

# Building a ‘new’ news model: Local America’s hard but inspiring struggle

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As communities everywhere – big and small one – buckle under the weight of the recession’s relentless financial pressures, I wondered, How will the news media, which themselves are in crisis, be able to tell this story of gradual community breakdown in all of its detail and depth? There were headlines about the cities declaring or threatening to declare bankruptcy, about pension costs upending municipal budgets and, grimmest of all, about teachers, police and firefighters being fired. But there are 6,500 communities of at least 5,000 population. What will their fate be with fewer resources for most if not all of this decade, based on the long-term sluggish growth economists are forecasting? Will kids be getting a worse education? Will neighborhoods be less safe? Will mobility be more snail-like? Will public services like health clinics, libraries and recreational facilities be curtailed even further or even shut down? In short will these communities be livable by the standards that had been set in previous decades? As these questions ricocheted in my mind, budget axes were falling everywhere. And I mean everywhere. The Detroit, Los Angeles and Portland’s took the biggest hits. But the axe fell even in places like the City of Rye, N.Y., where the median home value is \$,1,165,000.

While all this is happening, and with no let-up in sight, the news media is going through its own brutal downsizing. In some instances it’s not just axes that are falling, but the guillotine. The buttoned-down reign of terror is merciless. The Rocky Mountain News, “the voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire,” was closed in its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer was closed four years short of its same anniversary. Those executions got headlines. But who, other than the diligent [Business Insider](#), noticed that in a single year – 2009 – Gannett closed seven papers, Gate-House Media Group, eight, Sun-Times Media Group, 12, and Journal Register Co, 34, that altogether, 104 communities, from American Fork, Utah, to Vail, Colo., lost papers during that single year?

It’s heartening that while so many dead-tree papers are themselves now dead, the Web is a hive of news activity, with hundreds of sites being created, most of them focused on local news. Some of these sites are animated with the passion for community that’s been missing from newspapers since they were corporatized starting in the early 1900s. But even most of the best of the new digital sites have adopted a Ptolemaic journalistic model. News is what their reporters scribble in their notebooks or hear on their police radio lines. In most cases, it’s one

reporter per community – if that – who does the scribbling and listening. Scores of other figurative trees may be falling in the community, but their falls aren't heard, so they aren't news.

I was able to calm down my swirling brain and think about solutions. My first idea was that the Ptolemaic model for journalism, especially at the local level, had to be thrown out and replaced with a Galilean model that could capture the 95% of news that was missing.

One big news source, it was becoming clear to me, was data. Thousands of data sets were pouring on to the Internet: K-12 math and reading tests, obesity levels, open-space standards, vehicle congestion levels, comparative hospital costs, rich people – that 1% -- per Zip Code, even fast-food restaurants per 1,000 population. But how do you wrangle all this data? Would websites have to hire a roomful of Bangaloreans to do all the collecting, sorting and filtering? Supposed you managed to do all this. What do you make of the data? How do you deal with inaccuracies, out-of-date metrics and other inevitable gaps that would end up shining a distorted journalistic searchlight, and creating further mistrust of the media?

The data, I concluded, had to be subjected to scrutiny just like the community it was scrutinizing. That was fine in theory, but how do you make it happen, and who should be doing it? And would the cost make it prohibitive? Trying to find answers was intimidating. But just as frustration was overtaking me, the phenomenon of social media burst on to the Web. News was no longer just being “covered,” it was being “shared,” to use Peggy Holman's key differentiators between old and new news. Still, sharing doesn't happen just because you roll out a welcome mat. What was needed was – to be blunt – a gimmick. You had to come up with a clever hook, something like what [Joseph Pulitzer devised](#) to get the community not only to read his New York World but create news for it through a campaign to raise \$100,000 to build the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty under construction in France. Day after day, the World wrote beseeching stories for donations to ensure that Liberty would be a beacon in New York Harbor, not in other cities competing for the statue. Finally, just about as Liberty was to arrive in New York Harbor, the \$100,000 goal was achieved from donations by 120,000 people. The campaign gave New York City a symbol that is recognized worldwide, and, not incidentally, it gave the World the largest newspaper circulation in the U.S.

I tried to think of the right gimmick for the digital era. The more I thought, the more blanks I drew. Then one night I woke up with an idea that had eluded me in my waking hours: The website would grade the community. The grades would not be the one-category “best” or “worst” of the standby features of Kiplinger's, Forbes and other publications. The community would be graded across a broad spectrum of livability – everything from jobs and economy to education to health and wellness to vision – even to fun, like hidden treasures. Initial grades would come from data covering 20 or more topics of livability. But it wouldn't end there, like the “best” and “worst” grades doled out by other publications. The community had to own the grades. That would happen if the community – its experts and “the wisdom of the crowd” – had tools on the site to answer grades it deemed unfair. To achieve this critical balance, the Local America team I helped assemble developed an algorithm that would analyze both data and feedback, with each weighted by its relative importance. The grades from this “contextualization process” (see



banging and see if there is another solution, like maybe going over rather than through the wall. I'd been reading about the fast growth of business intelligence. New software not only could find all the data you wanted, but "structure" it so you could quickly analyze it to get answers you wanted for your algorithm. Other software could create visualizations that showed one image could be worth, quite literally, 1 million bytes.

