Venmo removed its global, public feed as part of a major redesign

Sarah Perez  @sarahpereztc  /  10:02 AM PDT • July 20, 2021

Venmo removed its public feed after years of backlash for making all transactions public by default, despite the norm that money payments should be private.

“Norms” example submitted by Joseph

0.5% extra credit for examples relevant to recent or upcoming lectures — submit on Ed under the “Lectures” category
Prototyping and Cold Start

CS 278 | Stanford University | Michael Bernstein
Announcements

Sections starting today: waitlist on Ed for switches

Project proposal
  Pick a project
  Pick a zone
  Prototype

Vote on memes by Friday! This is part of the assignment.
Last time: norms

We act differently in different spaces.

Norms — informal rules that govern behavior — play a massive role in determining how you act in a give space, giving the character to that socio-technical system.

Descriptive and injunctive norms operate differently, but people notice them remarkably quickly, and they are most influential when they are made salient.

Design defaults can influence norms; seeding the community can likewise set expectations.
I have an idea. Where do I start?

Why “build it and launch” is a bad approach, and how to do better.
Why? Because you never know where things will go…

My professor wants us to make a meme for homework, can we make him the meme
when my friends tell me to stop sending videos of my professor who looks like old Tom Holland

grace :)
he just needs a better haircut 😚
3-31 Reply

Corporate needs you to find the differences between this picture and this picture.

They’re the same picture.
Today: getting started

Prototyping

The cold start problem
Prototyping social computing systems
If we’ve learned anything from human-computer interaction (HCI), it’s that it’s a really bad idea to have your idea and then Just Build It. Just Build It is an immense waste of time, energy and resources in order to find out that your idea was terrible. Instead of Just Building, HCI pushes for the concept of prototyping.
Prototyping

Progressive fidelity increases as you gain confidence in your idea

Low-fidelity paper prototypes that are rapid to create and explore

Richer instantiations that answer lingering questions

Detailed refinements of the approach

Flickr: Samuel Mann

IDEO

Erin Malone
But traditional low-fidelity prototypes aren’t the right fit here.

Why?

The basic interface flows aren’t what need to be tested.
Example: On-demand office hours

Imagine that the CS department had allocated a few floating TAs across classes to offer ad-hoc help/support/tutoring on demand.

Your idea is to create a social computing system where you can request help, and if any of the floating TAs had previously TA’ed the class you need help with, and are awake, they’ll swing by.

Why is a paper prototype a waste of time here?

You’re not really answering the question at the core of the idea.
Prototypes should answer a question: **how will the social dynamics play out?**

Prototypes shouldn't focus on a specific modality, e.g., paper. Instead, prototypes should focus laserlike on what's the big risky unanswered question about the idea.

Typically, that question is not whether the interface is usable. It's **how the social dynamics will play out.**
Piggyback prototyping

Don’t build the entire technical stack just to answer a question. Instead, piggyback on existing social computing systems that get you similar affordances. [Grevet and Gilbert 2015]

In other words, layer your design on top of existing social platforms to prototype the social interactions.

- Push messaging? Use texts.
- Collaboration? Use GDocs or GSlides.
- Chat? Use Slack or GroupMe.

In HCI parlance, piggyback prototyping can be thought of as a specific method for experience prototyping. [Buchenau and Suri 2000]
Welcome to Stanford Slate: collaboratively edited breaking news at Stanford. Read by scrolling down. Add any new article using the following format, putting the most recent news at the top:

--------------
HEADLINE
Tags: [campus events, tea, grad students]

[One-paragraph summary]

[Full article]

-------------
Stanford Students Speak Out: "Professor Bernstein Doesn't Actually Look That Much Like Tom Holland"
Tags: tea

The group was not happy. "I'm a Tom Holland stan," shouted Sanjay Kairam into a megaphone, "And comparing Michael Bernstein to Tom Holland is poisoning our parasocial relationships." Other students held up signs proclaiming "No, They're Entirely Different People" and "Ugh, Can't Unsee It".
On-demand office hours II

What's the big unanswered social dynamics question about the on-demand office hours idea?

