

Final Prototyping Report

Colorado Media Project

Cultivo Media

**COLORADO
MEDIA
PROJECT**

CULTIVO



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Executive Summary

Problem

Colorado's media landscape is changing rapidly, and the role of news is constantly evolving with new, digital-first, sources emerging. **The future of news in Colorado is uncertain and changing every day.** The Colorado Media Project seeks to ensure that more Coloradans have access to the information needed to participate in civil society.

The challenge – and the opportunity:

- Disinterested media ownership has led to a rapid decline in the amount of coverage on important issues vital in driving civic awareness and engagement
- A variety of independent sources are emerging to fill Colorado's widening news gap with issue-specific coverage, hyperlocal news, and investigative reporting. These outlets are experimenting in exciting ways and attracting specialized audiences but have yet to achieve broad reach and financial sustainability.
- Given the fractured media landscape, Coloradans – particularly younger audiences and the large influx of new residents to our state – lack access to high-quality, reliable Colorado news and are struggling to participate in important community conversations.

Prototyping and Results

This summer, the Colorado Media Project researched and tested innovative new ideas and digital tools to strengthen the civic fabric of Colorado. Over the course of ten collaborative, exciting, and educational weeks four prototypes were built, tested, and reported on. **This report covers the results of those 10 weeks, the process for how we got there, and what needs to be done next to create sustainable, scalable scrutiny.**

Final Recommendation

After four weeks of testing, Cultivo determined which elements of each four prototypes were successful and why. The final recommendation is a suite of digital platforms focused on providing quality, scrutinous journalism to the state of Colorado. This will entail elements of geo-targeted stories, daily digests comprised of bite sized content, and an interactive, engaging user experience. While this testing period provided valuable insight into how users experience these features, further research and design will be needed to determine the right technologies and formats to be used.

Observation - The Problem

Secondary research indicated news is moving in strong and specific trends in the media landscape. There is a strong decline in local news as readers are instead opting for social media and digitally formatted national sources more than anything else. Younger people are overwhelmingly moving towards digital news platforms, and 18-44 year olds are most likely to pay for digital news subscriptions. Despite substantially less trust from readers in these mediums, the convenience and format provided by them draws users back. The format that draws users back is increasingly due to bite sized content and video, which users prefer. This decline in local news has led to the rise in news deserts; large areas with little to no coverage provided at all.

With known industry trends, it became clear that existing news sources are struggling to maintain profitability in a news landscape that is quickly moving towards social media and digital news. In order to determine actual user preferences and needs, Cultivo needed to dive deeper into what Coloradans were experiencing with news. Six weeks of empathy interviews were conducted to determine when, how, and why people were consuming information and then communicating it.

The Empathy interviews began to show themes which were distilled into insights about Colorado news consumers:

- Social Capital is a primary motivator for news consumption
- People feel news is entertainment and does not feel like a waste of time
- Statewide news is not as directly impactful as local news, but also does not deliver the heightened identification that national news does.
- Getting outside your bubble can be more trouble than it's worth

With these insights, Cultivo was able to pinpoint what matters most to Colorado news consumers and looked into how we can prototype around them. The first problem we noticed was people wanted to feel confident and informed in their social circles and relish the opportunity to feel like a trendsetter by bringing new news to their peers. It was also apparent readers primarily used digital news sources to fill short amounts of downtime in busy,

unpredictable schedules. Creating a local news format as attractive as national news and as addictive as a mobile game would be important. It was also surprising to find readers did not find state news as relevant to them as hyper-local or national news. Finally, an overwhelming number of users indicated they wanted a political counterweight to the opinions of their go-to sources.

The Four Prototypes

GeoStory

The GeoStory prototype is a morning email digest curated to provide relevant news based on test users' home, work, and favorited 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.

StoryHound

StoryHound is a mobile app prototype allowing users to swipe through Colorado news stories quickly deciding to either read immediately, save for later, or pass. This prototype was designed to address demand for quickly consumable, bite-sized Colorado news content in an entertaining format that is also rewarding for users.

