwork has been exhibited at the ICA Boston, Eyebeam, and MASSMoCA, and has won awards from the Tanne Foundation and Turbulence.org. Catherine has a BA in International Relations from Tufts University (Summa Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa) and an MFA in Studio Art from Maine College of Art. She has lived and worked in Paris, Buenos Aires, and Michigan, and currently resides in Waltham, MA.

At the lab, Catherine conducts research on critical geography and media attention. Her thesis looks at ways to "engineer serendipity" - to stage encounters with information outside our comfort zones, biases and habits. She is also interested in researching experimental ways of engaging more deeply with place and

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Last year in Ethan Zuckerman's class Future of News and Participatory Media we read a provocative article by the Swiss novelist Rolf Dobelli entitled News is bad for you – and giving up reading it will make you happier. In the article he lays out some fairly compelling reasons for not reading the news: It makes us passive and angry, kills our creativity, moves too quickly to be meaningful, and produces skewed senses of risk and danger. For Dobelli, news stories are "bright-coloured candies for the mind", diversionary at best and toxic at worst. In her response to the article, journalist Madeline Bunting makes a case for the conventional wisdom of the civic function of news, "At its root there is a responsibility to know and understand the world and age you live in. That is at the root of democracy: that we all have a responsibility to make decisions about how our society is ordered. How is democracy possible if people don't want to know?"

I'm inclined to agree with Bunting at first. The public has a right to know! We need to bring important issues to public attention! Why am I a graduate student in a Civic Media program anyway? But upon reflecting on my own experience of the news I think about how often I feel hopeless, overwhelmed and even assaulted by the news for many of the reasons that Dobelli outlines. How do I take action about broken foreign policy? How do I help people who have lost their homes in a crisis? What do I do about human rights violations? When I feel hopeless I usually turn to my mom, so I asked her what she thought. It turns out she is so frustrated with the politics in her home state of North Carolina and the partisanship of the news reporting about it that she just doesn't read the news anymore and prefers mystery novels and podcasts about British history. In fact, despite the endless torrents of information spewing forth every second of the day from news producers large and small, Pew's State of the News Media 2013 report shows that 31% of U.S. adults have turned away from a news outlet because of lower quality reporting and fewer stories overall.

So rather than taking a "side" between Dobelli and Bunting, I want to ask a question: What other experiences of the news are possible? Can we imagine news less as civic duty (There you are eating your vegetables of helplessness each morning...) and more as a process of discovery, curiosity, and emotional connection?

Help us map this territory

Ethan Zuckerman and I want to write a research paper about systems that are trying out alternative approaches to news discovery. Part of this is for my thesis project Terra Incognita, a news recommendation system that shows you where in the world you have *not* read about and gives you recommendations for what to read. We are interested in systems prioritizing exploration and serendipity in relation to global news as a counterpoint to the 24-7 barf cycle way of discovering news. Here are our questions to you:

- Which news recommendation systems prioritize diversity (what you are *not* looking at, what the algorithms are *not* showing you, what your friends are *not* sharing) versus just similarity to prior reads or what your friends like?
- Can news discovery systems encourage reflection, support curiosity, and stage encounters with new cultures, people and ideas?
- Which news experiences are acknowledging that their readers are human beings with an emotional radius for meaningful action?
- Which platforms are explicitly trying to change peoples' news consumption based on alternative value propositions?
- Finally, what products are simply trying out new and weird ways of connecting audiences and news stories?

The field is rich with experiments. We are interested in commercial, academic and experimental projects. Below is what we have so far. Please post what we have missed in the comments or connect with me at dignazio@mit.edu/@kanarinka.

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umano - An app that supports news discovery through having people read articles aloud to you. You define a set of topic interests when you install the app. You can up-vote articles to request that they be narrated. You choose articles to add to your playlist but the premium version will auto-generate a playlist based on your interests.
Serendipity/Discovery: The novelty is the reading aloud by narrators from the community. The stories might not be the most current (since they have to go through the upvote-narration process) but might be high-quality, might match your interests and listening to them is different than reading.

News 360 - News recommendation app and website. You define topic interests and it finds you "the best content on the web." Up- and down-voting trains the system on what you like.
Serendipity/Discovery: The app's algorithms do the searching for you based on your topic interests. Everything displayed together in an infinite scrolling feed with large images.

The Onion - Website, app and media brand that traffics in satire using the news as its organizing format. Similar strategy for Jon Stewart and the Colbert Report in broadcast.
Serendipity/Discovery: You might actually experience important news stories while laughing.

Accidental News Explorer - Explicitly serendipitous news app. Encourages users to click on related topics to a given story and go on a kind of dérive from topic to topic.

Reverb - Personalized news app and aggregator. Allows you to aggregate your social feeds and news near your geolocation and combine those with news topic interests.
Serendipity/Discovery: Potentially through power of aggregation. Standard recommendation system based on topic interests.

