

Backyard: A Location-based News App Project

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### **Abstract**

This professional project centered around the construction and design of an app for the iPhone and iOS that would allow users to access news from a variety of sources based on their location as determined by their smartphone. In addition, users would be able to post their own content and observations of news as it happens and geolocate their posts so other users would be able to learn about what's taking place in their community.

The first version of the app was developed and mocked up at a Startup Weekend in St. George shortly after the project was initiated. This weekend-long event, sponsored by Google, is designed as a three-day competition to develop a concept for a startup business and then pitch the idea to a panel of judges.

After producing a mockup of the app at Startup Weekend, two of the participants continued the project in an attempt to take it from a concept to a working product.

## Acknowledgements

This project has taken considerable time and effort and couldn't have been accomplished without significant help from several individuals. However, the greatest amount of thanks and credit needs to go to my friend, Adam Wilson.

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In addition to Adam, there were also a number of other people involved with the project at Startup Weekend. Braydn, Cristina, Alejandro, Derik, Carter, Josh, and Ceci, thanks for all your help on the project and thanks to the organizers of Startup Weekend St. George for putting on a fantastic event and providing a jumping off point for this project.

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## Introduction

The idea for an app that would allow users to share the news they see happening around them struck the author while he was working as a photojournalist for a local newspaper. As the author was returning to the newspaper's offices from another assignment, he happened upon the scene of a motorhome stopped at a red light with its engine compartment on fire. He just so happened to have arrived at the scene shortly after the fire had started and well before firefighters arrived. Usually, this type of breaking news story is heard about by reporters listening to emergency frequencies on a scanner after the fire department is called and very rarely do journalists arrive on a scene before first responders.

As firefighters arrived the author quickly got to work capturing images of the fire. What struck the author after a few minutes was the large number of bystanders who had their smartphones out and were taking video or pictures of the fire along with the professional photojournalist. The author began to wonder who would see those images and that video. Would they simply show the video to friends and family when they got home? Would they post the video and images to social media? Would they try and sell them to local news outlets?

The author knows from experience, while a reader will occasionally call in trying to sell images or video of a breaking news event to the newspaper, during his 20 year career, the paper has never once paid a reader for images or video. Which leaves just the small circle of friends and family along with the few people who might be connected with the bystander on social media who will ever see those images.

From this observation, an idea sprung to the author. What if there were a platform where anyone could share news as they see it, as it happens, then their fellow users of the app could see what they'd posted, not just by virtue of being social media or real life friends with the poster,

but by virtue of being in the same location, living in the same town with the poster? What if, on this same platform, journalists could share their stories and geo locate them so readers could see what news was taking place in their neighborhoods and quickly find out from an official source what had caused the fire, the accident, or the flooded streets they saw their neighbors posting about on the app?

Would there be value in such a journalistic platform, the author wondered?

## Literature Review

Shortly after the idea for this crowd-sourced location-based news app struck the author, he happened upon a Bob Garfield interview with Jeff Jarvis, a professor at the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism, while listening to an episode of *On the Media* on National Public Radio (Garfield, 2015). Garfield and Jarvis discussed the idea that rather than continuing to chase clicks and pageviews by grinding out more content, journalists should instead attempt to better connect with readers and provide them with the information they want and need. Jarvis suggested, “The *relationship* business... might offer journalists a better way to serve the public in more efficient and enduring fashion.”

Garfield responded by asking, “What does a relationship-based model look like, compared to the content factory that was so availing for so long?”

Jarvis answered, “Let me give you an example after Hurricane Sandy. My information needs in New Jersey were clear: I needed to know what streets were open, where the power was coming back and which Starbucks had Wifi. What did news give me instead? It gave me articles, which summed everything up to say, well, a lot of trees down, a lot of power out, as if i didn't know that. If instead we thought of journalism as a platform, where communities could share their own knowledge, we could share what streets were closed and where the nearest Starbucks is with Wifi, and where we can get gas. That's a way to rethink what we do and what our role is in a larger ecosystem of news.”

The interview continued to vindicate and almost directly advocate for the author's idea to construct a crowd-sourced, location-based app to provide news to readers. Jarvis continued,

“The process of journalism necessarily starts with listening to the public and *only* then finding the best mechanisms to help the public meet their needs. If all we do is keep churning out 400 pieces of content a day, the same to everyone, then that's not a great service, and I think we have to reinvent other ways to help communities come together and share what they know, which by the way also makes us more efficient. News can be a lot more efficient. If you look at Google News on a plane crash, you'll see 2,000 versions of the same story. Well, why? That's mass media economics, that says everybody has to have their own take on the same story so that we can get our own page views, and our own mass volume. What we need to do is shift to other models where we start to reward relevance, quality, originality. Yes, we'll still do articles when they're appropriate, but we'll also make tools, convene people to get together, and we should judge our success not by eyeballs by the ton; we should judge our success as to whether people have improved their lives and their communities. We may end up looking more like community organizers. That's a different, perhaps heretical way to look at journalism.”

Jarvis and Garfield also went on to discuss the monetization of the news and how by more specifically targeting advertising to news consumers wants and needs, news can become more profitable and thus survive the staggeringly difficult times it has found itself in over the last decade.

This segment of a few minutes on a radio program led the author to begin further research on the feasibility of his idea, beginning with a deeper dive in Jarvis' work. The book he and Garfield were discussing during their interview was every bit as informative and spoke as directly to the author's idea as did the radio interview.

