

H Y P E R P A P E R

BEN ELIJAH
UNFORMATION.NET

HELLO

If you read for pleasure you might get a great idea randomly. If you read for enlightenment, the great ideas are deliberate. You're very likely to want to do something with the information. Reading for enlightenment might also take the form of research for mastering a subject. Relevance is important.

Relevance has two parts. How to find relevant information quickly and how to turn it into something you can action. Reading newspapers, browsing websites and using search engines is inefficient. I think they deliver a poor experience. I hope that Hyperpaper will help. We'll explore some of the problems with newspapers and search engines and describe a few simple processes in a workflow that might do a better job.

NEWSPAPERS

The February 1st issue of The Independent's *i* paper contained 170 pieces - articles and shorter copy. 9 of them were of interest to me. This is a publication which tracks my biases fairly closely. It took me 6 minutes, 38 seconds to skim the paper to find them. Reading them back to back took 9 minutes precisely. So over 42% of the time spent reading the paper wasn't spent reading at all but actually finding the 5.3% of the paper that caught my attention.

Why spend money on words you don't care about?
You're not reading writing, you're reading filler.

SEARCH

Search engines have three big problems:

1. The web sucks

While I didn't find Google's ads particularly intrusive, ads on websites are dire. Banners. Slideshows. Flash. Text. It violates my eyeballs. Websites varied from clean, well presented pages to typographical armageddon. A search engine is your gateway to this visual cataclysm. It's a really bad experience.

2. Credibility

I found it tough to establish credibility. Running a search for something that matters to me, I'd hoped to find established writers and respected professionals. People whose skills and experiences could benefit me. I didn't have any reason to trust that Google was delivering this over SEO-literate wannabes.

3. Tangents

Search engines are great if you know what you're looking for but they fail to deliver the single biggest advantage of reading a paper: tangential interest. You can browse a paper and find pieces that interest you, even if you're not looking for anything in particular. Search engines offer specificity but if you want to read around or find something *generally* relevant, you're screwed. Search cannot go off at a tangent.

EXTREMES

Existing methods of finding information leave something to be desired. Three things are clear.

1. Extreme serendipity

The probability of finding an interesting article in a newspaper is low. It's inefficient in use and there's no clear call to action on that information, at least not without a lot of effort on your part.

Newspapers have to be generalists. They make money selling copies and eyeballs which requires distribution to as broad a demographic as possible. My interests are hindered by having to wade through stuff I don't care about. They have a stable of writers - some of whom are consistently interesting - who produce a series of articles curated by the paper to have the greatest appeal to the greatest number of readers. A paper offers extreme serendipity but the interested person will only ever get a taster.

2. Extreme specificity

Search engines are diametrically opposed to newspapers. Google will serve up what you want fast and with little fuss. But the price of extreme specificity is that you need to know exactly what you want and the experience will be worse than having Satan's tears squirted directly into your eye.

3. What am I supposed to do with this information?

Newspapers and search engines give you no clear route from article to action.

Your options are limited if you want to read the newspaper later. You could hack up some sort of bookmark, cut the articles out or simply remember whatever it was that interested you. That doesn't feel very smart. What do you do if you find an interesting page on the web? You can bookmark but they're too easy to forget. Emailing a link to yourself makes more sense. But a link alone won't let you go deeper and extract real value from the article.

HYPERPAPER

We need a method that will find information with increased relevance, offer the opportunity to go off at a tangent, while giving you a clear means to act.

Converge multiple sources

A newspaper brings together many different sources; staffers, columnists, external agencies. They choose the output with the greatest appeal. You should do the same, except for an audience of one.

Follow interesting people

If a writer you admire uses Twitter it's likely that they'll not only post links to their own work but that by people who interest them. If they themselves are interesting to you there's a good chance you'll like the people they're interested in. To re-post something requires an investment of their credibility and reputation. This means your Twitter follows are doing the hard work of curating the web for you.

Social endorsements like this should give you the assurance that the pieces being chosen are of high quality and relevance.

You should prune the boring people. This will further increase the percentage of your feed that you find interesting.

Thresher and Hopper

When used together RSS and Twitter are very efficient at finding high quality reading material. The ratio of interesting to boring should be much higher than in a newspaper. I think of myself as a Thresher at this stage. Send interesting work you want to read later to an inbox; a Hopper.

The Hopper is your personal newspaper. You're safe to assume that *every* article in this inbox will be worthy of your time.

I find it useful to control the reading experience by separating words from the formatting exacted by the website. This isn't essential but I think it helps to properly hear the writer's voice rather than have your eyes battered with noise. It might be as simple as emailing yourself the text of a page, activating a reader mode in your browser or using a reading environment such as Instapaper.

You'll have more attention for properly digesting and understanding a piece when you know it's of interest and when it's easy to read. With distractions removed you might even start reading long-form journalism and epic posts instead of shorter pieces.

Verbs

How can you act on a stimulating article? After all, an article is still a big bucket of words someone else

wrote. You can't just plug the whole lot into your project and expect it to make sense. You can read it and it can inspire you but next you need to break it down and turn it into something actionable.

I prefer to use "verb" instead of "action" because action doesn't always make sense when dealing with information. Making a decision is necessary before taking any action and those decisions are informed by verbs (defer, delegate, research, delete, outline, edit, etc).

Verbs call for a subject: the thing you want to do, and an object: the context it relates to. Having a well defined vocabulary of verbs will encourage you to think about their context. A verb demands a sentence. The verb "research" might imply the object "in the library".

