

## [This Week in Review: AOL snaps up TechCrunch, effecting social change online, and hyperlocal minds meet](#)

By [Mark Coddington](#) / today / 10 a.m.

*[Every Friday, Mark Coddington sums up the week's top stories about the future of news and the debates that grew up around them. —Josh]*

**AOL continues moving into media:** The Internet giant of the '90s, AOL, has been [aggressively trying](#) to [remake itself](#) as a media company for the 2010s, and it made one of its biggest moves this week when it [bought the influential tech blog TechCrunch](#). The deal was [first reported](#) by GigaOM and announced on stage Tuesday at TechCrunch's Disrupt conference. AOL also scooped up the [web video company 5Min](#) and [Thing Labs](#), maker of the social media reader Brizzly on the same day, though it [couldn't snatch](#) the popular All Things Digital blogging crew away from The Wall Street Journal.

### This Week in Review



Given how central TechCrunch's founder, Michael Arrington, is to the blog's success, the first questions were twofold: Will Arrington be able to [continue exercising his iconoclastic editorial voice](#) with AOL, and can the blog remain strong if he leaves? Salon's Dan Gillmor was [skeptical](#) about the latter, and [Fast Company](#) and [The Atlantic](#) gave reason for similar doubts about the former, with a list of Arrington's past criticism of AOL and statements by the founder of Engadget, another blog purchased by AOL, that too many layers of management made the company difficult to work at. (He said things have changed at AOL since then.) For his part, Arrington gave assurances to tech blogger [Robert Scoble](#) and [TechCrunch's readers](#) that he'll have complete editorial independence and has agreed to stay on for at least three years.

The bigger media issue, of course, is that this purchase signals AOL's deepening transformation into a full-on web media company. As a marketing exec [told the New York Post's Keith Kelly](#), "Nobody gives AOL enough credit for the massive transformation that the brand has undertaken." AOL CEO Tim Armstrong explained the rationale behind the deal to [Advertising Age](#) and [Bloomberg](#): TechCrunch's insider, consumer audience can garner premium ad rates, and the TechCrunch brand can give AOL some cred it couldn't necessarily get on its own. He also [told GigaOM's Om Malik](#) that he wants to begin developing platforms in communication, content and advertising for other companies to build on, though he wouldn't go into details.

The Wall Street Journal [threw a little bit of cold water on the AOL hype](#), noting that more than 40 percent of the company's revenue still comes from dial-up Internet service and related subscriptions. Advertisers haven't totally bought into the change yet either, the Journal said. AOL might have come a long way, but it still has a long way to go, too.

**Can social media produce real social change?:** In a [piece](#) in this week's New Yorker, cultural critic [Malcolm Gladwell](#) challenged the idea that social media is an effective tool of social change and revolution, comparing it with the civil rights movement and other pre-social media large-scale social reform efforts. Gladwell argued that social media is built on weak social ties, which are good for encountering new information and amassing followers of a cause, but bad at inspiring collective action. "The evangelists of social media don't understand this distinction; they seem to believe that a Facebook friend is the same as a real friend and that signing up for a donor registry in Silicon Valley today is activism in the same sense as sitting at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro in 1960," Gladwell wrote.

Gladwell expounded helpfully on his points in a [chat](#) on the New Yorker website, in which he said, among other things, that he holds up the 2008 Obama presidential campaign as the "gold standard" for social media-fueled civic engagement. His piece generated some thoughtful disagreement: The Atlantic's Alexis Madrigal said he [liked the article overall](#) but took issue with Gladwell's assertion that online networks don't have leadership or organization.



Others weren't quite so complimentary: In a [video conversation](#), politics professor Henry Farrell and the Cato Institute's Julian Sanchez agreed that social media's weak ties could make it easier to form the strong social ties that lead to significant action. A [quasi-anonymous Economist correspondent](#) made a similar argument to both those points, saying that social media strengthens all social ties, and that networks' bottom-up nature make them particularly subversive. Jeff Sonderman [made similar points as well](#) and pointed out that online and offline social networks tend to overlap, so they can't be treated as discrete entities.

There were plenty of other avenues (thoughtful and somewhat less so) down which critics took this debate — see this [New York Times feature](#) for six of them — but the most cogent points may have come from Expert Labs director Anil Dash, who [argued](#) that Gladwell is limited by his outmoded idea that the only type of revolutions that produce change are those that come in the form of chanting, sign-wielding masses. **“There are revolutions, actual political and legal revolutions, that are being led online,” Dash wrote. “They’re just happening in new ways, and taking subtle forms unrecognizable to those who still want a revolution to look like they did in 1965.”**

**Helping hyperlocal news thrive:** Many of the U.S.' hyperlocal-news pioneers gathered in Chicago late last week for the [Block By Block Community News Summit](#) hosted by the Knight Digital Media Center's Michele McLellan and NYU j-prof Jay Rosen. A variety of ideas, tips, anecdotes flew back and forth at the event, which was ably summarized by the Lab's [Megan Garber](#) as well as [Lauren Kirchner](#) of The Columbia Journalism Review and [Polly Kreisman](#) of the local-news blog Lost Remote. You can also check out [videos](#) of several of the sessions at the Reynolds Journalism Institute.



