Basetrack (One-Eight)

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
Basetrack	November Eleven	An online journal and social media resource center providing continuous coverage of the entire deployment of a US Marine battalion to southern Afghanistan	**$202,000**

Basetrack created an independent, civilian online journal and social media resource center that provides continuous coverage of the deployment of the First Battalion, Eighth Marines (1/8), to southern Afghanistan. Military media units provide some reporting for the Marines, but their reporting is not independent and the reporters often lack knowledge about the areas in which they are based. This means that the families and friends of military members can only expect passing and superficial reports about those deployed to Afghanistan. Basetrack aimed to provide a platform for reporting to and drawing reporting from the Marines and their families, in order to broaden the perspectives that surround US military operations and to better inform the Marines, their families, and the public.

THE INNOVATION

Basetrack's site combined original reporting from a network of embedded reporters in Afghanistan with aggregated news and analysis about wider regional issues and user-generated content (photos, video, and commentary) from the Marines themselves. Its WordPress-based platform integrates existing popular social media products (such as Flickr, Vimeo, Twitter, and Facebook) to host and broadcast content created by Marines and by the project's embedded reporters. Basetrack allowed the troops and their families to be interactive audiences: they steered, challenged and augmented coverage of the 1/8 Marines' deployment in Afghanistan, and distributed content through their own social media channels.

IMPLEMENTATION

The project aimed to chronicle new uses of social media by the military. Basetrack originally intended to employ existing social media frameworks such as Twitter, Facebook, Vimeo, and Flickr through a relatively simple platform which would require very little software development. Ultimately, however, Basetrack decided to create a more complex platform where content was organized by, and posted in relation to, its location on a web-based map. Basetrack struggled to find reliable, effective programmers to develop its WordPress-based publishing platform, and the platform ultimately suffered from various technical glitches that made it difficult to load pages, navigate, and view posts. As a result, activity on Basetrack's primary website subsided and much of the activity took place on its Facebook page. To gain an audience among 1/8 Marines and their family members, the project relied entirely on word-of-mouth and viral peer-to-peer marketing through social media channels.

Basetrack's first team of embedded photo journalists traveled to Afghanistan in September 2010. The project had originally planned to host three to four full-time contributors, but because of the danger inherent to being embedded, it instead ended up using one full-time staff member and more than a dozen part time-time contributors. Basetrack's embedded photo journalists documented the Marines' daily operations through essays and photographs taken with the iPhone's Hipstamatic Application.

In addition to the difficulties the project faced in working with outside developers, Basetrack encountered a number of other significant technical and operational challenges. Gaining internet access in remote areas of southern Afghanistan was a challenge and required the team to use expensive and often ineffective satellite data modems. The project also encountered resistance and an unusual level of restrictions placed upon its embedded contributors by the battalion's commanding officers. In response, Basetrack created redaction software designed to foster radical transparency of the military's censorship policies. The software allows commanders to black out any text or images, but requires that they indicate that the item was censored, provide an explanation, and assign an officer to be held responsible for the censorship. The software made it easier for the military to censor Basetrack's content, but helped the project avoid unnecessary censorship when commanding officers found explaining their redactions too awkward.

Basetrack's embedded contributors were asked to leave six weeks ahead of schedule on February 5, 2011 amid concerns about the mapping tool's "perceived Operational Security violations." Follow-up e-mails from the military concluded that "media ground rules were not violated" and a definitive explanation for the reasons for terminating Basetrack's access was never given. The cancellation notice was issued shortly after Basetrack was given an ultimatum to shut down its Facebook page.

Following the ejection from their embed in Afghanistan, Basetrack's project team went on to present on the project at conferences around the world and to build wireframes for a future

Number of Social Media Mentions

blogsearch   facebook   twitter
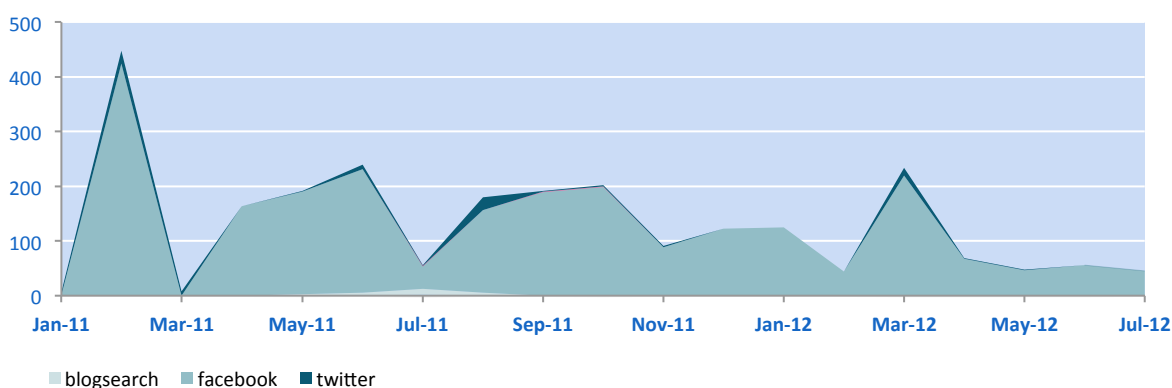
Number of Facebook Users Reached

