“Atomic Info” MVP White Paper

Sav Sidorov, Johann Cooper | Draft; 05/24/20

This paper describes a new idea we have for a minimum viable product (MVP).

Overview

Atoms are short and self-contained. They’re longer than a tweet, but shorter than a Wikipedia article. They describe — naturally — a particular event. Atoms can also be picked up and embedded in other software — note taking apps, blogs, you name it — in a similar fashion to Tweets or YouTube videos. This makes for easy sharing.

Chains can be constructed by linking together Atoms — thereby using the cards to craft a particular narrative by spatially laying them out and linking them.

The goal is to create a repository for primary and secondary source data formatted as small, easy to consume cards and have them shareable anywhere on the internet.

You can also think of this like Lego for news. Events Cards are building blocks which can stand on their own or can be used as part of a larger construction, potentially revealing novel insights.

Part of the inspiration for this MVP comes from wtfhappenedin1971.com. That website is a great example of taking a collection of standalone info and using it to make a larger point.

The Structure of an Atom

As mentioned above, Atoms are small, shareable cards that contain atomic information. Atomic means that the info is irreducible and self-contained. They are the fundamental building block of our MVP.

Atoms can be used to depict self-contained events. These would consist of a brief bulleted list, meant to summarize the piece of news in about a minute (tentatively thinking of limiting to a 700 character limit).

Atoms introduce the possibility of templates (similar to Wikipedia or WolframAlpha) for common types of news stories. The templates would be optional. Here's a couple of possible templates off the tops of our heads:

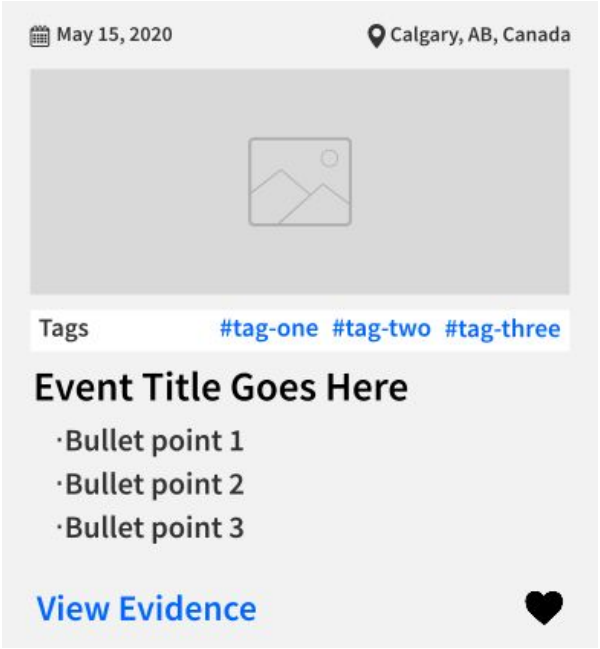
- Election win
    - Candidate: _____
    - % of Votes: _____
    - Turnout: _____

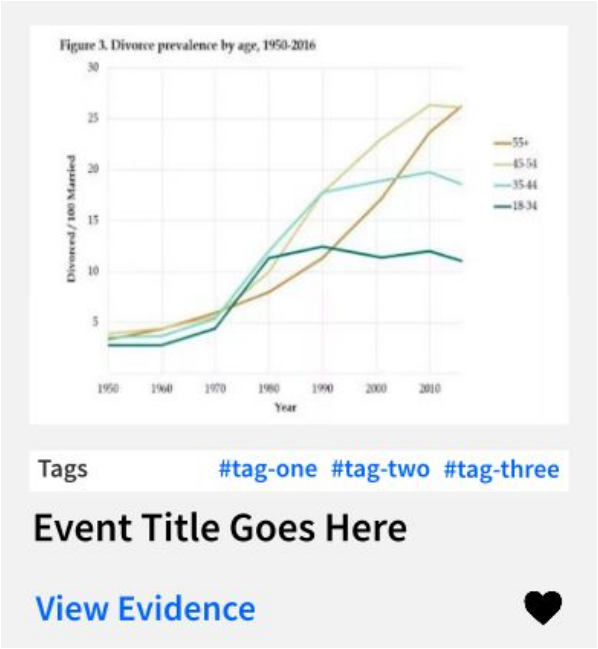
- Product announcement
    - Industry: _____
    - Manufacturer: _____

