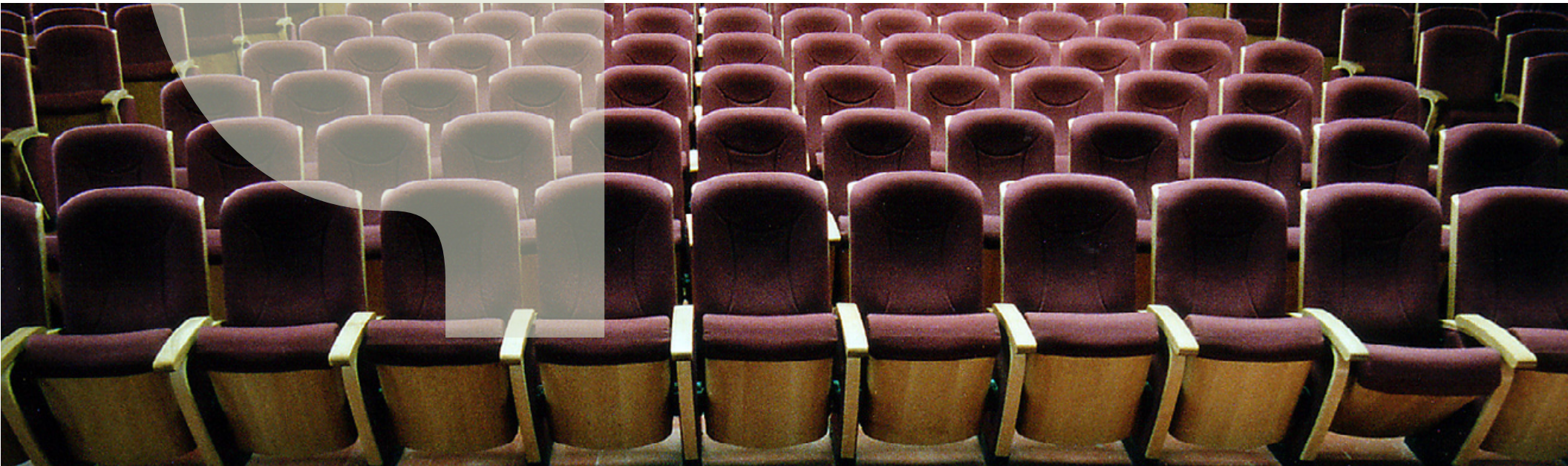# Against *You:* A Manifesto in Favor of Audience By Andrew Keen

THE INTERNET IS BACK, WE ARE TOLD.

Best-selling authors like Chris Anderson (*The Long Tail*) and Don Tapscott (*Wikinomics*) say that the technology sector is hot once more and that the Internet is again revolutionizing traditional media. We hear that, in contrast with the ephemeral Nineties tech boom, today's revolution is for real. This time, Anderson, Tapscott and their digital utopian chorus promise us, new Internet technology really is going to radically alter the world.

These revolutionaries are only half right. Google, Digg, Craiglist, MySpace, Wikipedia and YouTube are indeed successfully changing our media landscape. Digital technologies like blogs, podcasts, remixes, videocasting and mash-ups are revolutionizing traditional communications—blurring the age-old distinction between author and audience and between creator and consumer. Venture capitalists are elbowing each other to fund promising new start-ups—the next generation YouTubes, Wikpedias and MySpaces which enable the creation of user-generated-content. The technology media—*Wired*, *Business 2.0*, *Fast Company*, even *Fortune* and *Business Week*—is once more glamorizing start-up entrepreneurs. Silicon Valley, never shy of linguistic innovation, has even come up with a new word—Web 2.0 (coined by technology impressario Tim O'Reilly)—to describe this new revolution.

