

we the media

GRASSROOTS JOURNALISM
BY THE PEOPLE,
FOR THE PEOPLE

DAN GILLMOR

We the Media

Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People

by Dan Gillmor

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Contents

Introduction	IX
1. From Tom Paine to Blogs and Beyond	I
2. The Read-Write Web	23
3. The Gates Come Down	44
4. Newsmakers Turn the Tables	66
5. The Consent of the Governed	88
6. Professional Journalists Join the Conversation	110
7. The Former Audience Joins the Party	136
8. Next Steps	158
9. Trolls, Spin, and the Boundaries of Trust	174
10. Here Come the Judges (and Lawyers)	191
11. The Empires Strike Back	209
12. Making Our Own News	236
Epilogue and Acknowledgments	243
Web Site Directory	251
Glossary	259
Notes	261
Index	281

Introduction

We freeze some moments in time. Every culture has its frozen moments, events so important and personal that they transcend the normal flow of news.

Americans of a certain age, for example, know precisely where they were and what they were doing when they learned that President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. Another generation has absolute clarity of John F. Kennedy's assassination. And no one who was older than a baby on September 11, 2001, will ever forget hearing about, or seeing, airplanes exploding into skyscrapers.

In 1945, people gathered around radios for the immediate news, and stayed with the radio to hear more about their fallen leader and about the man who took his place. Newspapers printed extra editions and filled their columns with detail for days and weeks afterward. Magazines stepped back from the breaking news and offered perspective.

Something similar happened in 1963, but with a newer medium. The immediate news of Kennedy's death came for most via television; I'm old enough to remember that heart-breaking moment when Walter Cronkite put on his horn-rimmed glasses to glance at a message from Dallas and then, blinking back tears, told his viewers that their leader was gone. As in the earlier time, newspapers and magazines pulled out all the stops to add detail and context.

September 11, 2001, followed a similarly grim pattern. We watched—again and again—the awful events. Consumers of

news learned the *what* about the attacks, thanks to the television networks that showed the horror so graphically. Then we learned some of the *how* and *why* as print publications and thoughtful broadcasters worked to bring depth to events that defied mere words. Journalists did some of their finest work and made me proud to be one of them.

But something else, something profound, was happening this time around: news was being produced by regular people who had something to say and show, and not solely by the “official” news organizations that had traditionally decided how the first draft of history would look. This time, the first draft of history was being written, in part, by the former audience. It was possible—it was inevitable—because of new publishing tools available on the Internet.

Another kind of reporting emerged during those appalling hours and days. Via emails, mailing lists, chat groups, personal web journals—all nonstandard news sources—we received valuable context that the major American media couldn’t, or wouldn’t, provide.

We were witnessing—and in many cases were part of—the future of news.

Six months later came another demonstration of tomorrow’s journalism. The stakes were far lower this time, merely a moment of discomfort for a powerful executive. On March 26, 2002, poor Joe Nacchio got a first-hand taste of the future; and this time, in a small way, I helped set the table.

Actually, Nacchio was rolling in wealth that day, when he appeared at PC Forum, an exclusive executive conference in suburban Phoenix. He was also, it seemed, swimming in self-pity.

In those days Nacchio was the chief executive of regional telephone giant Qwest, a near-monopoly in its multistate marketplace. At the PC Forum gathering that particular day, he was complaining about difficulties in raising capital. Imagine: whining about the rigors of running a monopoly, especially when Nacchio’s own management moves had contributed to some of the difficulties he was facing.

INTRODUCTION

I was in the audience, reporting in something close to real time by publishing frequent conference updates to my weblog, an online journal of short web postings, via a wireless link the conference had set up for attendees. So was another journalist weblogger, Doc Searls, senior editor of *Linux Journal*, a software magazine.

Little did we know that the morning's events would turn into a mini-legend in the business community. Little did I know that the experience would expand my understanding of how thoroughly the craft of journalism was changing.

