



Knowing Your Town: Local News Aggregators

Excerpt 5 of 7: Assessment of the
Knight News Challenge, 2007-2008

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Prepared by **LFA Group: *Learning for Action*** for **John S. and James L. Knight Foundation**



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I. Introduction

The rapid advance of Internet connectivity and location- based mobile phone applications, as well as the proliferation of citizen-generated news and information is causing a seismic shift in the way that media consumers interact with information related to their local communities. These shifts create tremendous potential for customizing an individual's or a community's experience with locally relevant data.

In this context, the Knight News Challenge in 2007 and 2008 awarded grants to two experimental efforts that sought to aggregate community-level information and data in a manner that citizens would find useful. The foundation chose to support two divergent approaches to local news, hoping to produce lessons for the field, and possibly to create models that could be replicated: one focused on aggregating local blogs, and the other focused on aggregating a wide range of public data at the city- block level. Together with these two grantees, Knight aimed to better understand the viability of platforms for aggregating local news.

This report was completed as part of an interim review of the Knight News Challenge focused on the early winners (2007-2008). The project cluster – local news aggregators – that serves as the organizing principle for this report was created through the process of conducting data analysis for the interim assessment; this category was not an organizing principle for the contest when it first launched. This report is based on: a review of project reports, websites and other materials; key informant interviews with winners, key partners and field experts; and facilitated review and structured reflection with Knight Foundation staff.

Key Learning Questions

- What are the technical requirements for and barriers to localized news aggregation?
- Which approaches and design features hold the most potential for generating wide-scale use?
- What are the main barriers to adoption?

Overview of Local News Aggregators: 2007-2008

The foundation invested in an aggregator of locally specific blogs, and an aggregator of news, public information, and other locally relevant data. The following table provides a summary of the two projects.

	Placeblogger	EveryBlock
Grant	<p>Winner: Lisa Williams Grant Amount: \$222,000 Timeframe: 2 Years Year Awarded: 2007</p>	<p>Winner: Adrian Holovaty Grant Amount: \$1,100,000 Timeframe: 2 Years Year Awarded: 2007</p>
Idea	<p>Aggregate the feeds of local blogs: Help individuals more easily find blogs about the town or city they live in, and help local blogs raise their profile, thereby increasing their sustainability.</p>	<p>Provide citizens with a variety of extant information specific to their block or neighborhood: Create a single source for locating public information, such as building permits, crime statistics, and restaurant reviews at the block or neighborhood level.</p>
Innovation	<p>Typical search engines do not have the capacity to sort blogs by their area of geographic coverage. Placeblogger helps users find the place-related blogs they are interested in, thereby generating vital traffic to placeblogs that are struggling to be sustainable.</p>	<p>In the cities where it operates, EveryBlock provides a single point of entry for an unprecedented array of locally specific news and information, reducing the effort and time a person needs to expend searching various sources for information related to their locale.</p>
Output / Reach / Impact	<p>Output</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site launched in 2007. Several releases of the source code over the grant period. • Provided technical assistance to local politicians and other adbuyers to generate earned revenue for Placeblogger • Launched the "Placeblogger Angel Fund" to support local bloggers • Produced a template for an advertising rate card specific to placeblogs <p>Reach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8,000 local blogs can be searched on placeblogger.com (as of 02/11) • 120,000 monthly unique visitors (May, 2011) <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anecdotal evidence of individual placebloggers whose sustainability has been increased. 	<p>Output</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launched the website in January 2008 in three cities; added 13 more over the course of the grant period • Released source code in June 2009. <p>Reach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To date, EveryBlock is available in 16 cities with plans to add more • 330,000 unique visitors per month as of June, 2011 • The open source code has been downloaded over 1,500 times¹ <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project was acquired by msnbc.com as the grant period ended, providing it with a significant resource base from which to generate future impact. • Drew attention to the importance of access to public data at the local level.
Lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assembling the right technical team – including contractors – to build the necessary code and functionality is critical to success. • Having a project leader with influence in online communities helped build momentum and generate interest. • Producing high quality geo-tagging code was instrumental to project success and is likely to yield many benefits for the field. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User personalization is an important strategy for building audience. • Employing an iterative process of testing models and soliciting user feedback is essential. • The sale of EveryBlock to msnbc.com raises questions about grant dollars funding an initiative that results in the establishment of a for-profit venture with the profits accruing solely to the grantee.

