Heuristic Evaluation On Micro-Blogging Platforms

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By:

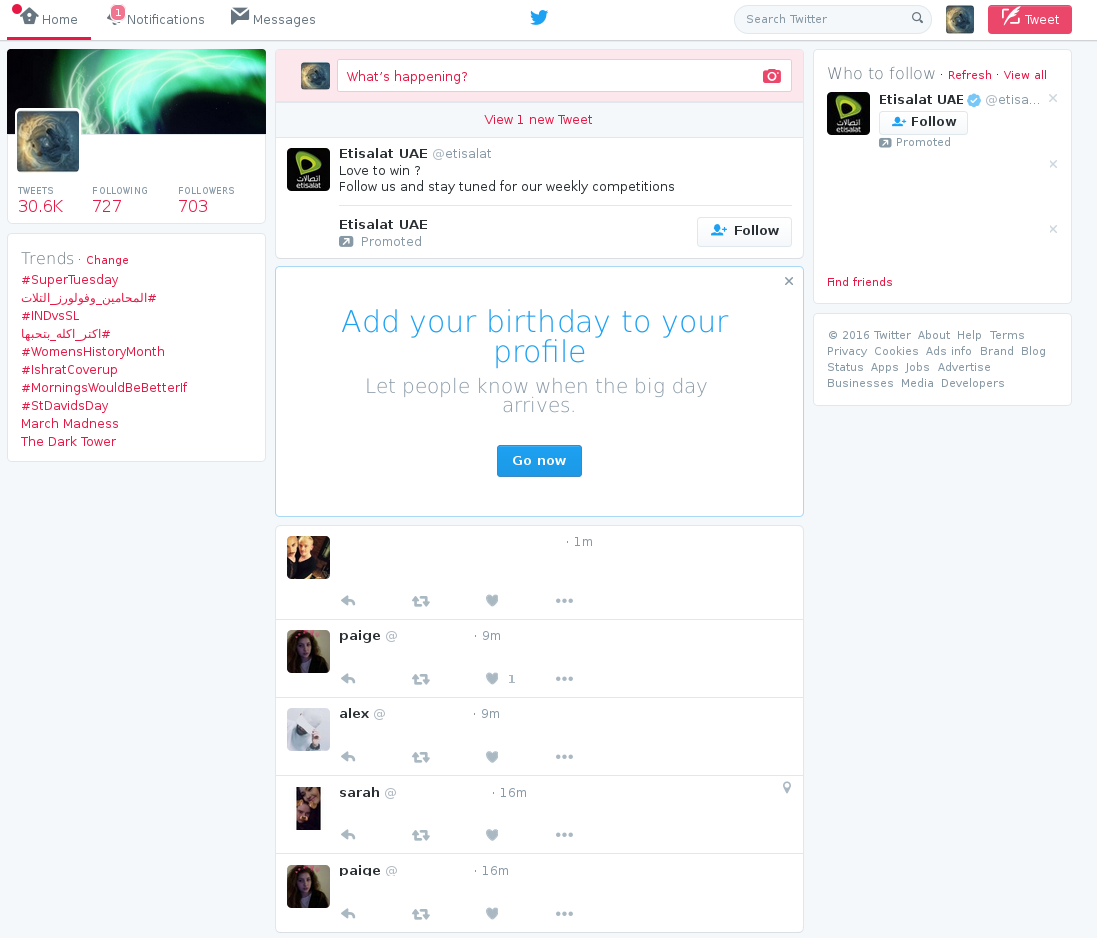
Ahmed Hesham

Heuristic evaluation, is a technique developed originally in 1990 by Rolf Molich and Jakob Nielsen, before being improved in 1994 by Nielsen, to help locate usability problems, in user interface design. This technique however, is not a to be used as a replacement for usability testing, in which the interface is tested on actual users. Microblogging platforms are a new trend in the internet, where they are a hybrid of both blogging and instant messaging that enable users to post short messages in the form of a status, they are mostly used for promotions of products. The most renowned platform is Twitter.

