

Real DC: News for the Un-federal city

A business proposition

By Kathy Kiely
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THE MISSION:

To harness the ambitions of Washington's journalism students, the energy of its information-savvy retirees and the power of the Internet to cover and publish the news that the Washington Post can't afford to print.

THE PITCH:

Real DC will provide local and hyper-local news a city in which the news media is focused on every place but home.

Our on-line service will accomplish this goal at a low cost and virtually no overhead by exploiting:

- A rich pool of local journalistic talent: We will recruit volunteer student journalists, repaying their legwork with real-world experience that will launch them in paying careers. We will give prematurely retired and bought-out journalists the newsroom adrenaline fix they want -- along with a chance to pass their values onto a new generation.
- A justifiably insecure local media. Newsroom managers across the district know they should be experimenting with multi-media. They know they should be spearheading hyper-local coverage and citizen blogs. And, if they are journalists worth the name, they know they should chase news where it takes them -- not just where the ad dollars go. *Real DC* will be a laboratory where they can follow their instincts and ideals -- little cost and no risk to their mainstream operations.

- Universities, journalism foundations and other philanthropic organizations interested in using the Internet to empower the public and expand journalism's reach.

Real DC will partner some of Washington's most experienced journalists with aspiring young reporters to provide daily surveillance of such undercovered Washington beats as city council, the local courts, cops and, especially, the local school system. We'll combine new technology with old-fashioned shoe leather reporting to create features such as a Google maps mashup for crime statistics that will plot what's happening street by street..

In local high schools and elementary schools, we'll develop a network of kid stringers. They'll be able to alert us to potential news stories. They'll also get a chance to express themselves by writing reviews of books they're reading -- and the food they're eating in school cafeterias. We'd ask them to do video reports on their school teams' athletic events -- developing a city-wide highlights archive that could make it onto mainstream TV.

These opportunities will empower kids, develop new voices and attract a new generation of readers, along with -- not so incidentally -- their parents.

THE MARKET:

Arguably the most information-obsessed city in the world, Washington, D.C. nonetheless suffers from a peculiar information gap. There is little sustained coverage of the city council, the grassroots politics of DC's eight wards, the city's 37 Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (venues for key zoning debates) or its 178 public schools. For a city that perennially ranks among the top five in the country in terms of high-speed internet usage, the solution seems obvious.

Real DC will take advantage of the Web's relatively low-cost news delivery mechanism to raise the local intelligence quotient. Where other media focus on glamor beats -- the presidency, Congress, the Supreme Court -- we'll drill down to the most local level, blanketing local police precincts, schools, zoning boards and neighborhood meetings. While other established local media players, such as the Washington Post, WTOP and the major TV stations, juggle the coverage demands of a tri- or quad-furcated community (two states and one city-state in the shadow of the nation's Capitol), *Real DC*

will focus on the least covered of all the local jurisdictions: the central city.

Up until now, DC proper has lost out as commercial players have focused their Internet ventures on the more uniformly affluent suburban counties. The Washington Post's first hyper-local internet project is launching in Loudoun County. The closest Backfence.com got to the city was Bethesda.

That means there's a golden opportunity for an pilot online project within the city limits. That's the territory *Real DC* intends to own. We think we can break new journalistic ground, attract new audiences and -- at the end of the long tail -- bring new advertisers into our hyper-local cyber-community.

THE MODELS:

In creating *Real DC*, we intend to borrow elements from some established journalistic models:

- Chicago's City News Bureau, a legendary training ground for many writers who went on to greater glory, among them, the late Kurt Vonnegut. As City News once did, Real DC will blanket local police precincts, neighborhood political gatherings and other community events. Our reporters will be green but

energetic. Their copy will be edited by proven veterans.

Updating the model, we'll take advantage of the Web's interactivity to create blogs and attract user-generated content.

But the heart of the site -- and what will drive the user responses -- will be well-edited shoe-leather reporting. We'll cover the city the way the Washington Post covers the world.

- States News Service: This (in)famous Washington bureau was designed to provide DC reporting for papers too small to afford their own bureaus but it also provided a bench of extras for some established DC bureaus, handling the stories that the regulars didn't have the time or desire to cover. Like City News, States also relied on young reporters who made up for what they lacked in experience with their ambition to get ahead. The main take-away from the States model: if you can't beat 'em, offer to do the scut work they won't. Rather than competing with existing news media, we'd offer to be their legmen -- covering the routine meeting or press conference on the off chance they might produce a story. This provides the mainstream media with the surveillance they need and *Real*

DC's journalists with the occasional chance to break into print or broadcast air.

- The Daily Princetonian: This five-day a week college newspaper serves as the local daily for the town of Princeton, N.J. and provides an interesting potential business model for *Real DC*: All ads for the paper are sold by a student sales staff. *Real DC* will ask local MBA and economics professors and their students to adopt us as a project. Students will not only sell ads and do the shoe leather marketing that Mark Potts said proved so valuable to Backfence.com; they'd also be tasked with developing a business model to make the website profitable. The payoff for *Real DC* is obvious; the payoff for the students: real-world experience that they can tout when they seek their first paying job.

