

We the Media

Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People

by Dan Gillmor

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Printed in the United States of America.

Published by O'Reilly Media, Inc., 1005 Gravenstein Highway North, Sebastopol, CA 95472.

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Editor: Allen Noren

Production Editor: Mary Brady

Cover Designer: Emma Colby

Interior Designer: Melanie Wang

Printing History:

July 2004: First Edition.

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ISBN: 0-596-00733-7

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Journalists

We will learn we are part of something new, that our readers/listeners/viewers are becoming part of the process. I take it for granted, for example, that my readers know more than I do—and this is a liberating, not threatening, fact of journalistic life. Every reporter on every beat should embrace this. We will use the tools of grassroots journalism or be consigned to history. Our core values, including accuracy and fairness, will remain important, and we'll still be gatekeepers in some ways, but our ability to shape larger conversations—and to provide context—will be at least as important as our ability to gather facts and report them.

Newsmakers

The rich and powerful are discovering new vulnerabilities as Nacchio learned. Moreover, when anyone can be a journalist, many talented people will try—and they'll find things the professionals miss. Politicians and business people are learning this every day. But newsmakers also have new ways to get out their message, using the same technologies the grassroots adopts. Howard Dean's presidential campaign failed, but his methods will be studied and emulated because of the way his campaign used new tools to engage his supporters in a conversation. The people at the edges of the communications and social networks can be a newsmaker's harshest, most effective critics. But they can also be the most fervent and valuable allies, offering ideas to each other and to the newsmaker as well.

The former audience

Once mere consumers of news, the audience is learning how to get a better, timelier report. It's also learning how to join the process of journalism, helping to create a massive conversation and, in some cases, doing a better job than the professionals. For example, Glenn Reynolds, a.k.a. "Instapundit," is not just one of the most popular bloggers; he

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has amassed considerable influence in the process. Some grassroots journalists will become professionals. In the end, we'll have more voices and more options.

I've been in professional journalism for almost 25 years. I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had, and the position I hold. I respect and admire my colleagues, and believe that Big Media does a superb job in many cases. But I'm absolutely certain that the journalism industry's modern structure has fostered a dangerous conservatism—from a business sense more than a political sense, though both are apparent—that threatens our future. Our resistance to change, some of it caused by financial concerns, has wounded the journalism we practice and has made us nearly blind to tomorrow's realities.

Our worst enemy may be ourselves. Corporate journalism, which dominates today, is squeezing quality to boost profits in the short term. Perversely, such tactics are ultimately likely to undermine us.

Big Media enjoys high margins. Daily newspapers in typically quasi-monopoly markets make 35-50 percent or more in good years. Local TV stations can boast margins north of 50 percent. For Wall Street, however, no margin is sufficiently rich, and next year's profits must be higher still. This has led to a hollowing-out syndrome: newspaper publishers and broadcasting station managers have realized they can cut the amount and quality of journalism, at least for a while, in order to raise profits. In case after case, the demands of Wall Street and the greed of investors have subsumed the "public trust" part of journalism. I don't believe the First Amendment, which gives journalists valuable leeway to inquire and publish, was designed with corporate profits in mind. While we haven't become a wholly cynical business yet, the trend is scary.

Consolidation makes it even more worrisome. Media companies are merging to create ever larger information and entertainment conglomerates. In too many cases, serious journalism—and the public trust—continue to be victims. All of this

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countless pamphleteers and people shouting from soapboxes. We need something better.

Happily, the anarchy scenario doesn't strike me as probable, in part because there will always be a demand for credible news and context. Also possible, though I hope equally unlikely, is a world of information lockdown. The forces of central control are not sitting quietly in the face of challenges to their authority.

In this scenario, we could witness an unholy alliance between the entertainment industry—what I call the “copyright cartel”—and government. Governments are very uneasy about the free flow of information, and allow it only to a point. Legal clampdowns and technological measures to prevent copyright infringement could bring a day when we need permission to publish, or when publishing from the edge feels too risky. The cartel has targeted some of the essential innovations of tomorrow's news, such as the peer-to-peer file sharing that does make infringement easier but also gives citizen journalists one of the only affordable ways to distribute what they create. Governments insist on the right to track everything we do, but more and more politicians and bureaucrats shut off access to what the public needs to know—information that increasingly surfaces through the efforts of nontraditional media.

In short, we cannot just assume that self-publishing from the edges of our networks—the grassroots journalism we need so desperately—will survive, much less thrive. We will need to defend it, with the same vigor we defend other liberties.

Instead of a news anarchy or lockdown, I seek a balance that simultaneously preserves the best of today's system and encourages tomorrow's emergent, self-assembling journalism. In the following pages, I hope to make the case that it's not just necessary, and perhaps inevitable, but also eminently workable for all of us.

It won't be immediately workable for the people who already get so little attention from Big Media. Today, citizen

The commercial online world was in its infancy in those days, and I couldn't resist experimenting with it. My initial epiphany about the power of cyberspace came in 1985. I'd been using a word processor called XyWrite, the PC program of choice for serious writers in those days. It ran fast on the era's slow computers, and had an internal programming language, called XPL, that was both relatively easy to learn and incredibly capable. One day I found myself stymied by an XPL problem. I posted a short message on a word-processing forum on CompuServe, the era's most successful commercial online service. A day later, I logged on again and was greeted with solutions to my little problem from people in several U.S. cities and, incredibly, Australia.⁹

I was amazed. I'd tapped the network, asking for help. I'd been educated. This, I knew implicitly, was a big deal.

Of course, I didn't fully get it. I spent the 1986–87 academic year on a fellowship at the University of Michigan, which in those days was at the heart of the Internet—then still a university, government, and research network of networks—without managing to notice the Internet. John Markoff of *The New York Times*, the first major newspaper reporter to understand the Net's value, had it pretty much to himself in those days as a journalist, and got scoop after scoop as a result. One way he acquired information was by reading the Internet's public message boards. Collectively called Usenet, they were and still are a grab bag of “newsgroups” on which anyone with Net access can post comments. Usenet was, and remains, a useful resource.¹⁰

CompuServe wasn't the only way to get online in the 1980s. Other choices included electronic bulletin boards, known as BBS. They turned into technological cul-de-sacs, but had great value at the time. You'd dial into a local BBS via a modem on your computer, read and write messages, download files, and get what amounted to a local version of the Internet and systems

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heard from people who agreed and disagreed vehemently. He kept the discussion going, adding links and perspectives.

Today, InstaPundit.com has a massive following. Reynolds is constantly posting trenchant commentary, with a libertarian and rightward slant, on a variety of topics. He's become a star in a firmament that could not have existed only a short time ago—a firmament that got its biggest boost from the cruelest day in recent American history. The day is frozen in time, but the explosions of airplanes into those buildings turned new heat on a media glacier, and the ice is still melting.

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So what is a weblog, anyway? Generally speaking, it's an online journal comprised of links and postings in reverse chronological order, meaning the most recent posting appears at the top of the page. As Meg Hourihan, cofounder of Pyra Labs, the blogging software company acquired by Google in February 2003, has noted, weblogs are "post-centric"—the posting is the key unit—rather than "page-centric," as with more traditional web sites. Weblogs typically link to other web sites and blog postings, and many allow readers to comment on the original post, thereby allowing audience discussions.

Blogs run the gamut of topics and styles. One blog may be a running commentary on current events in a specific arena. Another may be a series of personal musings, or political reporting and commentary, such as Joshua Micah Marshall's TalkingPointsMemo.com. A blog may be pointers to other people's work or products, such as Gizmodo, a site devoted to the latest and greatest gadgets,⁴⁰ or a constantly updated "what's new" by a domain expert, such as Glenn Fleishman's excellent Wi-Fi Networking News and commentary page.⁴¹ While some blogging software permit readers to post their own comments, this feature has to be turned on by the blogger, and a significant number of prominent bloggers have not enabled the comment feature. At the other extreme, the Slashdot weblog, featuring news about technology and tech policy, is essentially written by its audience.

What the best individual blogs tend to have in common is voice—they are clearly written by human beings with genuine human passion.

Blogs are, as New York University's Jay Rosen puts it, an "extremely democratic form of journalism." On his PressThink blog,⁴² a site that has become essential for anyone looking at the evolution of journalism, he offers 10 points to explain why. Here are the first three:

1. The weblog comes out of the gift economy, whereas most (not all) of today's journalism comes out of the market economy.

mediums, repositories, mail systems, and chat rooms. “It’s a tool for collaboration,” he writes. “In fact we don’t really know what it is, but it’s a fun way of communicating.”⁴⁸

“WhatIs.com” (an online information technology dictionary) defines them this way: “A wiki (sometimes spelled “Wiki”) is a server program that allows users to collaborate in forming the content of a Web site. With a wiki, any user can edit the site content, including other users’ contributions, using a regular Web browser.”