In *Geeks Bearing Gifts*, Jarvis (2014) suggests one path to creating a relationship between readers and journalists is to look at journalism as a service and proposes the following change of mindset to help produce journalism that better fits his model of journalism as a service. “The idea of outcomes-oriented journalism requires that we respect the public and what it knows and wants to know. It forces us to stop thinking that we know better than the public. It leads us to create systems to gather the public's knowledge (loc. 323 of 3156).”

Knowing and then anticipating the public's needs when it comes to journalism is the key according to Jarvis. That's exactly how Google, Amazon and eBay all became juggernauts in the tech industry, they used the information we provided them through what we click on and what we buy to bring us more of what we want.

If a journalist could use an app to see what people in their area are asking about, what they're seeing on the streets, what they're doing in their schools, what their businesses are doing, and what resonates with the people around them, they could use that information to them pursue more in-depth stories that explain the how and the why of what's happening and being posted on this community platform.

There are a few other questions, however that need to be asked and answered before jumping into the production of this app with both feet.

First, how likely are readers to abandon traditional media sources and turn to apps and the internet for their news? According to Ami Mitchell's report on the state of the media conducted through the analysis of a Pew Research Study "Some of our 2014 research revealed that nearly half of Web-using adults report getting news about politics and government in the past week on Facebook, a platform where influence is driven to a strong degree by friends and algorithms" (Mitchell 2015, p. 4).

The struggle to retain old readers and capture new ones in this new environment has been more difficult for some legacy journalism formats than others. Network television news has seen less of a decline in viewership while daily newspaper circulation has fallen 19% since 2004 (Mitchell 2015).

Revenues have fallen with the decline in readership. “Financially, the newspaper industry continues to be hard-hit. Newspaper ad revenue declined another 4% year over year, to \$19.9 billion – less than half of what it was a decade ago” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 6).

This is not news to those who’ve been paying attention to the newspaper industry for the past decade. Stock prices in the legacy media companies have fallen precipitously from the highs they reached shortly after the turn of the century. Stock in the New York Times was trading at \$51.50 in 2002. On Jan. 1, 2009, a share could have been purchased for \$4.52 and while the price has rebounded somewhat since the dark days of the recession, as of the close of trading on Dec. 1, 2017, the stock was valued at \$18.65, about 36 percent of its 2002 value. The New York Times, it should be noted, is one of the few newspapers that seems to have managed to begin to win in the new digital landscape (Ember, 2017).

For more than a century prior to this digital revolution, the news business had been extremely profitable. Throughout the 20th Century, as audiences and ad revenue grew, newsrooms swelled in size, and the amount of news content that was generated rapidly increased even as competitors in most major media markets vanished (Grueskin, Seave & Graves, 2011).

The monopoly or oligopoly that most metropolitan news organizations enjoyed by the last quarter of the 20th Century meant they could charge high rates to advertisers, even if their audiences had shrunk. If a local business wanted to reach a community to promote a sale or announce a new store, the newspaper or TV station was usually the best, and in some cases, only way to do it. Even if the station or newspaper could deliver just 30 percent of the local market, down from 50 percent a decade earlier, that was still a greater share than any other single medium could provide.

That changed after 2001. The recession that followed the September 11 attacks forced many companies to cut spending, reducing media companies' advertising stream. More importantly, the digital transformation accelerated, and more users began to get their news, for free, on personal computers. The link between a consumer getting the news and a providers expensive investment in publishing, broadcast and delivery was broken; this brought a flood of new competitors (Grueskin, Seave & Graves, 2011).

In response to the losses in revenue, media companies have trimmed budgets and cut the number of journalists employed in newsrooms around the world. In 1990 the number of people employed in newsrooms in the United States peaked at 56,900. In a census taken just shy of a quarter century later, by the Society of American Newspaper Editors "newsroom jobs dropped 10.4 percent — down to 32,900 full-time journalists at nearly 1,400 U.S. dailies, 2014 over 2013. That's the loss of 3,800 jobs in just one year" (Doctor, 2015, p. 4).

Newsrooms are staffed by just over half the number of reporters that worked in journalism before this digital revolution. In an effort to recapture lost audiences, journalists post stories not just on their newspaper's website these days but also on Twitter and Facebook; they engage with their readers in person through community events; they attempt to draw readers in through interactive experiences; they engage in conversations with readers on social media platforms, and in general make every attempt to connect with and retain readers as they chase pageviews and other digital readership metrics in this new digital landscape.

While technology has given the public numerous other outlets through which they can now consume journalism, it has also given journalists a myriad of new tools with which to more rapidly deliver and better convey information.

From digital still and video cameras to iPhones with built in voice recorders, word processing and email programs that can transform a mobile phone into a mobile newsroom, technology has transformed the job of journalism.

For some news outlets, a shift to digital has provided some success. Ember (2017) writes, “The New York Times Company continued its march toward a digital future in the third quarter of 2017, as strong growth in digital advertising and new online subscriptions helped counteract a further collapse in print advertising.”

Ember continues, “The company said on Wednesday that digital advertising revenue in the quarter rose 11 percent, to \$49 million. The company also added 105,000 net digital-only subscriptions for its news product, helping to push digital subscription revenue to \$86 million, a 46 percent increase compared with the same period a year ago. Overall, the company said, total revenue increased 6 percent in the quarter, to \$386 million.”

Clearly, digital news is the path to the future of journalism. But is it enough to just provide the public with national and international news? Who’s going to provide the coverage of school board and city council meetings the New York Times will never have the staff to attend?

The Gannett Company, the publishing giant that owns the local newspaper of record in St. George and Cedar City, has had round after round of layoffs and furloughs since 2007. The most recent Gannett layoffs that took place in September of 2017, reduced the number of full-time reporters (including those covering sports) at the newspaper to under a half dozen, down from almost 30 a decade ago. While those numbers are based on the author’s personal knowledge as a former employee with over 20 years of experience with the organization, Gannett was not forthcoming with reporting the number of journalists left in other local newsrooms around the country.

