



Published on *The Big Money* (<http://www.thebigmoney.com>)

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Created 12/22/2009 - 6:29pm

Why is hyperlocal news so terrible?

 [091222_TBM_localNews.jpg](#) [1]

When was the last time you saw the police blotter in your local paper? Chances are that you can barely remember; if you are younger than 30 you may not even know what that means. Even as we drown in more and more news, the resources given to local news are quickly drying up. Advertisers can now target ads to ever smaller groups, but if you want the news that matters to your block, you're out of luck.

As traditional newspaper readership falls off a cliff and layoffs become the main order of business for traditional newsrooms, there's a vacuum in local news that new services are rushing into. For the media, getting local is the latest draw. MSNBC.com now promises news tailored to your ZIP code with [EveryBlock.com](#) [2].* Denver billionaire [Phil Anschutz](#) [3] has started a chain of local news sites under the Examiner.com banner. AOL has its own local news venture, Patch, and from a coalition of newspaper companies we have Topix.com. The promise of all these sites is that somehow, with traditional local news outlets blown to smithereens, they'll be able put it all together again. (*Correction Dec. 23: An earlier version of the story said that EveryBlock was owned by MSNBC. It is owned by MSNBC.com, which has a separate corporate structure.*)

The reality of the sites, though, is a scary lesson in just how dreary the local news outlook is. The new local ventures are designed to deliver more news with fewer resources. In fact, they deliver less. That in itself is not a surprise, but just how much less is a shock for anyone who bothers to actually look at what they offer.

A little virtual tour of my own neighborhood, the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, N.Y., [via EveryBlock.com](#) [4], revealed that a local bar was cited, but not closed, by health inspectors for improper dishwashing temperatures. Also that the city of New York is lifting its prohibition on beekeeping, though the likelihood of anybody making much effort to keep bees in this particular part of the city seems minimal. And also that two residents lost iPhones in muggings, though the first of these was back in June. That tidbit was culled by computer from a more comprehensive and timely [story](#) [5] in the *New York Post*.

Even for "local" news, this is awfully small potatoes. It's sub-trivial. But at least it is local (except maybe for the beekeeping part). The [New York home page of Examiner.com](#) [6], another new "local news" venture, doesn't even do that. In addition to highlighting a story about hiking student fares on public transit—a genuine local story—it featured news about avoiding obesity for the holidays and, better, the untimely death of actress Brittany Murphy. In Los Angeles, which—despite some appearances—is not in any way a borough of New York.

Then there is Topix.com, yet another local news aggregator, a joint venture between the newspaper owners [Gannett](#) [7] (GCI), Tribune, and [McClatchy](#) [8] (MNI). The [Topix page for Brooklyn](#) [9] scored a couple of points for linking to [a story about gentrification](#) [10] from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and then lost them by filling rest of the screen with news like a cut in funding for Rhode Island hospitals and a story about the recent snow (OK ...) from a paper in Edmonton, Alberta. Canada, readers will note, is also not in Brooklyn.

So much for the news that you get from these local ventures. But more interesting still is what you don't get. For instance, a company called Outside.in now aims to provide local news providers with an automated feed of the key stories in their areas. I decided to check out Outside.in's [page for Richmond, Calif.](#) [11], a struggling suburb of Oakland. Outside.in did in fact provide some news about a horrible rape in a local high school that made national headlines last month. But it had no update on the rape just over a week ago of a student at [Portola Middle School](#) [12] that has similarly made national news. That school is in the neighboring town of El Cerrito—to get to it from Richmond, you cross San Pablo Avenue and walk a few blocks east—and Outside.in's algorithm didn't know (as a human editor might) that residents of Richmond might have some interest in that.

Such are the unholy collisions between “local news” and computerized news gathering. The problem for the new localists is that local news doesn't obviously “scale,” a term of art that folks who put together business plans throw around to refer to businesses that get a lot cheaper to run as they grow. To cover more ground you generally need more bodies, a real buzzkill in a news industry that is desperately trying to stay afloat by doing ... well, less with less. So what we see in the local news efforts is something like the creepy apocalypse of a 1950s science fiction story, in which, with the people gone, computers take over the few tasks that remain to be done in the barren landscape, hoping by algorithms to take the bits of local information that are out there and put them together into sites that can be built on the cheap.

If only there were enough high-quality local news to aggregate. But there is not. There are some fine sources of local news, but not so many in any one place that they benefit in any meaningful way from being pulled together into a Google News-like feed. So what these sites are left with—with one key exception—are mainly the dribs of information put online by local governments and bits of detritus culled by computerized agents that scan the Web for any mention of “Brooklyn, N.Y.” or “Richmond, Calif.” Much like the highly hyped Wolfram Alpha search engine, the new local news sites largely answer the few questions that computers are good at answering (those restaurant inspection reports on EveryBlock.com) instead of those that real people ask.

The exception here is [Patch](#) [13], a network of hyper-local news sites that started with three towns in New Jersey. Patch was funded by Tim Armstrong, the former head of advertising sales at [Google](#) [14] (GOOG) and [newish CEO of AOL](#) [15]. And what distinguishes it is that Patch actually has a live local writer/editor for each local site. Think about that for a second: The sites run by media companies, such as Topix and EveryBlock, are the ones that hope to take people out of the news gathering process, while the one that's backed by the onetime Google ad guy is putting them back in.

That should give you a pretty good hint about the difference between the problems of local news and those of struggling national news sites. The big sites suffer from an excess of sources, the local markets from a scarcity that's only getting worse.

It's into this breach that Patch steps—or at least, sticks a toe. Much of the advertising turf that local news backers dream has already been homesteaded by sites such as Citysearch and Yelp.com, which draw in people who are already looking for local businesses—probably the core of the hyper-local, news-of-my-ZIP-code formula that Patch is drawing from. Then, too, the resources that Patch can devote to each site are minimal, and its one-size-fits-all look is dreary when compared with even a [good local news blog](#) [16]. The future of something like Patch.com

may well be as an adjunct to Citysearch and Yelp.

Yet for those who think that local news is a viable business as well as a public necessity, Patch may offer the faintest bit of hope for local news. Much of the media has failed miserably in making money from the resources it pours into news gathering. It is now, with sites like EveryBlock and Topix, failing equally miserably at trying to do local news with almost no resources at all. Patch.com may not be on its way to any Pulitzers, but at least the folks at AOL have noticed that to aggregate and monetize local news, you need to have someone gathering it in the first place.

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TAP Tagline:

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