GeoStory

Prototype Report

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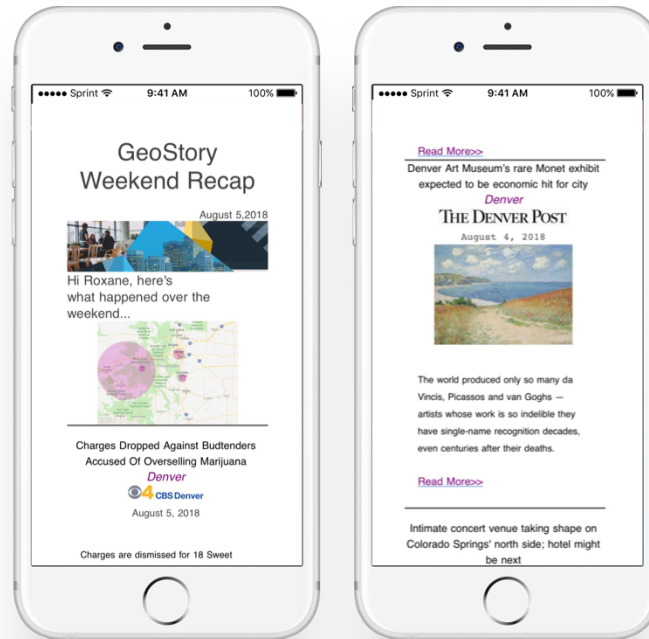
The Prototype

The GeoStory prototype was a morning email digest curated to provide relevant news based on test users' home, work, and favorite locations. The email featured maps corresponding to each story highlighting areas of Colorado impacted by the story's content. After consistent feedback indicating people tend to find hyper-local and national news to be the more relevant than statewide news, Cultivo designed a solution to provide state news that matters to readers, testing through a daily email digest providing stories near users' home and work locations and a map showing areas relevant to the stories.

The Results

With a test user group of six, readers found the stories selected for them were more relevant when a map was included. When users had easier access to stories they wanted to read, those based on locations near them, they were more likely to consume the content. Through location-based content, these test users found that when they understood how stories from other areas impacted theirs, they were more likely to engage with the content. However, from our understanding these users engaged with this prototype similar to any other news daily digest; they read the headlines and copy but rarely read through the full stories. **In summary, users were more likely to engage with content when it was selected for them based on their location. They also found it easy to understand and felt more educated on local and state issues than before.**

The Recommendation

Cultivo would strongly recommend a further analysis into monetization strategy and methods for providing quality content intended to keep users coming back before moving forward. However, based on Colorado Media Project research and Cultivo interviewees with test users, the GeoStory model using maps to demonstrate news relevance is worth pursuing as a scalable product for Colorado.

The Opportunity

Overview

Both our primary and secondary research show a clear theme indicating readers do not find state news as relevant as hyper-local or national news. Through a series of empathy interviews, we discovered the size and diversity of the state causes people to feel like a lot of state news does not apply to them and they need to sift through it in order to find stories they care about. Geo-targeting helps to increase relevance of stories and ads, as well as increase engagement.

News Landscape Research

The research behind the current state of local news is surprising and indicates massive opportunity for a digitally focused local news source. While readers have trouble finding relevance in Statewide news, local news tends to be more trusted than national outlets, and consumers express more interest in local news than national. Users are interested in local news but are discouraged by the lack of relevance they feel with the majority of stories they encounter.

Using data to focus stories around what engages users is crucial for success in local news. Local media outlets need to move towards digital platforms with multiple revenue streams in order to survive in a market with particular, content hungry users.[1]

On a revenue model side, increasing engagement is the priority, but industry research shows that diverse revenue streams are very important for success. The decline in classifieds have driven the struggle for local news outlets, and advertising revenue for papers is not providing sustainable revenue. Increasing relevance of ads, and providing a suitable digital format to deliver them is the best way to ensure sustainable ad revenue.

Empathy Interview Findings

Throughout the primary research and ideation conducted, the core of the problem was discovered; the right statewide news was not being delivered to the right communities. Individuals in Aspen did not care about a park in Denver closing if they've never been there, and a Denver resident largely did not care if a brewery in Boulder was closing if they never had any intention of going there.

The Problem to Solve

During the community ideation session held on July 23rd, 2018, the following problem was presented to the group: how can readers come to read and view statewide stories that have impact on them, and how can these stories be delivered to them?

