TERENCE SMITH: For years, Americans have been accustomed to getting their news from professional journalists on network and local television, on radio and in newspapers. But these days, more and more Americans are taking news gathering into their own hands.

WOMAN: What we started doing is the whole issue, sort of the next theme issue on growth, taxes and growth.

TERENCE SMITH: This editorial meeting at a kitchen table is citizen journalism in action –

WOMAN: And that’s one of the lead stories for the next time.

TERENCE SMITH: — and so is this promotion event for a new television venture.

SPOKESPERSON: Go to current.tv, and there you can check out all the VC2 pieces and viewer-created contests submitted by people like you.

TERENCE SMITH: And here’s a Web site example.

SPOKESPERSON: This is not a member of the community, somebody in the public who thought to change it.

TERENCE SMITH: The fast-emerging field of citizen journalism comes in as many shapes and sizes as it has names: “Participatory journalism”; “community journalism”;
“hyper-local,” “grassroots;” “do-it yourself;” “bottom up”; “open source”; “social media”; “user-generated journalism”. These names all add up to a phenomenon that is grouped under the heading, “we media.” It is built on the notion that, thanks to new technologies, everybody is, or can be, a journalist.

Veteran newspaper reporter Jan Schaffer heads J-Lab, the University of Maryland’s incubator for interactive journalism projects.

JAN SCHAFFER: There is an enormous capacity for citizens to want to be able to participate in news and information in various ways — participate in interacting with it, questioning it, truth-squading it and creating it. And now that they have the tech tools and the tech skills to do that, the appetite has only increased.

TERENCE SMITH: One of the citizen projects for which J-Lab has provided seed money is the all-volunteer Forum in Deerfield, New Hampshire, population 4,000 — a new online newspaper about and by the residents of four local communities.

Founder and chair Maureen Mann explains that the rural New Hampshire hamlet was a black hole for mainstream media.

MAUREEN MANN: For the most part, we’re sort of a little vacuum between the sea coast, the major cities and there’s almost no coverage. So we’re hoping to provide coverage of local events; we’re also hoping to essentially give people an opportunity to become reporters themselves. We almost want people to be the news.

TERENCE SMITH: Relying on a handful of regular contributors, the paper has covered news from the new fire engine in town to the regionally recognized Deerfield Fair to poetry.

MAUREEN MANN: But, on the other hand, we are utilizing space efficiently, someone might say.
SPOKESMAN: Very efficiently.

TERENCE SMITH: On this day, Maureen Mann was wearing one of her many hats — interviewing local school officials about overcrowding.

Last year, Deerfield residents voted to abandon the centuries-old tradition of town meetings. So in a sense, the Forum has become the electronic equivalent.

At the Lazy Lion Cafe, the only restaurant in town, members of a local women’s bible study group gather.

Joanne Bradbury says she likes the immediacy of the online paper since she lives outside the circulation of area dailies.

JOANNE BRADBURY: I can just turn on the computer and there it is, plus it’s local people and they’re talking about things that I know about locally.

TERENCE SMITH: Denny Grieg has been both a reader of and contributor to the Forum.

DENNY GRIEG: A few weeks ago, right after the tax assessors came through, the phone system went down at city hall. Well, you know, I’m sure that day a number of people were trying to call city hall and there was a full and candid explanation about what the issues were and how it was dealt with, and that’s an incident that never would have been explained before.

TERENCE SMITH: A very different example of “we media” has taken root on a site called Wikinews, which allows web site users to contribute to and edit news stories.

“Wiki wiki” is a Hawaiian word meaning quick. Jimmy Wales recently founded Wikinews, an offshoot of his larger, well-established Wikipedia Encyclopedia project.

JIMMY WALES: One of the main motivations or the main ideas behind it, we had seen actually going all the way back to Sept. 11 when we were still a very young project, on Sept. 11 our page about the attacks was very good and, not only
that, we did a great job of filling in background information. So who is the architect who designed the World Trade Center — a whole article about his life and history.

TERENCE SMITH: Wikipedia, now five years old, gets two billion page views a month, making it the 40th most popular web site on the Internet with more readers than the New York Times, the LA Times, Washington Post, and USA Today combined.