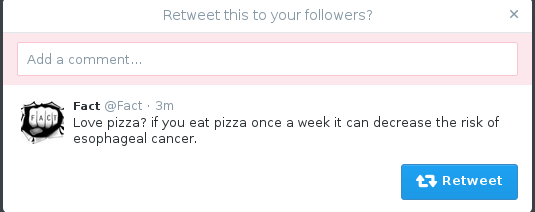
Heuristic evaluation allocates 10 different assessors, to rate the interface according to predefined heuristics. Which are:

1. Visibility of system status - the system should provide appropriate feedback to users happening within a certain frame of time.
2. Match between system and real world - the system should be presented in the target user’s language and terminology and present information in logical order.
3. User control and freedom - the system should handle if a user should perform an unwanted function to roll back or reapply said operation, furthermore it should allow the user to opt out of an operation with a clearly marked exit button.
4. Consistency and standards - the system should not present ambiguous operations to the user; platform conventions should be applied.
5. Error prevention - error prone conditions should not exist or request user confirmation before they perform an error prone action.
6. Recognition than recall - users are not required to memorize the locations of items in the interface, they should be presented clearly, nor is the user required to remember information from one dialogue to another.
7. Flexibility and efficiency - system should cater to both experienced and inexperienced users by tailoring specific actions to each, for example accelerators are faster for experienced users.
8. Aesthetic and minimalist design - dialogues should only contain relevant information, any extra unneeded information reduces the visibility of required information.
9. Help users recognize, diagnose and recover from errors - error messages should be expressed in plain language (i.e. no advanced terminology), pinpoint the problem and suggest a valid solution.
10. Help and documentation - help and documentation should be available to the user, with tools for easy retrieval of information.

– Twitter

Launched in 2006 by Jack Dorsey. Over the years Twitter has had numerous make overs. This is current display of the timeline (Some data has been hidden for discretion):

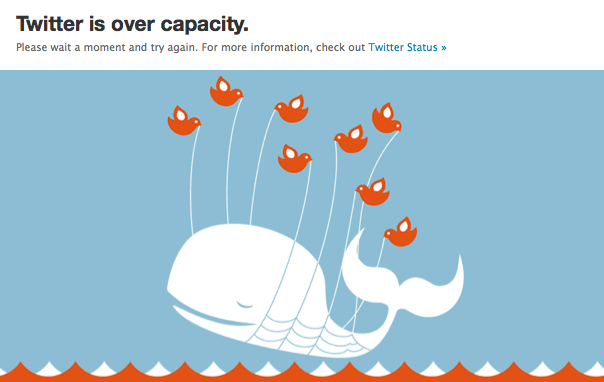
1. Visibility of system status – severity 0
   1. Compliances: the interface provides a constant update of the timeline for new tweets, which occurs every couple of minutes displayed as the box under the tweet option. The tabs in the top left are highlighted to indicate, which view the user is in.
2. Match between system and real world – severity 1
   1. Compliances: the interface does use simple terminologies for simple users; furthermore, simple icons are used to indicate operations, such as: retweet, like and more options. Tweets are shown in chronological order.
   2. Violations: the alias for the word “post” being “tweet”, may confuse new users as to what it performs.

