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CHAPTER 2

We Have Been Here Before

The numbers are shocking. In the initial ten years of the twenty-first century, newspapers saw nearly half of their ad revenue disappear. Roughly a third of all newsroom jobs vanished. The audience and revenue for network news were less than half what they had been twenty years earlier. More than two billion dollars in news gathering annually disappeared.

Yet for all that the information revolution may seem startling and disruptive, it is not unprecedented. We have been here before. Through the history of human civilization, there have been eight epochal transformations in communication that, in their way, were no less profound and transformative than what we are experiencing now: from cave drawings to oral language, the written word to the printing press, the telegraph to the radio, broadcast television to cable, and now the Internet.

And with each information revolution, certain key patterns have repeated themselves and certain tensions have remained. Each new method of communication made the exchange of information easier, more textured, and more meaningful. Communication of shared knowledge and shared curiosity brought people together in larger and larger communities based on common ways of knowing. Each advance in form and efficiency also had a democratizing influence: As more people became more knowledgeable, they also became better able to question their world and

the behavior of the people and institutions that directed their lives. And those new levels of awareness resulted in shifts in power arrangements, toppling or changing old authorities and creating new ones. We moved from shamans to tribal leaders, from tribal leaders to kings and city-states, from city-states to nations. Each change, in turn, forced existing power elites to try to exploit communication in order to reorganize and direct the energy democratization released at the grassroots level.

And as it reorganized social order, each change in popular communications was accompanied by a renewal of the tension between two strands of knowledge or ways of trying to understand existence: the tension between knowledge based on observation and experience and knowledge grounded on faith and belief—the tension between fact and faith.

All these patterns—the forming of larger new communities (community and democratization), the toppling of old authorities and the creation of new ones (reorganization), and the increasing gulf between empiricism and faith (tension)—are evident in the technological revolution of the twenty-first century. Even the bloggers, cable demagogues, citizen Web sites, and populist political movements of our new century all have parallels in earlier moments of technological and socioeconomic change. Our challenge as citizens today is to understand and learn, as more power cedes to each of us, how to use the power and not be thwarted by it.

The Written Word

The first record of communication, in which humans tried to reach out to people beyond face-to-face communication, are cave drawings, dated to about 15,000 B.C. The earliest-known cases—in Altamira, Spain, and Lascaux, France—share two striking characteristics: Both feature pictures of hunting and, more tentatively, illustrations of star clusters that suggest some kind of spiritual communication, a searching for answers about the place of humans in the universe. They express, in other words, two kinds of knowledge: that which is temporal and empirical and that which is based on belief about what cannot be proven.

Oral language likely began earlier, 30,000 to 100,000 years ago. Anthropologists have traced the third breakthrough in communication, the written word, to 5000 B.C. Written language took its first form in the development of numerical symbols, which could be used to measure, record, and distribute the wealth individuals accumulated. That was soon followed by

the codification of spoken words into written symbols. Written communication differed from oral in important ways. Unlike oral knowledge, which might be forgotten or altered with each retelling, what was written was preserved. The symbols were fixed, and their permanence made them more reliable and more precise. The communication became deeper, more complex, and more empirical. The written word was also mobile. What was recorded could be carried from place to place and stored to be referred to months or years later. One could experience the precise thoughts and observations of an unknown and unseen person.

These qualities of permanence, complexity, and mobility effected profound change. They helped move the human race from a hunter-gatherer culture of primitive tribes to a civilization of organized communities based on agrarian life. The codification of records and deeds enabled the domestication of plants and animals and the settlement of larger populations in communities that could communicate across large distances. In the earliest-known written stories, the tales of Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, there is evidence of all these patterns. The stories tell in great detail of the building of walls, the organization of community, the discussion of politics, and the contemplation of man's place in the universe—the same subjects found in the cave drawings made ten thousand years earlier.

The tensions between the two ways of understanding the world—fact and faith—became even greater as written communication reached a new level of sophistication in ancient Greece. In his dialogues, Socrates advanced a disciplined method of empirical questioning of the world. In the Socratic method, each person uses personal observations and reason to challenge the assertions or beliefs of another. Then together, in dialogue, people employ reason and experience to compare assertions with observed reality to form knowledge. It was the most formalized approach yet recorded to what we might call, in modern terms, empiricism and consensus.

Socrates' student Plato further extended his teacher's dialogues, but Plato distrusted sense experience alone. In the "Allegory of the Cave," he argues that what we perceive as the real world is simply a shadow, an illusion, of ideal reality. These shadows can help us understand the world, Plato suggests, but such knowledge is insufficient as a basis for a moral life. And if forced to choose, Plato argues, moral truth is more important than empirical.

