Democracy in Internetia

The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today's User-Generated Media Are Destroying Our Economy, Our Culture, and Our Values

by Andrew Keen
Doubleday, 2007,
256 pages.

Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations

by Clay Shirky
Penguin, 2008,
336 pages.

Reviewed by Marshall Poe

In 1988, I bought a book called *High Weirdness by Mail: A Directory of the Fringe—Mad Prophets, Crackpots, Kooks and True Visionaries*. The book was something of a cult object among smirking post-hippies,

which was what I then aspired to be. It was compiled by "the Reverend Ivan Stang," head of the "Church of the SubGenius." Of course, both were fictions. The real Ivan Stang was a businessman named Douglass St. Clair Smith who sold wacky counterculture to college students; the Church of the SubGenius was his vehicle. You won't be surprised to learn that *High Weirdness* was published by Random House, a company whose interests are decidedly not countercultural. At the time, I didn't see the irony in any of this, and ate *High Weirdness* up like so much hipster candy. Not that I took the book seriously—one can't really take anything seriously and still remain hip. No, *High Weirdness* was what I called "bog reading": stuff you read on the toilet. And "read" isn't really the right word, either; instead, you leafed through the book, laughing at the random wackiness that filled its pages and reveling in the sense that you were in on something the squares were not.

Though I now put *High Weird-ness* in the category of "pretentious things I thought were cool back when I thought I was cool," I must confess that the book taught me something important, namely that there were many more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in my philosophy. I thought I had seen a fair amount of what there was to be seen, at least in the United States. But I was dead wrong. *High Weirdness* was brimming with tales of invisible groups deeply engaged in the pursuit of the most bizarre things you could possibly imagine; and many that you—or at least I—couldn't. It just never occurred to me that a group of people would band together for *that*—whatever *that* was. But there they were in their hundreds, a huge secret garden of strangeness growing just below the surface of American life. And what was more intriguing, the garden had no walls. Stang promised high weirdness *by mail*, and he delivered: For the cost of a stamp, I could contact any of the odd groups listed. I could have an epistolary exchange with "mad prophets, crackpots, kooks, and true visionaries," all at a safe distance. That was somehow exciting.

I sometimes think the Internet is *High Weirdness by Mail* writ large. The Reverend Stang uncovered a small piece of the invisible world

of human variety. The Internet has shone a bright light on the entire sphere. Before the Internet, most of us had no idea that there might be toilet paper critics, rotten fruit collectors, and toenail worshippers walking among us. Now we know that they exist, as do millions upon millions of other eccentrics. Just type "fetish" into any search engine (*not* at work) and behold the infinite weirdness that is humanity. See anything interesting? Well, it's your lucky day, because you can easily participate in the fun! Just write a post on the Web site or send an email, and you're a member of the club. Don't see the flavor you like? Well, your bonanza continues, because you can set up your own oddball site almost as easily. Sign up with a Web hosting company (some are free), write a Web page (it's as easy as pie), and watch as people who share your "interests" gather round. Of course, consorting with fetishists can be a nasty business, even if you are one yourself. But don't worry. The Web provides you with the cloak of anonymity, so you can sit back and watch the rumpus from a safe distance.

Sounds great. But is it? Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur* and Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody* both grapple with this question. Let me begin by saying that both books are excellent. If you want to

understand what the Web is doing to you, me, and everyone else, I highly recommend you read them. But you have to read *both* of them, because they reach diametrically opposed conclusions. This is somewhat disturbing: We would like to think that when two smart people look at the same thing, they will tend to agree on what they think about it. At the very least, we would expect them to reach conclusions that seem to come from the same planet. Instead, it turns out that Clay Shirky is from Mars and Andrew Keen is from Venus.

When the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the classic study *Democracy in America*, first came to the United States in 1831, he noticed something odd about Americans: they loved to form groups.

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to distribute books, and to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society.

In the Old World, commoners rarely formed such associations. Instead, they relied on the state or the nobility to organize common affairs. Why, Tocqueville wondered, were the Americans such joiners? His answers were democracy and liberty, by which he meant equality of conditions and freedom from overarching control. He believed that democracy gave rise to liberty, and that you couldn't have one without the other. Together, they constituted the basis of the American propensity to make common cause, of which Tocqueville generally approved.

In *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky picks up the story nearly two centuries later. He has also taken a trip to a strange land—let's call it "Internetia"—and been amazed by the associative propensity of the natives, whom we'll call "Internetians."

