

Design Evaluation of

Vox

homepage

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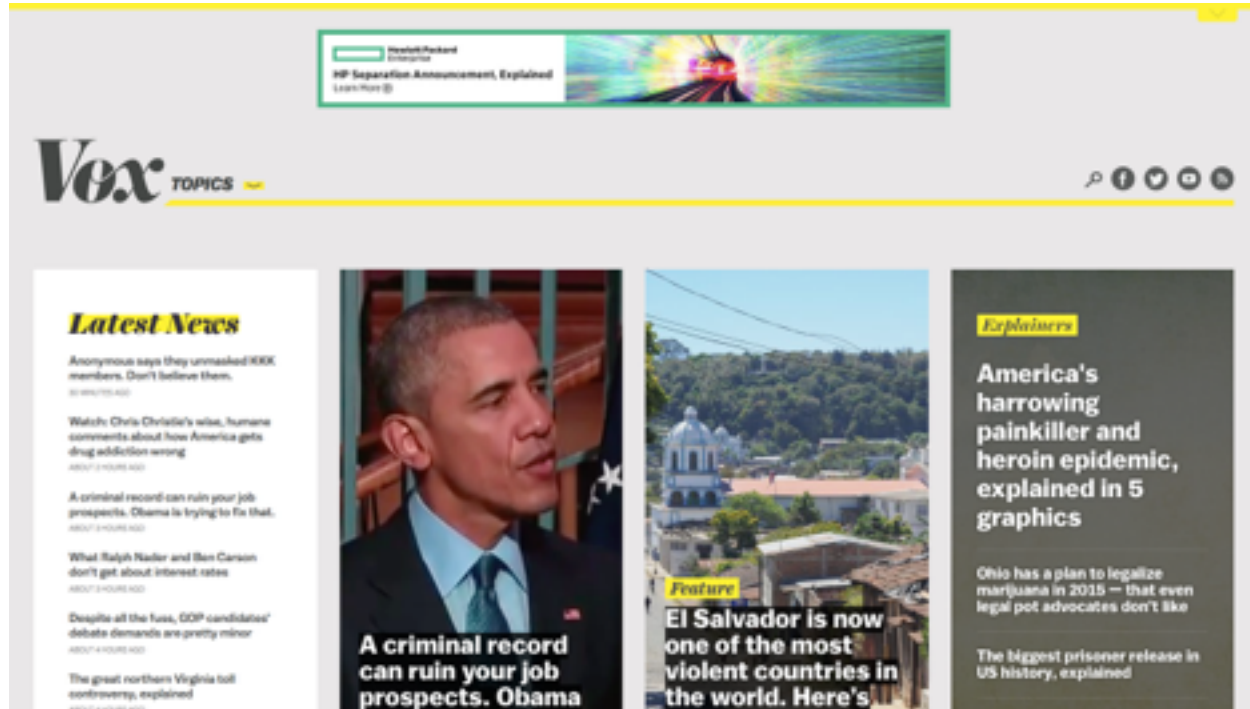
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Intro (1)

In this usability report I studied the vox.com homepage. Vox is a general interest news site, therefore, I studied their site to see how well people could find new news, people could find particular types of news, and how well Vox explained the news (one of their goals). In this study I was particularly interested in discoverability on the Vox homepage. In total, I had six participants in this study and used three different research methods.

Problem Area, Summarize Topic, Outcomes (1.1)

The news homepage is dying, currently most traffic for news sites comes from outside sources such as social media, or newsletters (Seward). With this in mind, Vox aims to make a more interesting home page (Bell). With this problem being considered I was interested in seeing how Vox has designed their home page to make it attractive, inspire users to visit it, and have it be valuable to their users. Vox's tagline is "Explain the news" and this is something they mentioned having a desire to do when they designed the site and it's content (Klein, Bell, Yglesias) so as I studied the usability of the site I was also considering how much they were emphasizing their explainers and card stacks (two ways that Vox explains the news). The outcomes of this study showed that most of the core functions of the home page work well. None of the participants of this study said they would use the home page rather than just

consuming news the way they do now (5 out of 6 participants just read news by links from social media or newsletters). So in this way, the homepage is not necessarily effective in attracting people to use it. There are some usability issues with the home page that could be easily fixed though. I will discuss these problems in detail in my conclusion's "Design Implications" section.

