

Usability Test Research Results and Report for TexasMonthly.com

The Texas-Themed Media Outlet and Magazine

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Executive Summary

Test Objective:

Sunday Leak, the Web Development Technical Lead for Texas Monthly expressed her concerns regarding the efficiency of the Texas Monthly website as follows:

- Are users able to efficiently locate the articles they want to read?
- Are the more nuanced features of the Texas Monthly website easy to use?
- Are the website's accessibility tools simple to identify and implement as needed?

To address these questions, our usability study was focused on gathering qualitative and quantitative data based on participants ranging from novice to professional media experience level.

Test Process:

Our testing process was focused on taking participants through a short usability test consisting of hypothetical scenarios which might mirror real life situations that users could find themselves in. Following industry-standard methods of usability testing, our team undertook an evaluation of the site, along with collecting key user feedback and suggested improvements.

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Introduction

The purpose of this *Texas Monthly* usability test was to collect feedback on how users utilize and navigate website features, such as with areas of frustration or what potential improvements can be made to the media site.

With this primary objective in mind, this report and its results are purposely designed to inform Texas Monthly's Sunday Leak, the Web Development Technical Lead, who will intake the usability test's data to improve the website itself.

The following results include:

- Test Goals and Research Questions
- Target Participants versus Actual Participants
- Testing Methodology
- Results, According to Research Questions
- Discussion of Findings
- Recommended Improvements
- Appendix
 - A) Recruitment Email
 - B) Moderator Script
 - C) Participant Bill of Rights and Consent Form
 - D) Pre-Test Questionnaire
 - E) Post-Test Questionnaire

Test Goals and Research Questions

As previously mentioned, the primary goal of this usability test was to understand and decipher what aspects of the Texas Monthly website are difficult or simple for users to navigate. To complete this objective, users were given one specific task to complete in the form of hypothetical scenarios tailored to the site. Through this, the primary researcher, Christian Jeter, could understand Texas Monthly's strengths and weaknesses.

The research questions which served as a framework for user experience and data analysis were as follows:

- *Initial website layout:* Does the layout suggest the route first-time users need to take to reach the selected destination?
- *Language:* Can individuals with varying types of media experience understand website lingo and syntax?

- *Perceived credibility*: Does the website evoke a professional, reliable journalistic feeling from users?
- *Navigation*: Does Texas Monthly's categorization choices make locating specific resources simple?
- *Satisfaction*: What aspects of the site did users like and what aspects did they dislike?

These questions are based on a mixture of user experience principles and objective information provided by Leak and Texas Monthly. Through this, the usability test allowed us to quickly gather and analyze qualitative user data, such as deciphering the website's strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, these questions helped to maintain a framework for understanding potential problems and their solutions.

Target Participants versus Actual Participants

To ensure test participants would best represent actual Texas Monthly users and provide efficient results, potential participants were recruited based on a number of characteristics, as based on provided website demographic data.

A general description of preferred user characteristics were to:

- Be between ages 18-44
- Be Texas-based, ideally from major metropolitan cities
- Have at least a novice understanding of media cite layouts
- Be very familiar with standard English language
- Be at least semi-familiar with media categories and organization

Using these characteristics, the original plan was for participants to be categorized into one of **two** user profiles to best decipher and understand what key demographic aspects and data they will represent for analysis.

These profiles were:

- Younger user (age 18-31) with moderate to advanced *digital* media exposure
- Older user (age 31-44) with novice *digital* media exposure

However, the *actual* participants differed from these predefined ranges quite a bit. To be more specific, the younger users had more novice digital media exposure while the older users had more moderate to advanced digital media exposure, flipping the two categories. Therefore, it is more ideal to update the current categories to better align with the actual participants.

These new categories include:

- Younger user (age 18-31) with novice *digital* media exposure
- Older user (age 31+) with moderate to advanced *digital* media exposure

These new categories serve as a stronger reflection and representation of the participants, which in turn provides a better understanding of the Texas Monthly demographic audience.