We found two business-intelligence companies, Alteryx and Jaspersoft, that said they could carry out our "contextualization" process, and produce initial community ratings that we could then push out to our pages to be balanced by community feedback. Our chief adviser, Mike Orren, field-tested each company's software, and concluded both could do the job we needed done. Alteryx said it is close to partnering with or buying a company that can scrape sentiment from Twitter and other social media and "parse" it to produce weighted feedback that can also be fed into our algorithm so we can offer even more balance.

Our next step is finding a lead developer who can oversee the nerdy extraction/transformation/loading (ETL) data collection and filtering process and make sure the software that does that can "talk" with our CMS platform. Content has to be able to flow back and forth between the two software systems to ensure that the grades Local America publishes are a good balance between data and what the community thinks. The community will "own" the grades. The grades will give each community a truly democratic performance baseline it can use to protect and enhance what's working well and fix what isn't. With 20 or more categories of livability in the baseline – and multiple data points in each category – the community will cover everything that's important to every slice of the population and business. The dynamic quality of the grades – they can go up or down as frequently as daily – means the community will have hard information on performance instead of guesses to plan its next five, 10 or even 20 years. Most important of all, Local America can provide some of the glue that's needed to put fractured communities back together.

Local America, our team believes, can also help nudge journalism away from its Ptolemaic model to one built around interdependent sharing of news. We believe that our Livability Index for communities will appeal to Americans'



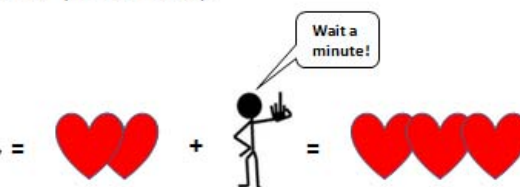
## Data is balanced by community feedback

Take the performance of black students at South Lakes High School in Reston, VA. Our algorithm rates SLHS as a "C" – two hearts. But a Local America Local Expert, the principal at SLHS, points out: "We've increased our graduation rate among black students 25% in three years. You don't have that." Local America's algorithm factors in the principal's information, plus other supporting facts – powered by our civic network and social networks like Twitter and Facebook – to raise South Lakes' rating from a "C-" (two hearts) to a "B" (three hearts).

South Lakes High School English: Reading Grade 10				
		2009-2010		
Student Subgroup	Type	Adv	Prof	Pass
All Students	School	47	45	92
	Division	38	39	96
	State	46	48	94
Black	School	19	63	83

Percent of students who earned a 3 or higher				
Student Subgroup	Type	Four Years	Five Years	
All Students	School	75	80	
	Division	83	86	
	State	77	77	
Black	SLHS	59	69	
	Division	73	75	
	State	67	67	



*We will use powerful Alteryx intelligence software to collect, filter and interpret thousands of data points. Preliminary ratings based on data will be tested and balanced by feedback from local experts and 'the wisdom of the crowd.'*

competitiveness. If a community earns a mediocre grade in, say, K-12 education, we're betting that will help promote action. The grades will not be based on simplistic categories. K-12 school grades, for example, will be based on as many as 15 to 20 data sets, covering everything from reading and math tests to whether the school has a minority achievement program. This kind of detailed grading will give the community an opportunity to focus on specific problems. All this can be achieved at a fraction of the cost of the Ptolemaic model of local journalism. It does require inefficient scribblers who mostly cover only the news they hits them upside the head. Grading, we believe, will help trigger a new kind of news – shared news, and across all the categories, zones and nodes that comprise the complex organism that is any and every community.

Once we get our lead developer in place – we believe we we're close to getting the right person – and finance produce a demo (it will cover 10 communities in metro Washington, D.C., including the District of Columbia and new and old suburbs in Maryland and Northern Virginia and cost about \$60,000 we're trying to raise), we believe we'll have a product that can be licensed to other community sites, all of which are hungry for quality content. Under our plan, we'll license Local America and also share in the ad revenue on the page inventory we create. If and when Local America scales widely enough, we would sell our .privacy-protected personal-preference data (collected from users who want to grade their community in categories they choose). Editorial costs will be low. There won't be reporters scribbling notes, or even editors in their traditional roles. Instead, there will be "sense-makers," to borrow again from Peggy Holman, each of whom will be able to manager the contextualization process for several community sites. Most of the heavy lifting will be done by the software and through the collective feedback from the community.

We don't pretend we're the only group that's trying to make this transformation to a shared world of news, where journalism and community develop a partnership that's built on the trust that's now missing. Michael Fancher, in his ["Re-Inventing Local News,"](#) wrote an inspiring, charge-leading thesis for what needs to be done to make this happen. The coalition that put together ["The Next Newspaper"](#) has provided even more detail about what should and can be done to make the transition, and is leading some community-focused charges. We fit in this movement somewhere toward the back rank. But even from the back rank it's a grand movement to be part of, and we intend to stay in step with everybody in front of us.

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