



Select Interview Highlights

The Media Consortium’s Game Changer Project

Interviews conducted by Tony Deifell, Nicole–Anne Boyer and Tracy Van Slyke
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John Battelle, author, *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*, founded Battelle Media

- “We’re in a transition and there is so much opportunity in transition but there is also so much loss and so much fear.”
- “If you’re a journalist in traditional environment that is either allergic to or has an immune response against the approach of openness and transparency in how you do your work it’s a terrible, terrible time to be in the media world because you just aren’t going to succeed in that new environment.”
- “I think only a very, very few print outlets will make it through this next couple of years.”

- “I have no doubt that there is a market and a way to create great reporting that is supported both by a community in terms of that community either spending money to support it and/or being a robust conversation with marketers who also believe in whatever the mission is of that publication. But you know we have never seen investigative journalism thrive in print form to be honest and we have to be honest with ourselves. We could say *Mother Jones* is a success but I don’t know what you’re smoking if you say that. It’s not. The *New Yorker* is not a success as an economic play. It’s only profitable maybe 12 of the last 50 years. And it’s great to have a place like the *New York Times* or the *New Yorker* or *Mother Jones* where Seymour Hersh or 15 international correspondents can hang out but they don’t pay for themselves.”
- “You have to understand that the reason reporters exist is because publishers exist. And publisher understands the commercial side of things and how to have conversations with marketers and marketers actually aren’t evil. Marketers actually want to support communities that they find interesting and aligned with their brand where there are engaged consumers, potential consumers who might be customers of theirs... I think that we got really comfortable as journalists saying well we’re over here doing our thing. We’re an ivory tower and nobody can talk to us and those evil advertisers over there that pay our salaries they just – they have to stay far away and they’re bad. And I think that that whole premise is so ridiculous and it just it’s presumptuous. It’s egotistical. It’s supercilious and the fact that and it also is speaking down to the reader which is of course one of the greatest faults of the traditional press which is to presume that the readers just don’t know what’s good for them.”
- “We’re watching hundred of billions of dollars being spent unaccountably to support supposedly our American way right? I think at some point we have to ask the question as to whether or not the American way includes journalism.”
- “There is so many information and community reasons for advertising to be part of the mix that journalists over the last five decades have been literally trained to ignore and pretend it’s not important to them. When in fact if you could as a journalist say look I’m involved in this publication, all of it, including the part of it supported by marketers. And if you as an audience member don’t understand that I’m capable of both having a dialog with a marketer and doing my job, then you reader can leave because you don’t trust me.”
- “I’ve argued from the very beginning that Google is good for the news business.”
- “I suggested in the past that Google.org buy the *New York Times*. Not .com but .org, because you’ve got that model of sort of the trusteeship running journalism, high quality journalism as a nonprofit.”
- “If you asked me what the future is, I think the future is that you can connect to a real time conversation of millions of people going on at this moment...As Mumbai was unfolding you had this real time reporting source that was Twitter. People holed up in hotel rooms Twittering for their lives. I’m in room 404 and does anyone know where the gunman is now? That’s extraordinary. As reporters we have to understand how to tap these tools and do what we always have done which is make sense of it, and analyze it, have a voice about it and tell the story. And as a

reporter I couldn't think of a more exciting time to be a reporter. Just like you always have in any trade you have to learn the craft and the craft now includes tools like Twitter and Google and telling your stories in ways that are native to environments that are circulated by Twitter and Google and others."

- Battelle's 2009 predictions: "in order to truly succeed in conversational media, the company must itself be fluent in that conversation."
- Battelle's 2009 predictions: "(Twitter) has a tiger by the tail, and two really defensible assets: a passionate, committed, and growing community, on the one hand, and a valuable, growing, and meaningful database of real time conversations on the other. By the middle of 2009, the integration of Twitter's community and content will become commonplace in well-executed marketing on third party sites."
- Battelle's 2009 predictions: "Agencies will increasingly see their role as that of publishers. Publishers will increasingly see their role as that of agencies. Both can win at this, but only by understanding how to truly add value to real communities – not flash crowds driven by one time events."
- Battelle's 2009 predictions: "2009 will see the year mobility becomes presumptive in every aspect of the web."