Plato's approach of employing faith and reason together profoundly

influenced future conflicts between the two ways of knowing. It inspired Saint Augustine, for instance, who developed a history of knowledge that helped clear the way for church and state to work together for centuries. Yet the tensions that dominated the Middle Ages, and saw violent expression in the Inquisition, didn't ease significantly until the next great shift in communication a thousand years later.

The Printing Press

If art was the first great development in communication, language the second, and writing the third, the next epochal transformation was touched off in fifteenth-century Europe when a craftsman named Johannes Gutenberg perfected a machine for moveable type. Gutenberg's printing press made it possible to quickly produce mass quantities of books and pamphlets. At the time he developed his press, around 1450, it took a monk roughly a year to hand copy a single Bible. In its first full year of production, Gutenberg's press printed 180 Bibles. The printing press left in its wake the transformation of Europe, the Renaissance, and the Reformation. Before the printing press, Oxford University owned 122 books, each equivalent in value to a farm or vineyard.¹ By 1501, fifty years after its invention, at least 10 million copies of an estimated 27,000 to 35,000 books had been printed in Europe.² New universities independent of religious orders opened, and the reading public slowly expanded.

The explosion in writing and reading led to a boost in empirical thought. Scholars began to see the physical world as more important than medieval authorities had argued. The expansion of literacy led to the idea of testing generalizations by observation and of creating situations to be studied experimentally.³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* records that the word "fact" first appeared in the English language in the sixteenth century—one hundred years after Gutenberg's printing press—and is defined as "something that has really occurred or is actually the case; hence a particular truth known by actual observation or authentic testimony, as opposed to what is merely inferred."

At the same time, Gutenberg's Bibles weakened the clerical monopoly on religious texts and meaning. Common people no longer had to rely on interpreters when they could read their own Bible and find their own road to salvation. A key principle in Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation was the idea that all Christians should become literate so they

could read the Gospels daily by age ten. The pattern of community, democratization, and social reorganization forged by language and writing thus repeated itself.

And part of this was the birth of journalism. Within a century of Gutenberg's printing press, something called "news books," one-time reports of a current event, began to appear. The first newspapers soon followed in Germany, France, and England, starting around 1604. Despite censorship, suppression, and imprisonment of its practitioners, and often government control over its daily operations, the fledgling press grew. The shared information allowed people to question, challenge, and amend the information they received from established authorities. The crown, in effect, no longer had control over information or over people's thoughts about public affairs. Gradually but inexorably the notion grew that even the lowliest person in a community had the right to a personal opinion and that opinion should be heard in the councils of government. By the eighteenth century a burgeoning political press, financed by opponents of the government, began to use new forms of language and even political metaphor to evade censorship and challenge the crown. The political press's audacity and newness created a sensation—much the way the brazen frankness of blogging, the popularity of YouTube, and the ease of Twitter have today. The social critic Samuel Johnson considered the work of these new political journalists better reading than any other publications of the time.

With journalism, too, something else happened. What had for centuries been known as common or vulgar opinion was transformed into a more venerated concept: public opinion. The idea, largely absent since Greece and Roman civilizations, reemerged in England in the writings of seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke, and soon the term itself was used in speeches in parliament and political essays. And with the spread of information came an even more powerful concept: the idea that people could be self-governing. Western civilization's greatest fruit, democracy, is itself a product of the evolution of communication.

The Telegraph and the Birth of News

The printing press gave rise in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the newspaper as an organ of political opposition and debate, helping to forge the creation of political parties, but the nineteenth century brought

the advent of another invention that created what we now think of as news. In 1844, John Morse used electric signals of dots and dashes to transmit language electronically over wires. Morse's telegraph made it possible for the first time for people to learn things almost instantly across very long distances. This technology created something that didn't exist before—news as a factual product independent of the observer writing it. Within two years, newspapers formed a nonprofit cooperative called the Associated Press to supply the news for them across the telegraph. The news stories from the AP had to be suitable for any newspaper to publish. Almost instantly a new language of communication was born. News writing took on a more neutral tone that wasn't tied to an author. It was also terse, since it was billed by the word when transmitted over telegraph wires. And it found a new form in the technique of organizing news accounts from the most important facts to the least important, the so-called inverted pyramid, with the thicker part at the top.⁴ Previously, news narratives were more subjective and often told chronologically, with the most dramatic facts revealed toward the end. These older, more personal dispatches, frequently presented as letters from a particular person, resemble blog posts of today.

