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News by the block

Adrian Holovaty's EveryBlock site takes a new approach to neighborhood news

Story by Stephanie Detillier | Photo by Nicholas Benner

Adrian Holovaty, BJ '01, has found perhaps the smallest way to slice up the news pie.

While several media organizations have experimented with hyper-local neighborhood coverage, Holovaty's innovation offers news by the city block. The website [everyblock.com](#), which he launched in 2008 and sold to [msnbc.com](#) in 2009, keeps residents informed of crime, real estate listings, business permits, media coverage, photos and blogs specific to their geographic location. The site serves every block in 16 major cities, adding up to more than a million news feeds.

"Most people who use our service sign up to get our daily email early in the morning that has everything we've found around their block the previous day," says Holovaty, who uses the site to keep informed about his own Chicago block. "I like keeping track of what homes have gone on the market and new meetings happening in the neighborhood. I find out about new restaurants and learned of a building permit for a new health club — all stuff that shows up on [everyblock.com](#) before it gets mainstream media coverage."

When Holovaty started looking at data through a geographic lens, it was a mere hobby. He was working as a Web developer for the *Lawrence (Kan.) Journal World* but living in Chicago, where he realized there was no easy way to see neighborhood crime rates. Just for fun on evenings and weekends, he built [chicagocrime.org](#), which plotted police reports on a Google Map.

"I found that the Chicago Police Department's website had a bunch of crime data, but it wasn't represented in a very easy-to-read way," he says. "I wrote a couple programs that grabbed the data from that website automatically. At the time, there wasn't an official way of putting Google Maps on your own website. It took some reverse engineering and hacking Google

Maps to make it work. Initially, I didn't even put my name on the site because I was a little scared I'd get in trouble with Google."

A couple months later, however, Google released legitimate software to give other programmers the ability to mesh data with maps. Holovaty was hailed as creating one of the Web's first "mashups" and won the 2005 Batten Award for Innovations in Journalism for chicagocrime.org.

At age 24, Holovaty became the editor of editorial innovations at *The Washington Post*. Then, wanting to expand chicagocrime.org, he won a \$1.1 million grant from the Knight Foundation to start what would become everyblock.com. The funding allowed him to work on the project full time.



From the North Center neighborhood of Chicago, Adrian Holovaty runs everyblock.com, which offers news by the city block in 16 cities.

'There's more to journalism than writing articles. Everyblock.com is providing an information service, which is just as useful.' — *Adrian Holovaty*

The site started as an aggregator that relied on government agency data, such as building permits and restaurant inspections. The six-employee staff also crawled the Web for local news stories, Flickr photos, Craigslist lost-and-found postings and business reviews. In March 2011, everyblock.com adopted a new design that promotes discussion among neighbors. Its aim is to create a network for people who live near one another but might not have met. The site's new mission is to help people make their blocks better places to live.

"The redesign changed the focus of the site to be less about one-way flow of information and

more about tools that help you post and contribute information to your neighbors,” Holovaty explains.

But critics have asked: Should a compilation of data be considered journalism? On May 21, 2009, Holovaty posted his stance on his blog:

“Is data journalism? Is it journalism to publish a raw database? Here, at last, is the definitive, two-part answer: 1. Who cares? 2. I hope my competitors waste their time arguing about this as long as possible.”




In the past two years, Holovaty thinks database journalism has become more accepted. The problem is that few journalists have the programming know-how to mine large sets of data and display them graphically.

However, Holovaty, a first-generation American and a gypsy jazz guitarist, was drawn to computer science long before he became interested in journalism.

“I’ve always been into geeky stuff since I was a little kid,” he says. “I always liked information, storing it and reading it. I think journalism is an appropriate field for me because I love getting, collecting and organizing information, which also goes along with being a computer geek. There’s more to journalism than writing articles. Everyblock.com is providing an information service, which is just as useful.”

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