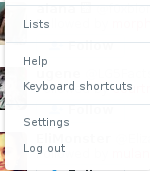


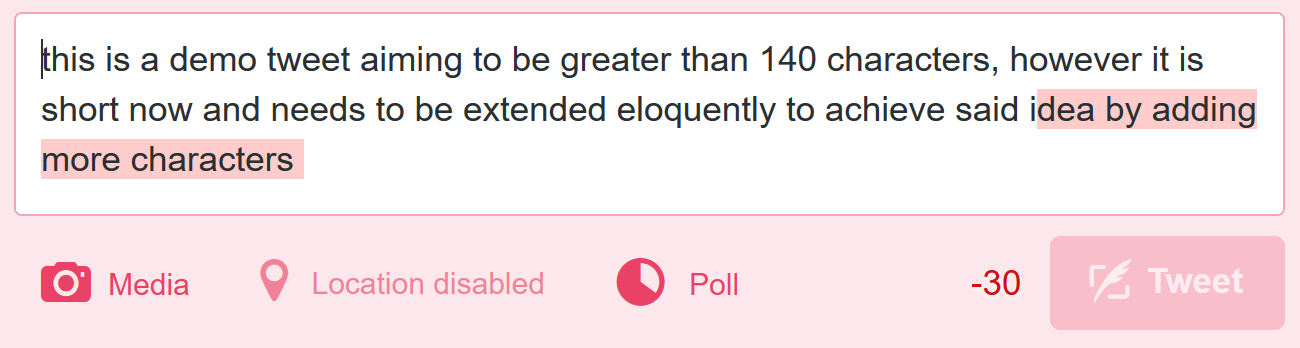
1. User control and freedom – severity 3
   1. Compliances: when a user clicks a retweet button, they are faced the above dialogue, there is a close button, lest the user wishes to opt out.
   2. Violations: the close button is not big enough to catch the user’s attention, however it does exist. In addition, should a user wish to undo a retweet, they should navigate to their profile, find the retweeted tweet and re-click the retweet button to undo the action. Similarly, for like button. If a user accidently clicked the logout button in profile menu, there is no confirmation dialogue, they will be logged out directly.

Screenshot from 2016-03-01 20-23-59Screenshot from 2016-03-01 20-40-37

1. Consistency and standards – severity 2
   1. Compliances: there are no ambiguous operations to the user.
   2. Violations: over the years, the favorite button has been changed from a star, to a heart with no notification to inform the user.



1. Error prevention – severity 2
   1. Compliances: prior to the switch to a JVM based language from ruby in 2011, twitter often faced overloads and went through numerous “down times”. After the switch the error no longer appears.
   2. Violations: random errors occur with no description indicating the cause, a message “an error has occurred” appears at the top of the page, offering the user to refresh the page in an effort, that the error will be fixed.
2. Recognition rather than recall – severity 1
   1. Compliances: all the main operations are laid out in front of the user for easy access
   2. Violations: the lists view is hidden inside the profile menu; new users won’t be able to find it easily. In addition, the delete tweet option is hidden inside the more options button in the tweet
3. Flexibility and efficiency – severity 0
   1. Compliances: the interface caters for both advanced and novice users by providing buttons for all actions, and by providing shortcuts for advanced users. To access the list shortcuts, list the user has to view it from profile menu
4. Aesthetic and minimalistic design – severity 0
   1. Compliances: twitter has been redesigning its interface over the years to match the current trends. As of 2014 it has switched over to minimalistic design.
   2. Violations: dialogues have been on point, except the find friends suggestion box, which offers corporate accounts being promoted due to advertisements, such as Etisalat.



1. Help users recognize, diagnose and recover from errors – severity 0
   1. Compliances: twitter provides clear markers for errors, for example when a user creates a tweet with more than 140 character, the tweet box turns red, extra characters are highlighted and tweet button it grayed out.
   2. Violations: random errors occur, with no indication as to what causes them except that they ask user to refresh the page.