The crucial element is that any user can edit any page. The software keeps track of every change. Anyone can follow the changes in detail. As Cunningham so aptly puts it, all Wikis are works in progress.

The Wikipedia, a massive encyclopedia, is the biggest public Wiki, but far from the only one. There are Wikis covering travel, food, and a variety of other topics. You can find a Wiki category page on Cunningham’s site.⁴⁹ One of the best examples of a Wiki as a collaborative tool to create something useful is the WikiHow site,⁵⁰ which brings together a variety of viewpoints from around the world.

Wikis are going private, too. They’re increasingly used behind corporate firewalls as planning and collaboration tools. And entrepreneurs are even starting to form companies around the technology, extending it for wider uses.

Wikis are making inroads on campuses as well. My lecturer at the University of Hong Kong set up a Wiki for our students to use as a planning platform for the 2003 class project. The project looked at a controversial proposal to fill in more of the harbor for development. Students posted their outlines and story proposals on the Wiki and used the site to flesh out the ideas. Instructors could watch over their shoulders without interfering except to offer guidance. The Wiki was perfect for this task.

Their use in journalism, at least the traditional kind, is almost nonexistent. But as Wikis become easier to use, they will

product, every downloader's computer is also a content server.⁵⁸ So the more popular you are, the less it costs, not the other way around.

P2P is also valuable in a political sense. New P2P systems under development will provide the closest thing to anonymity that we've seen so far. Repressive governments want to keep Internet content under control, but anonymity will make censorship more difficult.

As we'll discuss in Chapter 11, the entertainment media barons of today utterly loathe P2P, at least the kind they can't control, largely because it can be a platform for copyright infringement. I also believe they fear it because of its assistance in democratizing media. Either way, they want to put a stop to it. They must not be permitted to succeed, however, because in the name of preventing copyright infringement, they are taking away other rights—including our right to make copies known as "fair use" for quoting and personal backups—and they could ultimately dampen or even wreck the possibility of grassroots journalism taking hold.

THE RSS REVOLUTION

For people who want to "roll their own" news reports, nothing may be more important for them to understand than a little known technology that is beginning to transform the delivery of Internet content. And they can thank the bloggers, in large part, for its growing success.

Early in the development of blogging software, programmers baked in a content-syndication format called RSS, which stands for (among other things) Really Simple Syndication. This syndication capability allows readers of blogs and other kinds of sites to have their computers and other devices automatically retrieve the content they care about. It's spawning a content revolution that is only now beginning to be understood and appreciated. It could

Like other newsreaders, NetNewsWire has three “panes,” much like most email programs. In the lefthand pane is a list of sites I follow. I click on one of those site names, and the pane at the top right of the screen shows the headlines from that site. I click on a headline, and in the bottom-right pane I see a summary of the article or the entire piece, depending on what the owner of the site has decided to provide. If I want to see the original page or article, I need only double-click on the site name or headline.

Because newsreaders pull together various feeds into one screenful of information, they are incredible time savers. I can pull the headlines and brief descriptions of postings from dozens of blogs and other sites into a single application on my Mac. I don’t need to go surfing all over the Web to keep an eye on what all the people I’m interested in are writing. It comes to me

The formatting and structure of an RSS feed tends to be bare bones, making RSS a great way to make material available on non-PC platforms such as smart phones and handheld organizers, as well as providing a way for web sites to syndicate content from one another. For example, I have an RSS reader on my Treo 600, a combination phone and personal organizer. It scoops up a bare minimum of material from the RSS feeds—just the headlines and summaries—and provides a great service.

The extensibility of RSS creates some drawbacks. Many weblogs expose only headlines and summaries to newsreaders, requiring the user to click through to the source (the original web site) to read the full text. The irony here is that the newsreader actually undoes the idiosyncratic feel of many weblogs by stripping them of visual elements such as layout or logos, as well as eliminating the context produced by blogrolls (blog authors’ links to other weblogs) or the author’s biographical information (and any advertising). The same drawback, or benefit, exists with text versions of email newsletters.

Newsreaders also assign equal weight to everything they display. So the headlines and text from Joe’s Weblog receive roughly the same display treatment as material from, say, *The*

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become far more difficult to keep, something fundamental will have changed. Imagine Rodney King and Abu Ghraib times a million. Police everywhere must already wonder if they are being taped. Soon they will have to assume they're being caught on digital video. This has obvious benefits, such as curbing police misconduct. But everyone who works, or moves around, in a public place should consider whether they like the idea of all their movements being recorded by nosy neighbors. We may not be able to choose between the benefits of ubiquitous cameras and their drawbacks.

It's worth reflecting how events of the past would have looked had tomorrow's technology been available at the time. Let's apply that to the horrific events of September 11, 2001. Our memories of that awful day stem largely from television: videos of airplanes slamming into the World Trade Center, in fireballs that erupted, people falling and jumping from the towers, the crumbling to earth of the structures. Individuals with video cameras captured parts of this story, and their work ended up on network TV as well. The big networks stopped showing most graphic videos fairly quickly, but those pictures are still on the Net for anyone who wants to see them.

We also learned, second-hand, that people in the airplanes and Trade Center towers phoned loved ones and colleagues that awful day. What would we remember if the people on the airplanes and in those buildings all had camera-phones? What if they'd been sending images and audio from the epicenter of the terrorists' airborne arsenal, and from inside the towers that became coffins for so many? I don't mean to be ghoulish, but I do suggest that our memories would be considerably different had images and sounds of that kind ricocheted around the globe.

TRUTH SQUAD

In September 2002, Microsoft posted a semi-bogus web page advertisement featuring a winsome young woman, identified as

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mind (and as you'll see, I'm not alone in wondering these things):

1) Who's doing the watching? A self-appointed "watcher" is an antagonist in most cases, convinced before he/she starts posting criticisms that the journalist in question is getting things wrong, whether due to incompetence or animosity. Journalists confronted with this kind of attitude don't respond well, and probably won't respond at all.

Paul Krugman has a cadre of online critics who make my own look benign. Occasionally they make a sound point. Much of what they say is incorrect. And some of it is debaters' tricks: using straw men to shoot down things he didn't say, or saying something that may be true but is off point, etc.

2) Will journalists who do participate in the online discussion of their work—and many will be forbidden to do so by their organizations, probably for legal reasons—suffer the law of diminishing returns?

I recall the quasi-religious debates over the OS/2 operating system back in the early and middle 1990s. I was a fan of OS/2 but not sufficiently infused with the religion. Once in a while I'd post a note in a Usenet discussion where something I'd written was either being misinterpreted or had been seriously twisted. I'd then get hammered by one of the more fervent OS/2 acolytes who'd deconstruct every sentence and ask further questions, few of which were actually relevant (in my view) to the issue. I quickly learned that I had time for correcting outright mistruths and not much else. (I also had defenders in the newsgroup, which helped.)

3) Why should anyone trust what critics say any more than what the journalist says? An assertion that a journalist has a fact wrong is not, in itself, true. It's just an assertion.

Do we need Truth Squads watching the Truth Squads? There are, amazingly, sites that deconstruct the anti-Krugman stuff. But you'll forgive a casual reader for ignoring almost all of it.

None of these issues means that Web watchers are a bad idea. But if the idea is to really make journalism better, I'm just not convinced this will work.

Chapter 4

Newsmakers Turn the Tables

On January 9, 2002, reporters Bob Woodward and Dan Balz of *The Washington Post* sat down with U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The journalists were working on a series of articles about the hours and days immediately following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington—"the best serious history we can do of these 10 days," they told the secretary.

Rumsfeld said he understood from Secretary of State Colin Powell that he, Rumsfeld, was at the end of the interview trail: "He said you've talked to everybody in the world on this."

The two reporters were indeed prepared for their session. They asked a series of questions, probing deeply into what Rumsfeld had thought, said, and done in those days. Their homework was, in a word, exceptional.

How do we know? Because immediately after *The Washington Post* series appeared later that month, the Department of Defense posted a transcript of the interview on its DefenseLink web site.⁹⁷ Anyone who cared to know about the journalists' interviewing style could see it firsthand. Moreover, anyone who wanted to see which small pieces of the interview had made it into the newspaper could also do that. It turns out that the Defense Department posts every major interview with Rumsfeld and his chief deputy, Paul Wolfowitz.

Why this practice? It's to make sure that the full context is available, according to a Rumsfeld aide. What she didn't say—

but didn't have to—was that posting these interviews serves a multitude of purposes for the department. First, assuming the transcriptions are accurate (and sometimes they are not),⁹⁸ they provide valuable history for anyone who cares and not just context for the interview itself. Second, if an interviewer writes or broadcasts a story that doesn't reflect the substance of the interview, or outright misleads the audience, the department can point to the transcript in its own defense. Third, the process helps keep reporters on their toes.

It will also make journalists uncomfortable. Our little priesthood, where we essentially have had the final word, is unraveling. But as software people say, that's a feature, not a bug.

