Mapping Online Streams of Local News

PATRICK BARRY[*]

Abstract: The stream of news about neighborhoods has changed dramatically in the last few years after a prolonged period of decline. Whole new categories of "hyperlocal" information have been created and are available online, providing more information than traditional newspapers ever did. This essay sorts the new streams into tiers that range from pseudo-traditional journalistic sources to raw and unfiltered data sets. Examples from Chicago are provided, along with analysis of the positive and negative aspects of each type of new stream.

I. INTRODUCTION

I became a neighborhood news junkie more than thirty years ago, when I began my career as a free-lance urban-issues writer, and back then the supply was plentiful. The two big dailies in Chicago had large, experienced staffs covering all manner of urban happenings, and on certain days of the week there were thick sections devoted entirely to neighborhood news or real estate. That was just the main meal. A neighborhood newspaper came twice a week, there was a hefty business weekly that included neighborhood development stories, and other niche publications dug deep around various special interests.

Over the last ten years, of course, I have been increasingly disappointed at the dramatically shrinking news holes at the dailies, the demise of the neighborhood paper, the thinning out of the business weekly, and the dwindling staffs at all these publications.

[*] Patrick Barry has been writing about community development and Chicago neighborhoods for 30 years, most recently as the creator of a web-based communications effort for LISC/Chicago's New Communities Program (NCP). Before this, Barry wrote for a range of newspapers and magazines, including the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Enterprise*, *U.S. News & World Report, Chicago Magazine* and *Washington Monthly*.

Neighborhood issues that were once routinely covered—things like plan commission meetings where public subsidies were discussed for new grocery stores or affordable apartments—did not seem to exist anymore (but of course they do). Neighborhood groups, once able to snag a reporter or TV crew with a catchy theme for their press conference, are increasingly playing to their own audience and having to publish the news themselves if they want any coverage at all.

Five years ago, my role had already morphed from journalism into a form of community-development storyteller. I worked with nonprofit community groups helping them develop news-oriented websites, but never really embraced the citizen journalism fad, knowing how hard it is to get a volunteer to submit a single story, let alone a regular stream, on deadline and with the rigor of a journalist.

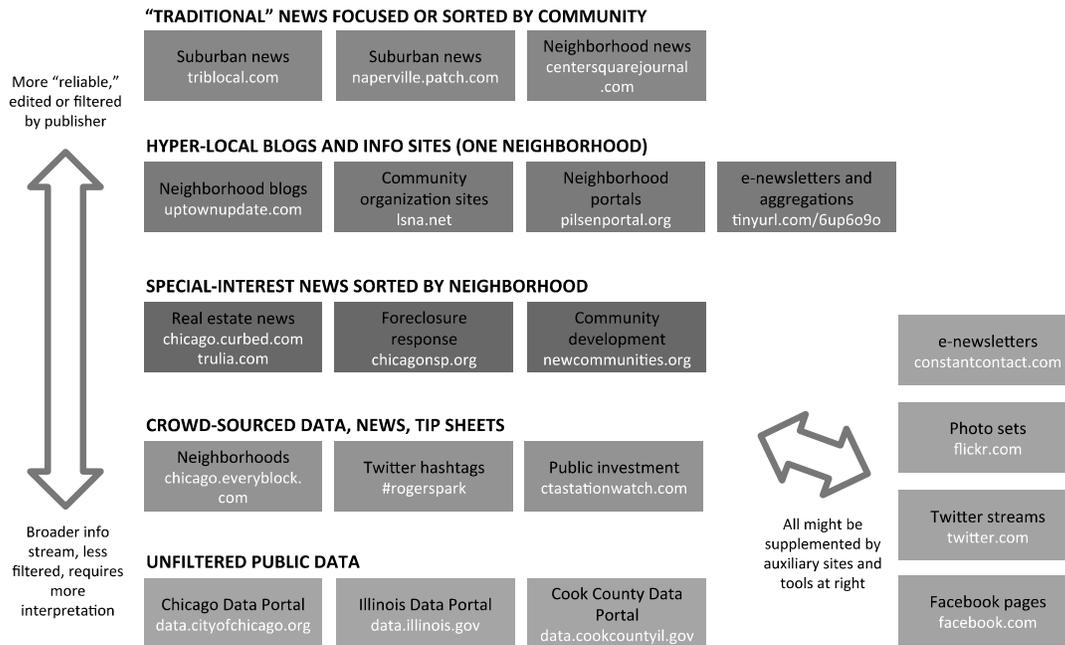I figured that the neighborhood news stream was essentially dead.