Garber listed several of the main themes of the gathering: Developing an intimate connection with a community (something of a throwback role for the news media, Garber said), building advertising and branding, and finding ways to share ideas with each other. Kirchner noted the common strain among the participants' description of their own situations: "I've figured out how to do this, but I don't know how to make it last." She also noted the general tension in the room caused by the presence of representatives from AOL and Yahoo, two media companies with large-scale hyperlocal news aspirations. (Elsewhere this week, AOL's hyperlocal Patch initiative was [called the WalMart of news](#) and a [potential steamroller](#) of hyperlocal startups, though The Batavian's Howard Owens [gave some tips](#) on beating Patch in your own neighborhood.) Afterward, McLellan [took stock](#) of what hyperlocal journalists need next.

That wasn't the only hyperlocal news resource to emerge this week. J-Lab [released a report](#) detailing what's worked and what hasn't in the the five years it's been funding community-news startups. One major conclusion in the report is that **hyperlocal news sites didn't replace the journalism of traditional news sources; they added something that hadn't been there before.** (Some other key takeaways: Engagement, not just content; sweat equity is big; and the business model isn't there yet.) At Lost Remote, Cory Bergman of Seattle's Next Door Media [offered an endorsement of the report](#), adding that for his startup, "the biggest critical success factor for a neighborhood news site is a passionate editor." And at PBS Idea Lab, Martin Moore [made the case](#) for a bottom-up structure in local news sites.

**Media trust hits a new low:** Gallup [released its annual poll](#) on Americans' trust in the news media, and in what's become a fairly regular occurrence, that trust is at an all-time low. MinnPost's David Brauer [tried to square that finding](#) with Pew's finding two weeks ago that people are spending more time with the news. (My guess: Gallup's survey measures feelings about the traditional news media, while Pew's finding of increased news consumption is attributable largely to new media sources.)

The Atlantic's Derek Thompson [asked why trust is so low](#), and came up with an interesting hypothesis: The news media is telling us not to trust the news media. Citing Bill O'Reilly, Glenn Beck and Jon Stewart as examples, he concludes, **"to consume opinion journalism ... is to consume a product that exists to tell you that the product is inherently rotten."** As if on cue, the Los Angeles Times' Andrew Malcolm [rattled off a sarcastic litany](#) of things the media has done to confirm people's belief that it's biased.

**Reading roundup:** Before we get the miscellany, there were a few smaller news developments that I want to highlight this week:

— The Boston Globe [announced](#) that it's planning on splitting its websites into free and paid versions late next year. The Globe is owned by The New York Times Co., and The

Times is also planning to charge for its website next year, and the Lab's Megan Garber [saw the plan](#) as a logical extension of the Times' paywall — a sort of steppingstone into the tablet-news world. Media analyst Ken Doctor wrote a [smart analysis](#) on the Globe's strategy, calling it a plan to retain its print readers in the short run and convert them to (paid) tablet reading in the long run. The alt-weekly Boston Phoenix, meanwhile, didn't waste time in [writing Boston.com's obituary](#).

— Mayhill Fowler, who gave The Huffington Post one of its [biggest-ever scoops](#) in 2008 as a reporter for the Off the Bus citizen-journalism project, [wrote a kiss-off post](#) on her personal blog announcing she was leaving the site, essentially, because she was tired of writing for nothing. The Post [fired back](#), and Politico's Ben Smith used the incident to [wonder](#) if the opinion-oriented blogosphere is moving toward news judgment as the mainstream media makes the opposite transition.

— After Forbes bought his freelance blogging network True/Slant, Lewis D'Vorkin is [planning on selling blog space](#) to advertisers alongside the company's news blogs, Advertising Age reported. Reuters' Felix Salmon [predicted](#) the plan would spur a uprising along the lines of ScienceBlogs' [PepsiGate](#) this summer.

Now the three stray pieces you need to take a look at:

— The Awl's Nick Douglas [wrote a great post](#) explaining why online forums are so underrated as online culture-drivers, and why Reddit is becoming more important within that subculture.

— Stanford scholar Geoff McGhee produced a [fantastic set of videos](#) on data journalism. Regardless of whether you're familiar with data journalism, this is a must-see.

— And possibly the most essential piece of the week: Jonathan Stray's [case for designing journalism](#) from the user's perspective. "The news experience needs to become intensely personal," Stray wrote. "It must be easy for users to find and follow exactly their interests, no matter how arcane. Journalists need to get proficient at finding and engaging the audience for each story." A quote doesn't do it justice; go read the whole thing.