Research the mating habits of the Beringian Waterfish in the library.

It should be easy to extract verbs like this from any interesting piece you read. Extract any part of the text that excites you, makes you want to do something or stimulates a random thought.

For more complex pieces, say you need to analyse a document, a podcast or a phone call you could consider outlining or mind mapping. I find these two extraction processes terrifically useful.

How you do it is up to you. Read with a pen nearby, use Omnifocus, write on your hand; it doesn't matter. Find an external brain in which you can collect and process all the stuff your short-term memory can't handle.

Capture it all. Too many good ideas are lost because we forget them. Capture the verb before you forget it and you'll keep focused on what you're doing now while retaining ideas to fuel your attention later.

PROBLEMS

Because this might not be for everyone.

Pleasure or purpose?

Hyperpaper should happily support reading for pleasure or purpose. It offers the freedom to find pieces of work curated by your sources. However, it probably won't give you that same random flight of fancy you can get from a novel. Neither will it suit you if you just want to switch off and read crap because you've just chosen sources that don't give you crap.

Reading experiences

Paper people sometimes get defensive about the experience of reading they're accustomed to. They like the feel of the paper, the typography, even the smell. The idea of some poor dishevelled intern with smelly pits who slaved for hours to make the images and text work together. In a paper or a book the art isn't just in the words.

But the word is the basic unit of currency here. Words can be transmuted and transformed, taken from their source and cooked into a digestible meal of information. The word alone is art in this town.

So Hyperpaper won't work so well for eBooks, PDFs and some of the other popular methods of delivery out there. Many of these closed reading experiences are gorgeous works of art. They're also easy to monetise.

But the art isn't merely in the words and there's no getting around the fact that they are meant to be enjoyed as delivered. That doesn't always suit the reader best.

Serendipity

I think people like discovering new stuff and I think they want serendipity. Open a paper and you'll find writers you've never heard of on subjects you didn't know you were interested in.

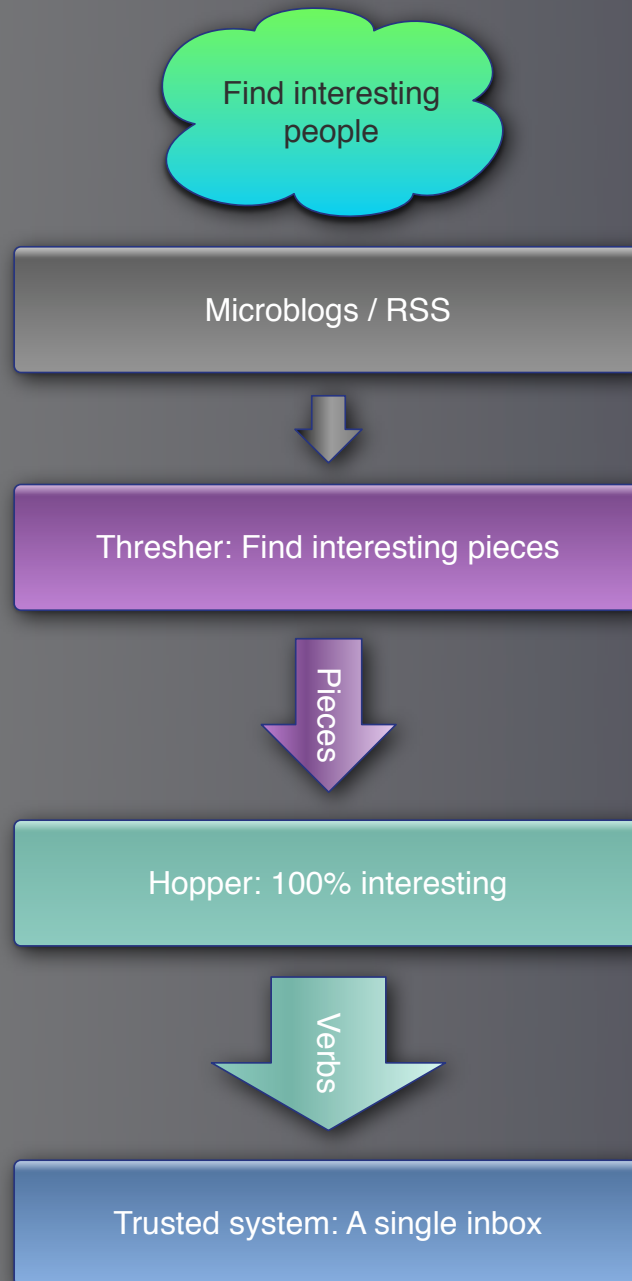
I don't think this is really a criticism. It's more a very succinct description of the problem I'm trying to solve. How can you find cool new writers? It's easy to quantify a comparison between this method and traditional newspapers by analysing the probability of finding interesting writers.

To start with, unlike a newspaper it's you that selects the interesting writers. A repost or a retweet is nothing more than a connection between writers so the number of new writers you'll be exposed to will increase with the number of the writers you choose.

GOODBYE

It's unlikely that all of this will be new to you. You're probably doing much of this already. However, I hope the way these processes are strung together will help to increase the quality of your mental input and creative output.

APPENDIX A



APPENDIX B

Links to more information about the micro-processes on which Hyperpaper depends.

A better way to read

An exploration of reading for pleasure and reading for purpose.

Thresher and Hopper

More on harvesting verbs.

DNA of a document

How to use verbs to deconstruct and reconstruct text.

Much ado about noting

Using mind maps for taking notes and extracting meaningful information.