

# CUNY ACADEMIC COMMONS: HEURISTIC REPORT

[HTTP://COMMONS.GC.CUNY.EDU/](http://commons.gc.cuny.edu/)

OCTOBER 28, 2013

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## METHODOLOGY

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The heuristic evaluation method was used to assess the usability of the CUNY Academic Commons website (<http://commons.gc.cuny.edu/>). A heuristic evaluation involves usability experts completing a specified set of tasks, highlighting any usability problems, recording the problem and which heuristics it violates, and the perceived severity of the problem. The heuristics chosen for this evaluation were developed by Jakob Nielsen, the foremost expert in usability research (see Appendix A for the full heuristics list). The heuristic method was used because it is efficient and requires only a small set of usability professionals to conduct the evaluation. Fortunately, students in Professor Craig MacDonald's "Usability Theory and Practice" class, part of the Pratt Institute Master in Information and Library Science program, had recently learned about the heuristic evaluation method and were available to conduct the evaluation of the CUNY Academic Commons site. The participants used various types of computers and screen-sizes to conduct the evaluation, including 27-inch iMacs and 13-inch Macbook Pros.

Though Jakob Nielsen has found that only three to five evaluators are needed for a thorough evaluation of a site, the class size allowed us to pair students up and have six groups of two and one group of three conduct the evaluation. The students were given a brief explanation of the site they would be evaluating, logins for the CUNY Commons, and five tasks that allowed them to explore the Commons website in depth (see Appendix B for the tasks used in the evaluation). They then evaluated the site for 45 minutes, recording as many problems as they could identify in that time and rating the severity of those problems (see Appendix C for definitions of the severity ratings). These were combined with an evaluation conducted by one of the project team members and resulted in a total of 51 problems identified (see Appendix D for a full list of identified problems). These were taken into consideration by the project team and the issues that were recorded most often and/or inhibited usability the most are included in this report.

# FINDINGS

## HOMEPAGE

The homepage appearance, including its design and graphics, is visually attractive and appealing overall, however the amount of content that is presented is overwhelming to navigate and it is difficult to discern the site's purpose. The slider, located prominently at the top of the homepage, serves as a good focal point for welcoming and initially engaging users. While it is loaded with rich, interesting graphics and useful content related to current events and advanced Commons usage, it does not include content that clearly reveals the site's purpose or how to get started. In order to learn about how to use the site, users must locate the "Take a Tour" link to the right of the slider and navigate to a video that explains how the site can be used. While the link is readily available at the top of the homepage, it fades into the background and is easily overlooked because it competes with the dynamic and colorful slider. This creates a scenario in which the user is unable to quickly determine the site's purpose.

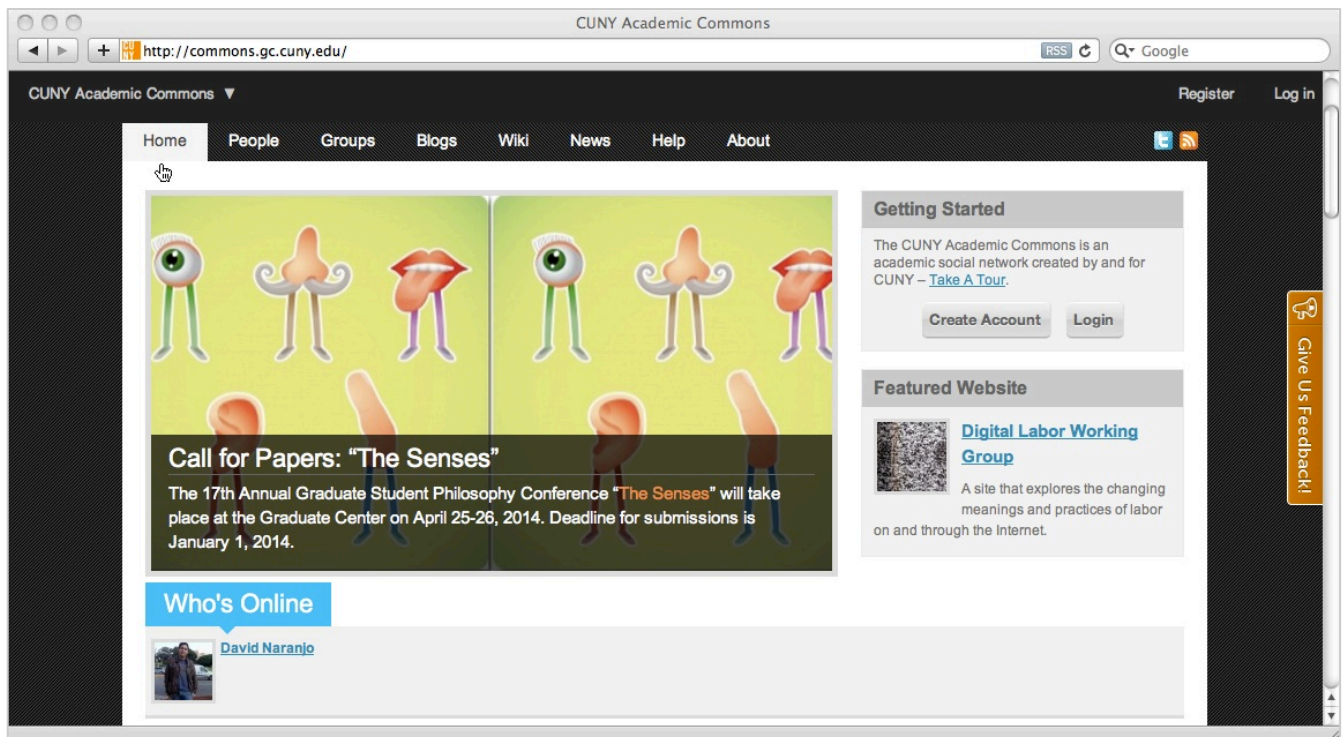


FIGURE 1: HOMEPAGE SLIDER

The problem with understanding the site purpose and how to use the site is amplified by the confusing manner in which "Groups", "Members", and "Recent Blog Posts" are presented

