Usability Testing on Synopted News' first product

in 12 slides!

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Project Context

Synopted News started in mid-2013 with the objective of making news easy to understand for its readers. Synopted created original news content and experimented with the format in which it was presented on its website.

Situation

Synopted's first iteration was released in early 2014. It was pre-product/market fit and optimising for retention. Retention was <5%.

Research Objective

To understand why Synopted had such a low retention rate by answering these questions:

- What were readers' reactions to Synopted's interface and design?

- Did Synopted help readers assimilate and understand the news better than other digital sources?

- In what context were readers consuming news on Synopted, and to meet what needs?

The version of Synopted being tested

A news story, MH370 here, was broken into "modules" that contained original content on relevant updates.

Where relevant, there were "modules" on analysis to explain the news story and give readers context.

These "modules" were on one page dedicated to the story, and could be selected from a navigation column. Readers could follow stories of interest and receive notifications on updates.

Methodology

- I asked 10 participants a few basic questions about their internet use and news reading habits. I specifically asked them a couple of questions about the news story they'd be reading on Synopted to gauge their level of prior knowledge of the subject.

- I observed participants using Synopted with no guidance from me for 10-20 minutes. They were encouraged to think out loud! During this time, I also asked them to perform 1-2 tasks on the site.

- I finally asked them a couple of questions about their experience. More importantly, I asked them questions about the story they had just read on Synopted to assess assimilation of the material.

Key Findings:

What were readers' reactions to Synopted's interface and design?

What's this button? What happens when you bookmark a story?

Alright, where should I start? Is this the navigation or menu?Analyses?

Why is there another menu? Where will this take me?

Ok, I'm lost. What was the story about again?

Is this like a live blog? So I just keep scrolling to read the whole thing?

Key Findings:

What were readers' reactions to Synopted's interface and design?

EXPECTATION
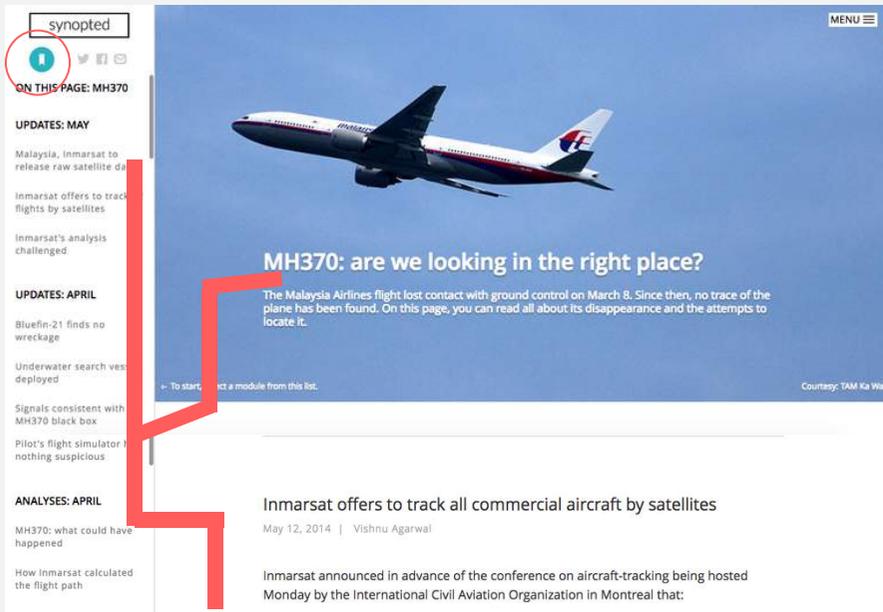
REALITY

It was expected that readers would follow a logical, pre-determined path through the site:

Reading the headline, then the instruction to browse the list of modules, pick a module, read a few modules. Finally, bookmark the story.
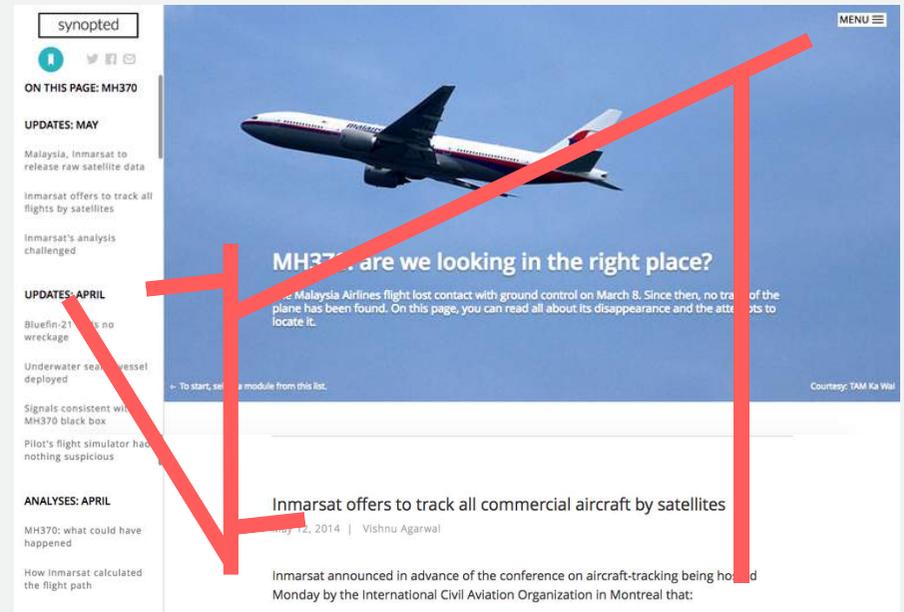
In reality, readers skim and skip through the design and content on the site.