Yes, this second Internet revolution is indeed going to be different, at least in terms of its business success. The first time around, during the gold rush of the Nineties, the digital economy rose meteorically, then crashed and burnt in April 2000 with even greater speed. The dotcom boom, that digital tulip craze, turned out to be empty of real economic value. After the crash, the start-ups withered away and the new thing turned out to be the dead thing. That was Web 1.0. But today, the new new thing, this Web 2.0 thing, is indeed the real deal. Pundits like Anderson and Tapscott are correct. The digital utopians of Silicon Valley really are transforming American culture and media with their new technologies.

But the one problem with Web 2.0., and this is a very big problem indeed, is that the consequences of the technology transformation are catastrophic. The good news is that the Web 2.0 revolution is for real; the bad news is that it is having a profoundly destructive impact upon media, culture and society.

There is an old cliche in Silicon Valley that nothing succeeds like failure. The assumption is that business failure hardens the entrepreneur, making him more resilient. Turning that cliche upon its head, this manifesto focuses upon the failure of success by exposing the destructive consequences of today's Silicon Valley revolution.

Web 2.0's utopian vision is of an "always-on" society in which we have instant access to a democratized, interactive media. I believe that this could spell the death of traditional mass culture, the end of nationally read newspapers, hit music and movies, universally read books. Rather than always-on, the consequences of the Web 2.0 revolution will be a culture that nobody will want to watch, read or hear. It will be an always-off world.

For the digital utopians, mainstream media is an elite racket monopolized by privileged experts which has failed, historically, to reward real talent. Society is, consequently, full of unjustly unpublished writers, unrecorded musicians, undistributed movie directors. Web 2.0's technology, therefore, is emancipating. By becoming bloggers and podcasters, we—the traditional audience— become the empowered author.

This is the heart of the Web 2.0 matter. For digital utopians like Don Tapscott and Chris Anderson, the latest technology of the Internet, which allows anyone to publish weblogs or record music on their computer or distribute video over the Internet, smashes the traditional barriers to entry. In one sense, they are right. Now, empowered by Web 2.0's digital technology, anyone with a personal computer and broadband Internet access can, theoretically, become a writer, a movie maker, a musician. Our inner creativity has indeed been liberated from censorious editors, publishers and agents.

We can all now broadcast ourselves—irrespective of whether we have talent, irrespective of our training, creativity or intelligence.

Here for example, is Silicon Valley utopian Dan Gillmor in his radical manifesto, "We the Media":

"When anyone can be a writer, in the largest sense and for a global audience, many of us will be."

Many of us will be writers? What, I wonder, will we be writing about? And who is our audience if everyone else is an author?

We can all now broadcast ourselves—irrespective of whether we have talent, irrespective of our training, creativity or intelligence.

The depressing consequences of this democratization can be seen in most sectors of the traditional media business. In contrast with the exuberance of the Web 2.0 economy, traditional media—the media of a clearly separated author and audience in which consumers pay for content—is in crisis: the recorded music business is in free fall, Hollywood has sunk into a deep funk, newspapers are laying off journalists in historically unrivalled numbers, local radio and television are struggling, publishers are nervously confronting the specter of Google's universal library and its assault on the traditional book and writer.

The digital utopians, of course, present this story quite differently. Writing in the July 2005 issue of *Wired* magazine, the cyberpunk novelist and Web 2.0 agent-provocateur, William Gibson, announced the death of audience in an article entitled, "God's Little Toys":

"Today's audience isn't listening at all—it's participating. Indeed, "audience" is as antique a term as "record", the one archaically passive, the other archaically physical. The record, not the remix, is the anomaly today. The remix is the very nature of the digital."

This informational bolshevism is resulting not only in the destruction of traditional media, but in the disappearance of shared cultural understanding and experience.

Quoting such icons of the Sixties drug counterculture as Beat poets Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, Gibson goes on to argue that digital technology has done away with the distinction between artist and audience, thereby flattening culture into a cacophony of self-intoxicated creators.

Gibson asks rhetorically: "Who owns the words?"

