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Student R&D Can Show the Way for Media

2007
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by [Rich Gordon \(Bio\)](#), November 17, 2008

Tagged: [crunchberry project](#), [hyperlocal media](#), [medill](#), [placeblogger](#)

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[Placeblogger](#), a Knight News Challenge winner from 2007, has launched a new design and [announced](#) that it is now indexing more than 3,000 "placeblogs" -- Web sites that deliver, as founder [Lisa Williams](#) puts it, "an act of sustained attention to a particular place over time ... about the lived experience of a place."

The new design served to remind me -- yet again -- of how much has happened in online media in the past few years. About 4 1/2 years ago, I directed a team of [Medill](#) master's students who explored the potential of what they called "hyperlocal citizens' media" by launching an experimental Web site called [GoSkokie](#). The site, serving the community of Skokie, IL, northwest of Chicago, was an early version of what Lisa would call a placeblog.

GoSkokie is no more, but it did inspire the Skokie Public Library to create a similar site called [SkokieNet](#). (The library credits the student team [here](#).)

More significantly, perhaps, the students authored a report on their experience that they called, "Hyperlocal Citizens' Media: Connecting Communities, Improving Journalism, Building Democracy." In the report, the students described their experiences, captured the lessons they had learned, and made recommendations to individuals and media companies interested in developing hyperlocal news and information sites that rely on non-journalists to provide the content. The report was downloaded from the Medill Web site more than 300 times by would-be placebloggers, employees of major media companies and startup businesses interested in hyperlocal news.

I dug up the report this week to see how well it has stood the test of time. I was pleased to find that the students had nailed many of the key lessons for "hyperlocal" sites -- lessons that continue to be relevant to individuals and companies interested in hyperlocal news and information.

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For instance:

- Open source software has made launching a hyperlocal site relatively easy.
- Photos are extremely popular.
- Short, readable postings in a conversational style are better than traditional journalism articles.
- Readers respond to postings about subjects that don't necessarily meet the definition of news as journalists tend to define it.
- It's much easier to get people to visit an HLCM site than to get them to become content contributors.

There's a lot of good practical information in the report, which is no longer available on Medill's Web site because of a redesign last year. You can find the report [here](#) thanks to [J-Lab](#), which designated the site a "[notable entry](#)" in the 2004 Knight-Batten Awards for Innovations in Journalism.

The GoSkokie project was sponsored by Advance.Net, the Internet arm of the Newhouse newspaper chain, then headed by [Jeff Jarvis](#). The idea emerged out of several brainstorming sessions with Jeff, who has since left Advance and now directs the interactive journalism program at the City University of New York's graduate school of journalism. At Advance, Jeff was looking for ways that metropolitan newspapers could do a better job of covering -- and generating advertising dollars from -- suburban communities.

Our original charge to the students ([Leah Gliniewicz](#), [Sara Oceguera](#), [Gina Petrelli](#), [Vivek Shankar](#), [Mike Tumolillo](#) and [Jason Tuohey](#)) was to conduct a "content census" in Skokie to determine who already had content that could be part of a hyperlocal site, and to mock up what such as site might look like. Two weeks into the project, after interviewing the people behind a half-dozen pioneering hyperlocal Web sites, they proposed to do something different: launch a real site using open-source software. They argued that this would enable them to learn more about the potential of such sites, and they were right.

The GoSkokie project continues to serve as a model for "innovation projects" at Medill, [including the one I'm currently directing](#), which focuses on improving "[conversations around news](#)." This year's Crunchberry Project involves six students, including the first two "[programmer-journalists](#)" attending Medill under a Knight News Challenge scholarship. Thanks to their involvement, the student team this year isn't limited to using off-the-shelf software -- they are developing their own tools for enabling news-based conversations.

The basic model for GoSkokie in 2004 and the Crunchberry Project in 2008 is the same:

1. Find an interesting problem or issue relevant to the future of media or journalism. (Then: hyperlocal citizens' media. Now: better conversations around news.)
2. Identify a media company interested in sponsoring the class and learning from the students' work. (Then: Advance.net. Now: [Gazette Communications](#) of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.)
3. Turn the students loose.
4. Document their experiences and recommendations in a report that others can find helpful.

When it works, as it did in 2004, such a class can serve as a great educational experience for the students (all six of the GoSkokie students have successfully pursued careers in journalism and online media) and can also provide good information that journalists and the media industry will find relevant and useful. I have high hopes that the Crunchberry Project will have similar results. In a few weeks, the Crunchberry team's final report will be made available to anyone who's interested. In the meantime, I'll be writing some more for this site about the cool ideas -- and tools -- that the students have come up with for improving conversations around news.

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