So you can imagine my surprise and delight as, over the last two or three years, I have watched the online flow of neighborhood news get stronger, more diverse, and more frequent. Since that low point five years ago, there has been a remarkable increase in fine-grained information about neighborhoods.

It is very uneven. Much of it is not even journalism by the traditional definition. There is a lot of junk out there, a lot of opinion, a lot of misinformation or biased content. And that means that readers need to apply more filters and cast a much more skeptical eye than they did back when the news shops were full of experienced writers and editors.

Still, there is a new structure emerging—a "media ecosystem"—that is delivering more information than the newspapers ever did, even when the Sunday paper hit the porch with a resounding thud. But now it is not a single hit each morning but a series of hits all day, a stream, or, as they have started to describe the Twitter feed, a fire hose.

The flow of information is sufficiently fascinating and diverse that I have organized it into a typology with five categories that range from traditional news sources to raw data streams. As shown on the graphic, the media in the top tier are the most heavily edited and "reliable," while those at the bottom are raw feeds of data or streams of unverified information that must be interpreted. All of these sources can be characterized as "local neighborhood" or "hyperlocal" because they are either organized around a discrete geographic area (a neighborhood or suburb) or can be sorted or filtered by geography as a result of the architecture of the web site.

A Typology of Neighborhood Information Sources

"TRADITIONAL" NEWS FOCUSED OR SORTED BY COMMUNITY

Suburban news	Suburban news	Neighborhood news
triblocal.com	naperville.patch.com	centersquarejournal.com

More "reliable," edited or filtered by publisher

HYPER-LOCAL BLOGS AND INFO SITES (ONE NEIGHBORHOOD)

Neighborhood blogs	Community organization sites	Neighborhood portals	e-newsletters and aggregations
uptownupdate.com	lsna.net	pilsenportal.org	tinyurl.com/6up6o9o

SPECIAL-INTEREST NEWS SORTED BY NEIGHBORHOOD

Real estate news	Foreclosure response	Community development
chicago.curbed.com trulia.com	chicagonsp.org	newcommunities.org

e-newsletters
constantcontact.com

CROWD-SOURCED DATA, NEWS, TIP SHEETS

Neighborhoods	Twitter hashtags	Public investment
chicago.everyblock.com	#rogerspark	ctastationwatch.com

Photo sets
flickr.com

All might be supplemented by auxiliary sites and tools at right

Twitter streams
twitter.com

Broader info stream, less filtered, requires more interpretation

UNFILTERED PUBLIC DATA

Chicago Data Portal	Illinois Data Portal	Cook County Data Portal
data.cityofchicago.org	data.illinois.gov	data.cookcountyil.gov

Facebook pages
facebook.com

Created by Patrick Barry, LISC Chicago, for The Future of Online Journalism Symposium, March 29-30, 2012 – pbarry.chicago@gmail.com

These examples are from Chicago, but something similar is likely to exist in other major metropolitan areas.

1. **Traditional news:** Decent reporting is flowing from Chicago suburbs via dozens of locally focused sites created by TribLocal,[1] a Tribune Company offshoot, and Patch,[2] AOL's hyperlocal network. In late 2012, a new hyperlocal site called DNAinfo.com [3] began publishing with a crew of staff writers and professional editors, some hired away from the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

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[1] See "TribLocal," *Chicago Tribune*, http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/suburbs (accessed March 14, 2013).

[2] See *Patch*, http://www.patch.com (accessed March 14, 2013).

[3] See *DNAinfo.com Chicago*, http://www.dnainfo.com/chicago (accessed March 21, 2013).

It is putting out a heavy stream of stories sorted into thirteen neighborhood clusters; it is based on a similar and earlier news operation serving New York City. There are also a few shoestring neighborhood news shops, typically in higher-income, educated communities.[4] The news stream here is not Pulitzer quality, but it is a record of what is going on and thus, of great value to a news junkie.

2. **Hyper-local sites:** These are one-neighborhood blogs[5] or websites, e-newsletters and something new we call portals[6] in Chicago, which allow contributions from anyone who wants to sign up (with light moderation). Many of the websites and blogs are operated by a community organization in the same way that "booster" newspapers used to serve neighborhoods, providing a simple stream of mostly good news and announcements. Again, it is not journalism, but information about what is going on in the community, and it is visible even if you are 100 or 1,000 miles away (more on those portals later).

