

been labeled “ridiculously easy group-forming” by the social scientist Seb Paquet. Our recent communications networks—the internet and mobile phones—are a platform for group-forming, and many of the tools built for those networks, from mailing lists to camera-phones, take that fact for granted and extend it in various ways. Ridiculously easy group-forming matters because the desire to be part of a group that shares, cooperates, or acts in concert is a basic human instinct that has always been constrained by transaction costs. Now that group-forming has gone from hard to ridiculously easy, we are seeing an explosion of experiments with new groups and new kinds of groups.

CHAPTER 3

EVERYONE IS A MEDIA OUTLET

Our social tools remove older obstacles to public expression, and thus remove the bottlenecks that characterized mass media. The result is the mass amateurization of efforts previously reserved for media professionals.

My uncle Howard was a small-town newspaperman, publishing the local paper for Richmond, Missouri (population 5,000). The paper, founded by my grandfather, was the family business, and ink ran in Howard’s blood. I can still remember him fulminating about the rise of *USA Today*; he criticized it as “TV on paper” and held it up as further evidence of the dumbing down of American culture, but he also understood the challenge that *USA Today* presented, with its color printing and national distribution. The *Richmond Daily News* and *USA Today* were in the same business; even with the difference in scale and scope, Howard immediately got what *USA Today* was up to.

Despite my uncle’s obsession, *USA Today* turned out to be

nothing like the threat that old-time newspaper people feared. It took some market share from other papers, but the effect wasn't catastrophic. What was catastrophic was a less visible but more significant change, already gathering steam when *USA Today* launched. The principal threat to the *Richmond Daily News*, and indeed to all newspapers small and large, was not competition from other newspapers but radical changes in the overall ecosystem of information. The idea that someone might build four-color presses that ran around the clock was easy to grasp. The idea that the transmission of news via paper might become a bad idea, that all those huge, noisy printing presses might be like steam engines in the age of internal combustion, was almost impossible to grasp. Howard could imagine someone doing what he did, but better. He couldn't imagine someone making what he did obsolete.

Many people in the newspaper business, the same people who worried about the effects of competition like *USA Today*, missed the significance of the internet. For people with a professional outlook, it's hard to understand how something that isn't professionally produced could affect them—not only is the internet not a newspaper, it isn't a business, or even an institution. There was a kind of narcissistic bias in the profession; the only threats they tended to take seriously were from other professional media outlets, whether newspapers, TV, or radio stations. This bias had them defending against the wrong thing when the amateurs began producing material on their own. Even as web sites like eBay and Craigslist were siphoning off the ad revenues that keep newspapers viable—job listings, classified ads, real estate—and weblogs were letting people like gnarlykitty publish to the world for free, the executives of the

world's newspapers were slow to understand the change, and even slower to react. How could this happen? How could the newspaper industry miss such an obvious and grave challenge to their business? The answer is the flip side of Howard's obsession with *USA Today* and has to do with the nature of professional self-definition (and occasional self-delusion).

A profession exists to solve a hard problem, one that requires some sort of specialization. Driving a race car requires special training—race car drivers are professionals. Driving an ordinary car, though, doesn't require the driver to belong to a particular profession, because it's easy enough that most adults can do it with a modicum of training. Most professions exist because there is a scarce resource that requires ongoing management: librarians are responsible for organizing books on the shelves, newspaper executives are responsible for deciding what goes on the front page. In these cases, the scarcity of the resource itself creates the need for a professional class—there are few libraries but many patrons, there are few channels but many viewers. In these cases professionals become gatekeepers, simultaneously providing and controlling access to information, entertainment, communication, or other ephemeral goods.

To label something a profession means to define the ways in which it is more than just a job. In the case of newspapers, professional behavior is guided both by the commercial imperative and by an additional set of norms about what newspapers are, how they should be staffed and run, what constitutes good journalism, and so forth. These norms are enforced not by the customers but by other professionals in the same business. The key to any profession is the relations of its members

to one another. In a profession, members are only partly guided by service to the public. As the UCLA sociologist James Q. Wilson put it in his magisterial *Bureaucracy*, "A professional is someone who receives important occupational rewards from a reference group whose membership is limited to people who have undergone specialized formal education and have accepted a group-defined code of proper conduct." That's a mouthful, but the two key ideas apply to newspaper publishers (as well as to journalists, lawyers, and accountants): a professional learns things in a way that differentiates her from most of the populace, and she pays as much or more attention to the judgment of her peers as to the judgment of her customers when figuring out how to do her job.