Newsmakers have always possessed a certain leverage in the give and take with the press. After all, they're the ones we write and talk about; we're only the observers. Moreover, in a world where too many reporters serve as little more than stenographers, newsmakers can create and hold onto the agenda.

But it's true that newsmakers can use the tools of new journalism in old ways, such as the old-fashioned trial balloon, to trick the press and mislead the public. Many will do just that because they continue to live in a world where all interactions with the media that can't be controlled are by their definition hostile. The ones who behave this way will be missing a profound point, but they've been missing it for years.

The point has *Cluetrain*-ish echoes—that markets are conversations. It has realpolitik echoes, too, because the stakes are so high in such interactions. But the bottom line is a change, for companies, for politicians, and for other newsmakers brave enough to get it. This evolution from a broadcasting view of the world to a conversational view will not be neat and clean. But its inherent messiness will open communications in ways that will benefit everyone, assuming it's done correctly.

As I noted in Chapter 3, the old rules of newsmaking are no longer the only ones in force. What made them work in the first

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Q: Should all CEOs do their own blogs? If so, why? If not, why not?

A: Probably not. Being in sports is different than just being in business. The local newspapers write about the Mavs every day. They might write about a company once a quarter at most.

Q: What kind of thing wouldn't you say on a blog? What are the limits, if any?

A: I don't know yet.

Q: What else should I have asked you about the new world of communications?

A: It's not a new world. We all have been able to create our own websites for years. This is just a content management system, verticalized for diary entries. That diary-like format has caught the attention of the voyeur in all of us. Whether or not it's a long-term impact, I have no idea.

CEO blogs are useful. I've noted, in many cases, are blogs and other materials from people down the chain. For journalists, some of the most valuable communications from inside companies come from the rank and file, or from managers well below the senior level. Why not let them communicate with the public, too?

A growing number of smart companies understand why this is a good idea. Perhaps the best at this early on was Macromedia, maker of popular web-design tools such as DreamWeaver and Flash. Macromedia programmers and product managers contribute to a variety of blogs. For example, John Dowdell offers a "news service for people using Macromedia MX",¹⁰⁴ one of Macromedia's key products. Macromedia also aggregates its blogs onto one page for convenience and allows anyone to read them.¹⁰⁵

Microsoft has set a new standard in several ways. In May 2004, Bill Gates touted the advantages of blogs and RSS in a speech to corporate chief executives. Noting the convenience factor, he said, "The ultimate idea is that you should get the information you want when you want it..." Walking the talk,

THE CELEBRITY BLOG

Wil Wheaton is not, repeat not, Wesley Crusher.

Now in his early 30s, Wheaton isn't a bit sorry he played the role of the brainy but somewhat annoying teenager on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* back in the 1980s and early 1990s. He's proud of it. But some fans of the show utterly loathed the Crusher character. A once notorious Internet discussion group was called "alt.ensign.wesley.die.die.die"—and the tone of the postings fit the newsgroup's title.

In 2001, the Pasadena resident launched a weblog,¹¹¹ in part to "undo a lot of the misconceptions directed toward me because of the character I played on Star Trek," he said. His online journal mixes intensely personal observations with commentary on modern life, politics, technology, and entertainment. It tells you a lot about who he really is: a thoughtful and intelligent family man, with a bent toward geekiness and political activism.

The blog has become Wheaton's portal into a new career as a writer. And Wheaton has established a new kind of connection with his audience. Call it the Celebrity Blog. And think of it as the evolution from the celebrity as a manufactured product to the celebrity as something more genuine in a human sense.

Wheaton's is highly personal. It's helped people get to know him, as opposed to the *Star Trek* character. (A personal observation: *The Next Generation* remains by far the best of the many series in the long-running franchise.)

Wheaton was no fan of the Hollywood system that creates stars and spits them out after using them. The blog has reflected that sentiment. "I'd struggled so much as an actor, and felt like I was running out of time to be a successful actor," he said. "I'd done lousy movies to support my family. I started writing about that, the ups and downs, mostly downs—what it's like to be someone whose first half of life is being famous, and the second half, being famous for being famous."

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BUSINESS AS USUAL

For all the obvious value of Net-based politics, it isn't going to overturn the status quo overnight. The consent of the governed had become a sick joke in the latter part of the 20th century, when "one person, one vote" morphed malignantly into "one dollar, one vote"—in which the dollars were spent on TV to appeal to the masses with increasingly truth-free attack ads. And by all evidence, the 2004 campaign season showed that big money and media were still largely holding sway.

Exhibit A was the spate of attack advertising that helped sink Howard Dean in the first contest for delegates, the Iowa caucuses. And even Dean, who used the Net brilliantly to raise money in mostly small, sub-\$100 donations, turned around and used much of that money to buy television advertising in a media world where TV still wields great power, and in a campaign season in which the Democrats had front-loaded to make the winner of Iowa and/or New Hampshire virtually unstoppable, he was only doing the rational thing.

Exhibit B was Arnold Schwarzenegger's winning campaign for governor in California, when incumbent Gray Davis was ousted from office in the October 2003 recall election. The actor's victory had almost nothing to do with grassroots activism and almost everything to do with a Hollywood-style, Big Media sales job by a candidate who happened to have a box office hit in the theaters. Schwarzenegger did have popular appeal, and the recall campaign got its start online, but in the end, the pitch was to an electorate that—sadly, but typically in modern America—didn't care about the candidate's paucity of experience and qualifications, or his refusal to offer any specifics on what he'd do if elected. He hid from serious journalists, substituting appearances with Jay Leno and Oprah Winfrey, and almost laughed in the faces of newspaper reporters who tried to address the details of actual issues.

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Exhibit C, George W. Bush's 2004 reelection campaign, has been an even more pronounced version of the top-down, big-money affair from four years earlier, though his advisors did use the Net to some degree. Bush raised several hundred million dollars, most coming from the wealthy elite that had put him into power in the first place.

The message from these examples was clear: Americans as a whole weren't buying edge politics, at least not yet. It seemed that late 20th century politics, a time when choosing our political leaders was little more than a television show where voters were nothing more than consumers, still had some serious legs.

WHAT'S NEW IS OLD

The use of online technologies to organize politically is hardly new. As far back as the early 1980s, the radical right was using bulletin boards to keep people in touch and to spread its message.

Ross Perot's 1992 run for president as an independent had one little noticed but important feature. He proposed "electronic town halls," a concept that apparently stemmed from his founding and running of Electronic Data Systems. The idea didn't go very far, in part because of Perot's mainframe-era understanding of technology: he understood central control, not true grassroots activity. "Had Perot been using today's pervasive technology and literate base (of supporters) would he succeed?" wondered Peter Harter, a former Netscape executive who wrote a law-school thesis on the subject in 1993. "Probably not, as he yanked power and authority away from his volunteers." Yet Perot had still shown the way for subsequent campaigns.

People at the network's edges—using mobile phones, not PCs—helped bring down a corrupt Philippines government in 2001, *Smart Mobs*¹²³ author Howard Rheingold wrote. "Tens of thousands of Filipinos converged on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, known as 'Edsa,' within an hour of the first text

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THE TOOLS OF BETTER GOVERNANCE

Politics doesn't stop when the elections are decided. Governing is political, by definition. The tools of many-to-many communications will transform government if politicians and bureaucrats cooperate and lead. How this will occur is still a bit foggy, because a true deployment of e-government is many years away. But the potential may be even more obvious than in campaigns.

To date, e-government has largely consisted of static web pages offering information to taxpayers, businesses, and other constituents of governmental services. The interactivity in such sites tends to be limited to filling out the occasional form or making an appointment. It's the standard top-down approach moved to the Net.

But it doesn't have to offer a substandard result, not when it's done right. For evidence, visit the remarkable "Earth 911,"¹³⁶ a site created by an environmental activist that has become indispensable to citizens and governments alike. Phil Windley, the former state of Utah chief information officer, calls it a "public-private partnership that happened unilaterally"—that is, at the instigation of a single motivated citizen.

That citizen is Chris Warner, who's been working at this project for about 15 years from his home base of suburban Phoenix. Operating initially on a shoestring and now with contributions from companies and some government support, he and his team have collected under one virtual roof the most comprehensive array of environmental information you can find anywhere. If you visit the home page and type in your Zip Code, you'll find local data for that community from a variety of federal, state, local and corporate sources. Earth 911 is a clearinghouse that serves governments and people in their communities. Thousands of government employees, from a variety of agencies, send their information to Earth 911. Its staff massages the data and then arranges it so citizens can use it. In other

What was happening? In an emerging era of multidirectional, digital communications, the audience can be an integral part of the process—and it's becoming clear that they *must* be.

It boils down to something simple: readers (or viewers or listeners) collectively know more than media professionals do. This is true by definition: they are many, and we are often just one. We need to recognize and, in the best sense of the word, use their knowledge. If we don't, our former audience will bolt when they realize they don't have to settle for half-baked coverage; they can come into the kitchen themselves.