Research Methods (2)

In this study, I used three different research methods. These methods were heuristic evaluation, task assignment, and interviewing. For each of the methods I used I had 3 participants. The methods are in the order they happened chronologically. I ordered them in this way because it allows the reader to see how I came to my conclusions at the end of this study, and how each part of my research contributed to that conclusion.

Heuristic Evaluation (2.1)

One of my research methods was a heuristic evaluation based off of Nielsen's 10 most important criteria for a good homepage (Nielsen). I believe in some way, all of these heuristics were considered in the design of Vox's homepage. I approached this part of the study by reading each heuristic then analyzing the homepage based on that heuristic. The heuristic evaluation gave me a great way to start considering the usability of the site and identifying potential problems to investigate further in my next research methods.

Findings (2.1.1)

The criteria for each of these heuristics is detailed more in depth in this article by Nielsen "Top 10 Guidelines for Homepage Usability"

1. Include a One-Sentence Tagline

Vox does not have a one sentence tagline on their homepage, although they do have one a homepage title that appears in the browsers tab bar which says "Explain the news". This is one of their moves towards a more minimalist news site, and I think that this move is effective.

2. Write a Window Title with Good Visibility in Search Engines and Bookmark Lists

Vox does a great job of making sure that their intentions are shown on search engines. They give a brief explanation of the services their site provides.



3. Group all Corporate Information in One Distinct Area

All of the corporate information for Vox is in their footer, which makes sense considering their primary purpose is not to promote themselves but rather their content. Vox even maintains a blog of how they developed their site, which is particularly interesting for anyone interested not only about their corporate information but also about their products.

4. Emphasize the Site's Top High-Priority Tasks

The site's high priority tasks are to provide useful news to their readers in a way that is friendly and explained. The four main tasks I would assume Vox wants to enable users to do is:

1. Find breaking or new stories
2. Get explained version of news stories
3. Find news that is of interest to you personally
4. Allow users to search for any news they need to find

I believe the homepage facilitates most of these functions well, except for providing explanations of the news. Although there is an explainers section on the homepage it is text heavy, and therefore does not really capture your attention compared to other image heavy sections on the home page.

5. Include a Search Input Box

The Vox site does include a search function, although it is not conventional and would violate NNG's standard for a search box (Sherwin). Rather than showing when a user first lands on the home page, one must select the search icon to open up a box that allows a user to type. In this way, the search feature is far less visible than a traditional search box. This does conform with the minimalist aesthetic of the site but at a loss of usability and visibility.

6. Show Examples of Real Site Content

Vox does a great job of displaying their most recent and relevant content. The "Latest News" list is the first place I look when I land on the page because the heading is accented with yellow. The whole homepage is filled with new stories or stories that have been popular in the last 24 hours. There is not really any filler content on the homepage except for ads, but there is not an overwhelming amount of them.

7. Begin Link Names with the Most Important Keyword

There is only really one set of links on the home page those are the links to different sections of the site. The link names are just the word of the topic or section they link to, all of the section headings are very clear (Culture, Technology, Policy & Politics, etc.) The navigation structure to access these links was not easily visible to me though, which could cause problems with discoverability to those sections of the site.

8. Offer Easy Access to Recent Homepage Features

This is one feature that Vox is potentially lacking in, though this may be the nature of news sites, and where the search bar excels. If you reach the end of the home page, there is a “See all stories” button that leads to a list of the stories in chronological order, so you could technically find very old stories, although this is a highly ineffective way to find an old story.

