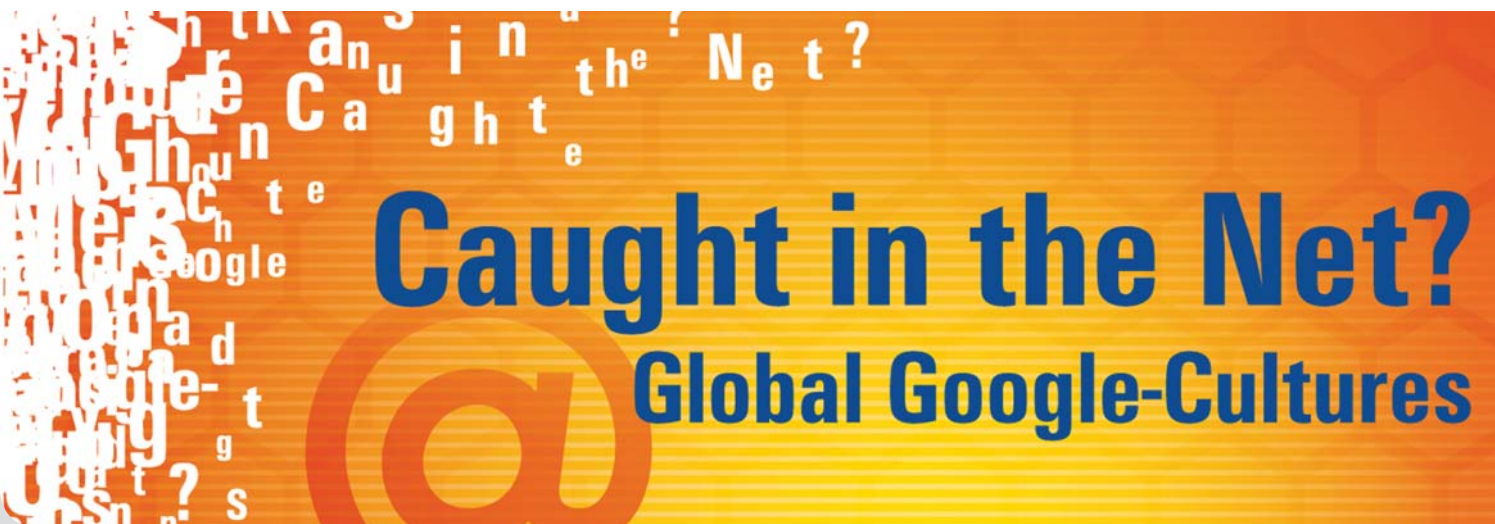


Is Web 2.0 Going to Destroy Our Values?

Andrew Keen





Thank you very much, it is a real honor to be here. I am here to talk about democracy and the relationship between the Internet and democracy. Let me make a couple of caveats before I start my speech. Firstly I am here to talk about representative democracy, not pure democracy. Beyond that I am here as a cultural critic of Western democracy or a cultural supporter of Western democracy. That does not mean I am here to talk about the relationship between the Internet and authoritarianism. I am not defending authoritarian regimes in Egypt or China or anywhere else in the world. Therefore my presentation should not appear as a defense of authoritarianism or an attack on the Internet. I come from Silicon Valley, I am an Internet entrepreneur, I am as wired as anyone. So sometimes my critics have called me a Luddite, but I am not. Rather than being against technology I am critical of some of the ways in which technology has impacted on culture and democracy, and indeed the way in which culture and democracy have impacted on the Internet.

I wrote a book in 2007 called *The Cult of the Amateur*¹ which has a great German title, *Die Stunde der Stümper*.² Germans will laugh when they hear this word 'Stümper'. There is no word for it in American. In American you would probably translate it as 'citizen' or 'dilettante'. You can imagine if I said the latter in America I would be put in jail or put on the next plane out. I love the translation of this book. I have been to Germany a lot and I think this is an audience or at least a culture which is perhaps sometimes more receptive to what I am saying than the one in America. I am just finishing another book called *Digital Vertigo*,³ which is an attack, a critique of social media. I want to divide the speech into two: talk about *The Cult of the Amateur*, and then about the *Digital Vertigo*.