In this chapter, we'll look at how the news industry can adapt to an evolution that is turning some old notions on their heads. It may be painful for some of us, but I will argue that the rewards are worth it. We really have no choice, anyway.

"More and more, journalism is going to be owned by the audience," said Jeff Jarvis, a prolific blogger who leads Advance Publications' Advance.net online operation. "That doesn't mean there isn't a place for professionals, who will always be there—who need to be there—to gather the facts, ask questions with some measure of discipline and put together a larger audience. What I've learned is that the audience, given half a chance, has a lot to say. The Internet is the first medium owned by the audience, the first medium to give the audience a voice."

As I noted in the *Introduction*, we shouldn't see this as a threat. It is, rather, the best opportunity in decades to do even better journalism.

The business questions are much more difficult to answer because many of the same developments affecting newsrooms are also, as noted earlier, having a massive and ultimately negative impact on the bottom line of Big Media news organizations. I hope we can survive what's coming because I believe in the mission of journalism and fear that serious investigative reporting will diminish, and perhaps nearly disappear, if big newspapers and other serious outlets wither; what blogger will take on the next Watergate scandal the way *The Washington Post* did?

TRADITIONAL MEDIA'S OPPORTUNITY

When most Big Media companies consider having a conversation with their audience, they tend not to push many boundaries. For example, it astonishes me that some organizations still don't put reporters' (much less editors') email addresses at the end of stories. There is no plausible excuse for leaving out contact information when the articles are posted on the Web. A news operation that fails even this test is not remotely serious about engaging its audience.

Bulletin boards don't fully cut it, either. *The New York Times*' forums¹⁴⁴ frequently contain valuable insights, but it's doubtful that many (if any) of those ideas ever reach the actual journalists inside the *Times* newsroom. If the staff isn't part of the discussion, it's just readers talking with each other—and they can do that without the *Times*. Contrast the paper's forums with *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof's "Kristof Response" discussions,¹⁴⁵ a truly valuable addition to the paper's repertoire.

Slate, the online magazine owned by Microsoft, has come up with one of the most useful ways of handling readers' input. The "Fraywatch" page¹⁴⁶—"What's happening in our readers' forum"—is a compilation of what Slate editors consider the most interesting comments posted by readers. Snippets from comments are reassembled, with context from the editor plus links to the original postings, in a coherent and entertaining way. This is useful journalism in its own right, even as it demonstrates the value of readers' contributions.

Web chats featuring journalists are a step in the right direction, but are once again only a step. *The Washington Post*'s frequent online Q&A sessions,¹⁴⁷ in which reporters answer questions from readers, are a useful addition to the online operation, but they aren't the only kind of interactivity we must adopt.

My own experience may be instructive. Covering technology in Silicon Valley is a humbling but rewarding job. In most gatherings, I'm taking up the far-left data point on the

I also point to sites of nontraditional journalists and, whenever possible, I post or point to the deepest source materials, such as transcripts and other data that provide more context. We in pro-journalism tend to do this on big projects when we post things such as affidavits, interactive maps, and the like. But the authority of a story increases with the links to the best original material from which it was derived. We can learn more from the bloggers about this.

Increasingly, I'm glad to say, news organizations are catching on. While online versions of news stories that have run in the newspaper rarely link to competitors' work, newspaper bloggers have been more wide-ranging in pointing outside. Dan Froomkin's "White House Briefing"¹⁶² on *The Washington Post's* site, which started in early 2004, was especially active in this regard, though he tended to ignore blogs in favor of establishment media. Similarly, *The New York Times* "Times on the Trail,"¹⁶³ a column that looks like a blog but isn't officially called one, has sometimes been generous in outside pointers.

We can also increase our credibility by listening to our online critics, and we're beginning to do just that. Long gone are the days when criticism was handled, except in extreme cases, by just waving allegations of note, the *Columbia Journalism Review*¹⁶⁴ and the *American Journalism Review*.¹⁶⁵

A right-leaning blogger who calls himself "Patterico"¹⁶⁶ has made it one of his missions to critique *The Los Angeles Times* for what he sees as an assortment of left-leaning sins. In early 2004, he took the *Times*, which he calls the "Dog Trainer," to task for its coverage of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's conflicts of interest, including the judge's hunting vacation with Vice President Dick Cheney, an old friend, when the court was hearing a pivotal case involving Cheney's Energy Task Force. Patterico observed that Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg also had a conflict of note, a connection to the National Organization for Women (NOW). His correspondence with the *Times* got results. On March 11, 2004, he wrote, proudly: "On the one hand, I

have to hand it to *The Los Angeles Times*. They have run a front-page story about Justice Ginsburg's speech to the NOW Legal Defense Fund. On the other hand, why did I have to be the one to tell them about it?"¹⁶⁷

For me, this follow-on complaint doesn't hold up. Journalists find out much of what we print and broadcast from people who tell us things—people like Patterico, who helped make the news.

ASKING THE FORMER AUDIENCE FOR HELP

Inviting the audience to contribute isn't a new phenomenon. After all, we've asked readers to write letters to the editor for a long time, and we generally answer the phones when readers call with tips or complaints. In other words, some conversation has always taken place; we just need to have more.

Some of the most important photos and videos in recent news history were the product of amateurs; we can scarcely imagine the second half of the 20th century without the gruesome Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination. More recently, as video cameras have become popular, we have seen what happens when average people captured important events such as police beatings of suspects and approaching tornados. And it was amateurs who caught the most horrific images of the United Airlines 767 fireball as it crashed into the second World Trade Center tower on September 11, 2001.

In each of those cases, the public was communicating through the mass media; the amateur videos rapidly made it, as in earlier events, onto CNN and the other major TV networks. For the foreseeable future, this will continue to be the case because TV is our gathering place in national crises, because of the high bandwidth costs for offering video over the Web, and for the simple fact that mass media still reaches the biggest audience. But

sounds to readers in the U.S., where we journalists enjoy roughly the same public esteem as politicians and used-car salesmen. The new way, Oh said, is that “a reporter is the one who has the news and who is trying to inform others.”

The paper’s citizen reporters go into issues that the mainstream media haven’t covered, said Jeong Woon Hyeon, chief editor. The site posts about 70 percent of the roughly 200 stories submitted each day, after staff editors read the stories. Postings work on a hierarchy corresponding to the place on the page; the lower the headline appears, the less important or interesting the editors consider it. The higher, the more newsworthy—and the more the freelance contributor is paid.

When OhmyNews started, the idea wasn’t entirely new. News organizations have long used stringers, people who contribute freelance articles. What was so different with OhmyNews was that anyone could sign up, and it was so difficult to get published. On the Web, space for news is essentially unlimited,¹⁷⁵ and OhmyNews welcomed contributions from just about everyone. The real-people nature of the contributors lent further appeal to the site.

The melding of old and new was extensive. The company issued temporary staff press cards so some of the more active contributors could cover specific events. Full-time professional staffers, meanwhile, worked in a time-honored manner. They jockeyed with reporters from big newspapers, magazines, and broadcast outlets for scoops in government and business, then lobbied for the best possible display of their work.

OhmyNews reflected its bosses’ passion for going beyond conservative newspapers’ constrained view of the world. Its coverage of events such as the death of two schoolgirls, crushed by a U.S. Army vehicle in an accident during the summer of 2002, forced the hand of mainstream media, which was downplaying the story. Protest demonstrations after that incident evolved into nationwide anger against America, and a profoundly nationalist fervor that helped elect Roh.

Oh's rise from underground magazine writer to powerful media figure had any number of ironies. One is that the government he disliked was instrumental in wiring the nation for high-speed data access, creating the conditions that ultimately gave OhmyNews an opening. Then there was the way he came to realize that he should start OhmyNews. He went to the U.S. in 1997–99 to get a master's degree at Regent University in Virginia. The school's president was Pat Robertson, the evangelist and right-wing political figure.

To know America, a journalist friend told Oh, you have to know how the conservative right operates. In Robertson's case, part of his strategy was counteracting what he saw as a liberal-biased press, and so offered media courses through Regent.

"I learned their techniques," he explained. "But my approach is quite different."

In one course, students' homework was to create a new media organization on paper. Oh's imaginary company was the genesis of OhmyNews, and "I got an A+," he said wryly.

The vision was to use the Internet, which was then growing like mad in Korea, and to capture the power of average people who, Oh strongly believed, did not back South Korea's government and official policies—people who also weren't being represented by the conservative media companies that controlled about 80 percent of daily circulation. A 50-50 liberal-conservative balance would be much better, he said.

Oh and his colleagues were well aware that the interactive nature of the medium extends far beyond OhmyNews' appeals for contributions from citizen reporters, and their approach reflected that understanding. Each story had a link to a comments page. Readers could, and did, post comments ranging from supportive to harsh, and they voted on whether they approved or disapproved of specific comments.

