

Citizen journalism's pied piper

From Berkeley to Harvard, Dan Gillmor tries to bring the new media into being, without bringing down the old **BY DAN KENNEDY**

BLOGGERS IN ONE corner, journalists in the other. Or is it bloggers *versus* journalists?

Perhaps this is a false dichotomy, or an outdated one. After all, it was nearly two years ago that New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen wrote an essay for his influential blog, PressThink, called "Bloggers vs. Journalists Is Over." Yet, judging by the hostility it still generates, this argument may just be getting revved up.

Within media circles, for instance, one of the most talked-about essays of the summer was a long, somewhat jaundiced take on blogworld written for *The New Yorker* by Nicholas Lemann, dean of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Although Lemann, a veteran journalist and author, was reasonably nuanced in his argument (the title, "Amateur Hour," was as provocative as anything he actually wrote), he immediately came under attack from what might be called the blog triumphalists. And every day, blogs on both the right (Little Green Footballs, Power Line) and the left (the Daily Kos, Eschaton) are brimming with snide contempt for what they invariably describe as the "MSM"—dismissive shorthand for the mainstream media.

Then there's Dan Gillmor. An unassuming 55-year-old former technology columnist and professional musician, he is the unlikely revolutionary behind what may prove to be the reinvention of journalism. As the founder of the Center for Citizen Media, a fledgling think tank affiliated with Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Gillmor occupies the middle ground between the MSM and the blog triumphalists. His goal: to help the nascent citizen-journalism movement raise its standards and boost its influence, while also helping mainstream media organizations use technology to reach out to what he likes to call the "former audience."

"Contrary to some folks in this area, I'm a big fan of traditional media," Gillmor says. "I want to help them work in ways that they've never done before. I want to work with people doing citizen media independently, and in places where that intersects

with journalism, I hope I can help."

According to Berkman's executive director, Harvard Law professor John Palfrey, it's Gillmor's balanced view that appeals to those who hope to define the journalism of the future. Calling Gillmor someone who "engenders respect on both sides of the discussion," Palfrey says, "I'm not by any means of the mind that journalism or newspapers or any of that stuff is going away. But obviously the business is going to change hugely."

Gillmor's 2004 book, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*, helped make

He's reaching out to the 'former audience' for news.

the phrase "citizen journalism" part of the new media lexicon. And never mind that no one quite knows how to define something so amorphous that it encompasses everything from nationally oriented political Web sites to local efforts devoted to the goings-on of a particular community.

His vision, simply put, is that the "former audience" knows more than professional journalists, and that technology, properly applied, can enable citizens both to engage with journalists in ways that improve journalism and also to *be* journalists themselves. At a moment when the mainstream media are being challenged by shrinking numbers of customers and plummeting advertising revenues, Gillmor holds out the hope that journalism's role in a democratic, self-governing society can be preserved, even revitalized.

BRIDGING THE JOURNALISTIC DIVIDE

Nearly two years ago Gillmor left a secure job at the *San Jose Mercury News* in order to strike out on his own. That led, about a year later, to the Center for Citizen Media, which is based mainly at the University of California—Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, near his home in Palo Alto. The Berkman tie brings Gillmor east several days each

month—enough, John Palfrey hopes, to give Massachusetts a role in a citizen-journalism movement that has until now been largely a West Coast phenomenon.

“We have too few Dan Gillmors around here, and we need some pied pipers,” Palfrey says. “Very self-consciously, we’ve tried to pull Dan to the East Coast and to Boston.” Indeed, an all-day conference held at Harvard Law in August—dubbed an “unconference” by Gillmor, reflecting his hope that the audience would be the star—drew about 100 bloggers, academics, and media activists, many of them from Greater Boston. All of a sudden, the Commonwealth is on the citizen-media map.

Lisa Williams, the founder and editor of H2otown, a nationally recognized citizen-journalism blog that covers Watertown (“Watertown’s Net Gain,” *CW*, Winter ’06), is among those who have signed up to work on projects with Gillmor. “He’s kind of the brand for citizen journalism because of the book he wrote,” Williams says. “If you asked anyone about citizen journalism, what’s the one name you associate with it, it would be him.”

To be sure, some of Gillmor’s tenets would seem to strain at the boundaries—well, if not of plausibility, then surely of practicality. For instance, there is his view that the audience knows more than professional journalists do. It’s

something Gillmor believes so passionately that he posted parts of the manuscript for *We the Media* online for suggestions, comments, and corrections.

Now, of course, there’s nothing wrong with that. But how would that work in the rush and competition of daily journalism? Yes, there are people within the audience—“former” or otherwise—who are experts. But isn’t it the journalist’s job to seek out those experts, interview them, and sort out for the reader what they have to say?

“If the right people join in the conversation, it will inevitably get richer and richer,” Gillmor responds. “The practical problems are many. How do you get knowledgeable people to join? How do you moderate things, if it’s a large conversation, [in a way] that pushes forward the subject? How do you elevate the signal out of the noise? I happen to think that’s one of the core issues we need to address in citizen media. How do you address the fact that most people don’t have the time to read every comment on every relevant blog?”

