

Innovations in the Delivery of Online Local News

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I. INTRODUCTION

The future of local news will be a tale of entrepreneurship, stories of the rise—and the fall—of small news startups. These news initiatives, primarily online, will figure out ways to launch and report, collaborate and compete, expand and multiply.

Many will succeed, but some will fail—only to be replaced by new startups.

The overarching narrative will be one of a growing corps of smaller and smaller news outlets having a larger and larger impact as they engage in smart collaboration, bridging their silos and amplifying news for the good of their communities.

Entrepreneurial ideas will be informed by a sense of urgency over the loss of original journalism generated by traditional news organizations. News startups will also be jumpstarted by the growing number of entrepreneurship courses, and continuing education programs at universities around the country. We will focus on many of these trends in this paper.

Here is what we know so far about local news startups, drawn from progress reports and consulting with our grantees as well as our training and research¹ into these startups:

- They are sprouting up in communities around the country, mostly to fill gaps in news coverage.

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¹ "Publications," *J-Lab*, <http://www.j-lab.org/publications> (accessed March 13, 2013).

- They commit genuine acts of journalism.
- They provide granular news and information that many communities have never had.
- They frequently watchdog local officials.
- They adhere to high ethical and journalistic standards.

We also know the following about local startups:

- They can only be viable if their founders do more than just journalism and also think of the enterprise as a business.
- They are not entitled to survive just because they are doing good work.
- They will only get noticed in their communities if they are frequently updated, preferably several times a day.
- They hate to be called "blogs."

On the bright side, the online news landscape is quite robust. Some of the oldest sites have been around for a decade or more. The vast majority, however, have launched since 2005.²

We know there are some 4,600³ active local news sites and placeblogs, which are blogs about a specific community or place, in the U.S. as of mid-2012, but that is a fluid number. New sites are launching on a regular basis, often propelled by professional journalists who are taking buyouts or being downsized from their

² Jan Schaffer, "Citizen Media: Fad or Future of News," *J-Lab* February 5, 2007, http://www.j-lab.org/_uploads/publications/citizenmedia.pdf (accessed March 13, 2013).

³ "Community News Sites," *J-Lab Knight Community News Network*, http://www.kcnn.org/citmedia_sites/full_list (accessed March 13, 2013); "2011 AEJMC Luncheon: Community News Sites: What Works," *J-Lab* August 12, 2011, <http://www.j-lab.org/workshops/category/summits/2011-aejmc-luncheon-community-news-sites-what-works> (includes a presentation by Jan Schaffer) (accessed March 13, 2013).

newsrooms. Digital natives who have embraced the idea that they will have to create their own media are also launching sites. Still more are the creation of so-called civic catalysts, often long-time community volunteers who may be empty nesters and are finding media to be a new channel for volunteer activity.

Recently, we have seen some local news sites go dark. Not all of these sites are meant to last forever. Most often, however, they go inactive because their founders moved away or got a better, full-time job, and they cannot sustain the level of reporting their site requires. Sometimes, a site shuts down because it cannot raise enough support for its efforts. Often sites die because they are the victims of funder fatigue and a failure to diversify revenue streams. There is not yet a market for the buying and selling of startup news sites.

II. TYPES OF ONLINE NEWS STARTUPS

Online local news startups come in several different varieties:

- **Hyperlocal sites** focus on a specific geographic area. They often cover police news, municipal government, schools, small business, and breaking news and generally offer a high degree of civic information.
- **Metro startups** cover a larger city, and their portfolio tends to be more targeted than the daily newspaper in town. For instance, *St. Louis Beacon*⁴ covers politics, arts, health and science, and “issues.” The *Voice of San Diego*⁵ zeroes in on politics, the economy, education, the environment, and living in San Diego.
- **Watchdog sites** tend to focus on state capitals or state issues and do a high level of accountability journalism, often leavened with data. They range from such sites as *California*

⁴ See *St. Louis Beacon*, <http://www.stlbeacon.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁵ See *Voice of San Diego*, <http://www.voiceofsandiego.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

Watch,⁶ to *VTDigger*⁷ in Vermont, to *CTMirror*⁸ in Connecticut.

- **Niche news sites** do in-depth reporting on a particular subject such as Paul Socolar's *Public School Notebook*,⁹ which covers Philadelphia public schools. Other examples would be *Great Lakes Echo*¹⁰ covering Great Lakes environmental stories; *C-HIT*, the Connecticut Health investigative team;¹¹ and *Pipeline*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* site¹² that does a deep dive on the Marcellus Shale.
- **University-led news startups** have a mix of missions. These sites can be hyperlocal, watchdog, niche, or national in nature. Many journalism programs are now integrating these sites into their curriculum as both clinical and service-learning opportunities for students.