Sometimes the journalists replied directly on the comments page. Lee Pong Ryul, one of OhmyNews' most active citizen

equipped to maintain those principles if we listen and participate in the conversation.

And we still need editors. Bloggers who disdain editors entirely, or who say they're largely irrelevant to the process, are mistaken.¹⁸⁰ The community's eyes and ears on weblogs are fine for what they provide. As noted, my readers make me a better journalist because they find my mistakes, tell me what I'm missing, and help me understand nuances.

Good editors add their own experience in a different way. They are trained, mostly through long experience, to look for what's missing in a story. They ask tough questions, demand better evidence for assertions, and, ultimately, understand how this thing we call journalism comes together. Sometimes they can help us see that less is more: I can't count the number of times an editor of my column has suggested that a sentence is unnecessary or inflammatory without purpose, leading me to agree that its removal would strengthen the piece, not weaken it. They make my work better in different ways, and I would not want to see them disappear.

We can help the new journalists understand and value ethics, the importance of serving the public trust, and professionalism. We can't, and shouldn't, keep them out.

THE FORMER AUDIENCE JOINS THE PARTY

Indeed, the grassroots are transcending the pallid consumerism that has characterized news coverage and consumption in the past half-century or more. For the first time in modern history, the user is truly in charge, as a consumer and as a producer.

This chapter focuses on two broad groups. First are the people who have been active, in their own way, even before grassroots journalism was so available to all. They are the traditional writers of letters to the editor: engaged and active, usually on a local level. Now they can write weblogs, organize Meetups, and generally agitate for the issues, political or otherwise, that matter to them. Once they know the degree to which they can transcend the standard sources of news and actually influence the journalism process, they'll have an increasing impact by being, more than ever before, part of a larger conversation.

I'm most excited about the second, and I hope larger, group from the former audience, the ones who take it to the next level. We're seeing the rise of the heavy-duty blogger, web site creator, mailing list owner, or SMS gadfly—the medium is less important than the intent and talent—who is becoming a key source of news for others, including professional journalists. In some cases, these people are becoming professional journalists themselves and are finding ways to make a business of their avocation.

CITIZEN JOURNALIST: BLOGGERS (AND MORE) EVERYWHERE

On February 19, 2004, Rex Hammock was ushered into the Old Executive Office Building in Washington. He and four other small-business people sat down with President George W. Bush for a short discussion on economic issues. It was another in a series of Bush meetings with supporters of the administration's policies. This one, unlike previous sessions, was closed to the press.

research is nothing short of amazing. In an interview on Linux Online,¹⁸⁶ Jones explained her motives:

All right, I said to myself, what can I do well? The answer was, I can research and I can write. Those are the two things attorneys and companies hire me to do for them. I decided, I will just do what I do best, and I'll throw it out there, like a message in a bottle. I didn't think too many people would ever read it, except I thought maybe IBM might find my research and it'd help them. Or someone out there would read it and realize he or she had meaningful evidence and would contact IBM or FSF [Free Software Foundation]. I know material I have put up can help them, if they didn't already know about it. Because of my training, I recognize what matters as far as this case is concerned. Companies like IBM typically hire folks to comb the Internet for them and find anything that mentions the company, so I assumed they'd notice me. That's all I was expecting. By saying all that, I don't mean to diminish it as a contribution. I wasn't expecting thousands of readers every day.

What she did hope for, and got, was “the many-eyeballs power in this new context.” This was a crucial insight. “Many-eyeballs power—open source journalism—worked because the work, while centered on one person’s passion for the subject, had been spread among the community. This is another example of a passionate nonexpert using technology to make a profound contribution, and a real difference.

EVOLUTIONARY AND REVOLUTIONARY

Americans, protected by the First Amendment, can generally write blogs with few consequences. However, in country after country where free speech is not a given, the blogosphere matters in far more serious ways. This is the stuff of actual revolutions.

THE FORMER AUDIENCE JOINS THE PARTY

One of the best known is the Independent Media Center, also known as Indymedia.¹⁹⁴ The project was founded in 1999 by a group of antiglobalization activists who wanted to cover the Seattle World Trade Organization meeting in ways traditional media would not. Activists working at the center pulled together material from a variety of sources, including camera-equipped people on the streets who captured images of local police officers mistreating protesters. With a newsletter and web site, Indymedia drew a large audience—and a heavy-handed visit from the FBI that brought the group considerably more attention. Buoyed by the Seattle effort, the Independent Media Center spread its wings. By mid-2003, it had dozens of affiliates in the United States and around the world.

When the United States invaded Iraq in the spring of 2003, protesters took to the streets of San Francisco, and by many accounts just about shut down the city. Deploying digital cameras, laptops, and Wi-Fi, Indymedia reporters—a self-assembling newsroom—captured the events brilliantly. “Indymedia kicked our ass,” Bob Gauthier, former vice president for Digital Media at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, told a group of online journalists in April 2004. In particular, he said, the independent journalists revealed several cases of police brutality that the major media had missed.

Overall, the Indymedia effort has produced some admirable results. But it has an uneven track record in ways that make traditional journalists uncomfortable, in large part due to a lack of editorial supervision. The Google News site removed Indymedia stories from its listings, the search company says, because of concerns about the deliberate lack of centralized editorial control over what individual contributors to the site posted there.¹⁹⁵ Much of what the site publishes is solid, occasionally path-breaking journalism; but, as with all advocacy reporting, a reader is well advised to maintain a skeptical eye.

The editorial process is a key part of *Democracy Now!*,¹⁹⁶ a left-leaning radio and web operation sponsored by the Pacifica

radio network. Amy Goodman and her colleagues are demonstrating new media's technical leaps, often with on-the-fly innovation, while producing material with real impact. Goodman, who was beaten by Indonesian government agents and deported from East Timor while covering the Timorese struggle for independence, did some of the best reporting on that conflict. Getting material out of the country wasn't simple, she said; at one point she asked passengers on Australia-bound planes to carry out CDs with compressed video programming, and the proprietor of an Australian Internet café then forwarded the programming to the organization's New York headquarters. While covering the Iraq conflict, her colleague Jeremy Scahill explained how the Iraqi government, in the run-up to the 2003 invasion by the U.S., censored outgoing media; one method was not to allow files of larger than half a megabyte to be sent from Internet cafes. So he found some software that broke 80-MB video reports into smaller chunks, which he and colleagues dispatched from different cafes back to New York.

Democracy Now!, while still relying on traditional forms of communication, is also becoming "an interface between the Web world and mass media," Goodman told me. The Web is chock-full of great information, she said, but most people don't have access to computers. So, for most of the world's population, the mass media still dominates. But all *Democracy Now!* programming, radio and video, is available via web "streams," which allow a user to watch or listen to the show without downloading massive files first. Like Indymedia, the organization is using open source software and offering its tools to others. Whenever possible, the programs bring people to the Web so they can find more information, such as additional video footage, extended interviews, and supporting documents, on the subject at hand. This is powerful stuff.

One of my favorite independent news sites is written and edited entirely by its readers. Kuro5hin, as noted in Chapter 1, has brought an open source style of journalism to the fore. Users

Weblogs Inc. differs from the Denton operation in a key way: though Denton owns the blogs and pays freelancers to write them, Calacanis creates more of a partnership, giving the author both ownership and a share of the revenues. There's room for both approaches, but Calacanis will probably attract a more entrepreneurial type of blogger.

The financial arrangement is simple, he told me. The blog writer takes the first \$1,000 in revenue each month, splitting additional revenue 50-50 with the company. The blogger and Weblogs, Inc. jointly own the contents, and a blogger who departs can take a copy of all postings. Finally, either side can end the arrangement at any time.

The site launched in the fall of 2003. As of February 2004, it had about 20 blogs, one of which (a social-software site) had been sponsored for \$2,500 a month. Calacanis said he was looking to have 100 blogs by the end of 2004, and have each of them generate \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month in revenue.

Many bloggers, meanwhile, have signed up with Google AdWords, a scheme offered through the Google search engine that allows Google to place ads on a web page based on the topic of the page. The revenue-sharing model has given some bloggers a small but worthwhile income.

And then there's Blogads,²¹³ an advertising service created by Henry Copeland, aimed solely at blogs. Copeland boasts several notable successes, including, as noted in Chapter 5, the special-election congressional campaign in Tennessee, where Democrat Ben Chandler saw a 20-1 return on ads placed on political blogs.

J.D. Lascia, who writes an excellent blog called New Media Musings,²¹⁴ has been experimenting with several advertising forms, including Google AdWords, Blogads, and plain text ads from several different online ad sales operations. He's not enamored of some of the gambling sites his advertisers are promoting. But, as he told me, the gambling ads have been "by far the most lucrative: \$300 a month for text links on my blog and personal web site." Early on, he posted a notice that said he

THE FORMER AUDIENCE JOINS THE PARTY

wasn't vouching for the services or products being advertised, only that they were legal. He also tells advertisers he'll kill their ads if they put spyware or other rogue code on users' computers. He explained further:

As distasteful as it may be to see these ads in the early days of a new medium, a reader can find much more risqué, questionable advertising in the back pages of any alternative weekly. One day we'll get to a place where targeted advertising really works and mainstream advertisers find value in blogs like mine that attract a daily audience of 3,000 or more upscale, educated, leading edge technologists and media people. Until that day arrives, I'm reluctant to turn down paying advertisers out of some effete sense of propriety.

