

John F. Kay, Samuel Lo, Aline McKenzie, Jenny Mizutowicz and Carol Welker

Professor David Parry

EMAC 6361

May 7, 2010

News Compass Points to the Future of Journalism

Media and Technology

The Media has depended on technology since the invention of the printing press. In fact, the very occupation of journalism is encompassed by the term used to describe the technology producing its product- the press. As technology grew bigger, better, and faster, so too did “The Press.”

By the late 20th century, the Media distributed the news by paper, radio, television, and the Internet. Less than a decade into the 21st century, the Internet also became available for use on handheld mobile devices, a development that made people hungry for instant news. Now, with so many people taking advantage of the ability to self-publish, the consumers’ appetite for instant news has increased exponentially.

Web 2.0 has not only given people the freedom to interact and contribute to the news, but it has also bred a new type of journalist. Citizen journalism has grown in both numbers and expertise, and has begun to threaten journalism as a profession. Twitter is “challenging newsrooms,” writes Jennifer Van Grove of Mashable.com. “Ultimately, you have a situation where newsrooms are challenged by the pace of Twitter and their own insistency on remaining reputable.”

Assumptions

Our primary assumption is that people will want to receive their news on mobile devices. According to a March 2010 study by the Pew Research Center, the mobile phone is the fastest growing platform for news, with 33 percent of those surveyed accessing news on their mobile phones. Gartner currently predicts that more people will access the internet from mobile devices than from personal computers by 2013.

But delivery of news on a mobile platform is more than simply “a laptop, but better.” A mobile device is not simply a small computer. Its Global Positional System can pinpoint the user to within a few feet, while the compass can detect which way the user is facing. Mobile devices have created an interest in geo-location: tying text, photos, and videos to a particular physical place, as seen by the popularity of location-based applications like Foursquare or I Was Here. While these applications are mostly commercial or social, they could not exist without mobile devices. We have chosen to follow their lead for our project.

OUR PROPOSAL

Our proposal is a mobile application that offers geo-tagging for hyper-local news, while also providing background of previous stories and contextual analysis. We do not pretend to predict the myriad of new types of technology that will affect journalism in the future. We will focus on a simple, plausible technology and its possible effects on journalism, both intended and unintended.

Our proposal exploits the GPS function of mobile devices, but also incorporates a truism from Internet news: people can generally only get hometown news from

hometown providers. If people can get information on major news stories from national and international news producers, why should they go to their hometown news source for these stories? But these sources might be the only place people could find out about local news such as high school football scores, area elections, or community affairs.

Details of the proposal

We have named our application “News Compass” because it points users toward news.

The mobile application will focus on local news in a radius of a few miles (the most workable level on a small mobile screen). The interface would show a map with a standard user locator button. At its simplest, the application would then show news with a geographic basis within the range of the screen.

The demolition of Texas Stadium provides a good example. An icon would alert a user that there is news tagged on that site. Tapping the icon would bring up a screen with the following choices:

- Most recent news, in the fewest paragraphs possible
- Video and photos
- Option to see previous stories
- Timeline of the stadium’s history
- Schedule of the demolition
- Feature stories and context (for instance, how the success of the Cowboys overrode Dallas’s grim reputation as “the place that killed Kennedy”)
- Buttons for sharing stories with friends and for entering/reading comments.

Different icons could represent different types of stories, reducing the number of sub-pages. For instance, a user in Lower Greenville might see different icons for the latest on the rebuilding of the burned-out clubs, the last few months’ coverage about the fire itself, and the history of the building from the 1930s. Other icons might represent

ongoing battles between homeowners and club-goers on parking and noise issues, and so on. A user could also share stories with friends.

What this proposal reveals about what we value in journalism

Teamwork and credibility are paramount to providing quality, useful news. Despite the trend for citizen journalists, we believe that there will always be a place for an authoritative voice in reporting. This is not to be confused with authority – rather, it signifies that the news producer adheres to the basics of checking facts, confirming stories with multiple sources, and has a solid grasp of grammar, spelling and style.