Is the increased emergence of online local journalism meeting the information needs of local communities and supporting a healthy American democracy? Time will tell, but I take heart from some recent work that *J-Lab*, a catalyst for pilot projects and news innovations, has done.

⁶ See *California Watch*, <http://www.CaliforniaWatch.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁷ See *Vermont Digger*, <http://www.VTDigger.com> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁸ See *Connecticut Mirror*, <http://www.CTMirror.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁹ See *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, <http://thenotebook.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁰ See *Great Lakes Echo*, <http://greatlakesecho.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹¹ See *Connecticut Health Investigative Team*, <http://c-hit.newhavenindependent.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹² See *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Pipeline*, <http://shale.sites.post-gazette.com> (accessed March 13, 2013).

In mid-2012, *J-Lab* wrapped up an online survey¹³ that asked more than 783 digital-first news sites how they were engaging their audiences; 278 responded. Most talked about "engagement" in terms of how many people came to their websites or how many became fans on Facebook.

However, when asked about the most successful thing they did to engage their audiences, over and over again they answered: Doing good journalism. Covering local officials. Spurring change.

Content is king for digital-first news sites, and good journalism is a fulcrum for engagement.

Many of the respondents went into great detail about their strategies. One site, *Urban Milwaukee*,¹⁴ in an effort to engage readers in reimagining a local retail corridor actually hired a graphic artist to convey a vision of what it could look like. Not long after, city officials bought into the vision, and the street was transformed.

The *Austin Bulldog*¹⁵ has singlehandedly forced open public meetings in Austin, Texas, through its tenacious coverage of officials doing work in secret.

*East County Magazine*¹⁶ in the outback of San Diego County urges its readers to take videos and photos of violations by San Diego Gas & Electric Co. And it has organized a major fire and emergency alert system in the fire-prone region that has drawn widespread attention.

Several sites said they were publishing the only voter guides available to inform readers about candidates for local public offices. Others talked about local investigations that changed business as usual in their communities.

Some online news sites try to challenge long-held master narratives in their communities. The *Lens*¹⁷ in New Orleans, for

¹³ Jan Schaffer and Erin Polgreen, "Engaging Audiences: Measuring Interactions, Engagement, and Conversions," *J-Lab*, http://www.j-lab.org/_uploads/publications/engaging-audiences/EngagementReport_web.pdf (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁴ Dave Reid, "S. 2nd Street Redesign Concept is a Pretty GOOD One," *Urban Milwaukee* May 20, 2009, <http://urbanmilwaukee.com/2009/05/20/s-2nd-street-redesign-concept-is-a-pretty-good-one> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁵ Ken Martin, "Austin Board and Commissions Get E-mail Policy," *Austin Bulldog* August, 23, 2012, http://www.theaustinbulldog.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=216:austin-board-and-commissions-get-e-mail-policy&catid=3:main-articles (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁶ See *East County Magazine*, <http://eastcountymagazine.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹⁷ See *The Lens*, <http://thelensnola.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

instance, says it follows a narrative of a "recovering city taking the reins of a historically corrupt and inefficient government," says Maggie Calmes, the site's community engagement editor.¹⁸

Increasingly, we see local online news sites expand their definitions of journalism to be more than simply news stories. Sometimes journalism is an act of data. The *Texas Tribune*, for instance, finds its data library¹⁹ to be one of the most popular offerings on its site.

Sites are also broadening the definitions of journalism to include conveying information at public events. The *St. Louis Beacon* does its "Beacon and Eggs" gatherings.²⁰ Again, the *Texas Tribune* raised some \$900,000 last year in event revenue alone. Its CEO Evan Smith asserts that, "events are journalism."²¹

One of my favorite innovations has been spearheaded by a group of community leaders in Vermont, who initially thought they wanted to form a nonprofit to raise funds for reporters to pursue discrete enterprise news stories. Instead, they ended up forming the *Vermont Journalism Trust*,²² which is now the parent of *Vermont Digger*. It is a stewardship rather than donor- or grant-model of support for nonprofit journalism. Another, *I-News*²³ in Colorado led by Laura Frank, recently joined forces with *Rocky Mountain PBS* to sustain its efforts.

III. INNOVATIONS AROUND COLLABORATIONS

In order for smaller news outlets to have a bigger impact, they need to partner with other news providers in their communities to get

¹⁸ Schaffer and Polgreen, "Engaging Audiences" 18.