As with so many other bloggers, the more useful payback for Lasica is how his writing enhances his reputation as an expert in online media. "Freelance writing also fosters one's credentials, but regular blogging or frequent online dispatches seem to be the best way to validate one's authority in a chosen topic," he said.

NEW BUSINESS MODELS: THE TIP JAR

There's nothing new about sponsorships for creative works or journalism. But bloggers and other online journalists have brought the concept into the modern age. And where sponsors in earlier times tended to be wealthy patrons, today, journalists can use the Net to raise money more widely. Probably the best-known example of this is Andrew Sullivan, a magazine writer whose blog²¹⁵ was one of the first to solicit readers' money via pledges, somewhat akin to the methods of public radio and television stations.

I'm even more impressed with Chris Allbritton, a former wire-service staff writer turned blogger, who brought the concept into the modern age in 2003. In an appeal to his Internet

Chapter 8

Next Steps

In the mid-1990's, just as the World Wide Web was gaining popularity, I was sure that the Internet would become a powerful force in our lives. But I didn't have a clue that services such as Google would emerge, or that weblogs and other personal media would play such a transformative role in my chosen craft.

I didn't anticipate online experiments such as Feed, the pioneering but now defunct online magazine that had an edginess bloggers later incorporated, or group edited sites such as Kuro5hin, where the audience writes and ranks the stories and then adds context and ideas as they discuss them. I didn't imagine that blogs and other tools would come along to make writing on the Web almost as easy as reading from it. So I won't try to predict the shape of the news business and how it will be practiced a decade from now. But even if we can't make specific predictions, we can look forward and make some safe assumptions about the architecture and technology of tomorrow's news, and then consider what they suggest.

My assumptions rest on two guiding principles. The first is a belief in basic journalistic values, including accuracy, fairness, and ethical standards. The second is rooted in the very nature of technology: it's relentless and unstoppable.

Only one thing is certain: we'll all be astounded by what's to come.

THE WORLD LIVE WEB

Dave Sifry, a serial entrepreneur, started Technorati in 2002. By April 2004, he was tracking more than two million blogs, with thousands coming online every day. Though many people abandon their blogs, the trend line is growing fast.

Technorati's tools are basically semi-canned queries that go into a giant, constantly updated database that Sifry likens to a just-in-time search engine. The service helps people search or browse for interesting or popular weblogs, breaking news, and hot topics of conversation. It also lets users rank people and their blogs and blog topics not just by popularity—the number of blogs linking to something—but by weighted popularity, determined by the popularity of the linking blogs. You can also see not just the most popular blogs, but the fastest rising ones. My blog had about 2,100 incoming links the last time I checked. If I get 100 more, that's gratifying, but for, relatively speaking, a huge change. But if someone who has a dozen incoming links today gets five more, that's an enormous relative change, and Technorati will probably flag it. Think of this as a “buzzmeter” for determining how fast a blogger—or a blogger's specific posting—is heating or cooling off.

The idea behind Technorati might be called the Google Hypothesis: link structure matters. Knowing who is linking to whom can take a seemingly random collection of weblogs and extract a highly structured set of information. This information can then be filtered in a variety of ways. The original Technorati application was the “Link Cosmos”—what Sifry called “an annotated listing of all weblog sources pointing to a site [blog] in recent time.” Type in the URL of a weblog (or an individual posting), and the engine shows a list of weblogs pointing to that URL, sorted by time of linking or by “authority”—the “most popular” linking weblog is ranked first. Searching on any linking weblog will show its Cosmos as well, and so on. (Imagine what this would look like displayed graphically as a web of links. Inevitably, someone will offer such a tool.)

and what some other people think of me (not all flattering by any means). Technorati is also this type of system: the more people linking to you, the more “authority” you have. But it’s important to note that the majority of blogs tracked by Technorati have nobody linking to them. This doesn’t mean the blogs lack value, because there are people close to the bloggers who trust them. No matter who you are, you probably know something about a topic that’s worth paying attention to.²⁴¹

Someday, a person who is interested in news about the local school system, which rarely rates more than a brief item in the newspaper except to cover some extraordinary event, will be able to get a far more detailed view of that vital public body. Any topic you can name will be more easily tracked this way. Just in the political sphere, the range will go beyond school governance to city councils to state and federal government to international affairs. Now multiply the potential throughout other fields of interest, professional and otherwise. And when audio and video become an integral part of these conversations—it’s already starting to happen as developers connect disparate media applications—the conversations will only deepen.

The tools are being built now. Look on the accompanying web site for this book, where we will maintain a comprehensive list along with links to the toolmakers.

DINOSAURS AND DANGERS

The technology tells us we’re heading in one direction, but the law and cultural norms will have something to say about the process.

The media of the late 20th century was largely the province of big corporations. All else being equal, it might be headed toward extinction. But all is not equal in the halls of power and influence. If today’s Big Media is a dinosaur, it won’t die off

software is being illegally copied. Finally, I had a spokesman for the PC industry announce the end of the sleazy practice of showing video monitors in computer advertisements, but then, in small print, saying the monitor isn't included.

A week later, after the column had been sent out by the Knight Ridder Tribune wire service, I got a call from an earnest woman at the Business Software Alliance. She was astounded, she said, by the quotes attributed to the spokesman for her organization and the Software Publishers Association. She wanted me to know that no one there could possibly have told me that the software industry was making up its piracy estimates, as my column suggested.

"It was a joke," I said.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Oh," she said. It turned out that someone had sent her an email containing the offending quotes, but without the column's introductory line that said, "News stories you're unlikely to read," a missing piece that led to more than one misunderstanding. Indeed, I got a similar call later that day from a well-known public-relations person. She reported that email was flying around Microsoft and her PR firm, with various executives insisting they weren't the unnamed sources in my piece.

It had taken almost no time for the column to morph into an urban legend. Musing about this episode later, I wrote: "Actually, the worst part is that Bill Gates interrupted his speech to world leaders in Switzerland to call and offer me \$10 million (plus stock options) to stop writing this column and become the editor of the column he writes for *The New York Times* syndicate. I told my boss and asked for a raise, but for some reason he didn't believe me." Happily, neither did anyone else, this time.

I learned a valuable lesson: email a copy of the entire article, or a URL to the original, and let the reader be the judge. And, as my case suggests, be careful of satire; some people are just too dense to get it.

In one online discussion on my blog about copyright, I challenged a commenter named “George” on his refusal to say who he was. “You’re welcome to remain anonymous,” I said. “I think you would enjoy even more credibility in this discussion if you said who you were. A casual reader might wonder why you want to be anonymous.”

He replied: “You should judge my credibility by how my statements correspond with the facts, logic, and the law—not by who I am.”²⁵¹

He had it partly right. Debating skills are not proof of anything. In the absence of a foundation for his comments, he hadn’t earned anyone’s trust. Credibility stems not just from smart arguments; it also comes from a willingness to stand behind those arguments when a compelling reason to stay anonymous is absent. There was none in this case.

Another commenter, also using a false name, defended an electronic voting machine maker’s use of copyright law to suppress memos that revealed flaws in its voting systems. It seemed that he or she was also posting comments, using a different name but similar (and in some cases identical) language, on a blog about intellectual property sponsored by the University of California–Berkeley journalism school. I learned this because Mary Holder, one of the principal authors of that blog,²⁵² noted similarities in style in postings on our respective sites, which we believe share a number of readers due to the topics we cover. We checked the Internet addresses from which the comments had been posted; they were identical. This didn’t absolutely prove that the same person was making both comments, but it helped make the case. Not only was this person refusing to be identified, but he or she was trying to make it seem as though a posse was patrolling our blogs to show us the error of our ways when, in fact, it was just one person on both.

What do these examples suggest? People reading comments on discussion boards would be wise to question the veracity of a commenter whenever they aren’t absolutely sure where the posting is coming from.²⁵³

This chapter isn't intended to scare anyone away from the Internet. Far from it. Nor should any reader consider this even remotely to be legal advice. To abuse a famous cliché, I'm not a lawyer and I don't intend to play one on these pages. If you need a professional answer to a legal question, please look elsewhere. (This book's accompanying web site, <http://wethemedia.oreilly.com>, includes links to legal sources.)

But it's important to consider some of the legal issues that have arisen in the online sphere. Libel is only one, and it applies not just to people who call themselves journalists but also to commenters in chat rooms. Other questions include copyright, linking, jurisdiction, and liability for what others say on your site.

