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Salt, a Web-Based iPad Magazine

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I. Introduction

On a characteristically chilly morning in early February, Kuan Luo, Brian Dawson and I sat in a corner of Funk 'n Waffles, laptops open and notebooks out. We met like this every Friday to discuss *Salt*, my Capstone project and the iPad magazine that we worked on together from September to May. Kuan, a high-octane graphic designer, always sat on the edge of her armchair and decreed opinions in clipped English. Brian, a "web developer and human being" – at least according to his email signature – cited philosophers, writers and other luminaries in conversations about mundane things like work ethics and sleep.

I wrote a rough agenda before each meeting, and we usually moved through the bullet points quickly: design check-in, story updates, a review of upcoming deadlines. But on this particular Friday, the discussion cycled more than usual. For some 40 or 45 minutes we had debated the issue of website commenting, and were no closer to a solution than when we started.

"I still think it's absolutely necessary that we have some kind of comment feature," I said, for perhaps the fifteenth time. Kuan and Brian both hold eye contact eerily well, so imagine discussing these technical details as if they were marriage proposals. "People want to interact with online content. I think we have to give them some way to do that."

Kuan reminded me of the reasons against: Comment boards breed negativity and boorishness; comments require moderation; comments would

mess with our design. Comments are, in fact, the great bane of most digital media operations. I've heard online editors say that comments tend to draw out the very worst of humanity.

"Just consider the kind of dialogue we're going to create," Brian said. "I wouldn't necessarily read through and engage with the comments of total strangers, especially if they're just saying things like 'this is cool' or 'this article sucks.' It's not very valuable conversation. It's not like a conversation you'd have with a friend."

That was an interesting idea, we all immediately agreed. Our most meaningful conversations, on any topic, tend to occur with people who know us already – but that's not a model of interaction that most comment boards support. Brian compared it to books that he shares with his roommates. He loved seeing what his friends highlight in books and how they react to the text. Kuan wondered, in turn, if we could create some kind of highlighting feature in the app. I thought a "highlight and share" function could fill the need for interaction better than comments.

Gradually, as our coffee cooled to room temperature and our laptop batteries faded to red, we developed the idea for Salt's unusual highlight feature. In the finished product, clicking the "highlight" button on any Salt story allows you to mark up a page, just as you would mark up a book, and email it to your friends with comments. It's hardly a flashy feature – not like the video covers or expensive interactive graphics that some major publishers

use to pack their iPad editions. It does, however, promote a different, deeper way of interacting with editorial content. It's essentially a means for a reader to simultaneously share a piece of content and a piece of himself.

I have been thinking a lot about the term "share" since completing *Salt* this semester. In fact, in many ways, I think the word is a good framework for considering the entire project. From a theoretical standpoint, I conceptualized the iPad app with that theme of sharing in mind – features like the highlighter evolved from that concern, as did the use of content filters and scalable programming. Similarly, the magazine's editorial point of view involves sharing stories from the local community: the majority of the stories raise up local artists and musicians, many of them operating in niche areas that would not receive recognition otherwise. I think ultimately, however, experiences like the early morning "highlighter" debate illustrate the most important type of sharing that went on during this project: Kuan and Brian are singularly talented collaborators, and we shared our inspirations, ideas, and responsibilities over a period of several months. As a result, this project enjoyed an enormous level of intellectual cross-fertilization, and is now profoundly smarter and more useful than it would have been otherwise. Considering the subject matter of this Capstone, that only makes sense. The Internet, after all, is essentially about sharing, and Internet media especially so.

II. Sharing and the Internet: A Theoretical Framework

At its core, the Internet is about sharing more of ourselves and connecting with people and information sources in ways we could not otherwise. When I wake up in the morning, I receive news digests from three papers I don't subscribe to. Since beginning this paper, I tweeted three times about my struggle to get through it. Amazingly, people tweeted back: A rapper featured in the magazine, a few of my friends, another Honors student. Through information, the Internet opens up our lives. The creation of a device like the iPad is thus not only a technological development, but also a psychological and existential one.