below the homepage slider. The Commons' system contains a tremendous amount of content (514 Groups, 4550 Members, and 981 Blogs). A sizable selection of this content is displayed on the homepage in what appears to be a 3-column newsfeed, and sorted by default according to "Active". It is unclear that "Active" means "most recently active" until you see the time of the last activity below each group and member name.

While "Recent Blog Posts" are, in fact, a site-wide news feed, "Groups" and "Members" are merely a list of titles and names which represent who was most recently active. In order to view the actual "Groups" and "Members" activity, or the more meaningful content, users need to click on each title and name, then navigate those individual pages post to find the activity. This is especially a problem because when users login they are not presented with a personalized homepage. Not only does this create confusion about whether or not login was successful, but the all-inclusive lists of titles and names on the homepage likely hold very little meaning to them. This puts a burden on the user to hunt for meaningful content, and it creates a scenario in which the user is left overwhelmed and possibly uninspired to proceed to the next step.

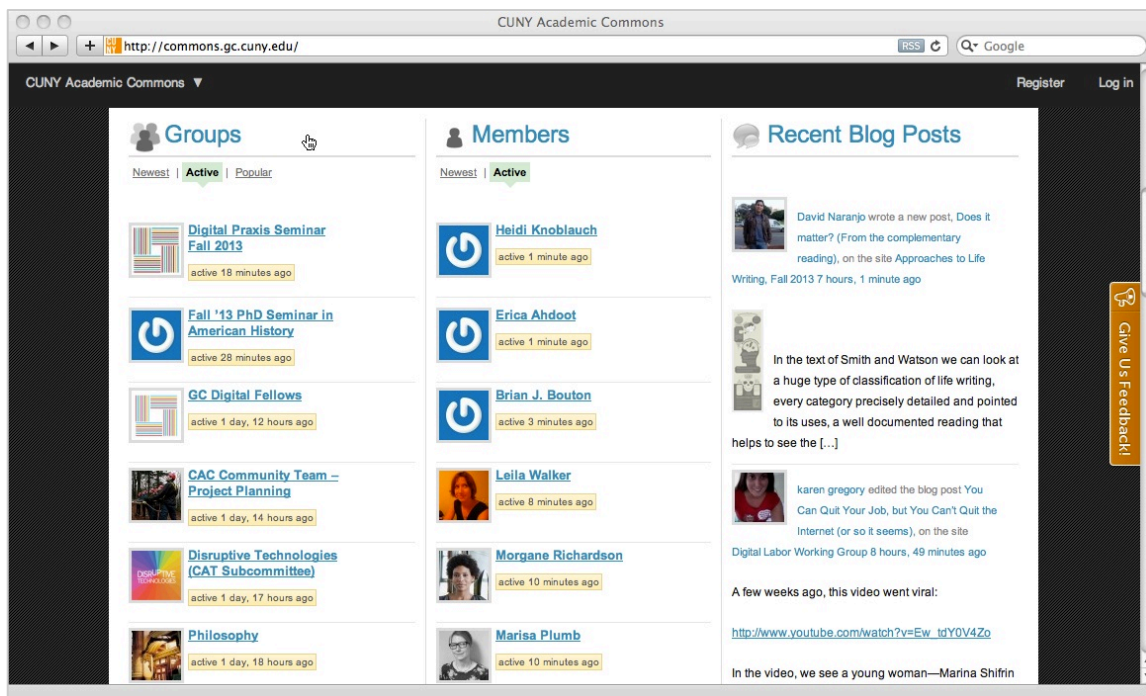


FIGURE 2: HOMEPAGE FEEDS

## FINDING INFORMATION

### LABELING

For the most part, the labeling within the site is clear and straightforward, however evaluators recognized a few areas that needed improvement. For example, on the homepage and the “People” page, the labels “People” and “Members” were used interchangeably. This inconsistency can cause confusion for users, creating inefficient navigation of the site.

