

can and do record the destruction that has been wrought on their nation. In five years, how much of that video have Americans ever seen?

Exactly my point.

Now, this is going to be upsetting to many of my colleagues in the business. When anyone can pick up a video camera, shoot a story and post it on the Web, then the “TV professionals”—an oxymoron, to be sure—are no longer so special.

No, they aren't. If we profess to believe in a free press, then it doesn't make sense to get freaked out when a free press actually starts to emerge. A.J. Liebling wrote, “Freedom of the press

is guaranteed only to those who own one.” Today, pretty much anyone can own the means to report and produce video news. To which I say, “Good.” It's going to get very competitive out there, and it's about time it did.

As we begin by empowering journalists of all stripes, the democratization of video will not be contained within newspaper or TV newsrooms—nor should it. Everything about our time tells me that we are about to embark on a great global awakening. Voices that have never been heard are about to make themselves known, and the rather tiny spectrum of information and opinion that has dominated our

national and global public discourse is about to be split wide open. And, I say, high time. ■

Michael Rosenblum has run Rosenblum Associates for 20 years, training news organizations throughout the world in how to equip and prepare their staff to work as videojournalists. Among his clients have been the BBC, the Voice of America, NY1, The McGraw-Hill Companies, Verizon, TV4 Sweden, and WKRN-TV in Nashville, Tennessee. He also was a founder of New York Times Television and Current TV.

A Retired Newspaper Journalist Takes What He Knows to the Web

‘What “sold” RappVoice to the local audience was solid and timely reporting, analysis, and in-depth explanation of complex subjects ...’

BY JAMES P. GANNON

I am an old newspaper guy—a reporter, columnist, Washington bureau chief, and finally editor of The Des Moines Register. I love ink on paper, the feel of newsprint in my hands, and the old standards of newspaper journalism as I came to understand them in the 1960's, when reporters simply reported, editors edited, and opinions went on the editorial and op-ed pages, where they belonged.

In other words, I am as outdated as a polyester pantsuit. So what am I—a retired journalist nearing the age of 70—doing operating an online news service?

First, some history. I got into this unruly world of Web-based journalism about two years ago, in October 2006, when I created and launched The Rappahannock Voice (www.rappvoice.com), an online community “newspaper” for my home community—a scenic, rural retreat along the Blue

Ridge Mountains in Virginia, about 75 miles west of Washington, D.C.. “RappVoice,” as the locals call it, covers only local news—Rappahannock County government, school news, local politics, business and people.

RappVoice was started out of frustration with the inadequacy of local news coverage in Rappahannock County, where I've lived since I left daily journalism in the mid-1990's. Our county has no daily papers, no radio or TV stations, and only one local weekly, The Rappahan-

nock News, whose local coverage at that time tended toward light fluff and little enterprise or hard news.

Seeing major local stories going unreported, I decided—almost on

The screenshot shows the homepage of [rappvoice.com](http://www.rappvoice.com). The main headline is "Patrick O'Connell borrows \$17.5 million to buy out former partner and finance future of his famous Inn at Little Washington" by James P. Gannon. The article text includes: "To buy out his former partner and finance the future of The Inn at Little Washington, owner Patrick O'Connell has borrowed \$17.5 million under a loan agreement that assigns all its properties, leases, income and fixtures to the lender as security for the loan." A photo of the Inn at Little Washington is shown. The article continues: "Last month, O'Connell and his former business partner, Reinhard Lynch, who held a 50% interest in The Inn and nearly two dozen other properties jointly owned with O'Connell, announced that they had settled their long-simmering business dispute. The terms of that settlement were not disclosed at the time, but O'Connell said it left him as sole owner of the Inn and the other properties, concentrated in Washington, VA." The article concludes: "The large loan that O'Connell obtained to accomplish the buy-out of his former partner came to light in an examination of documents on file in the Rappahannock County Clerk's office. The documents, dated Jan. 19, 2007, were filed with the Clerk on Jan. 26, in recording property transactions that transferred the ownership from the former Lynch-O'Connell partnership to a new entity called Inn at LW, LLC, a Virginia limited liability company." A sidebar on the left lists departments like Arts/Entertainment, Classified ads, Events, News, Opinion, Politics & Elections, Reviews, School News, and Sports. There are also links for REGISTER and LOGIN. At the bottom, there are advertisements for Business Loan, Personal Loans, Loans - No Fax, and a Bliz Loan Up to \$150,000.

a whim—to create an online news service. No geek, I knew nothing about how to do Web journalism, but I soon found that a common blogging software (WordPress) could be adapted to look like a news Web site and, with some help from a local Web designer, RappVoice went public. With less than \$1,000 in start-up costs and a simple, how-to manual as my tech training, I entered the publishing business.