InSpectre

InSpectre News is an exploration into how balanced perspectives might be provided on polarizing issues. Colorado readers expressed they should be consuming more diverse viewpoints. Cultivo understood that having a truly unbiased source is impossible, so InSpectre offers counterweight articles to strong opinions via a website featuring Colorado news stories with several follow up articles written from differing perspectives linked for each.

The Daily Snack

Coloradans are constantly looking for ways to fit content consumption into busy schedules and spare minutes. Research collected by the Colorado Media Project concluded users wanted to consume content quickly in multiple formats. To test this, Cultivo formed two separate twitter accounts, one with a focus on lifestyle news, @CODailyLife, and one focused on more traditional news, @CODailyNews. Test users were also asked to turn on notifications to receive push notifications when content was posted. On these feeds, content ranging from links to full length articles, podcasts embedded within the stream, retweets of videos, and short updates were pushed out for a period of five days.

Feedback and Results

GeoStory

GeoStory users were surprised and delighted by the relevance of the stories to them, routinely opening emails in the morning and expressing they enjoyed the 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. A number of users expressed the amount of content provided to them felt perfect, expressing 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 promotional offers included.

StoryHound

StoryHound users found the format of the prototype to be extremely engaging and fast. Several users actually swiped through the 18 test stories multiple times before realizing they were seeing the content repeated. Overall, users were eager to have StoryHound available for Colorado news and had numerous suggestions for additional features and design improvements. Five of the six test users expressed they would feel negatively about running out of stories in StoryHound and that endless content is preferred. Test users expressed interest in two methods of potential personalization of their StoryHound experience, 1. Choosing their

preferences and interests upon downloading the app, or 2. Selecting a story topic category before beginning to swipe through stories and changing the category at any point.

InSpectre

Overall users felt the platform made sense and the idea was interesting, however, the users Cultivo observed, engaged with only one or no follow up reading before navigating to a new topic or leaving the InSpectre website. Not once did a user consume follow up reading then go back to the story to get more follow up perspectives. In a few of the later interviews, we tried to explain a bit further that the idea was to consume follow up material from both sides of the aisle, yet users continued to click to follow up content 0-1 times per story. This gave us an interesting insight: navigating towards an existing political bias may be a deeply ingrained habit which users are not likely to change. This proved to be true even when users recognized it would be beneficial to read other perspectives, expressed support for the idea and had an easy option to do so.

The Daily Snack

Test users were first very vocal about the amount of content we were putting out, consistently giving us feedback that ten stories felt overwhelming. Our latter half of the test, pushing out five story updates twice a day seemed to work best for users. Ten stories does not seem like much, but perhaps the reason it felt overwhelming was because users were inclined to dig deeper when given short overviews of news. Not only did people want to engage with longer content, but snackable content made users want to consume further even if they felt it wasn't relevant. Interviewees expressed surprise they were being provided with exciting local news, and that they found content entertaining. This entertainment factor proved to be a powerful motivator for further reading. Test users also expressed that staying informed was a primary goal, and short content is great for this.

Potential Final Platform Features

Algorithm for Colorado Content

A digital news platform for Colorado will need an algorithm to aggregate content from various Colorado media outlets. This algorithm will need to learn user preferences through usage while also leveraging information given during onboarding, parameters set by users (like topic), and location data.

Test users for prototypes expressed desire for relevant local news and endless available content. Our StoryHound test showed us consistent feedback that users want to continuously swipe through stories, meaning an algorithm will be needed to supply enough content. An algorithm will also help to keep stories relevant to users by accounting for preferences and behavior.

Navigation by Topic

Our findings, from the StoryHound user group in particular, was the desire to sort stories by topic. While users enjoyed seeing a diverse array of topics, they did express that more often than not they are looking for a particular topic relevant to their field of work, their personal preferences, or their network's desired topic of conversation.

Push Digest

A daily push notification sending a user to a few pieces of bite sized content to get peoples day started should be included in any further product iterations. A daily push digest would include 5-7 short stories, videos and/or podcasts relevant to the user.

Testing through GeoStory and Daily Snack indicated individuals enjoy consistent news digests regardless of format, and that snackable content helped them feel informed quickly and was more engaging than they expected of Colorado news content. A short daily news briefing also encourages users to engage with longer content later on in the day, helping them to fill downtime in odd schedules.