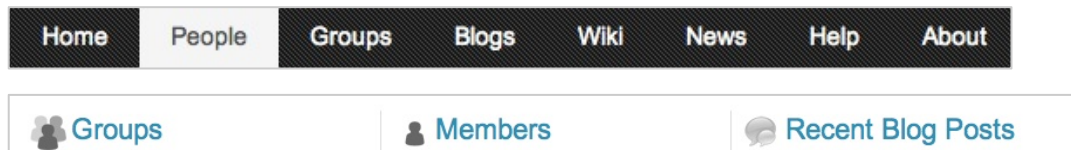


FIGURE 3: PEOPLE AND MEMBERS LABELS ON THE HOMEPAGE

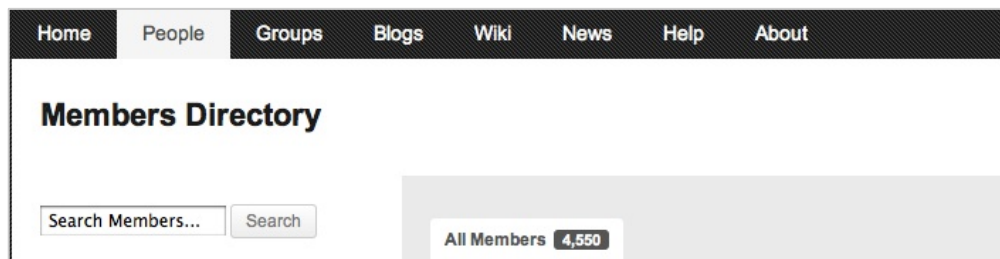


FIGURE 4: PEOPLE AND MEMBERS LABELS ON THE PEOPLE TAB

Several evaluators were unclear about what “Groups” meant, and the “Group Directory” page provides no introduction or explanation of how this section could be used. This emphasizes the importance of understanding the site’s purpose and how to use the site from the beginning.

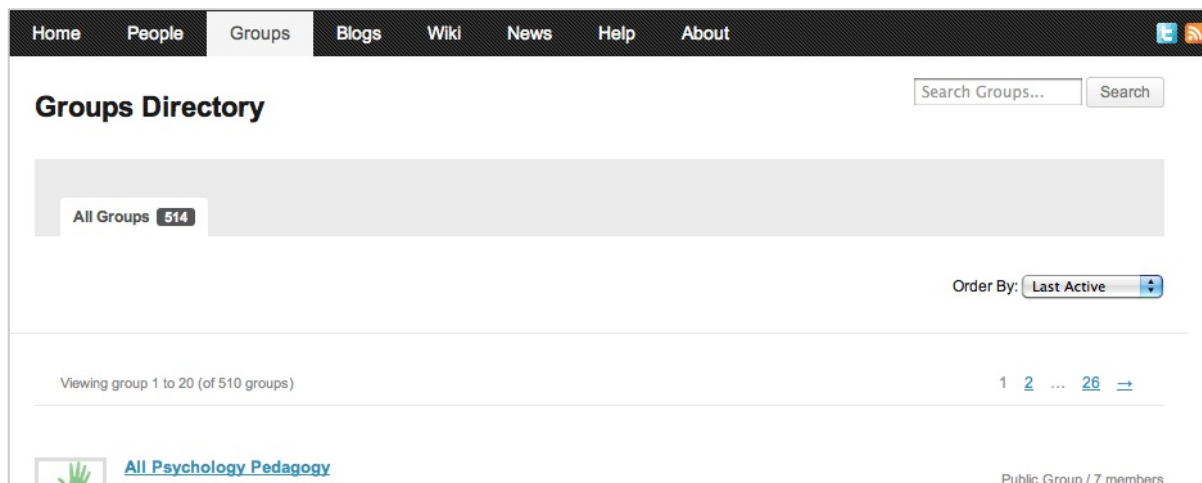


FIGURE 5: THE GROUPS PAGE WITH NO EXPLANATION OF WHAT GROUPS ARE

## FILTERING

The filters offered within the People tab are a good idea to help users narrow down the large number of users when looking for a specific colleague. However, the evaluators felt that the filter areas were ambiguous, especially the Academic Interests filter which evaluators noted was confusing and unclear.

**Filters** [Clear All](#)

**College** [Clear](#)

- \*Non-CUNY
- Baruch College
- Borough of Manhattan Community College
- Bronx Community College
- Brooklyn College
- City College
- College of Staten Island
- CUNY Central
- CUNY Graduate Center

[More](#)

**Role** [Clear](#)

- Administrator
- Alumnus/a
- Faculty
- Graduate Student
- Other
- Postdoc
- Staff

**Academic Interests** [Clear](#)


FIGURE 6: FILTERING OPTIONS IN THE MEMBER CATEGORY

Evaluators also noticed that once a search has been conducted, either by using the search bar or a narrowing filter, there were often still many results to peruse. To try to browse more efficiently they changed the sort option to Alphabetical, but felt it was unhelpful because the pages of results were still indicated by number.

All Members **4,550**

Order By:

Viewing member 1 to 20 (of 398 members)    1 [2](#) ... [20](#) ⇨

 **A Blake**  
active 1 year, 10 months ago

**College:** Queens College  
**Title:** Library Science  
**Academic Interests:** I am interested in Records Management

FIGURE 7: FILTERING MEMBERS ALPHABETICALLY

## NAVIGATION

It was also noted that, when accessing a group's blog that is external to the site, the menu in the top-left corner no longer functions correctly. The dropdown arrow can be highlighted, but no dropdown appears. Therefore, only the link to the homepage is accessible from group blogs outside of the CUNY Commons Wordpress site.