3. **Special-interest news:** These are niche sites whose architecture consciously allows them to be sorted by neighborhood. Curbed.com[7] is a real estate website now operating in thirteen cities and staffed by part-time or full-time editors who produce their own reports and aggregate others (a sister site called Eater, about restaurants, is in nineteen cities, also sorted by neighborhood[8]). Another is a non-profit site I have

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[4] One of the most prominent and successful is CenterSquareJournal.com, an ad-supported web newspaper that has spawned three similar operations in other North Side neighborhoods. See *Center Square Journal*, http://www.centersquarejournal.com (accessed March 29, 2013).

[5] See *Uptown Update*, http://www.uptownupdate.com (accessed March 14, 2013).

[6] See *Pilsen Portal*, http://www.pilsenportal.org/index.html (accessed March 14, 2013).

[7] See *Curbed*, http://curbed.com (accessed March 14, 2013).

[8] See *Eater*, http://eater.com (accessed March 14, 2013).

been involved with as an editorial consultant to *Local Initiatives Support Corporation* ("*LISC*") in Chicago. Organized around fourteen neighborhoods participating in a $50 million comprehensive community development program called the *New Communities Program*, the site at newcommunities.org [9] and its newer sister site, lisc-chicago.org,[10] use professional journalists (or former journalists) and photographers to develop news stories, data, and photos related to the neighborhood work.

4. **Crowd-sourced news and tip sheets:** The now-defunct *EveryBlock*[11] started out in 2008 as a pure data stream with no filtering and no context, which made it not very useful for anyone who was not willing to pore through lists of business licenses, building permits and crimes. Until the site was unexpectedly shuttered on February 7, 2013, by its parent company *NBC News*,[12] *EveryBlock* allowed neighborhood residents, business owners, and just about anyone else to post their own news, ask questions, and go on a rant if they wanted to do so. The site had become a free-for-all stream offering great information—a lot of which could be considered "news"—mixed in with the data and junk. It had been in sixteen cities. Chicago's *EveryBlock* site was very well developed in some neighborhoods, "breaking" some types of news (bicycle stolen, shots fired, business closes) almost as soon as it happened.[13]

5. **Unfiltered public data:** Many governments are releasing huge data sets in the interests of "open data."

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[9] See *New Communities Program*, http://newcommunities.org (accessed March 14, 2013).

[10] See *LISC Chicago*, http://www.lisc-chicago.org/index.html (accessed March 14, 2013).

[11] See *EveryBlock*, http://everyblock.com (accessed October 9, 2012).

[12] Jeff Sonderman, "NBC Closes Hyperlocal, Data-Driven Publishing Pioneer EveryBlock," *Poynter* February 7, 2013, http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/mediawire/203437/nbc-closes-hyperlocal-pioneer-everyblock (accessed March 21, 2013).

[13] See *EveryBlock Chicago*, http://chicago.everyblock.com (accessed March 22, 2013).

> These so-called data portals typically offer tens of millions of bits of information in big data sets covering things like crimes, building permits, business licenses, and use of city services. In Chicago,[14] it is a fire hose of information that is potentially very valuable. But the user interface on these portals, many of which are built on a platform called Socrata,[15] is hard to penetrate for the casual user and more suited to geeks and data scientists.

These sites often supplement their streams via Facebook, Twitter, Flickr or e-newsletters, which provide more info or broader access. I have been especially impressed with how some neighborhood organizations have developed e-newsletters into informative news aggregations, sometimes simply cutting and pasting fliers and other news items into the format and sending it out. Likewise with Facebook pages; the Logan Square Neighborhood Association has more than 2,430 "likes" on its page,[16] making it a formidable tool for information dissemination.

This is not static, one-way information flow, either. Others can post to Facebook pages and most of these other web places or provide comments, which adds another layer of information—or more junk and bias, depending on the site and its readers.

II. CHALLENGES OF THE NEW STREAMS

Unfortunately, none of these categories is perfect. Each has inherent problems. For instance,

- The traditional news sites depend on underpaid writers or editors. *Patch* and *TribLocal* hire eager young writers at entry-level wages and work them hard.[17] In early 2012, the TribLocal

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[14] See "Data Portal," City of Chicago, https://data.cityofchicago.org (accessed March 14, 2013).

[15] See *Socrata*, http://www.socrata.com (accessed March 14, 2013).

[16] See "Logan Square Neighborhood Association," https://www.facebook.com/ LoganSquareNeighborhoodAssociation (accessed March 21, 2013).

