Balance

be informed. be aware. be balanced

Overview

Democracy can't exist without an informed public.
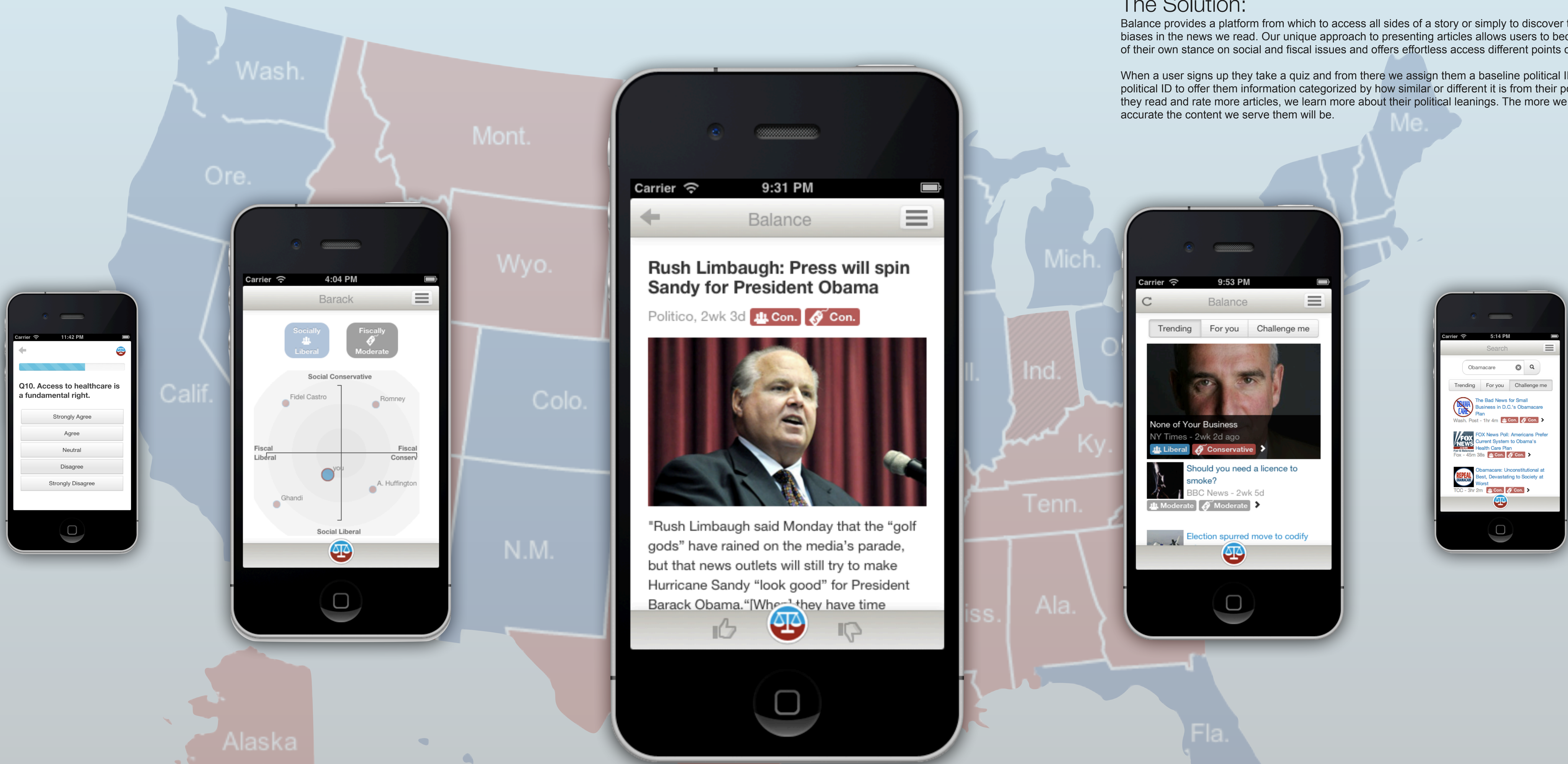—Bill Moyers, former White House Press Secretary

The Problem:

Mainstream media is increasingly polarized. Journalism continues to seek an elusive formula for success in the digital age. And the googlization of, well, everything places ever more value on curating and customizing information to a users' needs. Is this restricting our exposure to new ideas and moreover, is this harmful for society as a whole?

Given the breadth and depth of technology today, media and journalism could provide a richer fare than ever before. Our news reading app hopes to do just that.

The Solution:

Balance provides a platform from which to access all sides of a story or simply to discover the political biases in the news we read. Our unique approach to presenting articles allows users to become more aware of their own stance on social and fiscal issues and offers effortless access different points of view.

When a user signs up they take a quiz and from there we assign them a baseline political ID. We use this political ID to offer them information categorized by how similar or different it is from their point of view. As they read and rate more articles, we learn more about their political leanings. The more we know, the more accurate the content we serve them will be.

Rush Limbaugh: Press will spin Sandy for President Obama

Politico, 2wk 3d   Con.   Con.

"Rush Limbaugh said Monday that the "golf gods" have rained on the media's parade, but that news outlets will still try to make Hurricane Sandy "look good" for President Barack Obama."[Whe.] they have time

Design

Storyboarding

Creating multiple storyboards allowed us to gain deeper insights into the problem. We analyzed scenarios that the average news reader finds him or herself in and thought through relevant use cases for our solution.

Paper Prototypes

Heuristic evaluations with a small group of users led to discoveries about the good, the bad, and the ugly of our initial brainstorms. We realized the importance of treading carefully when assigning someone a political ID and never again will we forget about the back button!

Functional Prototype:

From paper we moved to wireframes and eventually to a functional prototype with a Wizard of Oz style back end. We needed to ensure we had a captive audience before delving too deeply into UI or hairy algorithmic database operations. During this stage, we hit on many useful UX improvements, like the need to prioritize screen real estate for content and not for menu icons.

User Testing

Ongoing feedback played a key role in the iterative refinement of our app. Online A/B tests allowed us to question two hypotheses: (1) the way we categorize articles affects user engagement, and (2) the emotive effect of the words that describe a category affects its perception. Though statistical analysis of the results failed to yield any epiphany, we gained vital understanding of how people were using our app and the tests proved to be rich grounds for qualitative feedback too!

Next Steps

Whether our dreams for Balance are realized or not, the next steps in its development would likely involve emphasis on AI techniques and a continued awareness of the user experience given the sensitive nature of navigating people's political ideologies. Examples of improvements are data crawling techniques to source up-to-the-minute news and investigation into better machine learning tactics for understanding user behavior and ascribing political IDs

Amit Kandpal, Simon Zheng and Xanthe Travlos