

Steve Mays in 2009

A Year at the Hinge

An interpretive overview of what Steve noticed, believed, feared, and got unusually right during the year broadcast media became networked media.

The short version

Steve's 2009 blog is a field notebook from the hinge between the broadcast age and the networked age. He was standing inside an old institution while already thinking beyond the institutional model. His deepest subject was not gadgets. It was power: who gets to speak, who controls attention, and whether institutions serve their stated purpose or merely preserve themselves.

The load-bearing belief: technology transfers agency. Once ordinary people could create, publish, organize, distribute, and answer back without permission, institutions could no longer rely on owning the channel. They had to earn attention by being useful, direct, credible, local, and human.

Prepared for Steve Mays

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What the year contains

This overview covers every public post returned by the smays.com WordPress archive for January 1 through December 31, 2009—including short link posts and media-only entries. The corpus contains 363 posts, averaging almost one per day.

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN
51	34	32	21	36	27
JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
34	21	22	23	32	30

The dominant subjects

The site's categories reinforce the reading: gadgets and apps (51 posts), media and culture (48), journalism (46), YouTube (45), business and marketing (42), radio (33), blogging (27), personal history (24), and politics and government (22). Those counts overlap because posts can carry multiple categories.

An important reading rule

Much of smays.com in 2009 is a commonplace book: Steve saved quotations, excerpts, videos, and ideas from Jeff Jarvis, Clay Shirky, Seth Godin, Dave Winer, Scott Adams, Paul Graham, Terry Heaton, and others. Selection shows interest; it does not prove agreement. This overview treats an idea as Steve's position only when he explicitly endorses it, applies it to his own work, returns to it repeatedly, or supplies a clear original conclusion.

The most reliable evidence is Steve's first-person reporting, his practical experiments at Learfield, his direct prescriptions for media organizations, and sentences framed as "I think," "my take-away," or an unmistakable judgment.

The governing interpretation

Steve was a technophile, but his enthusiasm was moral and organizational before it was technical. He liked tools that reduced friction, returned control to individuals, and made institutions answerable to the people they claimed to serve. The old tools could still matter; inherited privilege could not.

Three movements through 2009

January–April: the networked future becomes real

The year opens with several systems changing at once: Obama's inauguration, financial crisis, collapsing newspaper and radio economics, and the practical maturity of Twitter, the iPhone, blogs, cheap video, and social networks. Steve sees a common cause. The cost and friction of publishing, organizing, and connecting have collapsed; institutions built on scarcity are losing their privileged position.

He is openly hopeful. At the inauguration he writes that the crowd consists of "believers." He embraces witnesses sharing news directly, politicians communicating without press intermediaries, reporters becoming mobile multimedia publishers, and citizens contributing hyperlocal information. Yet he also recognizes the unresolved problem: an old model can break before a sustainable replacement exists.

May–August: the theory becomes practice

The middle of the year is less about prediction than experimentation. Steve is putting newsrooms on WordPress, thinking through how reporters should use Twitter, comparing mobile publishing tools, rebuilding sites cheaply, testing an iPhone as a reporting kit, and considering what Learfield's networks must become.

His key realization is that the audience is no longer merely an audience. People report, publish, organize, review, redistribute, and talk back. Institutions survive by adding real value—verification, context, judgment, service—not by defending access to a channel. This is also when his preference for direct, human communication sharpens into a doctrine: authenticity cannot be manufactured by a marketing department.

September–December: optimism meets institutional resistance

By year's end, Steve still believes the tools are liberating, but his skepticism about organizations has deepened. Media companies, advertising agencies, managers, political parties, Congress, banks, and corporate communications appear less like temporary laggards and more like systems structurally committed to self-preservation.

The year's political bookends are especially revealing. In January, Steve stands in bitter cold for Obama's inauguration and writes, "We are all believers." In December, he endorses Matt Taibbi's account of "Obama's Big Sellout" and imagines putting Congress on a cruise ship while Google and Apple run the country for a year. That is almost the emotional history of 2009 in miniature: hope colliding with incumbent incentives.

The emotional through-line

Despite the institutional criticism, the posts do not read as cynical. Steve remains playful, curious, and willing to test his own assumptions. His recurring answer to decay is not retreat. It is to make something smaller, cheaper, more direct, more useful, and more human.

Steve's take on the period

1. Technology redistributes agency

Twitter, blogs, smartphones, YouTube, and WordPress are not interesting because they are novel. They let an individual do useful work immediately: report an event, publish a site, reach a public official, document a community, or respond to a company. The important change is permission—or the lack of need for it.

2. Distribution is no longer ownership

Newspapers and broadcasters once controlled scarce channels. Steve sees search, subscription, social streams, linking, and mobile access dissolving that advantage. A home page or tower does not guarantee attention. Content must travel, be useful, and be worth sharing.