Testing Methodology

A total of 3 participants were recruited and interviewed, with 2 being in the new “Younger user” range and 1 being in the new “Older user” range. After the initial screening, each participant walked through an online testing session, conducted through Google Forms, where they were asked to complete a given task scenario and provide feedback. Each session lasted between 10-15 minutes.

Each session was composed of:

- Welcome and background questionnaire (Appendix D): 3 minutes
- One of three potential scenarios: 3-7 minutes
- Post-test breakdown and conclusion: 3 minutes

The estimated time and specifics for each scenario are noted in the procedure below.

Results, According to Research Questions

With the aforementioned research questions in mind, the team found the Texas Monthly website to be quite simple and efficient to navigate for most users. However, there were a number of obstacles that participants ran into. These issues can be categorized into the following:

- *Layout* – How the website’s layout presented information on first glance.
- *Navigation* – How intuitive and efficient the website’s navigation features are.
- *Data Location* – How simple or difficult it is to locate specific items of data.

Using these categories and qualitative data gathered from participants, the following table showcases 6 problems that can be identified, including how many participants were affected and severity.

Usability Problem	Number Affected	Severity
Layout – TM’s home page presentation was “confusing” or “overwhelming”	1/3	High
Layout – TM’s section menu was repetitive and inconsistent	2/3	Low
Navigation – TM’s accessibility tools were confusingly listed and visually overwhelming	1/3	High
Navigation – TM’s features, such as arrows, make navigating the site slightly troublesome	2/3	Medium
Data Location – Some of TM’s more nuanced features are too hidden	2/3	High
Data Location – Certain data is hidden or not well presented in relation to TM’s standard stories	1/3	Medium

Discussion of Findings

Overall, many of the issues that the Texas Monthly website suffers from revolve around the way it presents more nuanced information, including data regarding barbeque prices and choices. Also, many participants emphasized that locating specific items was also quite troublesome.

Participant 1 (Older user)

The user felt that a large majority of the website was clear and well-put-together. However, the user also emphasized that certain parts of the layout, such as the small magnifying glass acting as a search bar, made it semi-difficult to immediately search for items beyond the home page.

It took this user approximately 3 minutes and 6 seconds to complete the given task of “Scenario 1.” The user suffered very few navigational issues, with about 16 total clicks and only 1 substantial pain point (the initial search bar).

Participant 2 (Younger user)

Similar to the first user, this individual believed the Texas Monthly website was “uncluttered” and “well-laid-out.” However, the main issue the user suffered from came in the form of the accessibility menu starkly contrasting the home page with a cluttered and “overwhelming” outline.

This user took about 5 minutes and 32 seconds to complete the given task of “Scenario 2.” This participant had slightly more navigational issues than the first, with about 33 total clicks and 3 pain points (locating the accessibility tools, navigating options and improving the site layout).

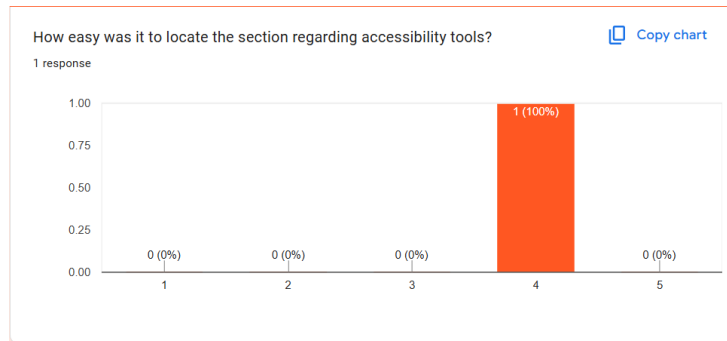


Figure 1: Bar graph showcasing how easy Participant 2 felt Scenario #2, regarding accessibility tools, was.

Participant 3 (Younger user)

Unlike the first and second users, this participant felt the Texas Monthly website layout was somewhat confusing, even if it did align with standard industry practices. This issue was compounded by their search for a specific piece of data, which was exasperated by hidden information and lacking, visible navigation tools.