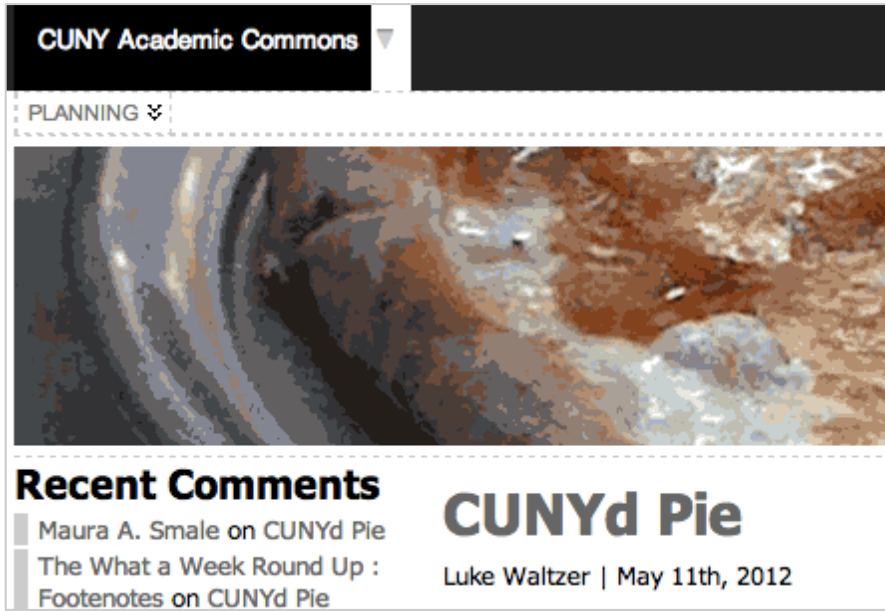


FIGURE 8: GROUP BLOG HOSTED EXTERNALLY



## SEARCH

When evaluators used the search bar to find information they found that the “People” page and the “Groups” page had multiple search bars located in different parts of the page. This caused confusion about which search bar should be used. It also created an inefficient navigation process because evaluators had to look for the search bars. Additionally, some of the evaluators felt that the search bars faded into the background and that their visibility was not prominent enough.

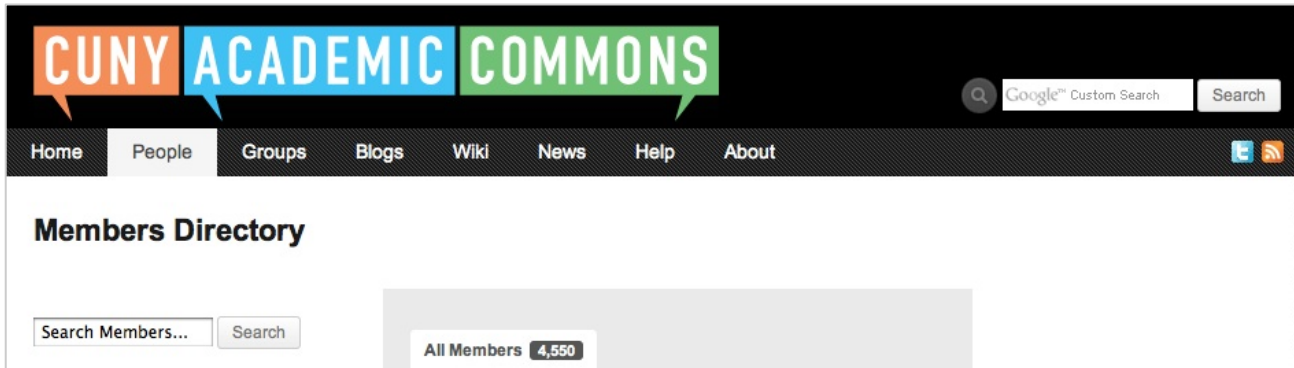


FIGURE 9: SEARCH BARS ON THE PEOPLE PAGE



FIGURE 10: SEARCH BARS ON THE GROUPS PAGE

# PROFILES

## LAYOUT OF PERSONAL PROFILE

The overall look of the profiles is great, especially when accessing them without logging in, but they are not entirely straightforward when accessing a personal profile when the user is logged in. The largest issue was the navigation between the profile and the activities that can be completed within the profile. Namely, the large block at the top of the page is always static, even on a user's own page, and all activities – messaging, friends, sites, activity, etc. – are hidden below the fold and within the Commons Profile, which is behind the Public Portfolio tab. On small screens, the non-profile items are not even visible when looking at the page. The change between the top (gray) and bottom (white) half of the profile is a fairly large jump, which one evaluator labeled as “jarring” to the user, especially on smaller screens. In addition, whenever any action is taken, the profile page snaps back to the top, taking the user away from the area that they were using.

