**We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People For the People**
by Dan Gillmor

When this book was in its earliest stages, the author, a respected Silicon Valley journalist, posted an initial outline on his weblog, asking for comments. He was besieged with emails offering suggestions and advice. More, in fact, than he could handle. Later, he posted draft chapters as they were finished. One reader, the publisher of a small newspaper in upstate New York, whom he had never met, sent back a draft chapter dripping with digital red ink, commenting: "The time is right; the subject is right. But your book deserves to be better than this."

For most journalists or authors the idea of putting yourself through this process, while trying to get a book out, seems about as smart as standing on a street corner with a sign round your neck saying: "Please poke me in the eye."

For Gillmor, however, it is a proof of his underlying thesis. Throughout this book, he argues that the growth of internet and related technologies is changing the balance of power between journalists and their readers; you can succeed in the coming decades only by acknowledging that shift in power and changing your behaviour accordingly**. "Big media ... 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 ... 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. 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 airways."**

This thesis in itself is neither new nor original. A lot of this sort of thing was said and written when the internet first emerged on our radars a decade ago.

What is new, and what makes this the right book at the right time, is that a huge amount has happened - particularly over the last three years - to prove it true. And this is the first time someone has put it all down in one place.

If you follow the internet closely, chances are you might have spotted many of the phenomena he writes about. But, even so, it will have seemed like a collection of random fragments of activity scattered across cyberspace: some spectacular, some comical, some irrelevant. However, when it is all put together in one very readable book, you can see that something quite remarkable is happening.

He tells us of OhMyNews.com in South Korea, which has 15,000 "citizen reporters" filing news and comment; and of wikipedia, the online encyclopedia where anyone can write or edit an article, which now has more than one million articles in more than 100 languages.

He tells us about bloggers who have bigger audiences than many newspapers, and who have become just as influential as any specialist journalist in their sector. How Russ Kirk of the alternative news site The Memory Hole used the freedom of information act to get photos of dead US soldiers being brought back from Iraq in flag-draped caskets into the public domain; and how bloggers swarmed together to claim the scalp of Trent Lott, the majority leader in the US Senate, after he appeared to wax nostalgic for a racist past at a fellow senator's birthday dinner.

Gillmor tells of his own experience as a columnist on the San Jose Mercury, starting to write a blog and dealing with comments and criticisms from his readers, who, he claims, "have made me a better journalist, because they find my mistakes, tell me what I'm missing and help me understand nuances". Hence his willingness to go through the rather bruising experience mentioned above.

The audience, claims Gillmor, is in fact **"the former audience".** They are no longer the passive masses, they have the tools to challenge traditional media and create media for themselves. And when they just want to consume, they have so much more choice of what to consume. He rightly points to the importance of RSS (really simple syndication), which allows people to access hundreds of news sources in one place. It is, as he says, a little too clunky for the average user. But then again, so were the first web browsers.

The other party whose lives are changed by all this is those who are written about, "the news-makers", particularly politicians and corporations that can no longer contain and control information about themselves as they might have done before, because "in the emerging world of internet-enabled communications, obfuscation and lies will work even less than before".

At the same time, they have a fantastic opportunity to use this new technology to be much more open and approachable than ever before. (He cites the fact that the Pentagon now puts full transcripts of all interviews with Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz online; and the fact that Microsoft lets some of its main staff keep personal weblogs describing their work.)

Gillmor's ultimate hope is that the result is going to be better for everyone. Journalism, politics and major corporations will all engage with this former audience in new ways to become more transparent and therefore trusted. The result will be better media and better democracy.

His fear, however, is that this won't happen, and based on a number of examples he gives, the future is more likely to live up to his fears than his hopes**. "If today's Big Media is a dinosaur,"** he writes**, "it won't die off quietly. It will, with the government's help, try to control new media, rather than see its business models eroded by it."**

In particular, he cites the over-aggressive use of copyright law in the US as a tool to stifle innovation and creativity. Proving his point again with an act of masochism, Gillmor and his publishers have made the full text available free online, using a "Creative Commons" licence, which means anyone can re-use it for non-commercial purposes.

This is a gripping snapshot of a period of profound change; and since the book was finished, at least half a dozen incidents have taken place to further prove his point. Not everything described applies to the UK - political bloggers, for example, have failed to make the same splash here as in the US, partly, one suspects, because the press here is opinionated enough, but the underlying trends are still relevant.

Exactly how newspapers and other organisations should evolve to deal with these phenomena is left unanswered. That is actually quite welcome. What's happening is so significant, so complex and so unfinished that simple three-point plans are neither welcome nor useful. But anyone plotting the future for a media organisation - or any organisation that deals with the media - would be foolish to do so without first reading Gillmor's book.