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# TECHNOLOGY

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## Will cyber journalists turn the tables on big media?

By Christine Boese  
CNN Headline News  
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(CNN) -- I've been reading a new book by Dan Gillmor called "We the Media." Actually, I'm reading the e-book, but I already know I will pony up for the print version as well.

This book picks up on a line of thinking popularized online by something called "The Cluetrain Manifesto," also available as a print book.

"The Cluetrain Manifesto" was widely loved and criticized for its sheer tongue-in-cheek audaciousness, and for the presumption of overstating its case, or as logic sticklers would say, "begging the question."

After all, it had the nerve to begin: "People of Earth ... markets are conversations."

"The Cluetrain Manifesto" asserted that audiences are rising up to take control of media messages, and if top-down big media controllers didn't get on the "cluetrain," audiences will simply move on without them.

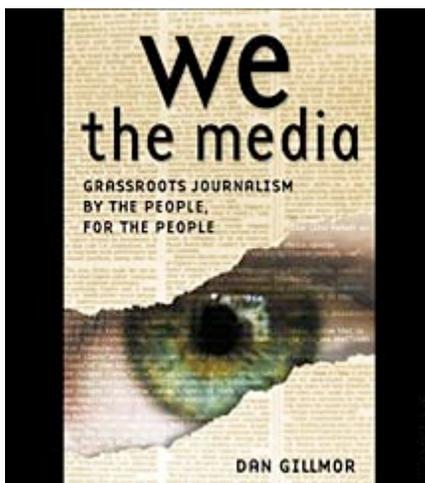
That seemingly innocent shift belies a power struggle.

Gillmor is an experienced journalist/columnist/blogger with the San Jose Mercury News. He's writing in cyber culture and in print, but in a more serious tone.

The main point of "We the Media" is similar: Journalism is a conversation in this era of the citizen journalist working in dialogue with other citizen journalists.

Gillmor touts the blog movement as a primary sign of this new participatory journalism, but he notes that blogs are only one visible sign of something much larger.

Traditional journalism generates content,



The main point of Dan Gillmor's "We the Media" is: Journalism is a conversation in this era of the citizen journalist working in dialogue with other citizen journalists.

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but it also acts as a gatekeeper, selecting which stories are blessed and visible, and which are cursed to invisibility.

With participatory journalism, readers act as editors/explorers of the news landscape. They also can become producers, adding story content and becoming part of the larger conversation. True dialogue has the power to shape that conversation, possibly to frame issues differently than professional journalists would.

In 1996, I wrote a magazine essay about the new role of reader as active explorer and dialogue agent. I thought it would lead to more critical questioning and critical thinking.

My idea was: "Why not get to know a subject the way a kid gets to know the woods?"

It is a mythic ideal of how kids explore a common "woods," playing hide-and-seek, building forts, damming creeks and avoiding the mean dog behind that one house in the neighborhood. It is active, unlike the more passive experience of reading a newspaper or watching TV.

Consider instead the media landscape preferred by public relations people, political handlers and message "spin doctors." We're in the middle of two well-funded presidential campaigns right now. Given the carefully crafted messages and repetition put out by the campaigns, it would seem that political handlers assume audiences are empty cups, waiting to be filled up with their "talking points."

What happens when the audience talks back? The Howard Dean campaign was the first to harness that powerful blog energy as well as other online tools such as "Meetups." Campaigns at all levels have discovered how much more quickly small campaign contributions add up when collected online.

Gillmor could be anticipating the power of citizen journalists, rather than noting their arrival. I believe we are still deep in the power struggle between top-down message control and interactive reader/journalists getting to know their political candidates the way kids get to know the backwoods.

I'm still not sure which side is winning.

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