Uberti writes of the mystery surrounding Gannett's reluctance to produce staffing figures,

“The confusion is yet more evidence of the difficulty in measuring what communities lose—accountability journalism, beat reporting, institutional knowledge—as local newspapers wither. Their continued decline comes as national media have been bolstered by digital investment and, more recently, renewed interest since the election of President Donald Trump. Despite debate over the centralization of the national press on the coasts, however, less attention is paid to how atrophy at the local level plays into media bubbles and drops in public trust” (2017, p. 10).

An abundance of options still exists for readers who wish to learn about Trump's latest tweet or the fate of the Affordable Care Act but fewer and fewer exist for those who wish to know what's happening in their hometowns and in their neighborhoods.

Thus we return to the two pronged approach of how to provide journalism as a service to the public. Listening to the public and getting the information they want based on where they are.

Better targeting news based on the location of the reader is a simple task if that reader happens to be using a smartphone with built in GPS and location aware technology.

Research has shown that young adults are more than willing to use location-based technology, tech built into a mobile device that uses global satellite positioning systems to determine where on earth the device and therefore the user is located (Weiss, 2013).

Services and applications like Foursquare have been using location-based technologies to provide users with information for years. Users of these applications have developed a sense of decorum somewhat organically. For instance, Frith's interviews of users of Foursquare showed that “few participants viewed check-ins as direct invitations to friends to show up to a location...and most participants claimed that type of behavior would make them uncomfortable” (Frith, 2014, p. 898).

With social norms in place regarding the use of location-based technology it is easy to assume that location-based technology would be adopted by news consumers and news outlets.

In fact, Weiss (2013) writes: “Clearly it can be assumed that the combination of news and geo-location would be a feature that young-adults would consume. The twenty-first century provides an opportunity for news organizations to take innovative approaches (i.e., location-based mobile news apps) to reach news consumers, particularly young adults, to provide them with a contextual, local news experience” (p. 449).

As for the second prong of the attempt to provide the public with the information they need and want, reliance on citizen journalism, news content that provides users with the potential to generate the information and content, is essential.

In broad terms, Carr, Barnidge, Lee, and Tsang (2014) define citizen journalism as “amateur news reporting” (p. 452). However, they add “citizen journalism can also include *civic* or *public journalism* (i.e., journalism focused on civic affairs), as well as *hyper-local journalism* (i.e., journalism focused on particular geographic communities) if the information is collected and presented by amateur reporters” (p. 454).

An experiment in Belgium described by Paulussen and D’heer (2013) that posted user generated content side by side with content produced by professional journalists gave the researchers an insight into the types of content most likely to be produced by the two different avenues. They found that crime and justice were the most popularly reported topics by professional journalists while club life, and culture were the most reported by users.

Which does raise the concern of what will the public will write about?

This concern and others will need to be addressed. Baruh (2015) points out that Tweets and video from a hostage situation like the one that took place in Mumbai in 2008 can give terrorists intelligence they can use to further their murderous aims, for example. The public can

also infringe on privacy of those involved in a crisis, and social media can also disseminate false information that can lead to mass panic.

Usher and Lewis (2013) suggest journalists should practice “knowledge management” acting as gatekeepers, which is, in fact the role the media has been playing for decades.

According to DeJuliis (2015), gatekeeping theory refers to the control of information as it flows through a gate. The gatekeepers who decide what information gets through and what stays out thus exert power over those on the other side of the gate. To what degree should the flow of information be restricted? How much power should journalists have over the public in their role as gatekeepers? A great deal of balance must be used.

In the end, as Jarvis (2014) suggests, “We must realize that the public’s contribution to the work of news can be invaluable. The potential economic impact of the public’s effort is so large, it seems incalculable – until some smart startup provides a way to capture that value as, say, Twitter, has done. Twitter is much more than news, of course; it’s also cats. But Twitter found the way to enable and capture the value of voluntary contributions; as of this writing it’s worth \$22 billion. I believe there are still more and better Twitter and Instagrams and Pinterests and YouTubes to be built” (loc. 1810 of 3156). Building these new tools of the future of journalism then can be seen as the key to the survival of the industry.

Bell (2007) writes, “Perhaps the most powerful lesson is that there are many ways now of telling stories which can, at the very least, enhance good reporting and, at the very best, do it many hundreds times better” (p.102).

However, as Grueskin, Seave & Graves (2011) write, “Defining and attracting a desirable audience is necessary, of course, but not by itself sufficient; acquiring an audience on a tight budget is what sets successful grassroots ventures apart from the also-rans” (p. 52).

Within the uses-and-gratifications approach to mass communication theory, which assumes that audience members are discriminating users of media (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011), it is proposed that users of mass media do so actively, rather than remaining passive consumers.

We can thus apply the theories of expectancy-value and dependency from within the uses-and-gratification approach to mass communication theory to the work of Amy Schmitz Weiss who studied the potential for location-based technologies – how people can use said technology to actively seek out mass media in the world around them – and expand on them in a number of ways.

Weiss (2013) details her ideas on the innovations, both potential and realized, of using location-based technologies on the smartphone to deliver localized news to readers in her paper titled, “Exploring News Apps and Location-Based Services on the Smartphone.”

Some of the philosophical assumptions her ideas espouse include such statements as “people are using their smartphones to make calls, get information, find help in emergency situations, and to combat boredom through entertainment” (2013, p. 435).