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[1] The New Yorker, "Survival Strategies For Local Journalism", 2018

Developing the HMW statements

The community ideation session attendees were asked to develop potential solutions to this problem prompted by a "How Might We" (HMW) statement developed by Colorado Media Project teams that articulated the objective for the solutions. The HMW statement addressing this problem was as follows:

HMW make people identify with statewide news the way that they do with national news?

Matthew—Montrose
IT, Montrose County Gov't
- Age: 34
- About Matthew: Former military, wife, 5 year old child

"I want to be able to see what my state representative and senator are doing, this last session they passed a bill and that was pretty cool to see"

Matthew

Chloe—Aspen
Program Manager, Aspen Institute
- Age: 29
- About Chloe: Moved to CO 7 years ago from Connecticut, loves to read

"If I'm being honest I just don't think Colorado news would be that interesting, I don't know why, a shutting down of a national park on the front range for a day, eh I don't care"

Chloe
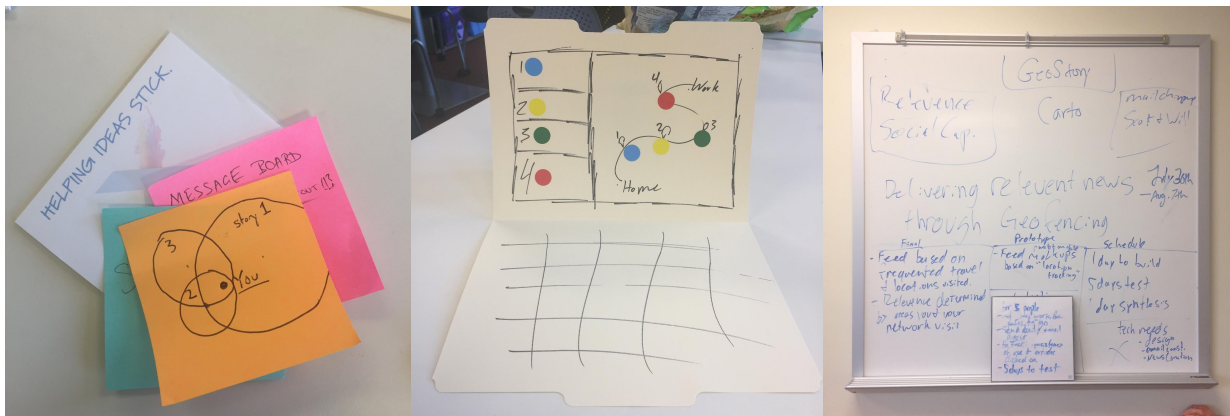
The Solution

In response to the two aspects of the problem it was discovered the delivery of the stories was the vital piece to drawing the relevance. In GeoStory, readers get a short email digest every day of stories curated for them based on their home, work, and favorite locations. The stories are then placed on a map of Colorado at the top of the digest as well as the location of the story's occurrence or impact listed under the headline above the copy.

With this proposed base for a solution, Cultivo looked at how to best test this aspect. Following is a breakdown of the prototype itself and the testing it went through.

Prototyping Process

The Final Idea

GeoStory would be a daily digest with stories just for each specific user. It offers a feed of stories, information, and news based on your current location and places visited frequently by both you and your network. The relevance of the news is tied directly to the user's location habits and will update live with push notifications as the user moves throughout their day visiting different locations. We would deliver this as a daily email digest manually curated by the Cultivo Project Team, built off the locations of their home, work, and favorite places shared by test-users. Using SendGrid email templates and analytics we would be able to track when users opened emails and which stories they clicked on.

The Building Process

In order to turn a final idea into a testable prototype Cultivo broke the problem down into the specific pain point and proposed solution. **People don't see the direct impact of a story and by noting the location and area of impact, can demonstrate relevance for readers.** With this direct problem, Cultivo began developing a plan to build and test a low-resolution prototype.