JIMMY WALKES: You can trust Wikipedia because you know there’s a community behind it, and everything on the site is reviewed by lots of people who are working together.

TERENCE SMITH: The bottom-up wiki concept prompted Michael Kinsley, then the Los Angeles Times opinion and editorial editor, to try it in his mainstream news organization– an online editorial which readers were invited to rewrite.

The “wikitorial” attracted thousands of readers who weighed in on the issue of the war in Iraq.

MICHAEL KINSLEY: Basically we published the editorial in a normal way and then we published it on a wikipage where anyone could go in and, you know, rewrite it, or anything. There’s much more of a built-in cooperative spirit there.

TERENCE SMITH: This is an example of how the wikitorial worked. Any additions and changes by the contributors appeared in bold and were time-stamped; 10:37, the post reads “It merely proves, as explicitly stated in the memo, that no political decision had been taken as of July 2002.” One minute later at 10:38, another contributor added his change: “It proves, as explicitly stated in the memo that ‘the intelligence was being fixed.’” His comments stood until the next contributor came along.

The experiment collapsed three days later after “cybercreeps” — Kinsley’s word — posted pornographic material on the site. The LA Times management dismantled the wikitorial
MICHAEL KINSLEY: You can’t just put it up there and watch it take off. Number two, would be there are a lot of snakes in this Eden and they will make trouble if they can. But number three is, there’s a lot of interesting stuff that can come out of it.

JAN SCHAFFER: I think the spirit is to be applauded. I think that news organizations need to do a lot more kind of experimentation, throw stuff up on the wall, see what sticks, see what works. And what doesn’t work, go back to the drawing boards and figure out the next thing.

SPOKESPERSON: Now you’re also going to get awesome tips on how to make TV; you’re going to get tips on storytelling, on editing –

TERENCE SMITH: In yet another approach, the we media concept is also showing up on cable and satellite television. Current, an independently owned news and information network, has 30 percent of its content contributed by viewers.

SPOKESPERSON: …taking the power of media into their hands.

AL GORE: Thank you.

TERENCE SMITH: It’s the idea of former Vice President Al Gore who addressed the young crowd that gathered at a recent Central Park promotion for Current.

AL GORE: I want to invite you to go to current.tv and participate in the conversation of democracy.

TERENCE SMITH: Keith Harris came to Central Park because he’s interested in the idea. By day, he’s the media coordinator of the Children’s Aid Society in New York. By night, he’s an amateur documentarian.

KEITH HARRIS: These are true-to-life stories that you can connect with. The stories and the people that are involved in production also the people that are involved in front of the
camera, behind the camera these are people such as myself, who aspire to have our sensibilities appreciated.

TERENCE SMITH: This type of channel is necessary even in an already-crowded 300-channel television universe, Gore argued before journalists assembled by the Media Center, a think tank.

AL GORE: Ironically, television programming is actually more accessible to more people than any source of information has ever been in all of history. But here is the crucial distinction: It is accessible in only one direction; there is no true interactivity and certainly no conversation.

TERENCE SMITH: Even with all of these different illustrations, the question remains: Is media really a viable alternative or a compliment to what professional journalists do? Michael Kinsley is not so sure.

MICHAEL KINSLEY: When I go to a restaurant, I don’t want my dinner cooked by the guy at the next table. When I pick up a newspaper or even go to the web, I like to think that, you know, our experience and training and standards will give us some advantage.

TERENCE SMITH: Citizen journalists themselves, like Maureen Mann, concede they do face limitations.

MAUREEN MANN: We’ve had a little bit of difficulty getting some answers from people we would like to speak to us. It doesn’t mean we won’t keep trying.

TERENCE SMITH: Jan Schaeffer says citizen journalists have their own strengths.

JAN SCHAEFFER: These are not journalists; they don’t even aspire to be called journalists. But what they’re doing has a lot of journalistic DNA, and so I think we look at that and think “wow, where is this going to lead?” It’s very promising.

TERENCE SMITH: That promise shone through recently in New Hampshire, when the National Guard was ordered to
New Orleans. Who broke the story? The Forum scooped the established paper in the area, the Manchester Union Leader.