Who are your users? comparing media professionals' preconception of users to data-driven personas

Lene NIELSEN

Soon-Gyu JUNG

Jisun AN

Joni SALMINEN

Haewoon KWAK
Singapore Management University, hkwak@smu.edu.sg

See next page for additional authors

Citation
1

Author

Lene NIELSEN, Soon-Gyu JUNG, Jisun AN, Joni SALMINEN, Haewoon KWAK, and Bernard J. JANSEN

Who are your users? Comparing media professionals' preconception of users to data-driven personas

Lene Nielsen
IT University Copenhagen
Rued Langgaardsvej 7, 2300 Cph, Denmark
Lene@itu.dk

Joni Salminen
Qatar Computing Research Institute
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar
jsalminen@hbku.edu.qa

Soon-Gyo Jung
Qatar Computing Research Institute
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar
sjung@hbku.edu.qa

Haewoon Kwak
Qatar Computing Research Institute
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar
hkwak@hbku.edu.qa

Jisun An
Qatar Computing Research Institute
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar
jan@hbku.edu.qa

Bernard J. Jansen
Qatar Computing Research Institute
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar
jjansen@hbku.edu.qa

ABSTRACT

[1]One of the reasons for using personas is to align user understandings across project teams and sites. As part of a larger persona study, at Al Jazeera English (AJE), we conducted 16 qualitative interviews with media producers, the end users of persona descriptions. We asked the participants about their understanding of a typical AJE media consumer, and the variety of answers shows that

Table 1: The interview pool is diverse in terms of age, gender and origins (Middle-East, Europe, North-America).

Media environment	Job role	Number
Social media	Video producer, video editor, programmer, marketing executive	8
Website	Feature editor, opinion editor, journalist, translator, documentarist, and web analyst	8

Figure 1: Figure 1: An example of the content of the data-driven persona descriptions generated by the system. The data comes from the case company's social media data.

the understandings are not aligned and are built on a mix of own experiences, own self, assumptions, and data given by the company. The answers are sometimes aligned with the data-driven personas and sometimes not. The end users are divided in two groups: news producers who have little interest in having data-based insights of news consumers and producers for social media platforms who have more interest in this information.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-Centered computing** → **Empirical studies in interaction design**

KEYWORDS

Personas, automation, journalism, user experience

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to look into how professionals working in the same domain of news production describe the media users, what sources their knowledge originates from, and whether or not their understandings are co-aligned within the organization and with the real demographic data of the users. It is crucial to clarify if the personas deviate or match the existing preconceptions of the organizational reality, as a conflict can result in change resistance and rejection by those who are to use the personas. This paper reports a research project in Al Jazeera English (AJE), a major news media organization based in Qatar. In this study, the media producers are referred to as 'users' of the system, whereas the media consumers (users of our case organization's offerings) are beyond the scope of this study. The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study on automated persona generation (APG), where a system is developed and used to generate data-driven persona descriptions from social media data (see [1]).

Originating from software development, the persona method has become widely adopted in other disciplines, such as design and marketing [11]. The discipline of media production has to date not been a frequent user of the method, with no examples reported in prior work that we could locate.

In the literature, the benefits of personas fall into the following categories: **Mental models:** Personas can help create common mental models and challenge existing assumption, as the persona gives an operational mental model of a specific and particular user [4]. Both on individual
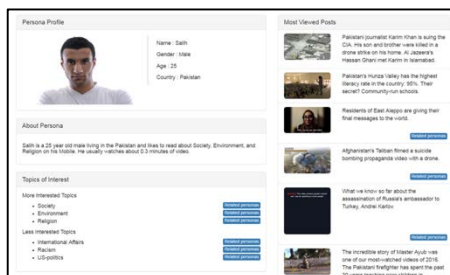
Table 2: Oppositions found in the analysis

Opposition	Explanations
Young vs. Old	The young are on Facebook, look at tweets, buzz feeds. The old look at TV have morning habits of watching news.
Westerner vs. Easterner	For US citizens, AJE is an escape, while other nationalities (Africa, Pakistan, Afghanistan, East Europe) have an interest in local stories not reported by traditional media.
The Eastern/Southern narrative vs. the Western narrative.	AJE shows the other side of the stories and does not follow the Western narrative.
Users looking for updates vs. Users looking for longer pieces (features)	Not all users have a long attention span, while others are genuinely interested and seek for investigative stories.

and organizational levels [7]. The common mental model can be used in the design process [11][8]. This enables the designer to understand worlds different from the designers' own [7]. **Data storage:** The reported benefits include the easy access to information and using storytelling to communicate data [5] [10]. **Prioritization:** A benefit at a more strategic level is that personas help prioritize audiences and bring about a focus on the most important audience(s) [7]. Personas can be used to define product features and make user interface choices, in software development and other domains [2], [3], [6], [11]. Through this effect, the use of personas is also linked to strategic decision-making, as product decisions have strategic importance in achieving organizational goals, and prioritizing product features remains a persistent issue for many organizations.

3 FINDINGS

In total, 16 interviews from the case company were conducted (see Table 1). The participants were asked "Who is the typical Al Jazeera reader/viewer?" After this, they were shown an example of a persona description and asked questions about it. The interview ended in questions about improvements to the descriptions and usefulness of the persona method in general.

Table 3 describes the five most representative personas (the APGs), based on data retrieved from the AJE Facebook account. A comparison shows that the participants' agreed on the gender: the typical user is a male, but the age varies from 16 to 50+. Some mention that the age is platform dependent, but most agree on someone above 22–27 in their 30es. Two female respondents mention that there are also women in the user group, but it is commonly agreed that *"Mostly male I think first, female might also, but usually males are more interested in news."* (Participant 8). When women are mentioned, it is because of other genres than news *"I think, viewing rate for females. Because there's great content, it isn't just about the news or documentaries, it's 101 East, I love it."* (Participant 16). Comparing the preconceptions (Table 4) with the most predominant personas generated from the data (Table 3), the characterization of gender and age is somewhat accurate., while country of origin varies.

