

Zeega

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
Zeega	Media and Place Productions	A platform to empower citizens and local news organizations to create multimedia stories about their communities	\$420,000

Integrating citizen-produced media with the work of professional journalists has been a challenge for many news organizations. And due to financial and technical constraints, creating multimedia projects is difficult for many newsrooms. Media and Place Productions won Knight News Challenge funding to address both of these needs by improving upon Zeega, an HTML5 toolkit that enables individuals and local news organizations to collaboratively produce, curate, and publish immersive multimedia projects without writing code.

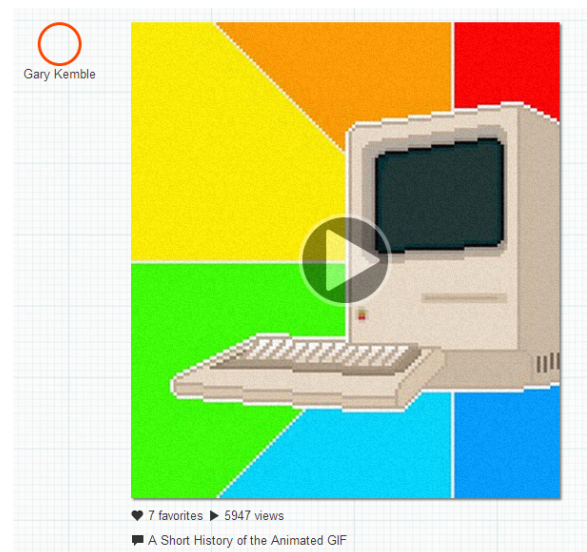
THE INNOVATION

At its core, Zeega is a web-based interactive storytelling application. Although many other tools exist for editing audio and visual content, Zeega is unique in that it provides an HTML5 interface for editing audio clips, videos, and images into nonlinear narratives, allowing users to seamlessly combine professional content with content from social media sites, news organizations, and libraries. Zeega allows users to create these narratives without infringing upon copyright by referencing content across the web and displaying proper citation and trackback URLs, rather than copying or hosting files on the site itself. The Zeega team's ultimate goal was to establish a tool for combining narrative and data that could be used collaboratively by newsrooms and citizens, strengthening news organizations' engagement with their communities.

IMPLEMENTATION

When Zeega won its News Challenge funding in 2011, it was organized as a nonprofit entity. At the time, in addition to developing the Zeega tool itself, the project team consulted and

partnered with local news organizations to create customized multimedia experiences through the Localore initiative, a project of the Association of Independents in Radio that aims to promote innovation among public radio and TV broadcasters.



It was not long, however, before the project team identified a fundamental tension in their approach: providing consulting services to local media organizations to help them produce content was a very different business than building a scalable, sustainable product. The former business model pulled the project team in different directions to provide customized solutions for multiple clients, whereas the latter allowed the team to focus on developing and improving a single product that could be priced consistently for users. At the same time, the Zeega team did not feel that they could set a price for their tool that would be sufficient to cover development costs. This assumption spurred the team to prioritize a third type of

business model: creating a community-based media platform that ultimately could reach a large enough audience to interest advertisers.

The Zeega team spent over a year prototyping and refining their platform, finally launching it on June 12, 2013. While Zeega was in development, an accelerating trend posed a problem for the team: although more people were creating and accessing content on their mobile phones, Zeega was designed for use on the desktop. By reworking the software, the team was able to make Zeegas visible on a mobile interface, but enabling the creation of Zeegas on a mobile phone would have been an expensive and time-consuming proposition. Partnering with media organizations to pilot Zeega also resulted in some unforeseen insights. The Zeega team was able to garner a prestigious roster of early partners, including NPR, *Mother Jones*, and *The Atlantic*, and they hoped that those partnerships would be valuable allies for helping increase public awareness of Zeega. However, they discovered that the process of building those partnerships was extremely resource-intensive—the investment of time and energy was not matched by a financial return that could support Zeega’s long-term development goals.

