

Organization, Labeling, and Navigation Analysis Of Ars Technica (<http://arstechnica.com>)

Introduction

Five years ago, two technology media web sites competed head-to-head to be the most trusted, objective source of reviews of hardware and software. These were Ars Technica (<http://arstechnica.com>) and Tom's Hardware (<http://www.tomshardware.com>).

Today the two companies have taken radically different paths. Tom's hardware has merged with another company, grown in size and complexity, and split their brand into three affiliated sites. This progression has resulted in their parent company Bestof Media Group becoming one of the top three technology media sites in the world. However, their apparent success has coincided with a precipitous decline in the usability of their web sites, and a palpable erosion of their brand.

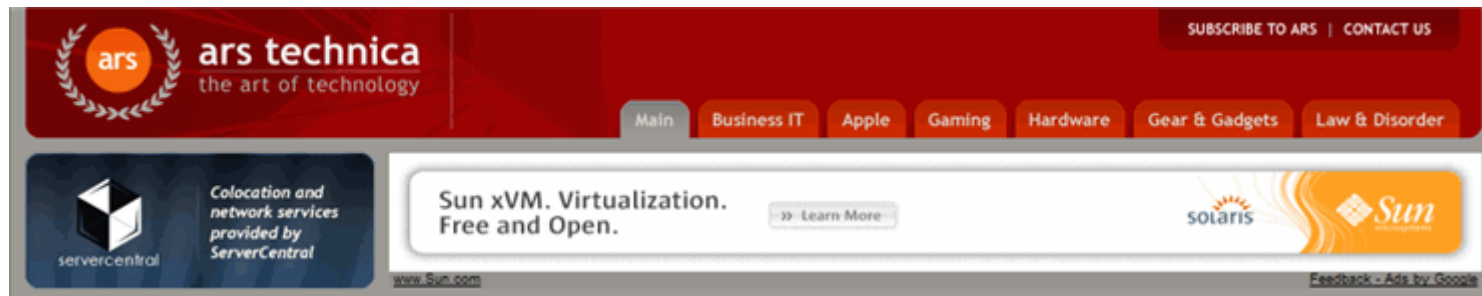
Meanwhile, Ars Technica just seems to get better at being what it is -- a trusted, independent source for technology product reviews and news. The Ars site has a consistent approach to organization, labeling and navigation that makes it easy to understand and a pleasure to use.



Section 1. Basic Structure

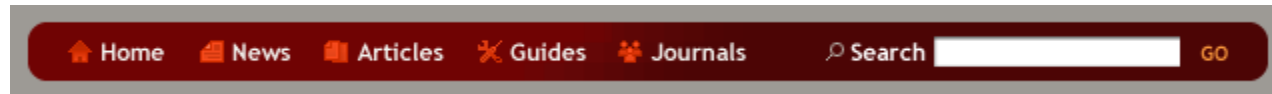
Throughout the site, the overwhelming amount of content is split into four areas, with very few exceptions. These are a static header block, two large dynamically sized side-by-side blocks, the left for content and the right serving many purposes, and a static footer block.

The header block contains the site's primary navigation in a bank of tabs: Main, BusinessIT, Apple, Gaming, Hardware, Gear & Gadgets, and Law & Disorder. This navigation is categorical, and is intended to establish at a high level the prevailing organizational logic of the site.



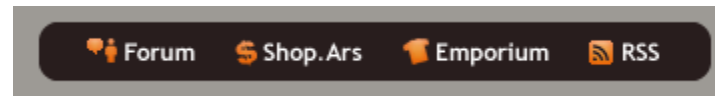
Primary Nav

The content block is moderately complex. In some areas of the site content consists of single-page stories, in others, running lists of stories are presented "blog-style". There is a persistent secondary nav which is referred to hereafter as the "content nav", consisting of: Home, News, Articles, Guides, Journals, and Search. The content nav item "Home" links to the home page of the site and duplicates the "Main" tab in the primary navigation. The content nav is task based, and assumes that the user intends to look at news, articles (almost no difference from news), guides which are deeply researched stand-alone publications intended to educate the audience in technical details of products and software, and journals (which are (once again, another kind of news)).



