

CREATING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS.ORG

Community News for Chicago, City of Neighborhoods



Map Elements by Alex Wedmeyer

FINAL REPORT FOR J-LAB -- GRANT 2006-2008

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Introduction

There's much to report in this final update. We've changed our name (and our URL) to the more catchy ChicagoTalks; we've won our first national award for an investigative series that ran just two months after last year's launch; and we're averaging more than 3,500 unique visitors a month without any marketing or promotion of the site (though we plan to do so in the future).



An early prototype of the site



A version of the site powered by drupal



Moving to a new look with wiki, blog & easier user interface

Screen shots illustrating the evolution of our news site.

We reached our goals in terms of training young journalists and publishing "hyperlocal" news online for Chicago residents in a number of neighborhoods. We have been able to keep a pretty constant supply of stories, averaging at least one new story on the home page five days a week. We have built up traffic and audience for the site. We have cross-linked to, aggregated content from and worked with other community news and citizen journalism sites. As far as engaging citizens as consistent contributors to our site, our results are mixed, as we explain below.

What we set out to do

Our original core purposes were to produce and publish quality local news stories not being covered by mainstream media, written by our journalism students, to build a content stream of neighborhood news supplied by community people, to be a content aggregator for ethnic and community news, and to build up a regular audience for the news on our site.

In our early reports to J-Lab, we noted that, "We must consistently offer new and useful content on our site – enough that it becomes a must read for current readers and attracts others. To accomplish this, we need to develop a broad and deep group of citizen contributors and student journalists." We also recognized that we needed to develop portal features for civic – community aggregation function because no one else was doing that as we designed and brought our site online.

We entered this project with a couple of assumptions. First, there are journalists who can and will report local news for our site. Second, there are people who will report news about things they are passionate about, though they don't have journalism training. Third, we can build an online community by combining the work of these complementary

but distinct groups. We were ready to provide training and support to both groups, but we didn't expect writers from the community to become professional journalists. We do believe community and democracy are made stronger when news from these two groups of people is published. We suspect that new roles for journalists are evolving at the nexus where professional journalist and impassioned citizen intersect, but we were not able to fully explore this during the last 18 months.

Accomplishments

We're especially proud of the steady gains in web traffic to our site, built through careful tagging of our content, which enhanced our rank in search engines. By collaborating with a better-known Chicago news and media web site, The Beachwood Reporter, we drove eyeballs to our site, too. Our first collaboration – a two-part series on Chicago aldermen hiring their relatives to work city jobs – resulted in a top award from Investigative Reporters and Editors (<http://www.ire.org/contest/07winners.html>) that we received June 7th in Miami.

On May 21, we published our second collaboration – a two-part series that found the Chicago City Council routinely breaks state law by failing to keep adequate records and voting on ordinances without enough members present. Those stories, which led to the two reporters being interviewed by several local media outlets, include links to 34 council committee meetings that we recorded and made public for the first time. Here are the links to our latest investigation:

- <http://www.creatingcommunityconnections.org/node/3336> (includes links to 34 different committee meetings that were tape recorded, so readers can listen to the actual meetings)
- http://www.beachwoodreporter.com/politics/out_of_order_council_committee.php

We published our first story on the site Feb. 21, 2007. One year ago, in June 2007, we had published 156 original stories on a range of topics. As of June 2008, we have published 588 stories. Our stories have included features with audio, video and/or photos.

As of June 2008, according to Google Analytics, we had over 28,000 unique visitors who logged more than 36,000 visits from 125 countries to the site. We started using Google Analytics in April 2007. Our monthly visits have risen steadily over time and are currently at about 4,000 per month.

CREATINGCOMMUNITYCONNECTIONS / CHICAGOTALKS MOST POPULAR STORIES

| STORY | NUMBER OF VIEWS |
|---|-----------------|
| Photographer John H. White Shares "P.J" love with students, area photojournalists | 2278 |
| Chicago alderman face no hurdles in hiring kin | 2100 |
| City of Chicago Payroll database | 1775 |
| Kelly High School students help undocumented students go to college | 1679 |
| The faces of immigration (video interviews) | 1568 |

Organization Name

Proposal Title

| STORY | NUMBER OF VIEWS |
|--|-----------------|
| Albany Park street gang expanding territory | 1448 |
| Chicago and Evanston police bust drug dealers | 1349 |
| No Child Left Behind affecting preschool and kindergarten | 1316 |
| Summit seeks to help people who have been incarcerated build new lives | 1141 |

It is interesting that our most visited story is one which was promoted heavily on a listserv frequented by former students and friends of renowned photojournalist John H. White. The influence of social media on promoting stories is critical.

Time is a limited resource as well as money, and in future iterations of Chicagotalks.org, we would look to have an editor whose role would center on pulling in content from the web, supplying it with context and publishing it on our site. This content would then be promoted on social networks, such as MySpace and Facebook. We established a presence on Facebook, but it isn't yet optimized to automatically post stories from the site. The Facebook connection would be considerably more dynamic if we had someone to promote content and organize occasional social events for readers.

We experimented with several mashups designed to draw readers to our site and to pull in video stories about Chicago to our site, based on a set of tags and search criteria. This worked, but produced lots of duplicate hits and stories written by our reporters were generally more popular than the more generic content pulled from other news sites. So instead of a simple automatic "feed" of video tagged "Chicago sports" for example, in the future, we will have an editor who pulls the content in, writes around it, and links it to other relevant stories on our site, and elsewhere.