In addition, Weiss theorizes on the possibility that the popularity of smartphones coupled with the potential for providing location could lead to a new user experience when she writes, “Statistics show that the popularity of news and location-based apps is growing, particularly among young adults. The combination of these two services (location and news) might enable a more contextual user experience and make searching for local news much easier for this younger demographic” (2013, p. 436).

Furthermore, Weiss points out that while it could be assumed that local newspapers and television stations already provide news based on a geographic location, this

approach is limited because it focuses on a wide area without acknowledging the individual's exact location.

If we look through the lens of expectancy-value theory we can ask if Weiss' assumptions provide validity to the theory that over time, as people come to expect that a location-based source of information will provide them with information that is relevant to their needs, they will develop value for that location-based source.

We can also look through the lens of dependency theory and ask if location has any impact on dependency. There are so many other factors that contribute to people's dependency on the media for information, outside influences, such as external conflict, election cycles, weather phenomenon, and so many other factors can completely change a person's need for information.

But could location, could providing a user with information based on where they are, combined with providing that user with information from both professional and citizen journalism sources, fulfill users dependent needs for information?

Weiss examined such concepts as location-based journalism, smartphones, mobile news apps and journalism. She describes the several apps she found currently available at the time of the publication of her article and one app in particular that Weiss examined, called Meporner, utilized citizen journalists to provide all of its information.

This concept, using citizens for community journalism, is also discussed in Paulussen and D'heer's 2013 article titled, "Using Citizens for Community Journalism."

Paulussen and D'heer describe in great detail the types of articles and stories that were produced at a newspaper website in Belgium that utilized crowd-sourced stories from

citizen reporters alongside the work done by the professional reporters that worked for the newspaper.

Meporter has, since the time of the publication of Weiss' paper, gone out of business. The app is no longer available in the app store. While it did provide location based news, it solely relied on community journalism as its only source of information.

Would combining the use of citizen journalism with an aggregation of professionally sourced news, all based on a user's location, be a significant enough draw to entice users to engage with an app? This question and surrounding theory is one worth further exploration.

Mitchell Stephens gets straight to the point of his book, "Beyond News, The Future of Journalism," in the introduction, pointing out that while journalism is struggling and its future is grim the amount of actual news consumed by our society has done nothing but grow in the digital age. "Newsworthy events nowadays" Stephens writes, "statements, contretemps, disasters – are all over the Web before they are over... We have never before seen a news medium like this" (p. xii).

Weiss concludes that her study "identifies a gap between news organizations and consumers. There is high use of location-based services by smartphone customers, but news organizations are only using geo-location features in their apps for traffic and weather" (p. 449).

Even if professional news organizations wanted to close that gap, to provide location based stories to readers, the content produced by smaller news outlets would be limited in that it wouldn't tell users about events that happen outside of the small paper's coverage area, while larger papers don't cover the small down to the neighborhood stories that would make this kind of app useful.

Combining location-based citizen journalism with professionally sourced journalism from a variety of sources, small and large, on a mobile device could be the solution to the problem. Further research followed by testing the theory would be the only way to find out but as Anderson, Bell and Shirkey write, "it is imperative that we collectively find new ways to do the kind of journalism needed to keep the United States from sliding into casual self-dealing and venality (p.3)."

## Methods

### Startup Weekend

Many of the first steps taken in the development of this app took place at Startup Weekend (<http://startupweekend.org/>) in St. George shortly after the initial idea was crafted. Startup Weekends are 54 hours of brainstorming, crafting and pitching ideas for creating a new company from scratch.

The first few hours are spent getting to know the other participants, listening to a few experts discuss their own startups and provide details and advice on how to go about starting your own company. How an entrepreneur should go about crafting an idea, finding the pain point in the current model of doing business, the point at which consumers of any variety experience difficulty or trials, and then trying to find a new way to solve those problems is just one example of the type of information provided. The advice given and information provided was alone worth the price of admission.

After the introductions and informational sessions, pitches began. During pitches participants throw out ideas for a new business. It can be anything from a new coffee shop to developing a new app, to building a better mousetrap from a 3D printer. There really is no limit to the types of ideas that can be presented. Most ideas do tend to revolve around the tech space, however.

After the initial one minute pitch where each participant with an idea briefly describes that idea, teams begin to form. The first round narrows the ideas down to about ten. Participants go around the room and vote for the ideas they liked. The top pitches get a second chance to convince the rest of the group and answer questions.

After this second pitch, teams begin to form. Those who either didn't make the first cut with their idea or who didn't pitch at all, sign on to join the team of one of the ideas still standing.

Once teams have been formed, the groups head off to begin developing their idea and being creating their startup.

The author pitched his idea for a crowd-sourced location-based news app and was pleasantly surprised to find a rather large team gathering to support the effort.

The first step undertaken for this project was to develop a name for the app. Themes based around the phrase "citizen journalism" were explored with ideas like The Citizen Journal, ZenJour, and CitiJour discussed. Most of these ideas suffered from the fact that they don't really describe what users will get out of the app. They seem a bit cerebral and vague.

After discussion turned to what it was hoped users would get out of the experience of using the app, it was determined that ultimately it was for people to find out what's happening in their towns in their neighborhoods and perhaps even in their own backyards.

Thus the name Backyard was chosen.

With a name in hand, development began. Fortunately for the author, four developers agreed to join the project along with a graphic designer, a marketing expert and a student studying application development at Dixie State University. Most of the group began working on coding and creating a mockup of the app that would have some interactivity to show the judges at the final pitch.

Startup Weekends conclude with a final round of pitches and a short Q&A period afterwards where the participants show off what they've built over the weekend and give a more

in-depth five minute pitch of the idea to a panel of judges. The judges then choose the best presentation and declare a winner of the event.

