

We the Media By Dan Gillmor

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 heartbreaking moment when Walter Cronkite put on his hornrimmed 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.

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.

In the 20th century, making the news was almost entirely the province of journalists; the people we covered, or “newsmakers”; 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 news-maker'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 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 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 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.