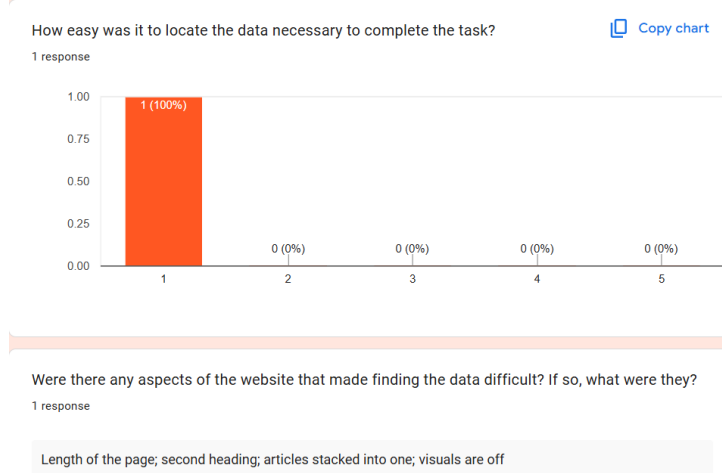


Figure 2: Bar graph showcasing how easy Participant 3 felt Scenario #3, regarding TM's more nuanced data locations, was.

This user took about 6 minutes and 47 seconds to complete the task based on “Scenario 3,” and required slight assistance from the test conductor (following the standard traditional usability study guidelines). The participant made about 57 clicks and suffered 4 pain points (deciphering headings, scrolling for info, using navigation tools and finding specific data).

Recommended Improvements

Based on both the original research questions and results of the usability study itself, there are number of recommended improvements that could be made to enhance the Texas Monthly website and create a more enjoyable user experience.

These improvements are:

- The top sections area should be simplified to remove repetitive language, specifically with the “Food & Drink” and “BBQ” headings
- The magnifying glass should be slightly expanded to create a more obvious search bar
- Longer pages should be broken up into multiple pages to reduce length and time of scrolling
- The “Accessibility Tools” section should have a more streamlined design which is consistent with the rest of the website. Also, it should utilize collapsible lists to make it quicker to scroll through
- The “50 Best BBQ Joints in Texas” page should be much shorter and presented with more visibility
- Items that help the user reach certain data, such as arrows and other page movers, should be made more visible with better contrast

Appendix

Recruitment Email

Good Morning or Afternoon, _____,

My name is Christian Jeter, and I am a user experience researcher conducting a study over the usability and effectiveness of the Texas-based media and magazine platform *Texas Monthly* to discern potential problems and implement design improvements.

I'm reaching out to you as I was hoping you would be interested in sharing your thoughts on the *Texas Monthly* website, as I believe your input would be greatly appreciated for the study. The total time for the testing and interview should last around 15-20 minutes.

If you are interested, I'd be happy to coordinate a meeting time and date.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Moderator Script

Introduction

Hi, my name is Christian Jeter. Thank you for coming in today! Your input and participation will greatly help our study and our sponsor learn valuable feedback for improving the website you'll be working with today.

Audio Recording Permission

Before we begin, I want to clarify that we will be recording this session for the sake of data collection; we will only be collecting audio, nothing visual. Audio will ONLY be used to review your thoughts, critiques and ideas about the website. Once the study is completed, said audio will be properly disposed of.

On the Google Form, you will be asked to sign a permission form stating you are aware of the reasoning behind the recording and that we have your consent to record audio.

Introduction to the Test

Today, you are going to be working with the Texas-based media and magazine platform *Texas Monthly*. Specifically, you will be given a task(s) to accomplish using the Texas Monthly website while I ask you some questions over your thought process throughout.

First, you'll be given a short Pre-Test Questionnaire to understand your experience level with the website. Then, you'll get into the test itself along with its assigned task. Finally, we'll conduct a debrief questionnaire to conclude the session.