A profession becomes, for its members, a way of understanding their world. Professionals see the world through a lens created by other members of their profession; for journalists, the rewards of a Pulitzer Prize are largely about recognition from other professionals.

Much of the time the internal consistency of professional judgment is a good thing—not only do we want high standards of education and competence, we want those standards created and enforced by other members of the same profession, a structure that is almost the definition of professionalism. Sometimes, though, the professional outlook can become a disadvantage, preventing the very people who have the most at stake—the professionals themselves—from understanding major changes to the structure of their profession. In particular, when a profession has been created as a result of some scarcity, as with librarians or television programmers, the pro-

professionals are often the last ones to see it when that scarcity goes away. It is easier to understand that you face competition than obsolescence.

In any profession, particularly one that has existed long enough that no one can remember a time when it didn't exist, members have a tendency to equate provisional solutions to particular problems with deep truths about the world. This is true of newspapers today and of the media generally. The media industries have suffered first and most from the recent collapse in communications costs. It used to be hard to move words, images, and sounds from creator to consumer, and most media businesses involve expensive and complex management of that pipeline problem, whether running a printing press or a record label. In return for helping overcome these problems, media businesses got to exert considerable control over the media and extract considerable revenues from the public. The commercial viability of most media businesses involves providing those solutions, so preservation of the original problems became an economic imperative. Now, though, the problems of production, reproduction, and distribution are much less serious. As a consequence, control over the media is less completely in the hands of the professionals.

As new capabilities go, unlimited perfect copyability is a lulu, and that capability now exists in the hands of everyone who owns a computer. Digital means of distributing words and images have robbed newspapers of the coherence they formerly had, revealing the physical object of the newspaper as a merely provisional solution; now every article is its own section. The permanently important question is how society

will be informed of the news of the day. The newspaper used to be a pretty good answer to that question, but like all such answers, it was dependent on what other solutions were available. Television and radio obviously changed the landscape in which the newspaper operated, but even then printed news had a monopoly on the written word—until the Web came along. The Web didn't introduce a new competitor into the old ecosystem, as *USA Today* had done. The Web created a new ecosystem.

We've long regarded the newspaper as a sensible object because it has been such a stable one, but there isn't any logical connection among its many elements: stories from Iraq, box scores from the baseball game, and ads for everything from shoes to real estate all exist side by side in an idiosyncratic bundle. What holds a newspaper together is primarily the cost of paper, ink, and distribution; a newspaper is whatever group of printed items a publisher can bundle together and deliver profitably. The corollary is also true: what doesn't go into a newspaper is whatever is too expensive to print and deliver. The old bargain of the newspaper—world news lumped in with horoscopes and ads from the pizza parlor—has now ended. The future presented by the internet is the mass amateurization of publishing and a switch from “Why publish this?” to “Why not?”

The two basic organizational imperatives—acquire resources, and use them to pursue some goal or agenda—saddle every organization with the institutional dilemma, whether its goal is saving souls or selling soap. The question that mass amateurization poses to traditional media is “What happens when the costs of reproduction and distribution go away? What

happens when there's nothing unique about publishing anymore, because users can do it for themselves?” We are now starting to see that question being answered.

Weblogs and Mass Amateurization

Shortly after his reelection in 2002 Trent Lott, the senior senator from Mississippi and then majority leader, gave a speech at Strom Thurmond's hundredth birthday party. Thurmond, a Republican senator from South Carolina, had recently retired after a long political career, which had included a 1948 run for president on an overtly segregationist platform. At Thurmond's hundredth birthday party Lott remembered and praised Thurmond's presidential campaign of fifty years earlier and recalled Mississippi's support for it: “I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either.” Two weeks later, having been rebuked by President Bush and by politicians and the press on both the right and the left for his comment, Lott announced that he would not seek to remain majority leader in the new Congress.

