

Project Description

Computer Science 316

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Background

Deep cutbacks at newspapers across the country have left many communities with no source for even basic news. Many towns in Massachusetts, for instance, have no reporters covering their meetings and events anymore. Only major catastrophes, such as murders or floods, draw the attention of large newspapers or TV stations. Citizen-led efforts, sometimes headed by retired journalists, are afoot to try to fill the gap.

If an individual or community group wants to start a news site, with no technical expertise, could they do it? And make it look like a professional online newspaper site? Typically not without money to hire Web designers and programmers.

Also, the sites of cash-strapped newspapers often suffer from poor design. The following links provide examples:

<http://www.thewesterlysun.com/>

<http://www.berkshireagle.com/>

<http://www.masslive.com/>

A set of simple layout and design tools should help to reduce or eliminate the development costs associated with setting up news sites, whether staffed by professional journalists or volunteers, technology-savvy individuals or technophobes.

Existing Software

Drupal

Drupal (<http://drupal.org>) is free, open-source software designed to allow users to publish, manage and organize content for a Web site. It is widely used, including for community Web portals and newsletters. The following links provide examples of Drupal-developed newspaper Web sites:

<http://groups.drupal.org/node/5100>

<http://vimeo.com/979664>

Drupal requires customization work in order to get an online news site to look and behave the way professional sites do.

WordPress

WordPress (<http://wordpress.org>) is open-source software that claims to be the largest self-hosted blogging tool in the world. <http://wordpress.org/showcase/tag/news/> showcases some news sites created with WordPress.

Drupal and WordPress don't take the user through the news site creation process, step by step.

CLEO

CLEO is a British site (http://www.cleo.net.uk/index.php?category_id=317) targeted at student publications that purports to offer actual tools that people can use. It appears to walk the students through the process, but the site is not attractive.

J-Learning

J-Learning is a Knight-funded site (http://www.j-learning.org/build_it/page/web_standards_for_publishing_ventures/) that offers advice on page layout and design, but it doesn't offer the tools to build those pages.

Proposed Project

The project's goal is to make news sites easier to build, for citizen-led groups, volunteers, schools, and other cash-strapped organizations. Although Drupal, WordPress, and other open-source systems are improving, they're still not as easy to use as they could be. The design objective is to make any tools and templates as intuitive as Web browsers, with point-and-click options wherever possible.

Another goal is for the resulting Web sites to be attractive, uncluttered by advertising and pop-ups, and easy to navigate. The model design is the front page of the New York Times site (without the ads).

A clear, clean site with wizards offering step-by-step instructions – such as <http://smallbusiness.yahoo.com/> – would be useful for neophytes at a news site operation. A demo for the creation of an e-commerce site can be found at the following link: <http://smallbusiness.yahoo.com/ecommerce/> That step-by-step process could be applied to the creation of a newspaper site, or the construction of a news story.

The tasks required for this project are to:

- Build templates for the front page, sections and individual pages of an online news site. The templates should be customizable, allowing users to use a different size banner/logo at the top of the front page, to move the photo slot, to select different fonts, etc.
- Build electronic forms that non-journalists can use to construct various types of news stories. Examples: obituaries, wedding and birth announcements, a concert review, a town meeting report, a simple news story about a fire, etc. It should be possible to generate stories that can be viewed on a Web page or a cell phone. Generating articles for delivery to cell phones is a low priority.
- Build software to help people use the templates and forms. The software should help users to write stories and headlines and build the pages of a newspaper. It should provide a wizard for the least experienced users and guidelines for the more technologically sophisticated users.
- Build a Web site that displays the templates and forms and provides users with access to the software.
- Do necessary integration work to ensure any templates, forms, and tools work with major content management/publishing systems, such as Drupal and WordPress.

Glossary

Form: An electronic form is the equivalent of its counterpart in the real world. Many newspapers, for instance, have wedding announcement forms or obituary forms.

Template: a design or layout that can be used over and over again for the front page and subsequent pages of newspapers. In Drupal, this might be referred to as a "theme."

Wizard: a tool that provides step-by-step dialog boxes to help a user complete a task.