

philadelphianeighborhoods.com:  
Journalism Street by Street  
Media in Transition 7  
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## **Abstract**

philadelphianeighborhoods.com provides news coverage about more than thirty underreported and underserved communities in Philadelphia. Affiliated with Temple University, the website and bimonthly printed editions focus on hyperlocal journalism, or journalism at the street-by-street level. The goals focus on many aspects of journalism, but this paper will address the successes and failures of this hyperlocal approach and whether the publications help to create reporters and editors with greater cultural awareness of communities not generally covered by the legacy media.

## **Introduction**

The Multimedia Urban Reporting Lab, the publisher of philadelphianeighborhoods.com, was created in 2004 at Temple University as a means to develop multimedia skills among undergraduate journalism students and to create greater cultural awareness of neighborhoods that had sporadic and generally unfavorable coverage of crime, drug use, and poverty.

From only a handful of students in 2004, the program has grown to nearly more than 160 students per year who take the course as the final capstone for the Department of Journalism. The journalists work in teams of two and are assigned to specific neighborhoods within the city. These areas include some of the following:

--Strawberry Mansion is a predominantly African-American neighborhood in North Philadelphia that suffers from high levels of crime, drug use, and poverty. The neighborhood also served as a cultural enclave for Jews before the 1960s and to such notable musicians as John Coltrane.

--Fairhill is a mixture of races, but Hispanics are the largest ethnic group in the North Philadelphia neighborhood. Often referred to as "The Badlands" and the subject of many stories about drugs in Philadelphia, Fairhill also includes a rich Hispanic heritage and important Hispanic organizations.

--Germantown is a large neighborhood in Northwest Philadelphia, which is predominantly African American. The neighborhood also includes some of the most important historical sites in the country, including the home of President George Washington and the locale of one of the most important battles of the Revolutionary War.

--Olney is a mixture of many races, including Asian, African American, and Caucasian. A North Philadelphia neighborhood, Olney has become a key cultural center for Cambodians and a key business area for Koreans.

The students produce a weekly blog about their neighborhood and six original multimedia stories during the course of the semester, which can be viewed at [philadelphianeighborhoods.com](http://philadelphianeighborhoods.com)

The program has earned numerous awards from the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association and the Society of Professional Journalists. One journalist was named the best reporter for the entire city in 2009 for her work concerning racism in the Philadelphia Police Department. The program also has been cited in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

## Literature Review

Many terms have been used to describe journalism about small geographic communities, including citizen journalism, community journalism, and hyperlocal journalism. The terms have been applied to all forms of media outlets, including the websites of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other mainstream or legacy outlets. The terms also have been applied to a variety of organizations, including AOL's patch.com and local blogs, such as BaristaNet.com.

In 2006, the Knight Community News Center, with support from J-Lab and the Ford Foundation, conducted research into *hyperlocal citizen journalism*. The center defined hyperlocal citizen journalism in the following manner:

What exactly is a hyperlocal citizen media site? It is a multimedia digital unspooling that reflects life in a particular place, typically with a rolling front page where posts go up in blog-like chronological order. Many display professionally produced local coverage (whether originated by a small paid staff, imported from an owner-newspaper, or linked to by volunteer staffs). Citizen postings take center stage on some sites or are relegated mostly to comments and photo galleries on others. Sites also typically feature event calendars, mission statements, tutorials on how to contribute text and images, local blog feeds and government and business directories. Many include poetry or creative writing, columns on gardening or sports or other topics and vast photo galleries, with featured photos on the front page. (Knight Community News Center, p.4)

Schaffer (2008) notes that four types of hyperlocal citizen journalists exist: former journalists, legacy or mainstream media outlets, community websites and bloggers, and journalism schools (2008). This research focuses on the latter at Temple University.