This would have been a classic story of negative press coverage altering a political career—except that the press didn't actually cover the story, at least not at first. Indeed, the press almost completely missed the story. This isn't to say that they intentionally ignored it or even actively suppressed it; several reporters from national news media heard Lott speak, but his

remark simply didn't fit the standard template of news. Because Thurmond's birthday was covered as a salutary event instead of as a political one, the actual contents of the evening were judged in advance to be relatively unimportant. A related assumption is that a story that is not important one day also isn't important the next, unless something has changed. Thurmond's birthday party happened on a Thursday night, and the press gave Lott's remarks very little coverage on Friday. Not having written about it on Friday in turn became a reason not to write about it on Saturday, because if there was no story on Friday, there was even less of one on Saturday.

William O'Keefe of *The Washington Post*, one of the few reporters to think Lott's comment was important, explains the dilemma this way: "[T]here had to be a reaction" that the network could air alongside Lott's remarks, and "we had no on-camera reaction" available the evening of the party, when the news was still fresh. By the following night, he adds, "you're dealing with the news cycle: twenty-four hours later—that's old news." Like a delayed note to a friend, the initial lack of response would have meant, in any later version, having to apologize for not having written sooner.

Given this self-suppression—old stories are never revisited without a new angle—what kept the story alive was not the press but liberal and conservative bloggers, for whom fond memories of segregation were beyond the pale, birthday felicitations or no, and who had no operative sense of news cycles. The weekend after Lott's remarks, weblogs with millions of readers didn't just report his comments, they began to editorialize. The editorializers included some well-read conservatives such as Glenn Reynolds of the Instapundit blog, who wrote, "But to say, as Lott

did, that the country would be better off if Thurmond had won in 1948 is, well, it's proof that Lott shouldn't be majority leader for the Republicans, to begin with. And that's just to begin with. It's a sentiment as evil and loony as wishing that Gus Hall [a perennial Communist candidate for president] had been elected." Even more damaging to Lott, others began to dig deeper. After the story broke, Ed Sebesta, who maintains a database of materials related to nostalgia for the U.S. Confederacy, contacted bloggers with information on Lott, including an interview from the early 1980s in *Southern Partisan*, a neo-Confederate magazine. The simple birthday party story began looking like part of a decades-long pattern of saying one thing to the general public and another thing to his supporters.

Like the story of Ivanna's lost phone (in Chapter 1), the story of Sebesta's database involves a link between individual effort and group attention. Just as Evan Guttman benefited from the expert knowledge of his readers, the bloggers posting about Lott benefited from Sebesta's deep knowledge of America's racist past, particularly of Lott's history of praise for same. Especially important, the bloggers didn't have to find Sebesta—he found them. Prior to our current generation of coordinating tools, a part-time politics junkie like Sebesta and amateur commentators like the bloggers would have had a hard time even discovering that they had mutual interests, much less being able to do anything with that information. Now, however, the cost of finding like-minded people has been lowered and, more important, deprofessionalized.

Because the weblogs kept the story alive, especially among libertarian Republicans, Lott eventually decided to react. The fateful moment came five days after the speech, when he issued

a halfhearted apology for his earlier remark, characterizing it as a “poor choice of words.” The statement was clearly meant to put the matter behind him, but Lott had not reckoned with the changed dynamics of press coverage. Once Lott apologized, news outlets could cover the apology as the news, while quoting the original speech as background. Only three mainstream news outlets had covered the original comment, but a dozen covered the apology the day it happened, and twenty-one covered it the day after. The traditional news cycle simply didn’t apply in this situation; the story had suddenly been transformed from “not worth covering” to “breaking news.”

Until recently, “the news” has meant two different things—events that are newsworthy, and events covered by the press. In that environment what identified something as news was professional judgment. The position of the news outlets (the very phrase attests to the scarcity of institutions that were able to publish information) was like that of the apocryphal umpire who says, “Some pitches are balls and some are strikes, but they ain’t nothin’ till I call ’em.” There has always been grumbling about this system, on the grounds that some of the things the press was covering were not newsworthy (politicians at ribbon cuttings) and that newsworthy stories weren’t being covered or covered enough (insert your pet issue here). Despite the grumbling, however, the basic link between newsworthiness and publication held, because there did not seem to be an alternative. What the Lott story showed us was that the link is now broken. From now on news can break into public consciousness without the traditional press weighing in. Indeed, the news media can end up covering the story

because something has broken into public consciousness via other means.