3. The audience becomes participant and competitor

Steve anticipates citizen reporting, direct political communication, fan publishing, and individual journalist brands. He does not conclude that expertise is obsolete. He concludes that professional value must be demonstrated through reporting, verification, context, curation, and judgment.

4. Authenticity beats polish

Steve consistently prefers a recognizable person speaking directly over a message filtered through management, PR, legal review, agencies, and production machinery. In social media, listening and responding are not promotional tactics; they are evidence that an institution is present and accountable.

5. Advertising loses power when attention gains choice

He does not call every radio commercial spam. He defends the value exchange of ad-supported programming. But he sees relevance and permission becoming decisive: when listeners and followers can leave instantly, money can purchase exposure but not trust or sustained attention.

6. Local still matters

Global distribution does not erase locality. Steve's affection for Kennett, KBOA, former colleagues, and emergency radio reveals what he thinks media is for: connection, service, memory, and community knowledge. He mourns radio's consolidation because it removed those human functions before the Internet finished changing the machinery.

7. Experimentation is a civic and professional virtue

Steve's maker ethic is visible everywhere: try the tool, build the site, publish the video, correct the recommendation, and learn in public. He has little patience for professionals proud of not understanding the Internet, but he is generous toward anyone willing to learn.

Nostalgia without denial

Steve's criticism of radio is easy to misread. He is not dismissing the medium. He is defending its purpose against the business practices that hollowed it out.

He remembers live, local radio as craft, improvisation, companionship, and civic infrastructure. During the southeast Missouri ice storm, KBOA mattered because veteran broadcasters knew the community and stayed live when cable, phones, and Internet failed. That is not nostalgia for a transmitter. It is evidence that locality and human judgment remain valuable under pressure.

What he rejects is the industrial substitute: consolidation, voice tracking, empty studios, generic programming, unreachable newsrooms, and content that "stops with the listener" because it cannot be linked, shared, or extended. Radio's failure, in his reading, is not that the Internet killed it. It is that management optimized away the qualities people might still choose.

This creates one of the year's most productive tensions:

Steve believes old distribution models are obsolete while remaining loyal to the human purposes those models once served. He wants radio to escape "radio"—to preserve connection, information, comfort, and locality while abandoning the assumption that those things must arrive through one inherited channel.

The person behind the media analysis

The technology posts coexist with a steady personal record: Kennett, Barb, old friends, former colleagues, small-town characters, travel, aging, creativity, happiness, and memory. Steve is a futurist with roots. He is not trying to become frictionless himself; he is using frictionless tools to preserve people and moments that would otherwise disappear.

That explains the blog's deeper function. It is not a publication strategy in the conventional sense. It is his place to "write things down"—a personal archive whose value compounds precisely because it is owned, idiosyncratic, and continuous.

A line that aged especially well

"My blog is mine. Nobody can buy it or mess with it."

In 2009 this was a reaction to seductive platforms such as Twitter, Posterous, and FriendFeed. In 2026 it reads as the clearest preservation principle in the entire year. Platforms are convenient rented rooms. The blog is the house.

What Steve got right—and what the period could not yet see

Directionally right

- Mobile would become the primary interface to news, communication, photography, and daily life.
- Distribution would move from institutions toward networks of people and algorithmically assembled streams.
- Individual voices and niche communities would compete with—and sometimes surpass—mass media brands.
- The distinction between audience, source, publisher, critic, and competitor would blur.
- Cheap digital tools would let one capable person perform work once requiring a department and a large budget.
- Advertising would lose leverage as people gained more control over attention and could demand relevance.
- Institutions would struggle less from lack of technology than from hierarchy, incentives, control, and fear of cannibalizing the old model.
- Owning one's archive and domain would prove more durable than depending entirely on social platforms.

The hindsight correction

Steve's optimism about democratization was understandable and, in many respects, justified. Lowering the gate admitted witnesses, citizens, creators, dissidents, specialists, and communities that old media ignored. It also admitted manipulation, surveillance, harassment, tribalism, algorithmic amplification, and industrial-scale falsehood.

His 2009 assumption was that making information easier to share would tend to produce more good outcomes. The missing variable was incentive design. The plumbing does not favor truth merely because everyone can reach the tap. Platforms discovered that outrage, certainty, and compulsion could be more profitable than accuracy, context, or civic health.

A second correction concerns concentrated technology power. Steve's "Congress 2.0" joke places more faith in Google and Apple than hindsight comfortably permits. He correctly distrusted incumbent institutions, but sometimes treated well-designed technology companies as if competence and alignment were the same thing. They are not.

Still, the central diagnosis survives

The technology changed; the argument did not. Power follows control of distribution, attention, identity, and the archive. Institutions that confuse their machinery with their purpose eventually defend the machinery at the expense of the purpose.