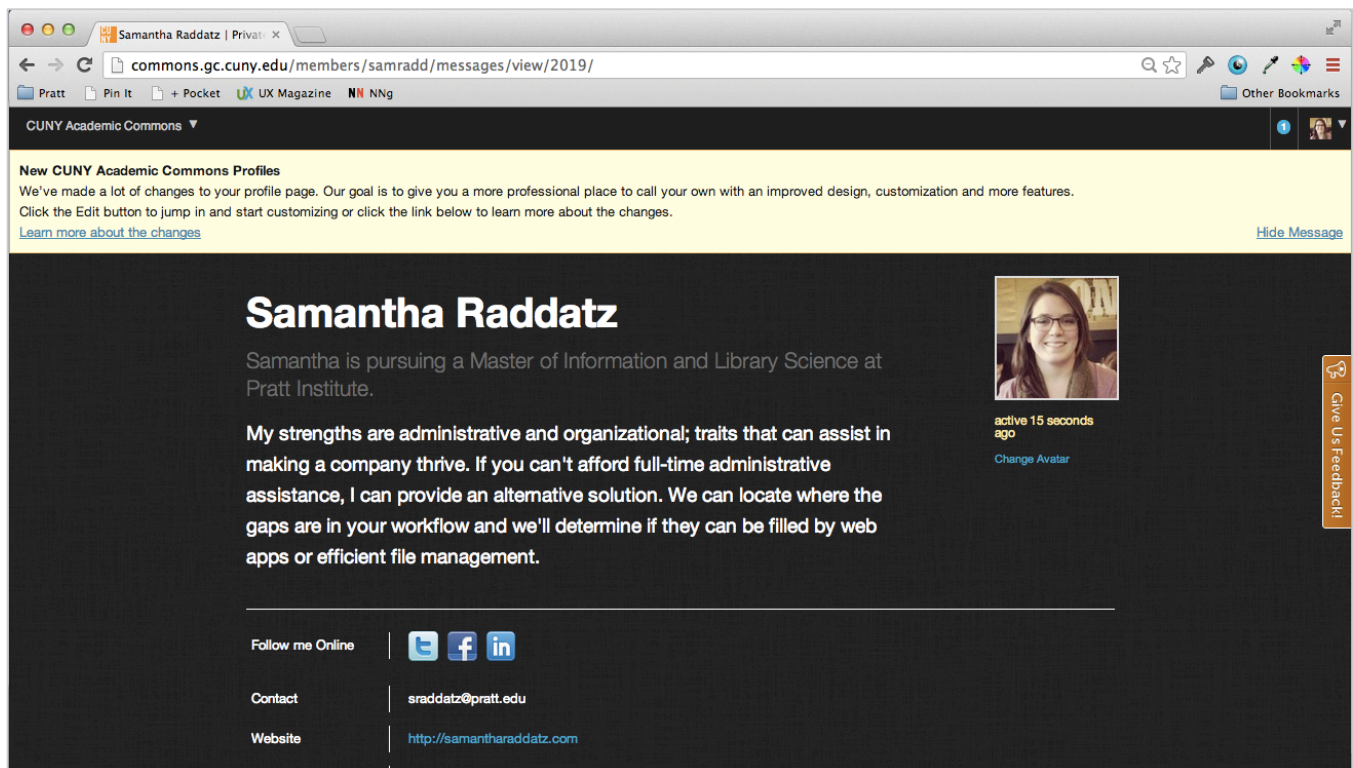


FIGURE 11: THE PROFILE ON AN 11-INCH MACBOOK AIR

When looking at your own profile, it is unclear what is seen or unseen by non-logged-in users. It may be assumed that the Commons Profile is only seen by users that are logged into the site or is the user's personal profile dashboard, but the public accessing the site actually sees much of it.