User Experience and Wireframes
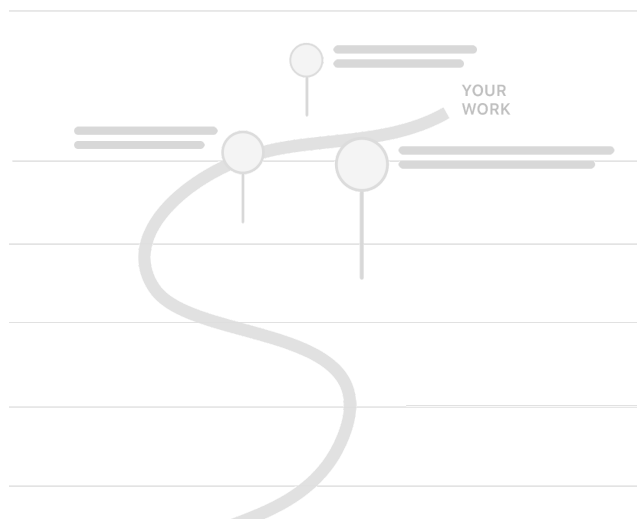
GeoStory Wireframe

When a user opens GeoStory they will see a map with stories pinned by the locations they frequent. The user can then open the feed view of stories, compiled from their frequented locations, to read them. When a user enters a new part of their city, or a specific building, they will occasionally receive a push notification with additional stories or updates from that location.

Final Prototype Design

A Daily Email Digest, manually curated by the Cultivo Project Team, was assembled using the locations of test users' home, work, and favorite places. Using SendGrid email templates and analytics we would be able to see how and when emails are opened and shared.

The Test

Cultivo selected 6 test-users, selected based on location/travel patterns and age
- Denver, Colorado Springs, Boulder, Aspen, Breckenridge, and Littleton
- 22 - 44

Each test user was sent a Typeform to collect basic demographic information and to understand news category preferences in order to tailor each day's email for the user. Initial conversations with each of our test users revealed a lack of involvement with current news across the board, which confirmed the original finding.

Initial Typeform Questions:
- What is your name?
- What is your email?
- What topics of news are you interested in?
- What is your home address?
- What is your work address?
- What places you go most often? Errands, travel, hobbies, restaurants, etc. Please be as specific as possible.
- Do you currently read local and state news?
- Do you think statewide news is directly relevant to you?
- Why do you feel that way?
- How old are you?
- What race/ethnicity do you identify with?

During the test Cultivo selected statewide and local sources, read on average 15-20 stories per day per user, and filtered those down to 5 stories per test user for their daily email. Stories were curated, eye-catching headlines were built and short copy was added with links to each story. This was all built into a Google Sheet, before being placed into a SendGrid email template and sent to each user. Below are examples of the story curation process document and one day of the prototype.

	Day 1		
Headline	Copy	Work Stories	
Cannabis as a States' Rights Issue	US Senate could soon vote on Gardner's marijuana banking legislation, making it a states' rights issue	https://www.summitdaily.com/n	
Wildfires Update	Rolling waves of fire decimate drought-stricken oaks and pines in Western Colorado. Some fires, including the Red Canyon fire, were pushed by high winds.	https://www.denverpost.com/20	
Mountain Town Cell Coverage	Frisco experiencing cell phone service issues. The town of Frisco is experiencing problems with cell phone service in the area.	https://www.9news.com/video/r	
New Restaurants in Breck	Breck has transformed into a culinary hot spot featuring worldly inspired cuisines and fresh takes on culinary classics. The new restaurants in Breckenridge are a direct reflection of this transformation.	https://www.gobreck.com/trip-id	
New Summit County Real Estate Statistics	In most areas of Summit County, prices are still rising and properties are selling faster and faster. The average residential sold prices rose 5% as compared to last year	http://www.susiecortright.com/h	
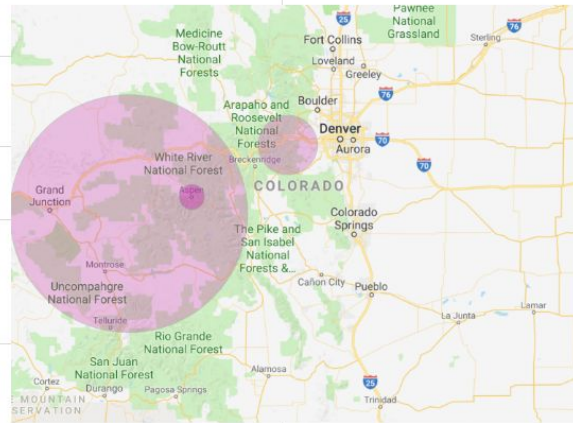
How the data was curated for each day's email
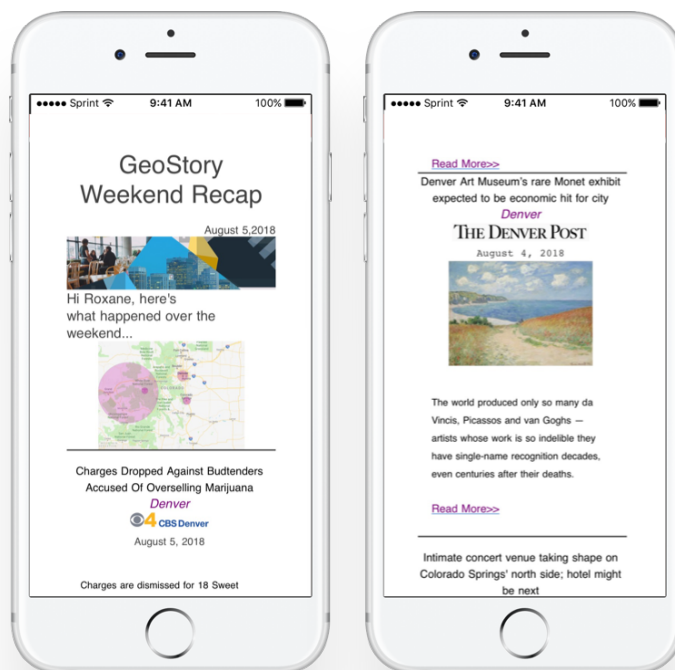
The prototype for mobile