For further testing of this feature, a feed dedicated to available bite sized content would likely be engaging for users. Cultivo tested daily digests of bite sized content through email and Twitter, and would also recommend testing through push and SMS.

Interactive Story Swiping

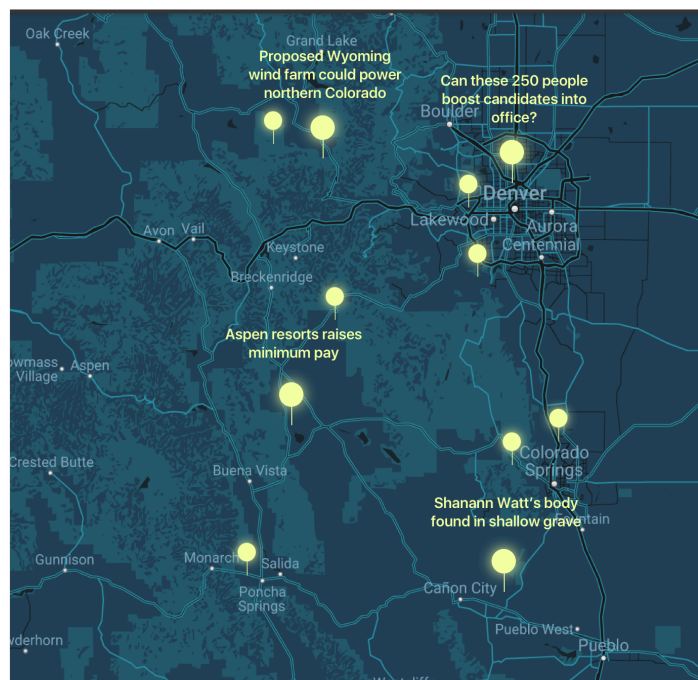
Cultivo would recommend user experience for the platforms be interactive and entertaining similar to the StoryHound format. A system for displaying content and enabling users to quickly read, save, share or pass on content is a strong recommendation for a feature on a next iteration. Users were heavily drawn in by swiping endlessly through content.

With consumers demanding more content quicker, a fast, interactive, format is a must have, swipeable formatting to keep users engaged and allow them to quickly go through endless content.

Location Tagging - Tagging stories by statewide, region, city

In order to enable effective Geo-targeting of stories, stories will have to be tagged with location in some way. Whether tagged by address, relative radius of affected area, or city, there needs to be some way for an algorithm to decipher where a story is happening and where it is relevant to.

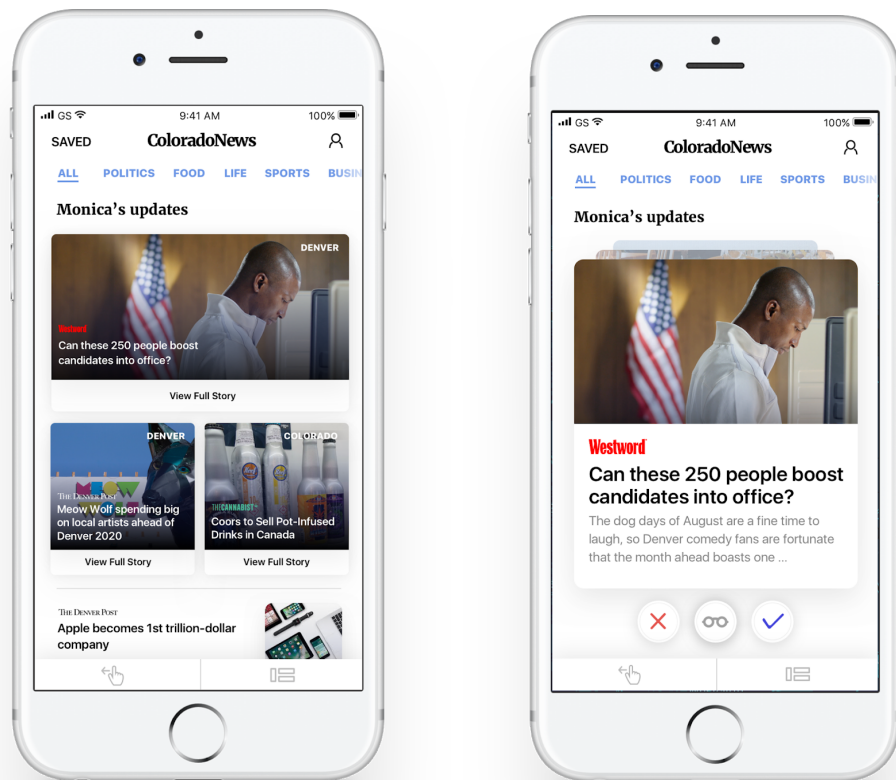
Geographic targeting helps stories feel relevant to users according to test results and interviews, and if a further product iteration is expected to provide a decent amount of content to users, location tagging will be a key feature. This will help inform daily digests, promoted content, and feed content for users, so further exploration into this is definitely necessary.



