Consumeter – An information tool

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Abstract. The development of the information society enables more effective dissemination of information, new ways of organising activities and new forms of communication between people and institutions. Today's consumers have limited ability to make decisions based on knowledge. In the future things might be different. We might see tools which can ease the information gap so that consumers can manage the huge amount of information. Consumeter is an application oriented scenario which aim is to wake thoughts about the present problems in our everyday information processing and outline solutions we might benefit from in the future. Consumeter is part of my own input to *Design Fiction* -project, organised by Media Lab, at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki.

1. Information overflow

In today's western society we can hardly find phenomena more typical to our time than the overwhelming development of the information processing capability of computing devices and the massive increase of the information flow in which we live in. This phenomenon has affected our everyday life, silently but revolutionarily. Each day we face large amount of information directed to us. We see messages, signs and advertisements in both digital and analog form. Today we should be more informed than ever before in the history, but it has become unbearable task to evaluate every message and interpret its content.

2. Consumption

If we take a closer look at consumption, an activity typical to our time, we will see that the development described above is everything but invisible in the domain. We will notice that the information available in a shop is unmanageable in amount. We can not base our buying decisions on information because of the information overflow.

We do not know how the products we buy are produced, where they came from and where they will end. In the future it doesn't have to be this way. We might see tools which can help as to choose, to base our decisions on our values, on subjects we find important. But this will happen only if the tools we are using can help us at the exact moment the buying decision is made - in the shop, between the shelves.

How could this kind of information tool work and what would be the consequences of informed consumer decisions? People are not rational shoppers in the way neoclassical economists see them. Price is only one aspect when consumers asses the value of a product. People are also interested in the environmental burden caused by the production. People would like to know that the product is produced without child labour or that the product does not origin from certain areas of the world or that it is produced with the best available methods. All the information needed for the informed consumer decisions exists, but is not available in any usable form. If this information could be easily accessible to consumers, it would help them direct their shopping patterns away from the producers and products they do not consider ethical, fair, environmentally sustainable or healthy to them selves. This would inevitably change production processes of goods, improve the conditions in the

factories, diminish the usage of unrenewable rawmaterials and hopefully make the economy more ethical and sustainable in its nature.

How could this information tool work? The tool would be based on metainformation or profiles every user could tailor according to his own norms, wants and desires. In a situation where the user of the tool is choosing a product, the tool would compare the information from the product to the metainformation and then inform the user. The final decision would be still left to the user. He or she could decide whether to follow the guidelines or not.

3. Scenario

In my concept the tool has a shape of a shopping bag. The bag it self has information processing capability. When user places items into the bag it indicates whether the item fits into the preprogrammed profile (green light) or if it is against it (red light). I chose the colors to be the indicators because they are almost ambient - user can use the information or ignore it. The most important thing in the scenario is improved availability and usability of the information.

To get better understanding of the concept reader may refer to the Consumeter video *[http://www.jyu.fi/~antello/designfiction/movie_bag.htm]*. The video describes one idea what this kind of information tool could look like and what would the functions of the tool be.

4. Context for the scenario

Consumeter is an application-oriented scenario which aim is to wake thoughts about the present problems in our everyday information processing and also outline solutions we might benefit from in the future. Consumeter is part of my own input to *Design Fiction* -project, organised by Media Lab, at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki. Design Fiction is a process which tries to approach technology, future and design from the viewpoints of home and everyday life

Design Fiction (DF) represents a new idea of future research in the way that design of new technologies could be based on everyday life. It is also the name of the Media Lab project in the University of Art and Design, Helsinki, which was on display in Nykyaika-gallery summer 1999. Design Fiction has also organised an expert seminar in Fiskars in autumn 1999 and an open discussion and work forum Design Fiction Summer Camp in summer 2000

Design Fiction has been organised by Media Lab's Future Media Home research project (FMH), with the target in examining how future homes would function as media environments if their design were based on the hopes, needs and realities of users. Design Fiction is an independent part of the FMH-project. FMH is sponsored by TEKES (the Technology Development Centre) and six corporations: Andersen Consulting, the Helsinki Telephone Company, ICL Data, Helsingin Sanomat, Sonera and the Finnish Broadcasting Company.

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