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## **North Jersey journalists, computer coders team up to create news tools**

A database allows consumers to quickly look up the widely varying costs of radiology services throughout New Jersey. A map permits members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community to identify towns where they've been harassed or assaulted.

A digital graph correlates damage done by superstorm Sandy with plummeting property values and local taxes. And an application provides data on gun violence data and gun laws for local areas, and then let a user tweet their legislators about the issue of gun control.

Those websites and applications were among 11 created during a frenzied 24-hour period at "Hack Jersey," the first so-called hackathon in the Garden State to team up local journalists and computer software coders. The competition, which kicked off Saturday and ended Sunday with some bleary-eyed contestants, was hosted by Montclair State University.

There were more than 70 participants in Hack Jersey, with 41 actually competing by creating projects that aimed to find "transformational" ways for New Jersey residents to consume news and information. Fourteen participants pulled all-nighters at the campus, trying hard to hit the quick deadline.

Allison Boswell, a Montclair State information technology major who lives in Wayne, said she drank plenty of coffee after staying overnight as part of the team that created the "Hack Sandy" application.

"I got maybe two hours of sleep," she said. "I slept on the floor ... I've had so much coffee. At some point I'm going to crash so bad I'm going to need an airbag."

In this digital age, "data journalism" is a buzzword for the task of finding intriguing graphic ways via the Internet to present statistics and facts, using them as tools.

"As a journalist, so much of story-telling these days is not just words, it's not just linear story-telling ... it's numbers and pictures," said Debbie Galant, director of New Jersey News Commons — created by Montclair State to foster collaborations between state news organizations. "And it's a whole new skill set. It's very hard."

Galant and Hack Jersey co-founder Tom Meagher, data editor at Digital First Media — a management company specializing in newspapers — came up with the idea for the hackathon at a conference in September. New Jersey News Commons and Knight-Mozilla OpenNews — which partners news organizations with coders — were lead sponsors for Hack Jersey, along with local media including The Record.

The hackathon's participants broke into teams that each included journalists and coders, and then worked on their projects. Dave Sheingold, computer-assisted reporting specialist for The Record, was part of a team whose project, "Schools and What You Get for Your Money," aimed to create a consumer guide for parents to compare one school with another, to analyze schools based on factors such as socioeconomic groups, districts, test scores and other measures.

Sheingold's team couldn't complete the project because one of its members dropped out. "I have no qualms about the work we did," said one of Sheingold's team members, Eyal Ben-Ari. "We did great work. We just didn't finish."

On Sunday afternoon, the Hack Jersey participants did presentations on their projects for a panel of media and tech judges, who chose four winners and awarded prizes to the best projects. The audience chose a fifth winner.

On Sunday Stephen Engelberg, editor in chief of ProPublica, a non-profit investigative newsroom, and Jeff Larson, one of its news apps developers, addressed the Hack Jersey participants, offering them a sense of how powerful news-related apps can be. Engelberg described how ProPublica developed "Dollars for Docs," which showed which physicians had received money from pharmaceutical makers, doctors who in some cases then endorsed their products or prescribed them for patients.

"We created an application that was itself news," Engelberg said. "It was a tool that could be used by the patient."

It remains to be seen if New Jersey News Commons will conduct hackathons on an annual basis, Galant said. She added that she would like to see more collaboration among the communications, computer science and graphics departments at Montclair State.

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