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ONLINE DATABASES

Web 2.0: Our Cultural Downfall?

By Carol Tenopir

ANDREW KEEN, FORMER INTERNET entrepreneur in Silicon Valley, has become an articulate contrarian regarding all of the Web 2.0 excitement. His recent polemic, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture* (reviewed in *LJ* 7/07), addresses the trend that he sees as eroding the authority of expertise and threatening traditional journalists, authors, and other sources of quality information.

As an enthusiastic adopter of new technology, I was initially tempted to dismiss Keen as someone who just doesn't get it. Librarians, including American Library Association president Loriene Roy, are finding new ways to reach their constituents with social networking (see "Living the Virtual Library Life," *LJ* 10/1/07, p. 24). Still, after I heard Keen's keynote presentation at the recent International Association of STM Publishers in Frankfurt, Germany, and read his book on the long flight home, I recognized a kernel of truth in his arguments, which resonate with librarians' continued challenge to help users find accurate, reliable information.

News in disguise

Social networking and Web 2.0 may not be the total downfall of culture, but some of Keen's warnings hit home. Special interest groups, whether hate groups, political action committees, or corporations with a product to sell, can convey their message without revealing their true identity. Keen warns, "When advertising and public relations are disguised as news, the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred. Instead of more community, knowledge, or culture, all that Web 2.0 really delivers is more dubious content from anonymous sources."

He provides many examples to support his theory, including a seemingly amateur-made YouTube satire of Al Gore's environmental message that was actually created by a conservative lobbying firm with big oil clientele. There's

also unattributed blogs praising companies that really originate from the PR departments of those companies and a fake personal ad on Craigslist.

Caveat emptor

The underlying message from Keen is buyer (or reader) beware. When anyone can add unfiltered, unvetted, and unattributed information to a growing array of social networking sites—sites some people rely on for their news or research—we have a dangerous dumbing-down of culture and a world where truth is hard to differentiate from falsehood.

Enthusiasts tout the democratizing effect of Web 2.0. Keen warns, however, that when users and participants buy into the ideal that anyone can contribute information, we lose the accuracy that comes from reliance on experts. Indeed, expert authors and creators (and librarians) have valuable training, knowledge, and experience.

Keen also sees Web 2.0 as seriously undermining the industries that create high-quality content—our news, our music, our literature, our TV shows, and our movies—which must be paid for that content to fuel the information economy. Although he doesn't discuss libraries, Keen expresses fears that could

amount of doom and gloom, Keen does suggest some solutions to channeling the power of the Web 2.0 "revolution" in constructive ways. As an answer to the amateur content of Wikipedia, he highlights Citizendium, the wiki encyclopedia that combines public participation with the guidance of experts (see "Quality Still Matters," *LJ* 5/1/07, p. 26). As an answer to unattributed news sites, he highlights the successes of some veteran newspapers (such as the *Guardian* and *Wall Street Journal*) and some more recent news sources (such as Politico) in transitioning to the web, with vetted content and amateur comments clearly differentiated and income generated in new ways. He suggests that legislative initiatives to catch and punish perpetrators can be a solution to illegal file sharing or intellectual property theft.

Message getting through?

You might have expected Keen's message to resonate with an audience of traditional scholarly publishers. However, several questions from the floor challenged the idea that a culture of sharing information is dangerous. Science has always been about sharing, one participant argued; Keen responded that editors and peer reviews make sure that only the most re-

Keen's fears could extend to the undermining of sound collection development policies

extend to undermining the foundations of sound collection development policies that rely on authority of information creators as a measure of quality.

Keen contends that all "old media" are in danger of being replaced by widespread social networking sites where "ignorance meets egoism meets bad taste meets mob rule." He fears we may replace trustworthy old media products with the "digital narcissism" of blogs, YouTube, and MySpace.

Although his arguments rely on a fair

liable and highest-quality science is published under a journal's good name.

Keen might see this as one of the most pervasive dangers of social networking—the seductive power that leads even those professionals tasked with creating, collecting, and distributing high-quality information to become early adopters and firm supporters of "the cult of the amateur."

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