One of my posts noted Nacchio's whining, observing that he'd gotten seriously richer while his company was losing much of its market value—another example of CEOs raking in the riches while shareholders, employees, and communities got the shaft. Seconds later I received an email from Buzz Bruggeman, a lawyer in Florida, who was following my weblog and Searls's from his office in Orlando. "Ain't America great?" Bruggeman wrote sarcastically, attaching a hyperlink to a Yahoo! Finance web page showing that Nacchio had cashed in more than \$200 million in stock while his company's stock price was heading downhill. This information struck me as relevant to what I was writing, and I immediately dropped this juicy tidbit into my weblog, with a cyber-tip of the hat to Bruggeman. ("Thanks, Buzz, for the link," I wrote parenthetically.) Doc Searls did likewise.

"Around that point, the audience turned hostile," wrote Esther Dyson, whose company, Edventure Holdings, held the conference.¹ Did Doc and I play a role? Apparently. Many people in the luxury hotel ballroom—perhaps half of the executives, financiers, entrepreneurs, and journalists—were also online that morning. And at least some of them were amusing themselves by following what Doc and I were writing. During the remainder of Nacchio's session, there was a perceptible chill toward the man. Dyson, an investor and author, said later she was certain that our weblogs helped create that chill.² She called the blogging "a second conference occurring around, through, and across the first."

Why am I telling this story? This was not an earth-shaking event, after all. For me, however, it was a tipping point.

Consider the sequence of news flow: a feedback loop that started in an Arizona conference session, zipped to Orlando, came back to Arizona and ultimately went global. In a world of satellite communications and fiber optics, real-time journalism is routine; but now we journalists had added the expertise of the audience.

Those forces had lessons for everyone involved, including the “newsmaker”—Nacchio—who had to deal with new pressures on the always edgy, sometimes adversarial relationship between journalists and the people we cover. Nacchio didn’t lose his job because we poked at his arrogance; he lost it, in the end, because he did an inadequate job as CEO. But he got a tiny, if unwelcome, taste of journalism’s future that morning.

The person in our little story who tasted journalism’s future most profoundly, I believe, was neither the professional reporter nor the newsmaker, but Bruggeman. In an earlier time, before technology had collided so violently with journalism, he’d been a member of an audience. Now, he’d received news about an event without waiting for the traditional coverage to arrive via newspapers or magazines, or even web sites. And now he’d become part of the journalistic process himself—a citizen reporter whose knowledge and quick thinking helped inform my own journalism in a timely way.

Bruggeman was no longer just a consumer. He was a producer. He was making the news.

This book is about journalism’s transformation from a 20th century mass-media structure to something profoundly more grassroots and democratic. It’s a story, first, of evolutionary change. Humans have always told each other stories, and each new era of progress has led to an expansion of storytelling.

This is also a story of a modern revolution, however, because technology has given us a communications toolkit that allows anyone to become a journalist at little cost and, in theory, with global reach. Nothing like this has ever been remotely possible before.

INTRODUCTION

In the 20th century, making the news was almost entirely the province of journalists; the people we covered, or “news-makers”; and the legions of public relations and marketing people who manipulated everyone. The economics of publishing and broadcasting created large, arrogant institutions—call it Big Media, though even small-town newspapers and broadcasters exhibit some of the phenomenon’s worst symptoms.

Big Media, in any event, treated the news as a lecture. We told you what the news was. You bought it, or you didn’t. You might write us a letter; we might print it. (If we were television and you complained, we ignored you entirely unless the complaint arrived on a libel lawyer’s letterhead.) Or you cancelled your subscription or stopped watching our shows. It was a world that bred complacency and arrogance on our part. It was a gravy train while it lasted, but it was unsustainable.

Tomorrow’s news reporting and production will be more of a conversation, or a seminar. The lines will blur between producers and consumers, changing the role of both in ways we’re only beginning to grasp now. The communication network itself will be a medium for everyone’s voice, not just the few who can afford to buy multimillion-dollar printing presses, launch satellites, or win the government’s permission to squat on the public’s airwaves.

This evolution—from journalism as lecture to journalism as a conversation or seminar—will force the various communities of interest to adapt. Everyone, from journalists to the people we cover to our sources and the former audience, must change their ways. The alternative is just more of the same.