Knowing the judges would be likely to ask about what sort of competition Backyard might face in the app store, the next step undertaken for this project was to determine what other apps might be operating in the space. A few Google searches revealed there have been other attempts made at geo-locating news for consumers and there have been other attempts at geo-locating crowd-sourced information but the two co-mingled have been much less rarely attempted if at all.

### **The Competition**

The idea to create a platform like Twitter but where all you need to do is be at a specific location to see what's been posted at that location has been attempted numerous times. A few of the more prominent apps include Nextdoor, Meporter, Ribl, Qork, Rawporter and YikYak.

While there are similarities, to the idea for Backyard found in all of these apps, none of them offer the same concept.

Nextdoor is an app that allows users to connect with people who live in their neighborhood. To post things like a yard sale, a missing dog, or news of a vehicle burglary but only those with a verified address in the neighborhood can join a neighborhood group.

Meporter, founded in 2011, was an app designed to allow users to share the news as they witness it with others using the app. Users would also be able to see what other amateur journalist have posted based on their location.

Rawporter, also founded in 2011 had a very similar concept but allowed users to post their video to a server where television stations could browse the footage and offer to pay users for content they wanted to use in their broadcasts.

Ribl was a more recent version of Meporter and Rawporter, again it was an app designed in 2015 that would allow users to post news they saw taking place for others in the same area to consume.

Qork and YikYak were both more geo-located social media apps than news apps. YikYak was an app that allowed users to post comments anonymously while any user in the same location would be allowed to see what they had to say. YikYak actually gained quite a bit of popularity on college campuses around the country as students used to the app for all sorts of nefarious purposes including hookups and finding parties. But a pivot in 2016 that required users to register with the site and eliminated their anonymity brought the app crashing down.

Qork and the app that followed it, Blockfeed, are actually the two apps that most closely mirror the idea for Backyard although the two apps provided aspects of Backyard separately. Qork allowed users to post information about events taking place in a community, kind of like a digital information board similar to the ones you used to see at the post office. After a few months of struggling to gain users, the app developers pivoted in an attempt to gain traction by beginning to post news stories to their platform instead of allowing users to post their own content. They changed the name to Blockfeed and spent several months trying to make their new app idea fly.

Based in New York City, Blockfeed attempted to aggregate New York City News and provide geo-located news stories from around the city and from a number of different local news outlets and blogs for users. The author downloaded and attempted to use the app which showed

block by block maps of New York City and had icons on the spots where news had recently taken place. Clicking on the icons took the user to the stories as they had been posted on other news websites.

There were often stories of local interest to be found along with restaurant reviews and other hyper-local items of interest. Unfortunately, this app only allowed users to view what was taking place in New York City and didn't allow users to post content as had its predecessor, Qork.

Several other news apps offering similar geo-location of news have also emerged over the past few years. The most significant and the app with the largest backing was Breaking News, a geo-located news app backed by NBC. All of these apps garnered positive press coverage when they emerged but then quietly slipped away just as Breaking News did when it shut down at the end of 2016.

All of the apps this author discovered had in common two things. First they attempted to provide geo-located news to a large audience such as the entirety of New York City in the case of Blockfeed and the entire United States in the case of Breaking News. Second, they failed to allow contributions from users outside of comments that could be left on posts made by professional journalists. None of these apps sought to provide a platform where journalists and the public could connect and interact. And if Jeff Jarvis is correct, that is exactly what journalists should be attempting to do to better draw in readers.

There are also the 800 pound gorillas in the room. Facebook and Twitter. The number of Americans whose primary news source is either Twitter or Facebook seems to grown with each passing day. Of course both of these apps require a user to follow a news source in order to get the news they seek and neither provides geo-located news, they only provide news shared by

your friends in the app. However, most people have a great number of friends that live in the same town and can generally get most of their local news by reading articles shared by the neighbors they follow on social media.

### **The Build and the Final Pitch**

During the weekend several of the organizers had remarked on their belief in the project and suggested they thought it had a very good chance of doing well in the final pitches. The team worked hard, designed graphics, created social media accounts for the app, and created a website with a landing page designed to allow users to sign up to receive an alert when the app was released.

In addition, a survey was conducted during Startup Weekend of people in attendance at youth soccer games being held on the campus at Dixie State University. They were asked questions relating to their preference for news based on its location and whether or not they would give an app that could provide news based on where they were a chance to keep them informed. The results of the survey were encouraging and provided further validation for the app.

Armed with information on the competition, survey results, and mockups of what the app might look like along with a very rudimentary web-based version of the app that provided a small glimpse into what it might someday look like, the author gave the final pitch at Startup Weekend.

From the beginning this app has, first and foremost, been envisioned as a means to provide local news in a smaller community. The idea has always been to try starting it up with a small user base where it could gain traction and then move on to other larger venues as interest and the number of users grows. Unfortunately, the Backyard team's explanation of that concept

was somewhat lost on the judges and Backyard failed to place at Startup Weekend, in large part due to a failure to adequately answer one judge's concerns about competing with Twitter.

### **After Startup Weekend**

After Startup Weekend, most of the team dispersed. Two team members, however, the author, and one of the developers, Adam Wilson, have continued to work on the app.

The author has had to chip in and help with the front end design, learning Swift, the programming language iOS apps are written in. Wilson has continued to work on developing the back end of the project creating the framework for the database that will house all the posts and allow the app to retrieve them for users.

Development has been slow but considering both Wilson and the author have full-time jobs and families, this is not to be unexpected.

Work has progressed to the point where we have an app that will allow posts to be sent to the server and recalled by other users, the graphic interface is fairly straight forward and easy to use and hopefully once the app is fully functional it will gather a following among local news consumers in Southern Utah.