Clay Shirky, author, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizing*; professor NYU graduate Interactive Telecommunications Program

- "With super distribution it doesn't matter, like it did in the physical world, where articles [came from] or what sections things go in... One of the great freedoms of digital data is there is "no shelf". Now media outlets are very comfortable with taxonomies, but these are more for organizing careers, not content."
- "It's worth noting, that many of the assumptions or points of agreement among progressive communities are simply not there. There are huge points of disagreement on everything from the financial crisis, the war in Gaza, to the use of markets to managing the carbon footprint. I would suspect the same is the case with TMC. In a way, hating Bush was easy enough— it became a rallying cry, a single point of agreement, but this was a false façade. It was much easier with Bush as a punching bag. But the Obama administration will not be nearly liberal or ideologically consistent enough for these publications either. So what they should be doing first is not hosting the argument [externally] but hosting the agreement for themselves [internally]."
- "I think the underlying dynamic of what's happening is a power law distribution. This means there will be some places that get very large audiences every day. In the space that the independents will preserve are the spaces where people are looking for alternative views that are hard to scale. So there are going to be still imbalances between larger and smaller audiences, these imbalances are likely to grow in orders of magnitude. But the way they describe themselves as "independent", well, that is gone. And moderately sized publications don't really see this yet."

- “The explosion of the number of ways to say something, which you can now do globally and with very little cost, is unprecedented. Nothing but the invention of the printing press comes close. This transformation is age-defining and epic, with a new scale of conversation possible. The 20th century broadcast model has left us.”
- “My nightmare scenario is that every city with 250,000 people or fewer loses its only daily paper, which have been the bulckworth against self-dealing local politicians. Now San Francisco, New York, Boston, Washington get a lot of attention. But St. Louis? Boise? Maybe not. If that happens, if we lose local reporting, I think we could see a dramatic rise in civic corruption.”
- “So many of the problems we have right now are problems of anonymity, which creates a high cost in terms of pure usability. So what I want to know is: how easy will it be 10 years from now to use my real name on the Web, how easy will it be to access things without separate logins across the web, and will my reputation and standing as a member be used— in short, will how we function and behave on the web become close to how we work in the real world? If this happens, we can see many new business models being possible.”
- “There are multiple ways distribution happens and this intersects with social networks. Social networks are both amplifiers and filters. It used to be an either-or choice. Direct mail lists were amplifiers, and “do not call” lists were filters. But social networks work the way gossip works, the way people move from interest to interest.”
 - “It’s possible to write one really good story and never be heard from again. You don’t need a standing wave of attention to get an important story out to a wide audience. Mainstream media isn’t the only game in town anymore.”
 - “The thing to realize is [for these models] it’s not just enough to have a place where readers talk back— or the classic “letters to the editors” pattern. Rather it’s about providing a platform for readers to coordinate with on another. That’s a really radical shift because in part because it means you have to take community seriously. The word “membership” has a nice feeling, but what media outlets usually mean by this is: give me money and we’ll give a product or access. But real membership is about coming together on shared projects, and this is extremely rare. The convening power of media organizations, a power they haven’t used because of their model, but the potential is huge.”

John Bracken, program officer, MacArthur Foundation

- “What worries me is, will people looking for serious news be able to find it? In a [NYTimes story](#) about online consumption habits, a young person was quoted as saying, ‘If the news is that important, it will find me.’ It’s a serendipity concern — what happens to news that is unpopular, long or complex, will such reports be passed along as well?”
- “I feel like “shoulds” are uncontrollable. People have been concerned about newspapers, but there are waves of trends going on that we can’t control.”

- "One of the potential revenue aspects of the web is that people are increasingly acting on their own, free of institutions. They are taking distinct actions on distinct issues online."