He observes two things in this regard. First, that the Internetians form groups at a much higher rate than real people in the real world, and that these groups "are larger and more distributed than at any other time in history." Alas, he never attempts to demonstrate this central claim systematically, though it is at least plausible.

Second, he notes that organizations in Internetia tend to be "flatter" than organizations in the real world, which is to say that the ratio of administrative overhead to productive activity is lower in the former than in the latter. In Internetia, "the loosely affiliated group can accomplish something more efficiently than the institution can." As a result, no hierarchy develops. There's just no need for it. Again, Shirky makes no effort to rigorously prove this proposition, but it, too, is reasonable enough.

All of this, according to Shirky, amounts to something of a revolution in human affairs, and, like Tocqueville, he naturally wants to understand how and why it works.

His answer? "Social tools." These tools, he says, enable us to coordinate "action by loosely structured groups, operating without managerial direction and outside the profit motive." It's easy to understand why he chose this term, for things "social" are all the rage in Internetia: "social software," "social hardware," and—everyone's favorite—"social networks." Nevertheless, it's an unfortunate choice. When I hear the phrase "social tools," canapés and cocktails come to mind. That is certainly not what Shirky means. More importantly, however, the term itself is completely redundant. All of Shirky's examples of "revolutionary" social tools—cell phones, email, Web sites of various types—are devices that allow people to send, receive, store, and retrieve information at a distance. Yet we already have a word for such things: media. That term, of course, sounds very old hat, but I can see no reason to abandon it simply because it isn't sexy. After all, a rose is a rose is a rose.

According to Shirky, social tools—in deference, we'll use his phrase—are responsible for the accelerated pace and unusual patterns of group formation in Internetia. This is because they radically reduce the expense of getting people together in order to do something. Social tools have driven down the "cost of all kinds of group activity—sharing, cooperating, and collective action." In the real world, coordinating people is relatively expensive for all kinds of reasons: people with certain interests can't find one another; when they can, they are scattered all over the place; and even when they are concentrated in one area, their activities have to be managed by a central authority. As a result, people in the real world form associations only when the benefit of doing so outweighs the costs of finding, gathering, and administering the group members. Since, in the real world, these costs are high, a lot of groups we might like to form and join simply never get organized. As Shirky correctly points out, "What happens

to tasks that aren't worth the cost of managerial oversight? Until recently, the answer was 'Those things don't happen.'" Social tools, therefore, turn once-marginal or non-existent groups into viable entities.

Shirky sensibly divides these groups into three types: First, collectives that share digital items like personal data (MySpace), news (Digg), photographs (Flickr), music (Napster), videos (YouTube), or movies (BitTorrent). Second, groups that pool their labor to create a common digital product like an online encyclopedia (Wikipedia), virtual world (SecondLife), or massive multiplayer game (World of Warcraft). Third, associations that form in cyberspace and then move into the real world in order to achieve a practical goal like meeting people face to face (Meet-Up), uncovering a crime (Voice of the Faithful), or getting someone elected (MoveOn). Shirky points out that each type of group is less expensive to form than the one that follows it, i.e., sharing is cheaper than collaboration, and collaboration is cheaper than collective action. This is why sharing sites have a higher participation rate than collaboration sites, and collaboration sites have a higher participation rate than collective-action sites—or so Shirky implies.

This is an excellent theory. It is both parsimonious and powerful.

It's also only half the story. The part Shirky gets—and he gets it very well—is the impact of equality on group formation. Tocqueville argued that Americans were all basically the same in terms of their mental and economic endowments. They were all pretty smart and fairly prosperous. In contrast to France and England, America knew no nobility of the mind or manse. This equality made it easy for Americans to mix, which in turn made it easy for them to form groups. Shirky argues that Internetians are similar. They are all more or less the same in terms of their communicative endowments. They all have Internet connections, which means they all have access to the mighty social tools. "Everyone," he claims, "is a media outlet." In contrast to the real world, Internetia has no class of media oligarchs—scribes, printers, television executives—who exercise disproportionate control over the means of communication. It is this equality of powerful communicative means that permits Internetians to join forces so easily.

This theory is easy to demonstrate. Imagine if Shirky's social tools were *not* evenly distributed in Internetia, much as the traditional media are not evenly distributed in the real world. What would happen? The few with tools would have more organizational power than the many without them,

virtual strata would form, the costs of group formation would go up, and the propensity to form groups would go down. As Shirky rightly points out, such is not the case in Internetia.

