



Designing Information for the *Me*: Implications of the “User Illusion”



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For some time, I have felt strongly challenged, as a designer of online information, by the fact that the user’s objective is only the starting point when the user seeks information.

Something other than that conscious objective seems to drive browse and engagement decisions.

Where do these other drivers come from? In the past, I’ve “located” them in the user’s agenda and the user’s context, but neither agenda or context explain the real issue—what is the relationship between the conscious and unconscious parts of the self, and which part is the most influential?

Tor Nørretranders has devoted his book, *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*, to exploring the relationship between the conscious and unconscious selves, between the *I* and the *Me*.

The *I* experiences that it is the *I* that acts; that it is the *I* that senses; that it is the *I* that thinks. But it is the *Me* that does so.

Nørretranders refutes the “user illusion” of famous rationalists like Pascal, that “man’s grandeur is his conscious, thinking self,” drawing on an enormous body of research to demonstrate that the conscious and unconscious, the *I* and the *Me*, are constantly in play, and that the *Me* is pre-eminent.

Consciousness is ingenious because it knows what is important. But the sorting and interpretation required for it to know what is important is *not* conscious. Subliminal perception and sorting is the real secret behind consciousness.

THE *ME* IS THE CHALLENGE FOR INFORMATION DESIGNERS

Once you “cut consciousness down to size,” you are left with the practical challenge of taking the *Me* into account.

- ◆ What do we know about our customer’s *Me*?
- ◆ How do we write for the *I* and the *Me*?
- ◆ How can we tip this combination of an *I* and a *Me* into achieving our business objectives?

Here are three suggested rules for designing information for the *Me*.

TARGET THE RIGHT CUSTOMER—KNOW THE *ME*

The writer’s dilemma is clear. I think I know the *I*. What do I know of the *Me*? Whom do I write for? The *I* or the *Me*? There is only one answer. Study the *Me*.

It’s not as if the *Me* is unknown to us.

Expressions like “winning the hearts and minds of a people” refer explicitly to the conscious-unconscious duality of each self. What we have tended to ignore, however, has been the *Me*’s primary role in knowing, learning, and making sense of the world. In fact, the very term, *hearts* and *minds*, hides the intimidating strength of the *Me* in the softer term, *hearts*.

In *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market*, Gerald Zaltman, like Tor Nørretranders, acknowledges the role that the *Me* plays in actions and decisions.

The areas of the human brain that involve choice are activated well before we become consciously aware that we’ve made a choice. That is, decisions happen before they are seemingly made.

Zaltman believes that the *Me* challenges every marketing assumption about knowing customers and analysing their behaviour. How do you ask customers about themselves if “90% of thought, emotion, and learning occur in the unconscious mind—that is, without our awareness.”

High re-definition of customer-centricity, “the degree to which [the business] focuses on latent as well as obvious needs of current and potential customers,” implies clearly that the focus on customers is only *customer-centric* if the business tracks the unconscious, the *Me*.

Zaltman’s focus is marketing insights, and he expresses frustration with marketing’s standard tools—surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups—proposing alternative ways for gathering insights about the *Me*.

In contrast, technical communication and usability thinking has explored numerous development approaches that emphasize the *Me*, such as minimalism. In fact, Jakob Nielsen was saying nothing new to the information development community when

he postulated observing users—the *Me* at work—rather than listening to them—the voice of the *I*.

JoAnn Hackos tells the story of a focus group session that aimed to determine the most appealing color for a new Sony Walkman.

The *I* was interrogated—participants were asked for their preference of red, yellow, or black, and the majority preference was for yellow.

As participants left the session, they were invited to take a device for themselves. All colors were on display on the table but overwhelmingly, the participants chose... BLACK! The *Me* was back in the driver’s seat!

Business knowledge is accepted by many of us as a rich source of information about the *Me* as well as the *I*. The business hears the squealing and compliments of the *I* but watches the *Me* very intently.