There are several reasons for this change. The professional structuring of worldview, as exemplified by the decisions to treat Lott’s remarks as a birthday party story, did not extend to the loosely coordinated amateurs publishing on their own. The decision not to cover Trent Lott’s praise for a racist political campaign demonstrates a potential uniformity in the press outlook. In a world where a dozen editors, all belonging to the same professional class, can decide whether to run or kill a national story, information that might be of interest to the general public may not be published, not because of a conspiracy but because the editors have a professional bias that is aligned by the similar challenges they face and by the similar tools they use to approach those challenges. The mass amateurization of publishing undoes the limitations inherent in having a small number of traditional press outlets.

As they surveyed the growing amount of self-published content on the internet, many media companies correctly understood that the trustworthiness of each outlet was lower than that of established outlets like *The New York Times*. But what they failed to understand was that the effortlessness of publishing means that there are many more outlets. The same idea, published in dozens or hundreds of places, can have an amplifying effect that outweighs the verdict from the smaller number of professional outlets. (This is not to say that mere repetition makes an idea correct; amateur publishing relies on corrective argument even more than traditional media do.) The change isn’t a shift from one kind of news institution to

another, but rather in the definition of news: from news as an institutional prerogative to news as part of a communications ecosystem, occupied by a mix of formal organizations, informal collectives, and individuals.

It's tempting to regard the bloggers writing about Trent Lott or the people taking pictures of the Indian Ocean tsunami as a new crop of journalists. The label has an obvious conceptual appeal. The problem, however, is that mass professionalization is an oxymoron, since a professional class implies a specialized function, minimum tests for competence, and a minority of members. None of those conditions exist with political weblogs, photo sharing, or a host of other self-publishing tools. The individual weblogs are not merely alternate sites of publishing; they are alternatives to publishing itself, in the sense of publishers as a minority and professional class. In the same way you do not have to be a professional driver to drive, you no longer have to be a professional publisher to publish. Mass amateurization is a result of the radical spread of expressive capabilities, and the most obvious precedent is the one that gave birth to the modern world: the spread of the printing press five centuries ago.

In Praise of Scribes

Consider the position of a scribe in the early 1400s. The ability to write, one of the crowning achievements of human inventiveness, was difficult to attain and, as a result, rare. Only a tiny fraction of the populace could actually write, and the wisdom of the ages was encoded on fragile and decaying manuscripts.

In this environment a small band of scribes performed the essential service of refreshing cultural memory. By hand-copying new editions of existing manuscripts, they performed a task that could be performed no other way. The scribe was the only bulwark against great intellectual loss. His function was indispensable, and his skills were irreplaceable.

Now consider the position of the scribe at the end of the 1400s. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable type in the middle of the century had created a sudden and massive reduction in the difficulty of reproducing a written work. For the first time in history a copy of a book could be created faster than it could be read. A scribe, someone who has given his life over to literacy as a cardinal virtue, would be conflicted about the meaning of movable type. After all, if books are good, then surely more books are better. But at the same time the very scarcity of literacy was what gave scribal effort its primacy, and the scribal way of life was based on this scarcity. Now the scribe's skills were eminently replaceable, and his function—making copies of books—was better accomplished by ignoring tradition than by embracing it.

Two things are true about the remaking of the European intellectual landscape during the Protestant Reformation: first, it was not caused by the invention of movable type, and second, it was possible only after the invention of movable type, which aided the rapid dissemination of Martin Luther's complaints about the Catholic Church (the *95 Theses*) and the spread of Bibles printed in local languages, among its other effects. Holding those two thoughts in your head at the same time is essential to understanding any social change driven by a new technological capability. Because social effects lag behind tech-

nological ones by decades, real revolutions don't involve an orderly transition from point A to point B. Rather, they go from A through a long period of chaos and only then reach B. In that chaotic period, the old systems get broken long before new ones become stable. In the late 1400s scribes existed side by side with publishers but no longer performed an irreplaceable service. Despite the replacement of their core function, however, the scribes' sense of themselves as essential remained undiminished.