With more news to fill pages, growing audiences as populations gathered in cities, and the price of newsprint falling by half every ten years, the press became increasingly independent of any political party in the years following the Civil War. This independence gained further momentum from the commercial advertising that came with the growth of industrial America. With political independence, some newsrooms developed a progressive philosophy of reform, a philosophy recognized and seized on by rising reform politicians like Theodore Roosevelt. And in the early twentieth century, muckraking and financial independence elevated the professional aspirations of journalists.

Radio, Reassurance, and Disruption

The next great change in communications was not far away. While the invention of the telegraph in the 1840s gave people the ability to learn about faraway events within a few minutes or hours of their occurrence, the invention of the radio in the 1920s gave them the ability to hear some of those events for themselves. And with it came a repeat of the pattern of forming new communities, political reorganization, and continued

tension between fact and faith. In a way local newspapers never could, radio began to knit together a nation whose population had become increasingly fragmented by the cascading change of the industrial revolution. Suddenly everyone was hearing the same national radio newscasts—a striking change from reading the local newspapers in the print-only age. Literacy, too, was no longer a requirement for learning the news. The new medium also altered print journalism dramatically. It was no longer enough to report the news. Newspapers now had to be more analytical, because people could get the facts from the radio before they would ever see the paper. Some newspapers responded by becoming more sensational and the “tabloid” era began, exploiting another technology, an enhanced ability to print photographs—and to alter them for dramatic effect.

Radio’s impact on politics was no less significant. President Franklin Roosevelt recognized the intimacy of the new medium and its unifying and democratizing potential. In his radio speeches and “fireside chats,” in which he talked to Americans as if he were with them in their living rooms, Roosevelt bypassed the press and spoke to people directly, explaining in reassuring and simple terms the complexity of the Great Depression and, later, the need for war.

The tensions between fact and faith also found expression via radio. At the same time Roosevelt used his broadcasts to help ease public fears about the Depression, reassurance of another kind came in the form of evangelical sermons by a new wave of radio ministers whose audience rivaled Roosevelt’s in size. One of the most powerful of these ministers was Father Charles Edward Coughlin, a Catholic priest with a weekly radio audience estimated at thirty million. Not unlike the books offered by cable hosts today, the first edition of Coughlin’s radio discourses, published in 1933, was a national bestseller, and he was considered by some to be the second-most-powerful man in the United States after the president.

Television, Newspapers, and the Nationalizing of Politics

Only twenty years after radio allowed people to hear the news themselves, an even more powerful new technology appeared. Television offered

people the ability to see the news as well as hear it. Influenced by the toneless and authoritative style of radio news, television news developed an affect thoroughly different from the heavily mediated quality of the brief weekly newsreels people saw in movie theaters, which were characterized by stylized, almost cartoonish narration and little or no natural sound. What’s more, the emerging TV network news divisions carried the sight and sound of events directly into people’s homes every night. Even the names of the early TV news programs promoted the idea that people were seeing the news for themselves: *Person to Person*, *You Are There*, and *See It Now*.⁵ The medium got its first boost in the 1950s by providing gavel-to-gavel television coverage of national political conventions. The public was riveted by the presidential selection process, and the conventions elevated a group of largely unknown network newsmen—Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, and Walter Cronkite—to “anchorman” status after they took on the supposedly unenviable job of narrating the coverage. The network evening news expanded from fifteen minutes to thirty minutes in September 1963. In less than a year, Americans reported that television had become the primary medium by which they got their news.

And again, familiar patterns repeated themselves—the creation of a larger, and more democratic community, political and social reorganization, and renewed tension. With newspapers, readers could pick and choose what articles they wanted to read, skipping stories that didn’t interest them. Radio made the news more intimate and national. But television unified it. Americans largely gathered around two newscasts each night, NBC’s and CBS’s (ABC’s was a distant third). Fully 70 percent of the televisions in use—sometimes viewed by more than a quarter of all Americans each night—were tuned to one of the three programs at the dinner hour. And unlike newspaper readers, television viewers could not pick and choose what they wanted to watch. They had to watch the programs as they were designed or turn them off. The effect was a growth in what social scientists call “incidental news acquisition”—when people learn about things they might not be interested in. And with a common enemy in the Soviet Union and a common news diet from the networks, social consensus rose. The political effect of Americans seeing the news for themselves, and to a significant degree seeing the same thing, was enormous.