## Results and Discussion

Despite not winning at Startup Weekend, the results were phenomenal. The author spent 54 hours working with a fantastic team of individuals on a project that he felt passionate about and he hopes will someday change the way journalists interact with readers and perhaps even change the way journalism works in our society. It was a weekend filled with excitement, very little sleep and an outpouring of ideas.

The author has gained a partner with whom he continues to work on the project and knows the two will eventually bring forth the app into the world in the very near future.

Throughout the author's time working in the master's program at Southern Utah University he has used much of the course work to compile more data in defense of his theory regarding the feasibility of a location-based crowd-sourced news app. Several more surveys have been conducted, qualitative and quantitative research undertaken and all of it points to the fact that there should be interest in this platform, in Backyard, once it is finished.

The author has confidence in his theory that the app could be created and perfected using a smaller audience in a smaller setting like Southern Utah and find more success than it could with a large funding raise from investors in a large market or even in a national market.

Just as Facebook took off from humble roots as a social networking app built for a single college campus and grew into a global phenomenon, the idea is essentially the same. Start from humble beginnings, bootstrap the first community using only volunteers and the two co-founders to get it off the ground. Keep overhead so low, it's almost nonexistent. Once it gains traction, then allow it to grow.

The founders of Blockfeed told reporters they could aggregate news for all of New York City using just one curator. There is no doubt a single curator could do the same and provide every user with all the news there is to read in Southern Utah through Backyard. At the same time, users could post their own news to all their friends and neighbors providing a fuller conversation and a better connection between the community and journalists.

## Conclusion

Designing an app for a smartphone is no easy task. During the author's work learning to code Swift he developed several apps while taking an online course. All were created based on code given to the author by the instructor of the online course and most were fairly simple. One example that leaps to mind is a "cat years" app that will convert the age of your cat in people years to cat years. So if you enter a value of say 4 years old because you've had your cat for four years, the app will tell you your cat is 28 years old in cat years.

Simple. Easy. Yet, telling a smartphone how to make those computations, what you want the box where you enter the number to look like, how you want the results to display, are all incredibly complex lines of code. More than anything else involved with this project, the author has enjoyed learning that new skill.

In the same vein, the author was once a bit shy to talk in front of groups, and was once a bit nervous to speak up and voice his opinion for fear of offending others. Participating in Startup Weekend forced the author to confront and rise above that fear in order to shout his vision for a news app from the rooftops.

This project has been about much more than just the project, about accomplishing the construction of an app. Far more of the real success of the project is based in the fact that the author learned new skills doing the work. The author grew as a human being, developed new talents, and has begun honing them into new tools that will help to accomplish even greater tasks.

Of course the author wishes the app were already in the app store, that it had been downloaded millions of times, investors were calling him day and night looking to get in on the

ground floor, that journalists were utilizing the tool and using it to do better work. He wishes journalists everywhere were no longer going to work each day in fear of another round of layoffs, that students studying journalism in universities around the nation could feel confident that newspapers and television news station will still be around in a few decades. He certainly wishes all of that could happen and more.

Yet while it hasn't yet, there is still hope, and even if there weren't, the author has already taken away more from this project than gold could ever buy. He has knowledge.

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## **Appendix A**



### **Images from Startup Weekend**

The Backyard Team at Startup Weekend (From left, Bradyn, Carter, Ceci, Adam, Cristina, Jud,  
and Alejandro)







## Appendix B

### Backyard Pitch Keynote From Startup Weekend



What's happening in your backyard?



**Know what's happening** near you  
and your family, wherever you are.



**Share local news** with your neighbors.



**Be safe.** Know about events that effect  
your family.













The average Twitter user has 208 followers, but that number is skewed by all the super users like:

- Katy Perry - 69+ million followers
- Justin Bieber - 63+ million followers
- Barack Obama - 58+ million followers
- ESPN - 18+ million followers
- CNN - 16+ million followers

KSL - 65.5K followers  
SLTrib - 57.4K followers  
DeseretNews - 54.1K followers  
Logan\_News - 4,385 followers

STGNews - 6,866 followers  
SpectrumNews - 6,118 followers  
SLIndependent - 913 followers  
KCSG - 25 followers

Josh Warburton - 941 followers  
Brian Passey - 914 followers  
David DeMille - 747 followers  
Casie Forbes - 442 followers  
Jud Burkett - 329 followers  
Mori Kessler - 291 followers  
Joyce Kuzmanic - 77 followers

Users with more than 978 followers  
belong to Twitter's 96th percentile...

The average user is merely "chatting with  
a few friends on living room couches." -

Circa News

"We must realize that the public's contribution to the work of news can be valuable. The potential economic value of the public's effort is so large it seems incalculable – until some smart startup provides a platform to capture that value as, say, Twitter had done. Twitter is much more than news, of course; it's also cats. But Twitter found the way to enable and capture the value of voluntary contributions... I believe there are still more and better Twitters and Instagrams and Pinterests and YouTubes to be built."

-Prof. Jeff Jarvis "Geeks Bearing Gifts: Imagining New Futures for News"

# Target customers

- Tech-savvy millennials and Gen Xers with children in St. George, Utah.
- College students at Dixie State and SUU

# Marketing plan

- Gather emails, sign up potential users at local events. We have close to 100 signed up for email updates so far.
- Push our brand on social media. - We added over 80 Twitter followers during Startup Weekend.
- Partner with local media outlets to spread the word about backyard.