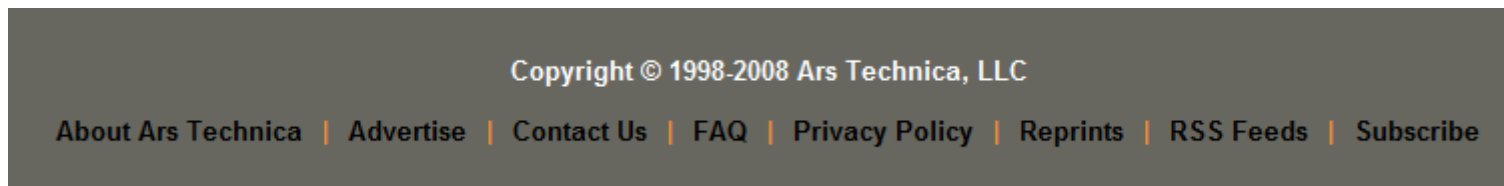
Content Nav (Secondary Nav)

The right column block is the most complex part of the site's organizational structure. However, its content is decidedly tertiary in nature. At the top of the right column is a persistent right column nav which leads to special areas of the site: Forum, Shop.Ars, Emporium, and RSS. The rest of the right column block appears in many different permutations throughout the site, but consists of content which tends to reappear consistently. These content elements are mostly a mixture of advertisements and "clumps" of headlines, each leading back to an area of the site already served by the primary and secondary navigation.



Right Column Nav

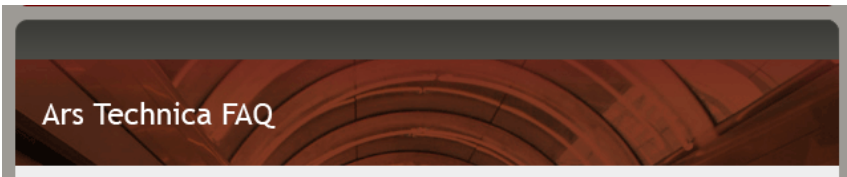
The footer of the site is static, and contains a copyright and the following footer navigation: About Ars Technica, Advertise, Contact Us, FAQ, Privacy Policy, Reprints, RSS Feeds, and Subscribe.



Footer Nav

Section 2. Variations on the Theme

Below the content block's navigation a title typically appears on each presentation of content which can appear in two distinct ways. One is referred to here as an "H1" type title, which situates the word alone, prominently centered on a graphic background. The other is a more subdued "H2" type title, which simply labels what the section is (often with a single line of elaboration), and gets down to the business of serving the rest of the content. The logic seems to be to foreground features of the site or content developed by the site, and to simply label content which is sourced from somewhere else and is rebranded, for example what are typically news articles. Still the variation is not intuitive or explained and results in a some confusion for the reader.



Content Title "H1" Style



Content Title "H2" Style

Often (but not always) coinciding with the H2 presentation atop the content section, are three prominent graphical blocks, which lead to feature stories. These "3-part Features" are smartly designed with a text-based tagline, positioned below a pleasing graphic. The similarity in layout within these features aids their readability immensely, and they dress and "redress" the cycled content in a way that shows something has changed when other parts of the layout may not have, for example when switching from primary nav elements "Apple" to "Gaming".