In 1492, almost half a century after movable type appeared, Johannes Trithemius, the Abbot of Sponheim, was moved to launch an impassioned defense of the scribal tradition, *De Laude Scriptorum* (literally "in praise of scribes"). In this work he laid out the values and virtues of the scribal tradition: "The devout monk enjoys four particular benefits from writing: the time that is precious is profitably spent; his understanding is enlightened as he writes; his heart within is kindled to devotion; and after this life he is rewarded with a unique prize." Note how completely the benefits of the scribal tradition are presented as ones enjoyed by scribes rather than by society.

The Abbot's position would have been mere reactionary cant ("We must preserve the old order at any cost") but for one detail. If, in the year 1492, you'd written a treatise you wanted widely disseminated, what would you do? You'd have it printed, of course, which was exactly what the Abbot did. *De Laude Scriptorum* was not itself copied by scribes; it was set in movable type, in order to get a lot of copies out cheaply and quickly—something for which scribes were utterly inadequate. The content of the Abbot's book praised the scribes, while its printed form damned them; the medium undermined the message.

There is an instructive hypocrisy here. A professional often becomes a gatekeeper, by providing a necessary or desirable social function but also by controlling that function. Sometimes this gatekeeping is explicitly enforced (only judges can sentence someone to jail, only doctors can perform surgery) but sometimes it is embedded in technology, as with scribes, who had mastered the technology of writing. Considerable effort must be expended toward maintaining the discipline and structure of the profession. Scribes existed to increase the spread of the written word, but when a better, nonscribal way of accomplishing the same task came along, the Abbot of Sponheim stepped in to argue that preserving the scribes' way of life was more important than fulfilling their mission by nonscribal means.

Professional self-conception and self-defense, so valuable in ordinary times, become a disadvantage in revolutionary ones, because professionals are always concerned with threats to the profession. In most cases, those threats are also threats to society; we do not want to see a relaxing of standards for becoming a surgeon or a pilot. But in some cases the change that threatens the profession benefits society, as did the spread of the printing press; even in these situations the professionals can be relied on to care more about self-defense than about progress. What was once a service has become a bottleneck. Most organizations believe they have much more freedom of action and much more ability to shape their future than they actually do, and evidence that the ecosystem is changing in ways they can't control usually creates considerable anxiety, even if the change is good for society as a whole.

Mass Amateurization Breaks Professional Categories

Today the profession of scribe seems impossibly quaint, but the habit of tying professional categories to mechanical processes is alive and well. The definition of journalist, seemingly a robust and stable profession, turns out to be tied to particular forms of production as well.

In 2006 Judith Miller, then a reporter for *The New York Times*, was jailed for eighty-five days for refusing to reveal her sources in an ongoing federal investigation, becoming a cause célèbre for reporters in the United States. She eventually relented, after those sources released her from any expectation of confidentiality, and was freed, but by that time her incarceration had created a great deal of unease about the fate of journalistic privilege—the right of journalists to grant promises of confidentiality in order to convince potential sources to cooperate. Though some sort of shield law for journalists exists in forty-nine of fifty states, federal law has no equivalent. Seeing the risk of federal incarceration without such protection, several members of Congress introduced bills to create a federal shield law. Surprisingly, though, what seemed like a simple technicality—pass the same kind of law at the federal level as existed in most of the states—turned out to be not merely complex but potentially impossible, and the difficulties stemmed from a simple question: who, exactly, should enjoy journalistic privilege?

The tautological answer is that journalists should enjoy such privileges, but who are journalists? One view defines

“journalist,” in the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as “a person who writes for newspapers or magazines or prepares news to be broadcast on radio or television.” This is an odd definition, as it provides less a description of journalism than a litmus test of employment. In this version, journalists aren’t journalists unless they work for publishers, and publishers aren’t publishers unless they own the means of production. This definition has worked for decades, because the ties among journalists, publishers, and the means of production were strong. So long as publishing was expensive, publishers would be rare. So long as publishers were rare, it would be easy to list them and thus to identify journalists as their employees. This definition, oblique as it is, served to provide the legal balance we want from journalistic privilege—we have a professional class of truth-tellers who are given certain latitude to avoid cooperating with the law. We didn’t have to worry, in defining those privileges, that they would somehow become general, because it wasn’t like just anyone could become a publisher.