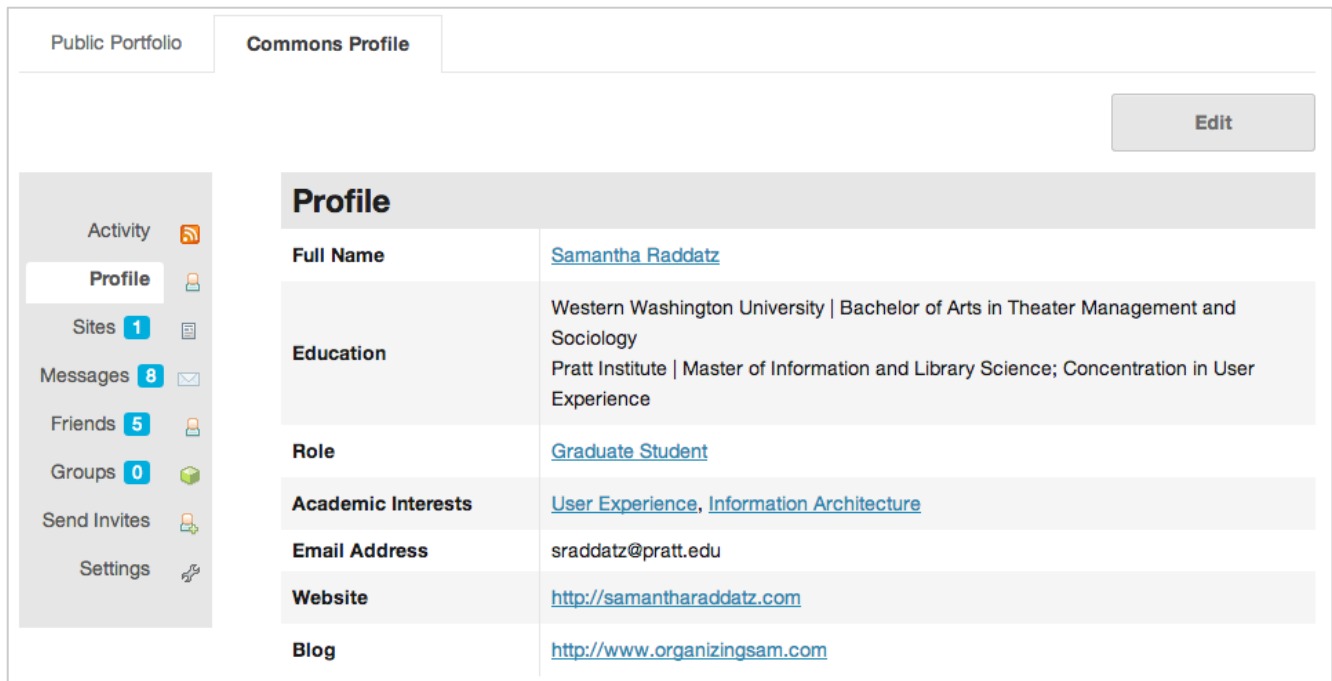


FIGURE 12: THE COMMONS PROFILE AS SEEN BY THE USER

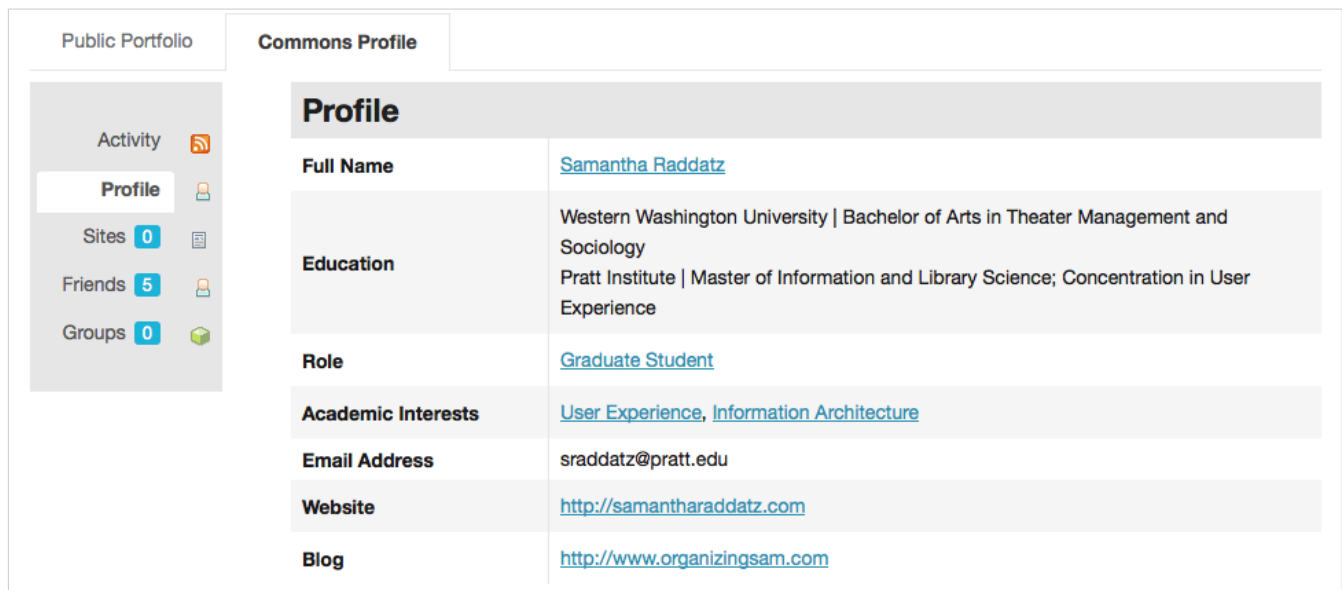


FIGURE 13: THE COMMONS PROFILE AS SEEN BY THE PUBLIC AND OTHER COMMONS USERS

## MESSAGING

The messaging system between users is a great functionality to have in the CUNY Commons. There are a few areas of it that could use improvement both on the friend's profile and personal profile sides. The smallest issue is that on other people's profiles the "Message" button (and the "Mention" button too) is quite small and is overshadowed by the Add Friend/Remove Friend button. If the user is able to message or mention a user without being friends with them, then the importance of the friendship is diminished.

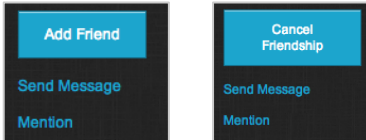


FIGURE 14: SIZE OF ADD FRIEND AND CANCEL FRIENDSHIP BUTTONS ON PROFILES

Once a user clicks on Send Message, they are taken back to their own profile to do so. This works well until after the message is sent. The user is taken to the top of their own profile, again hiding the message center and the feedback that their message has been sent below the fold. Even when the user accesses the message center via another user's page, they are taken to their own page rather than back to the user's page they were browsing previously. It is not immediately clear how to return to the friend's profile as their name is quite small at the top of the message area.