This is not unlike the way readers might browse the headlines and pages in a printed newspaper. That pattern of behaviour is consistent in the way people browse digital news as well.

Key Findings:

Did Synopted help readers assimilate and understand the news better than other digital sources?

For the majority of readers, the user interface was simply too confusing. The "modules" of information weren't succinct enough. There were too many modules on one page. The UI and news format did not promote a better understanding of the news story. The navigation between modules wasn't obvious.

For 3-4 readers, the news content itself seemed promising. The combination of stacked, relevant analysis and summarised updates helped them understand the news story better. This was better than their current workflow of browsing multiple links on through social media and search.

Key Findings:

In what context were readers likely to consume news on Synopted, and to meet what needs?

It was discovered just how widely the needs and behaviours of news readers vary.

News is often thought of as a "one-to-mass" model. The reading habits, needs, and behaviours of readers are not studied widely in the news industry.

Following this model in the first iteration was a huge mistake for Synopted.

In this test, it was discovered that similar to *tech products*, there were distinct customer segments. Synopted wasn't catering to any segment in an attempt to cater to all.

Key Findings:

In what context were readers likely to consume news on Synopted, and to meet what needs?

A note on *trust and news*..

Trust is an important factor in news, but not for all news readers.

In asking participants questions about their reading habits, it was found that many readers, particularly those over 35 years of age, had a pecking order for news publishers they trust for different types of news.

International news: *BBC, NY Times, Guardian, al Jazeera, and so on.*
National news: *Times of India, Indian Express, The Hindu, and so on.*

Readers with well-established news consumption habits were less likely to trust Synopted, an unknown brand. Readers interested in staying well informed, but not invested in established news brands, were likelier to trust Synopted.

Minor improvements

After this test, we first tried making small adjustments to Synopted's user interface. We preserved our original, timely reporting. Modules on updates were much shorter and there was a greater emphasis on analysis.

This helped retention somewhat, increasing it to around 9-10%.
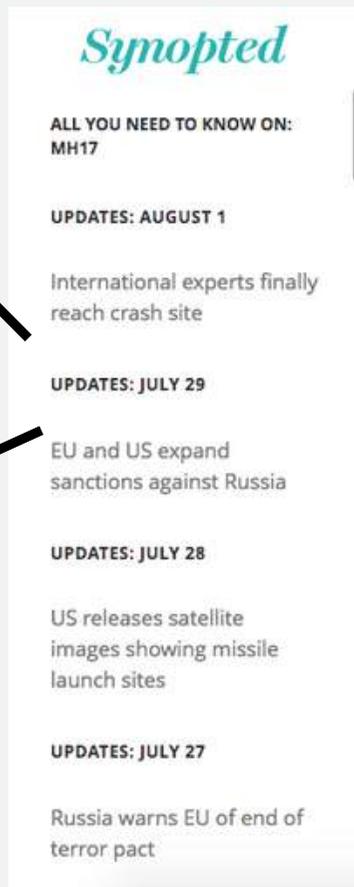
Fewer modules on one page.

Simplified interface, with just one menu.

Synopted

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ON: MH17

UPDATES: AUGUST 1

International experts finally reach crash site

UPDATES: JULY 29

EU and US expand sanctions against Russia

UPDATES: JULY 28

US releases satellite images showing missile launch sites

UPDATES: JULY 27

Russia warns EU of end of terror pact

MH17: Read all about it on just one page

Summary at a glance

- Malaysia Airlines MH17 shot down over Ukraine. All 298 aboard dead.
- Struggle between Ukraine, pro-Russia rebels, Russia under scrutiny
- EU & US line up further sanctions against Russia
- 'No evidence of Russia's direct involvement' - US
- Fighting intensifies in rebel-controlled Donetsk
- International experts arrive at crash site

Summary at a glance. No header image hiding updates below scroll.