[17] Joe Pompeo, "AOL's Patch Is a Sweatshop of 70-Hour Work Weeks with No Vacation, Editor Says," *Business Insider* August 5, 2010, http://www.businessinsider.com/aols-

network had about forty staffers—copy editors, designers, and web producers—but then cut about half of them[18] as it outsourced all of its hyperlocal editorial content to a firm called *Journatic*, "a fast-growing company that mines data and public records to create highly localized stories," according to the *Tribune*'s story[19] about the shift. So while the Patches and Locals are filling a news void now, there is a question of whether they will always be shoestring operations paying low wages, if they can become something more, or if they will survive at all.[20] (The *Journatic* venture spiraled into editorial scandal in mid-2012 amid charges of false bylines and fabricated material in stories that originated, in some cases, from low-paid contractors in the Philippines. [21] The *Chicago Tribune* suspended use of *Journatic* in July 2012. [22] It then reinstituted use of the service in December 2012.[23])

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patch-is-a-sweatshop-of-70-hour-work-weeks-with-no-vacation-editors-email-suggests-2010-8#ixzz25XOzVj5P (accessed March 14, 2013).

[18] Daily Herald Staff Report, "TribLocal Layoffs Coming as Coverage Outsourced to Provider," *Daily Herald* April 24, 2112, http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20120424/business/704239736 (accessed March 14, 2013).

[19] Robert Channick, "Journatic to Provide TribLocal Content," *Chicago Tribune* April 23, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-04-23/news/chi-journatic-to-provide-triblocal-content-20120423_1_web-sites-content-user-generated (accessed March 14, 2013).

[20] Claire Cain Miller, "Washington Post Ends Hyperlocal News Experiment," *New York Times* August 18, 2009, http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/18/washington-post-ends-hyperlocal-news-experiment (accessed March 14, 2013).

[21] Sarah Koenig, "Forgive Us Our Press Passes" (includes an interview with high school student Ryan Smith), *This American Life from WBEZ* June 29, 2012, http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/468/switcheroo?act=2 (accessed March 14, 2013); updated on July 17, 2012, http://www.thisamericanlife.org/blog/2012/07/updates-about-journatic (accessed March 14, 2013).

[22] Phil Rosenthal, "Chicago Tribune Suspends Use of Journatic," *Chicago Tribune* July 13, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-07-13/news/ct-chicago-tribune-suspends-

- Hyperlocal sites and blogs come with points of view, sometimes extreme, sometimes anonymous, other times bland or overly self-serving. The best of them are run by conscientious editors or communications professionals who edit the site in the interests of the community. If the site is run by a nonprofit community organization, as many are, that group's priorities will be in the forefront, and readers will have to discern that as they get to know the site. Other blogs are run by the same type of person who does well at sensationalist tabloids, always looking for stories that will grab some attention from readers. These sites can be entertaining, but the content and comments can get out of hand: diatribes and rants rather than reporting and news.[24] In this sphere, the reader has to work a bit harder to find reliable truths.

- Special interest sites have legs in some areas, like real estate, because there is a potential money stream there. Otherwise, it is all driven by the issue area that is covered, requiring a motivated editor/writer or a source of grant money to keep things going. If they are neighborhood-oriented sites, you can be sure there will be a strong point of view.

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use-of-journatic-07132012_1_weekly-print-editions-town-websites-editorial-ethics-policy (accessed March 14, 2013).

[23] Robert Channick, "Tribune Resumes Limited Usage of Journatic," *Chicago Tribune*, December 6, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-12-06/business/chi-journatic-tribune-20121206_1_journatic-after-tribune-editors-hyperlocal-content-journatic-ceo-brian-timpone (accessed March 21, 2013).

[24] A now defunct site called "The Broken Heart of Rogers Park," was written by neighborhood resident Craig Gernhardt and ran from about 2007 to 2010 at morsehellhole.blogspot.com. Gernhardt ranted about local issues and commenters jumped in to stir the pot. It became so filled with vitriol and untruths that Gernhardt shut the site down.

- Crowd-sourced sites are the most exciting, unpredictable, and wildly uneven streams I have come across. *EveryBlock* had terrific potential for up-to-the-minute news in neighborhoods where there is a steady cadre of committed readers and contributors.[25] Content tends to reflect the contributors, of course, so one neighborhood might have a lot of information about real estate while others focus on local businesses or public safety. Crowd-sourced sites within a particular niche offer potential as well. I personally experimented with a crowd-sourced site that tracked $200 million worth of public infrastructure investment at ten train stations on the Chicago Transit Authority's Red Line. The *CTA Station Watch* site[26] filtered the Twitter stream to pick up news about the stations, and pulled posts from a related Facebook page[27] where photo sets attracted heavy traffic and comments. Three months after launch, the site was attracting 3,000 to 5,000 visits per month[28] as CTA riders and neighborhood residents (with encouragement and steady posts from two professional editors) informed each other about what was going on. That experiment was winding down in early 2013 as construction activity was finishing up, leaving little news to report.