We really appreciate your feedback about the experience, so we ask that you tell us what you are doing and why you are doing it as you complete the task and navigate the website.

Before we get into the Pre-Test Questionnaire, do you have any outstanding questions about the process?

Pre-Test Questionnaire

To begin, I'd like you to fill out this questionnaire to help us understand your experience with digital media websites and Texas Monthly. While you are completing it, please tell us what you are writing down and also why you are writing these answers.

During Testing

We have *one* specific task scenario for you to work through. Remember, this is not a test of you; it's a test of the Texas Monthly website and we are very interested in your reactions and feedback. So, please think out loud. After each scenario, tell me when you are done and I will give you a brief Post-Test Questionnaire to complete.

Post-Test Questionnaire

That was excellent feedback. Here's our Post-Test Questionnaire. This the last thing we'll ask you to do. Please tell us what you are writing down and why you chose the answer you did. This will help us understand your experience even more.

Closing Debrief

That was great. We have learned so much from you. This concludes the testing session. Do you have any outstanding questions that remain?

Thank you very much for coming in today. We really have learned a lot from your feedback.

Participant Bill of Rights and Consent Form

Please read this form and indicate whether you consent to testing at the bottom.

You are invited to be in a research study in which we ask you to complete tasks on the Texas Monthly website while we record and measure the steps. This study is being conducted by Christian Jeter in the Department of English at Texas Tech University.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to observe how users interact with a website they are unfamiliar with based on digital media literacy and user experience principles.

If you agree to be in this study, your participation will consist of pre and post-test questionnaires about your experience with the website, the completion of a short task and a short debriefing interview about your experience completing the specified tasks. Your participation will not exceed 20 minutes of your time.

Voluntary Nature of Study

Your participation is strictly voluntary, and you are not required to participate in this study. You can withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that we may publish, we will include zero information that will make others able to identify participants. We will use pseudonyms or numbers in place of your real name to protect your identity. If you agree to participate in interviews, we will record your interviews through audio. Only researchers and our course professor will have access to this data.

Contact and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Christian Jeter. You may ask any questions you have about the study now. If you have questions later, you may contact Jeter through email at chjeter@ttu.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers to my questions. I consent to participate in the study.

Participant Signature:

_____ Date: _____

Pre-Test Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to participate in our usability test today. Your participation will provide valuable feedback about your experience using the Texas Monthly website.

Before we begin, we would like you to fill out this brief questionnaire so that we will have more information about your experience using the Texas Monthly website and, more specifically, about your experience with digital media layouts.

Name: _____

1. How often do you find yourself on media or magazine platforms online? (1 – not at all, 5 – everyday)
2. In your opinion, how familiar are you with media lingo and terminology, such as with “News” or “Lifestyle”? (1 – not at all, 5 – very familiar)
3. If applicable, what media platforms do you frequent most? (Free write)
4. When on a media platform, what is the first thing you notice? (Free write)
5. When on a media platform, what information stands out the most or is most valuable to you? (Free write)

Post-Test Questionnaire

Scenario 1

1. How easy was it to locate the appropriate section to complete the task? (1 – very difficult, 5 – very easy)
2. How easy was it to find an article regarding James Talarico and Jasmine Crockett? (1 – very difficult, 5 – very easy)
3. How easy did navigation panes make it to complete the task? (1 – very difficult, 5 – very easy)

Scenario 2

1. How easy was it to locate the section regarding accessibility tools? (1 – very difficult, 5 – very easy)
2. How easy was it to locate the correct visibility tools and features? (1 – very difficult, 5 – very easy)
3. How effective did you feel the visibility changes were, once you made them? (1 – not very effective, 5 – very effective)

Scenario 3

1. How simple to use are the navigation tools, such as section headings and the “hamburger” menu? (1 – not very simple, 5 – very simple)
2. How easy was it to locate the data necessary to complete the task? (1 – very difficult, 5 – very easy)
3. Were there any aspects of the website that made finding the data difficult? If so, what were they? (Free write)