Television in turn helped to nationalize politics to levels that had never been seen before. The daily reports from Washington, first from

NBC anchor David Brinkley and then a generation of network White House correspondents, fostered a growing fascination with political news. Newspapers increased their Washington bureaus, and a new aggressiveness and skepticism about government power converged with doubts about the Vietnam War. The ubiquity of the Washington view of political issues and activities had the effect of substantiating centralized authority. This was especially true of the authority of the president, the only public official elected nationwide, whose ability to perform on television became a powerful leadership tool. Where Americans once thought of their news in local terms, because it was brought to them by a local paper, radio, or television, they now began to focus on the institutions and political figures they had in common. With the civil rights movement, the images pouring daily into American homes of brutal public and police reactions to peaceful protesters in the South made it impossible for the political system to continue to ignore the challenge raised by black Americans' demand for equal rights. Television coverage of dramatic events, and the sense that the news was now less mediated, also gave ordinary citizens dramatic new power to effect political change. Televangelists, anti-war protesters, and members of the women's rights movement all were politically empowered by the new form of communication and began to change the nature of the political debate in the United States.

The reorganization also changed the communication order as well. The first print victims of the rise of television news were the afternoon papers, which generally were aimed at blue-collar readers who tended to go to work earlier and get their news at the end of the day. Television news came largely in the afternoon, and its quick accounting of the day's headlines was closer to the shorter, breezier style of papers aimed at these readers. Television's rise also made the surviving papers deeper and more analytical, targeting a more affluent and educated demographic. The morning paper and the Sunday paper entered a golden era. The push for elite demographics also gave more influence to advertisers. Morning papers that had begun to enjoy a monopoly status in their markets had more advertising than they had ever expected. The business was frankly easy, and lucrative. As a result, most newspapers were slow to react with creative thinking about their content until they were at risk of being relegated to a niche position by television, as radio had been. When newspapers did react, their confusion over the nature of the challenge was

reflected in the fact that the two major innovations followed diametrically different paths. *USA Today*, started in 1981, adapted much of TV's appeal, providing more colorful pages of short, snappy "bright" writing and newspaper sidewalk vending boxes that looked like TV sets. Established national newspapers like the *New York Times*, on the other hand, offered a new deeply analytical format that combined hard factual reporting with analytical detail drawn from the reporter's own experience, observations, and conclusions. The *Los Angeles Times* effected an approach that was almost a paradox: the concept of a daily magazine in which the reporting and writing was so deep that it challenged the limits of a daily newspaper.

Cable and Continuous News

Just seventeen years after the networks launched the first thirty-minute evening newscasts came the next major shift in communications: the advent of cable television news. Long before Fox and MSNBC changed the norms of TV news, CNN, launched in 1980, shattered the relationship that had existed between the networks and their local affiliates. Before CNN, three networks tightly controlled what national and international news Americans could see—and the networks did not even share this footage with their own affiliated stations until after it had aired on network newscasts first. In 1986, the affiliate feed provided by the three networks (the amount of footage shared with local stations) was limited to thirty minutes a day.

Ted Turner's CNN network had a profound influence on the news by breaking that monopoly. To get more footage that could air on CNN, Turner began to offer local stations a bargain they had never enjoyed before. If they would share their local footage with CNN, he would share CNN footage with them. Turner's offer, combined with fledgling local news cooperatives, effectively ended the three commercial networks' stranglehold over national and international news. Network affiliates, caught in the middle, began pressuring the networks to provide them with more footage. By 1990, the networks each were offering affiliates up to eight hours of footage a day. The effect on network news audiences came quickly. Not only did people have other programs they could watch on cable. They also had access to national and international news headlines at four, five, and six P.M. newscasts, even if they didn't have cable or watch CNN.

Digital Technology and Consumer Choice

News was becoming something consumers could begin to access when they wanted, and they were become more accustomed to having choices. The evolution of cable news in a sense represented a precursor to the rise of the Internet.

The dominos began to fall more quickly thereafter. In 1994, Yahoo began, and Reuters made the decision to offer its news virtually for free. The next year, America Online was providing Internet access, near real-time audio was available, and 50 percent of America's schools were wired. In 1996, Microsoft and MSNBC launched MSNBC.com. By 2000, Internet pioneers like MSNBC editor in chief Merrill Brown were talking about a major shift in the patterns of news consumption online. Previously, with the exception of rare moments of breaking news on cable and some all-news radio, people acquired news primarily around the breakfast table or in the late afternoon to early evening, plus some local news on television late at night. No longer. Web sites began to chart news consumption throughout the day, with noticeable spikes around lunchtime, and late at night.

From 2000 to 2008, the increase in Internet use was dizzying:

- In 2000, only 46 percent of adults in the United States used the Internet. By 2008, 74 percent did so.
- In 2000, only 5 percent had high-speed Internet at home. By 2008, 58 percent did.
- In 2000, only 50 percent of Americans owned a cell phone. By 2008, 82 percent did.
- In 2000, no one in America was wirelessly connected to the Internet. By 2008, 62 percent of Americans were.