Customer service, technical support, and sales people have rich insights about customer activities, priorities, expectations, pushbacks, and value propositions—the set of drivers that I loosely term the user agenda.

Wherever they can, and often because customer contact is not possible, information designers and developers mine internal business knowledge as part of the information user analysis.

So, as writers, we hopefully have access to a wealth of customer insights and simply need to develop and keep refining the tools and techniques that help us collate knowledge about our customer’s *Me*.

LET THE READER’S *ME* MAKE SENSE OF WHAT YOU WRITE!

In *The User Illusion*, Nørretranders examines the act of communicating—the work done by the communicator to put the words together, the words themselves, and the work done by the recipient to extract meaning.

The interesting thing about a message is what happens before it is formulated and after it has been received. Not its information content.

In creating the communication, the writer sifts and processes a great deal of information, most of which is discarded before the actual words pass to the recipient. Nørretranders has created his own term for the information that is discarded as the communication is formulated—exformation.

The recipient of the communication processes the words consciously but does not derive the meaning consciously—the meaning is picked up by the *Me*.

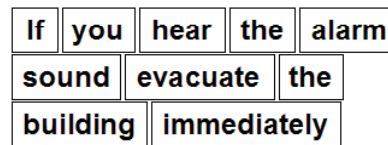
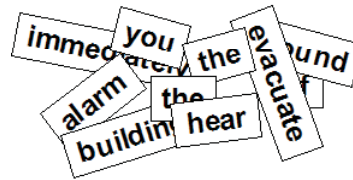
An example—discarding and restoring exformation

In my writing workshops, I use a word puzzle to illustrate the nature of exformation and meaning. I give participants a set of

word tiles and ask them to put them together into a meaningful sentence.

When they empty the word tiles onto their table, the words form a jumbled mess. Within seconds, they organise the words into a simple sentence: *if you hear the alarm sound, evacuate the building immediately.*

Do the words deliver a meaningful message because their organisation is now syntactically correct? No. The meaning of the sentence is encapsulated in two key words—*alarm* and *evacuate*—and is not to be found in the sentence at all, but in the unconscious knowledge and experience that readers bring to the words.



Participants imbue the word *alarm* with the sounds and duration of the alarms they know. They interpret the word *evacuate* with previously learned knowledge—going to the elevator area, looking for the Exit sign, taking the stairs to the ground floor, and moving well away from the building, perhaps for a roll call.

The sentence does not need to contain a description of the alarm sound or evacuation instructions. Readers find meaning in the words by unconsciously restoring the missing exformation from their unconscious knowledge and experience.

How does the writer plan and design to discard exformation?

There may be an enormous amount of work or thought behind a given message or product. Yet it may be invisible. Making things look easy is hard.

Why does it seem so difficult to identify what you don’t need to write? What you can discard? The exformation?

No one will forget the early debates on minimalism where the strongest argument against the approach was precisely our inability to answer the question, *what can you leave out?*

In *The Role of an Information Architect in the Technical Information-Development World*, JoAnn Hackos identified a key benefit of taking a minimalist approach.

When information architects begin with a minimalist approach, they are often able to reduce the verbiage, eliminate content that serves no one, and focus content more precisely.

In other words, the writer can leverage their knowledge of the user’s *Me*—context and agenda—to create information that synthesises the message and discards the exformation that is extraneous to or implicit in the user’s context.

Henry Korman presented strong arguments for adopting an exformation strategy in *Do We Manage Information Efficiently?* in the June 2005 issue of the *Best Practices Newsletter*.

- ◆ Organisations need to reduce the amount of information they are managing and storing.
- ◆ Information designers need to find more effective ways of getting customers to the information they can use without requiring them to spend so much energy that they give up.

When you read something that overwhelms you with detail, when you can’t find the information you want to use, or when your cognitive load meter hits the red zone, you KNOW what the writer did. They stuffed the message with every piece of information they could because they weren’t sure what YOU would want to know.