As Tocqueville made clear, however, equality is not enough to spark an explosion of self-organization. You also need liberty, and this is a factor Shirky seems to have missed. Tocqueville noted that Americans were largely free from invasive meddling by a ruling class or the government. They reserved the right to organize themselves however they liked within the confines of custom and law. The same holds true in Internetia. It has no intrusive class or state. As a result, the Internetians believe that they have the right to form groups as they please and, more generally, to do whatever they like. They have complete liberty, and that makes all the difference in terms of group formation.

This, too, is easy to show. Imagine if all the customs and laws of the real world were applicable and enforceable in Internetia. Some, of course, already are: Internetians can't hack, steal, defraud, or traffic in kiddie porn—although, as in the real world, a small number of them do—because the authorities in the real world will punish such actions no matter where they occur. But let's imagine those authorities governed Internetia to the same extent and in the same way as they govern the real world. What would happen? The answer is plain: a lot less. For example, it is not customary in the real world to hide your identity. A person in the real world is who he is. A person in the real world who conceals her identity or has multiple identities is a fraud. In the real world, then, you are not at liberty to do and associate as you please because your reputation is on the line. If you have, for instance, a stuffed-animal fetish, then everyone will know, and that's not good for you. The same thing would occur in Internetia if this custom were in force. Internetians would be afraid of public censure and therefore less likely to do unconventional things or join odd groups. But such is not the case. In Internetia you are practically encouraged to hide who you are, and almost everyone does. Though it may be a bit unusual to think of it this way, the "right" to hide who you are (as well as to do myriad other questionable things) is a kind of liberty.

It's no wonder that Shirky emphasizes equality instead of liberty in his theory of Internet association. Online equality isn't the problem. With a few exceptions—such as professional journalists who are worried that the Internetians will gather, write, and distribute the news themselves—most people agree that equal access to

the Internet is a fine thing insofar as it makes sending, receiving, storing, and retrieving information cheaper and easier for the masses. The problem is online liberty, or what many critics see as online license. For whatever reason—and I think it is largely because anonymity is so easy and common online—many Internetians behave very badly by the standards of the real world. They call each other names ("flaming"), badger each other for sport ("trolling"), and steal pretty much anything they can get their hands on (copyright violation and piracy). If these miscreants acted in a similar fashion in the real world, they would be tossed out, beaten down, or locked up. But in Internetia, anything goes.

To his credit, Shirky doesn't ignore this issue, though he doesn't give it the attention it deserves. But he does seem to excuse most of this bad behavior. He does so with two kinds of arguments. The first is that the victory of Internetia is inevitable, and with it the bad (and good) behavior it fosters, so we'd better get used to it and learn to embrace both. The transistor and the birth control pill, he says, triumphed because "no one was in control of how the technology was used, or by whom." People wanted them, they used them, and that's that. Social tools are the same. Yet a sensible person might respond: The Internet may triumph, and it may enable certain kinds of bad behavior in the process, but that doesn't make wrong right, bad good, or pigs fly. Things aren't right because they exist, they are right because they are right.

Shirky's second defense of Internet nastiness is that what appears to be a vice in the real world is actually a virtue in Internetia. Thus, anarchy becomes "democracy," mob rule becomes "self-organization," theft becomes "efficiency," and perversion becomes harmless "freedom of expression." These arguments are standard among Internet boosters, many of whom are smart people, but none of them are very convincing. There is nothing "democratic" about calling someone an "asshat"; self-organization is almost impossible when you can't shut anyone up; stealing is stealing, no matter how you justify it; and it is not at all clear that ubiquitous pornography injures no one.

The fact that Shirky and other Internet advocates soft-pedal the issue of online licentiousness does them no good, because it makes them appear to be serving interests other than the truth. After all, what do we call people who exaggerate the positive and conceal the negative? They might just be starry-eyed optimists. But then again, they may be salesmen. And what would Internet boosters be selling? Well, books, of course, but also

themselves. If you go to Shirky's Web site (www.shirky.com) you can read the following:

> Mr. Shirky divides his time between consulting, teaching, and writing on the social and economic effects of Internet technologies. His consulting practice is focused on the rise of decentralized technologies such as peer-to-peer, Web services, and wireless networks that provide alternatives to the wired client/server infrastructure that characterizes the Web. Current clients include Nokia, GBN, the Library of Congress, the Highlands Forum, the Markle Foundation, and the BBC.