¹⁹ "The Data," *Texas Tribune*, <http://www.texastribune.org/library/data> (accessed March 13, 2013).

²⁰ "Beacon & Eggs: Upcoming Events," *St. Louis Beacon*, https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/event/series/11409/beacon_and_eggs (accessed March 13, 2013).

²¹ Andrew Phelps, "For the Texas Tribune, 'Events are Journalism'—and Money Makers," *Nieman Journalism* (July 25, 2011), <http://www.niemanlab.org/2011/07/for-the-texas-tribune-events-are-journalism-and-money-makers> (accessed March 13, 2013).

²² Andrew Pergam, "New Stewardship Model for Journalism," *J-Lab* (April 27, 2011), <http://www.j-lab.org/ideas/category/spotted/new-stewardship-model-for-journalism-raises-88000-in-six-months> (accessed March 13, 2013).

²³ See *I-News*, <http://www.inewsnetwork.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

a little more distribution juice. As a result, innovative developments are emerging around collaborations on national, statewide, and local levels.

Online news sites are rethinking journalism as a collaborative rather than a competitive enterprise, especially as both mainstream media outlets and news startups try to lock in enduring relationships.

The path to collaboration has been bumpy, which is to be expected in the minefields of media disruption.

Just seven years ago, in late 2004, when online news sites started launching in earnest, the fledgling outfits were disdainful of traditional media. They thought the big media players were doing a lousy job of covering their communities—and in some cases, totally blowing the facts. The newbies identified significant gaps in coverage and aimed to do a better job of filling them.

For the longest time, legacy media players did not pay much attention to these upstarts. When I interviewed top editors at a major metro newspaper in 2009 for a foundation study,²⁴ we asked them about several new, rather robust, sites that were covering issues like education and city planning, right under their noses.

The editors were pretty clueless about what was happening. One even went so far as to declare that these small initiatives did not matter. “We’re the only game in town,” he said.²⁵

A lot has changed since then. Many of the newcomers started breaking major stories, winning prizes, and getting traction in their specific areas. Indeed, journalism’s highest honor, the Pulitzer Prize, has gone to online startups *Pro Publica*²⁶ and the *Huffington Post*.²⁷

Mainstream news outlets, on the other hand, kept getting smaller and smaller, forced to reduce staffs and the size of newspapers amid declining readers, declining revenues, and a recession. As a result,

²⁴ Jan Schaffer, “Exploring a Networked Journalism Collaborative in Philadelphia,” *J-Lab* April 19, 2010, <http://www.j-lab.org/publications/exploring-a-networked-journalism-collaborative-in-philadelphia> (accessed March 13, 2013).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Richard Adams, “ProPublica makes history with web-based Pulitzer Prize win,” *The Guardian*, April 18, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/richard-adams-blog/2011/apr/18/pulitzer-prize-winners-propublica> (accessed March 29, 2013).

²⁷ Michael Calderone, “Huffington Post Awarded Pulitzer Prize,” *Huffington Post*, April 16, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/16/huffington-post-pulitzer-prize-2012_n_1429169.html (accessed March 29, 2013).

their value proposition got slimmer and slimmer. Why should someone pay to subscribe when there is not much there?

Before long, some epiphanies set in:

- For one, mainstream news outlets have more than a business-model problem. They saw they needed to beef up their content and recruit some more feet on the street to continue to have a valuable product.
- At the same time, the news startups also had some epiphanies: scoops alone were not enough to make it in the digital-first news world. They needed a megaphone—some ways to amplify their good journalism and some ways to have more impact and more opportunities for support—be it from sponsors, funders, or advertisers.
- News sites also began to realize that collaboration was a business and marketing proposition. If they did not accept an offer to collaborate, one of their competitors might and they would be shut out.

So we have come to a place where news organizations, large and small, are trying out some new ways of working together. There are at least five models of collaboration that have involved relationships between old and new media:

- **Distributive partnerships.** These involve republishing content that one news organization creates by others who want to run the story.
- **Co-reporting partnerships.** These involve working together on newsgathering. This could entail localizing a national story, divvying up reporting tasks, or assigning a corps of correspondents to help gather the information to build a story.

- **Content-creation partnerships.** This usually involves a news startup sharing or creating content, especially for a legacy media partner.
- **Networked Journalism partnerships.** These usually entail formal agreements to belong to a metro network of blogs or news sites, often anchored by a legacy news outlet.
- **Civic engagement partnerships.** These involve media outlets collaborating with others to actually juice the involvement of citizens in public hearings or issues.