Along the course of our test, we also inserted relevant promotions marked as sponsored content. To analyze this test, Cultivo measured analytics through SendGrid throughout the week and conducted interviews with test users at the end of the trial period. Analytics informed us of opens, the amount of content readers engaged with and sharing of the email digest. Follow up interviews would indicate how the user felt using the prototype, including what they were happy with, what they didn't like and the relevance they felt about the stories.

The Results

Overview
GeoStory users were surprised and delighted by the relevance of the stories to them, routinely opening emails in the morning and expressing they enjoyed t
he content, the map and the timing of the daily digest. By curating stories based on topic and location, placing those stories on a map around the user's location, and noting the area of

impact under the headline, our test users were more likely than before to engage with local and statewide news.

Key Findings Summary
1. **Location tagging made news feel more relevant**
2. **Low quality content lead to low click through**
3. **"Sponsored Content" was a preferred payment method**

Length of daily digest

A number of users expressed the amount of content provided to them felt perfect, and indicated it was quick enough to prepare them for their day in a short amount of time, but in depth enough where they could go back to consume full stories and consider included promotional offers.

Location Tagging

Adding a map as an element of geo-targeted stories helped prime users to read further into the daily digest. Including the map would indicate to users the stories they were about to read the direct areas affected by the news, and in keeping this relevant to user locations, would spark curiosity. Users expressed the map would help them to identify with the news more, as showing spheres of influence around each story would indicate to users they are affected.

Four of the six test users found the GeoStory news more relevant than the news they were currently consuming. In discussions with those users **they noted the location tag on stories as the reason for identifying greater value** and relevance in the delivered stories. When users saw a story coming out of another area that impacted them, and they were able to see it visually, they connected with it. Even if they did not then read the article, they were self-identifying the relevance.

> Seeing the I-70 construction article made me nervous for when
> I go to Denver and use that road. I ended up doing more
> research on when it starts and where. -Scott

Content Quality

While these four users did identify the location tag as the reason for seeing the relevance of stories, five of the users did not click on more than 1 or 2 stories a day. From our post-test

interviews this was largely attributed to two things.

1. The quality of the news being sent, even from sources such as *9News*, *The Denver Post*, and *The Colorado Springs Independent,* was considered lackluster and low quality. For instance, one test user claimed the stories he saw were "poorly edited" and "full of grammar mistakes". He claimed when he only had five minutes to read the news in the morning he felt more trustworthy of sources, such as the Wall Street Journal that "knows when to capitalize a name".

2. The general "weight" of the stories was not enough to warrant this news taking precedence of national. Vivian's comment, "Colorado is a light news state", was shown very clearly through this test. Three of our users who were avid national news consumers, all made separate claims indicating   the news is not as important in Colorado as it is for the country. Back to the previous note, when a user only has so much time to read the news, they want to read the articles they view as more important, the Colorado stories did not always meet that unspoken requirement.

Without a source like *The Denver Post,* it would be incredibly hard to deliver statewide and Denver news in a classic news format. Currently there are minimal sources for delivering "scrutinizable" news on a statewide level in a reader friendly format. Local sources like 9News, Summit Daily, and the Colorado Springs Independent are trying, but struggling to meet this need.