9. Don't Over-Format Critical Content, Such as Navigation Areas

The only navigation area on this site, which is used to change sections is actually hidden by default in a drop-down menu, which could be an issue if a user can't understand how the bar works. Yellow is an accent color used throughout the homepage, but I don't believe it is used in excess, and it creates a strong sense of brand throughout the site.

10. Use Meaningful Graphics

Vox does a great job in this category, and their homepage is certainly more concerned with meaningful images than most other news sites such as New York Times who focus more on text. This is interesting as it violates the view of the traditional newspaper as a wall of black text with the occasional image. Occasionally though, there are images that are not very meaningful or visually interesting, they are usually stock images. These images feel very out of place among the other images on their homepage.

Overview

After this heuristic evaluation, I narrowed down some problem areas on the home page. These included the hidden affordance of the topics bar menu, looking for older posts, whether or not Vox's decision to focus on images rather than text is effective, and how easy it is to find an explanatory articles.

Task Assignment (2.2)

Following the heuristic analysis, I wanted to see if some of the usability problems I had identified such as the changing categories, looking for older posts, whether or not text vs. images was effective, and how easy it was to find explainer articles. I gave each of the participants three tasks, which were

“You’ve just woken up and you want to get updated on the news, use vox.com to catch up on the days news”

“Vox seeks to explain the news to it’s readers. Perhaps you are confused about what Benghazi is, find an explanation of Benghazi using vox.com”

“You have 10 minutes to kill between classes, and are looking for a quick read, find an article of interest to you related to culture on vox.com”

For this study, I had users come to my house and use my laptop in my dining room. Therefore this was essentially a lab study, as I did not go to the environments of my participants. As users completed their tasks, I asked them to try to think aloud so that I could get insight into their interaction with the site. On average it took about 10 minutes for users to complete the task assignment study. I videotaped users on my computer so that I could review their actions later. I designed the tasks in this assignment from NNG’s guide for creating task scenarios (Nielsen Norman Group).

Participants (2.2.1)

For my participants, I was able to find people who were somewhat part of Vox’s target audience, as recommended by NNG in their guide for creation of task scenarios in usability testing (Nielsen Norman Group). Participants were all college students who are web-native consumers and could be considered part of Vox’s target market which is described by them as “a covetable community of young yet affluent decision makers who are highly influential in both their personal and professional circles, Vox is the leading digital news platform for connecting quality brands with discerning web-native consumers.” (Vox Media)

Two of the participants (P1 and P2) had very little experience on the Vox site, one of the participants (P3) uses Vox as their primary source of news. This allowed me to get an idea about how intuitive the site is, and how familiarity with the site could affect navigation. All three of these participants use news sites to varying degrees in their regular lives.