Now, of course, some of the models overlap with one another, but let us take a closer look.

A. *Distributive Partnerships*

Distributive partnerships are sort of like mini-wire services, often for a single geographic region. They almost always involve a digital news startup allowing others to pick up and republish their content—with attribution, of course.

Key examples include *Pro Publica* and the *Texas Tribune*, which openly invite users to republish their stories. There are rules to obey. These new journalism entities will let users republish their content if users obey the following rules:

- Do not edit;
- Use all internal links;
- Ask special permission for photos, which may have separate copyrights;
- Do not sell ads against their stories;
- Do not resell the story itself;
- Give credit; and

- Link back to their sites.

Sometimes these distribution agreements²⁸ are set up from the very start; others work on a story-by-story basis.

Significantly, a growing number of online news operations are discovering they can monetize their content with their partners.

California Watch now has agreements with eleven newspapers and five radio stations in the state.²⁹ The members pay a fee based on their size that allows them to use *California Watch* stories. Some of the partners might localize the stories and some work with *California Watch* to help report.

Likewise, the *New England Center for Investigative Reporting* (“NECIR”), a center at Boston University launched by two journalists, is getting revenue from a number of news organizations in the northeastern U.S. that subscribe to its monthly *Public Eye* feed of investigative stories.³⁰

B. Co-Reporting Partnerships

Co-reporting partnerships are aimed specifically at getting journalists from different news outlets to collaborate on reporting a story.

Pro Publica employed these partnerships well in a number of ways in its “Dialing for Docs” investigation. At least ten other news organizations³¹ developed their own stories using *Pro Publica* data and *Pro Publica* linked to those stories on its site. Its investigation of brain injuries³² in active-duty military was done jointly with National Public Radio and the partners turned the report into an Amazon Kindle Single.

²⁸ “About Us: Steal Our Stories,” *Pro Publica*, <http://www.propublica.org/about/steal-our-stories> (accessed March 13, 2013); “Take Our Content—Please!,” *Texas Tribune*, <http://www.texastribune.org/content/republish/6248/?iframe> (accessed March 13, 2013).

²⁹ “California Watch Media Network,” *California Watch*, <http://californiawatch.org/california-watch-media-network> (accessed March 13, 2013).

³⁰ “NECIR Launches “The Public Eye,”” *New England Center for Investigative Reporting*, <http://necir-bu.org/2010/10/17/necir-launches-the-public-eye> (accessed March 13, 2013).

³¹ “Dollars for Docs: How Industry Dollars Reach Your Doctors,” *Pro Publica*, <http://projects.propublica.org/docdollars> (accessed March 13, 2013).

³² “BrainWars: How the Military is Failing Its Wounded,” *Pro Publica*, <http://www.propublica.org/series/brain-wars> (accessed March 13, 2013).

C. Content-Creation Partnerships

Content-creation partnerships usually involve a new startup specifically creating content for use by another media partner. A key example of this involves the deals the *New York Times* established with several statewide news startups in the U.S.

The *Texas Tribune*, for instance, provides the *Times* with enough stories and columns to fill two pages each on Fridays and Sundays in the regional editions of the *New York Times*³³ that circulate in the Southwest. The *Tribune* even hired a person to produce arts and culture stories for this collaboration because the *Times* wanted such coverage even though it is not part of the *Tribune's* portfolio, which focuses on government, politics, and state issues. The *Times* pays the *Tribune*, though not a lot.

Two of these partnerships recently ended after less than two years. One of the first sites to ink a deal with the *New York Times*, the *Chicago News Coop*, went belly up.³⁴ The other, the *Bay Citizen* in San Francisco, merged with the *Center for Investigative Reporting* and ended the *Times* deal.³⁵ The *Times'* relationship brought all these sites significant validation although not much advertising or syndication revenue.

One caveat here is that you have to be careful not to get into a situation where the tail wags the dog³⁶ and you are just on a treadmill of producing copy for The *Times*. Startup news sites do not have a lot of resources and do need to focus on building their own brand.

On a local level, *Philadelphia's Public School Notebook* has an interesting relationship with WHYY,³⁷ one of the city's public radio

³³ "Texas Report," *New York Times*, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/national/usstatesterritoriesandpossessions/texas/index.html> (accessed March 13, 2013).

³⁴ Robert Channick, "Story of the Chicago News Cooperative an Obituary," *Chicago Tribune* February 25, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-02-25/business/ct-biz-0226-cnc--20120225_1_cnc-new-york-times-chicago-news-cooperative (accessed March 13, 2013).