The National Newspaper Association, which includes 2,700 community newspapers, provides this definition of community journalism:

Today, the distinguishing characteristic of a community newspaper is its commitment to serving the information needs of a particular community. The community is defined by the community's members and a shared sense of belonging. A community may be geographic, political, social or religious. A community newspaper may be published once a week or daily. Some community newspapers exist only in cyberspace. Any newspaper that defines itself as committed to serving a particular community may be defined as a "community newspaper." (National Newspaper Association, para. 3)

It should be noted that a search of the Communications and Mass Media Compete databases at Temple University, where the author teaches, generates only thirteen academic research articles on *hyperlocal journalism*, a term commonly used in public discussion. The author tends to agree with the belief that the term, *hyperlocal journalism*, is poorly defined and is used to generally to define myriad publications (McLellan, 2011).

Hyperlocal is often combined with citizen journalism, where individuals in a community contribute to or create a blog or journalistic enterprise. Moreover, the term, community journalism, tends to deal primarily with smaller journalistic outlets based outside of major cities.

Therefore, the author defines hyperlocal journalism as reporting on a specific neighborhood, a precise geographic location, or a specific community with common interests that may not be defined geographically, such as decorative arts practitioners.

Hyperlocal journalism may occur in printed form, broadcasts, and websites and blogs. Hyperlocal journalism may or may not include commentary and journalistic endeavors from local citizens, now defined as citizen journalism. Furthermore, it should be noted that hyperlocal journalism differs significantly from practices during the 1990s called *public journalism* or *civic journalism* in which primarily legacy media engaged in including the public in the process of reporting.

The literature provides both optimistic and pessimistic analyses of such reporting. For example, Weaver notes (2009) that part of journalism's future may be online.

[The] assessment of the future of U.S. journalism is pessimistic, but it does include the various forms of citizen and nonprofessional journalism, including blogs, chat rooms, websites, etc. that may offer a more optimistic picture of the information available to those who have access to the Internet and who know how to find this information online" (Weaver, p. 396).

Will Bunch, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter at the *Philadelphia Daily News* who also writes the popular blog, *Attytood*, is less sanguine.

For the past couple of years, a number of change-minded journalists, academics,

and engaged citizens have been discussing a lot of great ideas for saving the news business: Teaching reporters how to wield video cameras on assignment, to file breaking news for the Web, to use a blog to cover a local beat like mass transit, or work as moderators with engaged citizen journalists.

What's almost never mentioned in these discussions is the human factor. After all, one of the underlying tenets of saving newspapers is supposed to be rescuing the livelihood of working journalists. But do the rank-and-file of most metro newspapers in 2007, people in their 30's, 40's, and 50's, actually want to do these things—cover local news for life, with no chance of parole?

Some, perhaps. Most, no. Definitely not me. (Bunch, paras. 11-13)

## **Research Questions**

RQ1: How successful has philadelphianeighborhoods.com been in serving underreported and underserved neighborhoods?

RQ2: How successful has philadelphianeighborhoods.com been in creating more culturally competent individuals and journalists?

