Creative Capstone Project Proposal - 6 hour
Improving civic engagement through a software-assisted community news harvest
Student: Chris Hardie
Degree: Master of Arts in Journalism
College: Communication, Information and Media
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Abstract

The availability of comprehensive, representative sources of local news remains core to a community's level of civic engagement, whether in local politics and elections, community improvement efforts, or general public life. While many business models for gathering, producing and publishing local news are evolving, and some succeeding, they still often have significant gaps, whether in efficient use of already available community information, inclusiveness of diverse voices and perspectives, or financial sustainability and the model's repeatability or scalability.

I propose to explore one of these new models and the intersections of local journalism, software publishing tools, civic engagement and improving diversity and inclusion by combining my studies in the Ball State Journalism program with my skills and experience in web software application development to research and contribute improvements to an existing community news service. By doing this I anticipate not only helping that news service to thrive, but also to help establish a template and methodology that could be repeated in other communities where a sustainable local news model is still missing.

Background and Literature Review

Despite ongoing challenges to the stability and sustainability of journalism, we live in something of a golden era for the reinvention of news business models. Rarely a week goes by that we don't hear about the way a given publication, news source or journalist is evolving,

changing ownership, changing business models, opening or closing offices, joining forces with another entity or otherwise rethinking its approach to revenue generation and subscriber retention. Experimentation abounds with not-for-profit legal structures, paywall expansion and freemium models, changes in formats, reshuffling staffing and reporting structures, transitioning print subscribers to digital delivery, email newsletters, alternative channels like podcasts and events, micropayments, aggregators and more.

Beyond the tinkering happening within individual publications, the foundations of journalistic purpose are examined and upended weekly as myriad technologists, technology platforms, universities, industry associations, funders and individual scholars and critics share their assessments of what new thinking, strategies and tactics might just save local journalism.

We can see the fruits of all of this creativity and reflection in the successes and failures being tracked by organizations like The Nieman Lab, which maintains an archive of "Business Model" stories with headlines like "These competitors joined forces to allow readers to use a single login across their news sites," "How news publishers are turning casual, infrequent readers into paying subscribers, " and "The puzzle turned out to be more complicated than we thought" ("Business Models » Hubs » Nieman Journalism Lab » Pushing to the Future of Journalism," n.d.).

And yet even with all of these efforts, most local news organizations continue to shed subscribers, journalists or close altogether (Abernathy, 2020). The ones that remain struggle with cost-cutting, layoffs, subscriber retention issues or other changes that leave the communities they serve wanting. More importantly, ongoing and fundamental challenges including reader trust, polarization (Jurkowitz et al., 2020) and having diverse representation (Bramlett-Solomon & Carstarphen, 2017) mean that the industry overall remains in a precarious position as a vehicle for sustaining a well-informed and engaged citizenry, and yet the outsized role of newspapers and news reporting in the health of a community's civic engagement remains (Shaker, 2014). No one-size-fits-all model has emerged to address this crisis.

Indeed when it comes to long-term solutions, we are in early days and the journalism community seems to be figuring it out "one community at a time." ("The Local News Crisis Will Be Solved One Community at a Time," n.d.). Failing to completely comprehend all of the factors that led to the current situation or a clear path to a universally sustainable future for news reporting, we have perhaps accepted that experimentation and exploring the unknown are our best bet for saving journalism. Clay Shirky anticipated this in 2008:

"*For the next few decades, journalism will be made up of overlapping special cases. Many of these models will rely on amateurs as researchers and writers. Many of these models will rely on sponsorship or grants or endowments instead of revenues. Many of these models will rely on excitable 14 year olds distributing the results. Many of these models will fail. No one experiment is going to replace what we are now losing with the demise of news on paper, but over time, the collection of new experiments that do work might give us the journalism we need.*" (Shirky, 2008)

At the core of this experimentation (and to this project) is the question, what gratifications and affordances in the reporting and distribution of local news and information lead people in a given community to seek it out, trust it, and stay subscribed or otherwise engaged with it? What makes someone feel like a local news source helps them, represents their interests, and is thus valuable to them? And how can what we learn about those questions in one city or region be replicated elsewhere while still accounting for factors unique to any given place?

The temptation over the last 15 years has been to answer these questions with algorithms and automation. Social media platforms first positioned themselves as the arbiters of what news was important for people to see based on their profiles (Cetina Presuel & Martínez Sierra, 2019), and in the process decimated the control publishers had to shape the news narrative of a community. When platforms like Facebook tried to reduce the power they held over news distribution, that power didn't return to publishers, but instead shifted to the software algorithms that rewarded a user sharing salacious, sensational or outright incorrect information

over almost everything else. The result is a population of news consumers who are distrustful of news itself, in addition to the platforms and publishers who gather and distribute it (Park et al., 2020), and who are unequipped to determine when the news they do consume underrepresents views and voices not like their own. And thus an outsized focus on software, automation and scale within the news media and technology platforms has contributed to a general unwillingness to pay for news reporting. The exception to this, as explored by Goyanes and others, is in a willingness to pay for or otherwise support local news outlets where one lives (Goyanes, 2015). It seems clear that algorithms that don't consider the interests and history of a local community or region will be insufficient at best, and likely harmful.

If population age, education levels, political trends, racial and cultural diversity, economic stability, historical news coverage and many other characteristics of a community might critically affect what a thriving local news ecosystem looks like there (Wadbring & Bergström, 2017), then much more local-level experimentation is needed to understand the interrelationship between these variables. And though corporate news media and longtime family-owned newspapers alike may struggle to take risks and move quickly to test new ideas in specific local markets (Powers et al., 2014), entrepreneurs and non-traditional community journalists are taking up the charge. "If you've been thinking about launching a local news site, there's never been a better time. Tools, resources and business opportunities for ground-up ventures are proliferating, even as need for community news and information becomes more acute" writes Andrew Sherry for the Knight Foundation (Sherry, 2021).