¹ As part of its grant requirements, EveryBlock developed and released its open source code in 2009. However, the code that was released was not easy to use. In June 2010, Knight Foundation made subsequent grants to [Open Plans](#) to improve the EveryBlock open source code's ease of use and to the [Columbia Tribune](#) and [Boston Globe](#) to test and install the improved software.

II. Grant Implementation, Reach and Impact

Despite some initial challenges in assembling the right team, Placeblogger successfully built a platform for aggregating local blogs. EveryBlock has expanded to 16 cities across the US, and recently re-launched its website in a bid to enrich the user experience.

Placeblogger

Placeblogger was conceived by Lisa Williams in 2007, who at the time was running an online local news platform for *The Boston Globe*. Having built a well-reputed placeblog in her hometown of Watertown, MA – and possessing an abundance of technical and corporate know-how – she was encouraged by a colleague to apply for funding to implement an idea she was developing to document and enhance access to the placeblogs she was encountering more frequently through her work.

Upon being awarded a Knight News Challenge grant, Williams quickly hired a team of programmers to begin creating geo-tagging software to aggregate local blogs according to their geographic coverage. After overcoming a few challenges with her technical team, the site launched in 2009 with 700 blogs listed – another 300 were added by day two. Word about the site spread quickly, and within months there were 18,000 unique monthly visitors. However, growth in site visitors stalled, and it was not until technical changes were made to how the pages were indexed by search engines that site usage again increased; according to Williams Placeblogger attracted 120,000 monthly unique visitors in May 2011.

“Placeblogger has distributed millions of clicks to local blogs. Even changing the traffic profile of a placeblog by 10% is dramatic. If a fraction of the 8,000 that are on Placeblogger become sustainable, that is significant.”

Lisa Williams
Placeblogger

More than 8,000 local blogs have installed Placeblogger’s geo-tagging plug-ins so that they are searchable on the Placeblogger website. While Placeblogger has no official marketing budget, Williams expects to continue to increase site traffic by using Placeblogger’s presence on Twitter and Facebook.

Placeblogger is a relatively lean organization, with six administrative employees and eight technical contractors. According to Williams, the website itself is a “loss leader” as it does not currently generate any revenue through advertising (although she does regularly receive inquiries from marketers). Placeblogger instead has successfully generated revenue through training and consulting to media companies

and politicians who want to improve their advertising on, development of, and/or interaction with local blogs.

Placeblogger is fundamentally as much – or more – about increasing the sustainability of placeblogs as it is about helping citizens gain access to locally relevant news and information. To that end, Williams is pursuing two initiatives that are intended to simultaneously strengthen the business viability of placeblogging and promote the placeblogger.com brand. The first is a grant program for placebloggers called “The Placeblogger Angel Fund” which provides small grants to support compelling investigative journalism projects conceived by placebloggers to help them build their portfolios. Its ultimate aim is to “create a pool of experiments that will give us valuable information about how investigative journalism will work in the digital age, and to create a network of site founders and journalists with entrepreneurial experience.”

Second, Placeblogger is in the process of developing an “Open Rate Card,” a tool that enables individual placebloggers to embed an advertising rate card on their site so that advertisers can easily identify them. Currently designed to help increase ad revenue one blog at a time, Williams imagines this concept could be evolved into a large-scale ad block for placeblogs.

In addition to the ways in which Placeblogger provides technical assistance, financial support, and tools such as the open rate card to placebloggers, the website drives traffic to these sites; even small increases in traffic can make a critical difference for a blogger trying to secure ad revenue. Furthermore, Williams sees Placeblogger as building community and connectivity among bloggers to support peer learning and cross-promotion.

While Placeblogger’s progress has been consistent and the concept holds promise, several observers expressed early skepticism. *MarketWatch*’s Frank Barnako initially saw potential in Placeblogger, but early in its development became concerned by the lack of reviews, proliferation of dead links, and the fact that many of the “blogs” are in fact alternative newspapers.² Dead links in particular represent a significant challenge for Placeblogger; since so many local blogs are started and then abandoned within a few weeks or months, a high level of quality control is required to monitor and eliminate these at a level that allows for a seamless user experience.