An unfocused flood of information gives you no value at all because your *I* is obliged to sift and discard itself, without even the confidence that, at the end of the process, it will have what you want.

In fact, in the aggressive world of the information user, the user cost is only paid in full by the desperate—all others drop off as soon as the reading task is too demanding or stops being relevant to their conscious task.

The real work of the writer and the value that their communication offers is in the work done *consciously* to synthesise and discard.

The value of a message...is the amount of mathematical or other work plausibly done by its originator, which its receiver is saved from having to repeat.

Norretranders is reaffirming the value attribute of minimalism. Writers must work hard to remove exformation from the message because they must add value. Organising detail and laying it out in tables and object types is not the value add. Reducing the effort that the reader has to expend to retrieve the message is where our real value add is to be found.

So, there are definitely sizable benefits from adopting an exformation strategy for design, and, later in this article, we shall look at a tool that represents one option for putting the theory into practice, but first we should explore the third challenge of the *Me*.

TIP THE *I* THROUGH THE *ME*

Successful advertising has always spoken to the *Me*.

By chance, as I ploughed through *The User Illusion*, a legislative furore in Australia was confirming the risk of ignoring the *Me* in communication design.

The Australian Government decided to reform the workplace by removing checks and balances from the industrial relations legislation—I confess my bias upfront!

The Union movement recognised the implications for employees and began a campaign against the planned legislation. The main component of the Union campaign was a set of short television advertisements that presented workplace scenarios under the new laws.

- ◆ A mother who needed to stay home with a sick child but who was being pressured to come in to work or lose her job
- ◆ An older worker who had worked for the firm for many years and was being asked to sign an agreement with reduced pay and conditions—take it or leave it

Analysed in terms of the *I* and the *Me*, the advertisements identified the issue to the conscious *I* but argued the injustice subliminally, to the *Me*. Nothing stated “this could be you or your daughter” or “don’t think you are safe just because you have given long-term service to your company.”

Each scenario was just the “bones” of an unfair message. The message was completed by the viewer’s knowledge and experience.

The Union campaign gained tremendous traction, and a concerned government decided to counter the impact of Union advertising with its own advertising campaign.

But any advertising campaign can fail if you forget to address the *Me*. The government put together a campaign for the *I*.

- ◆ They named their legislation *WorkChoices* to counter the reaction that they were taking away employee choices—they assumed the electorate would pick up the conscious message, that of *Choices* in the legislation title.
- ◆ They took full-page, 2-column advertisements in newspapers, setting out the planned legislation changes and presenting arguments to refute the challenges in the Union campaign—they assumed that the populus would open their weekend paper and leap enthusiastically into a serious read of the “facts” rather than skip around the sports and general news pages.
- ◆ Their television commercials had explicit messages presented by smiling workers—they presented general details of the new legislation, details that could not resonate with viewers because no one had experienced them.
- ◆ They produced a booklet entitled *WorkChoices, A simpler, fairer national Workplace Relations System for Australia*. The first edition of the booklet, hundreds of thousands of copies, went to the shredder because government wanted to emphasise the notion of *fairer...* to the *I*.

What the government campaign failed to understand is that the

I doesn't have a lot of processing power. If you flood the *I* with arguments and information, if ALL your messages are directed at the *I*, most of your message will be lost.

The government campaign failed. Polls up to three months after the legislation went through showed that more than 70% of Australians were against the workplace changes.

As social commentators, advertising gurus, or information designers, we could simply look at this example of successful versus unsuccessful marketing and congratulate the Unions on their “intuitively” better advertising strategy.

However, as writers, we want people to ENGAGE with our communications and “take up” our messages.

- ◆ We want email subscribers to click.
- ◆ We want customers to read essential information that will stop them “falling over” and hitting the phone to our service lines.

