

# Quality information key for VidFest speaker

■ **INTERNET** Lack of knowledge, false information, larceny — Andrew Keen says we deserve better when we go online

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Andrew Keen used to be an Internet believer. But after a Road to Damascus experience, he's become one of the few to question the Internet from the inside.

The event that triggered his transformation took place three years ago. Keen, the founder of audio-caffe.com in the Web's early days in 1995, was at an Internet pep rally in Sebastopol, Calif.

He was among 200 other digital evangelists at a two-day camp talking about Web 2.0 — a loose term used to describe how the Internet has evolved since the dotcom crash of 2001.

The more he listened to what was being said, the less he wanted to express himself. The rampant narcissism he observed left him silent: Everyone was broadcasting but no one was listening. He came to the realization that what he was doing was taking part in digital Darwinism: the survival of the loudest and most opinionated.

By not participating, he broke the camp's cardinal rule. Instead, he sat back and watched.

"I've spent the last two years observing the Web 2.0 revolution, and I'm dismayed at what I've seen," said Keen.

His pointed observations are contained in *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*.

Written for the non-Geek, *The Cult of the Amateur* is about the dark side of the Internet — and not just the usual suspects such as digital gambling and online porn. His critical but entirely reasonable comments are a welcome antidote to the incessant cheerleading about everything digital you find everywhere else. As a digital apostate, however, he's been targeted on the blogosphere, where his book has been described as "Pathetic 2.0."

"It's a warning; it's an attempt to at least kick-start the conversation about what all this means," he said in a phone interview from Berkeley, Calif.

"I'm the first person who has done it — that's why the book has aroused so much controversy. I've had peo-



A scene from *Sanctuary*, a Vancouver Web series being shown on the big screen for the first time Sunday at the Vancity Theatre.

ple telling me I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm thrilled that it's taking off, particularly outside America; it seems to have really resonated in Canada and Europe."

As a prime example of what he describes as the cult of the amateur, Keen singles out Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia created entirely by users. There's a big cost, Keen suggests, to treating the amateur and expert equally, allowing entries to be posted anonymously and giving away information for free. It seriously damages the role of cultural gatekeepers who help the rest of us "sift through what's important and what's not, what is credible from what is unreliable, what is worth spending our time on as opposed to the white noise that can be safely ignored."

In all his business and social encounters, Keen said he's never met anyone who does any Wikipedia editing. Exactly who are these people?

"Why would anyone waste their time doing that? I know intellectuals and academics who sell their labour and I'm sure would be happy to write something online. They're not going to give away their expertise for nothing," he said.

"That's one of the biggest issues I have about the whole wisdom of the crowd thing. The reality is that it is



Andrew Keen will speak Monday at VidFest during the Creative Exchange Conference.

not the crowd; it is a relatively small group of people who are driving the online agenda. The scariest of all is that this is an anonymous oligarchy."

What concerns Keen greatly is what we're losing. Not only has the so-called democratization of information resulted in a decline in its

## ■ AT A GLANCE

### VidFest

Saturday to Tuesday

Andrew Keen will speak Monday at the Creative Exchange Conference at the Vancouver International Film Centre

More info at <http://2007.vidfest.com/>

reliability, the new citizen journalists don't have the same legal and ethical restraints that professional journalists working for newspapers, like this one, have. The unregulated online information market, he believes, "encourages the invention of false information."

Keen is scathing about the Internet's impact on the music industry, which he says is "being strangled by the most brazen mass larcenies in history."

How is anyone — including the artists — going to make money when only one out of every 40 downloaded songs is paid for? The loss of gathering places such as the U.S. retail giant Tower Records and the personal expertise of their staff may actually result in the eventual dominance of impersonal Web retail

giants and fewer musical choices.

As a solution, he points to the example of Larry Sanger, who left Wikipedia to found Citizendium, an online encyclopedia that uses experts plus user-generated content. Another is to regard news media as more of a public good on par with a school or a park.

"The book was written for parents, editors, teachers, for anyone who cares about quality and standards in media — truth, objectivity and reliability," he said.

Keen is speaking at VidFest described as the country's biggest digital content festival, which brings together creative and business people working in digital media. For the first time, the fourth annual VidFest will be preceding the Vancouver International Film Festival.

VidFest runs Saturday to Tuesday at the Vancouver International Film Centre. The public portion of the festival takes place Saturday during the Recruiting Fair and the Pitch 'n' Play from 12 noon to 4 p.m.

On Sunday at 4 p.m., the nanopunk film *Infest Wisely* gets its Canadian premiere followed at 6 p.m. by a screening of the Vancouver web series *Sanctuary*, which will be shown for the first time on a big screen. Both directors will be in attendance.

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