Daily Engaged Users   Daily Total Reach
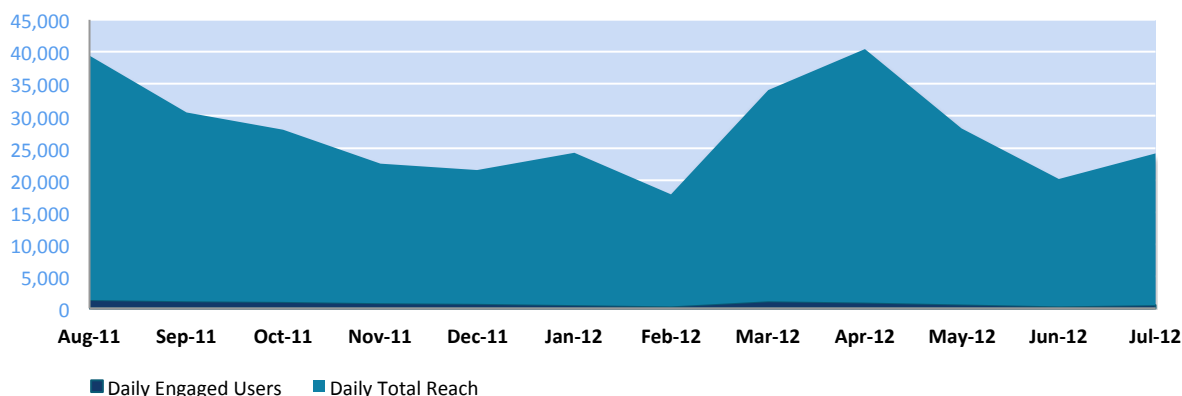
redesign of its website. Basetrack produced a book of the images and the Julliard School in New York City adapted Basetrack's photos, videos, essays, Facebook transcripts, and tweets into a multi-media live performance.

REACH AND OUTCOMES

Though it was asked to leave its post in Afghanistan prematurely, Basetrack was successful in building an audience of the US First Battalion, Eighth Marine Corps members, their families, and other members of the public. Analytics on the project's Facebook page (which hosted the majority of the project's activity after the 1/8 Battalion returned home from its deployment in Afghanistan) suggest that its daily total reach averaged nearly 27,000 individuals per month from August 2011 until July 2012. During the time when the 1/8 marines were deployed in Afghanistan, Basetrack's website was updated with 238 posts, 1460 images, and 100 embedded videos. Seven embedded reporters contributed to the primary content of the site, in addition to the Marine officers who were in charge of redaction.

Basetrack provided an invaluable benefit to military family members, connecting them to information on their loved ones, to other military families, and to background information on Afghanistan. Evidence of Basetrack's impact can be found in the direct communication from family members of 1/8 Marines via postings to Basetrack's website and Facebook wall. Although independent-minded, vocal, and engaged, the parents and friends of the 1/8 service members were also respectful and civil, expressing very little hostility in their Facebook postings. Users shared articles of interest and generally engaged in intelligent debate.

Essays and photographs from the project have been used in a number of well-known outlets including the *New York Times*, *Foreign Policy* magazine, *Newsweek*, BBC/PRI's *The World*, *Wired*, and *Gizmodo*. Basetrack was the recipient of a number of awards, received widespread media attention from the traditional press and blogs, and generated significant conversation in online forums and social networks (both positive and negative). Project leader Teru Kuwayama has also been invited to speak to Afghanistan-bound US military forces and provide advice on information operations strategy. The project team aimed to use Basetrack as a replicable model that could be imitated in other military units to provide an in-depth, wide-spectrum view of US military operations. Other military units have expressed interest in potentially hosting a similar project, but it looks unlikely that Basetrack will return to Afghanistan. Its project team is developing and upgrading its WordPress software piece with the intention of making it usable for any kind of blog or media project.