Let me say one thing very clearly. I have heard this term 'Web 2.0' used already. Web 2.0 is dead! So we are talking about two periods: my book *The Cult of the Amateur* was a critique of Web 2.0, *Digital Vertigo* is a critique of something new. The big thing now in Silicon Valley is the social, Facebook for instance. It is nice to be at the *Karlsruhe Dialogues*, but I have not noticed a lot of dialoguing, yet. This of course is the old world, a world that I am very comfortable in. I assume most of you are. The world of 'raised diases': a place where you keep

¹ Keen, Andrew: *The Cult of the Amateur. How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*, New York/London 2007.

² Keen, Andrew: *Die Stunde der Stümper. Wie wir im Internet unsere Kultur zerstören*, München 2008.

³ Keen, Andrew: *Digital Vertigo: An Anti-Social Manifesto* [forthcoming].



quiet and I tell you I inform you about the world. I have been told by a couple of spies I have out in the audience that you are all concerned citizens of Karlsruhe. You have come here to better inform yourselves about these debates. Every year Professor Robertson-von Trotha puts on an event in which you come to familiarise yourselves with subjects that you are interested in, but not intimately familiar with. You are familiarising yourselves as citizens. You want to know more about the mafia or organised crime, the Internet, politics or culture. That is the way the old media worked in the 20th century, the old industrial media. We had experts, authorities, perhaps people like myself, people who knew their subject. You will all have a subject that you know a lot about, that you are intimate with. Some of you may indeed be teachers or university professors and it is your calling to inform others who are not necessarily more ignorant but certainly less well informed about the world. That is why we have these 'raised diases', that is why I am brought here to inform you about the world.

That is how the old media used to work, to some extent like a bank. Let us imagine we are in a bank now and you trust the bank with your money. You come here and you put the money in and you know – or you hope at least – the bank is not going to spend it. But then you show up the next day and your money will have gone. The same is true of old media: we *trusted it*. In the old world, in the world of the pre-Internet media, you bought your newspapers in the morning, you switched on your television, you listened to the radio and you listened to the authority of people who were not necessarily wiser or smarter or certainly not any more virtuous than you were. You did that because you wanted to know about the world, you wanted to inform yourself; partly perhaps because you were interested, but also because you are all citizens. If you are to be good citizens, if you are to know about the world, if you are to understand the nature of politics and foreign affairs, you have to be informed about it. So the nature of pre-Internet, pre-digital, analogue media was that we educated ourselves from professionals. We paid those experts for their – not so much their wisdom – but for their authority, because we sent them off to Baghdad or Washington D.C. or Berlin and they spent their lives collecting the news and then distributing the news to you as citizens, as concerned citizens. Because citizens can only be proper citizens if they are informed.

The nature then of a representative democracy is kind of like a dias. Politicians of course stand on the dias, but perhaps even more essential than politicians, or mayors, or vice presidents of banks are professional media people. People who we can rely on. Now, that does not mean that they are completely objective. When I was an undergraduate, I studied the work of Max Weber. Weber, of course, was the early 20th century sociologist who exploded the idea of completely objective information. All information comes with cultural baggage, we know that. Every journalist chooses which story to cover, thus every journalist, every newspaper, television and radio station is biased. But the concerned citizen, the serious citizen, the informed, educated citizen knows that. A good citizen will read more than one newspaper, one perhaps on the liberal left, one perhaps on the conservative right. The same is true when it comes to television: in America you might watch FOX and MSNBC, one on the right and one on the left. We collect information and then we make judgments, as citizens about who is right and what is more important. It affects who we are voting for.

Now the Internet has come along, and – to use a very overused and rather ugly word from Silicon Valley – has ‘disintermediated’ that. My first book *Die Stunde der Stümper* was a critique of not so much the technology of the Internet, which enabled everyone to become an expert, which did away with the old information monopolies, which destroyed the dias. The old world was one in which there were monopolies of information, control of information, so those dias seemed natural, inevitable, unavoidable. But of course in reality nothing is ever unavoidable or inevitable. If technology meant the first wave or the second wave of Internet technology, Web 2.0 technology meant that we could all become journalists, we could all set up our blogs, we could all put videos up on YouTube, we could all distribute our audio on MySpace. The nature of Web 2.0 technology has done away with the expertise of the professional. Now my book *Die Stunde der Stümper* is critical of this for two reasons. Firstly I argue most of us do not know what we are talking about. It does not mean that there are not some people in citizen media, some bloggers, some people on YouTube who have value, who have talent. But the vast majority of people who are expressing themselves on these new flattened democratised interactive media are narcissistic and ignorant, they do not know what they are talking about. And their product, what they throw into the world, is for the most part useless and sometimes even worse: destructive, corrosive, nasty, vulgar, sometimes even illegal.

