

ANDREW KEEN

The Cult of the Amateur

How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy

"A thought-provoking and sobering book...really interesting insight and research."

Larry Sanger, Co-founder of Wikipedia and founder of Citizendium



The Cult of the Amateur
 Andrew Keen
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WE ARE routinely informed that Web 2.0, with its blurring of the boundaries between author and audience, is changing the world for the better. Andrew Keen's book represents a counter-argument to this prevailing philosophy, a David to the new internet's Goliath. At once ranting, polemical and downright funny, it is a damning critique of the whole social media phenomenon.

Keen hates amateurs – or at least the ones that pose as authorities. He values experts – intellectuals, academics and gurus – and thinks that the internet does not. He is no fan of mediocrity, and yet finds that internet is full of it. And in this book, using

well-researched anecdotes, he outlines the problems.

In the offline world, nutters tend to sink to the bottom. But the online version sometimes feels like a breeding ground for pseudoscience, lunatic conspiracy theories and libellous gossip that evades ordinary censure. Unpaid citizen-journalists cost real journalists jobs, staff at *Encyclopedia Britannica* are thrown out on the street by Wikipedia and, worst of all, fact and fiction are blurred when a Google search brings up inaccurate information.

Where Web 2.0 evangelists see social levelling and power to the individual, Keen sees "mass exhibitionism". Where fans of today's internet see escape from censorship and the power to publish, Keen sees intellectuals reduced to "just another strident

voice in the cacophony". He threatens us with a dystopian world where we are left "sitting through the millions of efforts to find the rare few which are worthwhile".

Keen's primary failing in this book is his unwillingness to concede the good that the internet has undoubtedly brought to the world. Nevertheless his work provides food for thought, even if it doesn't make us blank ourselves from blogs, walk away from wikis or purge our podcasts.

A world where it is impossible to seek out an academic or expert may indeed be one of postmodern relativistic madness. A world in which everyone published everything and no one had time to listen would be a kind of narcissism on steroids. If indeed "our bank of collected information becomes infected" then one is tempted to think that humanity might as well return to its cave.

Keen's second failing lies in his conclusion, which is illogical. In it he makes an all-too-hasty link from the amateurism of Web 2.0 to a desire for stronger censorship. For me, the real lesson is a little less concrete but more far-reaching.

The Cult of the Amateur demonstrates that the internet is neither perfection nor utopia. Yes, wikis and blogs can change the way that humanity writes and disseminates its history and culture, but most of what people write is still rubbish. In turn this suggests that the role of aggregation and editing will be supremely important in future.

In bravely highlighting the Web's frivolity, and doing so in a witty and entertaining style, Keen has done us all a great service.

Chris Grannell is a marketing consultant.