And now it is like that. It’s exactly like that. To a first approximation, anyone in the developed world can publish anything anytime, and the instant it is published, it is globally available and readily findable. If anyone can be a publisher, then anyone can be a journalist. And if anyone can be a journalist, then journalistic privilege suddenly becomes a loophole too large to be borne by society. Journalistic privilege has to be applied to a minority of people, in order to preserve the law’s ability to uncover and prosecute wrongdoing while allowing a safety valve for investigative reporting. Imagine, in a world where any blogger could claim protection, trying to compel someone to testify about their friend’s shady business: “Oh,

I can't testify about that. I've been blogging about it, so what he told me is confidential."

We can't just exclude bloggers either. Many well-read bloggers are journalists, like the war reporter Kevin Sites, who was fired from CNN for blogging, then went to blog on his own; or Rebecca Mackinnon, who was formerly at CNN and went on to cofound Global Voices, dedicated to spreading blogging throughout the world; or Dan Gillmor, a journalist at the *San Jose Mercury News* who blogged both during and after his tenure; and so on. It's tempting to grandfather these bloggers as journalists, since they were journalists before they were blogging, but that would essentially be to ignore the weblog as a form, since a journalist would have to be anointed by some older form of media. This idea preserves what is most wrong with the original definition, namely that the definition of journalist is not internally consistent but rather is tied to ownership of communications machinery. Such a definition would exclude Ethan Zuckerman, a cofounder of Global Voices with Mackinnon; it's hard to imagine any sensible definition of journalist that would include her and exclude him, but it's also hard to imagine any definition that includes him without opening the door to including tens of millions of bloggers, too large a group to be acceptable. It would exclude Xenia Jardin, one of the contributors to the well-trafficked weblog Boing Boing who, as a result of her blogging, has gotten a spot on NPR. Did she become a journalist after NPR anointed her? Did her blogging for Boing Boing become journalism afterward? What about the posts from before—did they retroactively become the work of a journalist? And so on.

The simple answer is that there is no simple answer.

Journalistic privilege is based on the previous scarcity of publishing. When it was easy to recognize who the publisher was, it was easy to figure out who the journalists were. We could regard them as a professional (and therefore minority) category. Now that scarcity is gone. Facing the new abundance of publishing options, we could just keep adding to the list of possible outlets to which journalism is tied—newspapers and television, and now blogging and video blogging and podcasting and so on. But the latter items on the list are different because they have no built-in scarcity. Anyone can be a publisher (and frequently is). There is never going to be a moment when we as a society ask ourselves, "Do we want this? Do we want the changes that the new flood of production and access and spread of information is going to bring about?" It has already happened; in many ways, the rise of group-forming networks is best viewed not as an invention but as an event, a thing that has happened in the world that can't be undone. As with the printing press, the loss of professional control will be bad for many of society's core institutions, but it's happening anyway. The comparison with the printing press doesn't suggest that we are entering a bright new future—for a hundred years after it started, the printing press broke more things than it fixed, plunging Europe into a period of intellectual and political chaos that ended only in the 1600s.

This issue became more than academic with the arrest of Josh Wolf, a video blogger who refused to hand over video of a 2005 demonstration he observed in San Francisco. He served 226 days in prison, far longer than Judith Miller, before being released. In one of his first posts after regaining his freedom, he said, "The question that needs to be asked is not 'Is Josh Wolf

a journalist?’ but ‘Should journalists deserve the same protections in federal court as those afforded them in state courts?’ This isn’t right, though, because making the assumption that Wolf is a journalist in any uncomplicated way breaks the social expectations around journalism in the first place. The question that needs to be asked is, “Now that there is no limit to those who can commit acts of journalism, how should we alter journalistic privilege to fit that new reality?” The admission of Wolf into the category of journalist breaks the older version of that category, giving the question “Who is a journalist?” a new complexity.