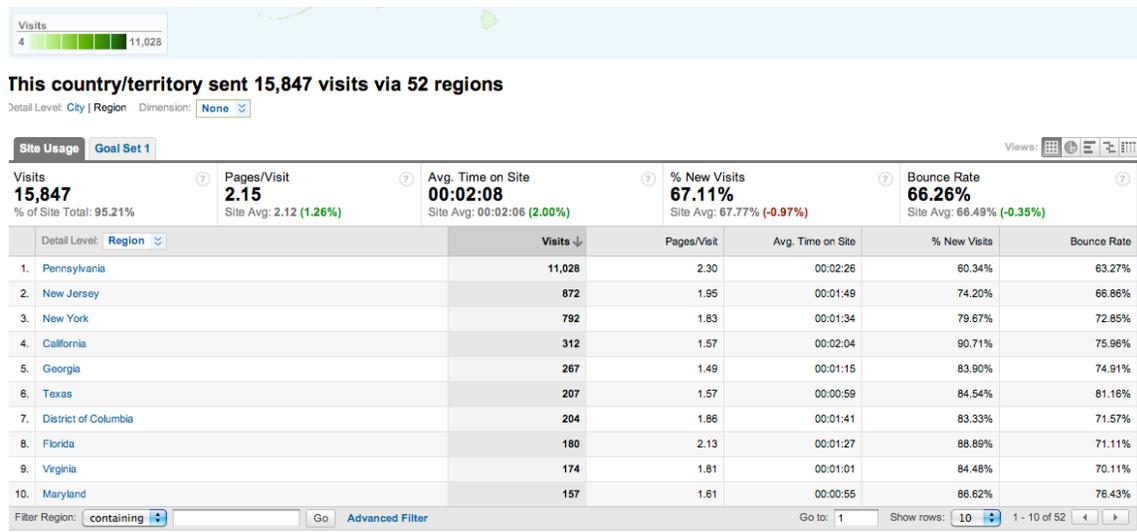
## **Methodology**

The first question depends heavily on using digital tools available to track the viewers of the website. The second question draws heavily on the work of Dianne Garyantes, who studied the program for her doctoral dissertation at Temple University and is now an assistant professor at Rider University.

## **Discussion**

The website operated primarily as an internal Temple University site until 2008 when philadelphianeighborhoods.com was launched. Therefore, the website went from virtually no viewers to today with nearly 150,000 discrete viewers per year or roughly the size of a small-sized legacy media site.

The Google Analytics demonstrates that the website has attracted roughly 600 to 800 viewers per day, mainly from the United States.

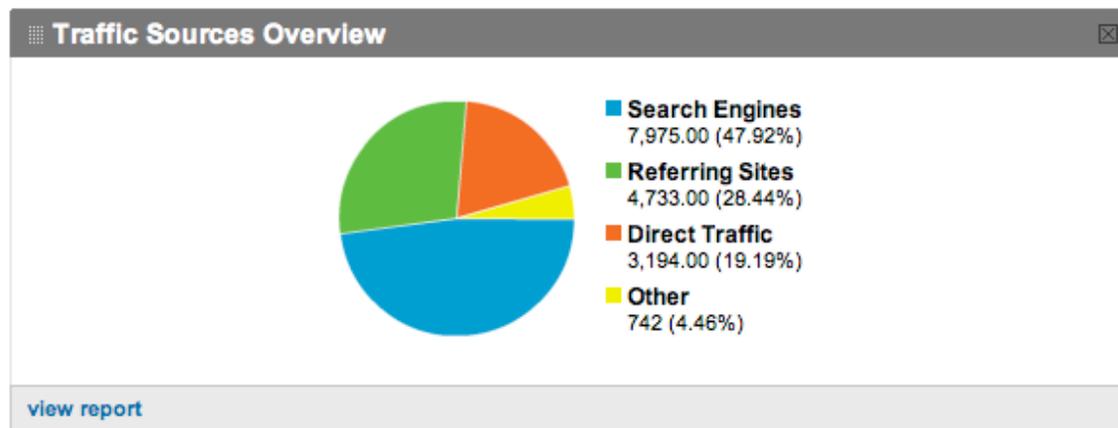


The branding was changed from the Multimedia Urban Reporting Lab, or [www.temple.edu/murl](http://www.temple.edu/murl), to philadelphianeighborhoods, which has made it easier to engage in better search engine optimization and branding.

This change was critical in the development for easier recognition of the website. Earlier, the website was almost impossible to locate.

The program works with a variety of community outlets, including Germantown Newspapers, two biweekly newspapers; WHYY, the public broadcasting outlet; pa2012.com, an important political blog; neastphilly.com, a website covering Northeast Philadelphia; technicallyphilly.com, a website about technology in the city; planphilly.com, a website devoted to development issues; and *Al Dia*, the largest Hispanic weekly in the Northeast United States.

Although roughly half of the visitors come from search engines, the program has been able to create referring traffic from partnerships and direct traffic by better branding.



The graphic below demonstrates that the bulk of the viewers come from the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, which would indicate that the targeted audience is who is being reached.