Lessons learned

Most of the \$5,000 grant we received from New Voices last summer has been spent on redesigning our site and moving later this month to a new host that we think readers and contributors will find easier to navigate and to use to submit content of all kinds. The new site will automatically optimize our content for display on an iPhone or other mobile device. One lesson we've learned: The infrastructure of the site is critical to its performance and growth.

Today it is difficult to separate how a story looks online from how it reads. Writing for the web means having a sense of how to present a story to the eye in a visual medium, from the organization and placement of links to photos. It is becoming a desirable if not a necessary part of reporting to understand existing CMS issues of scaling and hosting as well as the costs and benefits of a DIY approach versus outsourcing site development.

Writers of all sorts need to know how to publish hyperlinked text, embed various media files and understand the basics of cascading style sheets and XML. Most of the site's reporters hadn't been trained to be online writers. They did not know how to develop new site features or help with the "back-end" of the site. To succeed in the online world, journalists would be wise to remember this mantra: "Grant me the skill to do what I can, the humility to outsource what I can't and the wisdom to know the difference" if they are to succeed in coming years. This will surely influence journalism education and hiring in the workplace.

We also spent \$500 to research and write a business plan for the site, which we hope to complete by early fall and then share with several potential funders. It became clear to us after being turned down by two different local foundations last year that we need to be able to articulate in writing a clear plan for our future. We remain hopeful that our niche – a site that publishes content about places, people, events and issues not being covered by other media outlets - will be of great interest to advertisers in the many Chicago neighborhoods that have no local newspaper, and developing a business plan will help us communicate that vision with funders, too.

Future plans

Writing a business plan has forced us to think long and hard about what we do best and what we want to become. To move forward, we are putting aside some of our ideas, such as developing a mobile submission module and creating a class to train citizen journalists, in order to ensure our focus remains on what we have done best: producing stories, pictures and other content about the neighborhoods of Chicago found no where else.

We continue to forge new partnerships and develop existing ones. Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC), a non-profit working in 16 of Chicago's struggling neighborhoods, pointed us during our first year to the Auburn-Gresham area, its most digitally connected target community. Outreach to create a workshop for business people in that community is ongoing. Someone from that neighborhood posted one of our few audio-only stories, submitted via phone, about a mobile health van that provides service for teens at a local high school. Filing the story via mobile phone was hard for some people, because there is no easy way to edit a call-in from the user's side. One mistake, and the user had to call again and start from the beginning. All of the existing free audio via phone solutions we could find had this weakness, so we did not "push" the audio submissions process with our existing resources and site. Though we are not focusing on this now, this will be a key feature of news and communication in the future as 3G networks become the rule rather than the exception in the United States.

This spring, with the help of the MacArthur Foundation, we met again with representatives from the Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC). This time, we set up a partnership between our Columbia students and several LISC groups to tell the largely untold stories from neighborhoods that have been largely ignored by the mainstream media. We will begin publishing these stories this month, and there are plans for them to also run on LISC's web site, with links back to ChicagoTalks.

Earlier this year, we developed a relationship with Streetwise, a small weekly newspaper sold by homeless vendors. Because the paper doesn't also post its stories online, we're running some of the paper's stories once that week's editions have come off the street.

Something gained, something lost: our identity in 2008

We are becoming an established online source of local neighborhood news, serving the community and our students, and training a generation of reporters to recognize local news and understand its value to a community. As the economics of the news business continues to be transformed by electronic publishing and the web, we expect the number of niche markets to grow along with WOM (word of mouth marketing) and other new strategies.

ChicagoTalks.org should be able to garner financial support from local businesses, in the form of advertising and other tie-ins. We are exploring this as we work on our business plan, and it figures prominently in the future of ChicagoTalks.org.

But ChicagoTalks.org is not everything we meant for it to be. In Poynter E-Tidbits, a variety of “citizen journalism” news web sites that haven’t really engaged citizens except as readers were discussed recently, and ChicagoTalks.org could have been one of them. “The technology was there, but the human touch was missing. Ventures like this need a “community weaver” -- a local native who is passionate both about the community and about fostering community relationships online -- and face to face,” wrote Michelle P B Ferrier, <http://poynter.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=144827>

ChicagoTalks.org had a “community weaver,” but with dozens of communities to cover, building online relationships has been problematic. We faced a number of questions: Is a community weaver a journalist? Can a journalist learn to be a community weaver? What are the skills of a community weaver, and can these skills be taught? Is this something we need to teach journalism students to do? And we’ve had vigorous debate over the importance of community interactivity and its role in ensuring a steady stream of content from the community.

The limited resources we had went to support students as site editors. This was valuable insofar as they learned to use a CMS and to edit for the web. However, this prevented us from experimenting with the riskier notion of training journalists to be “community weavers.” Thus, ChicagoTalks.org currently is more a news web site featuring local news than it is a community news hub or social network cemented by interest in news and neighborhoods.

New Voices program and J-Lab

We will continue to consider these important issues and work on further defining what we are to become. That journey has been greatly helped by the substantial in-kind support we’ve received from Columbia College Chicago, and we remain ever appreciative of the financial support we’ve received from New Voices.

Other support we received from New Voices and J-Lab that was particularly important for us were opportunities to meet with other New Voice project personnel and J-Lab staff and board. We knew what we were doing, but it was useful to see what others were doing and to have the opportunity to discuss our work with people doing online, community and citizen journalism work.

Jan Schaffer’s support was unfailing, but not uncritical, supportive but challenging, and it helped us keep our project on track and encouraged us throughout the 18 months of the grant. The Knight Citizen News Network website aggregates resources (e.g. “Top 10 Rules for Limiting Legal Risk”) for the community of citizen and community journalism providers.

We thank you, as do the readers of ChicagoTalks.org. We look to continue with this project for many years to come.

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