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Patch.com is a local news and information platform serving more than 1200 communities across the country through web, iOS & Android apps, social media, and such aggregators such as Alexa, Apple News, Flipboard, GoogleNews, Yahoo, and MSN. Across all outlets, Patch serves approximately 80 million views of our content a month to 27 million users. We publish approximately 4000 pieces of content (1/3 by Patch staff, 2/3 by our users), and send about 4.5 million emails—every day.

Patch, since it's spin-out from AOL 5 years ago, has been out of the gate fast: we had an AMP implementation within weeks of release. We were early adopters of Facebook Instant Articles and the Apple News format. Other outlets touch custom RSS or JSON feeds: Amazon Alexa, Flipboard, Yahoo and so forth.

Though under one umbrella, Patch is not "one" website to our users. While following a combined fire-hose of local news from everywhere in the country can be wildly entertaining, it is not why users come to us. One generally wants to follow what is going on outside one's front door or in select areas of interest, a workplace, hometown. Patch must therefore be both unified and atomic: Herndon Virginia Patch has little in common with Livermore California or Wayland Massachusetts Patch, but all are served by the same technologies. This wildly diverse set of concerns also means that our content is specialized by nature of its locality, high-value, rare, which prompts high-engagement and habituation by our users (30% email open rates are not uncommon). People want what we provide, and alternatives are becoming fewer and fewer. This means that, for instance, we have as many Facebook pages as we have Patches (1200); so too Alexa feeds, Twitter accounts, and the list goes on. We take integrations seriously.

A couple examples of integrations into external ecosystems might be illustrative in regard to this conference's subject matter:

Apple News initially reached out to us because they are aware of the value of local content. Yet as soon as we started to integrate -- we found we had to create 1200 channels, upload 1200 different logos, and maintain statefulness with their api (revisions, deletions). We had to create four different accounts due to limitations with their UI, rewrite all our content to markdown/Apple News format, and eventually gave up linking all our accounts to their advertising technology. As such our implementation on Apple News has languished, as it monetizes poorly, and the cost of maintaining has not been worth the return. (That said, we may do another pass at it soon.) Likewise Facebook Instant Articles monetized miserably, and restrictions with the platform ("likes" only pertained to our main national account, not our individual Patch Pages, there was no way to customize subscribe links to particular Patch towns, and so forth), combined with their closed ad ecosystem which only looked to their demand rendered an even larger headache. We turned FBIA off and never looked back

AMP: Patch was out of the gate with AMP within weeks and we saw an immediate search-uptick on that content. However, its poor monetization capabilities (especially at the outset) immediately hurt revenue and it began to cannibalize our standard mobile traffic. Most of our dependent analytics (Chartbeat, GA) were still in beta and buggy. Our AMP GA property is still different from our primary Patch.com property which makes all internal analytics more difficult than they need to be. We still monetize AMP at only 65 percent of mobile web (Facebook Instant Articles were at a far, far lower rate), and we lose much core function: subscription, content contribution, tailored recirculation, commenting and so forth. So too maintaining AMP can be process of whack-a-mole: updating particular libraries; hunting down errant html tags, and having to back port any of our innovations to comply with the standard. Dependency on Google's infrastructure which has seen AMP outages hurting our search traffic, rendered distribution uncertain (AMP moved in and out of the Google News product) has made it hard to forecast and rely on it.

These downward pressures put on monetization by closed distribution ecosystems is compounded by the costs of maintaining the divergent technologies to satisfy them. We have found that local news outlets simply do not have the resources (financial/technical) to survive; and are closing their doors, rendering large swaths our country news deserts. Temptations like monthly subscription products, often touted as panaceas, are rarely sustainable at a local level and have not yet been shown to be viable in these far smaller addressable markets. Patch is lucky, in that it can weather these systemic headwinds—perhaps paradoxically—because we are a single platform serving many localities and can develop once and deploy everywhere. Yet even we feel we struggle unnecessarily to do so, and watch with great regret our friends at local news outlets across the country see their livelihoods and community information centers evaporate.

Certainly Patch faces particular challenges that are intrinsic to the hyperlocal problem which would not affect single-channel outlets. Yet many challenges are not simply a function of our horizontal scale. By no means would it be impossible for us to solve any one of the issues with these closed-ecosystem providers, yet as we currently have almost a dozen external integrations that maintenance comes at the cost of new development. Despite being profitable for 4 years and growing revenue at 30%, resource restriction (and sound financial stewardship) is a daily reality for Patch and presumably other news publishers. Our ability to innovate is restricted by the vicissitudes of these distribution channels, which could be solved, potentially, by evolving a single, extensible, open standard (like html once was!) where we could develop once, and deploy everywhere.

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