

6.4 Design exercise: splitting in websites

Objective

This exercise shows how to apply the splitting strategy to organize information in a content hierarchy.

Background

The novel *Ulysses*, written by James Joyce between 1918 and 1920 is considered one of the most important works of modern literature. Joyce experiments with different writing styles according to the thinking processes of his characters. The final episode consists of Molly Bloom's thoughts as she lies in bed. The writing style is a continuous flow of words without punctuation to better reproduce Molly's stream-of-consciousness. Here's the beginning of the chapter:

'no that's no way for him has he no manners nor no refinement nor no nothing in his nature slapping us behind like that on my bottom because I didn't call him Hugh the ignoramus that doesn't know poetry from a cabbage that's what you get for not keeping them in their proper place pulling off his shoes and trousers there on the chair before me so barefaced without even asking for permission and standing out that vulgar way in the half of a shirt they wear to be admired like a priest or a butcher or those old hypocrites in the time of Julius Caesar of course...'

The text flows along a loopleftike ribbon unfolding before our eyes. Lack of punctuation and paragraphs prevents more complex use of text.

Let's now look at how hypertext is used to create a web page. For instance, the Wikipedia page dedicated to the Roman Empire contains many links to other articles:

'In the mid-1st century BC Julius Caesar was appointed as perpetual dictator and then assassinated in 44 BC. Civil wars and proscriptions continued, culminating in the victory of Octavian, Caesar's adopted son, over Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC.'

There are as many as eight references linked in just a few lines. The reader has two options: follow the main text, or stop, go deep, and go back. Of course, there is also the third possibility: getting lost in exploring the jungle of references. Wikipedia is organized as a network of pages. While the path in the network is in principle decided by the user, it is not infrequent to engage into serendipitous exploration that leads us far away from the initial target.

Between Molly's chaotic thinking and the Wikipedia network, there are various intermediate solutions based on stable hierarchies. In a scientific book, the hierarchy is defined by paragraphs, sub paragraphs, notes, tabs. The hierarchy is defined by title, subtitle, and text in newspapers. On websites, the hierarchy is structured in several ways:

- By graphical solutions aimed at capturing users' attention, such as featured content.
- By drop-down menus, with broad categories in the headers and sub-headers listed in the drop down menu.
- By flashing news and updates that are assumed to be relevant to the user.

Behind the hierarchies, there is always a hypothesis of what is relevant for users and how they organize their thinking when they are looking for information.

Figure 6.4a contains the headers of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard websites. The organization by topic is widely used in designing the first pages of websites, along with drop-down menus and a search bar. Despite obvious similarities, you can find significant differences in topic choices and how the subpage hierarchy is managed.

It is easy to see that there is no such a thing as an optimal solution or precise rules. Sites change over time in a co-evolving relationship with users.

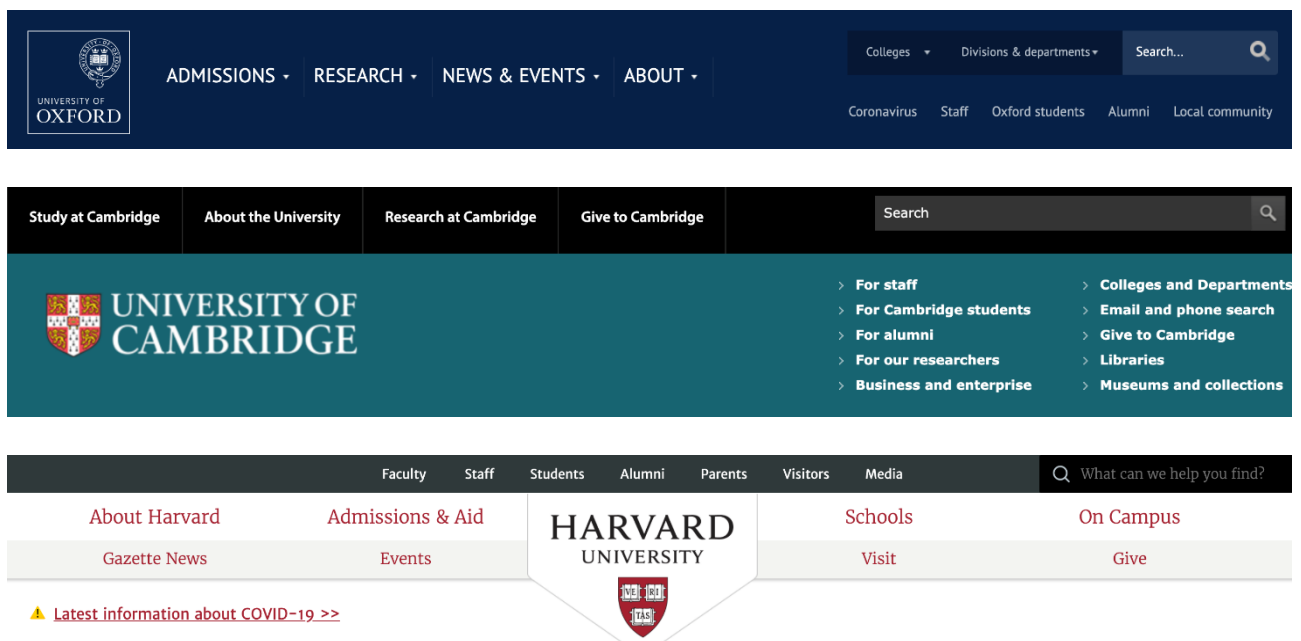


Fig. 6.4a - Top strip of the websites of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard.

Instructions

The problem with splitting information on a hierarchy of pages is particularly relevant for streaming sites. Streaming sites are very popular, but their users have to deal with a few crucial pain points that current designs struggle with. A well-known issue is the limited ability of these sites to support users to search for content they might be interested in and will eventually like.

While sophisticated algorithms are in place to guarantee a high level of customization and curation of individual account web pages, the amount of content is typically overwhelming. The typical user would spend a lot of time figuring out what to watch.

For this exercise:

1. Pick a streaming website you have access to (Netflix, Amazon stream, iTunes, Spotify).
2. Spend some time analyzing the current interface and think about the things you like/don't like about it.
3. Interview at least one user about what he/she thinks of the current interface.
4. Develop an idea of to redesign some of the interface by applying the split strategy.