

**bookmark** reviewed by kevin keohane, abc

## Unpopular opinion

Everyone's an expert on the Internet. Is that such a bad thing?

Keen ignores the fact that for every recognized expert, there are a dozen other passionate experts who have just as much information and insight.

### about the reviewer

Kevin Keohane, ABC, is head of brand and employee engagement at SAS, a strategic communication agency based in London. He serves on the board of IABC/UK.

In *The Cult of the Amateur*, author Andrew Keen despairs of Wikipedia that “everyone with an agenda can rewrite an entry to their liking.”

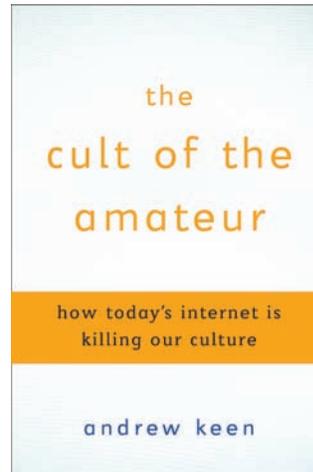
Keen, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who writes about culture, media and technology, has produced a book about a world where “our most valued cultural institutions—our professional newspapers, magazines, music and movies—are being overtaken by an avalanche of amateur, user-generated, free content. If we are all amateurs, there are no experts.”

He predicts that by 2010 there will be more than 500 million blogs, “corrupting and confusing popular opinion about everything from politics, to commerce, to arts and culture.” But what is his definition of “popular opinion”? Something mediated by “experts”?

“Few of us,” he lectures, “have special training, knowledge or hands-on experience to generate any kind of real perspective.”

Speak for yourself, Andrew. (He does—on his blog.)

He calls citizen journalists “a pajama army of mostly anonymous, self-referential writers who exist not to report news but to spread gossip, sensationalize political scandal, display embarrassing photos of public figures, and link to stories on imaginative topics such as UFO sightings and 9/11 conspiracy figures.”



### about the book

*The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture*  
by Andrew Keen  
Currency/Doubleday, 2007  
240 pages

What is fascinating about Keen's book is that it is actually an exploration of a belief system, an attitude toward authority, a culture of specialization and expertise, the commercial value of ideas, and a fear of change that many of us share.

We have been raised and taught to trust authority, to seek out and trust the expert. We are conditioned to become the expert, to excel in our chosen vocations and professions. We fear the mindless tyranny of the mob.

But we have also been raised to question authority, to critically assess information, to consider the source. What Keen misses, completely, is that peo-

ple have a critical faculty. Despite information overload and fatigue, we still function.

Keen ignores the fact that for every recognized expert, there are a dozen other passionate experts who have just as much information and insight. For that dozen, there are hundreds of quite inspired and talented amateurs. For those hundreds, there are thousands with an interest and a desire to learn more and be involved. He also fails to address that people can *reply* to blogs, and edit and correct Wikipedia entries as quickly as an error (honest or otherwise) is made.

Keen's most salient points are on the intellectual property, privacy and copyright issues the new age raises. Yet even these points so drip with Keen's belief in the self-evident authority of the credentialed expert that they fail to win over readers unless they already agree with him. In communication theory, that's called the assimilation contrast effect.

The topic is an immensely important one to explore, particularly for communicators facing the exciting challenges of consumer-generated social media in their day-to-day jobs.

Unfortunately, someone other than Keen—someone a little less terrified by the prospect of change and the possibility of other intelligent people in the world—would be far better placed to carry the banner. ●