This creative project aims to contribute to one such opportunity. The Bloomfield Information Project was created in March 2020 by Simon Galperin as a community news service focused on providing the residents of Bloomfield and Essex County, New Jersey better access to "information, context, and connection" (*About*, n.d.) as a part of making the community "more informed, engaged, and resilient." (*About*, n.d.) The project is thriving in its own right and is also

a pilot program of the Community Info Coop, a nonprofit which "uses journalism, media, and technology to strengthen democracy." (*Community Info Coop*, n.d.).

The Bloomfield Information Project is a perfect vehicle for experimentation and iteration, as there is no foundational commitment to a particular news gathering, production or distribution model; it changes all the time. The Project currently uses a mix of tools and technologies to review, curate and produce its news product, including email, RSS feed readers, Facebook and other social media platforms, public data sets, press releases, Google Docs and Spreadsheets, Zapier, WordPress, MailChimp, video transcription tools and various other tools and services. Their workflow has been described in articles such as "How automation helped this journalist quench a 'news desert'" (Martinez, 2021): "With automation, Simon can focus on program development, community engagement, and other big picture projects for the Community Info Coop, his grander vision for news as a public utility."

The Project is already practicing the human-centered design that Norman discusses: "an approach that puts human needs, capabilities, and behavior first, then designs to accommodate those needs, capabilities, and ways of behaving" (Norman, 2013). With their growing number of channels for reader-provided news tips and responses, it also makes inroads in formalizing the role of sharing and collaborative consumption as a key engagement factor and as a challenge to traditional journalism's gatekeeping role, as explored by Belk (Belk, 2014). And so with a small team, a concern for increasing diversity and representation in local news, and a willingness to listen to and quickly act on feedback from their readers, they are well positioned to turn their particular "special case" into a framework and structure that could be replicated elsewhere.

I have made contact with Galperin and his team, and through our conversations have reached initial agreement that my involvement could be beneficial to the Project and to making advances in this problem space more broadly.

While the specific desired outcomes are still being established, there are a few key areas where we see opportunities for collaboration: (1) improving foundational tools and processes

that make the existing Bloomfield community news "harvest" more sustainable and scalable, (2) developing new software functionality that could allow other communities to repeat and apply Bloomfield's methods and philosophy to their own local journalism efforts.

Key questions that we'll hope to explore throughout include: (A) What does it look like to build inclusiveness and accessibility into a news gathering, production and distribution process and toolset? (B) What is an appropriate balance of automation and algorithm against human curation, to ensure comprehensiveness, utility and representation?

Methodology

The final capstone project will tie together a variety of efforts including interviews with stakeholders, design thinking sessions, creation of web interface mockups, development of software tools and functionality, usability and experience testing with users, and publication of software for use by others.

Stakeholder Interviews: I will conduct a variety of interviews and conversations with key stakeholders, including project founder Simon Galperin, other project staff, key project supporters, and one or two representative readers.

Design Thinking Sessions: I will work with stakeholders to conduct several design thinking sessions where we discuss key challenges and problems, gather insights and ideas about needs and possible solutions, display and react to mockups and prototypes, and make plans for next steps of prototyping and iteration.

Mockup Creation: Based on feedback gathered in interviews and design thinking sessions, I will create mockups and wireframes of possible web interfaces and tools that could help address some of the technical and user-facing needs of the project. I'll gather feedback on these and iterate on them as needed.

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Development of Software Tools and Functionality: Using the PHP software programming language, the Laravel software application development framework and related software development tools, I will design, create, test and launch software tools and functionality that solve some of the technical and user-facing needs of the project.

Usability and Experiencing Testing: through a combination of live demonstrations, recorded user sessions and feedback surveys, I'll gather information about the usability and user experience for the various software tools and user interfaces I've created.

Publication: for software applications and other tools created for the project that may be of use to other communities, I will use an open source software license to publish those on a website like GitHub so that the software may be downloaded, re-used and improved upon by others.

I will document my work and methods through a combination of notes, meeting summaries, image files, video recordings, software code and other related documentation.

Timeline

Based on the currently available information, my proposed timeline for the project includes these major milestones:

- Week of January 10, 2022: proposal defense

- January-April 2022: stakeholder interviews, design thinking sessions, mockup creation, development of software tools and functionality, testing and refinement

- April 30, 2022: on or before this date I'll make sure the above components are completed and verified as such with project stakeholders

- May 2022-June 2022: compiling and writing up summaries, analysis, project reviews and related discussion

- June 22, 2022: on or before that date I'll deliver the completed capstone project

Deliverables

For the final capstone project, I will deliver the following assets as a part of my submission:

- Summaries and analysis of stakeholder interviews (2 pages)

- Summaries and analysis of design thinking sessions (2 pages)

- Any and all mockups along with notes about how they were presented and received (2-3 pages)

- Software packages via links to GitHub repositories or zip file attachments, along with summaries of what each major software tool or library does (3 pages)

- Summaries and analysis of usability and user experience testing sessions (2 pages)

- Links to published open source software for re-use by other communities (1 page)

- A review of the project and our collaboration from Simon Galperin (1-2 pages)

- Project summary and discussion (2 pages)

Capstone Project Committee

I'm working on assembling members of my capstone project committee; I have initial interest or commitments from:

- Dr. Robin Blom, Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Strategic Communication and my academic advisor

- Dr. Gabriel Tait, Assistant Professor of Diversity and Media in the School of Journalism and Strategic Communication

- Simon Galperin (as External Reviewer), head of the Bloomfield Information Project and Community Info Coop, and John S. Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford University

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