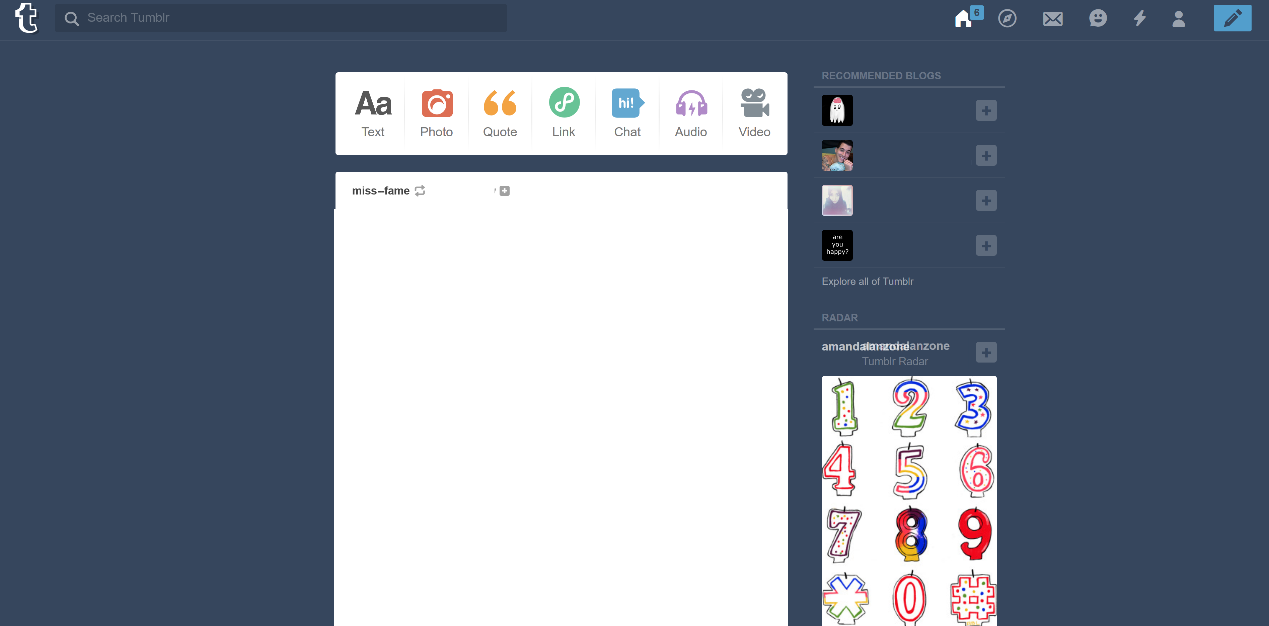


1. Help and documentation – severity 1
   1. Compliances: twitter has a vast support center, including how to use twitter for new users and ability to search help.
   2. Violations: the help center is located in the profile menu, which can be hard to find for new users.

– Tumblr

Another microblogging platform founded by David Karp in 2007. Similar to twitter, it offers the users to upload pictures and videos and to create posts but without the limitation on text size.

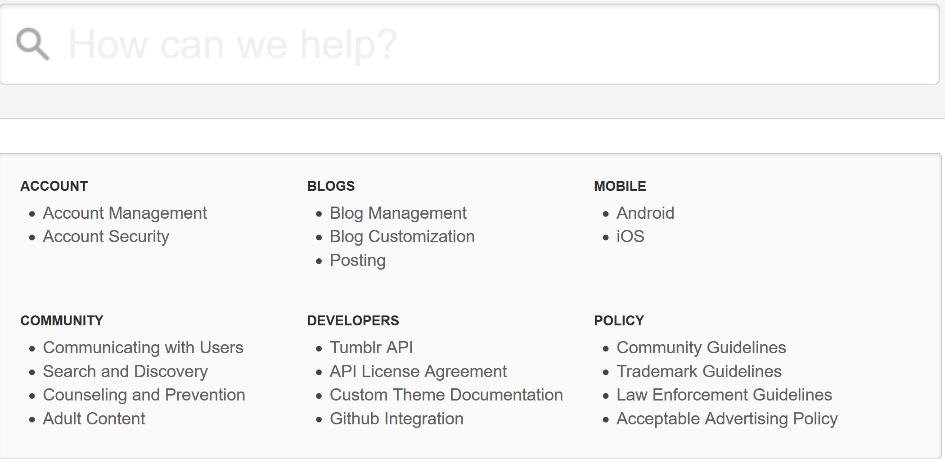
The landing page after logging in



1. Visibility of system status – severity 0
   1. Compliances: similar to twitter, Tumblr checks for new posts in the background, and displays the number of new posts on the home icon on the top. Also a small box in the bottom left appears whenever a person like or reblogs a post a user creates or reblogs.
2. Match between system and real world – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Tumblr uses simple terminologies to attract the user