The pattern is easy to see with journalists, but it isn’t restricted to them. Who is a professional photographer? Like “journalist,” that category seems at first to be coherent and internally cohesive, but it turns out to be tied to scarcity as well. The amateurization of the photographers’ profession began with the spread of digital cameras generally, but it really took off with the creation of online photo hosting sites. The threat to professional photographers came from a change not just in the way photographs were created but in the way they were distributed. In contrast to the situation a few years ago, taking and publishing photographs doesn’t even require the purchase of a camera (mobile phones already sport surprisingly high-quality digital cameras), and it certainly doesn’t require access either to a darkroom or to a special publishing outlet. With a mobile phone and a photo-sharing service, people are now taking photographs that are being seen by thousands and, in rare cases, by millions of people, all without any money changing hands.

The twin effects are an increase in good amateur photo-

graphs and a threat to the market for professionals. Jeff Howe, author of the forthcoming *Crowdsourcing*, describes iStockPhoto.com, a Web-based clearinghouse for photographers to offer their work for use in advertising and promotional materials (a practice called stock photography). Prior to services like iStockPhoto, amateurs had no outlet for selling their photos, no matter what the quality, leaving the market to professionals. Because one of the services provided by professionals was the simple availability and findability of their photos relative to the amateurs, they commanded a premium for each photo sold. How high was that premium? When a project director at the National Health Museum wanted pictures of flu sufferers, Howe notes, the price from a professional photographer was over \$100 (after a discount) per photo, while the price from iStockPhoto was one dollar, less than one percent of the professional’s price. Much of the price for professional stock photos came from the difficulty of finding the right photo rather than from the difference in quality between photos taken by professionals and amateurs. The success of iStockPhoto suggests that the old division of amateur and professional is only a gradient rather than a gap and that it can be calculated photo by photo. If an amateur has taken only one good photo in his life, but you can find it, why not use it? As with the profession of journalist, iStockPhoto shows that the seemingly consistent profession of photographer is based on criteria that are external to the profession itself. The only real arbiter of professionalism in photography today is the taxman; in the United States, the IRS defines a professional photographer as someone who makes more than \$5,000 a year selling his or her photos.

New communications capabilities are also changing social

definitions that are not tied to professions. Consider what happened to Sherron Watkins, an accountant at the failed energy firm Enron. In 2001 Watkins wrote an e-mail to a handful of executives at Enron and their accounting firm entitled, "The smoking gun you can't extinguish," wherein she detailed the dangerous practices Enron was using to hide its true revenues and costs. As Watkins put it presciently, "I am incredibly nervous that we will implode in a wave of accounting scandals," which is exactly what happened the following year. Watkins was widely described as a whistle-blower, even though her e-mail was addressed to only a handful of people at Enron and at the accounting firm Arthur Andersen. Different from any previous definition of whistle-blower, all Watkins did was write a particularly damning interoffice memo; she didn't leak anything to the press. What the application of the whistle-blower label signals is that in an age of infinite perfect copyability to many people at once, the very act of writing and sending an e-mail can be a kind of publishing, because once an e-mail is sent, it is almost impossible to destroy all the copies, and anyone who has a copy can broadcast it to the world at will, and with ease. Now, and presumably from now on, the act of creating and circulating evidence of wrongdoing to more than a few people, even if they all work together, will be seen as a delayed but public act.

The pattern here is simple—what seems like a fixed and abiding category like "journalist" turns out to be tied to an accidental scarcity created by the expense of publishing apparatus. Sometimes this scarcity is decades old (as with photographers) or even centuries old (as with journalists), but that doesn't stop it from being accidental, and when that scarcity gets undone, the seemingly stable categories turn out to

be unsupportable. This is not to say that professional journalists and photographers do not exist—no one is likely to mistake Bob Woodward or Annie Liebowitz for an amateur—but it does mean that the primary distinction between the two groups is gone. What once was a chasm has now become a mere slope.

Publishing used to require access to a printing press, and as a result the act of publishing something was limited to a tiny fraction of the population, and reaching a population outside a geographically limited area was even more restricted. Now, once a user connects to the internet, he has access to a platform that is at once global and free. It isn't just that our communications tools are cheaper; they are also better. In particular, they are more favorable to innovative uses, because they are considerably more flexible than our old ones. Radio, television, and traditional phones all rely on a handful of commercial firms owning expensive hardware connected to cheap consumer devices that aren't capable of very much. The new model assumes that the devices themselves are smart; this in turn means that one may propose and explore new models of communication and coordination without needing to get anyone's permission first (to the horror of many traditional media firms). As Scott Bradner, a former trustee of the Internet Society, puts it, "The internet means you don't have to convince anyone else that something is a good idea before trying it."