I became interested in this side of the Internet at a very early age. As a lonely 14-year-old at a new school, I started a blog on the now defunct platform Journalspace and wrote terribly wordy, confessional entries about my classes and my friends. For reasons I can't entirely explain, the blog attracted a sizable following. I liked the attention from my faceless readers, who commented by the dozens and sent me messages about my posts. But I also recognized, even as a vain, self-involved high-schooler, that a very strange phenomenon was at play on the blog. There was no reason these people should care about me or my classes. The fact that they did care, and furthermore, that they cared enough to comment about it, suggested something about the way people want to engage and interact on the Internet. I won't draw any conclusions from those blessedly distant Journalspace days, but I

will say that they put me in a specific theoretical framework. I understood that people could interact with online content in very personal, self-fulfilling ways, perhaps in ways they could not in real life.

Four years later, in 2008, I found myself using that framework to start a very different type of blog. During my freshmen year, *20 Watts* magazine hired me to start its website – the first magazine website on campus, in fact. This presented a theoretical challenge similar to, but fundamentally different from, the challenge posed by a personal blog. I still wanted people to feel a sense of personal connection to the website and its stories, as if it belonged to them and answered their specific needs. But now, I couldn't rely on long-form emotional angst to forge that level of connection. Somehow, straight-up, journalistic music stories had to compel people to return to the site, to rely on us for news, and ultimately to consider us a friend.

I don't know if 20 Watts accomplished the latter two goals, but based on my obsessive analysis of its traffic statistics, I know it accomplished the first. In the three years I worked on the blog, page views grew from 10 or 20 a day to well over 1200. The majority of our readers came from Syracuse, and while they read national coverage and reviews of major bands, they seemed to most appreciate narrow, niche content tailored specifically to them. Now, instead of writing sappy poems, I instructed a video team on coverage plans for local shows and brainstormed multi-part packages that people could click into one time or ten, depending on their preferences. But despite some obvious

stylistic changes, the essential framework remained: "The Internet is a place of profound sharing and interconnectivity. How do I create that sense of connection for my readers?"

It was not until just this year that I understood how truly vast and significant this question really is. In October 2010, I attended the Online News Association's annual conference, where I met digital journalists, editors and commentators from across the country. The lectures and panels I saw were, of course, very informative. But I found myself moved more by the tone of the conference than by individual speakers or strategies. I still remember sitting in the back of a hotel ballroom, straining to see NPR's Vivian Schiller as she talked about digital strategy. Gradually, I realized that I was the only one making any effort to actually watch Schiller speak: Everyone else in the 500-person room sat hunched over, heads down, typing furiously on a Macbook, iPad or iPhone. The hotel Internet crashed several times that weekend because of the number of people online.

When I went to the massive technology conference SXSW Interactive in March, I experienced similar things: the barrage of Twitter updates and Foursquare check-ins, the omnipresence of Apple devices, the total immersion in technology, the seamless integration of Internet and real life. On a personal level, I have become fascinated with the way this integration changes our lives and relationships; in fact, I wrote an essay on that very subject for *The New York Times*.

My professional interest in and framework on the Internet are not much different. Thanks to my personal experiences with technology, the discussion for me does not turn on questions like "how do we save the magazine industry with the iPad?" or "how do we monetize online?" The much more interesting problem to me concerns both the narrow issues of journalism as we know it and the meta-themes of information, interconnectivity and sharing in a new, hypersaturated age. Essentially, when I approached this project, I asked myself how magazines could structure content in order to promote meaningful types of engagement and sharing in the often meaningless virtual space.

III. Current iPad Magazines: Zinio, Twitter and #doingitwrong

The problem with current iPad magazines is that they do not address, or even approach, this question. In fact, most iPad editions currently on the market are reactionary in nature: They represent not an attempt to embrace a new technology, but to catch up with it. I think this becomes fairly obvious just scrolling through some of the recent tablet editions that try to imitate the look of a print magazine. It's also obvious in the existence of services like Zinio, which converts print magazines into look-alike PDFs that readers can tap through on the iPad. Zinio editions are expensive, unwieldy, and for the reader, both tedious and difficult to navigate. But at SXSW, Zinio's panel drew a standing-room-only crowd. During a Q&A at the end of the panel,

many editors expressed a certain middle-aged desperation to "get on the iPad" by any means necessary. I sat in the back like someone's disinterested punk kid, tweeting comments with the hash tag "#doingitwrong." One of Zinio's speakers actually tweeted back to me, and we exchanged a few thoughts about the talk. "The best iPad magazine out there is Twitter," he said, and I tend to agree. Twitter, of course, is not a literal magazine. But on the iPad, it achieves what most major publishers have not: a high degree of personalization and those all-important sharing options in a user-friendly, easy-to-navigate space. Essentially, Twitter does look ahead to the meta-question of structuring content to promote new engagements and modes of use. The Zinios, Hearsts and Conde Nasts of the world simply react to the fact that Apple put out a new product.