You'll be happy to learn that you can also hire him to speak through his agency, Monitor Talent. Now you can't blame a guy for trying to make a buck, and I hope that Shirky's business thrives, because he's a very bright fellow. The trouble is that *Here Comes Everybody* makes Shirky look a bit like a pitchman for his Internet consultancy in particular and Internet consultancies in general. He seems to be saying, "Internetia is a wondrous place full of possibilities and opportunities. Of course, there are a few pitfalls. But with my help, you and your business can prosper there." Let me say this: Were I trying move my business onto the Web, there is no one I would rather hire as a consultant than Clay Shirky, and not only because he knows everything about

Internetia. It's also because—having taken his consulting fee—he would doubtless tell me that the pitfalls of doing business in Internetia are in fact legion, and that Internetia is a lawless frontier where good reputations can be tarnished, solid brands discredited, and terabytes of material stolen in the blink of an eye. I certainly hope he would tell me this, because if he didn't, I—or you—would be in deep digital doo-doo.

Tocqueville admired American democracy, but he was also quick to point out that it had its drawbacks. First among them was the "tyranny of the majority," which he understood in both a political and cultural sense. Americans acknowledged no natural political leaders, i.e., they had no king or nobility. Therefore, the majority was left to decide everything regarding governance. Tocqueville didn't like this very much. Having grown up in the shadow of the French Revolution, he knew that majorities (read: "mobs") could destroy liberty as easily as they could enshrine it. But that wasn't the only problem with popular rule: it could also do great damage to refinement and good taste. Americans did not recognize natural cultural authorities any more than they did natural political authorities. They had no aristocracy of learning or art. Thus the

majority decided what was good and what wasn't. Tocqueville didn't like this very much either. He was an elitist on these matters, and had no faith that the popular will could produce or even recognize anything of scholarly or artistic merit. When it comes to American culture, he argued, the damage has already been done. Here he is on American writers:

> [Their] style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, over-burdened, and loose, almost always vehement and bold. Authors will aim at rapidity of execution more than at perfection of detail. Small productions will be more common than bulky books; there will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity; and literary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigor of thought, frequently of great variety and singular fecundity. The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste.

From Tocqueville's point of view, then, cultural populism as practiced in America was a disaster, a clear example of what happens when people confuse what is popular with what is good.

In *The Cult of the Amateur*, Andrew Keen updates this critique for the age of the Web. Like Shirky, he's journeyed to Internetia and come back with a fascinating report on its remarkable residents. But he does not tell a tale of plucky natives deftly using miraculous social tools to join forces in all kinds of interesting, productive, and profit-making ways. No, it's a story of venal pitchmen selling egomaniacal amateurs dressed-up gadgets that permit them to abuse one another, create all kinds of digital rubbish, and steal copyrighted material with impunity—all in the name of "democracy." The pitchmen in question are Silicon Valley's Web 2.0 moguls Sergey Brin, Larry Page, and Chad Hurley, along with its intellectual gurus Tim O'Reilly, Chris Anderson, and Lawrence Lessig. Keen argues that their Internet boosterism is either sorely misguided or completely hypocritical. Most of them, he says, are in it for the money and willing to say just about anything to make sure the cash keeps flowing. Keen calls this the "great seduction." The egomaniacal amateurs in question seem to be the direct descendants of Tocqueville's nineteenth-century American philistines. They are cocksure that they can tell good from bad—even though they can't—and are impulsively driven by their own foolish pride to use the Internet to tell anybody and everybody what they think about things they can neither appreciate nor understand. The result is an army of narcissistic ugliness and stupidity marching ever onward under the banner of "self-expression"

and "wise crowds." The noble amateur, Keen says, is "a digitalized version of Rousseau's noble savage, representing the triumph of innocence over experience, of romanticism over the commonsense wisdom of the Enlightenment." The gadgets in use are easily recognizable as Shirky's social tools, except in Keen's opinion they are nothing but instruments of self-aggrandizement, pseudo-understanding, and mass pilfering. He laments, for instance, that "digital piracy and illegal file-sharing from services like BitTorrent, eDonkey, DirectConnect, Gnutella, LimeWire, and SoulSeek have become the central economic reality in the record business." And, he adds, they are destroying it.