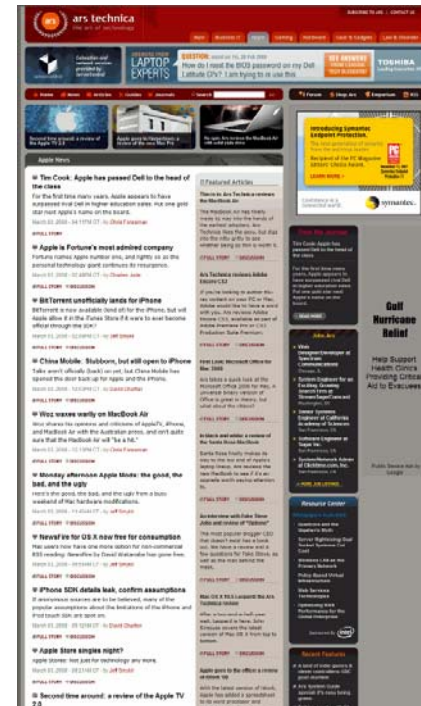


Three-part Feature

As is often the case, the prevailing rules of the site are interpreted a little differently on the home page. On the home page, at the top of the content block, the content block "yields" about a third of its (ordinarily 60%) size to the right column block (ordinarily 40%). This allows the right column block to get more "face-time" with the audience. The way this is achieved seems to be very cleverly done CSS that achieves a humbling amount of alignment on two axes and manipulates the background color of part of the content block to make it [appear to be] part of the right hand block. The purpose of this adjustment is to allow the content categories of the site to rise higher on the page and creep more to the left, rendering the content area on the home page much smaller (above the fold). This is because the content area itself only exists to display editorially selected feature content, which is probably also presented elsewhere in the site.



Main/Home Page Content Block vs. Right Column Block



Ordinary Page Content Block vs. Right Column Block

Conclusions

Ars Technica has been refining this presentation and content for a long time, and it shows. The site's organization is established almost entirely in the context of the categorical primary nav and the more task-based secondary nav. Only one part of the site drops their organizational scheme entirely, which is the forum. It seems likely that this was a tactical concession of implementing the forum software.

The site shows a great deal of finesse in selectively clumping (grouping) links to content in labeled sections which participate in the larger organizational systems of the site, and does so in a way that disguises that the chosen content may not be featured through an editorial process.

Another interesting feature of Ars Technica is that it makes use of human readable urls throughout. This means that if you send someone a link the link describes what the content is about. This also makes Windows shortcuts more readable, and shows up more meaningfully in the browser history. Sadly this strategy falls short of the ideal goal for highly structured readable URLs, which is that the url itself can be a browsing interface. Ars' long-time rival Tom's Hardware makes outstanding use of this technique. By comparison, Tom's links are structured with nested folders based on date elements, so as a user, you can delete the document from the url and see all the links from the current date, trim off more and see a month's stories, and even more to see a year's stories.

However, Ars's organizational choices do support their mission of being a premier trusted source of information. They intentionally limit their ad content to no more than three ads per page. Ads appear as a horizontally oriented skyscraper[?!] ad in the header block, and one large rectangular, and one skyscraper ad in the right column block. They even manage to pass off an entire block of content about Intel (which probably comes right from their marketing department), in the stack of chunked links in the right column block. This particular block differs from all others in two ways, first it clearly says "sponsored by Intel", and secondly its decidedly ambiguous title "Resource Center" is italicized. That's a pretty classy approach to something that many sites would have either made no attempt to disguise, or would alternatively disingenuously attempted to brand as content.

Nav Onscreen?:	Header Block	Content Block (Left)				Featured Articles/ Categories/ Related Stories
<u>Nav Choice</u>	2-part Nav	ContentNav	3-part Feature	ContentTitleH1	ContentTitleH2	
HEADER (100%)						
Categorical Nav:						
Main	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N
BusinessIT	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Apple	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Gaming	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Hardware	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Gear & Gadgets	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Law & Disorder	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
LEFT (ordinarily 60%)						
Content Nav:						
Home	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N
News	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
Articles	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Guides	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Journals	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
Search (results)	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N