How could we use piggyback prototyping to answer it in 24 hours?

[2min]
Pick the piggyback platform

Local news, but with Wikipedia-style open contributions

Communities for tracking growth in personal skills (e.g., fitness, practicing music)

Your new Twitter clone

Slack / Discord
Google Docs
YouTube
Group Chat

(There is room for more than one reasonable approach for each of these. Focus on which platform provides the best affordances for testing the social behaviors.)
Pick the piggyback platform

Local news, but with Wikipedia-style open contributions

Communities for tracking growth in personal skills (e.g., fitness, practicing music)

Your new Twitter clone

Slack / Discord
Google Docs
YouTube
Group Chat

Create a Google Doc to track a specific topic for a week and invite folks to contribute
Pick the piggyback platform

Local news, but with Wikipedia-style open contributions

Communities for tracking growth in personal skills (e.g., fitness, practicing music)

Your new Twitter clone

Slack / Discord
Google Docs
YouTube
Group Chat

Sign up for a goal you're interested in, populate channels by goal, and post updates regularly to that channel
Pick the piggyback platform

Local news, but with Wikipedia-style open contributions

Communities for tracking growth in personal skills (e.g., fitness, practicing music)

Your new Twitter clone

Slack / Discord
Google Docs
YouTube
Group Chat

I “post” tweets to the group chat, and others can react
Approaches that are not piggyback prototyping

Not piggyback prototyping: running a survey to ask “would you use this system?” or “what would you do if you saw this interface?”

(Besides not getting an authentic sense of what the social behavior will be, asking questions like this is also unlikely to give you good data. Take CS 347 to learn why.)
Prototype simple social formulas

It’s very tempting to try and design out an entire social ecosystem. Don’t.

“Ooh we’ll let people post photos of their dogs. If it gets more than 33.5% upvotes, it’ll get a Pupper badge. But then others can sidevote the photos, and if there are enough sidevotes, it starts a chain. Chains are groups of Puppers that are displayed together and aggregate their upvote counts. If someone uploads an old Pupper, the mod (oh by the way there are mods. they’re called Doggos.) can remove the sidevotes and… Sounds like a Dungeons and Dragons campaign.
Prototype simple social formulas

It's very tempting to try and design out an entire social ecosystem. Don't.

“Oh we'll let people post photos of their dogs. If it gets more than 33.5% upvotes, it'll get a Pupper badge. But then others can sidevote the photos, and if there are enough sidevotes, it starts a chain. Chains are groups of Puppers that are displayed together and aggregate their upvote counts. If someone uploads an old Pupper, the mod (oh by the way there are mods. they're called Doggos.) can remove the sidevotes and...

Sounds like a Dungeons and Dragons campaign.
Prototype simple social formulas

Instead, identify the simplest set of social interactions that is possible. This focuses the social formula you’re prototyping down to its core.
Prototype “the hard side”

[Chen 2022]

Think critically: whose contributions will be the most challenging to recruit?

- in a student+faculty forum, it’s hardest to get faculty to reply
- in tiktok or wikipedia, it’s the content creators
- in an art feedback forum, it’s: the artists, or the feedback givers?

   My take: it’s the feedback givers: they are the scarce resource

Nearly every system has different roles: always prototype the role representing “the hard side” — if that part fails, the whole thing fails
Bootstrapping content and interest

Prototypes do not magically become bustling spaces. Often they feel like ghost towns, because there’s nothing there yet.

When prototyping, you will need to bootstrap the bustling spaces to help set the norms and encourage contributions.

Reddit co-founders initially pushed content until the community took over. (They used many sibyl accounts, which is...ill-advised...)

If it’s a two-sided system — e.g., interns and mentors — be prepared to prop up one side of the system to make it useful to the other side.
The cold start problem
Close to 25,000 people had signed up for an account in Instagram’s first 24 hours. The next day, “after getting three hours of sleep,” Systrom recalls, “we were exhausted, but we knew we had created something different. We had a really good feeling about it.”
Cold start problem

The problem: the social computing system isn’t really very enjoyable or useful to anybody when nobody’s there yet.