More than anything else, Keen thinks Web 2.0 is an open conspiracy to get something for nothing. The moguls provide the software that suborns digital theft in exchange for online advertising revenue; the gurus justify said larceny by saying patently silly things like "information wants to be free" in exchange for consulting fees; and the Internetians just steal, and steal, and steal again. The problem is that you can't get something for nothing forever. "What you may not realize," Keen warns, "is that what is free [on the Internet] is actually costing us a fortune." Somebody has to suffer, something must be lost, and the piper

must eventually be paid. In the short term, he says, the victims of the "great seduction" will be creative professionals who live by copyright and ad revenue, e.g., journalists, musicians, filmmakers, TV producers, writers, editors, and the enterprises that support the production and distribution of their work. The gurus go on and on about the evolution of a "new business model" that will somehow magically funnel lost revenues back to what they call "content providers" (an unlovely phrase if ever there was one), but as Keen points out, no such model exists today, and the gurus are hopelessly vague about what it might look like. Meanwhile, newspapers, record companies, broadcast TV networks, and other cultural institutions are going broke. When they do, Keen predicts, we will all suffer.

The new winners—Google, Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Craigslist, and the hundreds of start-ups hungry for a piece of the Web 2.0 pie—are unlikely to fill the shoes of the industries they are helping to undermine in terms of products produced, jobs created, revenue generated, or benefits conferred. By stealing away our eyeballs, the blogs and wikis are decimating the publishing, music, and news-gathering industries that created the original content those Web sites "aggregate." Our culture is essentially cannibalizing its young,

destroying the very sources of the content it craves.

It's not that there won't be any more journalism, music, or video after the professionals have been swept from the field. Indeed, there will probably be more than ever before. It's just that it will all be frightfully amateurish, because it will have all been made by amateurs: people like you and me who really have no idea what we're doing but have been convinced by the "wisdom of crowds" gurus that we do. A million monkeys at typewriters can't write the *New York Times* every day, and neither can a million Internetians at their glowing boxes.

Much of Keen's jeremiad against Web 2.0 is spot on. Too often, the Internet is where "ignorance meets egoism meets bad taste meets mob rule." That said, Keen is long on critique and short on solutions. He identifies a number of enterprises—Citizendium, the online version of the *Guardian*, Joost—that are attempting to use social tools while still maintaining professional standards. The trouble, as Shirky points out, is that they are swimming against a very strong tide. At the moment, the Internetians have at their disposal a massive archive of "content" that has been built up by professional "content providers" over the past century: books, magazines, newspapers, music, photographs, TV shows, videos, films, games, software,

etc. Millions of items, all for free. Once the archive has been emptied, of course, things may change. The Internetians may decide that good things are worth paying for. But I doubt it. It's easy to drop the price of a product, but it's very hard to raise it if there are near-substitutes available at a lower price. And the Internetians produce near-substitutes by the digital truckload. Most Wikipedia editors aren't experts, most bloggers aren't journalists, and most YouTube videographers aren't filmmakers, but the Internetians don't seem to care very much. If I had to guess, I'd say they will continue to prefer free mediocrity to even low-cost excellence. This is what Tocqueville would say as well. In the absence of some aristocracy of judgment—and there is none in Internetia—you will always see a rush to the lowest common denominator. And if that lowest common denominator can be produced for free—as it can in Internetia—then nearly everything you have to pay for, no matter how good it is, will be swept away.

For all their apparent differences, both Shirky and Keen share one basic assumption: The Internet is an unprecedented phenomenon with powers so great that it will change the way we live. This is hardly an uncommon position. Indeed, it seems to be held by almost everyone who writes

about the Web, supporters and detractors alike. And it seems obviously true. A quarter century ago there was no Internet—now there is. Therefore, the Internet is new. A quarter century ago we didn't participate in huge online communities devoted to anything and everything we can think of—now we do. Therefore, the Internet is changing the world. The veracity of these arguments appears so self-evident that hardly anyone bothers to try and prove them. Shirky and Keen certainly don't. Instead, they provide carefully chosen anecdotes to make their respective cases. Shirky has dozens of entertaining stories about how the Internetians are forming all kinds of groups that are "changing the world." Keen has just as many scintillating horror stories about how the Internetians are destroying vital cultural institutions. All of this is quite entertaining. But anecdotes are merely suggestive, and cannot be taken as proof of anything.

So one is obliged to ask: Is the Internet an unprecedented phenomenon with powers so great that it will change the way we live? Probably not.