³⁵ Dan Fost, "Bay Citizen, Center for Investigative Reporting to Merge," *The Bay Citizen*, March 27, 2012, <http://www.baycitizen.org/media/story/bay-citizen-center-investigative-merge> (accessed March 13, 2013).

³⁶ Jan Schaffer, "The Tail Wagged the Dog," *J-Lab* February 28, 2012, <http://www.j-lab.org/ideas/category/blogically-thinking/the-tail-wagged-the-dog> (accessed March 13, 2013).

³⁷ "WHYY's Content Partners," *NewsWorks*, <http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/about-us/item/6203> (accessed March 13, 2013).

stations. WHYY actually pays for part of the salary of a school reporter who does stories that appear on both thenotebook.org and on WHYY's NewsWorks.org website. The *Notebook* is the assigning editor in this relationship. WHYY gets excellent school coverage that is a product of the *Notebook's* extensive knowledge and network of sources.

Meanwhile, the *Voice of San Diego* website has been creating content and video reports, often explainers, for the local NBC affiliate.³⁸ The relationship has been so successful that NBC expanded that model to several other places around the country.³⁹

D. Networked Journalism Partnerships

Networked Journalism partnerships entail formal agreements to belong to a blog or hyperlocal news site network that is usually anchored by a legacy news outlet.

Over the past couple of years, *J-Lab* funded nine Networked Journalism pilot projects in which a legacy news organization was asked to partner with at least five local startups. *J-Lab* did not tell them how to do it, and interestingly, every site took a different approach. Five have done very well. Two started strong and are now limping along. Two did not make it.

What do the successful models look like? In Seattle, the *Times* started with five local partners and its network has now grown to more than fifty.⁴⁰ The *Times* does not steal their stories. Rather it publishes headlines and links to important stories seven days a week, bumping the partners' traffic numbers and giving them additional credibility.

The participants seem to be happy with the network and the newspaper discovered, from a *J-Lab/Times* survey,⁴¹ that it was benefitting from significant goodwill in the community as a result of the initiative.

³⁸ "Our Media Partners," *Voice of San Diego*, <http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/radio-tv> (accessed March 13, 2013).

³⁹ Brian Stetler, "For Local NBC Stations, Collaborative Journalism," *New York Times*, December 6, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/06/business/media/for-local-nbc-stations-collaborative-journalism.html?2> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁴⁰ "News Partner Network," *Seattle Times*, <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/flatpages/local/newspartners/newspartnernetwork.html> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁴¹ "Seattle News Network Gets High Marks," *J-Lab* April 6, 2011, <http://www.j-lab.org/about/press-releases/seattle-news-network-gets-high-marks> (accessed March 13, 2013).

The editor of the *Times* credits its participation in Networked Journalism with triggering a cultural sea change in his newsroom. Before, his staff turned up their noses at these new sites; now they see the benefits of working with them.

Similarly, in Portland, the network⁴² has grown to more than forty sites, comprised of a dozen news sites plus a larger group of topic and arts-and-culture blogs.

In Pittsburgh, the *Post-Gazette* assembled a small network⁴³ built around a topic: the controversial drilling for natural gas in a swath of sedimentary rock known as the Marcellus Shale. The partners have been less visible but include a public radio show that has helped broadcast stories and a data-tracking site. They have won a number of awards and again the editor credits the partnership with helping to transform his newsroom.

So what does success look like? There are some common characteristics of the projects that have done very well. Typically, the anchor news organizations did the following:

- Honored the independence of the smaller sites;
- Gave the network partners visibility on their home pages or in-house ads in the newspaper;
- Provided a community editor to spearhead the effort; and
- In most cases, provided some training—in social media, in selling ads, in legal issues—for the smaller sites.

We found some areas where the networks did not do well:

- The anchor news organizations required their small news partners to use a specific content management system;

⁴² “Oregonian News Network: News Partners,” *Oregon Live*, <http://www.oregonlive.com/onn> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁴³ “Pipeline News Partners,” *Pipeline*, <http://shale.sites.post-gazette.com/index.php/news/pipeline-news-partners> (March 13, 2013).

- Leadership changed—editors or community managers disappeared over the course of the project;
- Staff resources disappeared; and
- The network was kind of a secret—not marketed well in the community.

However, the manner in which these networks could aggregate advertising as well as content is still a nut that needs to be cracked. Seattle experimented with an advertising network headed by the KING television station but closed it down after about a year. The *Miami Herald* gave its partners advertising spots to sell on channels on the newspaper's website and the partners never sold them.