- Ship date: _____

Atoms can also be used to depict trends — basically becoming little cards with graphs on them. For the MVP, we're thinking of static graphs, although there's no reason why we couldn't have dynamic graphs that show evolution through time (like this one).

Here's how Atoms look like:





Metadata

Each Atom has metadata:

- Tags (one required)

  Work in a similar way to Steam tags, or Twitter hashtags. They're a way of categorizing Atoms. For example you'd be able to search *#donald-trump* and see all Atoms related to Donald Trump. You can search for multiple tags at once to find stories containing all of the searched-for tags. For example *#donald-trump* and *#impeachment*.
- Image (optional)

- Bullet points (optional)
- Title (required)
- Evidence (one source required)

  Each Atom has to be backed up by one piece of evidence.
- Speculative? (required)

  Binary answer. Are we sure of this Atom? How good is the source data?
- Date (optional)

  Can vary in specificity (May 14th, 2020 vs May 2020 vs Q2 2020)
- Location (optional)

  Can also vary in specificity (Calgary, AB, Canada vs AB, Canada)

Upvoting

The little hearts on the Atoms work like a *like button*. *Like* any Atoms you find interesting, and they'll show up in a separate feed of liked items for future reference. Not reinventing the wheel here. A like button would help users bookmark interesting Atoms, and perhaps notify them when popular Chains have been made using the bookmarked Atom.

Atoms in Action

Here's a recent news story: the 2020 Nova Scotia Attacks — in the form of three Atoms (the event as it happened, the police reaction, a law introduced partially as a consequence of the event):

I'd like to encourage others to try coming up with Atoms in this framework, and/or playing around with what metadata Atoms should require. The Atom is at the heart of this whole system: once we get this right, everything else will stem from it.

Atoms as Building Blocks (Chains)

Now that we've introduced self-contained Atoms, we can begin to use them as building blocks for larger systems. This comes back to our analogy of Lego for news.

With these connections, users can craft narratives similar to wtfhappenedin1971.com (imagine that website being made entirely of Atoms). Or, for example, let's say you want to track the statements that a public figure made over a certain period of time. Or show two

contradictory accounts of what happened. You'd be able to do all that with a simple set of tools.

You can also upvote Chains as you do with Atoms. The most interesting and/or insightful Chains constructed would rise to the top.

You can also use created Chains as a starting point for your own construction, or suggest changes to existing Chains.

Chains are basically the way in which you can a) draw conclusions from and b) detect patterns in news stories. They're the language with which you'll be able to communicate patterns.

It should be made clear that the purpose of Chains is NOT to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. They're more like narratives — patterns that can be put together out of base Atoms. As with any narrative, there's inevitably some degree of cherry picking involved. We think that's okay, although we would love to hear others' input.

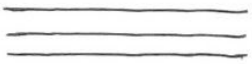
Something that hasn't been thought through yet: what kind of quality control should there be for Chains, if any?

The Suite of Tools for Chain Construction

Any Atom can be linked to any other, rhizomatically or hierarchically. You get 4 types of links:

The Default link. Implies some ambiguous connection.

The Causal link. Implies causality.

