THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT...™
PERSONALIZED DIGITAL MAGAZINES

Scenario

Gavin, a senior in architectural design, is taking a departmental seminar called Portfolios and Presentation, hoping it will help him rework his portfolio and ace his upcoming interview for an internship. Examining the course list of possible software applications, he decides to download Zite on his iPad. He isn't sure how it will help with portfolios and interviews, but he has heard it's a nifty way to view tweets from friends. After minimal setup, he's soon seeing Twitter in a magazine-like presentation that pulls in pictures with the first lines of text from any links posted by the people he follows.

He decides to present his portfolio as a magazine. He creates a Twitter profile and posts links to a web announcement that his gray-water system was chosen for the department's eco-house project, a write-up on a home-show site naming him winner of their kitchen-design contest, and an article in his hometown newspaper with a photo of Gavin installing the windmill he designed for a community project. He also posts links to other photos of his work and to several blog posts he wrote for a course in human-centered design. Then he pulls the Twitter thread into Zite. The result is a professional-looking portfolio that gives a solid idea of what Gavin can contribute to a firm.

Gavin then pulls in the Facebook page for his course Classic Design: Eco Materials, where the instructor posted a reading list. After reading an article on environmentally safe alternatives for restoring wood, Gavin uses Zite to locate similar articles. He also sets up Zite sections for RSS feeds from municipal and commercial contractors who offer building materials for salvage.

At the conclusion of the seminar, Gavin faces a panel of faculty members in a mock interview. He takes out his iPad, sets up his portfolio, and passes it over. When they ask about current projects, he chats easily about the Arts and Crafts fireplace surround that he salvaged and is restoring. The panel agrees that his personal project will underscore his commitment to environmental principles, while his innovative portfolio presentation will improve his chances for hire. A week later they are proven right: Gavin is the first senior selected for an internship.

1 What is it?

Applications like Flipboard, Zite, RSS5000, and Taptu aggregate content from personal social media networks and other sources, presenting the information in a snappy magazine-style format complete with headlines, images, column formatting, and multimedia. The difference these applications make in viewing social media can be palpable, changing a Twitter stream from a relentless march of 140-character text blurbs to a vibrant parade of color images and well-chosen fonts in an inviting presentation. They perform this same elegant repackaging for information from RSS feeds, news sites, blogs, and article repositories, frequently making use of the tablet touch-screen interface to mimic traditional magazine browsing. The result is a consumption tool that invites further investigation of the topics it introduces.

This type of application has risen sharply in popularity among people trying to make sense of their increasingly complex social networking lives and has proven useful to busy individuals who must keep abreast of breaking news in their field. Some are useful for research, and many of these applications could involve students in designing the character of their own media for consumption.

2 How does it work?

Users who download these free or inexpensive applications register and set up a user profile that determines what content they will see. In a typical model for these applications, **users set up sections, like those in a newspaper, and each section provides content from Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, or other social media account or pulls data from an RSS feed or a website**. The software delivers each stream formatted as a magazine, which the user opens by clicking a tile in the application menu. One advantage over a standard Twitter stream is that for posted URLs, these applications provide a portion or all of the linked articles. Zite goes further, asking whether users enjoy the material or whether they would like more articles on the same subject or from the same source. The application learns from the responses, selecting ever more targeted content for perusal. In addition, Zite, Flipboard, and similar applications offer a few preselected (pushed) news feeds that users can choose to receive. For all of these tools, content is pulled to the device and integrated into a magazine format in a process that is seamless for the user.

3 Who's doing it?

Users have embraced these personalized magazines with enthusiasm, with one of the leading applications, Flipboard, estimating that it receives tens of millions of page views per day. Perhaps a key element of their utility is that some of these

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applications, Zite in particular, will search the web for articles the users might not find on their own. Thus doctors use Zite to track medical research, while instructors recommend it for a variety of investigative projects. But while many instructors have spoken of the utility of Flipboard, Zite, Taptu, and similar apps in blogs and online discussions, the **implementation of these products in academic settings remains in the early stages**.

4 | Why is it significant?

Personalized digital magazines may represent a shift from mass-market publications created for a broad reading audience toward content selected for, designed for, and delivered to the individual reader. Applications like Flipboard and Zite tighten the link between social networking and news services by offering the reader the crowd's view of current events rather than the publisher's. At the same time, they can filter much of the noise from social networks, presenting these media streams in a coherent context that makes them more engaging and easier to consume.

More significantly, **these products change who has control of content**. Scholars can use them to keep up with new research in their fields from articles recommended by colleagues or tailored by the application to specific research needs. Best of all, these apps present this volume of information in a more easily digestible format. But while user-defined content represents an opportunity for readers and may offer publishers wider distribution of their web-based content, it has raised considerable speculation about what personalized digital magazines might mean for the traditional publishing model. Of particular interest is the question of whether readers who use a free app to select news from RSS feeds and the recommendations of their friends will be reluctant to return to paid content selected by a single editor and packaged by a conventional publisher.

5 | What are the downsides?

This category of content-aggregation software raises new questions about copyright. Recently a consortium of publishers, including Time, The Washington Post, Getty Images, and the Associated Press, among others, sent a cease-and-desist letter to Zite, which had been providing copies of the plaintiffs' content with the original formatting and advertising removed. Upon receiving the notice, however, Zite changed its presentation to deliver content in a web browser view, mirroring content as it appears on the originators' sites. Whether this move has adequately addressed the legal issues is not yet clear.

In-class use of these applications may be limited by the need for all students to have access to a tablet device. In fact, to use most of the applications available today, the tablet would have to be an iPad, although most vendors plan to accommodate other platforms. A few options, like Taptu, are already available for Android. For research applications, the value of content that comes from sites like Twitter and Facebook is directly dependent upon the quality of the social network and how relevant that network is to the user's scholarly needs and interests. Finally, for all the sorting and filtering that they do, these apps create yet another content channel for users who may be reaching saturation.

6 | Where is it going?

Certainly where iPad applications lead, tablet apps for other operating systems are likely to follow, and **we can expect similar content-delivery products on smartphones and laptops** down the road. Already their impact can be felt in websites like trend.fm that echo the Flipboard interface. Bloggers, meanwhile, have started to use OnSwipe, a free plug-in for WordPress that allows any iPad user to view WordPress blogs in a magazine-style layout. This hints at a future where more types of highly engaging content would be vetted by social networks or by the user, pulled in by personal publishing apps from diverse sources. But will that content continue to arrive for free? Such apps may become fee-based services that pay publishers for the content they resell to an expanding market of users, or they could continue to deliver free content but find funding through advertising.

7 | What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Instructors who set up Twitter or Facebook accounts for their classes may find students are more eager to read the information and links posted there when these appear in a personalized magazine format. But applications like Flipboard, Zite, or Taptu can do much more. If instructors set the right parameters for posting in these social network spaces, these streams can become a collaborative course magazine, a class-project newspaper, or a customized course minitext. **As students contribute their own text, photos, videos, and related links to the network, the emerging content can engage classmates and encourage participation in the conversation.**