The Internet is a medium, a device we use to send, receive, store, and retrieve meaning. As such, it cannot be unprecedented, because it obviously has predecessors, namely earlier media like writing, print, and audiovisual devices. Now it is true that

the Internet is new. But if we are to demonstrate that it is novel in some significant, world-changing way—the claim made by most Internet boosters and critics—we would have to identify some significant, world-changing capacity that distinguishes it from earlier media. No one to my knowledge has done this, and it strikes me that no one can. Traditional media—mail, photography, libraries, the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, motion pictures, radio, television, and books—permit us to send, receive, store, and retrieve large amounts of data in multiple formats through many kinds of networks and to do so rapidly over large distances. The Internet also permits us to send, receive, store, and retrieve large amounts of data in multiple formats through many kinds of networks, and to do so rapidly over large distances. Using traditional media, we can talk on the phone, compose and exchange messages, write and read books, record and listen to music, capture and view images, make and watch motion pictures, organize and play games, and conduct and store research in libraries. Using the Internet we can talk on Skype, exchange emails, write and read blogs and Web pages, upload and download music, post and look at pictures, make and watch videos, design and play games, and look stuff up and write things

down on Wikipedia. If the Internet has any communicative capacity that traditional media do not, I'm having trouble finding it.

So are Shirky and Keen. While they imply that there is some difference in kind between old and new media, they actually focus on differences in degree. Shirky doesn't say that we can't form groups in the real world and we can on the Internet; he just says that the Internet makes it easier to do so. Keen doesn't say that we can't steal things in the real world and we can on the Internet; he just says that the Internet makes it easier to do so.

While it's not nearly as sexy as the claim that the Internet has some magical new communicative capacity, the difference-in-degree thesis has the virtue of being true. The Internet *does* make a lot of things easier, and it does so for some fairly obvious reasons. First, it bundles traditional communications tools into one convenient package. The Internet is a postal service, photograph album, telegraph, telephone, jukebox, movie theater, radio, television, and library all in one. Second, it improves on some of these older technologies. Its postal service is faster, its photo albums richer, its telegraph better, its telephone cheaper, its jukebox more extensive, its movie catalogue bigger, its radio range wider, its television

more diverse, and its library larger than its real-world counterparts. Finally, as Shirky rightly emphasizes, it reduces the price of using these tools. On the Web it costs virtually nothing to send, receive, store, and retrieve huge amounts of information in many different formats. This really is new, and it makes getting things done a lot easier. The critic Lee Siegel has argued that the Internet is first and foremost a "marvel of convenience." That sounds about right to me.

The question we need to ask is whether the Internet is so marvelously convenient as to be the breathtaking, epoch-making, earth-shattering, revolutionary force that Internet boosters—and critics—want us to believe it is. Judging by experience, it clearly is not. The Internet has been around for almost twenty years. That's not a long time, but it is arguably long enough to see the beginnings of certain long-term trends. So what has really changed over the last twenty years? Look at your own life. If you live in the developed world, you probably do a lot of things online that you used to do in the real world, because they are easier to do online. The venue has changed, as has the amount of energy expended, but the menu of activities has remained roughly the same. Now look at the big picture. Again, if you reside in the developed world, you probably still live in a

liberal democracy with a regulated capitalist economy and a consumer culture. Here, almost nothing has changed. It's hard to argue, then, that a new day has dawned or will dawn anytime soon.

Yet we shouldn't think that the convenience offered by the Internet isn't important. It is. The Internet is not going to save us or destroy us. Neither it nor any medium has the power to do either of those things. But it will, as Shirky says, make it easier to form and join associations. It will, as Keen says, challenge traditional media. But more than anything else, the Internet is enabling us to create a richer reflection of human life and imagination.

We use media for all sorts of purposes, but one of the most basic is simple representation. As we've accumulated media over the past several thousand years, our ability to represent ourselves and the world we live in has improved. Speech gave us the ability to create and exchange words and—through them—pictures. Writing gave us an instrument to draft and trade these words and pictures in textual form. Print provided a tool to disseminate these texts far and wide.

Audiovisual media added the capacity to accurately capture and broadcast sounds and images. With each new form of media, our individual and collective ability to represent our lives and our imaginations has grown. The Internet combines all of these representational methods into one easy-to-use tool. It allows almost everyone to take what's *inside their heads* and put it *out there* for all to see. The Internet may or may not be Shirky's engine of organization or Keen's destroyer of culture, but it most definitely *is* a machine for effortless mass exhibition. The result is plain to see: the spontaneous formation of the greatest "Show and Tell" ever imagined. It shouldn't surprise us that some of the kids bring nice things (Shirky) and some of the kids bring naughty things (Keen). What should surprise us, and perhaps even delight us, is that for the first time in human history we get to see *everything*. The Internet is our mirror. *Ecce homo*.

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