Ashish Soni, Director of the Information Technology Program (ITP) at the Viterbi School of Engineering at the University of Southern California

- "The media world needs to act and think more like tech entrepreneurs."
- "Most companies and organizations that I see have an inability to think about how to use technology strategically." "I see people who only see one piece of the puzzle and want to do mini experiments with that without seeing how that impacts the rest of the media. People who do have knowledge of the other pieces of the puzzle can do real systemic innovation, and this is the highest area to impact." "The *New York Times* experiments are systemic and may have a huge impact, and they can test things out on a grand scale, where other [independent media] sites don't have that as much."
- "There is an inability to do what I call rapid low cost innovation."
- "[One] big thing that has to pan out is – and this is against the grain of how these businesses operate, but the *New York Times* has taken a lead – is how do you break down the barrier between you and your competition? For example, the *New York Times* homepage sometimes has a link to a story on *Businessweek*. That's great for their SEO because of their linking behavior, yet this is totally counter-intuitive for them business wise. So this is a real opportunity for smaller organizations— to be part of this linking process."
- "Talent – the talent is an issue. For instance, some of the recent hires by large companies or deans of journalism, they are still the old guard, they don't truly understand the technology piece."
- "I think the media companies that really understand the emerging technology landscape and what consumers want will survive. The others will shrink or die. ... The future of media for me would be the type of content that I want anytime anywhere on any device. So it'd be coming up with the technology, solutions, and an ecosystems to deliver something like that. ... All the bounds of time, location, and medium are completely dissolved. This is an almost personalized media platform of consumption that I can choose what I want to do, when I want to do, and where I want to."
- "This wisdom of crowds idea, it's true, but you still have to have the right crowd. You can have stupid crowds."
- "Semantic web is one level beyond aggregation; how do you take that information in the story and use automation and technology to simplify the story?" "The technology itself is a barrier. It turns out that understanding the relevance and importance documents is hard."
- "The biggest thing is to go after those opportunities that traditional media have ignored for so long. Because of the way the editorial role is set up, there are lots of

niches that traditional media is ignoring. ... Its about finding areas that consumers are really interested in that traditional media typically ignores. It would have to be somewhat localized to the city. For instance, Talking Points does well because its focus is the Washington DC policy context, and we have in Silicon Valley Tech Crunch”

- “Really understanding people’s mental maps of what a website is useful for is important. You want traffic, but the right kind of traffic. You want the biggest ROI [return on investment] for your time and attention, and a lot of times traditional media doesn’t get this.”

David Weinberger, author, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, journalist, fellow at Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for the Internet and Society

- “How much more of the game needs to change, really!?”
- “It’s not that there are new sources of content, which is how the media first tried to understand it, but rather it’s about the complete disaggregation of content and our increasing ability to pull together what’s interesting to us.”
- “The media thinks its job is to make us well informed. It’s not, it never was. We’re reading it because it’s interesting to us in some way, not because we want to be well informed.”
- “(There is a) terrible and seemingly inescapable tendency of humans to prefer the familiar to the unfamiliar. There’s always a risk that we’re going to get caught up in self-reinforcing circles where we don’t learn enough about what we don’t know about the rest of the world. ... This is not an Internet problem, but a human problem. We do prefer to hang out with people with whom we have something in common.”
- “One argument is that the Internet is making us more self-involved, rather than what we’d hope and even expect: that everyone reads everything and are becoming more part of the world and all of that. We don’t actually know that that’s happening.”
- “The notion that the only sign of success for new media/internet is that people will always be talking with an open mind with people with whom they deeply disagree in order to hash out differences and come to agreement is bull-crap. Where do you ever see that in the real world? In that view, all human conversation has failed except maybe one you have had in your life. And I take that back. Guess what, you’ve never had it; you’ve never sat down with a Nazi and tried to take his perspective seriously.”
- (One question I have for the future is) “How much paper is their going to be? Have we managed to replace books and magazines yet? That’s the shoe that’s waiting to drop on multiple industries from publishing, to education, and when it happens — I’ve no idea when — but once it starts it’ll happen very, very rapidly.”
- [Regarding social reading:] “Reading is an individual act. When you think of reading, you think of being by yourself, sitting quietly and reading in the

hammock, with nothing but a book and your socks and a summer breeze. Or in the bath and reading naked—it's the thing you do alone. In the history of writing, as soon as reading got internalized, it was a big deal. Some people say that's the origin of modern consciousness. The voice we heard externally, reading to us, we now here internally."