The producers of this news should not introduce false information into material either by low ethics or sloppiness. Nor should they alter photo content. Moreover, quotations must be accurate and precise. This is not to say that the reporter will be “objective,” a term that is more and more often discredited. There is no single point of view and no single truth, and a journalist looks foolish by pretending there is.

Imagine, though, that a news organization left a story tag. The tag has been researched, edited and fact-checked. Users might be more likely to accept the content as fact. They might not *agree* with the content any more than news conveyed through paper, television, radio, web or Tweet, but they might trust the source.

CNN already telegraphs an aspect of this. Its iReport section posts amateur videos and pictures on its web site with the caveat that it does not endorse the contents. Only a fraction of them become vetted as meeting CNN’s standards for reporting. On May 6, 2010, 280 iReports were posted but only 270 were vetted, an indication that while an

amateur report might have been exciting or newsworthy, the reporting was not up to professional standards.

We also believe that immediacy is essential for news to be valuable. The very essence of news is timeliness, which is only becoming faster and faster with the emergence of mobile technology. Despite the new format, the application will rely on the same sense of breaking news that occurs now.

Finally, we value the ability for readers to interact by leaving tips and comments. Letters to the editor have transmuted into internet comments. People have always wanted to interact and express their opinion. Electronic media give people ways to influence stories even as news is being reported. As Dan Gillmor wrote in *We the Media*, the “expertise of the audience” had come into play.

Thus, even though we propose professional sources for this application, it must enable people to leave comments or tips, or it will certainly not succeed.

How our proposal can enhance journalism as it exists now

Our application would enhance journalism by capitalizing on context and portability. Readers could obtain easy access to the background of a news story, timelines, analytic features, opinion pieces, etc. Furthermore, they could read the content on-the-go rather than relying on a desktop or laptop computer.

The application would create an authenticity of experience for readers. As the popularity of historical markers and tours show, there is always a sense of extra perspective being in the exact place where something happened. This also fits with Walter Benjamin’s view on an original object having an “aura.”

The application would also allow for social interaction. Readers would be given the ability to share sites of interest with their friends, either through existing social networks or through the application itself.

What parts of modern journalism do we reject?

The application would minimize the cost of production. Historically, journalism became more and more expensive as the equipment grew. In American colonial times, a press could fit in a room. By the late 20th century, producing mass-market news was a multi-million-dollar endeavor with an enormous staff. Purely digital news production requires computing equipment, reporters, editors and some management. Expenses would plummet, and money could be diverted into producing quality journalism.

A digital setup also means that anyone can produce stories, but that capability already exists in the blogosphere and the previously mentioned applications, and is not relevant to our particular proposal.

We also reject the tendency in journalism in which stories are almost all “B matter.” Often the news in an ongoing story is contained only in the first few paragraphs, while the rest is repetitious background. This application allows the news to be most accessible through the top interface, with the background available through further screens.

Finally, we reject inane comments. Patrick Thornton of the Poynter Institute argues that the most successful comments sections are those in which the writer interacts with the contributors, and the comments are moderated to remove juvenile, racist and other inflammatory comments that derail a discussion. Moderating comments is a return

to the newspaper (and radio) policy of editing letters, and maintains the reputation of the news source.

Social/cultural implications of our proposal

The application could serve as a useful tool for people who recently relocated. People move around a lot, particularly because of school, changes in their career, and family-related opportunities. People who are new to a city would benefit greatly from this sort of application because it would allow them to become familiar with their city. The application would inform residents of local news stories while simultaneously allowing them to become acquainted with their new city's geography.

Furthermore, our application would lead to citizens becoming more engaged in their local government. The geo-tagging of news stories would cause events and propositions to have more of a personal effect on city residents, which would lead them to feel more passionately about issues. For example, imagine a resident who enjoys walking outdoors. If one day that resident were to pull out their mobile device during a walk and discover that one of their favorite nature scenes was soon to become a parking lot, they would likely contact their local lawmakers. A new layer of news is created when location is tied in with an event, and this layer generates intimacy between the reader and the story's location.