"We do," he answers, in his own Proudonesque "property is theft" style remix. "All of us."

So who, exactly, is "us"? *Time* magazine has the answer. It's YOU, their person of the year for 2006. YOU is all of us. As the December 25, 2006 cover of *Time* boldly announced:

"[Y]es, you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world."

But what about *them*? What about the tradition owners and distributors of culture and information—the mainstream media companies, the Hollywood studios, the big record labels, national newspapers and magazines, book and magazine publishers, and the television and radio networks?

According to Web 2.0 radicals, mainstream media is an anachronism, yesterday's news. The good news, according to the radical democratizers, is that technology frees culture from these traditionally authoritative institutions. We no longer need printing presses to publish our writing or recording studios to mix our commercial music or Hollywood studios to film our movies. So, the "good" guys (ie: YOU)—the bloggers, the remixers and the denizens of virtual worlds—are uniting audience and author into something called "citizen media".

Welcome to your world—all you citizens of what *Time*'s Lev Grossman called the "digital democracy."

But what, of course, radical democratizers like Grossman forget to tell us is that mainstream media has brought us such treasures as *The Wall Street Journal*, Bono and U2, *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan, "Seinfeld," National Public Radio, *The Weekly Standard* magazine, F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Gone with the Wind," "The Simpsons," "Kind of Blue," Joan Didion and Norman Mailer, and, yes, even Henry Luce's old *Time* magazine.

In truth, both Gibson's "God's Little Toys" and *Time*'s YOU are dangerous polemics against the artist as creator and the audience as consumer. And the greatest casualty of this vision is actually YOU—Yes, all of us—you, me and the rest of America. This informational bolshevism is resulting not only in the destruction of traditional media, but in the disappearance of shared cultural understanding and experience. Ironically, conversation—one of the ideological fetishes of the Web 2.0 movement—is one of the first casualties. In a "personalized" media world of 70 million bloggers authoring 1.5 million blogs a day, we are too busy broadcasting our opinion to have anything to say to one another.

The consequence—unintended or otherwise—of [this] "participatory" media revolution is a culture of digital narcissicism in which our most meaningful cultural references become ourselves.

The consequence—unintended or otherwise—of Silicon Valley's "participatory" media revolution is a culture of digital narcissicism in which our most meaningful cultural references become ourselves. Web 2.0 media—today's 70 million unedited blogs, 100 million unedited MySpace accounts, 7 million unedited Wikipedia articles, the 65,000 amateur videos uploaded daily on YouTube —is an omnipotent mirror, a digital panopticon for the early 21st century. Everywhere we look on the Internet, all we will see is ourselves: our own blogs, our own Wikipedia entries about ourselves, our own movies and music. This fragmented, individualized outcome of the social software revolution is the reverse of the nightmare in George Orwell's dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Big Brother in the early 21st century, I am afraid, is turning out to be ourselves.

This manifesto will shock anyone who cherishes our traditional mass media and mainstream culture. With their idealization of user-generated-content, the radicals of Silicon Valley are implicitly attacking the very notion of traditional audience. My generation must wake up and fight back. The future of our culture and values is the issue here. This is serious stuff. It's about what defines our humanity: books, music, newspapers and movies.

In the opening paragraph of Nick Hornsby's best selling 1995 novel, *High Fidelity*, the memoir of Rob, an obsessive North London collector of vinyl records, there is a list of the author's five "most memorable split-ups" with old girlfriends. Like me and like Rob in *High Fidelity*, we all have our own lists for everything, our own favorite opening lines in a song (mine: "The screen door slams..." from Springsteen's 1975 "Thunder Road"), our favorite newspaper columnist (mine: Maureen Dowd in *The New York Times*) or their favorite movie (mine: Hitchcock's *Vertigo*). The reason that we— and I'm talking specifically about my generation of media consumers born between 1945 and 1980— are so compulsive about these lists is because we care so deeply, so passionately about culture, whether it's a song, a movie, a book, a tv show, a newspaper column or a magazine article.