Zite - A "personalized, intelligent newsmag" in the form of an iOS app. You define topic interests from 40,000 topics and Zite selects news articles for each topic as a feed. All topics get displayed together in a visual interface. You train it on what you like and don't like by up- and down-voting.
Serendipity/Discovery: Zite's algorithms find and categorize the stories for your defined topics.

Instapaper - The "read it later" site and app. Similar to Pocket. Helps users mark things they want to read later and auto-sync across devices. Both applications have moved into the recommendation space recently.
Serendipity/Discovery: You can browse what's trending in the systems and also view what your friends are reading. The interesting thing about both systems is that what people mark as wanting to read later becomes an interesting proxy for longer form and higher quality articles.

Longreads - A hashtag (#longreads) and website to share long-form journalistic storytelling about any topic.
Serendipity/Discovery: The length of story along with curation by the editors and community are the organizing concepts so if you follow the feed then stories could be about anything.

Track 180 - An iPad application that organizes news in distinct categories: environment, technology, human rights, energy exploration and use, government accountability and corporate responsibility. The visual interfaces allows for comparing multiple perspectives on an issue simultaneously and explicitly places "Call to action" buttons where there is an opportunity to get involved.
Serendipity/Discovery: Potentially through tight curation around specific topics and visual ways of interacting with information.

stumbleupon - The web discovery engine that allows you to "stumble" onto webpages based on topics of interest that you have defined. Interface is highly visual. The experience of the site is one-site-at-a-time.
Serendipity/Discovery: Explicitly built into the purpose of the site. So the downside is that you must "choose" serendipity.

News Intermix - Inspired by Rewire. Chrome extension designed by West Space Journal. It has a database of ~900 geographically-diverse English-language news sites. Tell the extension what your daily news site is—or whatever site you habitually and automatically visit in lieu of a better idea—and enter the percentage of visits that you want to be redirected to a random news source.
Serendipity/Discovery: Through hijacking the browser every so often, surprising user by making them aware of when they return to the "same old" news site.

Balancer - Chrome extension. Tries to get you to read more politically balanced news by observing your behavior and presenting you with a man on a wire.
Serendipity/Discovery: Through reflection on political balance of current reading.

Slimformation - Chrome extension. Wants to enable personal insight into reading history and enable users to set goals.
Serendipity/Discovery: Through reflection on current reading, setting explicit topic goals.

bananaslug.com - Lovely little late-90's aesthetic site which adds a random word to your Google Searching. Probably too silly for anyone to actually use but it's a nice gesture.
Serendipity/Discovery: Adds random word to your google search

We See in Every Direction - A collaborative web browser which is an art project. People browse the internet together. Probably more a gesture to collectivity and online experience than a useful tool but an interesting experiment.
Serendipity/Discovery: There are as many cursors as people currently logged on to the system. Others can control your search bar, potentially taking you to plenty of places that you have no interest in whatsoever.

NewsCube - Presents user with articles about the same news story but written from different points of view. HCI paper on development of the text processing engine for this, not widely available as a product.
Serendipity/Discovery: Keep information the same but vary the framing as a way of discovering/reflecting on bias.

EyeBrowse - David Karger's work at CSAIL. Users can selectively share their browsing history, "bump into" friends on the same websites at the same time. Not limited to only news sites. Squarely in the space of personal analytics.
Serendipity/Discovery: "Run into" friends looking at the same information, Aspect of reflection by looking at visualizations of your browsing history (though they do not have a particular "behavior change" goal in mind).

RescueTime - Monitors your daily browsing and media consumption habits across devices. Shows you where you are spending your time.
Serendipity/Discovery: Potentially through reflection on past behavior.

Data Portraits paper - HCI experiment in seeing whether people will be more open to opposing points of view if they come in via social networks connected by other issues.
Serendipity/Discovery: Exposing people to opposing points of view by connecting them first to people based on unrelated topics. Users do not seem to be aware of intention of the system. However, recent research shows that people don't necessarily avoid information with opposing viewpoints, just that they seek information with confirming viewpoints.

Match the News - Firefox extension and research paper. Uses the current page you are browsing plus your recent browser history and finds related content to recommend you.
Serendipity/Discovery: Not really serendipity/discovery because it's browsing based on sameness criteria. It does try to gauge current user interest and allows user's to rate the recommendations that it gives.

pugmarks - Chrome & Android extension. Uses recent browser history to give you recommended articles on similar topics. Takes over your "New-Tab" window in Chrome.
Serendipity/Discovery: Uses your recent browser history as context for what recommendations you should see. I have found this to be rather effective, though its recommendation criteria is matching like

to like.

Curriculum - NYT R&D lab experiment to make web browsing social. Similar to eyebrowse but for the news environment.
Serendipity/Discovery: Social browsing with people in your organization and/or immediate vicinity; Reflection via viewing your history.

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