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[25] The Chicago neighborhood of Rogers Park had dozens of regular contributors on EveryBlock who posted news and comments on a daily basis at http://chicago. everyblock.com/locations/neighborhoods/rogers-park (site now discontinued).

[26] See *CTA Station Watch*, http://ctastationwatch.com (accessed March 14, 2013).

[27] See CTA Station Watch, https://www.facebook.com/CtaStationWatch (accessed March 14, 2013).

[28] Web traffic data provided by Google Analytics for ctastationwatch.com for July and August 2012.

- Finally, the unfiltered data sets are just that, unfiltered and, so far, only useful to data geeks or code-writers that put in their own time developing apps that filter and display the data. There is some very innovative work going on—apps and websites track buses and snow plows and which potholes are being filled in Chicago[29]—but there is a big gap between the "big" public data sets and the "little data" that is parsed and analyzed enough to be useful.

III. LOWER-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS

I will close with two observations about information streams in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods. These are typically trickles, much harder to establish and maintain than in well-educated and wealthier neighborhoods. Yet they are just as important to the future health of our nation.

When I started working for *LISC Chicago*'s New Communities Program ten years ago, the neighborhoods we worked in had almost no web presence at all—or if they did it was stories about crime and murder. That has changed, not by itself, but by focused effort.

1. In 2004, we built a single web site at newcommunities.org that featured news, data, and photos of sixteen neighborhoods, and immediately drew good search results and traffic. The traffic came because we were filling a void with information that people wanted.

2. Neighborhood partners liked the attention, and said they wanted websites to build their own information streams. *LISC* and its technical partner, *Webitects*, Inc., [30] created a template and trained eight neighborhoods that built and maintained their own sites. Now there are more than twenty such sites.

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[29] Examples of data-driven apps in Chicago are featured on the web site of Derek Eder, an app developer involved with the group OpenGov Chicago. Many of the apps pull data from the City of Chicago data portal. See http://www.derekeder.com (accessed March 14, 2013).

[30] See *Webitects, Inc.*, http://www.webitects.com/portfolio (accessed March 14, 2013).

3. The neighborhoods took the innovation lead after that, adding social-media layers like YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, and e-newsletters.

4. These sites are "owned" by community organizations. The best of them are led by staff members who have some writing or photography skills and what we used to call a "news sense."[31]

IV. COMMUNITY "PORTALS"

Portals are community websites on steroids. Using a federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program grant[32] to the City of Chicago, *LISC Chicago* helped five neighborhoods set up "portal" websites that allow anyone to contribute calendar items, business listings, news, and photos.[33]

After two years of operation, all five sites have managed some level of group participation, and three have become bona-fide contributors to the community information streams. The *Pilsen Portal* serves a Mexican neighborhood and gets 8,000 visits and 17,000 page views a month.[34] It has bilingual content, dozens of contributors, and broad involvement of businesses, artists, activists, and regular people. We think this is a very important and new contribution to the information stream and are working to figure out how to keep these portals going in the future, which involves both money and local commitment.

Any editorial product requires good writing, editing and/or photography, and that costs money. The portals have been getting by with a part-time "portal manager" who earns $10,000 per year. It has

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[31] Two good examples are lsna.net, an advocacy-oriented site run by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, and resurrectionproject.org, a community site focused on education, business, and other activities of the site's owner, The Resurrection Project.

[32] National Telecommunications and Information Administration, "Secretary Locke Announces Recovery Act Investments to Expand Broadband Internet Access and Spur Economic Growth," press release, March 25, 2010, http://www.ntia.doc.gov/press-release/2010/secretary-locke-announces-recovery-act-investments-expand-broadband-internet-ac-0 (accessed March 14, 2013).

[33] "Community Portals," Smart Communities: Chicago Digital Excellence Initiative, http://www.smartcommunitieschicago.org/Our-Programs/Community-Portal.html (accessed March 14, 2013).

[34] Web traffic data provided by Google Analytics for Pilsen Portal, May through August 2012.

been enough to get some good people at the keyboard, but like the hyperlocal news operations referenced above, it is not nearly enough to maintain a consistently good product over time.

For neighborhood web sites, the other big factor is the engagement and depth of activism among readers and contributors. Like blogs that stay alive on the enthusiasm of the editorial founder, the future of portals will depend on the kinds of gut instinct and editorial talents that epitomized earlier waves of innovation in the news business.

What comes next? I am not sure. But for the moment there is plenty to read. And that is something to celebrate.