IV. Designing Engagement: Salt's UI, Navigation and Sharing

In conceptualizing Salt, I very much wanted to move beyond the realm of "reacting" and actually put forward a new model for consuming mobile content, prefaced on ease of use, navigability, and most importantly, sharing. In our weekly meetings at Funk 'n Waffles, Kuan, Brian and I often stepped back to consider these larger issues. When one person proposed an idea, the others would mercilessly throw it against that framework: Is it intuitive? Does it feel native to the iPad? Are we promoting new ways to interact and engage with content?

It would require far more than 15 pages to explain the answers to each of those questions for every element in Salt's design. Suffice it to say that absolutely everything you see in the app, from the arrangement of photographs on the main page to the transparency of the filter overlay, survived several rounds of debate before we decided we liked it. There are a few elements of the app's user interface, however, that I think merit greater discussion. These features and design choices, which I will organize as a bulleted list for the sake of clarity, represent significant departures from conventional or prevalent iPad magazine design.

- **Salt is a "web-based" application.** There are two types of iPad applications: "native" apps, which are written in an advanced coding language and launch in their own screen, and "web-based apps," websites specially designed and formatted for the iPad. At the most practical level, I chose to pursue the latter type of app because the cost to develop native is prohibitively high – more than $20,000 on the low end. This puts native apps out of reach not only for me, but for small and midsized magazine publishers. On a secondary level, web-based apps are more "scalable" than native apps, an increasingly important concern. Scalability refers to how many types of devices an app supports. A web-based app can be read on a normal computer, an iPad or iPhone, or any other type of tablet device; a native app will only work on the iPad, and to a lesser extent, on the iPhone. At SXSW, I

heard editors and developers in several panels propose web-based apps as a solution to this problem. Scalability allows for greater sharing.

- **Salt's orientation is locked, meaning that it can only be read with the iPad held horizontally.** Most iPad editions support landscape and portrait orientations. If you hold the iPad horizontally, the magazine appears horizontal, and when you turn the screen it flips vertical. Salt locks horizontally in order to promote a very specific reader experience: While the app does not look like a literal magazine, the horizontal scrolling mimics the act of turning a page. Thus, readers can interact with the content in a way that is familiar and intuitive to them, but that still feels native to this specific device. This also solves for some of the design dilemmas inherent in laying content out in two different orientations.

- **Salt does not look like a literal magazine.** Almost all current iPad editions look exactly or almost exactly like their print counterparts, and then include videos or other multimedia flourishes meant to make the content "mobile." But the iPad is not a magazine, and it is also not a website. From a user interface perspective alone, it makes no sense to design for it as if it were – a user navigating through an iPad app that looks like a print magazine has to contend with two mental models of using the content, resulting in confusion or frustration with both. Designing a mobile edition as if it were print also fails to capture the

potential of the iPad as a medium. Many designers speak of the "intimacy" of the iPad's touch interface; essentially, the logic goes, interacting with content through touch makes it far more personal than scanning words on a page. When you can engage a reader in that new and profound way, why would you give them something that looks like a PDF?

- **Salt's stories are in a filterable database.** Kuan, Brian and I spent a lot of time debating how readers move through content. We agreed that we wanted to provide a "browsing" experience, similar to perusing a print magazine or walking through a bookstore and looking at titles on the shelves. At the same time, we also wanted to promote a highly personalized experience and to guide readers in some way to the most important stories. To accomplish these goals, we put all of the stories in a database and tagged them with certain attributes: place, subject, importance, etc. When readers open the app, they call up a randomized mosaic of stories, with picture size based on story importance. Then, they can also use the filters at the top of the page to display only types of stories they want to see. Recommended stories at the end of each article provide points to continue moving through the magazine.

