Stephanie Schwartz
Interactive Media Strategies
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Comparing Local News Websites: Patch.com and NorthJersey.com

Patch is a hyperlocal website that caters to specific towns, primarily featuring news like council races, school board meetings, and high school games, but also heavily features input from local residents, who can write about what they want. Patch gets lots of referral traffic; since the site is owned by AOL, anyone who goes on AOL's homepage is likely to encounter a local news article from Patches in their region.

North Jersey Media owns two dailies and over 40 community newspapers; each town in its region gets its own page. For community newspapers, Patch is their main competition. Despite the fact that Patch's journalism is subpar and their coverage spotty, since Patch selects its town based on a complicated, proprietary algorithm, their website is easier to navigate and much more friendlier to local residents than North Jersey's. This is eroding whatever trust North Jersey Media has in the region, devaluing the good work the company produces, and poorly informing the public about news in the area.

The first thing noticed in comparing the Hasbrouck Heights, NJ Patch site with the Hasbrouck Heights page on NorthJersey.com is that the North Jersey page is very difficult to locate. Unless users have that specific page bookmarked, they aren't likely to go to a town-specific page unless they click on a keyword attached to an article, since they have to click on the "local" tab, then "towns" before they can find a particular town, which is listed alphabetically. North Jersey might do a good job of providing local information, but users searching for anything hyperlocal are not going to find it here. On Patch, they can go straight to

the source; even if they don't know the exact URL, on Patch's main site one click on a map of the U.S. brings a list of all the town Patches in a given state.

Patch is designed to be interactive, so that those who live in a given town can post, comment, even write for the site. That's why the center column of the Hasbrouck Heights Patch homepage is titled, "What People Are Saying," with links to the comment, article, and commenter. Right above the logo is a tiny picture of the editor, her name and email address. Users already know that if they have grips or tips, they know who to contact. Most sites do not do that; this reinforces that the community has a lot of input as to what they want highlighted. These editors also comment on articles, usually in response to another commenter, and there usually is a bio, which features the editor's opinions on what they consider major stories in the region and their political and religious backgrounds, in addition to the person's birthday, phone number, and hometown. This transparency contributes to the feeling that this person is connected to the community, and so really cares.

Under the fold, the second column is titled "Local Voices," with blog posts from locals (but not necessarily Hasbrouck Heights residents), and a large button underneath that asks, "Want to blog for Patch?" The button takes users to an application page, opening with a line that says anyone can blog about anything they want, with examples, complete with big headshots of bloggers, meant to highlight different topics and age ranges of participants. To post on Patch, one has to be logged in (which can be achieved via Facebook), and then automatically a fill-in screen comes up, much like one on Blogger. Again, this reinforces that Patch is part of your neighborhood, each citizen has a voice, and that it's easy to showcase an opinion.

"Advertise," "Volunteer," and "Contribute" are largely displayed above the main Patch footer. This again brings the user to the forefront: if they want to get involved with their

community, which includes using Patch, they can do so. "Contribute" is where links to tips and event notices go. Although users can add event listings to the Hasbrouck Heights page on NorthJersey.com, that link is small, hidden under a weekly map of events on the right side. That takes you to a page to post them, but noticeable on the right is text – if you want to optimize your listings, pay $20! This system is much more elaborate and will deter organizations from posting; there is no one to email or link, so novice users, usually local event organizers who have no knowledge of marketing or communications, are likely to be turned off and not get the proper publicity they want. Patch has a box on the right side of any given event category, where users have several options on how to post an event. They can even export events to Twitter, Google Calendar and Facebook, among others. On Patch, these events are also Hasbrouck Heights-specific, like storytelling at the local library, while on North Jersey, they can be anything from surrounding towns. This is another reason why those searching for local news will not visit the website of the local newspaper; it's not local!

Content-wise, both pages try to make it seem as if there's more content than there really is. Patch has a drop-down menu for their main navigation, but there's a lot of overlap. Under news, there are over 15 categories, including elections, school news, and business, but it also includes features like Readers' Choice and Connections, which are features and press releases. Many of these categories are unnecessary and repetitive; they repeat under the "Events" and "Directory" tab, and there's a tab specifically for "Elections," which is a category under "News." However, since Patches cater to a general audience in terms of usage, this repetition is there so users can easily find what they're looking for, without frustration or confusion.

Although Patch's focus is on community, and they have a section devoted to pictures and video clips, it's not organized well. There's no context for pictures – they are randomly arranged

– and there's often no date or particular reason an event is listed in the spare caption. On the homepage, there is one main photo and a few thumbnails to break up the text, but it's obvious that Patch doesn't have the resources for any type of real multimedia. While North Jersey does have the manpower, the site does not lay out multimedia well. A user can scroll down the page to an area marked video, with a main clip to the left, flanked by smaller rectangles of other videos, with a description, that a user can scroll through. There're no headlines or description for the main video; it's actually the first video in the queue, but that's not easy to figure out. North Jersey's awful layout reduces its readers' trust in the brand, especially with the ability to see other aspects of news stories, as additions to an article. North Jersey's clips are newsworthy, while Patch's generally aren't. The other big difference is that the Patch photos generally are Heights-specific, while the videos on the Heights North Jersey page are not. Those videos are just filler, to give lip-service to the idea of multimedia, but they do not belong on a town-specific page unless they are town-specific. Although Patch's videos might be newsworthy to those in a particular town, without context, there's no reason for them to be there. North Jersey has the opposite problem.

Patch is going for a "we are your neighborhood" feel, and wants to make things as easily and pleasant for anyone, with a welcoming community behind it. They largely achieve this, and notably, many users will not notice that their journalism is often poor and sparsely updated. North Jersey's journalism may be better, as they have a larger staff to cover topics (among other resources), but its spare and poorly designed site is a turnoff to those seeking information via the web. The print publications do well, and this could be a subtle way of keeping the print publications dominant, but it reflects badly on the company, and reinforces the notion that North Jersey Media does not care about truly being "A Good Neighbor to the People It Serves."