Due to the twin decisions to focus on building a community-based media platform and on developing the ability to create Zeegas on mobile platforms—an expensive undertaking that could not be supported by its existing

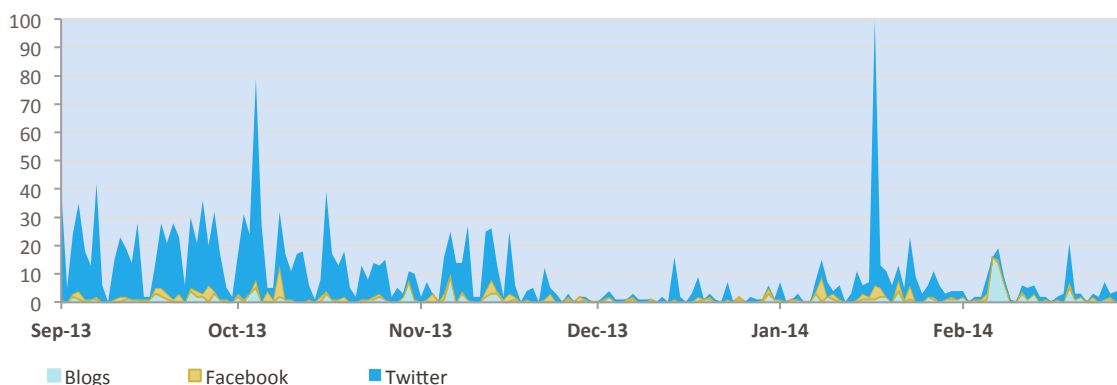
business model—the team moved away from its nonprofit status and restructured Zeega as a for-profit entity in June 2013. They determined that raising money through venture capital investments was a more promising path to support the development and growth that they envisioned than the time-intensive processes of pursuing grant funding and consulting and partnership fees that their original nonprofit status would have entailed. As it transitioned into a for-profit entity, Zeega was incubated at Matter, a media-focused start-up accelerator in San Francisco, where Zeega was a member of the inaugural class of projects.

In focusing on the Zeega experience on mobile devices, the team decided to create a separately branded product called Pop. Launched in February 2014, Pop is mobile app that takes the interactive multimedia concept behind Zeega and makes it functional on a mobile phone, enabling users to record photos and videos on the go and integrate them with web content. The shift to Pop has necessarily resulted in a de-emphasis on the team’s media partnerships, as Pop is designed for a much broader audience of young early technology adopters, and not a more niche user base of journalists.

REACH AND OUTCOMES

Zeega’s current users fall into three broad categories: those who follow innovative trends in journalism, those interested in the

Zeega Social Media Mentions



educational possibilities of Zeega, and younger early technology adopters, with the latter group being the largest. By February 2014, 150–200 new users per day were using the web-based Zeega app. To date, the most popular Zeega project was a baseball-related project created during the 2013 World Series that showed pictures and video clips of Red Sox player Jacoby Ellsbury escaping a rundown, accompanied by circus music and the sounds of a crowd in the background. That Zeega-produced story garnered over 100,000 views in 15 minutes, and the Zeega team attributes its viral spread to its timeliness and referral traffic from social media. Other Zeega stories have received only a fraction of that attention, however—even those created and promoted by major media outlets. For instance, a notable early Zeega project created by NPR with photos

and videos of the March on Washington set against audio clips of marchers recalling their experiences had been viewed 6,350 times as of March 2014.

Zeega's growth model was predicated on a number of early adopters discovering the app and using it consistently, but the early adopters' behavior failed to meet that expectation. Instead, Zeega had difficulty retaining users after their initial site visit, even though they seemed to enjoy the process of making Zeega stories. As a result, the Zeega team is refocusing its attention on Pop, which its creators hope will prove more habit-forming among teens and young adults. Thus far, Pop has raised over \$1 million in venture capital funding.