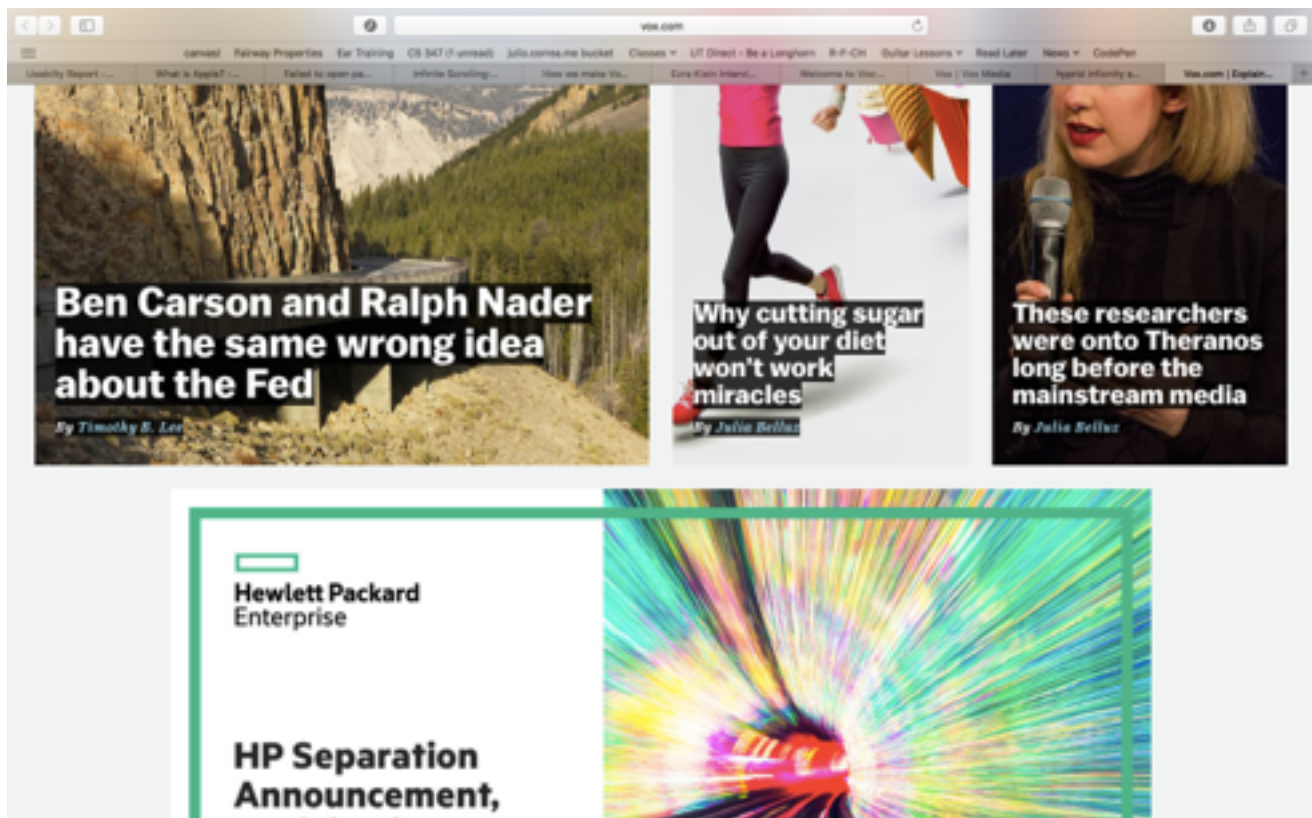
Findings (2.2.2)

For each task I assigned, I will detail the behaviors of the participants. Once again, P1 and P2 are not frequent users of the Vox site. P3 uses the Vox site daily and it is their primary news source.

“You’ve just woken up and you need to find the days news, use vox.com to get updated on the news of the day”

P1 and P2 first looked at the top news of the day, then scrolled down the page to see what else was on the home page, they opened various articles and felt caught up. P3 knew that in middle of the homepage was the list of the top 100 stories so they went straight there to see

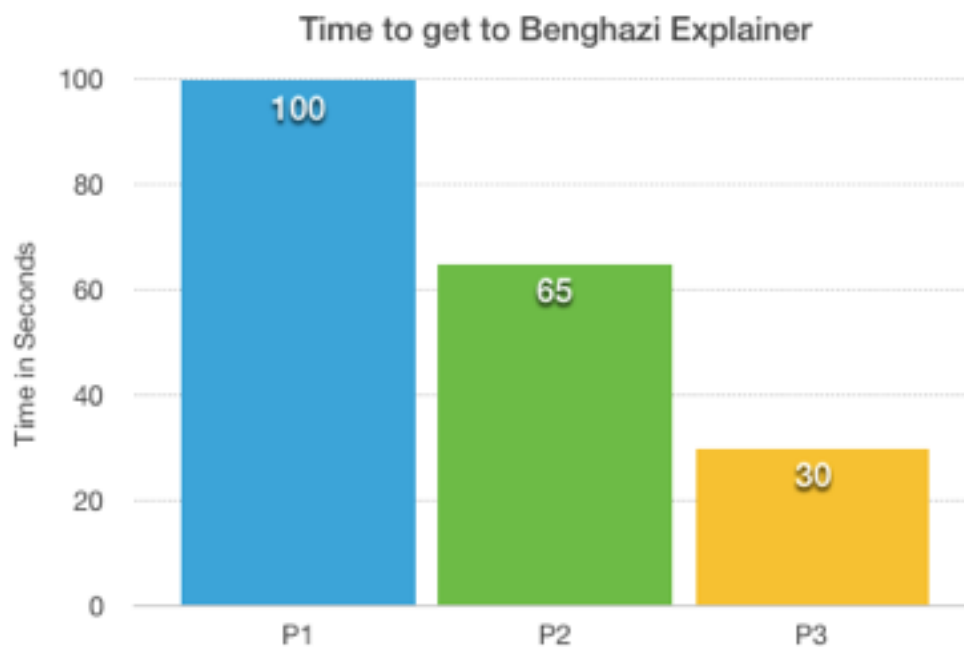
what was most popular. The stories that P1 and P2 opened were both stories that had an image, and the stories they mentioned aloud were also stories with images. Which means that the images are effective for creating a hierarchy of importance in terms of stories and focus the readers attention on themselves. One thing worth mentioning is that while scrolling P1 stopped at the full width ad shown here, my suspicion is that he did so because he thought it was a false floor, as mentioned by NNG (Bedford).