In a decade, we shifted to people having access to news and information virtually anywhere anytime. Some imagined that this would scatter the audience to a million new places for news, including blogs and articles by citizen journalists, and substantially away from traditional news values such as journalistic objectivity, the idea of the journalist as an independent broker who has verified the news that is published and who offers multiple points of view. The presumed end of the news oligarchy even found voice in some simple concepts such as the "long tail." This notion,

popularized by *Wired* editor Chris Anderson, is that the market for information and goods on a wide array of niche topics from myriad distinct sources in various forms—Web sites, blogs, social networks, and mobile media—would eventually supplant the market and information previously delivered via mass media. Anderson argued that the mass media culture that emerged in the twentieth century was an anomaly specific to the newer but dominant forms of the time: television and radio. The Internet was allowing consumers to more easily gravitate toward news, information, goods, and services tailored to individual interests and one's (very exact) geography.⁶

Anderson's prediction, however, isn't really what has happened in journalism. When it comes to news, the reality, at least so far, appears more complex. Traditional online news sites got bigger, not smaller. For instance, in 2007 the top ten newspapers controlled 19 percent of newspaper circulation, but they received 29 percent of the audience for newspaper Web sites. In 2008, the top seven hundred news and information sites saw traffic grow by 7 percent. But the top fifty sites, almost all of them run by traditional newspapers or television stations, saw traffic grow 27 percent.⁷ The front end of the tail is getting bigger online. So is the long end of the tail. It is the middle that's suffering.⁸

Why, then, are traditional news destinations still suffering?

The problem isn't fundamentally a loss of audience. When numbers from their new and old platforms are combined, many traditional media venues are seeing their audiences grow. The crisis facing the news industry created by technology has to do more with revenue. The technology has decoupled advertising from news. Many advertisers no longer need the news to reach their audience—be they big-box retailers with their own Web sites or individuals posting apartments for rent or bicycles for sale on Craigslist. At the same time, the Internet has turned out to be a poor delivery system for the kind of display advertising that financed news gathering in the twentieth century. News delivery for the past century benefited from a happy accident. A commercial system (advertising) subsidized a civic good (professional journalism). That system is now ending, at least as we know it. And it is not clear what, if anything, will replace it or at what scale.

But it is important, as we try to navigate our new world, not to be naive. We should take a breath and look back as well as look forward. Whatever the future news structure, the history of communications suggests that

the old technologies will not disappear. But they will change, becoming smaller and playing a different role. Communication's history also suggests that new technologies do not change human nature. They simply allow us to express and satisfy our curiosity about the world beyond our own direct experience in different ways. Today, as bytes of information move through cyberspace in nanoseconds and as citizens in remote corners of the world are awash in the latest news, it can be difficult to contemplate how slowly information moved four hundred years ago. But there are clear echoes the history recalled here. The written word or printing press was in every way as profound a change as the Internet. The emerging newspapers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were analogous to the embryonic blogs, social networking sites, video sharing platforms, and other online forums for citizen conversation of the twenty-first century. And the emerging newspaper industry of those earlier centuries had a political impact in democratizing Europe and North America—not unlike the impact of viral videos in propelling the career of Barack Obama in 2008 and in challenging his health care plans in 2009. In the simplest terms, newspapers made information that was once held by a few more transparent to many. The readership of the press in the 1730s was certainly not widespread, but nonetheless, information that was once essentially confined at court traveled in dramatic and profound ways. A century later the rise of a commercial press in the United States increased the spread of information and helped previously marginalized citizens become involved in public affairs and become a major factor in the challenge to the established order in American society and the crisis over slavery that ended with the Civil War. The emergence of political radio evangelists like Father Coughlin during the Depression and the New Deal era have their twenty-first-century analog in the rise of cable personalities like Glenn Beck.

And in those echoes the patterns also repeat. Each advance in communications technology has made it easier to learn about the world around us, to more easily become involved, to challenge and even dismantle old authorities who once controlled the flow of information, and to create new authorities. What we are seeing now is the end of old authorities, but be aware that they will be replaced by new ones. The ancient tensions, between the confusing and inductive empiricism of observation and science and the comforting and synthesizing power of faith and belief, have never

been resolved but will find new expressions and disruptions as they seek a balance.

The net effect of these steps forward is more information in the hands of citizens. In the twenty-first century, access to information has reached a new high. The question we now face is how to proceed: How do we identify, with our new tools and options, what information is reliable?