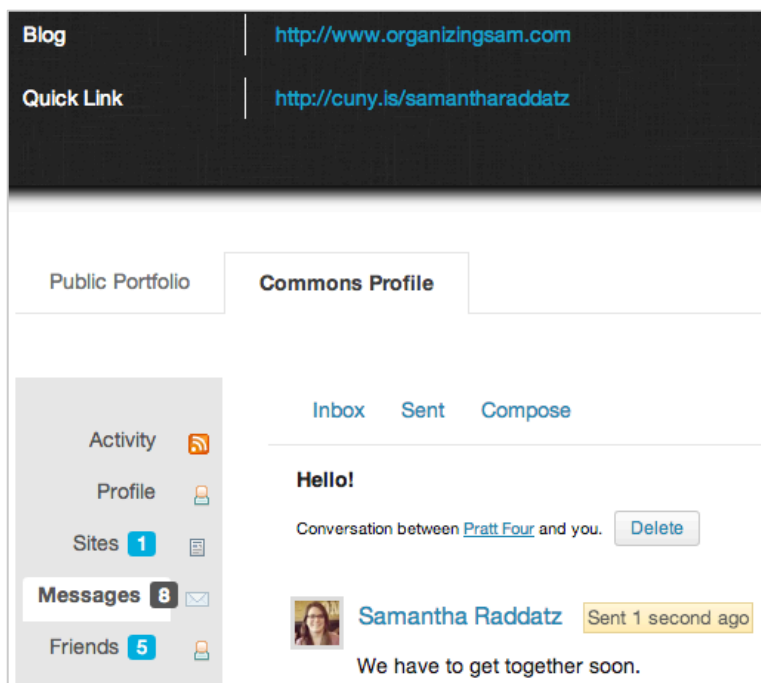


FIGURE 15: ALL OF THE FEEDBACK GIVEN AFTER A USER SENDS A MESSAGE

The message center itself has a few confusing aspects. First, it is unclear if it functions more like e-mail or chat. If the user is expecting it to work similarly to e-mail they may be confused by the lack of options, such as adding attachments or saving drafts. If the user expects a chat-like interface they may be confused by the 'Delete' button – does this delete the conversation for both the user and the person they are messaging?