…but then, why would someone join and start populating it, if there’s nobody there?

The entire effort struggles to hit critical mass, like how a car engine on a freezing day can’t start up because it’s too cold, and if it can’t start up, it can’t warm itself up to start. Thus, a cold start problem.
Cold start: how do you hit critical mass?

**Critical Mass and Prisoner’s Dilemma Problems**

Most groupware is only useful if a high percentage of group members use it. Different individuals may choose to use different word processors but two coauthors must agree to use the same coauthoring tool! Achieving a “critical mass” of users is essential for communication systems [8]. Even one or two defections may cause problems for meeting scheduling, decision support, or project management applications. Even in an idealized situation in which every individual will benefit once critical mass is achieved, the early adopters may well abandon it before the critical mass of users is reached.

[Grudin 1998]
Going broad, and trying to get all users at once, typically fails.
Building a focused, engaged core initially is better design.

Why?
- The designer has a clear sense of who the users are, what issues they face, and what norms they expect
- Cliques help overcome the cold start problem
- This an “atomic network”: aim to create the smallest stable, self-sustaining group possible [Chen 2022]
Harvard undergraduates
handicraft meetups at local boutiques
food delivery on Stanford campus
launched as justin.tv, tried to be relevant to everybody, but failed

refocused

gamers
Affirm my identity

Alex Wolf (bossbabe.com): kickstart by creating a social space that affirms a group’s sense of identity

Look for micro-cultures, e.g., a trend of millennial women graduating from college and not wanting to go the traditional route of subverting their femininity to be professional

At its best, fashion operates similarly: identify micro-cultures that exist and create clothes that affirm that micro-culture’s identity
Close to 25,000 people had signed up for an account in Instagram’s first 24 hours. The next day, “after getting three hours of sleep,” Systrom recalls, “we were exhausted, but we knew we had created something different. We had a really good feeling about it.”
Instagram grew out of a “failed” app called Burbn. Burbn was a mobile check-in app. They realized that people were ignoring the check-ins and just sharing photos, so they started over and built an app just focused on photo sharing.
Identify lead users

Pamela Chen (@NatGeo, then Insta, then HAI, now Apple): one of the first 100 employees at Instagram

On Instagram, one early community was surfers. IRL, there are lots of different kinds of surfers: the best one, the social one, the political one, the one with the surfwear line.

At Instagram, she identified and reached out to the leaders of the community who would be emblematic and shape how other surfers on the site should behave.
Who is the assumed user?

Starting narrow helps in part because it provides a concrete set of user personas to focus on.

But it’s also important to ask critically: who are we assuming is that prototypical user? Do they look like this?:

Who are we silently assuming is not the prototypical user, and are they often excluded from these dialogues?

Reflect on these questions before you prototype.
As you grow, how do these techniques change?
Are we breaking things?

Prototyping with piggyback prototyping sounds a lot like “Move Fast And Break Things”, Facebook’s motto that has been widely derided because…well, Facebook broke a lot of things.

However, there were a lot of outcomes that would have been fundamentally unknowable from a Harvard dormitory. So, how do we balance it?
One view: responsibility changes as scale changes

When Facebook was new and only launched to a few thousand people who knew it was an evolving experiment, I would argue that everything was still very liquid, and it’s more reasonable to prototype and iterate rapidly.

However, as the community grows, the system solidifies: responsibility grows for addressing the issues created by prior decisions, and for making the next decision more carefully.
Summary

Prototyping social computing systems requires a different approach than usual. Use piggyback prototyping to tie together existing social systems with the goal of testing the social dynamics.

The cold start problem occurs when a system is too empty to attract initial usage, so it remains empty. Two solutions:

- Focus on a narrow group initially, and broaden out later
- Be prepared to bootstrap activity
References