Why would I read about Union Station when I could read about Trump! -**Ben**

Brooke, a 22 year old Littleton based test user, naturally finds emails more engaging and easy to use. Based on her pre and post survey answers, Cultivo focused the questions less on user experience and instead more on how relevant she found the news and even how much she would consider paying for it (hint: its less!).

Nicki, as another example, is 43, based in Aspen, and expressed she does not use email regularly. Because of this, the focus with Nicki was on delivery methods and format; she thought the map was too big and got in the way of the stories on her phone.

Sponsored Content

Sponsored content based on location received great feedback, as test users expressed the actionable nature of the promotions was great. Users appreciated hyper-localized offers such as restaurant promotions and social events near home or work.

Consumption habits

While recipients of the daily digest would routinely read one or two articles immediately, users would mostly scan headlines and captions, opting to read more stories later. This indicates users turn to their news to fill down time as they see fit; making content easily accessible is key to enable this behavior.

Recommendation

Conclusion

The primary question the GeoStory prototype sought to solve was, can local news be viewed in a manner that increases relevancy? Throughout the testing phase, and in gathering the results, it was clear for the users engaged regularly and often, GeoStory did just this. By placing the curated stories on a map, the test users were more likely to engage with local and statewide content then they were before. With several iterations and updates, GeoStory would prove to be a successful way for increasing local news engagement.

Further Recommended Research and Limitations

GeoStory could be launchable, however the biggest thing holding it back is the content quality. **Cultivo would strongly recommend a further analysis into payment methods and content quality before moving forward.** But, based on the previous Colorado Media Project research, and our interviews with test users, the recommendation is further research and testing on a larger scale would be worthwhile.

Recommended Product Iterations

In order to best connect readers with relevant, and therefore valuable, information there are several needed iterations.

1. **Delivery**
- While email proved to be a successful method, follow up interviews posed the idea of using **location-enabled push notifications** through a separate app, text notifications, or desktop notifications.
- Timing: more consistent and either early morning or throughout their day (push notifications)
2. **Content**
- Test-users generally found statewide content less valuable to them. Even with location based curation they still found the general "weight" of the stories to be minimal and "lacking" - Mike.
- Using more precise location targeting could help to further bridge this gap
3. **Tech**
- RSS Feed style aggregator collects which stories you are reading or not and makes a stronger selection in story choices.
- A consistent template that is better fit for desktop and mobile is needed.
    - Look into deeper analytics which focus on the amount of time spent on both the email and in the links for possible partnerships and sponsored content

Potential Monetization

For a product like this, Cultivo was wary to focus too much on monetization due to the small group size. What we did find though was the inclusion of "**sponsored content**" led to higher interest from our users. In place of actual sponsored content we took articles from businesses such as ReMax and included them throughout.

The other aspect our users noted was the sources we provided them with sometimes sent them to a paywall. Articles in *The Denver Post, The Colorado Sun,* and *The Denver Business Journal,* each sent users either immediately or after a few articles to a paywall, limiting their ability to read through the articles. In a potential revenue stream for this product is a partnership with new sources and for every click on their articles they pay an amount. While none of our test users bought subscriptions to these sources, two of them, Ben and Nicki, expressed interest. Scott already had a Denver Post subscription.

Appendix

Additional Feedback from Testing

Within the testing period our main variable was looking at different ways to note story relevance and geographic location.

Methods Tested for Representing Geographic Relevance

- One map per story
- One map with every story on it
- Tagging the location for each story
- Trying stories from other locations that impact their location
- Adding locations the reader was likely to find relevant, or nearby locations (say someone in Breckenridge going to Frisco)

At the end of the 5 days, another [Typeform](#) was sent to these users which asked them some short questions to guide our follow-up phone interview with them.

Questions:

Did you feel the news sent was relevant to you?

About how many full articles would you read per email?

Did you share any of the emails or stories?

How helpful was the story map?

Did having stories plotted on a map make them feel more relevant?

Was five stories a day a good amount of content?

Did you notice "sponsored" content?

Did you find "sponsored" content to be relevant or helpful?

Any general comments or suggestions?

While the respondents gave shorter answers in the post-survey, they helped guide the questions in the extended interview.

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Work With Us

Cultivo is a marketing and product development agency focused on providing innovative digital solutions to any problem your business is facing. Ranging from websites, apps and software, brand development, and marketing solutions.

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