E. Civic Engagement Partnerships

Finally, the fifth kind of media collaboration is civic engagement partnerships.

Some news startups are partnering with local agencies and nonprofits to fortify the participation of people in local issues. One of the most interesting is a site called *NowcastSA*⁴⁴ in San Antonio, Texas, which launched a couple years ago to live stream and webcast public meetings.

City leaders have begun to credit *Nowcast's* presence with higher turnout at public meetings. And city agencies are now hiring *Nowcast* to videotape their meetings, integrate online chat capabilities and archive the sessions on *Nowcast's* site. Nonprofits are even writing funding for *Nowcast* into their grant proposals as part of their formal strategy for "civic engagement."

Audience engagement itself is another challenge to be addressed. There has been a lot of attention on building new business models in the evolving news ecosystem but not much attention to what constitutes "meaningful" engagement.

It is becoming clearer that there is a difference between superficial interaction with users and genuine engagement that drives users to support news operations and drives citizens to take more active roles in their communities.

⁴⁴ See *Nowcast San Antonio*, <http://nowcastsa.com> (accessed March 13, 2013).

The *J-Lab* report,⁴⁵ based on a spring 2012 national survey, surfaced engagement challenges for the 278 mostly small digital-first news sites that responded.

While the digital-first news sites reported that the rise of social media tools has empowered them to distribute content, market their sites, and track users, they could not lasso data to track whether they are turning users into supporters who will help their sites survive. Eight in ten respondents said they could not measure whether their engagement strategies were converting readers into advertisers, donors, content contributors, or volunteers. These roles are critical to the future survival of these news startups.

IV. PUBLIC MEDIA AND ONLINE LOCAL NEWS

Innovation in local news has to include roles for public media, particularly local public radio stations.

One way that public radio stations are building up their portfolios of local-news offerings is by partnering with local news startups.

Some quick examples: in San Francisco, as part of *J-Lab's* Networked Journalism project, KQED public radio began working with a number of hyperlocal sites⁴⁶ and putting their reporters on the air to do debriefs on local stories.

Likewise in Philadelphia, WHYY's *News Works*⁴⁷ is partnering with sites that cover city neighborhoods, contemporary art, and city planning, among others. Partners like theartblog.org⁴⁸ are even doing podcasts for WHYY's new 6 p.m. newscast.

In New Orleans, *Nola Vie*,⁴⁹ an arts and culture site that *J-Lab* funded, has been producing content for Nola.com, the website of the *Times-Picayune* newspaper, as well as for its own site and is doing programming for the local public radio station. It is also working on a partnership with another digital news site.

⁴⁵ Schaffer and Polgreen, "Engaging Audiences."

⁴⁶ "KQED News Partnerships Bring You More Bay Area Coverage," *KQED*, <http://www.kqed.org/support/membership/onq/webexclusives/article-newspartners.jsp> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁴⁷ See *NewsWorks*, <http://www.newsworks.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁴⁸ See *theartblog.org*, <http://www.theartblog.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁴⁹ See *NolaVie*, <http://nolavie.com>.

V. UNIVERSITY NEWS STARTUPS

Another news frontier involves journalism schools that are becoming incubators for news startups populated with student content.

The degree to which student production of news stories for these startups is fully integrated in the curricula is still a nut that needs to be cracked. There is no question, however, that students involved in these initiatives are learning not only how to produce stories on a faster turnaround than most classroom assignments, but they are also getting firsthand experience in how to operate a news business.

The models vary widely. They range from Temple University's required capstone that has some 180 students covering thirty neighborhoods over the course of an academic year for its *Philadelphia Neighborhoods*⁵⁰ to UC-Berkeley's program that divvies up its journalism grad students among its three hyperlocal websites⁵¹ (*Mission Local*, *Richmond Confidential*, and *Oakland North*) as part of their clinical work.

Some sites such as USC-Annenberg's *Neon Tommy*⁵² are 24/7 operations covering national and metro news that attracts some 270,000 unique visitors a month, according to site founder Marc Cooper.⁵³

Others, such as *NECIR* and *Wisconsin Watch*,⁵⁴ are separate university affiliates located in academic offices and employing or assigning students, even though they are primarily producing stories for mainstream media outlets.