To misquote some lyrics from the iconic English band, The Who: *my generation is audience.* My generation knows how to watch, how to listen, how to read, how to be lectured by people more talented than ourselves. My generation knows how to follow bands, collect DVDs, memorize lyrics, get lost in novels, and be educated by knowledgeable professional journalists on network television.

Yes, in contrast with Web 2.0's Generation Y, my generation is audience. We don't want to be authors. We want to consume rather than create. My generation is appropriately deferential. We know our place in the cultural order of things. We revere the expert creators of our culture rather than seeking to be those professional artists ourselves. Like Rob in *High Fidelity*, my generation collects music rather than wanting to make it ourselves.

We all benefit from this deference. Respect for others, for their expertise and natural talent, is simply a reflection of a natural meritocratic order. Yes, we would all love to be Mick Jagger, Jon Stewart, Barbara Walters or Francis Ford Coppola. But my generation is realistic. We know, as Max Weber reminds us in his Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism that "many are called, but few are chosen." And second best isn't so bad. I might not be Alfred Hitchcock, but at least I can appreciate his cruel Catholic humor, each time I pop *Vertigo* into my DVD player.

As a consequence of this deference, my generation has been able to communicate with each other. We can talk books, argue the political merits of the *Wall Street Journal* versus *The New York Times,* debate the myriad of possible meanings from the latest Tarantino movie. Our common consumption of mass media and culture ties us together. It creates common frames of reference and enables interesting, passionate conversation.

As the Czech sociologist Ernest Gellner argues in his classic, *Nations and Nationalism*, modern man is socialized by what Gellner calls a common "high culture". The sociologist argues that we get community, cultural identity, from mainstream media. Without that high culture, without common frames of cultural references, without a common language, we slip back into the fractured village life of the pre-industrial world. Benedict Anderson, in his equally respected *Imagined Communities*, agrees. A modern common culture, according to both Gellner and Anderson, creates national identity. And it is mainstream media that creates this shared culture, this conversation in modern society.

In place of genuinely shared culture, the Web 2.0 crowd offers us interactivity and "conversation"—which is a euphemism for tearing down the age-old distinction between author and audience. One of the most radical of all the Silicon Valley utopian visions is *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual* by Locke, Levine, Searls and Weinberger. The book begins with an ambitious "95 Theses" (with a nod and wink to Martin Luther). These all focus upon undermining the idea of expertise in business and commerce. Some sound so absurd that they could have been authored by a French literary theorist.

Here are five sample theses:

- #1: Markets are conversations

- #7: Hyperlinks subvert hierarchy

- #17: Companies need to realize their markets are often laughing. At them.

- #39: The community of discourse is the market

- #74: We are immune to advertising. Just forget it.

Written by a quartet of leading digerati, *The Cluetrain Manifesto* is a good example of the way Sixties countercultural contempt for authority and hierarchy has become fused with the libertarian optimism of the Web 2.0 ideologue.
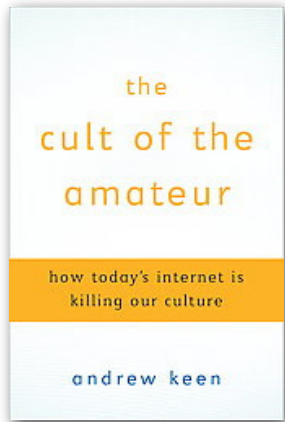
In reaction to the fashionable 95 theses in *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, I've authored a ten point alternative. Martin Luther pinned his 95 theses to the door of the castle church at Wittenburg. I'm pinning mine to a dog-eared copy of *High Fidelity*.

THE ANTI WEB 2.0 MANIFESTO

1 The cult of the amateur is digital utopianism's most seductive delusion. This cult promises that the latest media technology—in the form of blogs, wikis and podcasts— will enable everyone to become widely-read writers, journalists, movie directors and music artists. It suggests, mistakenly, that everyone has something interesting to say.