“Vox seeks to explain the news to it’s readers. Perhaps you are confused about what Benghazi is, find an explanation of Benghazi using vox.com”

P1 and P2 both went to the topics section, and changed the topic to “World” and then scrolled until they found a story about Benghazi. When they arrived at the Benghazi store they didn’t successfully find an explainer, card stack, or timeline. So in this way Vox failed to find them a proper explanatory piece. Meanwhile, P3 who was familiar with a feature Vox calls “Explainers” just used the search feature to find a story about Benghazi that explained the topic by searching “Banghazi Explainer”.

This implies, that the explainer features may not be very obvious in Vox to new users, and that the search magnifying glass is not prominent enough to influence the way users might behave on the site. It is worth noting that I first noticed the problem with the search affordance when P3 clicked on the magnifying glass, began to type, then realized that the cursor hadn't automatically been put into the text field. This is mentioned in my design implication section more heavily. P3 who used search, got to the explainer much faster and more successfully than either of the other two participants could even reach an article about Benghazi as evidenced by this chart:



“You have 10 minutes to kill between classes, and are looking for a quick read, find an article of interest to you related to culture on vox.com”

Again, P1 and P2 behaved similarly in this part of the study. They changed the topic at the top of the page, and scrolled through the section I had tasked them with finding a story in. P3 used the search function to search the name of a culture writer whose writing she enjoyed. Once she reached that writers page, she selected their newest article. This is another example of P3 being far more comfortable using search, and enabling her to use the site with more control.

Overview

This portion of the study led me to a couple conclusions. I wondered if the search affordance was not very visible, so perhaps it didn't encourage being used often. This is why P3 who knew the site well and felt comfortable using it, used it more often. Users also read the headlines of

stories featured with images aloud while browsing the site, which showed that the images were effective in letting people know where to focus. There was also a moment when P1 was scrolling through the homepage when he scrolled back up as if he'd reached the bottom, which might be a problem with false floors, while watching P3 use search I first noticed the problem with the cursor moving into the text field, and lastly explainers were not easily found by new users.

Interview (2.3)

After having performed my heuristic evaluation and task assignment, I constructed a list of questions I still had about the Vox site. The interviews were actually very useful in helping me identify new issues with the site and reaffirm suspicions about usability problems. Each of these interviews was around 10 minutes, prior to the interview I asked all 3 participants to browse the Vox site for 5 - 10 minutes to familiarize themselves with the site. The interview consisted of a series of questions that I felt logically expanded on some of concerns with the usability of the site I had discovered in the last two research methods, such as the image-heaviness of the home page, and the lack of focus on explainers and card stacks.

Participants (2.3.1)

The participants in this portion of my study were also all users that were near the target audience of Vox just like the last research method.