We need a reusable, structured way that takes us beyond our intuitive skills to delve into our user's agenda and context, and to find the concerns or value propositions that will resonate with the *Me*.

EXAMPLE—TOOL FOR DESIGNING A WEB SITE'S CONTENT

Information designers constantly use tools to gather and collate information. Sometimes the tools structure the data we capture, sometimes we analyse the data and create the structures after the fact.

User insight structures don't map easily to information structures

When we are committed to researching our readers' *I* and *Me*, our issue is not usually about gathering and collating our own user insights.

I believe our challenge is and has always been the difficulty of mapping the knowledge we gather about users to what we create at the moment of writing or designing.

We hold our user knowledge in one set of flexible structures—scenarios, profiles, personas, and real-world tasks—but we derive most of our information architecture from the inherent relationships of the information itself.

At the highest level in an information domain, we may very well be able to match our user insights to an information object but the lower levels of the structure are invariably derived from the higher object, in a top-down, decomposition process.

At the point of writing, we are often struggling to apply macro insights drawn from the user domain to micro states in the information domain.

If we cannot easily map our knowledge of the user's action and decision drivers to the information object, how can we identify what we *don't* need to write?

Over the past five years, the challenge of the reader's *Me*

has given all my analysis and design techniques the same objective: use the same tool to capture the user insights and derive the information structure.

Make web site content deliver outcomes

Recently, *I* was working with a client who had a huge web site of content. They knew the web site wasn't delivering the outcomes that the business wanted but couldn't see exactly what was wrong.

In our workshop, we analysed content topics such as child restraints or membership options. Where normally we would analyse the user task, we looked at the content that should be the online destination of the task.

We used a variation of a task analysis tool to collate their business knowledge of customers and web site users and to derive information structures and page content designs.

The tool captured

- ◆ the business and user agendas—why the business wanted users to read the content and what would influence user engagement
- ◆ proposed content messages, their high/low priorities for the user and their high/low *Me* rating

Some customer knowledge was drawn from contact with customers in focus groups but most came from the business itself—from the sales and marketing people, from the customer service and technical support people, from the contacts and emails that are received via the web site.

Each topic analysis sheet provides criteria for determining what and how much the *Me* will need and tolerate.

1. The comparison of agendas helps the business see what parts of its agenda it can realistically pursue, given the user agenda, and what it must push back to a second layer or abandon.
2. The listing of business messages is easy for the business, which invariably knows what it wants to TELL people. The business can also easily apply user priorities to the messages by assessing the messages against the user's agenda of expectations, assumptions, pushbacks, and values—the *Me* that the business observes daily.
3. The *Me* rating is the most interesting overall driver for prioritising content. It assesses which messages need the LEAST amount of explanation or WORDS. By applying a combination of the user priority assessment and *Me* rating, we can immediately identify the structure of the content and the content layers.

The messages are statements, not marketese or hype. If the user only skims or scans the page, the business hopes to ‘insinuate’ some information into the *Me*'s knowledge.

Add some visual landmarks

The business is also encouraged to think about varying the visual landscape of the page by presenting information in different

ways—with short lists or mini-tables, as well as images, icons, and simple diagrams.

I am a firm believer in the writer’s visual design role. The landscape of an online page is full of sameness, which is why users regularly scroll up and down for something that “they know is there” but cannot find.

Online, the user’s eye cannot move diagonally, across two pages, up, down, and back to the beginning, as it can on a book, but by creating an interesting visual mix on each online page, the writer is able to create landmarks that persist in the user’s mind even when they disappear out of sight.

So whom do I write for? The *I* or the *Me*?

For the past several months, my *I* has been struggling through Tor Nørretranders’s very demanding book, *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*.

The book is definitely NOT written for the *Me*, for the subliminal acquisition of insights to supplement the work of the *I*. However, his analysis of information theory provides a good basis for developing strategies for designing for the *Me*—while writing for the *I*. □

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Best Practices Volume 8, Issue 2
April 2006