Gillmor sketches out a scenario whereby journalists and citizens would work together every step of the way, from pre-publication to well beyond. At the beginning, a reporter—instead of relying entirely on a Rolodex that may or may not lead him to the right sources—might post a

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message on his blog or on his news organization's Web site. "Say, 'Here's what I'm working on,' in a very public way," says Gillmor. "And then, 'Who should I talk to?'" After publication, Gillmor says, the reporter could keep revising his story as new information becomes available. Ideally, this would be done in a way that would allow readers to see precisely what was changed, deleted, and added over time.

If this seems revolutionary, it may be because journalism is among the most hidebound, and shortsighted, of businesses. In some ways, what journalists do has not changed significantly since the emergence of the modern newspaper in the mid 19th century. Indeed, Robert Giles, curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism, also based at Harvard, recalls that during his years at the newspaper chains Knight Ridder and Gannett, "stilted and restrictive economic thinking" all too often led company executives to shun innovation. Instead, they focused on immediate financial gains while ignoring the rise of technology-driven competition such as Craigslist.org and Monster.com, to their short-term benefit and long-term detriment.

"I think one of the things that's most intriguing is his recognition that there are a lot of people in the community who are more of an authority than journalists," Giles says of Gillmor. "They're a resource in that regard. And newspapers have to find a way to invite them in, to tap their authority."

A slightly different take on Gillmor's participatory-journalism idea was recently unveiled by Jay Rosen, who's a member of the Center for Citizen Media's advisory board. Rosen's notion, called NewAssignment.Net, would enable professional journalists, bloggers, and interested citizens to collaborate in public on news stories that the mainstream media have ignored. (Gillmor, in turn, is an adviser for NewAssignment.Net.)

"The thing that has fascinated Dan and myself and others is the potential power of geographically distributed groups of people cooperating to put together a story that would be very hard to do without such cooperation," Rosen says. "We believe this continent exists"—here Rosen refers to the journalistic promised land as if it were the New World—"but we haven't found it yet. And the only way to find it is to discover stories in which such a network actually does operate effectively. I think it's eminently doable, and we'll just have to see how it all works."

In a real sense, the Center for Citizen Media is an incubator, driven not so much by a particular belief in what the future should look like as it is by Gillmor's desire to hasten



Gillmor sees journalists and citizens working together at each step of a news story.

that future along. Veteran journalist Tom Stites, who hired Gillmor as a stringer around 1980 when he was national-trends editor of *The New York Times*, and who later hired him as a staff reporter when he was managing editor of the now-defunct *Kansas City Times*, sees his old protégé as a "catalyst" in the ongoing conversation of how to reinvent journalism.

"The more he stirs the pot and gets the conversation going, the faster something is going to emerge from it," says Stites, now an associate editor with the Center for Public Integrity.

A LOT TO LEARN

On a stiflingly hot day in mid-July, Dan Gillmor is tapping on his Apple PowerBook in the air-conditioned comfort of the Harkness Commons cafeteria, at Harvard Law School. Wearing white jeans and a checked shirt with the sleeves rolled up, his hair graying and swept back, he looks like he could be one of the tech-support geeks. He speaks so softly that you have to lean forward lest you miss something. In conversation he's modest and self-effacing, suggesting



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It is somehow telling that, over the course of a two-hour conversation, Gillmor offers nary a sound bite. He answers questions in a thoughtful, matter-of-fact manner, given neither to grandiose pronouncements about his work nor self-serving statements about his own importance.

In a lecture he gave at the University of Michigan in 2005, Gillmor said, "Professional journalists have a lot to learn. If we accept the idea that we are moving toward a more conversational system, then we must remember that the first rule in having a conversation is to listen. We don't listen very well." In fact, Gillmor listens very well. It's talking—especially about himself—that he's not so good at.

Interestingly enough, if you want some insight into what makes Gillmor so passionate about journalism and technology, you might try asking him about his career as a professional musician. He was raised in upstate New York and lived for many years in Vermont, where he worked as a stringer for *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. During that time Gillmor played guitar, sang, and wrote songs for a band called Road Apple—"kind of a pre-Phish Phish," he calls it. Ask him whether his music influenced his writing and he replies, "Writing music, playing music, singing influenced my writing a great deal. Writing needs cadence and rhythm. There always, for me, needed to have some music in the words."

But then goes off in a completely different direction—unexpected, yet more to the point, given what he's doing now. In the 1980s Gillmor discovered MIDI, the Musical Instrument Digital Interface, a method for combining computers and music. More than a method, it was a standard, with software writers and instrument-makers agreeing to abide by that standard so that everything could work together. Suddenly it was relatively simple for a musician to write music, record all the tracks on his own, and distribute the finished result.

"These are very imperfect analogies, but it was almost like the TCP/IP of music. Or maybe the HTML," Gillmor says. "Anyway, it was an open standard where you could see the result, you could share the result, you could build the result. And it created a global community. Not overnight, but pretty quickly."

In a sense, what Gillmor is trying to create today is a new sort of global community. Perhaps what Gillmor really got out of music wasn't so much cadence and rhythm as it was the ability to collaborate and listen, mediated by technology.

Which, when you think about it, sounds like a pretty good metaphor for the kind of journalism Gillmor wants to nurture. **CW**



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