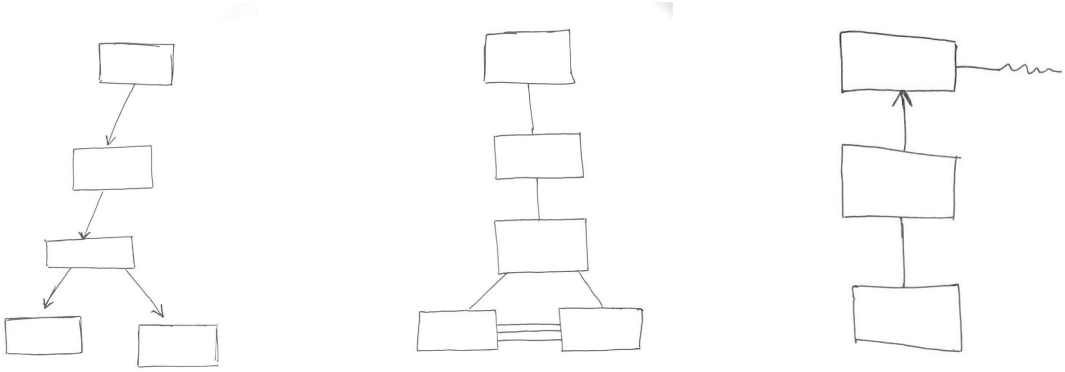


The Contradictory link. Implies contradiction.

The Missing link. Implies missing information. You'd be able to attach a note to the dangling end of it and elaborate on what you think is missing.

Abstract Examples of Chains

Here's how these Chains might look:

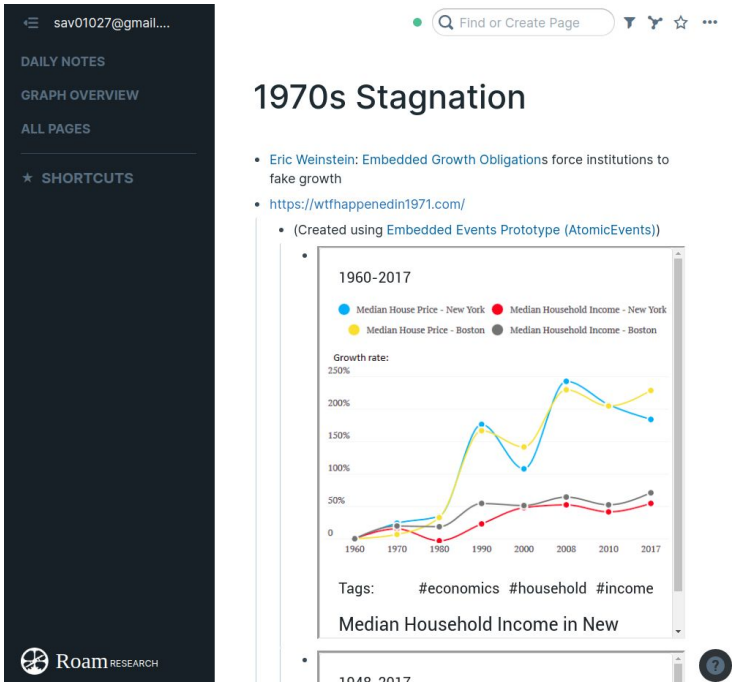


Embedding

This is a very crucial aspect of this MVP idea. The notion that you could take Atoms and do something with them outside of the platform is important. Include Atoms in an essay you're

writing about politics. Add them to your Roam DB to gain access to more powerful tools. Share Atoms with friends. Go nuts. Maybe you'd even be able to embed whole Chains.

Here's an example of an Atom being embedded in Roam:



Conclusion

Atoms are small, shareable cards that contain atomic information. They are created by users, and the database of Atoms will grow as more users contribute.

Atoms can be picked up and embedded in other places around the web — note taking apps like Roam Research and personal blogs, for example.

Atoms can also serve as the building blocks for larger constructions called Chains. Chains are created by linking together Atoms using 4 different types of links. Chains are also user created. The most insightful ones will be promoted, shining a light on novel conclusions and unseen patterns.

If implemented properly, we believe that a system like this would help cut through the noise and improve our ability to make sense of the world — as individuals and as a collective.