Potential Final Platform Layouts

Mobile

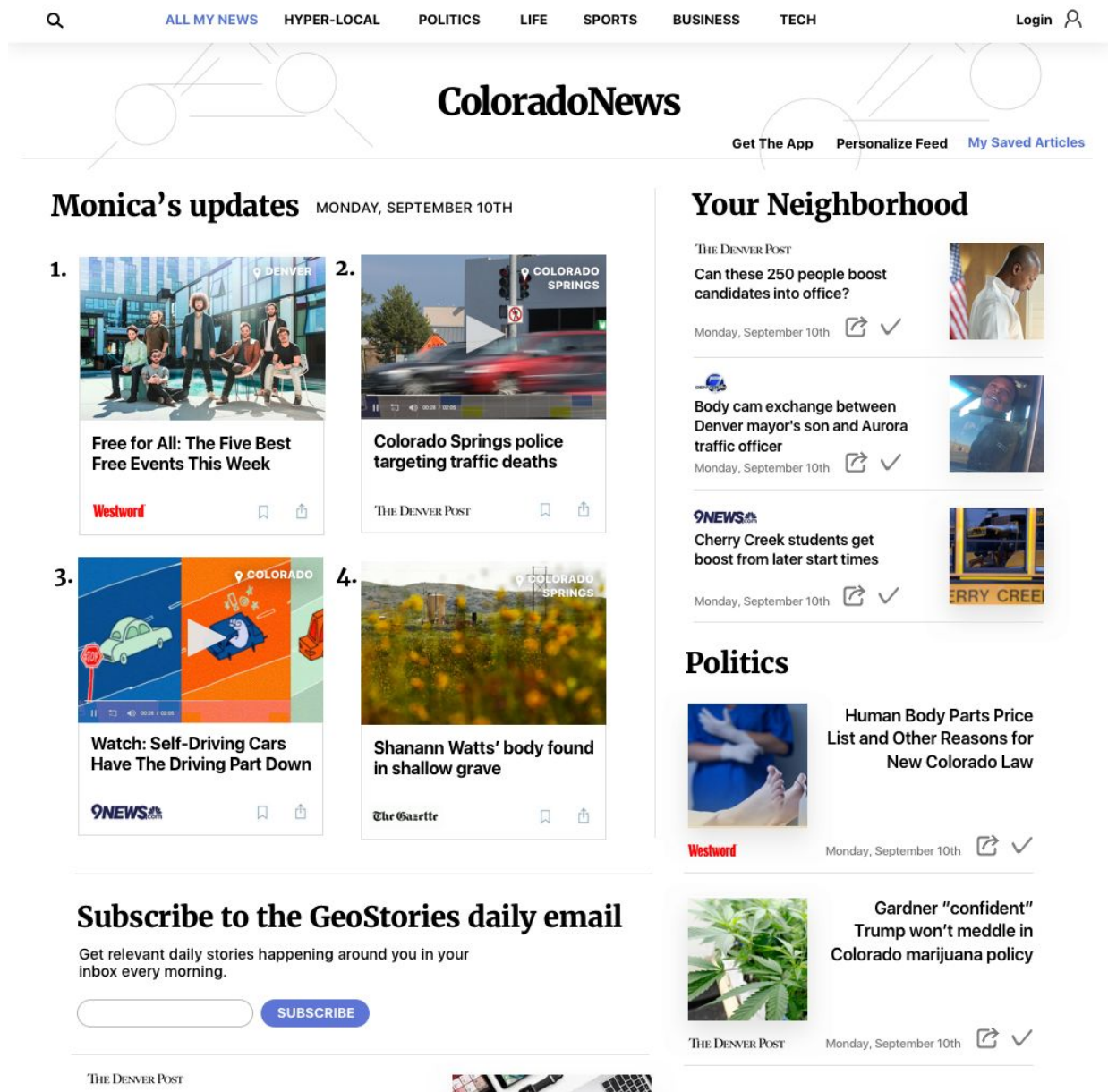
A seamless and fun mobile platform will be crucial to the success of a potential new Colorado news source. Consumers today spend the majority of their time on digital devices on mobile and thus consume their news on mobile as well. Below are mockups designed to illustrate what some of the features Cultivo has recommended implementing could look like in a final product. These mockups are just one possible iteration, the content and branding is for example only.