² Kaplan, David. *Welcome to Placeblogger, now keep going*. January 4, 2007. <http://paidcontent.org/article/welcome-to-placeblogger-now-keep-going/>

EveryBlock

EveryBlock was conceived by Adrian Holovaty, a software engineer who had built his reputation and skills in both the technology (he is a co-founder of *Django*) and journalism (stints at several major newspapers, including *The Washington Post*) communities. Having piloted a more topical version of EveryBlock called *chicagocrime.org* on his own, Holovaty applied for a Knight News Challenge grant in hopes of developing the concept into a more comprehensive news feed that could help users answer the question “What’s happening in my neighborhood?”

The EveryBlock platform – built within six months of receiving the Knight grant – automates the collection, filtering and presentation of a wide range of news and information, from building permit applications to restaurant reviews. Geo-tagging allows the information to be displayed at the city-block level. In addition to aggregating information that already existed on the web (such as geo-tagged flickr photos), EveryBlock worked diligently with local government agencies to mine public information that was effectively inaccessible by virtue of being deeply buried in disparate government databases.

Launched in three cities in January, 2008, the website experienced some initial technical challenges when greater-than-expected traffic overwhelmed its servers and caused the site to run slowly. After quickly resolving this problem, Holovaty encountered a second barrier: he did not have the editorial capacity in place to explain and help curate the data being collected. Once a full-time managing editor was hired to address this need, the website expanded rapidly, growing to cover 16 U.S. cities by the end of the grant – six more than the initial goal.

EveryBlock has received tremendous media coverage³ throughout its existence due both to the popularity of the idea and Holovaty’s reputation and following on the web. In addition to driving significant traffic to the site, its high profile has helped EveryBlock establish a level of credibility necessary to earn the trust of city agencies and others whose data it aims to mine and link. When the open source code was released in July, 2009, it was a “much-anticipated event” for programming journalists who wanted to see the mechanics of code for location-based data.⁴

In August 2009, around which time the website was estimated at 143,000 unique monthly visitors,⁵ it was announced that msnbc.com had purchased EveryBlock for an undisclosed sum of money. The sale of EveryBlock to a major media corporation immediately improved its sustainability and provided it with a platform and infrastructure from which to expand its reach.

Despite EveryBlock’s progress to date, several online journalists have cautioned about the challenge of aggregating news and information in a format that is relevant enough for citizens to find meaningful or helpful. Commenting on AOL’s recent purchase of Outside. In, Matthew Ingram of GigaOM argues that hyperlocal journalism and data platforms only work if there is a strong connection with the community served.⁶

At the conclusion of its Knight News Challenge grant, EveryBlock signaled its intention to expand coverage of U.S. cities and increase the volume of news and information available to users.⁷ In September 2010, EveryBlock created and hired a new Community Manager position to “grow [the] user community, help guide [EveryBlock’s] development team to build the tools [its] community wants by being a liaison with [its] users, and help spread the word about EveryBlock by attending community meetings and guiding [its] social-media efforts.”⁸ More recently, EveryBlock made a decision to fundamentally alter the nature of the website to promote greater community participation. The change is intended to boost traffic significantly from its current rate of 330,000 unique monthly visitors (as of June, 2011).

While it is not removing any existing functionality related to the news and information available on the site, there are plans to rebuild the site “from the ground up.”⁹ The rebuild is focused not just on information consumption, but on participation and “making your block a better place”, with “neighbor messages” as a core feature on the home page and a reputation system for quality assurance. As on Facebook, users can now build their own profiles including photos, bios, and answers to profile questions. EveryBlock’s experience with this community engagement strategy – in terms of both quality and quantity of impact – will bear valuable lessons for the field as to the potential of this approach.

² EveryBlock has received significant coverage in several major news outlets, including The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, and National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition.”