- "The notion that there is news "coverage" – this whole concept is historically a result of the assumption of scarcity. Coverage assumes a finite amount of stuff that you have a responsibility to cover.... But it makes no sense now. There's too much to cover! Now there's an abundance of everything – content, reporters reporting on it, commentators to make sense of it, and lots of ways to put it together, e.g. emailing links, doing a digg. It's entirely about abundance, and with abundance you don't worry about coverage; that whole responsibility goes away. It doesn't scale, the old system doesn't scale. The only thing that does scale is the massive effort of readers doing it for themselves."
- [re: successful examples of independent media:] "The Daily Kos is a great example. And everything it does right is traceable to viewing itself, not as an organization, but as a network. The game has changed already: going from being an organization to being a loose open network. Kos has been brilliant at that. So the task is figuring out the spirit of this model, and part of this is in trusting your nodes, your networking, and also paying attention to the meta-data work. Because content is cheap.... I'd worry far more about that and view myself as a provider and manager of meta data more than one of content. Content will take care of itself."
- "There is no more 'mainstream'."
- "For me, the best scenario for the future of media is this: the largest possible variety of writers and creators (including video of course) are working, they're supported somehow. There's this ecosystem that supports many, many different types of productions. The meta-data around this stuff is so robust that I'm able to find – well, it finds me – the information I'm interested in. ... "there are networks – many, many networks – of incredibly talented, dedicated people that write engaging stuff about important things. They're all connected, and I can get whatever I want whenever I want without having to worry which organization produced it."
- "We want quality content, but the trend is against going to a single place to find it.... I'd much rather have an article sent to me by someone with a comment like "here is a piece that I think sucks and here is why." That's way more valuable to me than just the article."

Vivian Schiller, CEO, National Public Radio, formerly general manager of NYTimes.com

- "I think radio does have some built in advantages in that unlike a newspaper and the web, radio and the web are complimentary and not necessarily in competition with each other....I listen to NPR in the car...I listen to NPR as I am getting dressed in the morning. But when you sit down to read a newspaper, you could be going online. So there is some competition between those two form factors, which I think is not necessarily the case in radio."

- “(Game changers in the media space) may be in the area of unique and innovative ways that digital media interacts with legacy media whether it’s prints, radio or television. ... The opportunity as we have layers of different kinds of media—each that has its own strength, to figure out a way to interconnect them to me is the real opportunity. If I had an answer of the perfect vision of how that works I’d be executing it.”
- “I think certainly the highest quality enterprises will survive.”
- “Some of the recent homegrown web-only news organizations are wildcards. I think some of them will survive and some of them won’t depending on their cost structure.”
- “When I think about the opportunity in NPR, and one of the reasons why I wanted to come here, I get very excited about the notion of the power of a national, international news gathering operation which NPR is, you know we have 18 foreign bureaus, combined with the power of the local communities, the NPR stations in these 800 some odd places in America.”
- “(I want) to work with all our member stations to create local portals so that as local newspapers die away we can step into the breach to make sure that there is not a vacuum there.”
- “There will be more partnerships among quality news organizations so that we can support each other. But I think you’ll see a separating of the wheat from the chaff.”
- “Don’t think about technology as the end of the process but for it to be integrated into the process. And that developers should be part of the journalistic process. And depending on their training developers are journalists, the right developers are journalists.”
- “What the web is doing is not just converting news into an online experience but it’s creating a whole new journalistic experience. Integrating newsrooms, in the case of the *New York Times* the print and the online newsrooms, was essential.”

Adam Berrey, Senior Vice President of Marketing & Strategy at Brightcove

Q: What kinds of factors tend to lead to successful, self-sustaining progressive media companies?

- “My initial response is that you just take “progressive” out and the real question is, “How do you build a successful media company?” It’s not like the progressive media companies have a particularly different challenge, necessarily, than all the other media companies.”

Q: Then, what are the key factors in building a successful media company?

