

Review: News app that lets you choose your editor

September 1 2010, By ANDREW VANACORE , AP Business Writer



This product image provided by Flipboard.com, shows the Apple iPad displaying the Flipboard app. (AP Photo/Flipboard.com)

(AP) -- Most of the articles that show up in your newspaper or magazine are chosen by professional editors. What if they are picked out by a friend from college instead? Or a colleague from work? Or your mom? Anyone you know, really?

That's the concept behind Flipboard, a new application for Apple Inc.'s mega-selling iPad.

It's a marriage of the new media ethos that we've all become news editors for our online contacts and the traditional media's talent for

packaging the news in a way that's inviting and cohesive.

Flipboard takes the random links that accumulate on your Facebook or Twitter account - plus your friends' personal [status updates](#) and [tweets](#) - and makes something like a digital magazine out of them.

Blurbs of text and photos recommended by friends become fodder for a continuously updated collage of content. You can also add sections to your magazine compiled from the tweets of just one contact or a specific publication - Spin magazine, say, or The Huffington Post.

The pages are laid out much like a newspaper or magazine. A swipe of the finger flips open the next page on the iPad's dazzlingly vivid screen.

And you can use the app to post comments to an item on Facebook or e-mail articles to friends.

For a week or so, I've made this hodge-podge my daily reading.

Flipboard comes with enough flaws that I won't be canceling my newspaper or magazine subscriptions just yet.

But I think the app has promise.

As much as the blizzard of Web links that confront me every day have begun to dictate my reading habits, I still want a comprehensive take on the day's events - something more than a link on a Facebook page. And there's an obvious appeal in keeping tabs on what the people I actually know and care about are interested in reading.

Flipboard is an excellent way to get a quick, very broad sense of what your [Facebook friends](#) and the people you follow on Twitter are up to.

Instead of scrolling through a Twitter feed of disembodied text links or sifting through your friends' wall postings, Flipboard lays it all out for you.

And like a professional publication, it usually gives you a better sense of what you're getting if you decide to click through to a story. The application digs into the link and pulls out some text, a headline and photo for you to peruse before you dive deeper.

If you do, the application takes you straight to the original Web page - presumably a plus for publishers, because the advertising they sell appears alongside the article. This process is surprisingly quick. If you have a good Internet connection, there's very little lag time between pushing the button and getting your material.

Which brings up the first serious drawback.

The articles will load up quickly only if you have a good Internet connection.

That leaves you at the mercy of a notoriously spotty AT&T cell phone network. Or, if you don't have the more expensive iPad model with 3G cellular service, you'll have to rely on whatever Wi-Fi connection is available.

Forget about using it on the subway.

Of course, you could say the same thing about Twitter or Facebook on the iPad. But the need for a solid connection puts Flipboard at a disadvantage compared with some of the slick magazine apps from the pros at Conde Nast or Time Inc. If you're willing to pay for the latest iPad edition of Glamour or Time magazine, the whole thing will load at once, and you can read articles anytime, even off the grid.

There's a free service called Instapaper that lets you click on any article in Flipboard and save it for later, but you still have to go through and click on each story you want to save. Couldn't all this be circumvented by simply grabbing and storing all of the articles at once?

Even if you do have a good connection, the wireless issue can be especially frustrating when it comes to video. The clips embedded throughout Flipboard could be one of its most appealing features. But I never mustered the patience to load a single one.

There are also some basic drawbacks to the way that Flipboard's software puts articles together.

Your friends and other contacts may serve as the editors who choose the stories, but the application serves as the layout editor. And it's not always a smart one.

Faces can get cut off in photos as they appear on Flipboard. Headlines are sometimes inexplicable, including this one the other day from NPR's Twitter feed: "Congo Odyssey, Day Two: Underwhelming Stanley falls 'More.'"

There's also some needless repetition. I follow a lot of media types on Twitter for my job and could not stop hearing that Fareed Zakaria was ditching Newsweek for Time magazine.

And if the idea is to organize all this material into some kind of a whole, the random status updates from Facebook or Twitter contacts that Flipboard squeezes in alongside the articles can make for some jarring transitions. Remember, we follow people on Twitter for many different reasons. Some personal, some professional.

Last week, for instance, a Twitter contact directed me to a touching

remembrance of the recently deceased New York University historian Tony Judt.

Next to it was Hugh Hefner, whom I follow because I cover Playboy Enterprises Inc. (I swear!): "Crystal bought her own iPad today. Now we can [Twitter](#) the night away together in bed."

Um, ew?

Still, Flipboard has potential.

There's an "experimental" mode allowing you to turn off status updates like Hefner's. You have to visit the settings menu on the iPad to find it. There ought to be an easy button to push in the app itself.

And I'm sure the software can get smarter and learn not to crop someone out of a photo or post more than one link to the same article.

The whole iPad phenomenon is only a few months old, so I wouldn't give up on Flipboard yet. With a few tweaks, I think it's a new-media, traditional-media marriage that could last.

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