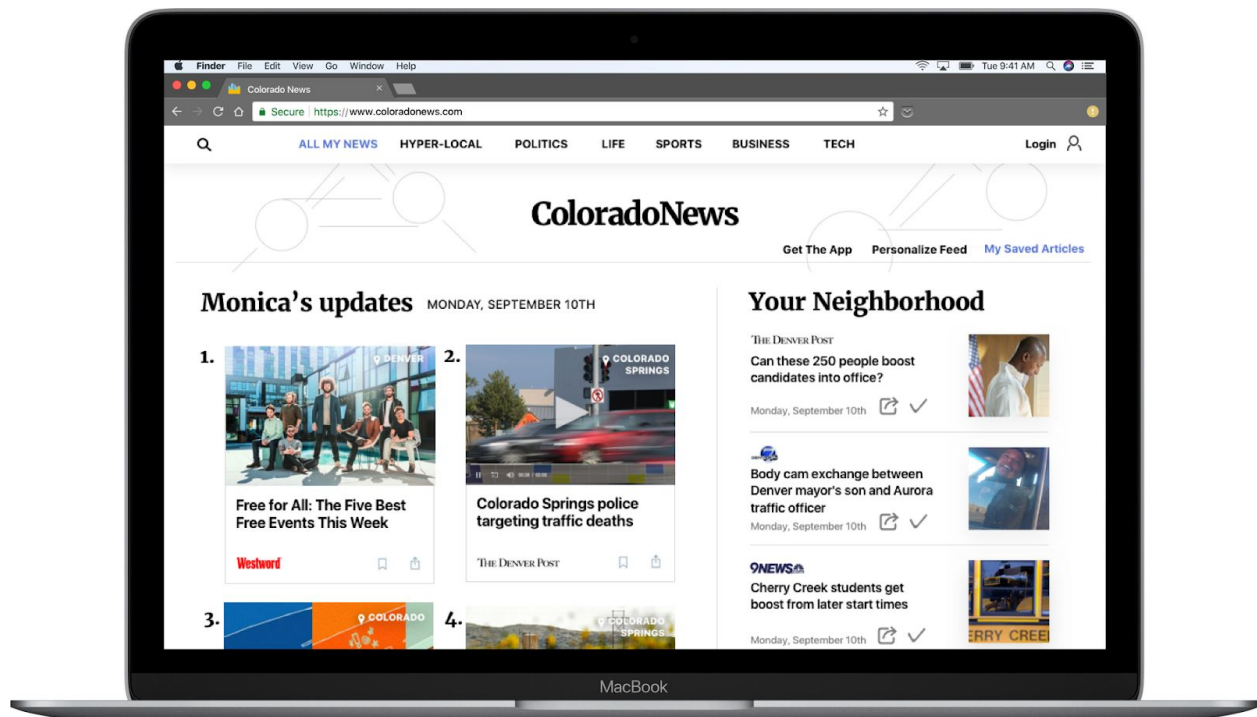
Potential feed of stories and StoryHound style swiping feature of a Colorado mobile news platform

Desktop

A potential desktop web platform is mocked up below featuring stories arranged by relevance for user (i.e. the Your Neighborhood section, updates based on a user's interests, and subscribing to an email digest of stories affecting a user).