Nav Onscreen?:	Header Block	Content Block (Left)				Featured Articles/ Categories/ Related Stories
<u>Nav Choice</u>	2-part Nav	ContentNav	3-part Feature	ContentTitleH1	ContentTitleH2	
RIGHT (ordinarily 40%)						
Right Column Nav:						
Forum	N	N	N	N	N	N
Shop.Ars	Y	N	N	N	N	N
Emporium	Y	N	N	N	N	N
RSS	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
1BigAd						
Headline Clumps:						
From the Journals	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
Jobs.Ars	Y					
<i>Resource Center</i>	N	N	N	N	N	N
Recent Features	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N
OpenForum (sic)	N	N	N	N	N	N
Editors Choice	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Outer Column:						
Skyscraper Ad						
FOOTER (100%)						
Footer Nav:						
Copyright						
About Ars Technica	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
Advertise	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
Contact Us	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
FAQ	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
Privacy Policy	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
Reprints	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
RSS Feeds	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N
Subscribe	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N

Nav Choice	Right Column Nav	Headline Clumps				
		From the Journals	Ars Journals Block	Jobs.Ars	Resource Center	Recent Features
Nav Onscreen?: Right Column Block						
HEADER (100%)						
Categorical Nav:						
Main	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
BusinessIT	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Apple	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Gaming	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Hardware	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Gear & Gadgets	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Law & Disorder	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
LEFT (ordinarily 60%)						
Content Nav:						
Home	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
News	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Articles	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Guides	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Journals	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Search (results)	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

Nav Onscreen?:	Right Column Block	Headline Clumps				
Nav Choice	Right Column Nav	From the Journals	Ars Journals Block	Jobs.Ars	Resource Center	Recent Features
RIGHT (ordinarily 40%)						
Right Column Nav:						
Forum	N	N	N	N	N	N
Shop.Ars	Y	N	N	N	N	N
Emporium	N	N	N	N	N	N
RSS	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
1BigAd						
Headline Clumps:						
From the Journals	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Jobs.Ars						
Resource Center	N	N	N	N	N	N
Recent Features	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
OpenForum (sic)	N	N	N	N	N	N
Editors Choice	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Outer Column:						
Skyscraper Ad						
FOOTER (100%)						
Footer Nav:						
Copyright						
About Ars Technica	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Advertise	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Contact Us	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
FAQ	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Privacy Policy	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Reprints	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
RSS Feeds	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
Subscribe	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

Nav Choice	Nav Onscreen?: Right Column Block: Headline Clumps (continued)					Footer Block
	OpenForum (sic)	Editors Choice	Skyscraper Ad (OuterColumn)	Video Block	Recent News Archive	Footer Nav
HEADER (100%)						
Categorical Nav:						
Main	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
BusinessIT	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Apple	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Gaming	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Hardware	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Gear & Gadgets	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Law & Disorder	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
LEFT (ordinarily 60%)						
Content Nav:						
Home	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y
News	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Articles	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Guides	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Journals	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Search (results)	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y

Nav Onscreen?:	Right Column Block: Headline Clumps (continued)					Footer Block
Nav Choice	OpenForum (sic)	Editors Choice	Skyscraper Ad (OuterColumn)	Video Block	Recent News Archive	Footer Nav
RIGHT (ordinarily 40%)						
Right Column Nav:						
Forum	N	N	N	N	N	N
Shop.Ars	N	N	N	N	N	Y
Emporium	N	N	N	N	N	N
RSS	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
1BigAd						
Headline Clumps:						
From the Journals	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Jobs.Ars						Y
<i>Resource Center</i>	N	N	N	N	N	N
Recent Features	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
OpenForum (sic)	N	N	N	N	N	N
Editors Choice	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Outer Column:						
Skyscraper Ad						
FOOTER (100%)						
Footer Nav:						
Copyright						
About Ars Technica	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Advertise	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Contact Us	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
FAQ	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Privacy Policy	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Reprints	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
RSS Feeds	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Subscribe	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y