1. User control and freedom – severity 2
   1. Compliances: should a user wish to abort an action, there is a clearly marked exit button
   2. Violations: should a user wish to undo an action such as a reblog, they need to navigate to their profile and delete the post manually
2. Consistency and standards – severity 3
   1. Compliances: apart from violations below, there are no more ambiguities in the interface
   2. Violations: there arises some ambiguity between text, link and quote, users need to try them out to see the difference. Furthermore, there exists an ambiguity between chat and messages.
3. Error prevention – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Tumblr has mostly eliminated error prone conditions to provide a consistent experience for users, for example, there is a limit on image size, should a user upload an image greater than the limit, the post will not be created and the user will be notified that the image is too large.
4. Recognition rather than recall – severity 1
   1. Compliances: Tumblr splays out all the user functions in-front of the user for easy access.
   2. Violations: Tumblr heavily relies on icons that text for the user to use its functions, the user may at first need to get acquainted with them.
5. Flexibility and efficiency of use – severity 3
   1. Compliances: similar to twitter, Tumblr also caters for novice and advanced users, by providing shortcuts for advanced users and buttons for novice users
   2. Violations: shortcuts are not documented, and found through trial and error and shared between users
6. Aesthetic and minimalist design – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Tumblr has been using minimalistic design over the years. If a user has linked their twitter account with Tumblr, a button to tweet the post appears, other than that no irrelevant information appears on dialogues.
7. Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors – severity 4
   1. Compliances: generally, there are no errors however should a user encounter a problem there is a help center
   2. Violations: banned accounts are simply removed from the system while the link the account is not, thus it maps to a nonexistent page throwing a “404 not found error”. The user does not know whether the account they clicked on is banned or not, meanwhile deactivated accounts have their URL changed to “deactivated”.

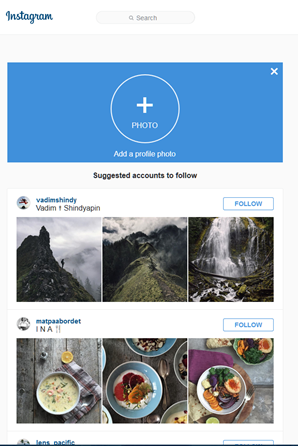


1. Help and documentation – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Tumblr offers a help center, with the ability to search for common problems or email a representative for help

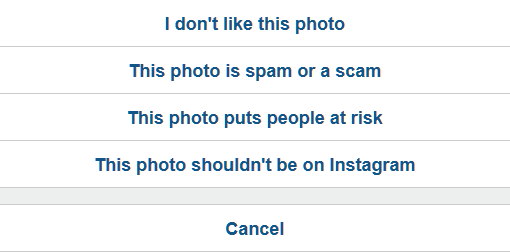
– Instagram

A microblogging platform similar to twitter, except that users can only post pictures from the mobile application and comment on pictures. Founded in October 2010 by Kevin Systrom.