Now, that in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. I am all in favor of corrosiveness; I am rather corrosive as you can tell myself. But something has gone along with that, which you cannot necessarily blame the Internet for, but is bound up in the Internet revolution. That is the crisis of mainstream media. You see the rise of the bloggers' sphere, the rise of Web 2.0 media that allows anyone to express themselves, that empowers all of us to become bloggers, all of us to become journalists and videographers. All we now need is a cell phone and we have the power of CNN and the New York Times. The problem is that we have forgotten how to respect that media. We become preoccupied with criticising it. And most of all for both technological and cultural reasons we have stopped paying for it. Now perhaps in Germany people have not stopped paying for it as much as they have in the US. But with the rise of Web 2.0 media, with the rise of the bloggers' sphere, we have had a crisis of professional media. Fewer and fewer people are paying for their news. More and more people are stealing their music and their movies and their books. We have something called free culture. The cult which is created out of free culture is perhaps best exemplified by Wikipedia, a network which suggests that if you charge for your information you are bad.

In my view, this is a catastrophe. It is a catastrophe for two reasons: on the one hand it means that citizenship is undermined, because all that we have is this sea of opinion that comes out of citizen-generated – or supposed – citizen-generated media. On the other hand we have a situation where with this cult of free information, with this cult of not charging, with this 'cult of the amateur', the real expert, the figure in the 20th century who stood on the dias, who informed people, is going away. Their livelihoods are made impossible. We have then not only a 'cult of the amateur', but a critique of professionalism. An idea that the old professional structures are corrupt, that they reflect the interests of some ruling class, some clique, some organisation that is bad for the world.

My book *The Cult of the Amateur* suggested that the end result of this is in a sense a crisis of democracy. It is a crisis for two reasons: firstly we have increasingly opinionated citizens and therefore voters. But these are people who are more and more preoccupied with their own views, less and less able to debate with others. They are more intolerant about the world, and more importantly, they do not know anything about the world, because they are not reading the newspapers and therefore the newspapers are dying. This means even the peo-



ple who want to read the newspapers, even the good citizens, are losing the sources to make themselves into better citizens. So how are we voting? How are we maintaining our democracy? We are doing it increasingly in a narcissistic way. We are voting as individuals. Our political parties are in crisis. Our political culture is in crisis. Now, I am not here to tell you that the Internet is to blame for that. The crisis of democracy, the crisis of the legitimacy of democracy is something that existed before the invention of the Internet and will probably exist after the Internet has been replaced by something else. But it has heightened, it has exaggerated and it has compounded many of the weaknesses of democracy. It explains then the crisis of ideology, the crisis of political parties, and most of all I think it explains the increasing cynicism and the nihilism in political culture.

A new class of Internet users who reject everything, who want to see through everything is evolving. It is a culture which creates a fetish perhaps out of – maybe not so much WikiLeaks – but out of radical transparency in general, out of the idea that it is the business of media to expose, not to inform, the business of media to destroy, to undermine, to reveal.

My book about social media grew out of *The Cult of the Amateur*. But Web 2.0 has been replaced by something else. The dominant company in Web 2.0 was Google. There has been a ‘Google Age’ between 1998/1999 and 2010/2011. You had a world dominated by data, the Internet was defined by data, Google was the dominant data-company. It essentially monopolised data on the Internet, spread its data, made money out of its data, and that explains many of the revolutions we have seen regarding the Internet. Even Google itself is a Web 2.0 company because it disintermediated the creators of information. The Google search engine is actually created by all of us. They do not have professionals, they do not have experts. We all create Google, although none of us actually benefit economically. A small group of people in Silicon Valley has been made mega rich by Google even if we are the creators. But something has replaced Web 2.0 and Google, and that of course is Facebook. Everyone is talking about Facebook. What we have now, is a new Internet coming into being – an Internet that I define as ‘the social’. Everything then is becoming social. The Internet of data is being replaced by the Internet of people.