An individual with a camera or a keyboard is now a non-profit of one, and self-publishing is now the normal case. This spread has been all the more remarkable because this technological story is not like the story of the automobile, where an invention moved from high cost to low cost, so that it went

from being a luxury to being a commonplace possession. Rather, this technological story is like literacy, wherein a particular capability moves from a group of professionals to become embedded within society itself, ubiquitously, available to a majority of citizens.

When reproduction, distribution, and categorization were all difficult, as they were for the last five hundred years, we needed professionals to undertake those jobs, and we properly venerated those people for the service they performed. Now those tasks are simpler, and the earlier roles have in many cases become optional, and are sometimes obstacles to direct access, often putting the providers of the older service at odds with their erstwhile patrons. An amusing example occurred in 2005, when a French bus company, *Transports Schiocchet Excursions* (TSE), sued several French cleaning women who had previously used TSE for transport to their jobs in Luxembourg. The women's crime? Carpooling. TSE asked that the women be fined and that their cars be confiscated, on the grounds that the service the women had arranged to provide for themselves—transportation—should be provided only by commercial services such as TSE. (The case was thrown out in a lower court; it is pending on appeal.)

Though this incident seems like an unusual lapse in business judgment, this strategy—suing former customers for organizing themselves—is precisely the one being pursued by the music and movie industries today. Those industries used to perform a service by distributing music and moving images, but laypeople can now move music and video easily, in myriad ways that are both cheaper and more

flexible than those mastered and owned by existing commercial firms, like selling CDs and DVDs in stores. Faced with these radical new efficiencies, those very firms are working to make moving movies and music harder, in order to stay in business—precisely the outcome that the bus company (and the Abbott) was arguing for.

In a world where publishing is effortless, the decision to publish something isn't terribly momentous. Just as movable type raised the value of being able to read and write even as it destroyed the scribal tradition, globally free publishing is making public speech and action more valuable, even as its absolute abundance diminishes the specialness of professional publishing. For a generation that is growing up without the scarcity that made publishing such a serious-minded pursuit, the written word has no special value in and of itself. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, pointed out that although water is far more important than diamonds to human life, diamonds are far more expensive, because they are rare. The entire basis on which the scribes earned their keep vanished not when reading and writing vanished but when reading and writing became ubiquitous. If everyone can do something, it is no longer rare enough to pay for, even if it is vital.

The spread of literacy after the invention of movable type ensured not the success of the scribal profession but its end. Instead of mass professionalization, the spread of literacy was a process of mass amateurization. The term "scribe" didn't get extended to everyone who could read and write. Instead, it simply disappeared, as it no longer denoted a professional class. The profession of calligrapher now survives as a purely

decorative art; we make a distinction between the general ability to write and the professional ability to write in a calligraphic hand, just as we do between the general ability to drive and the professional ability to drive a race car. This is what is happening today, not just to newspapers or to media in general but to the global society.

CHAPTER 4

PUBLISH, THEN FILTER

The media landscape is transformed, because personal communication and publishing, previously separate functions, now shade into one another. One result is to break the older pattern of professional filtering of the good from the mediocre before publication; now such filtering is increasingly social, and happens after the fact.

Here, on a random Tuesday afternoon in May, is some of what is on offer from the world's mass of amateurs.

At LiveJournal, Kelly says:

yesterdayyyyy, after the storm of the freaking century, i went to the mall with deanna, dixon and chris. we ran into everyone in the world there, got food, and eventually picked out clothes for dixon. found katie and ryan and forced katie to come back to my house with me and dixon. then deanna came a little after, then jimmy pezz, and then lynn. good times,

HERE COMES EVERYBODY

THE POWER OF ORGANIZING

WITHOUT ORGANIZATIONS

CLAY SHIRKY

THE PENGUIN PRESS | NEW YORK | 2008