I was amazed at how quickly RappVoice took hold in our media-deprived area. My ability to publish a story immediately—often within a few hours, or even minutes of an event—was an eye opener to local readers and left the local weekly looking stale when it published several days or a week later. RappVoice did stories in greater depth than the weekly and published them when they were news, not history. We dug out news (like a story about the county's most famous business—The Inn at Little Washington—needing to borrow \$17.5 million to buy out a disgruntled partner) that the paper wouldn't touch.

What sold RappVoice to the local audience was solid and timely reporting, analysis and in-depth explanation of complex subjects, like county budgets and taxes, salted with some OMG (Oh My God) stories, like a rare sex-and-gore murder trial. The audience boomed, and soon local advertisers (real estate agents, a bank, a fencing company, a dentist, etc.) wanted to advertise on RappVoice—without any sales pitch from me.

In short, I found that the old-fashioned journalism that I learned decades ago at The Wall Street Journal remained much in demand on the local level. I put a high premium on accuracy, completeness, clarity and fairness—the old virtues of traditional journalism—and submerged or masked my opinions about what I reported. I valued credibility for RappVoice over

controversy; I wrote mostly about what happened, not what I thought of it. I insisted that readers posting comments on stories sign their real names, just as a good newspaper shuns anonymous letters to the editor. (This substantially reduces the number of comments posted, because many

I valued credibility for RappVoice over controversy; I wrote mostly about what happened, not what I thought of it. I insisted that readers posting comments on stories sign their real names, just as a good newspaper shuns anonymous letters to the editor.

Web-users prefer to rant under screen names, but it eliminates anonymous cheap-shot attacks.).

Publish—Until I Quit

Two years of experience convinces me that RappVoice could be replicated in countless local communities—rural towns, suburbs or even urban neighborhoods—where local news coverage in print and broadcast is weak. I think it means the journalism of the old values can reach and win over new readers in a Web-delivered package. What we knew as “print journalism” doesn't have to die—it can be reborn, still clinging to old virtues, with digital delivery. Take it from me: Old dogs can learn new tricks.

This doesn't mean it's easy. RappVoice takes an inordinate amount of my time—going to county meetings and hearings, interviewing, writing and editing. RappVoice ate my retirement freedom, swallowed me whole. Disappointments: I had hoped to recruit many locals to write for the site but found few willing. I had hoped for more feedback from readers but found few willing to stand up publicly to state opinions under real names.

Internet publishing has its special perils. In early December 2008, a

cyber-disaster struck RappVoice. With no warning to clients, the Web-hosting firm I used suddenly shut down its servers—apparently because of financial trouble—making RappVoice inaccessible to readers. Worse, my archive containing two-plus years of work disappeared and may be gone forever. I am outraged by the Web-host's irresponsible behavior, and chastened by my failure to keep a back-up. I am attempting to restore or rebuild RappVoice, but the outcome is uncertain.

Even with payments from the local weekly newspaper that published some of the RappVoice stories and my advertising revenue, my income does not match what an entry-level reporter might earn today. Possibly, in a larger community, the income from such a site might be higher. But my experience suggests that an independent, local online news service is a viable avocation for those who can afford it, such as a retired journalist or someone who doesn't need to support a family. The rewards are more in personal satisfaction than in monetary payoff.

Reality check: the work is demanding, the deadlines ever-present, the financial rewards very modest—a few thousand dollars of revenue. Moreover, sustaining this project over time poses a dilemma. It's mostly a one-man band; if I quit, the music stops. With no successor in sight, RappVoice is both a triumph and an albatross. With apologies to Samuel Coleridge, I feel like the Ancient Mariner, sailing precariously on the Internet sea, wind in my sails, but unsure what's over the horizon. ■

James P. Gannon is the retired former editor of The Des Moines Register, and a former reporter for The Wall Street Journal and Washington bureau chief of The Detroit News.