1/2 Potential desktop view Colorado wide news platform with features Cultivo recommends further research into



2/2 Potential desktop view Colorado wide news platform with features Cultivo recommends further research into

Questions to be Answered

Content

Sourcing content is a critical investigation for further development of a new Colorado news platform. Consistent feedback from test users for all four prototypes indicated they wanted more content, or higher quality or more interesting content. Colorado stories can be perceived by users as dry or boring and national news is often utilized to fill this void.

Is there enough Colorado content to update multiple feeds of stories or provide enough video stories? Content feeling endless is very important to users, running out is not desirable. Will integrating national stories on topics relevant to Colorado with locally created content be necessary?

Further “How Might We” Question Research

Geographic Relevance

Will tagging stories with the locations impacted increase reader engagement? Further testing is recommended in addition to what Cultivo learned through introducing GeoStory to a test group.

Interactive Content Navigation

Do users want to swipe through content in a StoryHound format by topical category? What sorting features should be offered? What should be featured as the platform learns the users' preferences?

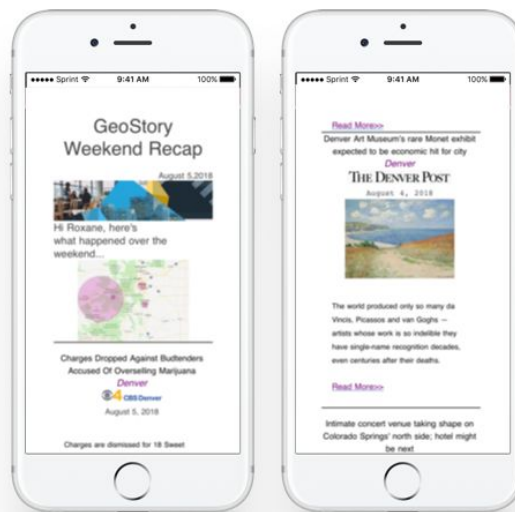
Bite-Sized Content to Longer Form Ratio

Consumers have demonstrated they enjoy quickly consumable content, but what balance of headlines vs. longer form stories is optimal for Coloradans? How long should a daily bite-sized feed be for each user? Can it vary? These questions should be developed further and answered.

Appendix

GeoStory Summary

GeoStory



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.

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.**

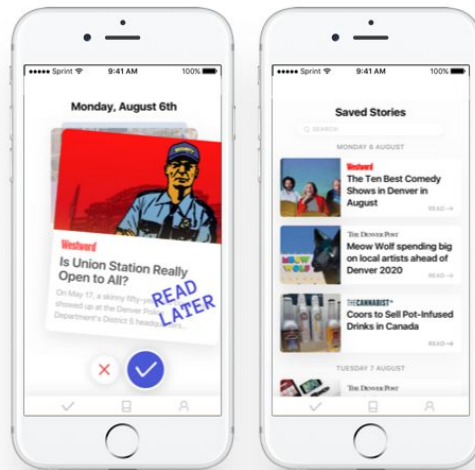
Recommendation

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.

StoryHound Summary

StoryHound



Prototype

StoryHound is a mobile app prototype allowing users to swipe through Colorado news stories quickly deciding to either read immediately, save for later, or pass. This prototype was designed to address demand for quickly consumable, bite-sized Colorado news content in a format that is entertaining and rewarding for users.

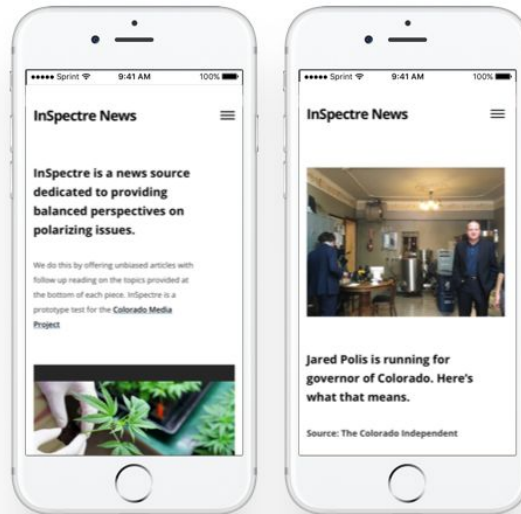
Results

Test users were eager to have StoryHound available for Colorado news and had numerous ideas for additional features that excited them. The top findings across test users indicated: they wanted endless content; StoryHound could replace users' go-to time killing app and provide social capital. Story feed personalization was a top feature request, and test users loved the swiping format, noting that saving content for later was key.