# Revenue potential

- Advertising - targeted to location
- Event promotion / ticket sales
- Post boosting for lost dogs

**What are you waiting for?**



Go to

**[backyardapp.co](https://backyardapp.co)**

and sign up to be a part  
of our private beta test today!

**backyard - St. George**

<p><b>PROBLEM</b> Most people want to know what's going on around them but there is no platform that delivers hyperlocal news.</p> <p><b>EXISTING ALTERNATIVES</b> Google Maps / Waze Nextdoor Local news websites</p>	<p><b>SOLUTION</b> A location based app that will allow people to post news that they see and read what others post about what's happening around them.</p> <p><b>KEY METRICS</b> Number of users Number of posts Number of advertisers</p>	<p><b>UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION</b> We'll tell you what's happening in your backyard and provide you with the information you want and need about your community.</p> <p><b>HIGH-LEVEL CONCEPT</b> Backyard - Twitter without the clutter of personal posts or having to follow everyone in town to get local information.</p>	<p><b>UNFAIR ADVANTAGE</b> The founder is a journalist with 20 years of experience working in our test market. He has many relationships with potential partners who can help promote the app with users.</p> <p><b>CHANNELS</b> Media companies Word of mouth Social media</p>	<p><b>CUSTOMER SEGMENTS</b> Our first target customers are tech-savvy millennials with families.</p> <p><b>EARLY ADOPTERS</b> Residents of St. George, UT Reporters</p>
<p><b>COST STRUCTURE</b> Hosting costs and people costs. We'll need developers to produce iOS and Android apps to begin with and aggregators to populate our app with a decent level of content.</p>		<p><b>REVENUE STREAMS</b> Advertising and sales of data. Event promotion and ticket sales</p>		

Lean Canvas is adapted from The Business Model Canvas ([BusinessModelGeneration.com](http://BusinessModelGeneration.com)) and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License.

**Appendix C**

**Mockups of Backyard**

iPhone 6 - iPhone 6 / iOS 9.0 (13A4325c)

◀ Back to News 5:28 PM

Profile Newest | Popular 

---

 **Protest at city hall**  
Protestors took to the streets to protest a city ordinance against dancing... 

6 by St. George News 11 min ago 5km

---

 **Mitt Romney visits county fair**  
Romeny stopped by the fairgrounds at the Salt Palace in Salt Lakt City on Friday... 

28 by The Deseret News 4 hrs ago 4km

---

 **RV Hits house**  
An RV carreened off of I15 and into a home in St. George Friday 

10 by FOX 13 6 hrs ago 3km

---

 **Cedar High State champs**  
My son Riley and the CHS boys wrestling team took State! 

56 by Joy Reynolds 12 hrs ago 4km

---

 **Fire in Hurricane**  
A fire broke out at a home in Hurricane Friday morning... 

1 by The Spectrum & Daily News 18 hrs ago 1km

---

 **Bomb squad destroys package**  
The Washington County Bomb Squad blew 

Home More | Less Peek

iPhone 6 - iPhone 6 / iOS 9.0 (13A4325c)

Back to News 5:29 PM

Back Home Next



My Neighbor's garage is on fire

Down 23 Up

<http://www.thespectrum.com/story/news/local/cedar...>

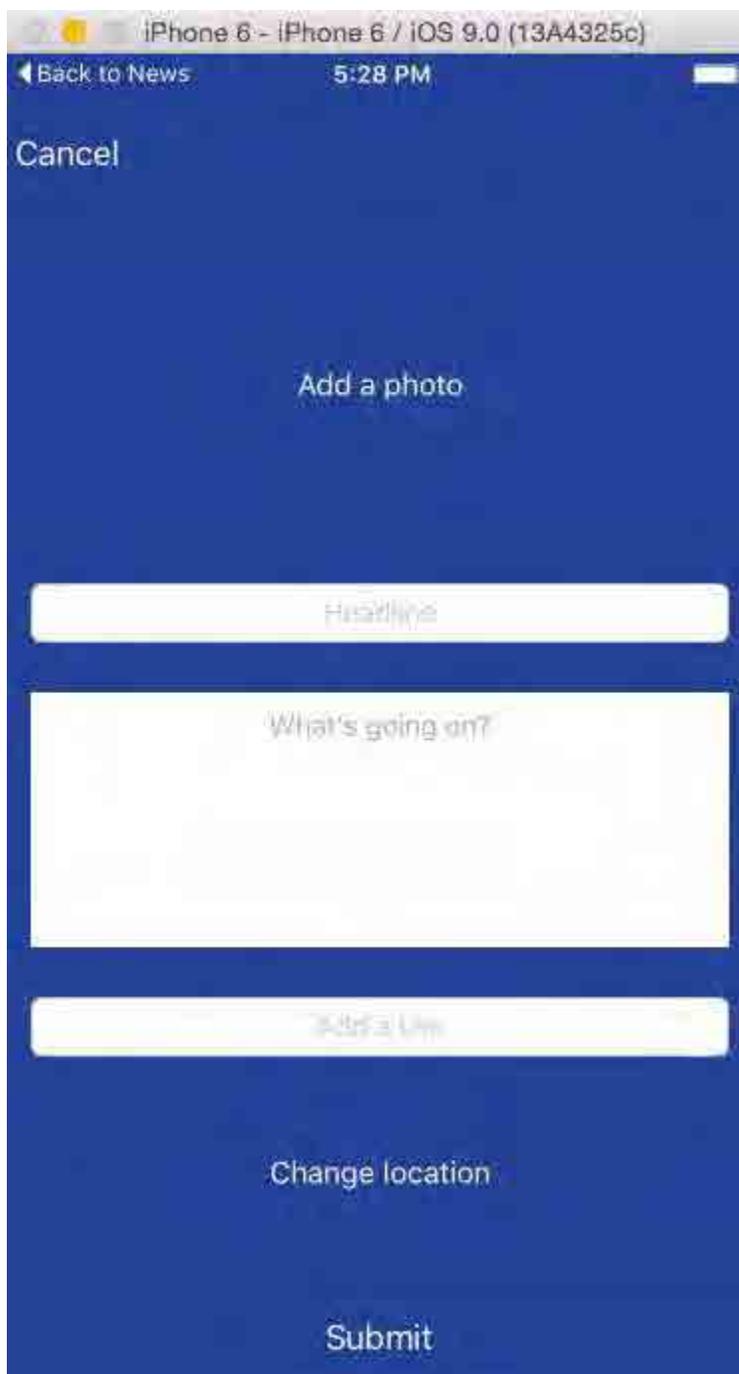
User1: my neighbor's house is on fire + | - 14 Flag  
8/31/15 10:06am