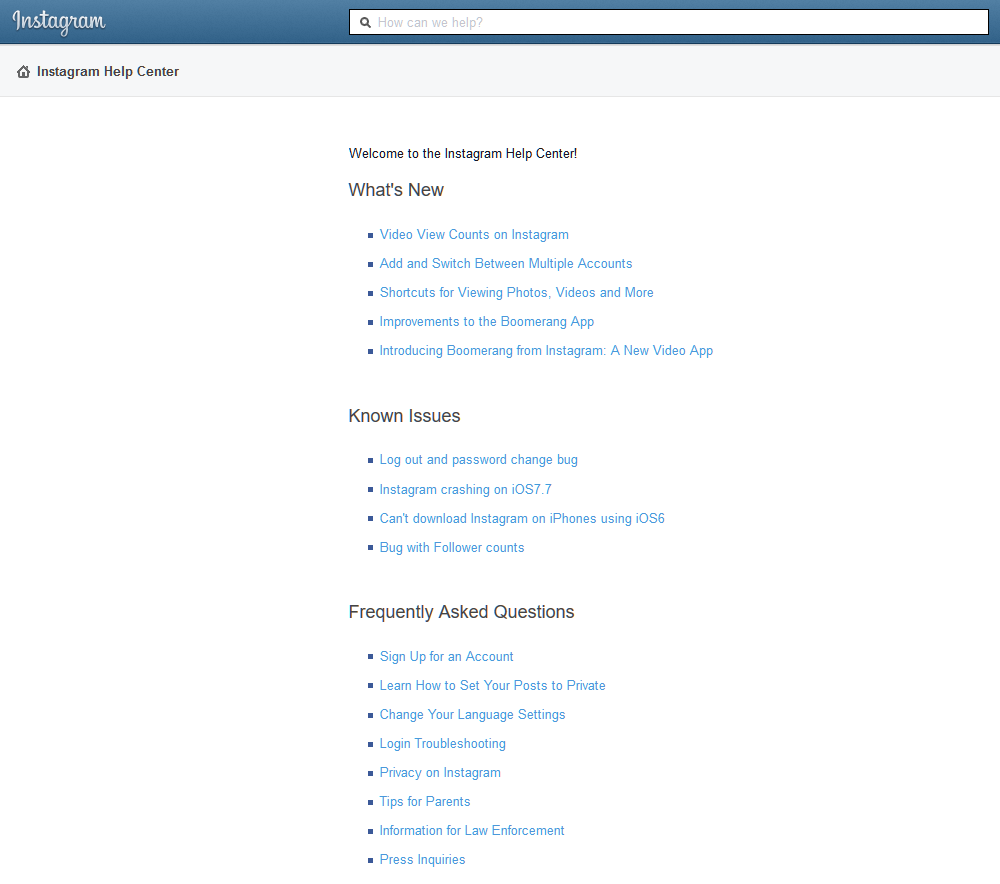
Landing page:



1. Visibility of system status – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Instagram’s dashboard immediately shows what is missing in the profile (this is a newly created profile) and offers account suggestions.
   2. Violations: after following 1 account, all suggestions of accounts went away, but the mobile application did ask for finding friends, using email or other social sites while signing up.
2. Match between system and real world – severity 0
   1. Compliances: the website uses simple terminologies to attract the user and the use of acknowledged icons for user operations, such as a heart for likes.



1. User control and freedom – severity 4
   1. Compliances: Instagram offers clear cancel buttons should a user reports a picture
   2. Violations: the site does not offer any operations on the posts a user creates, except liking their post, embedding the post or adding a caption; similarly, for other users’ posts.
2. Consistency and standards – severity 0
   1. Compliances: the site only has limited operations so no ambiguity arises
3. Error prevention – severity 0
   1. Compliances: due to the limited amount of operations a user can perform, many errors are eliminated. However, should a user for example wish to edit their profile and remove the username field, the input field turns red.
4. Recognition rather than recall – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Instagram uses simple icons to indicate operations, for instance a heart for liking, a speech bubble for commenting and ellipses for other options.
5. Flexibility and efficiency of use – severity 0
   1. Compliances: there are no needs for shortcuts, as there are only basic operations in the website, all operations have simple icons to use.
6. Aesthetic and minimalist design – severity 1
   1. Compliances: Instagram uses a very simple design following minimalism standards, however the design varies between dashboard and help center greatly (see image below)
7. Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors – severity 0
   1. Compliances: due to limited set of operations Instagram has avoided errors.