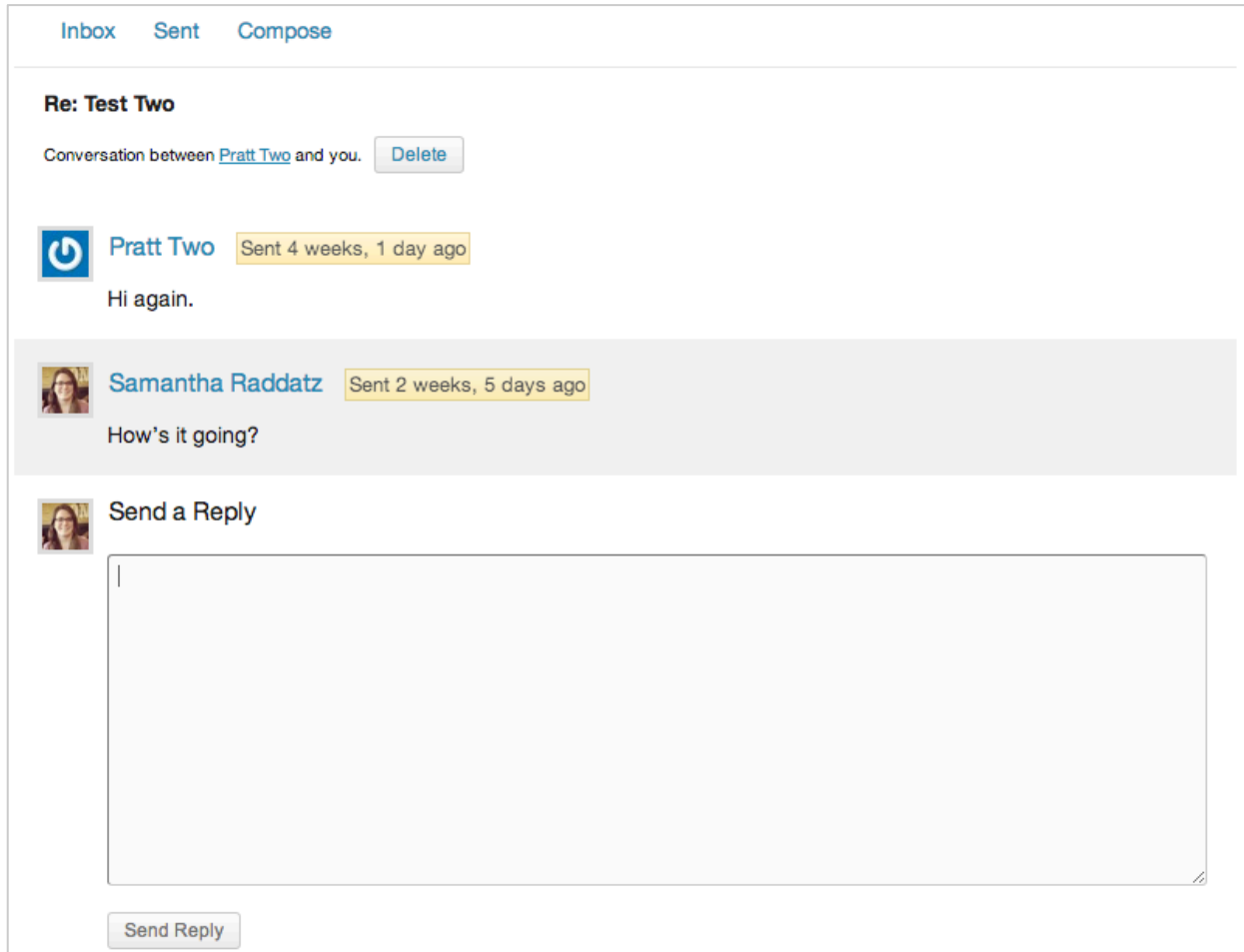


FIGURE 16: CONVERSATION VIEW WITHIN MESSAGES

## APPENDIX A: HEURISTICS<sup>1</sup>

NUMBER	HEURISTIC	DESCRIPTION
H1	<b>Visibility of system status</b>	The system should always keep users informed about what is going on, through appropriate feedback within reasonable time.
H2	<b>Match between system and the real world</b>	The system should speak the users' language, with words, phrases and concepts familiar to the user, rather than system-oriented terms. Follow real-world conventions, making information appear in a natural and logical order.
H3	<b>User control and freedom</b>	Users often choose system functions by mistake and will need a clearly marked "emergency exit" to leave the unwanted state without having to go through an extended dialogue. Support undo and redo.
H4	<b>Consistency and standards</b>	Users should not have to wonder whether different words, situations or actions mean the same thing. Follow platform conventions.
H5	<b>Error prevention</b>	Even better than good error messages is a careful design which prevents a problem from occurring in the first place. Either eliminate error-prone conditions or check them and present users with a confirmation option before they commit to the action.
H6	<b>Recognition rather than recall</b>	Minimize the user's memory load by making objects, actions, and options visible. The user should not have to remember information from one part of the dialogue to another. Instructions for use of the system should be visible or easily retrievable whenever appropriate.
H7	<b>Flexibility and efficiency of use</b>	Accelerators – unseen by the novice user—may often speed up the interaction for the expert user such that the system can cater to both inexperienced and experienced users. Allow users to tailor frequent actions.
H8	<b>Aesthetic and minimalist design</b>	Dialogues should not contain information which is irrelevant or rarely needed. Every extra unit of information in a dialogue competes with the relevant units of information and diminishes their relative visibility.
H9	<b>Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors</b>	Error messages should be expressed in plain language (no codes), precisely indicate the problem, and constructively suggest a solution.
H10	<b>Help and documentation</b>	Even though it is better if the system can be used without documentation, it may be necessary to provide help and documentation. Any such information should be easy to search, focused on the user's task, list concrete steps to be carried out, and not be too large.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/ten-usability-heuristics/>

## APPENDIX B: TASKS

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TASK	TIME	DESCRIPTION
Task 1	<b>5 minutes</b>	Browse the homepage. Please do not click on anything.
Task 2	<b>5 minutes</b>	Browse the People tab. Please do not click on anything.
Task 3	<b>10 minutes</b>	Find Samantha Raddatz, browse her profile, add her as a friend and then message her.
Task 4	<b>5 minutes</b>	Browse the Groups tab. Please do not click on anything.
Task 5	<b>10 minutes</b>	Find a public group that was active in the last 24 hours and see how often their blog is updated.

## APPENDIX C: SEVERITY RATINGS

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RATING	DEFINITION
0	I don't agree that this is a usability problem at all
1	Cosmetic problem only: need not be fixed unless extra time is available on project
2	Minor usability problem: fixing this should be given low priority
3	Major usability problem: important to fix, so should be given high priority
4	Usability catastrophe: imperative to fix this before product can be released



## APPENDIX D: IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS

PROBLEM	HEURISTICS VIOLATED	SEVERITY
<b>Unclear Labeling</b>		
It says both People and Members for the directory	4	3
The difference between Public and Commons portfolio is unclear	1, 10	3
Unclear what the 'groups' are	10	2
Not sure what Academic Interests means	10	2
<b>Findability/Filtering</b>		
No filter to sort groups by category	4, 7	3
Search bar doesn't autofill when searching for people you have already searched for	6,7	2
the Filter people choices are ambiguous, Academic Interests should be a dropdown of options	4, 6, 7, 2	2
The alphabetical sort option should then show letters so users can browse by letter rather than page number	1, 3, 7	1
<b>Messaging</b>		
clicking 'send message' in another user's profile totally redirects you to a page that resembles your own profile	1, 4	3
There are no options to edit a message or add attachments	3	3
It is confusing that users can send a message either to a friend or to their username	4	3
After you send a message it's unclear how to get back to a user's profile (or groups or anywhere else)	4, 6, 3	3
Send message feedback is small and you have to scroll down to find it	1, 9, 6	3
Actual form to send a message is below the fold of the page	8, 1	2
Unclear that the search bar next to a user's name in the message center is to add more people to a message	1, 5, 7	2
Sending a message appears to function like email but is actually a chat; therefore it's unclear if deleting a message deletes it for both parties	1, 2, 4	2
Send Message and Mention should be buttons like Add Friend is	1, 4	2
<b>Snap Back To Top</b>		
All actions within the user profile navigate the user back to the top of the screen	1, 7	3
<b>Unexpected Results</b>		
When you click on 'Mention' it takes you to the site-wide news tab and doesn't target the user	2, 4	3
<b>Double Blog Links</b>		
The CUNY Academic Commons dropdown menu does not work in blogs though the header remains	3, 4, 5, 10	4
Group blogs can be internal or external sites	4	

<b>Navigation</b>		
It is difficult to navigate the amount of information and links on the homepage slider	1, 3, 4, 6, 8	2
The navigation bars are not consistent	1, 4, 8	2
The CUNY Academic Commons dropdown menu is somewhat difficult to find	1	1
<b>Appearance</b>		
The "Getting Started" box is not clearly visible	1, 8, 10	3
When you want to compose a message, you have to scroll down the page to get to the message window	1	3
It is difficult to discern the website's purpose	2	2
There is too much information on the homepage and it is difficult to decide where to navigate	7, 8, 4	2
The amount of content on the people page is overwhelming	8	2
The homepage slider is loaded with content but it does not reveal the site purpose	8	2
The homepage is not unique to the user and it is unclear if login was successful	1, 6	2
Multiple search bars located in different parts of the page is confusing	4	2
The search bar is not clearly visible	1, 6	2
The shift from the header to the personal profile is jarring	5, 8	2
The font size is too small and difficult to read	8	2
The default icon looks like a power button and is confusing	2	2
Cancel friendship request is not consistent with other buttons	4	1
The "friend" button in member search is not clearly visible	1	1