

## Book Review

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**The Cult of the Amateur: how today's internet is killing our culture**, by Andrew Keen, New York: Doubleday, 2007, 228 p, ISBN 9780385520805

“This is not a fair book, and I’m proud of the fact that it’s not fair. It’s designed to open a fair conversation about Web 2.0”. That is how Andrew Keen described his own book, ‘The cult of the amateur: how today’s internet is killing our culture’, during Google Talk 2007 in Mountain View, California [12]. This book both demonstrates the way the internet has evolved and highlights the problems and challenges that go along with the evolution of the internet. Keen’s main message is basically this: the democratisation of media has created a new media landscape, in which the place for the serious ‘old media’, such as newspapers, is shrinking. Bloggers writing their own news, web-users suggesting sites on Digg.com and self-proclaimed experts adding articles to Wikipedia dominate the web nowadays. These expanding amateur-media create a culture of mediocrity, where a truly good artist or journalist does not stand out of the crowd. According to Keen, the increase in quantity of information thus causes a decrease in quality of information, thereby corrupting our culture and bringing down the expert institutions, such as professional journalism, novel writing and the music industry, which traditionally safeguard our societal values. Now, how does Keen structure his argument?

On the first page of his book the author summarises the digital revolution as ‘ignorance meets egoism meets bad taste meets mob rule. [...] On steroids.’ [12, p. 1]. Keen then argues that on the internet anyone can publish anything, generally being of poor quality. ‘For today’s amateur monkeys can use their networked computers to publish everything from uninformed political commentary, to unseemly home videos, to embarrassingly amateurish music, to unreadable poems, reviews, essays and novels.’ [12, p. 3]. By now, it is clear to the reader that Keen finds this ‘infinite desire for personal attention’ (2007: 7) a highly objectionable development. He then devotes the majority of his book (chapters 1–7) to convincing the reader of problems that arise as a result of this democratisation of information. He points out that ‘our cultural standards and moral values are at stake’ [12, p. 7] and connects this to the assertion that ‘the very traditional institutions that have helped to foster and create our news, our music, our literature, our television shows, and our movies are under assault as well’ [12, p. 7]. Indeed, Keen minutely exposes several fundamental problems arising on the internet: throughout the book, the reader witnesses the appearance of untrustworthy, morally objectionable and culturally debatable content, such as the worldwide spreading of home videos via You Tube, as well as criminal behaviour like identity theft, copyright violations, illegal online gambling and sexual predation. By going beyond general statements about these topics and stating real cases and statistics, Keen succeeds in convincing the reader of the seriousness of the described societal problems. In the final chapter (ch. 8) he makes an effort to come up with solutions to these problems, such as more control and regulation provided by traditional political institutions and website administrators. Keen for example refers to *Citizendium*, a Wikipedia-like initiative where content is provided by citizens and with two principles safeguarding the quality of information. Firstly, all contributions are verified by a board of expert editors. Secondly, the editors’ credentials can be checked upon, because their real names and CVs are published on the *Citizendium* website. By pointing to solutions like these, Keen manifests himself as an advocate for constructive use of the safeguards technology has to offer.

Unfortunately, Keen's line of argument isn't equally solid throughout the book. For example, to prove that the downfall of traditional media is upon us, Keen comes up with some statistics, but interprets these misleadingly for the reader by suggesting that the decline in book, newspaper and music sales can be solely attributed to the rise of the new media. For example, the rise of free advertising sites, such as Craigslist.com, supposedly invoked the fall of advertising revenue for newspapers; illegal downloading of music and movies is claimed to having created a loss in revenue of billions for the entertainment industry; and free information on Wikipedia would mean less book-sales. Keen assumes that every downloaded music track or movie, or article on Wikipedia, constitute a 1-on-1 loss for the industry. But would anyone who downloads Metallica's latest album, actually buy it, if it was impossible to obtain it illegally? Of course not, and research suggest it would take 5,000 downloads to reduce the sales of an album by one copy [8]. Another point of criticism concerns Keen's discussion of the role of experts in the offline world, like professional movie critics, political commentators, and academic researchers, in relation to the concept of culture. Keen thinks we need experts in our society to tell us what is important and true, or not. But is this not exactly the idea behind the 'killing our culture' subtitle? If a small group of public intellectuals tells the world what to think and how to argue, one creates a paternalistic culture. Culture, however, is never a stable set of beliefs and opinions. It arises on the crossroads of tradition and change, commentary, and conflict. So why then would everything that is printed and stands in a library, be true and culturally sound and everything that is digital and edited by dozens, be untrue? A quote from early in the book further demonstrates Keen's concerns: 'Since Wikipedia's birth, more than fifteen thousand contributors have created nearly three million entries in over a hundred different languages – none of them edited or vetted for accuracy' [12, p. 4]. Isn't the whole idea of Wikipedia that it is 'edited and vetted for accuracy' by many all the time? Here we need to reconsider experts in the offline world, since Keen appears to refer to the fact that Wikipedia doesn't undergo the scrutiny of experts. But do professional authors and journalists in all cases behave like the experts Keen thinks they are? In the face of the new media logic, of which interpretive journalism is a key characteristic, the appeal of sensation may prevail over actual research or in-depth reporting [2,9]. Furthermore, in parts of the world where autocratic regimes have a firm grip on the traditional media, thereby using them as means for state propaganda, from a moral point of view bloggers may deserve more praise than their 'expert' colleagues for bringing non-censored, non-partisan news to the people.

Keen thus raises several issues, ranging from the truth value of Wikipedia entries to downloading music on iTunes, to sexual predators on social-networking sites, to illegal online gambling and many more. Indeed, most examples mentioned by Keen clearly demonstrate the dangers of the internet and unwanted consequences in real life. The question is, however, to what extent these cases can be connected to the notion of 'democratisation of information'. Keen doesn't succeed in explaining the link between the crowd's collective need to expose oneself online and the actions of criminals such as identity thieves and copyright pirates. Throughout the book, Keen's story on the unwanted consequences of the cult of the amateur gets more and more blurred by the author's apparent urge to address all evil on the internet. Indeed, as Keen argues in chapter 7, it is questionable that a person's search engine entries are analyzed for marketing purposes, but how does this relate to this individual's supposed desire to express his or her opinion online?

Notwithstanding some inconsistencies and unconvincing elements in his argumentation, Keen's book does constitute a welcome critical voice amongst existing e-government literature by pointing out the downside of online democracy. Over the years, the democratic potential of the internet has managed to gain a firm position on the research agenda of e-government scholars [1,3,4,6,10]. Even though several of these research projects show successes in the field of interactive policymaking, increased

transparency of government policy, and new ‘bottom-up’ democratic initiatives, the general tendency in e-government research is to conclude that the democratic potential of the internet is by far not realised yet [5]. Not only are scholars active in this field convinced that the internet has the possibilities of reinforcing democracy [7,11], but they inexplicitly advert the normative assumption that this would be a good thing for society. The main merit of Keen’s book for e-government research is that his objections towards the democratisation on the internet provides a welcome new perspective on this topic which may inspire a more critical attitude when researching the democratic potential of the internet.

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