THE MONEY:

Let's get real. Boardrooms today prefer affluent suburbs to fiscally motley inner cities. The only way we can prove to them that a publication like *Real DC* will work is to just do it. That means looking for a few good

philanthropists willing to contribute seed money and journalists to contribute sweat equity.

As already outlined, Real DC plans to start on the cheap, relying heavily on student-power and journalist-volunteers. We will also solicit in-kind contributions from potential media partners. A Washington Post or USA TODAY to donate the time of a software developer; a WTOP or Channel 9 might chip in old equipment or training assistance. As already noted, we will tap into other free expertise by offering ourselves up as a laboratory for journalism, IT and business students at universities throughout the region.

We believe we can eliminate most overhead by keeping our offices virtual, taking advantage of facilities at the National Press Club or newsrooms around town for regular training sessions and meetings.

Some costs, however, are unavoidable. Estimated needs for first year:

Phone, forwarding and answering service: \$1,000

Software: \$20,000

Hosting/bandwidth: \$60,000

Salaries and benefits: \$250,000. This money would be used to hire one or two fulltime employees and to provide part-time stipends to others to launch the publication.

Accounting: We would hope to get our first year's financials done pro-bono or through an SBA incubator program, but may have to hire a firm.

Legal: *Real DC* will need advice to defend against libel suits but we are hoping we can get that pro bono, either from an established journalism partner, a law school, the Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press, or a friendly press-law expert. However we may have to buy libel insurance.

Potential funding sources include journalism and other civic-minded foundations such as the Annenberg Foundation, the Pew Foundation, the Knight Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Gannett Foundation. The University of Maryland's J-Lab provides grants in the \$10,000 range for innovative online projects. Real DC founder Kathy Kiely could also apply for a \$35,000 Alicia Patterson grant, by offering to write a series of articles for the foundation's journal about the experience of starting this project.

Similarly, she could pitch a book on the project, using the advance to pay herself a salary that would enable her to devote full time to the start-up..

By cobbling together funding from these sources, recruiting volunteers and soliciting donations of time and equipment, we believe we could come up with enough resources to launch *Real DC*. Donors would be issued "shares" that could be redeemed if the publication begins to turn a profit or is acquired by a larger organization.

But for the angels *Real DC* is seeking, the most important bottom line will not be measured in dollars and cents. The payoff will be in the engagement of the community and in the satisfaction of proving that old-fashioned reporting and story-telling -- however packaged or delivered -- is still a draw.

THE DREAM TEAM:

Kathy Kiely: Real DC's founder is a veteran journalist with 30 years in the business -- including eight as a reporter for USA TODAY, one of the leaders in journalism innovation. A resident of DC since 1981, she served as the chief of two Washington bureaus for regional papers, and as a member of reporters' committee that planned press logistics for the 2000 presidential nominating conventions and the 2001 inauguration. Kiely has mentored

journalism students both as a volunteer in the DC public schools and as a trustee for her college newspaper, The Daily Princetonian. She is plugged into the academic community and new trends in multimedia through her work towards a master's degree in interactive journalism at American University. Among her team of advisers and contributors:

Vince Morris: a long-time Washington correspondent for the New York Post, whose years of experience in journalism is complemented by an in-depth knowledge of DC's political scene. Following his reporting career, Morris served as a spokesman for DC Mayor Anthony Williams, a position that gave him connections within the political donor community -- a possible source of support and funding.

Mark Plotkin: Writer, radio commentator and DC political activist. He has the connections and enthusiasm to help get Real DC off the ground.

Noluthando Crockett-Ntonga: a former magazine and radio journalist. After leaving National Public Radio, she worked as a coach for journalists in South Africa and other emerging democracies on the continent.

Karlyn Barker: a 35-year veteran of the Washington Post metro desk. Barker, who took a buy-out in 2006, was an editor of the Post's District Weekly and helped plan the paper's quadrennial coverage of presidential inaugurations.

Sandy Grady: A long-time sports writer turned political columnist, Grady's work was syndicated on the Knight Ridder wire and has been anthologized in a number of sports writing collections. Retired from full-time writing in 2000, he continues to write occasional columns for USA TODAY.

Ricki Green: An independent television producer who has worked primarily for PBS. She has extensive experience in overseeing and funding independent projects.

Patricia Guadalupe: Political columnist for Washington Hispanic and on-air commentator on Hispanic issues for WTOP radio.

Rem Rieder: Editor, American Journalism Review and a former editor of States News Service

Peter Mackler: Correspondent, Agence France-Press and founder of the Plato Program, a system for teaching journalism to high school students.

Joan Van de Moortel, retired teacher of English and Journalism, DC Public schools.

Jerry Williams: Technology administrator and trainer, USA TODAY

Mark Potts: founder of Backfence.com. (He has said he'd do another start up. We'd like to give him a chance to show he's learned from his missteps.)