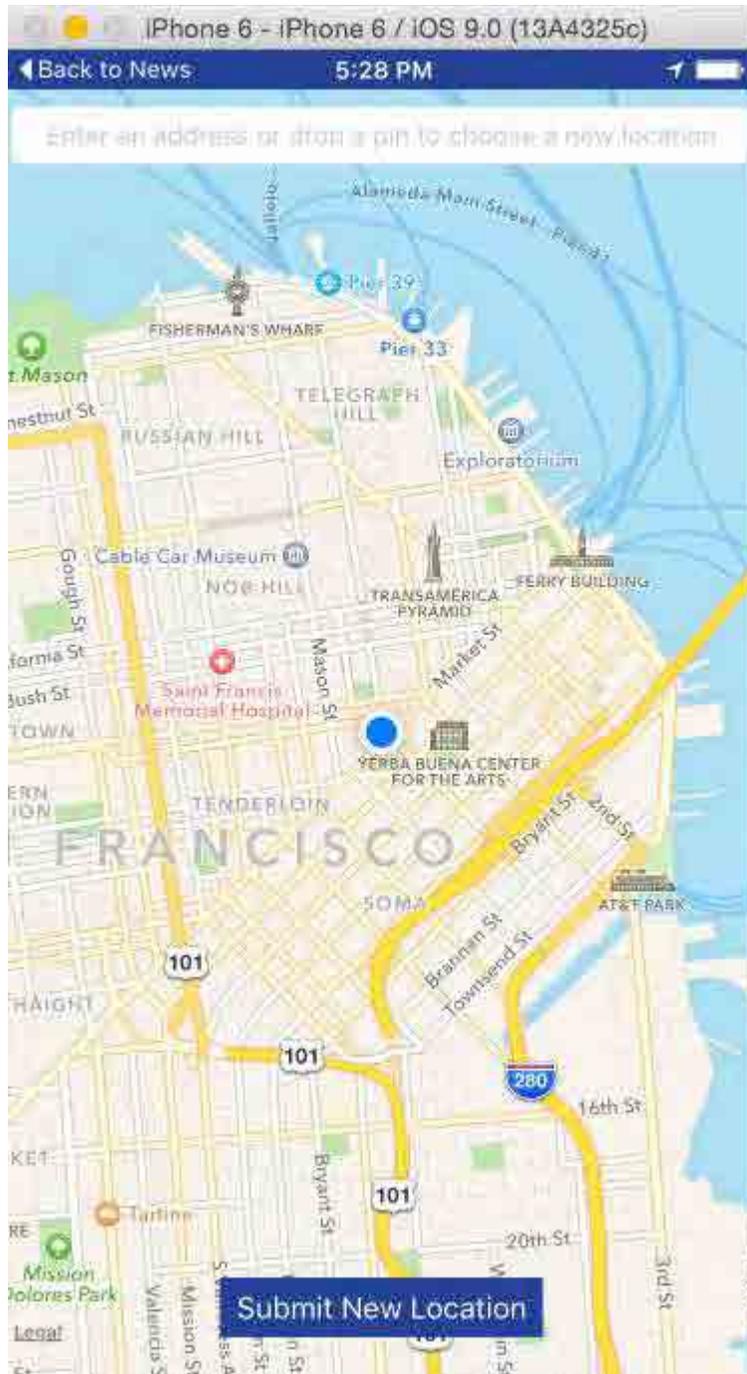
User 2: fire dept. took forever get there + | - 8 Flag  
8/31/15 10:09am

User 3: there's an account set up at Zion's bank to help the family, it's under Tom and Nancy Smith's name. + | - 23 Flag  
8/31/15 12:06pm

 Add a comment







**Appendix D**

**Current Images of the State of Backyard's Development**

AT&T 12:41 AM 15%

User Profile 

---

Police identify man killed in head-on crash...  
 thisismyusernameandits...  
2 years ago 386 km 

---

another one  
 thisismyusernameandits...  
1 year ago 0 km 

---

Woman killed by mixer at Sandy grocery st...  
 thisismyusernameandits...  
2 years ago 409 km 

---

Deer attacks man in Draper backyard, polic...  
 thisismyusernameandits...  
2 years ago 403 km 

Home | More | Less | Peek

AT&T 12:41 AM 15%

<Back



Police identify man killed in head-on crash with semi...

Down **23** Up

<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865646989/Police...>

User1: my neighbor's house is on fire + | - 14 Flag  
8/31/15 10:06am

User 2: fire dept. took forever get there + | - 8 Flag  
8/31/15 10:09am

User 3: there's an account set up at Zion's bank to help the family, it's under Tom and Nancy Smith's name. + | - 23 Flag  
8/31/15 12:06pm

 Add a Comment