DEFAMATION, LIBEL, AND OTHER NASTY STUFF

I'm fairly sure I've been personally libeled. That is, people have written plenty of unflattering things about me, the kinds of things that I would never, ever write about someone else without some extraordinarily credible sources. I haven't sued anybody, though. And after almost 25 years in journalism no one has sued me, either. I may be wrong in my opinions or my interpretation of facts, but I try hard not to get basic stuff wrong, and when I learn I've made a mistake, I correct it.

Online journalists are no less required to follow the law than anyone else. A blogger who commits libel may have to face the consequences.²⁶⁷

There has been at least one defamation suit filed against a prominent online journalist. In 1997, Internet gossip maven Matt Drudge quoted unnamed sources who claimed that Democratic operative, author, and former Clinton White House aide Sidney Blumenthal had committed spousal abuse. Drudge's posting was false, and he corrected it in fairly short order. But Blumenthal sued him for defamation of character. In 2001, the

According to the Chilling Effects Clearinghouse,²⁷⁶ an organization sponsored by the EFF and some prominent law schools, including Harvard and Stanford, trademark complaints are fairly common today. One common complaint is the use of domain names “identical or similar to well-known marks” that are typically registered by so-called “cybersquatters” who want to capitalize on the traffic or sell back the name. U.S. law bans “bad faith intent to profit” from such activities. A second is outright copying of logos onto a site to suggest an “authorized connection” to someone else’s better-known product or service.

It’s hard to object when a trademark holder wants to stop someone from trying to piggyback on its brand. Few Netizens objected when *The New York Times* persuaded the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO),²⁷⁷ one of the organizations empowered to make such decisions, to give it the *newyorktimes.com* domain, which had been registered by a third party.

But suppose you found yourself looking at a web site called “mercurynewssucks.com,” an online attack on my newspaper, the *San Jose Mercury News*, and its contents. Barring libelous assault or misrepresentations designed to confuse the public, such a site would be protected as a form of free speech. For the same reason, you’d most likely be laughed out of the U.S. courts if we sued to take away the domain. We’d probably have better luck, unfortunately, if we took our case to WIPO’s headquarters in Switzerland. It might order the domain-name registrars to hand the offending web address over to us because WIPO’s mission is not about freedom of expression. It is, in a fundamental way, the promotion of intellectual property rights.

WIPO, despite claims of neutrality in its arbitration process, has shown a strong bias toward handing over disputed domains to the holders of trademarks. As of mid-March 2004, according to statistics on the WIPO web site, the organization had granted the complaining party’s request to transfer the domain in 80 percent of the cases it has decided.

HERE COME THE JUDGES (AND LAWYERS)

They've posted it in the haiku form of poetry and a variety of other formats that, no doubt, could be ruled illegal but which demonstrate the essential illogic of the ruling. But such satiric reactions don't diminish the club now in the hands of the copyright holders and governments, should they choose to wield it selectively against individuals.

Second, and even more alarming, the courts agreed that even linking to the offending code—that is, posting a hyperlink to a web page containing the code, even one outside U.S. jurisdiction, was also violating the law. The trial judge, supported by the appeals court, said hyperlinking under these circumstances could be proscribed.²⁸³

The potential stifling effect of this ruling is obvious should copyright holders choose to pursue it. Neither my employer nor I were sued by the movie studios when I also linked to DeCSS code from my blog. Was I a more “legitimate” journalist than Corley? The court effectively made that distinction, but it was a frightening one. As Mark Lemley, a University of California-Berkeley law professor, told the online magazine Salon:

The court clearly tries to limit the circumstances in which linking leads to liability, but nonetheless, the fact that [the court is] saying it's illegal to make reference to information that resides somewhere else—well, that's got some troubling implications for, among other things, the news media; if Salon, for example, wants to show its readers what all the fuss is about [with DeCSS], reporters could be pulled into court and asked why they decided to link to the information. I can imagine that there will be a lot of litigation over the intent of the press, and a lot [of] reporters in court.²⁸⁴

The good news is that, as far as I know, this scenario hasn't come to pass. But the potential remains, with another danger lurking. If judges can say that one kind of journalist is legitimate and another kind of journalist is not, the entire concept of grassroots media is threatened. We are creating a division that

such absolute control got their start doing what they'd call "piracy" today. But it's also a shame to see an industry that has fought so honorably to maintain First Amendment protections, without which it could not itself survive, now leading a charge that threatens other people's speech.

Technological advances always threaten established business models. And the people whose businesses are threatened always try to stop progress. Cory Doctorow is an online civil libertarian and science fiction author who published two novels and also made them freely downloadable online the day they were in bookstores. "The Vaudeville performers who sued Marconi for inventing the radio had to go from a regime where they had *one hundred percent* control over who could get into the theater and hear them perform to a regime where they had *zero percent* control over who could build or acquire a radio and tune into a recording of them performing," he told me. The performers, in other words, wanted to prevent new technology from disrupting a successful business model.

It wasn't the only time. In one of the most important recent examples, Hollywood tried to kill off the home video recorder. Only by the narrowest margin in the Supreme Court, in a crucial 1984 decision, did Americans preserve the right to tape a TV show and play it back later.²⁹²

The advent of digital technology terrified the entertainment industry, and for apparently good reasons. After all, a digital copy of something doesn't degrade the way analog copies, such as a copy of a videotape, do in just a couple of generations. And cyberspace threatened to be the world's biggest enabler of infringement because of how easy it is to copy and distribute materials over it.

But the industry has cleverly, though wrongly, framed the argument as "stealing" versus "property rights." In fact, the issue is nothing of the kind. Ideas are different than physical property, and they have been treated distinctly through our history. If I take your car, you can't use it. If I have a copy of your song, you still have the song. Infringement is wrong, and I don't

who wrote the best seller, *Only the Paranoid Survive*,³⁰⁶ then called me paranoid. Several years later, amid the copyright industry's increasing clampdown and Intel's unfortunate leadership in helping the copyright holders lock everything down, I asked him if I'd really been all that paranoid. I never got a direct reply.

THE END OF END-TO-END?

A key design goal of the original Internet was called the “end-to-end principle.” Essentially, it states that we want to keep the intelligence out at the edges of the network and make the transportation of data as simple as possible in between. In other words, use the network to get the zeros and ones back and forth with as little interference as possible and let people using PCs, servers, and other devices do everything else. In an email, David P. Reed, one of the people credited with the notion, described it this way:

Communications systems should not implement functions that can be implemented by their users. In particular, systems designers should work very hard to find or invent system designs that avoid putting specific user-oriented functions into inflexible infrastructure, by moving the implementation of those functions to the edges of the network where they are implemented as part of the user-controlled applications.

It's been the experience in the Internet design community that many functions that are thought to be “network” functions or capabilities are possible to implement in the form of protocols among users or user applications. For example, security can be implemented by end-to-end encryption and end-to-end credentials [that can't be forged], so that the network need not be secure at all.

Similarly, when you are forced to think about problems such as spam in an end-to-end way, you start to realize that

to stonewall effectively. And they've seen the potential; more transparency is almost always better.

Yet I'm most gratified at how the "former audience," as I call it, has taken these tools and turned its endless ideas into such unexpected, and in some cases superb, forms of journalism. Yes, this new media has created, or at least exacerbated, difficult issues of credibility and fairness. We'll be wrestling with these issues for decades, but I'm confident that the community, with the assistance of professional journalists and others who care, can sort it all out.

The former audience has the most important role in this new era: they must be active users of news, and not mere consumers. The Net should be the ally of thought and nuance, not a booster shot for knee-jerk reaction. An informed citizenry cannot sit still for more of the same. It must demand more and be part of the larger conversation. We will lose a great deal if this does not occur.

Sometimes, I fear that it won't be allowed to occur. We are vastly better informed today because of mail lists, web sites, blogs, SMS, and RSS. These tools have roots in networks that encourage innovation.

Open systems are central to any future of a free (as in freedom) flow of information. Yet the forces of central control—governments and big businesses, especially the copyright cartel—are pushing harder and harder to clamp down on our networks. To preserve their business models, which are increasingly outmoded in a digital age, they would restrict innovation and, ultimately, the kinds of creativity on which they founded their own businesses. The danger in this is massive, but the public remains all too oblivious, in part because Big Media has failed to cover the story properly. I don't think that's a coincidence.

I've no doubt that technology will eventually win because it is becoming more and more ubiquitous. I also have faith, perhaps misguided, that public officials will ultimately pay proper attention to the interests of their constituents, and not just to the industries that pad their campaign war chests.

MAKING OUR OWN NEWS

I hope that I've helped you understand how this media shift—this explosion of conversations—is taking place and where it's headed. Most of all, I hope I've persuaded you to take up the challenge yourself.

Your voice matters. Now, if you have something worth saying, you can be heard.

You can make your own news. We all can.

Let's get started.