This style of news may appeal more to younger generations such as Generation Y rather than older generations, particularly because of the medium in which the news will be delivered. Generation Y, or "Millennials," make up young adults born since the early 1980s. Compared with older generations, Millennials are more tech-savvy. These people

talk, walk, listen, read, and text, all at the same time. Younger generations would be more prone to become engaged in this kind of mobile application, and in turn would get more involved with current events. Our application might make Millennials the most heavily concentrated group in terms of who reads the news.

Perhaps less desirably, this application could lead to the inability to escape notoriety of location. News stories involving a particular location would be attached to and ultimately become a part of the location, so sites with unfavorable pasts would likely be torn down to escape negative stigma associated with the event and reduce gawkers. The massacres at Luby's in Killeen, Texas, and McDonald's in San Ysidro, California are examples of establishments that were unable to escape the stigma associated with unfavorable events. Luby's reopened, but eventually shut down its operations after it struggled for nine years after the shootings, and the McDonald's was quickly demolished in attempt to erase the tragedy that happened there. Similarly, the Amish schoolhouse where a massacre occurred in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania was also torn down.

It is entirely possible that geo-tagging of news sites, which will make it easier for people to find notorious locations, would lead to more places being demolished. The loss for historians is literally incalculable – not because we believe this would be an irreparable loss to history, but simply because we cannot gauge the extent to which this will happen, and the importance of any particular site.

News Compass has limitations. Many news stories have no particular geo-location. For example, a march against an immigration law can be placed in space and time, while an editorial on whether or not such laws are good is more nebulous. On the other hand, those sorts of analytic stories might be contained in the news feed as

background. A “disengage” feature that knocks out the geo-located stories and shows the “free-floating” ones might be one solution.

On the other hand, the application might stick strictly to its mission of providing only geo-linked news, with the goal of promoting a sense of place. This approach may make it more appealing to users of mobile devices who, almost by definition, are large-scale users of geo-located applications.

CONCLUSION

The future of journalism seems to be arriving much more quickly than are the futures of the other institutions of knowledge. The livelihoods of those who have worked in professional journalism are on the line as news-media revenues drop and news corporations eliminate jobs to stay afloat. In the nineteenth century, economist William Stanley Jevons observed that the cycles of spots on the sun and of economic crises both lasted eleven years; therefore, he reasoned that sun spots naturally influence business cycles. The decline of professional journalism in the twenty-first century is not natural but historical. Journalism finds itself situated at a very important time in history, when decisions made will dramatically affect its future, one that is coming sooner than later.

We hope that the News Compass will improve the future of journalism because more people are turning to mobile devices to receive the news, because people want news that includes content that is pertinent to their physical location, and because people want the option of reading more in-depth articles.

A compass knows people’s locations. A compass helps people regain their bearings. A compass points to true north, and a compass is about the size of a cell phone.

We believe that the News Compass will point professional journalists in the right direction.

REFERENCES

5 Big Twitter Trends To Follow Right Now. Mashable.com, March 29, 2010. Web. May 5, 2010.

Amish School Shooting, Wikipedia.org. Web. May 5, 2010.

CNN iReport – Share your story, discuss the issues with CNN.com. www.ireport.com. Web. May 6, 2010.

Expel Trolls, Racists and Promote Good User Comments on News Sites, www.poynter.org, Aug. 13, 2009. Web. May 5, 2010

Gartner Highlights Key Predictions for IT Organizations and Users in 2010 and Beyond. www.gartner.com, Jan. 13, 2010. Web. May 5, 2010.

Gillmor, Dan. we the media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2006.

Luby's Massacre, Wikipedia.org. Web. May 5, 2010.

The New News Landscape: Rise of the Internet, pewresearch.org. March 1, 2010. Web. May 5, 2010.

San Ysidro McDonald's Massacre, Wikipedia.org. Web. May 5, 2010.

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." www.marxists.org. Feb. 2005. Web. May 6, 2010

William Stanley Jevons, Wikipedia.org. Web. May 5, 2010.