**This country/territory sent 15,040 visits via 52 regions**

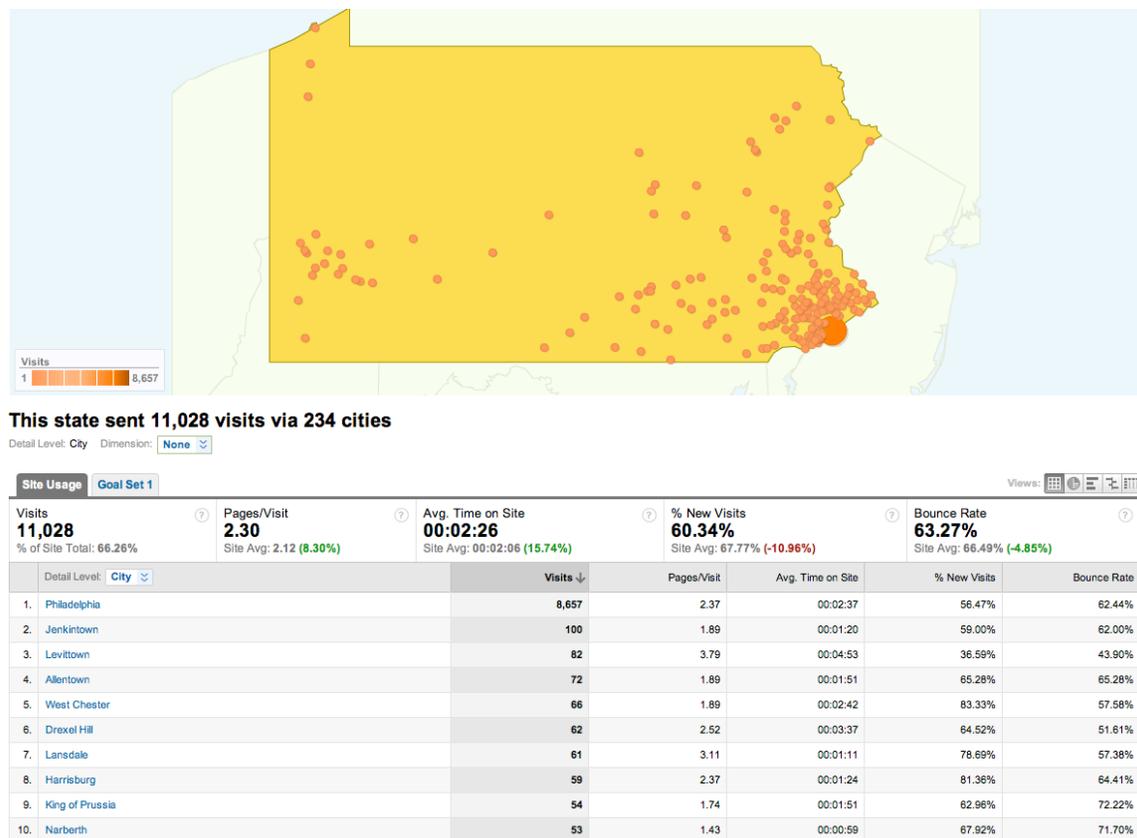
Detail Level: City | Region Dimension: **None**

Site Usage Goal Set 1 Views: [Grid] [List] [Table] [Chart]

