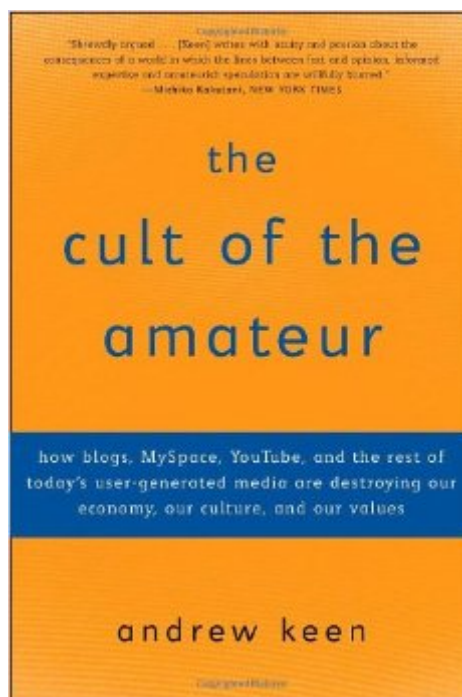


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The Cult Of The Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, And The Rest Of Today's User-generated Media Are Destroying Our Economy, Our Culture, And Our Values



Synopsis

Amateur hour has arrived, and the audience is running the show. In a hard-hitting and provocative polemic, Silicon Valley insider and pundit Andrew Keen exposes the grave consequences of today's new participatory Web 2.0 and reveals how it threatens our values, economy, and ultimately the very innovation and creativity that forms the fabric of American achievement. Our most valued cultural institutions, Keen warns, "our professional newspapers, magazines, music, and movies" are being overtaken by an avalanche of amateur, user-generated free content. Advertising revenue is being siphoned off by free classified ads on sites like Craigslist; television networks are under attack from free user-generated programming on YouTube and the like; file-sharing and digital piracy have devastated the multibillion-dollar music business and threaten to undermine our movie industry. Worse, Keen claims, our "cut-and-paste" online culture "in which intellectual property is freely swapped, downloaded, remashed, and aggregated" threatens over 200 years of copyright protection and intellectual property rights, robbing artists, authors, journalists, musicians, editors, and producers of the fruits of their creative labors. In today's self-broadcasting culture, where amateurism is celebrated and anyone with an opinion, however ill-informed, can publish a blog, post a video on YouTube, or change an entry on Wikipedia, the distinction between trained expert and uninformed amateur becomes dangerously blurred. When anonymous bloggers and videographers, unconstrained by professional standards or editorial filters, can alter the public debate and manipulate public opinion, truth becomes a commodity to be bought, sold, packaged, and reinvented. The very anonymity that the Web 2.0 offers calls into question the reliability of the information we receive and creates an environment in which sexual predators and identity thieves can roam free. While no Luddite, Keen pioneered several Internet startups himself; he urges us to consider the consequences of blindly supporting a culture that endorses plagiarism and piracy and that fundamentally weakens traditional media and creative institutions. Offering concrete solutions on how we can reign in the free-wheeling, narcissistic atmosphere that pervades the Web, *THE CULT OF THE AMATEUR* is a wake-up call to each and every one of us.

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Customer Reviews

Because I work in traditional media (book and magazine publishing) and regret how magazine and newspaper publishing are being decimated by competition from cheap (and free) Internet ad sales, I thought I'd like this book more than I did. Particularly since I agree with its premise that the vast majority of the free content on the Internet that is not supplied by traditional publishers is of less-than-professional quality. And that the Internet is home to a great deal of junk information, narcissistic self-expression, childish insults (the number of people who are 45 going on 13 is astounding, as is the number of the quasi-literate), slander, and scams. However, although *The Cult of the Amateur* is highly thought provoking, it is marred by sloppy thinking. For one thing: "Amateur" is never defined. Professionalism is a complicated concept in the fields of literature, music, visual arts, and dance (the last is a field this book does not cover, but it is one I am familiar with as a performer and teacher). Professionalism is often not defined by whether the person makes his or her living as a writer, musician, etc. Most people in most arts fields, including some highly skilled and well-known artists, simply cannot earn a living working in the arts full time because the pay is typically too low. Professionalism is sometimes defined by whether the artist has passed "gatekeepers," in the form of publishers or producers, or by winning contests. On the other hand, in the fields of live music and dance performance, this is often not valid, as the hiring parties often do not know enough technically to know whether the performers are any good. I have heard professionalism defined as whether the artist continually strives to achieve his or her best--and then studies and works to improve even more.

Since Andrew Keen is so instinctively dismissive about amateur contributors to the internet - people like me - it's hardly surprising that I should instinctively dismiss his book, so let me declare an interest right away: I like Web 2.0. I've been a contributor to it - through customer reviews, Wikipedia, discussion forums, MySpace, Napster and so on - for nearly a decade now, and I've

followed the emergence of the political movement supporting it, exemplified by writers such as Larry Lessig and Yochai Benkler, with some fascination. and no, I've never made a dime out of it (though I have been sent a few books to review, not including this one). Andrew Keen is that classic sort of British reactionary: the sort that would bemoan the loss of the word "gay" to the English language, and regret the damage caused by industrial vacuum cleaners on the chimney sweeping industry. His book is an impassioned, but simple-minded, harkening to those simpler times which concludes that our networked economy has pointlessly exalted the amateur, ruined the livelihood of experts, destroyed incentives for creating intellectual property, delivered to every man-jack amongst us the ability - never before possessed - to create and distribute our own intellectual property and monkeyed around mischievously with the title to property wrought from the very sweat of its author's brow. Keen thinks this is a bad thing; but that is to assume that the prior state of affairs was unimpeachably good.

What begins as a moderately intriguing if vague conjecture, elevates to a jeremiad against unchecked amateurism, rampant plagiarism, indifference to intellectual property rights, and the threatened extinction of professionally mediated information, escalates further into a tirade against online pornography, gambling, and video games, finally ends as a flailing, Orwell-invoking, anti-Google rant against privacy invasion. In fact, this book review on , written by someone who is not a "trained professional" reviewer, has no right even to exist. Thus speaketh one Andrew Keen in THE CULT OF THE AMATEUR. Yet how an exploration of the rise of blogs, Wikipedia, YouTube, and other amateur sources of information and culture can end in a moralistic scolding over online pornography and gaming rather escapes me. Regrettably, this book turns a potentially interesting discourse on a particularly problematic aspect of the Internet into an easily dismissed, faintly evangelical sermon ("...the moral fabric of our society is being unraveled by Web 2.0") that falls just short of mimicking the very blogs to which it so strenuously objects. Not that Mr. Keen is without street cred as a Silicon Valley insider - he was the founder and CEO of audiocafe.com. Not that his book is without a viable premise, either. Mr. Keen's primary points, offered in his early chapters, are arguable but well taken. He asserts that the Internet has democratized information to such an extent that amateur opinion has become a substitute for vetted fact. Far too often, he claims, bloggers merely synthesize and regurgitate information collected from the investigative work of traditional media or else rework it as disguised opinion.

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