⁵⁰ See *Philadelphia Neighborhoods*, <http://philadelphianeighborhoods.com> (accessed March 13, 2013); "Journalism: Degree Requirements," *Temple University*, http://www.temple.edu/bulletin/academic_programs/schools_colleges/sct/programs/journalism/sct_journalism.shtm (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁵¹ See *Mission Local*, <http://missionlocal.org> (accessed March 13, 2013); *Richmond Confidential*, <http://richmondconfidential.org> (accessed March 13, 2013); *Oakland North*, <http://oaklandnorth.net> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁵² See *Neon Tommy*, <http://www.neontommy.com> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁵³ Jan Schaffer, "Trending: University News Sites," *J-Lab* June 6, 2012, <http://www.j-lab.org/ideas/category/blogically-thinking/trending-university-news-sites> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁵⁴ See *WisconsinWatch.org*, <http://www.wisconsinwatch.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

The degree to which the universities support these offspring also varies widely. *Neon Tommy* benefits from \$150,000 and more in direct support. Boston University antes up \$60,000 a year for *NECIR*, their founders told a 2012 *J-Lab* workshop.⁵⁵ But other news sites hobble along on budgets of \$5,000 to \$20,000 a year—or less.

Most of the sites, however, face similar challenges:

- How to embed their operations more fully into the curriculum so that they are more than the pet projects of a few faculty members;
- How to “feed the beast” year round so that the sites do not go dormant over the summer or school breaks; and
- How to pay for these efforts.

From the standpoint of the overall university, such sites are proving to be assets that foster the following:

- Experiential learning in a clinical setting, a genuine newsroom that is covering real stories for real communities;
- Service learning that involves students in helping to meet the information needs of their communities; and
- Civic engagement that helps universities nurture good citizenship and be good neighbors in their communities.

“We’re thinking about this more as service learning. They are a required component of being a college student,” said Carola Weil, in 2012 when she was USC-Annenberg’s Director of International and Strategic Partnerships.⁵⁶ “These programs are part of the experiential learning.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Schaffer, “Trending: University News Sites.”

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

*Madison Commons*⁵⁸ at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for instance, recently got some funding via a service learning grant to integrate the news website into the journalism curriculum, said its founder Lew Friedland.

The university sites can post as few as three stories a week to as much as forty pieces of content a day. Nearly all find getting citizen contributors to supplement student content difficult to sustain.

Every month, Berkeley's *Mission Local* posts about one hundred feature articles and videos produced in-house and two hundred photos taken from around San Francisco's Mission District, current editor Helene Goupil told the *J-lab* workshop. The site was launched more than three years ago "to give the grad students some place to publish," she said.⁵⁹ "But it stopped being a class right away and felt like being a startup."⁶⁰

While fourteen to eighteen grad students produce content during the school year, that falls to only three students over the summer.

Still the site attracts about 100,000 unique visitors per month. It translates content into Spanish and publishes monthly print editions. Its \$350,000 operating budget includes two faculty members who work for the site.

USC-Annenberg's edgy *Neon Tommy* can post twenty-five to forty pieces of content on a "good" day, according to editor Marc Cooper.⁶¹ It has a core staff of thirty people; twenty are editors.

"I was frustrated that the school had no outlet for print," Cooper said.⁶² However, he quickly realized that the classes would not produce enough content for the site. So, this year he met with some ninety-five students from all over the university who wanted to work on the site and matched their interests with *Neon Tommy* opportunities. "Our default answer is 'yes,'" he says.⁶³

⁵⁸ See *Madison Commons*, <http://www.madisoncommons.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁵⁹ Schaffer, "Trending: University News Sites."

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

In 2012 *Neon Tommy* was a finalist for sixteen LA Press Club Awards, Cooper said, competing right alongside major Los Angeles media outlets.⁶⁴

Still, he and others say it is not easy to keep up the publishing momentum over the summer. “School breaks are—how do you say: disastrous,” said Gersh Kuntzman, former editor for the *Local—Fort Greene-Clinton Hill*,⁶⁵ a publication of CUNY that was affiliated with the *New York Times*. CUNY also houses NYCityNewsService.com and VoicesofNY.org.⁶⁶

Willa Seidenberg who runs *Intersections: South LA*, one of USC-Annenberg’s three hyperlocal sites, finds it “baffling” that students cannot find story ideas. So she distributes a weekly email to students with story ideas and invites them to sign up. The stories post on the sites and the students can use them for class.