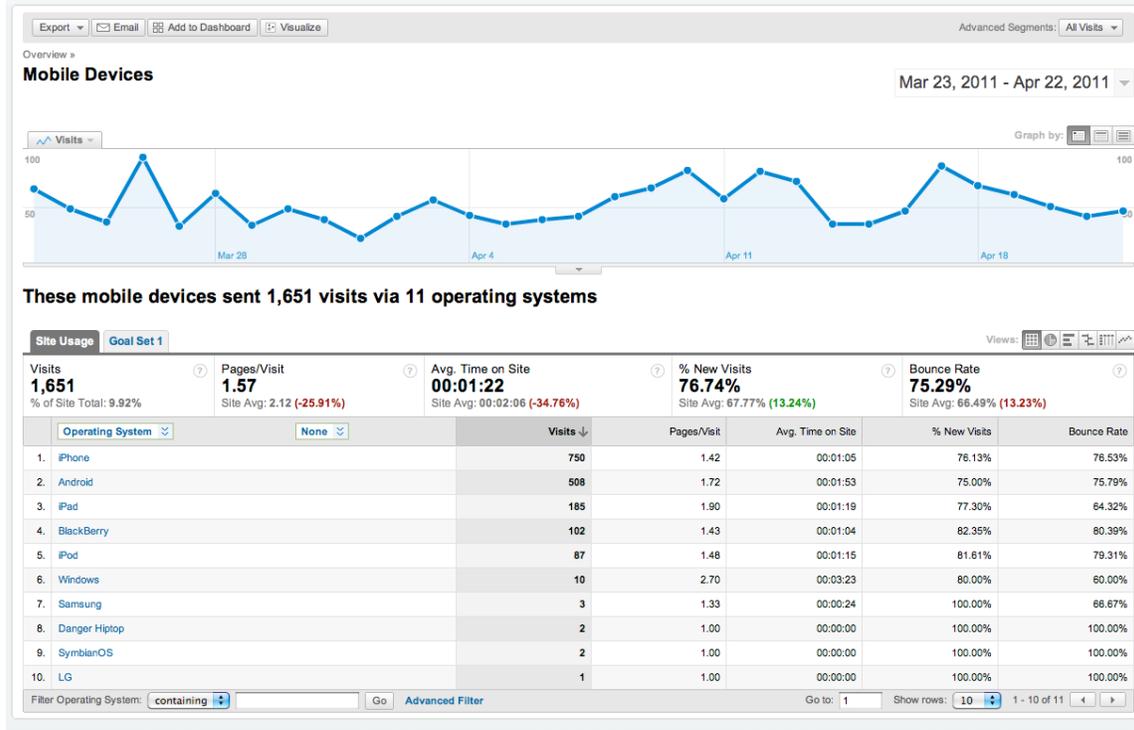
Visits	Pages/Visit	Avg. Time on Site	% New Visits	Bounce Rate	
<b>15,040</b> % of Site Total: 95.36%	<b>2.17</b> Site Avg: 2.14 (1.24%)	<b>00:02:13</b> Site Avg: 00:02:11 (1.42%)	<b>66.32%</b> Site Avg: 66.97% (-0.97%)	<b>65.43%</b> Site Avg: 65.65% (-0.35%)	
Detail Level: <b>Region</b>	Visits ↓	Pages/Visit	Avg. Time on Site	% New Visits	Bounce Rate
1. <a href="#">Pennsylvania</a>	10,556	2.31	00:02:33	59.97%	62.39%
2. <a href="#">New Jersey</a>	898	2.01	00:01:45	74.05%	66.48%
3. <a href="#">New York</a>	720	1.80	00:01:37	76.94%	72.78%
4. <a href="#">California</a>	271	1.62	00:02:21	90.41%	73.80%
5. <a href="#">District of Columbia</a>	195	1.70	00:01:13	80.00%	75.38%
6. <a href="#">Georgia</a>	191	1.45	00:01:07	83.77%	73.82%
7. <a href="#">Texas</a>	187	1.59	00:00:46	82.89%	80.75%
8. <a href="#">Florida</a>	167	2.10	00:01:04	85.03%	74.85%
9. <a href="#">Virginia</a>	155	1.47	00:00:43	87.10%	71.61%
10. <a href="#">Maryland</a>	153	1.57	00:00:56	85.62%	74.51%

Filter Region: containing [ ] Go Advanced Filter Go to: 1 Show rows: 10 1 - 10 of 52

The graphic below represents a concentration of the viewers from Philadelphia. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to drill down to the specific neighborhoods that philadelphianeighborhoods.com serves without additional funds to purchase this information. It is interesting to note, however, that the most widely read story in the past few months concerned a mural in Kensington that had been defaced by a tagger. More than 500 people viewed the story and more than thirty posted comments.



