Web 2.0: Opening up, or dumbing down?

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Are Google, Wikipedia, YouTube, and other Web 2.0 giants the scourge of American culture, laying waste to its 20th-century institutions and dumbing down society?

Or is the Internet's latest incarnation a cultural liberator, unlocking the long-suppressed artistic energies of the masses and nurturing democracy?

That depends on whether you're Andrew Keen, author of the recent book *The Cult of the Amateur: How the Internet Is Killing Our Culture* (Doubleday), or Paul Duguid, a linguist and co-author of *The Social Life of Information* (Harvard Business School Press).

The two faced off over the relative merits of Web 2.0 — the mass use of interactive technologies that allow anyone to publish anything online, for free — before a spillover South Hall crowd on March 19. The presentation, titled "Is the Web a Threat to Our Culture?," was staged by the School of Information and moderated by Geoffrey Nunberg, who co-teaches the school's Quality of Information class with his fellow iSchool adjunct Duguid.

Opening the sharp, witty exchange, Nunberg observed: "When the Web was built, everyone had these enthusiastic hopes for it, and then there turned out to be all these problems — from pornography to fraud to defamation to plagiarism to just plain unreliable information. It's as if we thought we were going to build the New Jerusalem and we wound up with something a lot more like the present one."

What's wrong with Web 2.0? Sure, it's great at creating space for self-expression, Keen said, one of his few points of clear agreement with Web 2.0 supporters. There's no question, he said, that "when you go to YouTube, or to MySpace, there's an awful lot of content."

In his view, though, "most of that content is worthless" because it is published without going through traditional gatekeepers: the record labels, newspaper editors, magazine and book publishers, scholars, and other cultural producers who are paid to sort good from bad and truth from lies.

The aggregated "wisdom of the crowd," epitomized by Google and Wikipedia, is rife with opinion, misinformation, and lies because Web 2.0 creates an "environment where anyone can say anything," Keen argued. And that's "a bad thing for the cultural producers, the creative class," he asserted. Newspapers, the music industry, book publishers — and the cultural producers who work for these institutions — are all in crisis because Web 2.0 has taught consumers that content should be free.

"The only people who are getting rich," said Keen, "are the people at Google, the people at YouTube, the people who have seduced us by suggesting that we're all smart enough and talented enough to self-publish, that we're better off expressing ourselves in blogs than reading the New York Times (or) putting our videos on YouTube [instead of] going to the movie theater."

And that's put the culture at risk, he contended: "I'm not against self-expression. [But] I am very concerned that this so-called revolution of democracy and equality is actually creating cultural anarchy and punishing people with real talent."

Duguid, however, suggested that Keen, as a former Web 1.0 entrepreneur and blogger who's made a name for himself by using the

Internet to promote his views and his book, wants to have it both ways. He's an "amateur bashing the amateurs," Duguid said, who then claimed to be contending with "an Eliot Spitzer of the blogosphere here. On the one hand we're saying stop this, bring in the law, let's close these people down; but on the other hand, while our backs are turned, we're also having a lot of fun with the blogs and all that."

Another problem with Keen's analysis, Duguid said, is that he never defines just what the culture is that needs defending.

"Tower Records?" he asked, referring to one of the examples in Keen's book. The independent record shops that the record-store chain put out of business probably wouldn't agree that Tower needed defending, he said.

"Newspapers are cultural gatekeepers? That's a very reverential view of newspapers. Here it is the fifth anniversary of the war, and who drove us to war other than the president and the newspapers? Should I go into mourning because they're having a little bit of trouble?"

The debate about what culture is, and who gets to define it, has been going on for centuries, Duguid said. Polarizing views like Keen's — and those of Web 2.0's ardent supporters — both err in failing to define their view of culture and to distinguish between the parts of the culture that may be worth defending and those that are not.

Challenging Keen's argument that traditional book publishing is superior to user-generated online compendia like Wikipedia, Duguid turned to examples culled from Keen's own book. He ticked off a half-dozen where, he said, Keen commits the very crime he accuses the Web of encouraging.

The book opens by comparing Web 2.0 to the famous hypothetical

example of 100 monkeys with typewriters who eventually, randomly write Shakespeare's collected works, a theory Keen attributed to Thomas Huxley.

"But Huxley didn't say it," announced Duguid. "If you go to Wikipedia, it gets it right." Wikipedia says that Huxley is often wrongly credited with proposing a variant of the theory, and that its roots date as far back as Aristotle.

After five more such examples, he observed, "I think it's Wikipedia 6, Andrew Keen 0 — and as a Wikipedia critic, that chagrins me."

Keen, for his part, admitted his sloppiness but said that the book was intended as a polemic. He'd originally intended to write a more ambivalent book, he continued, but his agent said it would never sell.

"The purpose of the book," he said, "is to spark conversation about how we use technology, to remind people that technology is not inevitable, that we control it, we make it and we can unmake it. We need to talk about the best bits and control the worst bits, the destructive bits."

That a conversation needs to happen seemed to be a point of general agreement. In the end, iSchool librarian Mari Miller, speaking from the audience, laid the issue squarely at the feet of educators. The freedom of Web 2.0 is really an old wolf in new clothing, she suggested.

"The business of figuring out what is reliable information has been a challenge for society since the dawn of time," said Miller. "The answer lies in teaching the art and science of critical thinking. Maybe we need to do more of that so people can make better use of this information."

Source: By Carol Ness, UC Berkeley