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Janet S. Scott, Linda Seebach, Bill Seitz, Ben Silverman, Some Random Humanoid, Kathleen Spracklen, Steve Stroh, Glenn Thomas, Fons Tuinstra, Manolis Tzagarakis, Mike Banks Valentine, Ed Vielmetti, Taylor Walsh, Jonathan Weaver, Joshua Weinberg, Dan Weintraub, Alex Williams, Phil Wolff, Jay Woods, Jim Zellmer and Ethan Zuckerman.

I tended to ignore remarks that said, “Don’t quit your day job”—except when they explained why they thought so. I tend to learn more (or at least as much) from people who think I’m wrong than people who think I’m right, and when they offer reasons I pay close attention, even if we continue to disagree. Thanks to those of you (you know who you are) who challenged my assumptions, even harshly.

So many people were generous with their time. (One of the dilemmas in writing this book was whether to use first names when talking about or quoting the many friends and friendly acquaintances whose work has inspired mine and therefore made it into the text; I used last names for consistency.) Among the people who have helped me understand this process, through conversations, formal interviews, and/or correspondence, are: Marko Antisari, Chris Allbritton, Chris Anderson, Azeem Azhar, Jay Bates, John Perry Barlow, Cameron Barrett, Yochai Benkler, Krishna Bharat, Shayne Bowman, Wes Boyd, Nick Bradbury, Yale Braunstein, Dan Bricklin, John Brockman, Buzz Bruggeman, Thomas N. Burg, Kevin Burton, Jason McCabe Calacanis, Mark Canter, Jerry Ceppos, Ying Chan, Joe Clark, Ed Cone, Robert Cox, David Crossen, Mark Cuban, Ward Cunningham, Rob Curley, Anil Dash, Nick Denton, Hossein Derakhshan, Betsy Devine, Samanthi Dissanayake, Cory Doctorow, Jack Driscoll, Esther Dyson, Ben Edelman, Renee Edelman, Charles Eisendrath, Dave Farber, Ed Felten, Rusty Foster, Karl Frisch, Glenn Fleishman, Adam Gaffin, Jock Gill, Steve Gillmor, Wiley Gillmor, Mark Glaser, Vindu Goel, Phil Gomes, Amy Goodman, Rich Gordon, Jennifer Granick, Matt Gross, Tara Sue Grubb, Justin Hall, Jay Harris, Peter Harter, Matt Haughey, Scott Hiefferman, Mary Hodder, Meg

Thanks to Esther Dyson, Daphne Kis, Christina Koukkos and their colleagues at Release 1.0, for whom I wrote an issue of their newsletter on blogs and RSS. Some of the material from that article is in this book.

Cory Doctorow, J.D. Lasica, Larry Lessig, Wendy Seltzer, Dan Shafer, Leonard Witt and Jeff Jarvis read draft chapters—sometimes very early drafts—and helped me understand where I was going astray and where I was making sense. As noted, Stephen Waters (the newspaper editor in New York state) pushed me to work even harder. Jay Rosen went far beyond the call of duty in reading chapters and in several long discussions. Howard Rheingold's insights and encouragement have been immeasurably helpful. Doc Searls is amazing, period.

Tim O'Reilly, the founder and chief executive of O'Reilly Media, publisher of this book, constantly impresses me with his rare combination of intellect and generosity of spirit. When I described the idea to him in 2002, he immediately said he'd like to publish the book but thought I'd do better financially with an East Coast house. I trucked out in New York despite the efforts of a fine literary agent. I'm glad, in retrospect, because working with Tim and his team—including Rael Dornfest, Betsy Waliszewski, Susan Winge and their colleagues—has been an absolute pleasure.

Allen Noren, an editor at O'Reilly and accomplished author in his own right, shepherded and edited this book. I'm in awe of his patience, thoughtfulness and good sense. He constantly challenged me to make this a better book, and if it is, he deserves much of the credit. Allen, thank you.

Noriko Takiguchi is a never-ending well of calm and joy. She put up with my absurdly long hours—including months of an alarm clock buzzing at absurdly early hours—and pushed me to get my butt in gear when I got lazy. She makes me sane. She lights my life.

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they were seeing at home. I leaned in favor of the war, but I was appalled at the lack of nuance in American journalism during a time when about half the population opposed the war.

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39. Yahoo Groups: <http://groups.yahoo.com>.
40. Gizmodo: <http://www.gizmodo.com>.
41. Wi-Fi Networking: <http://wifinetnews.com>.
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43. Six Apart: <http://www.sixapart.com>.
44. Radio UserLand: <http://radio.userland.com>.
45. LiveJournal: <http://www.livejournal.com>.
46. Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com>.
47. 20six: <http://www.20six.co.uk>.
48. Wiki: <http://c2.com/cgi/wiki>.
49. Cunningham's Wiki categories: <http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?Category:Category>.
50. Wiki Travel: <http://www.wikitravel.org>.
51. Instant messaging is also one way people spread news, mostly in the U.S., but SMS is much more global and destined, as devices become more mobile to be the headline service of the Digital Age.
52. Perseus, 2002
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58. BitTorrent: <http://bitconjurer.org/BitTorrent/>.
59. LockerGnome: <http://www.lockergnome.com>.
60. NetNewsWire: <http://www.ranchero.com>.
61. FeedDemon: <http://www.bradsoft.com/feeddemon/index.asp>.
62. NewsIsFree: <http://www.newsisfree.com>.
63. Syndic8: <http://www.syndic8.com>.

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96. Donald Luskin blog: <http://www.donaldstupid.com>.

CHAPTER 4, NEWSMAKERS TURN THE TABLES

97. *The Washington Post* interview with Donald Rumsfeld: http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/Feb2002/t02052002_t0109wp.html.
98. The assumption of accuracy is not automatic, and the Pentagon severely compromised its credibility in April 2004 in a similar circumstance. According to *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A28729-2004Apr20.html>), the Defense Department "deleted from a public transcript a statement Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld made to author Bob Woodward suggesting that the administration gave Saudi Arabia a two-month heads-up that President Bush had decided to invade Iraq." Woodward provided his own transcript. Will journalists and sources be posting dueling transcripts in the future?
99. Phil Gomes blog: <http://www.philgomes.com/blog>.
100. ActiveWords: <http://www.activewords.com>.
101. Tom Murphy blog: <http://www.natterjackpr.com>.
102. Ray Ozzie blog: <http://www.ozzie.net/blog/>.
103. Mark Cuban's Blog Maverick: <http://www.blogmaverick.com>.
104. John Dowdell's MX Blog: <http://www.markme.com/jdl/>.

NOTES

150. Dan Weintraub blog: <http://www.sacbee.com/insider/>.
151. *The Wall Street Journal* "Best of the Web": <http://www.opinionjournal.com/best/>,
152. Sheila Lennon blog: <http://www.projo.com/blogs/shenews/>,
153. Like so many journalism organizations, the *Charlotte Observer's* excellent work has disappeared behind a pay-per-view firewall. You can find the hurricane coverage, or some of it, in the nonprofit Web Archive: <http://web.archive.org/web/20010307020840/http://www.charlotte.com/special/bonnie/0828dispatches.htm>.
154. Tom Mangan blog: <http://tommangan.net/printsthechaff>,
155. CNN to Online Journalism Review: <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1049381758.php>,
156. Olafson fired: <http://www.houstonpress.com/issues/2002-08-08/hostage.html/1/index.html>,
157. Dennis Horgan blog: <http://denishorgan.com>,
158. The *Nieman Reports* back issues are, perversely, available only as PDFs: <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/03-3NRfall/V57N3.pdf>,
159. So are some broadcasters. Minnesota Public Radio (<http://www.mpr.org>) looks like it will lead the way, with a variety of programs designed to bring listeners into the process.
160. Spokane *Spokesman-Review*: <http://www.spokesmanreview.com>
161. Lawrence *Journal World*: <http://www.liworld.com>
162. White House Briefing: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/politics/administration/whbriefing/>.
163. Times on the trail: <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/politics/trail/>.
164. *Columbia Journalism Review*: <http://www.cjr.org>.
165. *American Journalism Review*: <http://www.ajr.org>.
166. Patterico: <http://patterico.com>.
167. In May, Patterico, whose real name is Patrick Frey, told Online Journalism Review's Mark Glaser that he'd contacted the *Times* not as a blogger but as an interested reader. His impact was no less real in any event. See <http://patterico.com/archives/002026.php>.
168. Minnesota Public Radio's Michael Skoler put it well in an interview on Leonard Witt's Public Journalism blog (<http://pjnet.org/weblogs/pjnettoday/archives/000172.html>) when he said: "If 'establishment' media organizations can plug into the energy and wisdom of the collective brain of the public, we'll bring the strength of traditional journalism—editorial judgment, fact-checking, truth-seeking—into a new age of better, more trusted news coverage. If we don't do this, I think the unfiltered, weblog-type model of journalism will overtake traditional media with its sheer energy and we will lose a powerful way of informing the public about critical issues in our democracy."

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