With competition for support, *Intersections*, which covers a diverse and poor community abutting the university, may end up being wrapped into a Community News Program although Seidenberg is working to keep it going. “Students are really the beneficiary of the site,” she says.⁶⁷ “It’s changed the culture of the school and increased the amount of reporting done in South LA.”⁶⁸

Austin Talks, a website run out of Columbia College-Chicago, has also made major inroads in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. It partners with a local weekly and a neighborhood volunteer has offered to jazz up the website. Now, other city neighborhoods are asking whether they can get a “Talks” site, too. “There is definite interest in doing this for other neighborhoods,” said site founder Suzanne McBride, who also helped to launch the school’s *Chicago Talks* news site.⁶⁹

Next to Berkeley, Temple has done the best job of integrating the *Philadelphia Neighborhoods* website into its journalism curriculum. All journalism students must report for the site as a capstone course.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.; See *The Local*, <http://fort-greene.thelocal.nytimes.com> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁶⁶ See *NYCity NewsService*, <http://nycitynewsservice.com> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁶⁷ Schaffer, “Trending: University News Sites.”

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.; See *AustinTalks*, <http://austintalks.org> (accessed March 13, 2013); *Chicago Talks*, <http://chicagotalks.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

Two full-time faculty and three adjuncts help run the operation. The site has won nearly thirty state, regional, and national journalism awards since 2010, co-director Chris Harper said in 2012.

BU's *NECIR* has probably developed the most sustainable model, so far. The university contributes \$60,000 in cash, plus space, equipment, a travel budget, supplies, and postage. It also has charged no overhead on the \$1 million in *NECIR* grant funding raised as of mid-2012.

Co-director Maggie Mulvihill said *NECIR* believes its content is good enough that it deserves to be sold to news outlets throughout New England. Content sales this year will amount to some \$60,000 with stories appearing in the *Boston Globe* and WBUR public radio. This year *NECIR* will produce about thirty-two major stories with two full-time co-directors, three to four freelancers, three to five college interns, and the same number of high-school interns per semester.

Training is another significant contributor to the center's \$530,000 operating budget. *NECIR* will bring in about \$180,000 in 2012 from training professional journalists and high school students in workshops on investigative journalism.

Few of the university news sites get full rides from their institutions. Temple offsets its program's costs by assessing students a tech fee. It also charges some of its mainstream media partners \$2,000 a year to run *Philadelphia Neighborhood* stories.

The Medill News Services charges clients about \$900 a semester for stories from two "beat" areas of coverage. Arizona State's Cronkite News Service⁷⁰ does not charge at all. The University of Maryland's Capital News Service charges client news outlets a few hundred dollars a semester, which it divvies up among the students to reimburse for gas money.

*CU-Citizen Access*⁷¹ at the University of Illinois-Champaign/Urbana works off university funding plus money from the local community foundation. *Great Lakes Echo*⁷² at Michigan State has found environmental and other funders willing to support its work.

Madison Commons supplements grants with a small amount from the university and \$5,000 a year from such partners as WISC-TV, which co-publishes its work. Going forward, founder Lew Friedland

⁷⁰ See *Cronkite News*, <http://cronkitenewsonline.com> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁷¹ See *CU-CitizenAccess*, <http://cu-citizenaccess.org/about> (accessed March 13, 2013).

⁷² See *Madison Commons*, <http://www.madisoncommons.org> (accessed March 13, 2013).

said he wants to set up a “MadCom” agency to involve students in fee-based social media consulting for local organizations.

Meanwhile, *AustinTalks*’ McBride dreams of a “Bob Newhart” model of funding, that is, getting a wealthy native of the Austin neighborhood to ante up some support.

Only a handful of USC students will be investigative or general assignment reporters; “most will get a web job,” said *Neon Tommy*’s Cooper.⁷³ “Our goal is to give our students maximum experience in the world of publishing.”⁷⁴

VI. CONCLUSION

The future of journalism is still a work in progress. The challenge is how to provide the kind of news and information citizens need to do their jobs as citizens and still support the news entities to produce it.

News startups that specialize in investigative reporting and covering state government are becoming more common. Growing numbers of local startups are filling some of the gaps in reporting on community affairs.

The good news is that we are getting past the days of the Bloggers vs. Journalists debates. The news and information being created by indie news startups has generally been quite good. And mainstream media’s scratchiness towards the new online sites is also falling away—in part because many of the new sites are launched by journalists who have left their newsrooms.

Still to be worked out is the question of metrics. Counting metrics—who is visiting, reading, commenting, tweeting—is important to advertisers, to funders, to the ability of an entrepreneurial news startup to tell its own story. Everyone still wants the unique-visitor counts, the page views, the Facebook likes, and the Twitter comments. Collaboration among news startups often means one news site will be driving eyeballs to the work of another news site that will get the analytics juice.

The big unanswered question is whether these entrepreneurial journalism ventures will elicit the kinds of support from their communities that will ensure their survival for the long haul.

⁷³ Schaffer, “Trending: University News Sites.”

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

