

iWitness

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
iWitness	Adaptive Path	A web-based tool for aggregating and cross-referencing news events with user-generated content	\$360,000

For media outlets looking to supplement professional news coverage with citizen-generated content, finding relevant content can be a challenging task. Keyword searches and hashtags fail to differentiate between first-person accounts of a news event and secondhand observations. Some news organizations have built custom systems to collect crowdsourced media, but these tend to be cumbersome and resource intensive, resulting in little actual use. User experience firm Adaptive Path won News Challenge funding in 2011 to bridge the gap between traditional and citizen media through iWitness, a web-based tool that aggregates user-generated content from social media during big news events.

THE INNOVATION

iWitness combined time indexing and geolocation technologies to allow users to search for citizen-generated content by both time and place. A date-time selector let the user search for events by hour and minute, and a map location box let users enter either a general city or a specific street address. When a major news event occurred (such as Hurricane Sandy hitting the East Coast in October 2012), iWitness could show users Flickr photos and Twitter messages posted from people at the scene, all aggregated into a single, easy-to-browse interface. Although an increasing number of services allow their content to be geotagged in this way, iWitness was unique in focusing on organizing data about news events.

By showing the same scene from multiple social media vantage points, iWitness aimed to provide a new way for people to explore and experience the news. Its ultimate goal was to

make it easier for journalists to find and analyze meaningful citizen content about world events.



IMPLEMENTATION

Adaptive Path is primarily a design consultancy. Identifying a need for a different kind of expertise to develop iWitness, it partnered with New Context, a software development company, to carry out the technical work of building the iWitness tool. New Context developers recognized that in order for iWitness to be used by newsrooms, it needed to be something that non-tech-savvy journalists could easily manage. Additionally, staffing and funding constraints meant that once iWitness was released, opportunities to perform ongoing maintenance of a server-based tool would be limited. For these reasons, iWitness was built as an entirely browser-based application.

The initial development process for iWitness was fairly smooth. The project timeline was extended four weeks beyond what had originally been planned—two weeks were dedicated to final technical iterations refining the finished product, and two more weeks were spent on marketing and promotion activities. The team worked with newsrooms at *The*

Washington Post, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Palm Beach Post*, and the *Sacramento Press* to beta test the application. iWitness was released to the general public on June 12, 2012. A promotional video about the tool posted on Adaptive Path's blog at that time received around 5,000 views. The visual design of the application didn't lend itself to a mobile display, but it was supported on Google Chrome and Safari, and it was viewable on mobile devices such as the iPad.

Unfortunately, iWitness hit a critical roadblock when Twitter changed its API in June 2013. The new version permitted only authenticated Twitter users to take advantage of the Twitter API; prior to that, using the Twitter API wasn't dependent on a user signing in. As a result, the mechanism by which iWitness retrieved information from Twitter was essentially blocked. In its News Challenge application, the iWitness team acknowledged the risks that potential changes to the Twitter or Flickr APIs might represent, as well as the tool's vulnerability to such changes. Unfortunately, when Twitter changed its API, the iWitness team lacked the funding to execute the extensive technical retooling of the application

needed to restore full functionality. Such retooling would have involved reengineering the product to support a server-based solution with ongoing maintenance and production demands. Consequently, the team decided not to overhaul its software to account for Twitter's new API. As of March 2014, the iWitness tool has been fully disabled, and iwitness.adaptivepath.com returns a user to Adaptive Path's website.

REACH AND OUTCOMES

Before the change in the Twitter API undermined the tool's technical underpinnings, iWitness was gaining notable traction. Within the first 11 months after its launch, the site received approximately 18,000 visits from 13,000 unique users. The professional organization Investigative Reporters and Editors reported that several of their members used iWitness to support their coverage of events such as the 2012 Newtown shootings and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings.

Currently, iWitness is non-operational, and team members have no plans to return to update the project.