

***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***

By Andrew Keen

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A Book Review by

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Andrew Keen's title, *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* (2007), sets the tone for the book as he enumerates the various ways in which he thinks user-generated media are destroying economics, culture, and values. Keen appears to be a staunch capitalist and takes a technological deterministic approach in assessing the impact of social media on society. Whether one agrees with Keen's arguments or not, the book is a sobering read for anyone who might think that user-generated media will revolutionize society and democratic institutions.

Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur* is a timely book that was written during the sudden and rapid rise in popularity of social media including Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, blogs, and others. At the time the book was written, social media were emerging as marketing tools for politicians both in Canada and the United States. One year later, Barack Obama would use these tools in his successful bid for the United States presidency in a campaign that many will likely try to replicate in the future. In September of 2009, Facebook announced that its number of active users stood at 300 million people—almost the same size as the American population.

Keen summarizes his argument that the prevalence of social media and society's subsequent reliance on the amateur generated information that comes from it, saying that "the monkeys take over." He continues that society should "say goodbye to today's experts and cultural gatekeepers" because "in today's cult of the amateur, the monkeys are running the show" (2007: 9). He criticizes the Internet for elevating the amateur above the expert. This is troublesome because he says amateurs are hobbyists, even if they are knowledgeable or wise in a particular area. He adds that experts cannot be laypersons. The main problem with this definition is that, in many cases, laypersons or people who actually experience specific phenomena can provide information in which "expert" observers cannot. Discounting the knowledge and wisdom of people who do not commit themselves full-time needlessly undermines those who may prove to be important sources of information. Who is and who is not an expert is a much larger issue and a much more difficult question than Keen makes it out to be. Historically, those we have considered to be experts has changed and will likely continue to change over time.

In discussing that bloggers spread anonymous gossip, uninformed opinion, and steal their information from “real” news sources, Keen rhetorically asks whether these amateurs think they can do a better job than actual journalists. Again, his argument relates to the question around who is an expert. But as traditional media institutions evolve over time, Keen ignores the changes in output quality of “expert” media institutions. One can point to Fox News and MSNBC in the United States as examples. It is also unfortunate that Keen takes a pessimistic view and does not explore the possibility that the sudden rise in citizen journalism might be a reflection of society’s dissatisfaction with traditional media.

Keen also makes an argument about volume, which is a legitimate criticism of social media. The enormous amount of information produced on a daily basis illustrates a need for gatekeepers to filter information. To argue, however, that people are fooled into believing that bloggers are legitimate sources of information is disingenuous. Also, believing that today’s mainstream media is doing an excellent job is naïve.

Next, Keen takes aim at the way the Internet is undermining the culture industry. Here, he relies heavily on the idea that sales and revenue are the drivers of quality cultural products. His criticism of the Internet’s seemingly negative effect on the traditional culture industry’s profits ignores the fact that revenues and quality are not necessarily correlated. More importantly, Keen fails to specify whose culture is being undermined. Is he talking about middle class Americans? Or is he assuming homogeneity of culture that transcends race, class, and ethnic backgrounds of all groups living in the United States? Without defining whose culture is being undermined, Keen struggles to substantiate his argument that social media have any impact on culture.

Ironically, Keen argues that throughout history, art and culture have served to bridge generations, establish a rich heritage, and generate wealth. He says that Web 2.0 is undermining this. But using Disney Inc., Sony BMG Music Entertainment, or any other cultural international conglomerate as examples, one can hardly argue that the primary goal of their shareholders is to establish a rich heritage over profits. These examples reinforce the concerns raised above—namely whose culture?

On morals, Keen uses religion to introduce the notion that the Internet is tossing morals into the delete file of our desktop computers as he claims the Judeo-Christian respect for others property is no longer being respected. He argues that Internet scams, the abundance of online sex, online addictions, and second lives are more examples of declining morals. But these “immoral activities” have existed long before the Internet. Scams, pornography, addictions, and infidelity are not new to society, nor can their persistence be attributed to the Internet.

To conclude, Keen ignores the fact that the Internet is a technological tool that allows us to do the very things we were already doing offline. It may be that the Internet and social media help us do these things better, but they are still only tools that are a reflection of society more than they are a reflection of technology. How technology is used depends on how users choose to use it. It is not the fault of user-generated media that the culture industry is changing. It is not because of the Internet that the so-called moral fabric of society is in danger. Finally, amateurs have always been part of public discussion as they vote, exercise purchasing power, and make important decisions on a regular basis.

*The Cult of the Amateur* raises some interesting issues that play a role in the discussion as they temper the voices that argue social media will revolutionize society for the better. That said, they should not be taken too strongly as Keen fails to consider both that society is in a constant state of change, and the possibilities that may be available if users choose to use certain

technologies for positive purposes. His approach is too deterministic and follows a view that has widely been discredited.

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### **About the Reviewer**

Derek has both academic and professional experience in communication. Professionally, Derek has worked as a communication advisor to a federal Member of Parliament as well as has helped build a communication department in one of Ottawa's largest youth social services agencies. He is currently completing his M.A. in Communication at the University of Ottawa, studying social media and politics in Canada. His research interests concentrate on the social media and the debate about their power to change public institutions in North America.

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