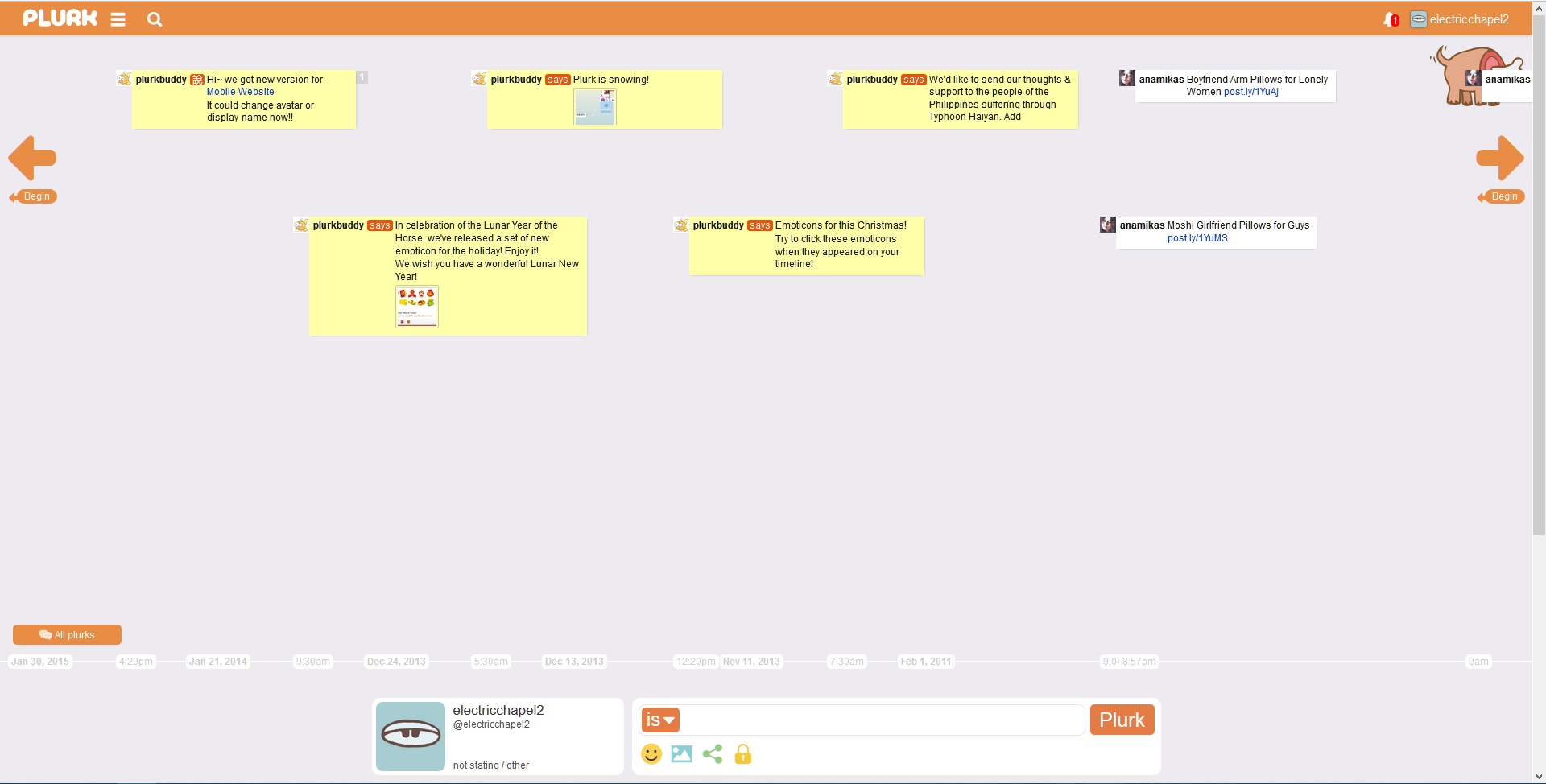


1. Help and documentation – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Instagram offers a help center with ability to search, and frequently asked questions.

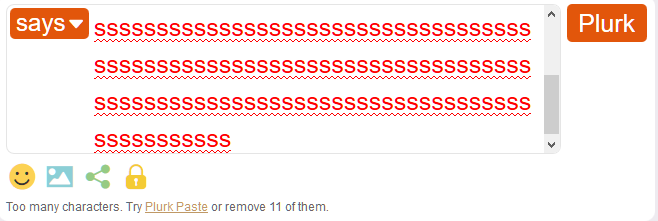
–Plurk

A microblogging platform created in May 2008 by a team name “A-Team”.