2 The digital utopian much heralded "democratization" of media will have a destructive impact upon culture, particularly upon criticism. "Good taste" is, by definition, undemocratic. Taste resides with an elite of cultural critics able to determine, on behalf of the public, the value of a work-of-art. The digital utopia seeks to flatten this elite into an ochlocracy. The danger, therefore, is that the future will be tasteless.

3 To imagine the dystopian future, we need to reread Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges. Unchecked technology threatens to undermine reality and turn media into a rival version of life, a 21st century version of Kafka's *The Castle* or Borges' *The Library of Babel*. This might make a fantastic movie or short piece of fiction. But real life shouldn't be fantasy; it shouldn't be fiction.

4 A particularly unfashionable thought: big media is not bad media. The big media engine of the Hollywood studios, the major record labels and publishing houses has discovered and branded great 20th century popular artists such as Alfred Hitchcock, Bono and W.G. Sebald. It is most unlikely that citizen media will have the marketing skills to discover and brand creative artists of equivalent prodigy.

5 Let's think differently about George Orwell. Apple's iconic 1984 Super Bowl commercial is true: 1984 will not be like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the message went. Yes, the "truth" about the digital future will be the absence of the Orwellian Big Brother and the Ministry of Truth. Orwell's dystopia is the dictatorship of the State; the Web 2.0 dystopia is the dictatorship of the author. In the digital future, everyone will think they are Orwell (the movie might be called: *Being George Orwell*).

6 Digital utopian economist Chris Anderson has invented a theoretically flattened market that he has christened the "Long Tail". It is an idealized cottage market of small media producers industriously trading with one another. But Anderson's "Long Tail" is really a long tale. The real economic future is something akin to Google—a vertiginous media world in which content and advertising become so indistinguishable that they become one and the same (more grist to the Kafkesque and Borghesian mill).

7 As always, today's pornography reveals tomorrow's media. The future of general media content, the place culture is going, is Voyeurweb.com: the convergence of self-authored shamelessness, narcissism and vulgarity—a self-argument in favor of censorship. As Edmund Burke reminds us, we have a responsibility to protect people from their worst impulses. If people aren't able to censor their worst instincts, then they need to be censored by others wiser and more disciplined than themselves.

8 There is something of the philosophical assumptions of Karl Marx and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the digital utopian movement, particularly in its holy trinity of online community, individual creativity and common intellectual property ownership. Most of all, it's in the marriage of abstract theory and absolute faith in the virtue of human nature that lends the digital utopians their intellectual debt to intellectual Casanovas like Marx and Rousseau.

9 How to resist digital utopianism? Orwell's focus on language is the most effective antidote. The digital utopians need to be fought word-for-word, phrase-by-phrase, delusion-by-delusion. As an opening gambit, let's focus on the meaning of four key words in the digital utopian lexicon: a) author b) audience c) community d) elitism.

10 The cultural consequence of uncontrolled digital development will be social vertigo. Culture will be spinning and whirling and in continual flux. Everything will be in motion; everything will be opinion. This social vertigo of ubiquitous opinion was recognized by Plato. That's why he was of the opinion that opinionated artists should be banned from his Republic. ∾

info

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Keen's deeply controversial Cult of the Amateur (to be published June 5, 2007) is the first book that exposes the economic, ethical and social dangers of the Web 2.0 revolution. Andrew hasn't always been a contrarian. In the mid-Nineties, he was a member of that generation of Silicon Valley visionaries who pioneered the Internet. He founded Audiocafe.com in 1995 and established it as one of the most highly trafficked websites of the late Nineties. Today, he is the host of the Internet chat show afterTV.com and regularly appears on the web, television and radio. His work can be found on his CultoftheAmateur blog, his syndicated Podtech video-essay, his ZDNet column as well as in traditional publications.

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