We can’t afford more of the same. We can’t afford to treat the news solely as a commodity, largely controlled by big institutions. We can’t afford, as a society, to limit our choices. We can’t even afford it financially, because Wall Street’s demands on Big Media are dumbing down the product itself.

There are three major constituencies in a world where anyone can make the news. Once largely distinct, they’re now blurring into each other.

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

INTRODUCTION

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 25–30 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

leaves a journalistic opening, and new journalists—especially citizen journalists—are filling the gap.

Meanwhile, even as greed and consolidation take their toll, those historically high margins are under attack. Newspapers, for example, have two main revenue streams. The smaller by far comes from circulation: readers who pay to have the paper delivered at home or buy it from a newsstand. The larger is advertising, from employment classifieds to retail display ads, and every one of those ad revenue streams is under attack from competitors like eBay and craigslist, which can happily live on lower margins (or, as in the case of eBay, the world's largest classified-advertising site, establish a new monopoly) and don't care at all about journalism.

In the long term, I can easily imagine an unraveling of the business model that has rewarded me so well, and—despite the effect of excessive greed in too many executive suites—has managed to serve the public respectably in vital ways. Who will do big investigative projects, backed by deep pockets and the ability to pay expensive lawyers when powerful interests try to punish those who exposed them, if the business model collapses? Who would have exposed the Watergate crimes in the absence of powerful publishers, especially *The Washington Post's* Katharine Graham, who had the financial and moral fortitude to stand up to Richard Nixon and his henchmen. At a more prosaic level, who will serve, for better or worse, as a principal voice of a community or region? Flawed as we may be in the business of journalism, anarchy in news is not my idea of a solution.

A world of news anarchy would be one in which the big, credible voices of today were undermined by a combination of forces, including the financial ones I just described. There would be no business model to support the institutional journalism that, for all its problems, does perform a public service. Credibility matters. People need, and want, trusted sources—and those sources have been, for the most part, serious journalists. Instead of journalism organizations with the critical mass to fight the good fights, we may be left with the equivalent of

INTRODUCTION

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

WE THE MEDIA

journalism is mostly the province of what my friend and former newspaper editor Tom Stites calls “a rather narrow and very privileged slice of the polity—those who are educated enough to take part in the wired conversation, who have the technical skills, and who are affluent enough to have the time and equipment.” These are the very same people we’re leaving behind in our Brave New Economy. They are everyday people, buffeted by change, and outside the conversation. To our discredit, we have not listened to them as well as we should.

The rise of the citizen journalist will help us listen. The ability of anyone to make the news will give new voice to people who’ve felt voiceless—and whose words we need to hear. They are showing all of us—citizen, journalist, newsmaker—new ways of talking, of learning.

In the end, they may help spark a renaissance of the notion, now threatened, of a truly informed citizenry. Self-government demands no less, and we’ll all benefit if we do it right.

Let’s have this conversation, for everyone’s sake.

Chapter 1

From Tom Paine to Blogs and Beyond

We may have noticed the new era of journalism more clearly after the events of September 11, but it wasn't invented on that awful day. It did not emerge fully formed or from a vacuum. What follows doesn't pretend to be a history of journalism. Rather, these are observations, including some personal experiences that help illustrate the evolution of what we so brazenly call "new media."

At the risk of seeming to slight the contributions from other nations, I will focus mostly on the American experience. America, born in vocal dissent, did something essential early on. The U.S. Constitution's First Amendment has many facets, including its protection of the right of protest and practice of religion, but freedom of speech is the most fundamental part of a free society. Thomas Jefferson famously said that if given the choice of newspapers or government, he'd take the newspapers. Journalism was that important to society, he insisted, though as president, attacked by the press of his day, he came to loathe what he'd praised.

Personal journalism is also not a new invention. People have been stirring the pot since before the nation's founding; one of the most prominent in America's early history was Ben Franklin, whose *Pennsylvania Gazette* was civic-minded and occasionally controversial.