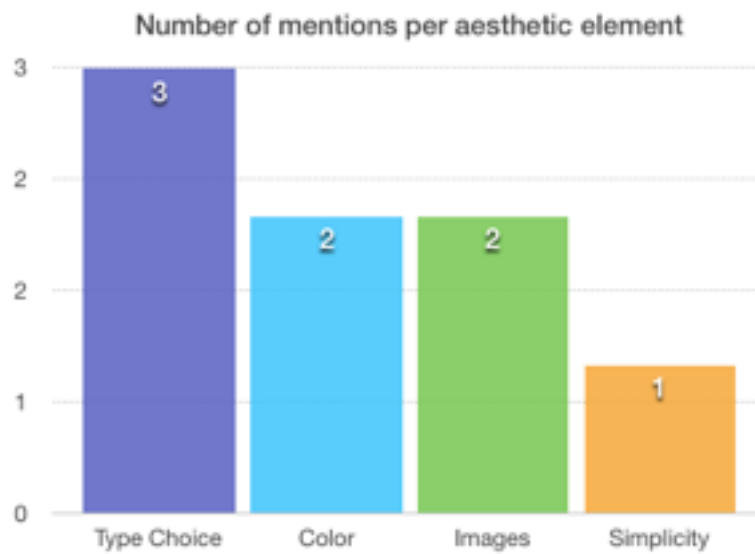
The participants in my interviews ranged from ages 20 - 25, are all college educated (one of whom was a college graduate), and 2 of them had prior experience with Vox, while one of them had never used Vox before. Again, I wanted to get experienced and new users opinions on the site. All three of these participants use news sites to varying degrees in their regular lives.

Findings (2.3.2)

I created a rough set of questions for my first interview, to allow us to have a conversation that was more free flowing. After the 1st interview, I added a couple more particular questions that my first interview had made me consider. I will detail the answers to a few of the questions I felt were particularly interesting and led me to consider some of the design implications I came to.

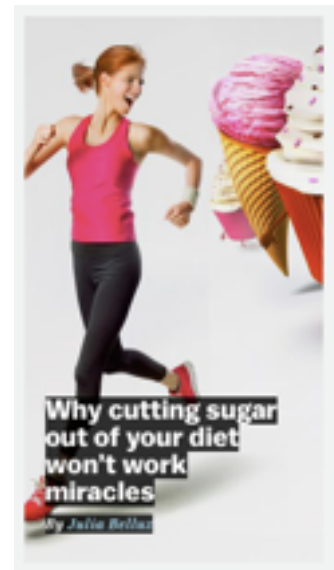
How aesthetically pleasing or displeasing do you find the Vox site?

All 3 users said they find the Vox site attractive. This chart shows the specific parts of the site people mentioned. All 3 interviewees mentioned the type choice, which is definitely crucial with the branding of a news site. So this is an effective part of the homepage design because as know from the aesthetic-usability effect, we perceive pretty things as working better. Participants also really liked the images on the site and the yellow color of the site used for branding.



How do you feel about the ratio of text to images on the homepage of Vox?

The overall consensus was that there is a nice balance between text and images, and that the stories with images feel more important or as though they are being featured. Which is an idea supported by the task assignment in which readers seemed to focus on the stories with text. 2 of the participants commented on the use of stock images for some stories, and how this was off-putting (example to the right). This was something I also found in my heuristic analysis of the site.



If you needed to use the search feature of Vox, where would you look? How clear was that to you the first time you used Vox if you can remember?

I asked all 3 of the interviewees how they felt about the search feature of Vox's site and all stated that they felt it was a typical set up, placed in a spot they have learned to expect search bars in. Although two of the participants did comment on how subtle it was, and felt that it could have been an expanded search bar instead.

Have you ever used Vox explainers or card stacks?

My suspicion about the lack of integration of card stacks in their website was confirmed. Two out of my 3 participants did not know what Vox card stacks or explainers were despite the fact they had both used the site previously. I think this could be remedied by making users view card stacks or explainer in their articles, which will be discussed further in my design implications section.