Looking at where the information originates from, we find two major sources: 1) personal information and 2) "vague data" (i.e., data the professionals do not have direct contact with). The personal information is varied and contains several insights, such as observations of the family, observations from reactions to own work, observations from TV watching of AJE in hotel bars when doing field work, and own interests. The personal observations also originate in an understanding of AJE as a brand: AJE has older followers due to their brand; AJE shows the other side of the story thus attracting another user group than traditional Western media; AJE attracts a user group outside US and/or with an interest in the Middle East. Interestingly, also the understanding of the AJE brand is varied.

Information from data ranges from analytics, background information from managing social media, 'we are told', to *"In our kind of a hand book we have a certain type of a person that we're aiming for. I can't remember exactly what the name is."* (Participant 10). Despite that some have access to data, there is still a need to understand why people living in Western countries (US and

Table 3: The 5 most predominant APGs

Name	Gender	Age	Country
Andrew	Male	30	USA
Vihaan	Male	33	Philippines
Camila	Female	22	USA
Tyler	Male	22	USA
Vivaan	Male	25	India

Table 4: Summary of findings.

	Preconception	Data for personas	Match between preconception and data
Gender	Mainly male	Mainly male	Yes
Age	In the 30es	Around 25	To some degree
Country	US	US + other	No
Origin of data	Personal observations, analytics	Social media	No

Europe) watch AJE. *"According to the data most of them are in United States. I don't think they are the average American reader, my hunch is that they are immigrants"* (Participant 3). *"While, I'd say, in like, in the UK, Al Jazeera viewer is maybe someone who's already involved into affairs, an NGO worker."* (Participant 9).

As can be seen in Table 2, the understanding of users is seen as oppositions by the interviewees. For example, there is a dichotomy of Western and non-Western perspectives*: "We are told that most of our audience comes from the United States (...). So, I guess we also try to present our stories in such a way that our Western audience would understand. (...) Also present a story in an alternative way that does not necessarily follow the Western narrative."* (Participant 14). Interestingly, the perception of US citizens is not aligned; they are either seen as Eastern immigrants or as a Western user group. The descriptions of the typical user are multifaceted: the typical user is from East Africa, North Africa, US, Europe, Balkan, someone with an interest in the Middle East, an immigrant, or a middle-class suburban well-educated person.

Our findings show that there are few commonalities among the perception of the typical news consumer; and there is not an interest in having a shared understanding *"I just try and make it like something I would watch"* (Participant 5). This might change as social media transforms the way news is consumed and there is an interest in understanding the interaction habits of the different user groups *"It would be interesting to find out of what people are interested in, what they are responding most to, so that is always helpful."* (Participant 3).

6 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The findings propose that the professionals' sense making is rich and varied. While we expected to find a "single truth" imposed by the organization, instead we found a myriad of different impressions and preconceptions, drawn from sources such as experiences with readers, own assumptions, and data given by the company. In comparison, the personas created by the automated persona system are more coherent and simplistic.

The use of personas is grounded upon a need to have a common mental model of the users; one that is shared between team members and stakeholders, at all organizational levels, reaching disillusionment from one's own beliefs about the user, and achieving a higher degree of user orientation. To implement personas in an organization is also to understand the preconceived perceptions and the need for a shared understanding. In this case there was no observed common need to have a shared understanding. If the introduced personas fall far from what the stakeholders perceive as the users, it might be difficult for the organization to use the personas and the wanted alignment might fall apart. Inspired by [9] stakeholders have to be addressed when introducing personas. One way to do this is to send the personas out in the organization and get feedback by asking if the stakeholders know of users like these, if they feel real. The feedback can show if they will get accepted or not in the organization – and the personas implementation needs to be redesigned accordingly.

REFERENCES

[1]   An, J. and Jansen, B.J. 2017. Automatic Generation of Personas Using YouTube Social Media Data. *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS).* (2017).

[2]   Cooper, A. et al. 2007. About Face 3.0: The essentials of interaction design.

[3]   Cooper, A. 2004. The Inmates Are Running the Asylum.

[4]   Floyd, I.R. et al. 2008. Resolving Incommensurable Debates: a Preliminary Identification of Persona Kinds, Attributes, and Characteristics. *Artifact.* 2, 1 (2008), 12–26. DOI:https://doi.org/10.1080/17493460802276836.

[5]   Grudin, J. 2006. Why Personas Work: The Psychological Evidence. *The Persona Lifecycle.* Elsevier Inc. 642–663.

[6]   Ma, J. and Lerouge, C. 2007. Association for Information Systems AIS Electronic Library (AISeL) Introducing User Profiles and Personas into Information Systems Development. (2007).

[7]   Miaskiewicz, T. and Kozar, K.A. 2011. Personas and user-centered design: How can personas benefit product design processes? *Design Studies.* 32, 5 (2011), 417–430.

[8]   Nielsen, L. 2004. Engaging Personas and Narrative Scenarios. *A study how a usercentered approach influenced the.* 215, 2 (2004), 353–380. DOI:https://doi.org/ISSN 1399 − 1779.

[9]   Nielsen, L. 2013. Personas-User Focused Design. *Human-Computer Interaction Series.* 164.

[10] Pruitt, J. and Adlin, T. 2006. The Persona Lifecycle: Keeping People in Mind Throughout Product Design. Morgan Kaufmann.

[11] Pruitt, J. and Grudin, J. 2003. Personas. Proceedings of the 2003 conference on Designing for user experiences - DUX '03 (2003), 1.