International experts finally reach crash site

August 1, 2014 at 06:00pm EDT

A team of 70 experts from Netherlands and Australia has reached the crash site of MH17. Their initial focus is the search and recovery of human remains. Of the 298 persons killed in the crash, 227 were flown to Netherlands for identification and as many as 71 bodies

Shorter modules. Greater emphasis on analysis of the news story.
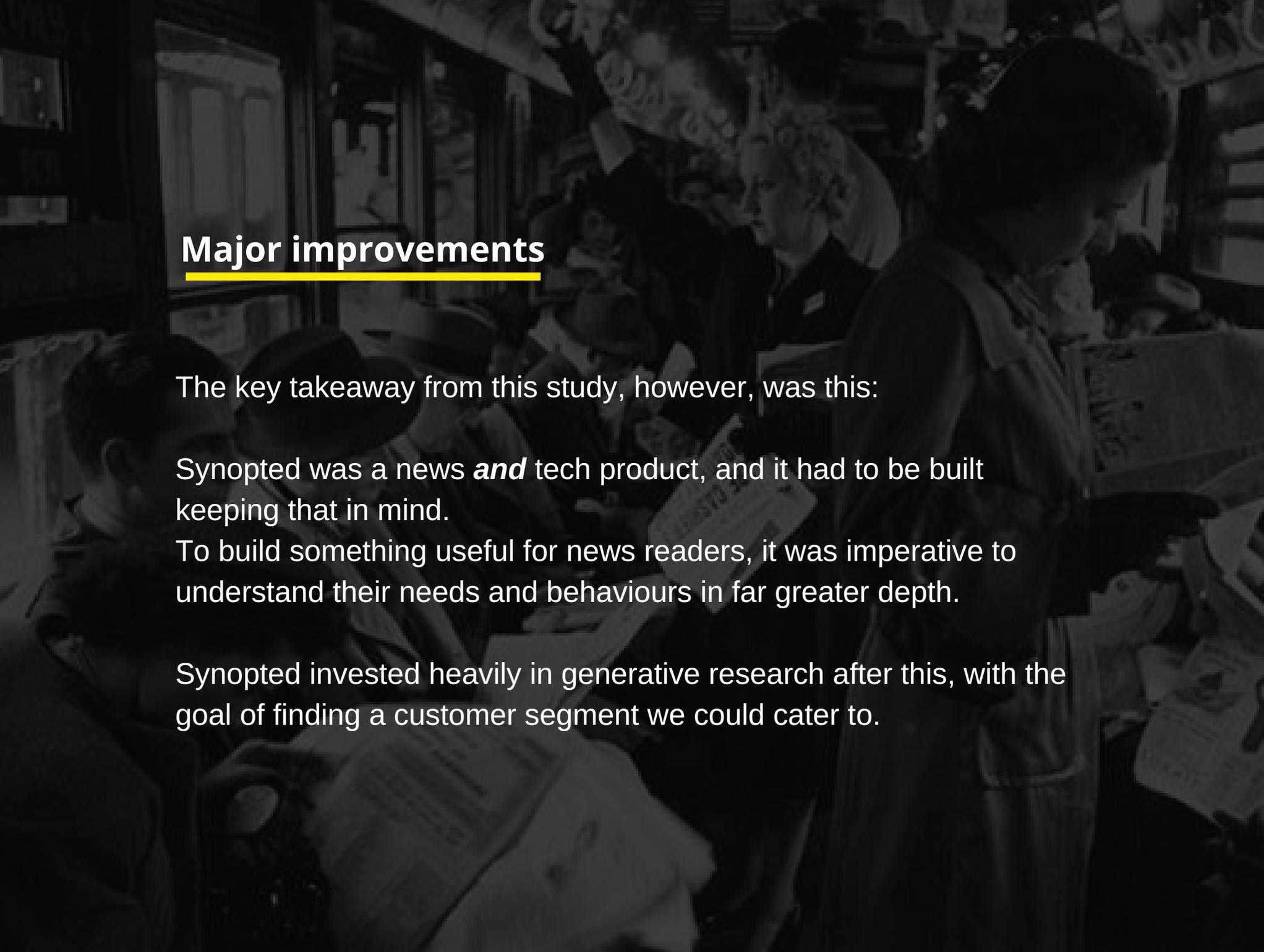
Major improvements

The key takeaway from this study, however, was this:

Synopted was a news *and* tech product, and it had to be built keeping that in mind.
To build something useful for news readers, it was imperative to understand their needs and behaviours in far greater depth.

Synopted invested heavily in generative research after this, with the goal of finding a customer segment we could cater to.