After having spent some time on the Vox homepage, would you consider coming to this page more often?

All 3 participants said they are satisfied with the way they consume news (newsletters and social media), and didn't think that coming to Vox's homepage for news be worthwhile to them.

Overview

The interviews served their role as a support for my findings in the previous two research methods, but ultimately provided me with some great qualitative information about how users felt about the aesthetic parts of Vox's website.

Conclusion & Findings (3)

Some of my intuitions about the design of the site based on my heuristic analysis were incorrect (such as the topic selector), but most findings were consistent throughout all three studies. My findings were that Vox homepage organization does not inherently have any specific features that would make users come to the homepage daily for their news needs. Although the usability of the homepage and discoverability of the homepage is good. There are some usability problems that could easily be fixed though, and I will detail those in my design implications section.

Design Implications (3.1)

The Good:

Generally the ratio of images to text is favorable and all the users said that it makes for an interesting and aesthetically pleasing home page. The images are useful in focusing or directing the users attention when on the site.

Participants all believed Vox used nice typography, enjoyed the strong sense of branding (yellow color), and felt that Vox kept things simple. Most users enjoyed the hybrid infinity scroll home page and felt that it encouraged a user to look for more new stories. The topics menu was intuitive to all of the users.

The latest news portion of the page is what readers see first and it gives an updated timeline of the news. Most users I observed looked through those first few stories first. This shows that Vox has succeeded in their goal of keeping their readers up to date on the latest news.

The Bad (Usability Issues):

Search icon click doesn't automatically place the cursor in the text field



All three times I saw someone try to use search on the site, they clicked on the search icon, began typing, then realized the bar wasn't registering their input. They then clicked in the text field and began typing again. No users commented on this verbally, but I saw all three users quietly accept this small flaw. Image on the left (above this block of text) is expanded search bar, image on the right is once the text field has been clicked.

This problem could easily be solved by registering the click on search icon and moving the cursor into the search field.

False bottom w/ ads

Vox commonly displays large ads in the middle of their home page. Sometimes these ads are very large and on occasion they are full width (Example shown above in 2.2.2). This can create the illusion that the bottom of the page has been reached. This is something that could be fixed by having ads that are not so tall, or having a message at the top of the ad that says "Keep scrolling" as recommended by Nielsen (Bedford).

Image choice on homepage

One thing that I noticed in my heuristic evaluation and two of my participants mentioned in interviews is that on occasion some Vox stories have cheap looking stock images for their featured stories (Example shown above in 2.3.2). It's understandable that Vox may have trouble finding images for a story they want to feature, but carefully selecting images of quality is important if they are on the homepage.

No following nav bar on home page

One problem noticed by one participant in the task assignment and one in the interview was the lack of a sticky nav bar. This problem became apparent when users reached the bottom of the homepage and had to scroll all the way back up manually to see a different section. This made browsing through various categories clunky and discouraged a user from scrolling through various categories because they had to return all the way to the top of the page manually to change the topic. This could easily be remedied and increase usability by creating some kind of sticky nav bar or "Back to top" button at the end of the semi-infinite scroll (Denney).

Further research needed:

In my task assignment two out three users manually searched for the Benghazi story. I'm not sure if this is particular to these users, or whether the layout of the site and subtlety of the current search icon encourage this kind of interaction rather than a search.

Explainers and card stacks aren't emphasized in any way on the home page. Although there is a list of explainers on the home page it's mostly text and can be easily ignored because it is among interesting graphics. It would be interesting to find ways for Vox to feature its explanatory journalism more prominently on the homepage as this is one of their unique offerings.

(3.2) Closing

Overall Vox has a great homepage that has considered usability and can give a casual news reader a good place to start exploring for new stories, keep daily news readers updated on the latest breaks, and explain a complicated news story to someone who rarely reads news (if they can find an explainer!). Whether or not it will prevail against the imminent death of the homepage will be something to watch for.

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