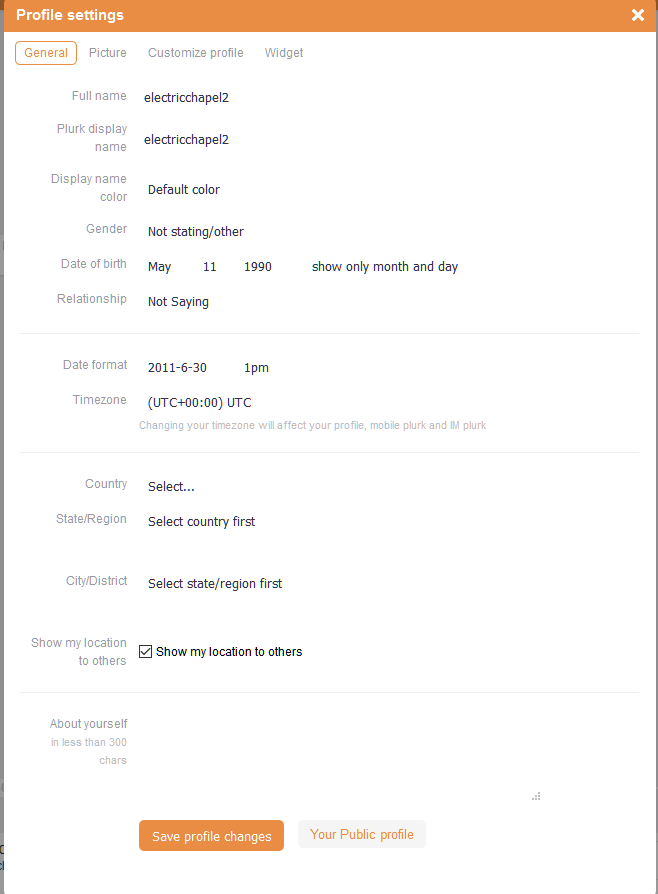
Landing page



1. Visibility of system status – severity 2
   1. Compliances: Plurk displays a timeline of all plurks (similar to tweets, with the exception that they are 210 character) from friends and suggested users. It also provides notifications for actions (such as confirm email in top right)
   2. Violations: Plurk does not indicate new plurks, the user should scroll the timeline, even though there is no indication that it is scrollable.
2. Match between system and real world – severity 1
   1. Compliances: generally, the terminologies used it simple to understand.
   2. Violations: Plurk does not describe all terminology such as: karma.
3. User control and freedom – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Plurk offers undo options for user actions such as, replurk, like, mute by simply clicking on the button again, they will change colour to grey.
4. Consistency and standards – severity 4
   1. Violations: users a left wondering what many items with no direct explanations on items; such as karma, fans, friends, badges and promote.



1. Error prevention – severity 0
   1. Compliances: Plurk prevents errors from occurring, for example if a user exceeds 210 character in a plurk, all text turns red and plurk button refuses to post.
2. Recognition rather than recall – severity 2
   1. Compliances: most user options, are laid out in front of the user
   2. Violations: there is a heavy usage of menus, requiring user to remember where items a placed in which menu. Furthermore, upon logging in there was no indication, that there were more options below the plurk dialogue.
3. Flexibility and efficiency of use – severity 4
   1. Violations: Plurk does requires experienced users, there are no shortcuts and furthermore, requires knowledge of all actions and they tend to be hidden in menus.



1. Aesthetic and minimalist design – severity 4
   1. Violations: there is no modern design pattern being used, most dialogues are not well presented, and the use of dark orange shades, gives a dull life to the site.
2. Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors – severity N/A
   1. No errors encountered, evaluator not applicable



1. Help and documentation – severity 3
   1. Compliances: Plurk does offer a help center and how to use some of its features.
   2. Violations: no search is available; the help center is not named help it is rather name “FAQs”. In addition, there is no visible contact us link in the help, it is hidden inside one of the options.

References:

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<https://www.nngroup.com/topic/heuristic-evaluation/>

http://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/heuristic-evaluation.html