The Facebook-centric Internet is one in which the network – and it is not a national network, it is a global network – made up in 20 years of 50 billion devices is one in which we are all for better or worse forced to be on, to maintain our livelihoods and relationships. It is a network to which we are forever revealing ourselves. Wikileaks reveals government, but social media reveals ourselves. When we go on Facebook, when we go on Twitter, we are revealing ourselves. The Internet then is becoming a vast network of voyeurism. A place where everyone is watching everyone else. We are all Big Brother and we are all objects of Big Brother in the new social world. Everything is being revealed when we go on the Internet now, when we go on Facebook, when we tell our networks what we are watching on television, what we are reading, what we are buying. All the new dominant companies in Silicon Valley: Zynga you may have heard of, Groupon (Social Commerce), LinkedIn (Social Network), Twitter, Facebook and then, most troubling of all, Geolocation Companies like Gowalla and Foursquare, which are becoming increasingly popular on the Internet, which reveal where we are. So, when we are on Gowalla or when we are on Foursquare, we reveal to these networks our exact location. Now, some of you are shifting around uncomfortably, but this is not some obscure cult. There are 6 million people now on Foursquare and it is the hot new company in Silicon Valley.

What are we doing then with this network, this social network? It is not Facebook – Facebook could be something else, and Facebook will probably be replaced by something else, just as Facebook replaced MySpace. It is not a single company, it is not Marc Zuckerberg, it is not Draper Fisher Jurvetson or any of the venture capital firms who are backing this. This is a vast structural problem in which we are creating a world where we will know what everyone else is doing all the time, what everyone else is watching and reading, and unfortunately eventually thinking. Germans know this scenario, know about history, certainly better than some Americans. They also know about Google Maps. They know that Google Maps is the beginning of this. Germans are one of the few people on earth who actually have taken a position about this. Perhaps my message in this book *Digital Vertigo*, which is based on Hitchcock's *Vertigo* of course, the great movie about voyeurism and watching of the 21st century, will resonate. What will this do to democracy? What will happen in this new world? What will happen in a world where we know what everyone is doing and where they are and what they are watching and what they are buying? There is even a new thing called 'Blippy'

in which you reveal your credit card payments on the network. Again, some of you snigger, but this is for real, it is a venture capital-backed business and it is popular. What will this mean to citizenship?

My argument would be, and I am not necessarily a complete fetishist of secrecy, that democracy relies on secrecy. The essence of citizenship is of course knowing about the world, but the essence of citizenship is also being able to shield ones opinions, ones views, who one votes for, from the world. There no doubt will be networks eventually that will reveal who we are voting for. Indeed, I can guarantee you that if you add all this personal information that we are collating on the Internet, it will be very easy for advertising and marketing firms and indeed governments to determine who we are voting for. Ideology is transparent when we reveal ourselves, when we know our lifestyle and our friends. What will this do to democracy, what will this do to citizenship? The essence of citizenship, the core right of citizenship, namely the right of secrecy, the right to disguise what one thinks, will be undermined by this new network. Now this is not a new problem: in the 19th century with the industrial revolution you also had the emergence of mass society, you had the dramatic social and cultural change that came out of the industrial revolution. I think we are living through a similarly epochal time, which is characterised by a great change, a new industrial revolution or a post-industrial revolution. We have been through this before and there were people who understood these mechanisms. John Stuart Mill for example wrote a brilliant book in the middle of the 19th century called *On Liberty*⁴ in which he focused on shielding the individual and its autonomy from the gaze of the public and maintaining the secrecy. We are at the same moment now. I will hopefully be writing about this in my book, so you will be able to read it in more detail.

I do not have all the answers, but I am able to lay out the problems. What we need now is an on-digital liberty. We have to understand that we are at the same moment, that history is repeating itself. That we are – by accident almost, you cannot blame Zuckerberg or Facebook or Twitter or Google – collectively falling into a nightmare, falling into a world that when we think it through properly none of us really want. What we need to do is not trash

⁴ Mill, John Stuart: *On Liberty*, London 1859.



technology, not destroy our iPhones, not fear technology; we need to relearn how to be masters of technology and to shape it according to our own concerns. Let us use the Internet, it is full of innovation, it is a great tool. But if we are to maintain a viable democracy in the 21st century, we need to maintain the value of secrecy. Because without individual secrecy there is no representative democracy. Thank you!

15th KARLSRUHE DIALOGUES

11th–13th February 2011

15th Karlsruhe Dialogues
„Caught in the Net? Global Google-Cultures“
11th-13th February 2011

Presented by:
ZAK | Centre for Cultural and General Studies
Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT)

Convenorship: Prof. Dr Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha
Organisation: Swenja Zaremba M.A.

Editorial Team:
Silke Flörchinger M.A.
Janina Hecht M.A.
Sonja Seidel

www.zak.kit.edu