- “There are the three kind of fundamental pillars. First, can you create and put together content and service that are valuable? Second, can you market this content and service in a way that an audience of consumers is really engaged with

and invested in? Lastly, can you turn the attention of that audience into viable advertising products and have a sales team that can really move those products with the advertisers that want to reach your audience? That's it."

Q: Many progressive media companies have relatively small audiences when it comes to the thresholds for attracting advertising, so how do they succeed?

- Yes, this is the Catch-22. It's a really big problem — it's very hard. This is why networks form. If you're able to finance yourself — whether that's with investors or with whatever it is — you need to be able to finance yourself for actually getting to scale. If your plan is, "I'm going to stay small," that might not be viable. We've seen a lot of companies that say, "We're just going to be small and really niche." That's not necessarily tenable over the longer term because you need a certain amount of traffic."
- "The key thing that drives scale is that, below a certain size, media buyers don't want to get involved — they'd say that it's too much work to deal with. We see the smaller publishers mostly sell on a sponsorship basis because they're able to command a really great niche audience."

Katrin Verclas, co-founder, MobileActive

- "[In ten years,] I don't think there will be such a thing as independent media anymore....I think the structural and quaking is so profound, the independent media is following in so many ways the traditional media, organizationally and structurally. This whole market is going to see upheaval in the next 5, 10, 20 years—independent media has not transcended in that way."
- "There's a place for much more systematic data-collection. Mobiles can be used in all this."
- "Innovative stuff is coming out of other developing countries that we need to be thinking about. This is all very bottom-up. There's a lot of hand wringing in the western world about the future of media, but look around, it's kind of happening. It's not happening through the big institutions of the NY Times. Maybe like the telegram, they will go away. Maybe they need to evolve."
- "I think the game changer is the availability/connectivity to communicate with each other and produce and consume wherever we are in unprecedented ways."
- "If there's any hope for so-called small independent media organizations, the question is how do we fundamentally take advantage of this open-sourced market, this networked market, user-generated market? We're still in the centralized market like the recording industry."
- "We need to be meeting people where they are and have the ability to contribute that is collaborative... "Media needs to think about how to apply these principles (we understand networks. The military gets networks). The principles have been unearthed and we know they work in open networks... There is this weird state of disconnect between existing structures and openness, and more open networks."

Where things are evolving--media organizations aren't. It's not a lot of proactiveness and a lot of reactiveness."

Amy Gahran, E-Media Tidbits, Poynter Institute

- "We're getting away from the idea that a journalist tells a story—it will be that a journalist offers a window for people to create their own meaning."
- "Don't underestimate the value of personal connection. The brain is wired to connect with other people. The problem of how media evolved is that it isolated people. Your role was passive and to take it in. That damaged society in some ways. The reaction to that damage will be an overreaction in the future. It will balance out."
- (One thing I want to know about the future is) "I'd want to know how people in communities find the news that is relevant to them... Can they find this stuff easily? What are they doing with that news?"
- "When you have a packaged new story—it puts it into this story with all this narrative and then it presents the information and then it is done. It doesn't give people room to say, 'What are the other stories?' Or 'That stat is interesting, but what does that mean for me?' It leaves them helpless with what to do with the information."

Don Tapscott, author, *Wikinomics* and *Grown Up Digital*

- "Publishers need to think of themselves not as publishers, but as community builders."
- "The big game changer over the next short term is mobility.... In the old days you got newspapers once-a-day. Watched evening news at a specific time at a specific location.... Now it's all independent time and it's in your pocket. It's a friend in your pocket.... So mobility is the big theme for the future. You care about freedom. This is about freedom of location and time."
- "It's a demographic revolution. This is the first generation to come of age in a digital age. For people who care about the world—the progressive media people—this is all enormously good news about this generation. They (the younger generation) have enormously strong values, they care a lot. It's not true about this being the 'narcissist me' generation. Civic engagement in U.S. growing decade to decade and is currently at an all time high. Civic engagement has turned into political action. This generation is going to change the world."
- "The world is in a precarious situation and the stakes are high. The combination of youth, new media communications and power of organizing moves us towards first global movement of change."