Recommendation

Based on multiple factors including test user feedback, the popularity of bite-sized content, and the pain points discovered through Colorado Media Project's (CMP) empathy interviews - StoryHound is worth building and launching for the public if further research is done.

InSpectre Summary



Prototype

InSpectre News is an exploration into how balanced perspectives might be provided on polarizing issues. Colorado readers felt they should be consuming more diverse viewpoints. Cultivo understood that having a truly unbiased source is impossible, so InSpectre offers counterweight articles to strong opinions via a website featuring Colorado news stories with several follow up articles written from differing perspectives linked for each.

Results

While test users felt the platform made sense and the idea of providing follow up reading from different perspectives both interesting and beneficial, the users observed on the InSpectre website actually engaged with only one piece of follow up reading or none on average before navigating to a new topic or leaving the prototype. Data collected on 252 users' behavior (tracked through Google Analytics and Hotjar) revealed the same trend.

Recommendation

Given consistent user behavior of only engaging with one piece of follow up reading if any, our conclusion is that people feel like they want politically balanced perspectives, yet tend to not actually take action. Further research and testing into different ways to present continued readings or multiple viewpoints side-by-side may be interesting, but the learnings from the InSpectre prototype tests revealed this might not be worthwhile.

The Daily Snack Summary



Prototype

The Daily Snack prototype was a set of two Twitter feeds developed in order to deliver a series of Colorado focused stories in an easy to consume medium. One focuses on lifestyle news, @CODailyLife, and the other focused on more traditional news, @CODailyNews. Test users were also asked to turn on notifications to receive push notifications when content was posted in order to replicate impactful push notifications. On these feeds, content ranged from links to full length articles, podcasts embedded within the stream, retweets of videos, and short updates. All of which were pushed out for a period of five days.

Results

The test users found the stream of content in the Twitter feeds engaging due to the nature of the feed and ease of consumption. But, it was also their interest in the stories that they repeatedly checked back on the feed to see updated content both throughout the day and the next day. The test users did find one single daily push of ten content pieces overwhelming and hard to

engage with. Instead, on days four and five of the test period the content was pushed out in a morning and evening group of five. Several of the test users found this more approachable and a better fit into their unscheduled leisure time but asked for a consistent release time. Another stand-out finding was that a few of the users found this a great format to more deeply engage with stories they initially heard about through the platform. Largely, users found the feed as a quick way to engage with content they would not normally take time to find and consume, including relevant Colorado content.

Recommendation

Based on both research and the experience our test users had with the prototype, a final version for this would be a stand alone web application using an aggregator across all Colorado journalist sources. A scrollable and shareable feed in bright colors with showcased photos would be the main feature. In order to determine if this is the right approach, more research and testing into how a Colorado-based aggregator could be profitable is needed. Based on findings from both GeoStory and StoryHound, a model that reflects partnerships with sources may be the most successful monetization strategy.

Potential Monetization

MONTHLY SUBSCRIPTIONS

Similar to plenty of new platforms on the market including news, entertainment, and food

IN-APP PURCHASES

Users may be interested in paying to subscribe to additional premium publications within a platform. For example, national sources or exclusive Colorado content.

SPONSORED CONTENT

One user suggested featuring sponsored content in a platform as featured stories. He noted that as long as it was clearly marked as sponsored content he would not mind encountering it.

PUBLICATIONS PAY FOR TRAFFIC AND INCLUSION

The third monetization method suggested by a user was having the publications whose stories are featured in a platform pay in order to be included. Her case was that the app could serve as a referral to publications own websites through the linked stories.

Cultivo Media Information



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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.

Looking to work with us? Email scott@cultivomedia.com and check our work out on cultivomedia.com