- **Salt prominently features sharing tools**. Many magazines lack sharing functions entirely, a decision that I think ignores readers' desire to interact with content on social platforms. To solve for this,

Salt shares articles directly with Twitter and Facebook, as well as by email. It also includes the aforementioned highlight tool, designed to bring a sense of intimacy and value to comment engagement.

IV. Sharing Stories: Localization and Personal Narrative in Salt

Ultimately, of course, readers engage and share editorial content, not navigation features or a clean layout. Thus, when I planned, assigned and edited the stories in the magazine, I also had to keep the overarching goal of greater engagement in mind. But outside of really great or scandalous stories, what engages readers and invites them to return to a source?

I addressed this question in two ways: First, I focused on local art and music stories that received little attention in mainstream media, the model that worked for 20 Watts' blog when I worked for the magazine. I also emphasized personal narratives over other types of stories. These stories speak to a small, hyper-engaged niche demographic – the exact people who would want to read 2,000 words about local house shows and then tweet it to their friends. Thus, the choice of story topics and presentations also encouraged a certain emotional exchange between the reader and the story. "Night Falls on O, Morning," one of my favorite pieces in the magazine, is instructional in that regard: So much has been written about Dan Creahan and his record label, but by the time you finish his essay, you feel like he's your friend.

IV. "Sharing" in the *Salt* Creative Process

Clearly, the development of both Salt's user interface and editorial content were critical to the completion of the project. On a personal and intellectual level, however, I think the collaborative, creative process behind the app is far more interesting even than the app itself. I had the enormous privilege of working with two of the most talented and rigorous thinkers I have ever met. Because of our debates and discussions – because of our essentially, sharing of ideas – we developed a product that reflected the sensibilities of multiple disciplines and still stood strongly on its own.

This meeting of the minds is, I believe, worth mentioning for two reasons besides my immense gratitude to Brian and Kuan. First, the journalism industry is absolutely notorious for its inability to balance editorial, technical and design concerns. Both ONA and SXSW offered multiple panels on the theme of getting different departments to play nicely together on innovative web projects; furthermore, at the end of almost every panel I saw, someone would inevitably take the microphone and ask "but how do we get editorial to sign on to this?" or "how can I work with my programmer better?" I can't pretend to be able to answer those questions for the industry, but I certainly know what worked for Salt. Because Brian, Kuan and I each have a high level of interdisciplinary knowledge, we all understood the needs and challenges of the project from multiple angles. Brian is a developer, but knew the importance of strong design. Kuan is a designer, but wanted to create a

layout that emphasized editorial. So we were consistently on the same page, if not at the same line or paragraph.

I think the creative process behind Salt is notable for another, more abstract reason, as well. I have devoted much of this paper to a discussion of "sharing," connectivity, and the Internet – to the idea that the Internet fundamentally and irreversibly changes the way we think about information and each other. I would say that my work with Kuan and Brian demonstrates that phenomenon. Because we are all "digital natives," we approached this project with a certain set of shared values and assumptions. For instance, we all strongly believed in the inherent value of using the Internet to share both editorial content and personal thoughts with friends. This indicates, I believe, the level to which the Internet has already changed my generation's social perspective and existential framework. Perhaps that explains the divide between what we expect from iPad magazines and what the likes of Zinio actually deliver. To return to the "punk kid" metaphor, the gap could be generational.

Conclusion

Naturally, if I did this project again, I would choose to do some things differently. Several of the planned stories dropped at the last minute, an inevitable hazard at student publications. Some of the photos are not as strong as they could be. I spent many dozens of hours rewriting weak stories, and given a second chance, I would structure my editorial schedule to allow

writers more time to make their own edits. Outside of editorial, I wish the app had some kind of real-time social functionality – a blog feed or a Twitter stream or something of that nature. I also have mixed feelings about the two-finger gesture required to scroll, something we did not realize when we designed the app with in-line scrolling.

Ultimately, however, I could not be more proud of this project or the process behind it. On a purely professional level, I believe Salt capitalizes on some compelling characteristics of the Internet and presents a potential new model for engaging readers on the iPad. On a personal level, working with Kuan and Brian taught me a great deal not only about the Internet, but also about the value of collaboration – and good collaborators. Over the past eight months, this project gave all three of us ample opportunity to consider abstract concepts like sharing, connectivity, and a reader's relationship with what they read. Transforming those concepts into a concrete project exhausted and inspired me.

