Conduct Secondary Research

How can we learn from expert sources to focus user research and build off the work of others?

Introduction

Secondary research is the act of collecting information from existing and reputable sources.Many groups and organizations have been creating social impact for years and good designers build on the work of others. To make a real impact in the world, your team needsto know what is out there. Build a holistic understanding of your problem context from the facts, stories, themes, and existing solutions from your secondary research.

PARTS OF A PROBLEM'S CONTEXT

Be on the lookout for the major components on the graphic above during your secondaryresearch! You will use them to help form questions in user interviews and observations.

There are fundamental parts of a problem's context to keep in mind, regardless of the methods your team uses to research. In human-centered design, the focus is on the user's perspective, but it is also important to understand the system surrounding the user (See figure above)

Always remember to document and share your research with the team. Your team will revisitthe secondary research often as you progress throughout the project, so keep

your findings organized!

Effective ways to do this include:

- Locate reputable sources is one of the difficult parts of secondary research. Always be cognizant that your sources may come with an agenda and biases.
- Read academic articles, find a relevant book, or look for newspaper articles
- Look for interesting facts, stories, themes, and "slap stats" (i.e. statistics that are so shocking and persuasive they seem to slap you in the face when you encounterthem!)
- Look for what has been done in the field, if it worked or not, and whatcould be improved to identify opportunity gaps - gaps of the problemneglected or poorly addressed by the current solutions

Source: DFA National Process Resources

How to write a secondary research post:

- Give it a title
- Say who you are
- Quick summary:
  - Tell us in a few lines if it's about an academic article, a book, an initiative, a program
  - What is the key thing you learnt from it
- Expand:
  - Articulate the main learnings and give some pieces of evidence.
- Link it to the challenge questions:
  - What do you want to explore further?
  - What directions does it suggest?
- Source (s):

Example 1:

A circular system to reduce plastic by changing consumption behaviors and creating a refill system (Secondary Research)

ALF

Algramo is a Chilean start up which first used vending machines to see refill of staple goods in stores and is now exploring using a mobile version

I read about this start-up in Fast Company:
"If you live in Santiago, Chile, and run out of dish soap or detergent, you don't need to toss out the empty bottle. Instead, in a pilot that the Chile-based startup Algramo been running since May, customers can bring a reusable plastic bottle back to a vending machine mounted on an electric tricycle that travels around the city offering refills. An RFID code on the bottle gives discounts on future purchases, creating an incentive for customers to bring the same package back over and over again." (Fast Company).

Brian Bauer who works at Algramo explains "We offer a solution where we decouple consumption from packaging waste,"

This model has been used by some stores like Waitrose in the UK (mentioned in the article; see also this video.)

What is interesting is that Algramo is using a different incentive than environmental motivation (although that plays a role too) to increase adoption (and behavioral change): costs is an important incentive. Indeed, buying in small formats means paying more for the product (30 to 50%) so the company is using this as a motivation. Interestingly in the video on the Waitrose pilot, several people mentioned price (and the ability to buy what you need) as a positive effect.

The solution is really a systemic view on selling detergents, as it uses an RFID tag on the package and customers get a "sustainable consumption credit" that is equivalent to a discount on the next purchase.

It was also interesting to learn in the article that the smaller packaging tends to be hard to track and recycle and thus has a lot of negative effects.

How can this inspire us for the challenge?

How can we change our habits of consumptions by tapping into refill practices?
How can we come up with more solutions that decouple consumptions from packaging waste?
How can we support behavioral changes by creating systems that make changes easy for users / customers?
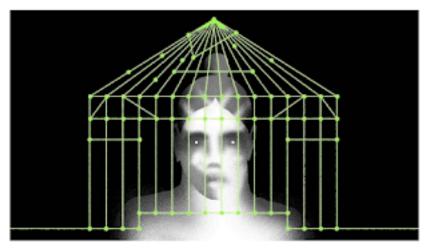
Source:
https://www.fastcompany.com/90416401/this-startup-is-ditching-plastic-waste-by-bringing-the-refills-to-you

Example 2

Algorithms create poverty trap (Secondary research)

ALF

DANIEL ZENDER

Great article by Karen Hao, the senior AI reporter at MIT Technology Review where she shows how ubiquitous and invisible algorithms are, and how harmful they are for certain groups.

"One person walks through so many systems on a day-to-day basis. I mean, we all do. But the consequences of it are much more harsh for poor people and minorities." (Gilman)

Hao interviewed, Gilman who has been a civil lawyer and poverty lawyer for 20 years. If you wonder what her job is it is to represent "people who've lost access to basic needs, like housing, food, education, work, or health care. Sometimes that means facing off with a government agency. Other times it's with a credit reporting agency, or a landlord." but what Gillman has noticed is that increasingly the problems faced by her clients involved some sort of algorithm:

"This is happening across the board to our clients," she says. "They're enmeshed in so many different algorithms that are barring them from basic services. And the clients may not be aware of that, because a lot of these systems are invisible."

And often times the people using these algorithms (for example a nurse using the results of algorithms to make decisions on whether to provide treatment or not) don't understand how they work.

Hao shows that there are two main trends: there is a growth of algorithms (for example for credit reports) because of the proliferation of data and there is a drive for adoption by government agencies who try to modernize to be more efficient, faster and more reliable.

But at Hao notes: *"the software procurement process is rarely transparent, and thus lacks accountability. Public agencies often buy automated decision-making tools directly from private vendors. The result is that when systems go awry, the individuals affected——and their lawyers—are left in the dark."*

Two other points made in the article which I thought was worth keeping in mind:

1. **The issue of accountability.** Another attorney interviewed by Hao reports that "He realized that nurses were telling patients, "Well, the computer did it—it's not me." "

2. **Lingering consequences from COVID:** "Gillman worries that coronavirus-related debts and evictions will get codified into credit scores, making it permanently harder for people to get jobs, apartments, and loans."

Gilman is currently a faculty fellow at the Data and Society research institute and has <u>released a report</u> *Poverty Lawgorithms*, documenting all the various algorithms that poverty lawyers might encounter.

Hao's article highlights how discrimination is embedded and accentuated by algorithms. She also shows the multiple actors involved: the public, government agencies, doctors, owners, insurance companies, lawyers, software providers, etc. and suggests that developing awareness and tools to understand issues and ask questions is a first important step.

A lot of the issues she describes are related to urban life.
- How can we use this article to list different issues, start mapping different stakeholders?

    - How can we make algorithms visible?

    - How can we empower beneficiaries / victims of these systems as well as make some of the users (from hospital, government agencies, more accountable)?

Source: Karen Ho, 2020, The coming war on the hidden algorithms that trap people in poverty, MIT Tech Review
https://www-technologyreview-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.technologyreview.com/2020/12/04/1013068/algorithms-create-a-poverty-trap-lawyers-fight-back/amp/