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Tapestry Story Reader: A Curated News Feed

For my thesis for the new media program at the Berkeley School of Journalism, I built a news reader for short stories, poetry, creative nonfiction and literary content. With over 1,000 literary publications of some kind active today, I believe that a platform isolating and promoting them is necessary for their survival. Tapestry Story Reader, the multi-platform application that is my final project, will help deserving writers and their publishers grow their businesses as its audience grows.

As a new media student, I was given the opportunity to build a product that would tentatively improve a subset of the media publishing industry. Notwithstanding my passion for arts & literature, I focused on literary publishing for several reasons. For one, the industry has generally failed to adapt well enough to the digitization of news platforms, and even those who have maintained physical magazine circulation have failed to grow online.

Building a news aggregator was not easy, as the technology required to automate news feeds often clashed with the code that let me present them on both iOS and Wordpress. So much of the work put into the development of Tapestry was necessary, but cavalier efforts to dive into certain types of programming or frameworks were abandoned on several occasions because a more efficient and cleaner solution was available.

Upon releasing my first iteration of Tapestry on iOS, I was naturally excited about growing the mobile platform into a sustainable business using affiliate marketing to link books and authors to Amazon. But what I soon realized was that a sustainable app native to iOS could only be updated about once a week, and that regular updates could only work if I was running a platform online that could be updated instantly. I could have stopped there, but I went back to the drawing board and got started on Tapestry for desktop, Android and iOS, to be built using Javascript and HTML/CSS and imported through Cordova, a mobile-launching platform.

The final version of Tapestry is, functional, editable and fun to use. It is also *portable*. I can move data and frameworks in and out of Tapestry without having to make burdensome changes that sacrifice content. This philosophy aligns with the advisory of Alan Mutter, who educated me on the principles of entrepreneurial journalism in the first year of my graduate studies. One must be open to adapting to changes in interest and industry to succeed, and the Swift version of my product was far too limiting.

I want to go over three lessons that I took from the development and release of Tapestry. The first is that building a news product is wholly different from building a news story. While the Berkeley School of Journalism fosters some of the best impact journalism in the world, I could not produce such impact out of thin air. Unless I could focus all of my effort and attention towards news stories, I would not be able to foster solid growth on social media and beyond. While an unforgettable story usually requires personality and bite, a platform must adhere to a scalable and global audience (My previous website, Qwiklit.com, received about 25% of its viewers from South Asia). Too specific a design, and you seem insular or inaccessible. Too broad a design and you seem alienating and robotic. Tapestry’s marketing must have bite, but the product itself must be subdued.

The second lesson is that nothing is guaranteed when building a product. On the day that Tapestry first appeared in the iOS app store, I had been lucky enough to receive the opportunity to travel to the 2016 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Nevada. After viewing over 2,000 booths at several locations, I realized that so many applications were vying for attention at once, that building an effective marketing blitz takes time. I decided to focus the majority of my time on building an effective product, one that improved based on the feedback of my immediate peers. A social media campaign should exist independent from a product, and should be executed with an effective product to boot.

The third lesson is that building a product allows you to learn far more quickly than not. I tried Khan Academy to learn basic programming. I tried Code Academy and EdX for javascript, and an endless playlist of Youtube tutorials for Swift. But I realized early on that you only learn by doing. I would not have learned so much about different types of code were it not for deep dives into writing complex commands and subtle design patterns.

The hope behind Tapestry is that it will help keep small literary publications afloat by rewarding their content with an enthusiastic audience. With the development of a multi-platform, mobile friendly application, Tapestry provides the literary world the attention it needs and deserves.