There were also the pamphleteers who, before the First Amendment was enshrined into law and guaranteed a free press, published their writings at great personal risk. Few Americans

can appreciate this today, but journalists are still dying elsewhere in the world for what they write and broadcast.

One early pamphleteer, Thomas Paine, inspired many with his powerful writings about rebellion, liberty, and government in the late 18th century. He was not the first to take pen to paper in hopes of pointing out what he called common sense, nor in trying to persuade people of the common sense of his ideas. Even more important, perhaps, were the (at the time) anonymous authors of the Federalist Papers. Their work, analyzing the proposed Constitution and arguing the fundamental questions of how the new Republic might work, has reverberated through history. Without them, the Constitution might never have been approved by the states. The Federalist Papers were essentially a powerful conversation that helped make a nation.

There have been several media revolutions in U.S. history, each accompanied by technological and political change. One of the most crucial, Bruce Bimber notes in his book, *Information and American Democracy*,³ was the completion of the final parts, in the early to middle 1800s, of what was then the most dependable and comprehensive postal system in the world. This unprecedented exercise in governmental assistance should be seen, Bimber argues, as “a kind of Manhattan project of communication” that helped fuel the rise of the first truly mass medium, newspapers. The news, including newspapers, was cheaply and reliably distributed through the mail.⁴

For most of American history, newspapers dominated the production and dissemination of what people widely thought of as news. The telegraph—a revolutionary tool from the day in 1844 when Samuel Morse’s partner Alfred Vail dispatched the message “What hath God wrought?” from Baltimore to Washington D.C.—sped up the collection and transmission of the news. Local papers could now gather and print news of distant events.⁵

Newspapers flourished throughout the 19th century. The best were aggressive and timely, and ultimately served their

readers well. Many, however, had little concern for what we now call objectivity. Papers had points of view, reflecting the politics of their backers and owners.

Newspapers have provoked public opinion for as long as they've been around. "Yellow journalism" achieved perhaps its ugliest prominence when early media barons such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst abused their considerable powers. Hearst, in particular, is notorious for helping to spark the Spanish-American War in 1898 by inflaming public opinion.

As the Gilded Age's excesses began to tear at the very fabric of American society, a new kind of journalist, the muckraker, emerged at the end of the 19th century. More than most journalists of the era, muckrakers performed the public service function of journalism by exposing a variety of outrages, including the anticompetitive predations of the robber barons and cruel conditions in workplaces. Lincoln Steffens (*The Shame of the Cities*), Ida Tarbell (*History of the Standard Oil Company*), Jacob Riis (*How the Other Half Lives*), and Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*) were among the daring journalists and novelists who shone daylight into some dark corners of society. They helped set the stage for the Progressive Era, and set a standard for the investigative journalists of the new century.

Personal journalism didn't die with the muckrakers. Throughout the 20th century, the world was blessed with individuals who found ways to work outside the mainstream of the moment. One of my journalistic heroes is I.F. Stone, whose weekly newsletter was required reading for a generation of Washington insiders. As Victor Navasky wrote in the July 21, 2003 issue of *The Nation*, Stone eschewed the party circuit in favor of old-fashioned reporting:

His method: To scour and devour public documents, bury himself in The Congressional Record, study obscure Congressional committee hearings, debates and reports, all the time prospecting for news nuggets (which would appear as boxed paragraphs in his paper), contradictions in the official line,

WE THE MEDIA

examples of bureaucratic and political mendacity, documentation of incursions on civil rights and liberties. He lived in the public domain.⁶

A generation of journalists learned from Stone's techniques. If we're lucky, his methods will never go out of fashion.

THE CORPORATE ERA

But in the 20th century, the big business of journalism—the corporatization of journalism—was also emerging as a force in society. This inevitable transition had its positive and negative aspects.

I say “inevitable” for several reasons. First, industries consolidate. This is in the nature of capitalism. Second, successful family enterprises rarely stayed in the hands of their founders' families; inheritance taxes forced some sales and breakups, and bickering among siblings and cousins who inherited valuable properties led to others. Third, the rules of American capitalism have been tweaked in recent decades to favor the big over the small.