⁴ McCombs, Regina. *How EveryBlock Code is Being Used to Develop Location-Based Journalism*. Updated March 4, 2011. <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/96652/how-everyblock-code-is-being-used-to-develop-location-based-journalism/>

⁵ Schonfeld, Erick. *MSNBC Picks Up Hyperlocal News Aggregator EveryBlock*. August 17, 2010. <http://techcrunch.com/2009/08/17/msnbc-picks-up-hyperlocal-news-aggregator-everyblock/>

⁶ <http://gigaom.com/2011/03/04/hyper-local-news-its-about-the-community-or-it-fails/>. See also Coddington, Mark. *This Week in Review: NPR at a crossroads, hyperlocal’s personal issue, and keeping comments real*. Niemann Journalism Lab, March 11, 2011. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2011/03/this-week-in-review-npr-at-a-crossroads-hyperlocals-personal-issue-and-keeping-comments-real/>

⁷ Mark Glazer email interview with Adrian Holovaty, August 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/idealab/2009/08/adrian-holovaty-talks-about-everyblock-sale-to-msnbccom237.html>

⁸ This language was pulled from a job announcement posted on <http://www.everyblock.com/about/> in April 2011 that has since been removed.

⁹ Myers, Steve. *Holovaty: Everyblock’s new community focus will ‘help make your block a better place*. March 21, 2011. <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/124651/live-chat-tuesday-adrian-holovaty-discusses-everyblocks-new-focus-on-community-discussion/>

III. Lessons and Learning Opportunities

The experiences of the two local news aggregator projects offer valuable lessons regarding both project concept and implementation.

- **User personalization is an important strategy for building audience and engagement.** EveryBlock's shift to a more interactive interface was a direct result of extensive user feedback, and appears to be paying short-term dividends in terms of use. EveryBlock's re-launch in early 2011 transformed it from a largely static information resource to a neighborhood social network, employing features such as bookmarking, favorites, and enabling a user to "follow" specific locations. While this type of functionality increases the risk of user abuse – for example, people have used the "post" feature on EveryBlock as an advertising space – the benefits of features that enable personalization of the site are likely to outweigh this risk.
- **Grantmakers should plan for the possible sale of grant-funded products to for-profit companies.** The sale of EveryBlock to msnbc.com raised some questions within Knight Foundation about grant dollars funding an initiative that results in the establishment of a for-profit venture with the profits accruing solely to the grantee. This development prompted Knight Foundation to explore strategies for addressing similar scenarios in the future, several of which have since been deployed. For example, a subsequent Knight News Challenge winner, Dan Pacheco, who was awarded a grant for Printcasting, voluntarily agreed to provide 6% of FeedBrewer equity to the Knight Media Innovation Fund in recognition of Knight Foundation's past support of Printcasting, which had served as a model upon which FeedBrewer was developed (proceeds from this equity are being used to fund other media innovation projects). Additionally, Knight Foundation created Program-Related Investment (PRI) mechanisms to provide convertible loans to for-profit entities; if there is a sale or new round of financing, the foundation can convert the loan into equity in the company.
- **Assembling a functional technical team is a challenge.** Placeblogger experienced significant delays at the front end of development while it struggled to find not only the right people to constitute the technical team based on the requirements of the project, but also how to structure and manage a working relationship with the team that they finally selected. Lisa Williams noted the importance of the team having the appropriate mix of skill sets; for example, having the capacity to identify the best technical solutions can help ensure you do not make unnecessary investments in hardware.
- **Having leaders with influence in online communities is key.** Engaging users and generating site traffic are important to the sustainability of local news aggregation sites. Having developed well-known prototypes of their respective products, both Lisa Williams and Adrian Holovaty developed a rich network of contacts and a positive reputation in online communities. These assets translated into early traffic for their websites, as bloggers and other online journalists followed their progress.
- **Employing an iterative process of testing models and soliciting user feedback is essential.** Lisa Williams attributes the success of the development process to her staged approach to launching versions of the website in a way that allowed for user feedback. Her active and effective recruitment of both placebloggers and technical advisers in the realm of online journalism resulted in a plentiful supply of useful feedback that informed timely improvements to the site. EveryBlock's commitment to soliciting user feedback through user surveys, user testing, and a feedback form on most website pages provided it with critical data early on regarding the need to make the site more interactive.