

BOOK REVIEW

ANDREW KEEN. *The Cult of the Amateur: How today's internet is killing our culture*. New York: Doubleday (2007). 228 pp. US\$22.95, C\$29.95. (ISBN 978-0-385-52080-5).

I'm personally against Web 2.0 in the same way as I'm personally against my own death. . . [but] we're going to 2.0. Like it or not, that is what is going to happen. (Paul Simon, quoted in Keen, p. 113)

Digital pirates and cut and paste burglars steal content online, noble amateur hacks fill our media palates with poorly researched dreck, experts fight for air time with sock puppet bloggers, and entire media industries are brought to their knees in an era of intellectual anarchy.

Does this sound familiar?

Welcome to the new media landscape of the Web 2.0, according to Silicon Valley pundit Andrew Keen. Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur: How today's internet is killing our culture* is a lament of cultural decline in the new Internet era.

The Web 2.0 is home to user produced sites such as YouTube and Wikipedia and participatory media forms such as blogging, social networking and video narrowcasting. It is also the platform for a wholesale transformation in how information and knowledge is shared.

Skeptics and enthusiasts of the new information order alike should read Keen's *Cult*. Like a canary in a coal mine, Keen provides a set of necessary cautions to the heady enthusiasm of authors such as Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams whose *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (2006) sings the praises of information sharing and collective intelligence.

In fact, both books have their merits, two bookends to a continuum of distinctions made by the many pundits who have entered into the debate over the cultural transformations that are occurring around us. *Wikinomics* focuses on the potentials of a participatory Web, *Cult* on the perilous downfalls.

Keen argues that access to a computer does not a journalist make, just as access to a kitchen does not make one into a serious cook. But here is the rub: we have all tasted delicious fare made by an amateur chef and an over-wrought concoction of foodstuff prepared by a professional.

The culture of the expert and the professional that we have grown up with has not been one of pure enlightenment. If anything, the trends that Keen identifies have picked up over the decades and the Internet is the lightning rod for a series of complications not entirely of its making. For example, Keen's two most compelling chronicles of cultural decline are newsgathering and music production. Large-scale media mergers, the contracting out of investigative journalism, the closure of foreign correspondent offices, the growing use of stories written by partisan think tanks, the increasing incorporation of government or corporate video news releases into television news, the reshaping of news as entertainment, and the "if it bleeds, it leads" mantra to editorial selection have contributed mightily to the delicate situation in which major news gathering organizations find themselves. The emergence of the citizen blogger and the cheeky, cacophonous Web are but late factors to a series of problems that have been developing over many years. The impact on newspapers' bottom lines of "giant killers" such as Craig's List has created a crisis that the already weakened media beast has a hard time withstanding.

Causality is more elusive than Keen depicts it. To draw a parallel, if a bus with bad brakes driven by a sleepy driver hits a pothole and has an accident, do we blame the driver who missed a night's sleep, the company that let the bus go on the road, the municipality that let the road deteriorate, or weather patterns of precipitation, freeze and thaw?

In the case of the music industry, it is clear to see that online sharing and music piracy have dealt a body blow to the structures that enabled artists to create oeuvres that could stand the test of time. Paul Simon explains to Keen that to produce an "exquisitely slow and detailed" album can cost as much as a million dollars, money that is unlikely to be recouped in the current economic context. The recent history of this industry too carries within it the seeds of its current discontent. Most significantly, when MTV "video killed the radio star" in the early 1980s, energy and resources were drawn away from the production of music to the creation of the images that package it.

Keen raises concerns about the future viability of other traditional media such as film, television, and advertising as we know it. He also stokes the flames of moral panic around the cultural decline of young people, the Internet addicted plagiarists and midnight gamblers whose sense of reality has been forever blurred by Second Life and Internet porn. In casting his net so widely, trolling at once for the institutional and socio-cultural remnants of

a lapsed utopia, an imagined community portrayed by Benedict Anderson, the load inevitably bursts under the overwhelming ballast.

Web 2.0 is “creating a generation of plagiarists and copyright thieves,” Keen ominously intones. Citing a 2005 study of 50,000 undergraduate students that revealed that 70% had cheated at least in a small way, and that 77% did not feel that Internet plagiarism was “serious.” Keen raises a concern shared by universities and schools, a problem that has resulted in the commercial success of the plagiarism detection software Turnitin. But Keen is not content to make a strong point, rather tarring other new forms of expression by association. In his view, Lawrence Lessig, the renowned Stanford University law professor and expert in intellectual property, is “misguided” in his efforts to free content from copyright protection. Among his other accomplishments, Lessig is the founder of the Creative Commons, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving access to creative content for everyday folks to produce remixes and mashups. Keen accuses this titan of productive, collaborative creativity of ignoring that all content is the product of someone else’s “creative brow” and “disciplined use of. . . talent.” Here Keen buys into the Western myth of the genius working in solitary toil, producing artifacts out of sheer will and divine inspiration. Lost in the shuffle is the essentially dialogic nature of all scientific discovery and all great art, but, more to the point, missing from the discussion is any acknowledgement of the corporate ownership of the symbols, icons and narratives of everyday culture, and the trifling incidents of creative collage on the part of Web 2.0 savvy young people that have caused consternation in the boardrooms of the merchants of culture.

Expressing this counterpoint to Keen’s arguments as sweepingly as I have, I fall into the very trap of which I accuse Keen, the polemic that brushes aside all the subtlety and contradictions that the position expressed may deserve. *Cult* is a frustrating read, but a thought provoking one. Like the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dyke, Keen resists the torrential flow of Web 2.0 praise and adulation, standing firm in his convictions that something has gone amiss. As a veteran of the dot.com booms and busts, Keen is well positioned to make his criticisms, and he contentedly plays the role of spoiler in an era of effervescent praise for communication technology’s newest development, a reading and writing Web. That he himself appears to be shilling for acceptance from corporate lobbies threatened by the changes raging underfoot is his Achilles heel. This book clearly has vested interests. But to detect bias and uncover selective accounts of Web 2.0 glory and folly should not preclude the acceptance of this critique as a somewhat annoying, but nonetheless worthy, spark in the grinding gears of technological change and cultural practice. To be dazzled by the shiny, smooth new machines that so dominate our work, play and consciousness today, is to remain blind to the ways in which they may unsettle and transform cultural practices we

value. Keen's is just one account of the impacts of technological change on cultural life, a lopsided one, but one to be contended with.

REFERENCE

Tapscott, D., & Williams, A. (2006). *Wikinomics: How mass collaboration changes everything*. New York: Portfolio.

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