As noted in the *Introduction*, however, the creation of Big Media is something of an historical artifact. It stems from a time when A.J. Liebling's famous admonition, that freedom of the press was for those people who owned a press, reflected financial reality. The economics of newspaper publishing favored bigness, and local monopolies came about because, in most communities, readers would support only one daily newspaper of any size.⁷

Broadcasting has played a key role in the transition to consolidation. Radio, then television, lured readers and advertisers away from newspapers,⁸ contributing to the consolidation of the newspaper industry. But the broadcasters were simultaneously turning into the biggest of Big Media. As they grew, they brought the power of broadcasting to bear on the news, to great

effect. Edward R. Murrow's reports on CBS, most notably his coverage of the wretched lives of farm workers and the evil politics of Joe McCarthy, were proud moments in journalism.

The news hegemony of the networks and big newspapers reached a peak in the 1960s and 1970s. Journalists helped bring down a law-breaking president. An anchorman, Walter Cronkite, was considered the most trusted person in America. Yet this was an era when news divisions of the major networks lost money but were nevertheless seen as the crown jewels for their prestige, fulfilling a longstanding (and now all but discarded) mandate to perform a public service function in their communities. The networks were sold to companies such as General Electric and Loews Corp., which saw only the bottom line. News divisions were required to be profit centers.

While network news may have been expensive to produce, local stations had it easier. But while the network news shows still retained some sense of responsibility, most local stations made no pretense of serving the public trust, preferring instead to lure viewers with violence and entertainment, two sure ratings boosters. It was an irresistible combination for resource-starved news directors: cheaper than serious reporting, and compelling video. "If it bleeds, it leads" became the all-too-true mantra for the local news reports, and it has stayed that way, with puerile celebrity "journalism" now added to the mix.

America has suffered from this simplistic view of news. Even in the 1990s, when crime rates were plummeting, local TV persisted in giving viewers the impression that crime was never a bigger problem. This was irresponsible because, among other things, it helped feed a tough-on-crime atmosphere that has stripped away crucial civil liberties—including most of our Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable searches and seizures—and kept other serious issues off the air.

As the pace of life has quickened, our collective attention span has shortened. I suppose it's asking too much of commercial TV news to occasionally use the public airwaves to actually inform the public, but the push for profits has crowded out

depth. The situation is made worse by the fact that most of us don't stop long enough to consider what we've been told, much less seek out context, thereby allowing ourselves to be shallow and to be led by people who take advantage of it. A shallow citizenry can be turned into a dangerous mob more easily than an informed one.

At the same time, big changes were occurring in TV journalism, and big newspaper companies were swallowing small papers around the nation. As noted, this didn't always reduce quality. In fact, the craft of newspaper journalism has never been better in some respects; investigative reporting by the best organizations continues to make me proud. And while some corporate owners—Gannett in particular—have tended to turn independent papers into cookie-cutter models of corporate journalism, sometimes they've actually improved on the original. But it's no coincidence that three of the best American newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*, have an ownership structure—voting control by families and/or small groups of committed investors—that lets them take the long view no matter what Wall Street demands in the short term. Nor should it surprise anyone that these organizations are making some of the most innovative use of the Internet as they expand their horizons in the digital age.

It was cable, a technology that originally expanded broadcast television's reach in the analog age, which turned television inside out. Originally designed to get broadcast signals into hard-to-reach mountain valleys, cable grew into a power center in its own right when system owners realized that the big money was in more densely populated areas. Cable systems were monopolies in the communities they served, and they used the money in part to bring more channel capacity onto their systems.

The cable channel that changed the news business forever, of course, was Ted Turner's Cable News Network (CNN). We've forgotten what a daring experiment this was, given its

FROM TOM PAINE TO BLOGS AND BEYOND

subsequent success. At the time it was launched on June 1, 1980, many in the media business considered CNN little more than a bizarre corporate ego trip. As it turned out, CNN punched a hole in a dam that was already beginning to crumble from within.