The graphic below demonstrates the number of views from mobile devices during a month—a factor that the program wants to expand. Even though computers may not have penetrated some of the neighborhoods in which the program functions, mobile devices have become an essential part of the lifestyle of almost everyone in the areas. As a result, the program modified its delivery system to provide for more compatibility with mobile telephones.



As noted earlier, the answers to the second research question about creating more culturally competent reporters at philadelphianeighborhoods.com come primarily from research done specifically about the program, including research on its reporters and the people covered by the publications.<sup>1</sup>

Garyantes (2010) uses both quantitative and qualitative data, including a survey to assess the self-perceived cultural competence of the journalists and interviews and in-depth interviews with the journalists, the news sources, course instructors, and neighborhood representatives. The research also includes actual observation of the reporting in the field and analysis of analysis of selected multimedia news pieces.

At the outset, she notes the following:

...[J]ournalists reporting on perspectives other than their own often include misrepresentations about the Other [the source] in their news texts. These misrepresentations are passed on to readers, who may have little direct experience with the people and perspectives involved and no understanding of the context for these perspectives, and thus may incorporate the distorted information into their thinking and opinions. (Garyantes, p. 12)

The research found a variety of both achieved and unachieved goals in analyzing the results of the work of philadelphianeighborhoods.com.

For example, Garyantes (2010) notes one of the most dramatic differences among the journalists was the self-reported knowledge of the neighborhood from the start of the semester when compared with the end of the semester. At the beginning, 57 percent, or 102 of those surveyed, said they had very limited or limited knowledge of the neighborhood they had been assigned to cover. By the end of the semester, 78 percent, or 130 of those surveyed, said their level of knowledge was good or very good.

Since many of the neighborhoods include individuals who do not speak English as a first language, those students with pertinent language skills were better able to engage people in the communities. For example, at least four journalists produced reports in both English and Spanish, and one journalist produced reports in English and Vietnamese.

Nevertheless, news sources and neighborhood representatives found that many journalists were inadequately prepared with information and historical perspective about the neighborhoods covered. Moreover, the journalists often made mistakes about neighborhood boundaries, inaccurate job titles, and interviews with individuals who did live in the community. It is unclear whether these errors occurred as a result of poor reporting or a lack of cultural awareness.

## **Conclusions**

As noted earlier, a better distinction must be made among community, citizen, and hyperlocal journalism. Without a better definition, the academic community, the practitioners, and the public will fail to understand what type of journalism is being conducted and what are its characteristics and parameters.

With respect to philadelphianneighborhoods.com, it remains unclear whether it has created a website and publications that actually benefit the communities and neighborhoods that are central to the program. What is clear is that an analysis of the website data provides a better understanding that the program had achieved the following:

- A significantly higher viewership
- A viewership that seems to be more targeted
- A viewership that seems to be reaching the intended audience

The next step will be to engage greater participation in creating news reports from community members themselves—a goal that has met with limited success, primarily through lack of funds for outreach and training. The program has identified six neighborhoods in the city to extend such outreach and training over the next three years to produce specific websites for four communities in North Philadelphia, and one each in Northwest Philadelphia, and West Philadelphia. The website URLs have already been purchased, with the need to expand the number of content providers over that time period.

It appears that the program has created greater awareness among the reporters of particular neighborhoods in the city. It still remains unclear whether the journalists have become more culturally competent, particularly where language barriers exist.

Garyantes sees a need for greater awareness on the part of journalism educators and practitioners to understand the history and sociopolitical context of the neighborhoods and communities in Philadelphia and elsewhere.

Without this kind of knowledge, culturally competent news coverage is nearly impossible.... I would further recommend that journalism as a profession fully examine its current news values and make “understanding” a new part of journalistic norms. This understanding would apply not just to the goals of the news stories, but also to the journalists as professionals in their attempts to learn their beats. The profession also needs to seriously examine its need for more representation of diverse cultures, with culture being broadly defined as it is in this study—as the way in which people make sense of their lives. (Garyantes, 338-346)

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#### Endnotes

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