I'm excited, and grateful, to share it with you.

Summary

In September 2010, *The New Yorker* – one of the world's oldest and most revered publications – released an iPad edition to the Apple Store. It was a moment of celebration for the 85-year-old magazine, as it ventured onto a new platform that could forever change the way print media is read. At the same time, its editors seemed confused: "We're at once delighted and a little bewildered about this latest digital development," they wrote online. "We'd be liars if we said we knew precisely where technology will lead."

No one knows quite what to make of the iPad yet – not even the editors of the nation's premier magazine. But in my Capstone project, "*Salt,* A Web-Based iPad Magazine," I created an iPad magazine that attempted to solve some of the essential issues facing the very new realm of mobile publishing. How can we optimize a print version for mobile delivery? What sharing and navigation elements will engage readers? How can this new technology help us become more effective storytellers? And how can we employ this technology in a cost-efficient, small-scale way, so that not only *The New Yorkers* of the world can make dynamic digital editions?

Salt is a regional arts and culture magazine, formatted and developed for Apple's iPad tablet. It is a type of iPad application known as a "web-based app." There are two types of applications: one, called a native application, launches directly from the iPad's home screen and requires a very specialized, very difficult type of coding. This is the type of application used by magazines

like *The New Yorker*, which have hundreds of thousands of dollars to spend on development. The second type of application, the web-based app, is essentially a website that has been designed, coded and converted to work specifically on the iPad. It can still launch from the home screen and employ many of the iPad's characteristic feature, but it uses the common coding languages HTML, CSS and Javascript. Because of that, it is also considered the more "scalable" type of app: It can also be read online and on other types of tablets, in addition to the iPad.

The tablet is an interesting device in that it mimics elements of the web and print, but ultimately is neither. Working with a web developer, Brian Dawson, and a graphic designer, Kuan Luo, I conceptualized a design to address this challenge. Important elements of that design included:

- **Non-literal magazine layout.** Almost all current iPad editions look like print magazines, with pages, a cover, and other traditional print features. This can be annoying for readers, however, because pages are unwieldy to scroll through on the iPad, and it's difficult to tell how you are supposed to navigate from one story to the next. Thus, Salt is built on a very clean, simple, image-driven grid that combines aspects of print reading (horizontal pages, for instance) with elements of web navigation (a home button, recommended story links, etc.)

- **Locked horizontal orientation.** Most iPad editions support landscape and portrait orientations: If you hold the iPad horizontally, the

magazine appears horizontal, and when you turn the screen it flips vertical. Salt only allows you to read the magazine when you hold the iPad horizontally. This simplifies the design process and allows users to read stories in a familiar, intuitive way – a horizontal iPad looks a lot like a two-page spread in a print magazine.

- **Personalization filters.** On the Internet, it's very easy for readers to personalize the types of stories they read and jump straight to content that interests them. In print magazines, that can be trickier; you might have to search the table of contents at length to find a story on music, for example. Salt brings the personalization of the Internet to print magazine stories with a "filter" feature at the top of the screen. By clicking on a category like "Downtown" or "Art," you can instantly see all the stories that most interest you.

- **Prominent sharing tools**. All Salt articles can be shared through Facebook, Twitter and email using a toolbar at the bottom of the screen. Readers can also "highlight" stories before sharing them with friends, allowing readers to interact very literally with both the magazine and each other.

On the editorial side, all of the stories in Salt involve music and the arts in Syracuse and the immediate Syracuse area. The subjects were chosen in order to appeal to a young, culturally engaged, niche demographic. In general, the stories also tend to be very personal in their editorial focus, and a

majority of the stories are profiles, personal essays, Q&As or other people-based narratives. The intention of both the magazine's design and its stories was to encourage a certain type of highly personal engagement between the reader and Salt.

Some people have asked me how I intend to promote Salt or attract readers to it. While I have no doubts that Salt could function as a "real" magazine, the true intention of this project was to solve a problem – "how can we create an engaging, web-based magazine app?" – and propose possible solutions to user interface flaws in current iPad magazines. In that regards, this project was very theory-based. However, because these theories underlie a tidal shift in the media, they have very profound implications for the future of publishing and content consumption. If iPad magazines are the future, as many have claimed, then Salt is an opportunity to see the future of the media ten or 12 years early.