The contradictions make the portrait more accurate

Democratization / quality	Everyone can publish, but not every contribution is equal. Steve still values judgment, skill, reporting, and earned trust.
Radio nostalgia / digital disruption	He mourns live local radio while arguing that its inherited economic and distribution model is failing.
Twitter enthusiasm / platform distrust	He sees Twitter as infrastructure for real-time connection, yet returns to the ownership and permanence of his blog.
Instant publishing / error	He acknowledges that speed spreads rumor. His answer is better literacy and reputation, not restoration of the old gate.
Open networks / personal filtering	He favors open participation while aggressively protecting his own attention from spam, irrelevance, and bad actors.
Optimism / institutional pessimism	He remains hopeful about what people can do with tools and increasingly doubtful about whether organizations will permit themselves to adapt.
Global reach / local loyalty	The Internet opens the world while making the distinctiveness of Kennett, KBOA, colleagues, and community more worth preserving.

These are not defects to be edited out. They show Steve thinking in public while the ground is moving. He does not pretend to know the replacement business model, and he changes his mind about tools when experience warrants it. That intellectual provisionality is one reason the archive remains readable.

A reading path through the year

Jan. 12 • [“News is being deindustrialized. No factory needed.”](#)

Journalism can survive only if it stops defining itself as one industry operating in one way.

Jan. 18 • [Inauguration: Day One](#)

First-person evidence of political hope: “We are all believers.”

Feb. 10 • [“Democratization of information”](#)

Steve explicitly agrees that easier sharing will produce more good outcomes.

Feb. 24 • [KBOA voice of SE Missouri during/after ice storm](#)

The strongest case for live, knowledgeable, truly local radio as civic infrastructure.

Mar. 10 • [Are radio commercials spam?](#)

A nuanced defense of ad-supported radio that makes relevance and listener choice decisive.

Mar. 14 • [If the old model is broken, what will work in its place?](#)

The sobering recognition that disruption can destroy an old system before a replacement is ready.

Apr. 27 • [“The world in my pocket”](#)

The iPhone replaces the morning newspaper and points toward mobile, assembled news experiences.

May 30 • [The unbundled media world](#)

Steve’s fullest analysis of the move from owned destinations to streams, links, participation, and shared storytelling.

Jul. 11 • [A new website for under \\$60.00](#)

Operational proof of the new leverage: fast, inexpensive publishing that maintainers can control themselves.

Jul. 17 • [Radio stops with the listener](#)

Before producing media, ask whether anyone can link to it and propagate it.

Aug. 7 • [Everything you need to know about Twitter, you learned in kindergarten](#)

Relevance, openness, honesty, care, and response are more valuable than purchased exposure.

Aug. 12 • [Blogs never went away](#)

The ownership principle: “My blog is mine. Nobody can buy it or mess with it.”

Sep. 27 • [Bomb shelters or spaceships](#)

Media leaders must choose between temporarily reinforcing the old business and building for a different destination.

Nov. 11 • [This tweet just in...](#)

Rumor existed before Twitter; now error is visible and correctable in the network.

Nov. 24 • [Internet service restored](#)

A tiny wire carries knowledge, conversation, and culture; universal access will change the world.

Dec. 29 • [Congress 2.0](#)

Satire covering a serious fear: the political system may lack the means and incentives to repair itself.

Dec. 30 • [Augmented reality and the annotated world](#)

Legacy institutions resemble Wile E. Coyote; the future belongs to players refusing the old cartoon rules.

A radio man watching power move

The most useful description of Steve's 2009 outlook is not "early adopter." That is true but shallow. He was an institutionally rooted person developing a post-institutional theory of media.

He understood that communication systems are also power systems. When publishing becomes cheap, distribution becomes social, and attention becomes voluntary, old authorities lose the right to be obeyed merely because they own the machinery. They must become good at the work beneath the machinery: reporting, serving, listening, explaining, remembering, and earning trust.

He also understood something many disruption enthusiasts missed: the human purposes do not disappear when the business model fails. Communities still need reliable information. People still need skilled reporters. Local knowledge still matters. Memory still matters. The question is which new arrangements will support those purposes—and which incumbents will sacrifice them while defending revenue and control.

The year is therefore both optimistic and elegiac. Steve is excited by what an individual can now make, sad about what consolidation already destroyed, hopeful about democratic participation, and increasingly doubtful that large institutions will reform themselves. The tension never resolves. It becomes the point.

My judgment: Steve was not predicting gadgets. He was recognizing a transfer of power. He saw the networked future earlier than most people in legacy media because he understood both sides of the transition—the promise of individual agency and the institutional instinct to protect the old machinery.

The specific platforms have aged. The argument has not.

— Milton