Even if cable was bringing more choices, however, it was still a central point of control for the owner of the cables. Cable companies decided which package of channels to offer. Oh, sure, customers had a choice: yes or no. As we'll see in Chapter 11, cable is becoming part of a broadband duopoly that could threaten information choice in the future.

FROM OUTSIDE IN

During this time of centralization and corporate ownership, the forces of change were gathering at the edges. Some forces were technological, such as the microprocessor that led straight to the personal computer, and a federally funded data-networking experiment called the ARPANET, the precursor to the Internet. Some were political and/or judicial, such as Supreme Court decisions that forced AT&T to let third parties plug their own phones into Ma Bell's network, and another that made it legal for purchasers of home videotape machines to record TV broadcasts for subsequent viewing.

Personal choice, assisted by the power of personal technology, was in the wind.

I got my first personal computer in the late 1970s. In the early 1980s, when I first became a journalist, I bought one of the earliest portable personal computers, an Osborne, and used it to write and electronically transmit news stories to publications such as *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*, for which I was freelancing from Vermont. I was enthralled by this fabulous tool that allowed me, a lone reporter in what were considered the boondocks, to report the news in a timely and efficient manner.

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

such as CompuServe. You'd find a variety of topics on all of these systems, ranging from aviation to technology to politics, whatever struck the fancy of the people who used them.

Fringe politics found their way onto the bulletin boards early on. I was a reporter for the *Kansas City Times* in the mid-1980s and spent the better part of a year chasing groups such as the Posse Comitatus around the Farm Belt. This and other virulently antiestablishment organizations found ready ears amid a rural economic depression that made it easier to recruit farmers and other small-town people who felt they were victims of banks and governments. I found my way onto several online boards operated by radical groups; I never got very deep into the systems because the people running them understood the basics of security. Law-enforcement officials and others who watched the activities of the radicals told me at the time that the BBS was one of the radical right's most effective tools.¹¹

RANSOM-NOTE MEDIA

Personal technology wasn't just about going online. It was about the creation of media in new and, crucially, less expensive ways. For example, musicians were early beneficiaries of computer technology.¹² But it was desktop publishing where the potential for journalism became clearest.

A series of inventions in the mid-1980s brought the medium into its new era. Suddenly, with an Apple Macintosh and a laser printer, one could easily and cheaply create and lay out a publication. Big publishing didn't disappear—it adapted by using the technology to lower costs—but the entry level moved down to small groups and even individuals, a stunning liberation from the past.

There was one drawback of having so much power and flexibility in the hands of nonprofessionals. In the early days of desktop publishing, people tended to use too many different

WE THE MEDIA

fonts on a page, a style that was likened, all too accurately, to ransom notes. But the typographical mishmash was a small price to pay for all those new voices.

Big Media was still getting bigger in this period, but it wasn't noticing the profound demographic changes that had been reshaping the nation for decades. Newsrooms, never mind coverage, scarcely reflected the diversity. Desktop publishing and its progeny created an opening for many new players to enter, not least of which was the ethnic press.

Big Media has tried to adapt. Newsrooms are becoming more diverse. Major media companies have launched or bought popular ethnic publications and broadcasters. But independent ethnic media has continued to grow in size, quality, and credibility: grassroots journalism ascendant.¹³

OUT LOUD AND OUTRAGEOUS

Meanwhile, talk radio was also becoming a force, though not an entirely new one by any means. Radio has featured talk programs throughout its history, and call-in shows date back as far as 1945. Opinionated hosts, mostly from the political right, such as Father Coughlin, fulminated about government, taxes, cultural breakdowns, and a variety of issues they and their listeners were convinced hadn't received sufficient attention from the mainstream media. These hosts were as much entertainers as commentators, and their shows drew listeners in droves.

But modern talk radio had another crucial feature: the participation of the audience. People—regular people—were invited to have their say on the radio. Before that, regular people had no immediate or certain outlet for their own stories and views short of letters to the editor in newspapers. Now they could be part of the program, adding the weight of their own beliefs to the host's.

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